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**Creativity and Gender: Nietzsche’s Ideal of Self-Cultivation**

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“The colossal manliness of his soul, his antifeminism, his opposition to democracy – what could be more German?” Thomas Mann on Friedrich Nietzsche[[1]](#footnote-1)

**1. Introduction**

Culture is a broad and ambivalent concept with a myriad of meanings. It can, for instance, refer to individuals, different kinds of social groups, or humanity as whole; denote processes, systems, or states; include practices, institutions, norms, and beliefs; be opposed to nature, animality, barbarism, or civilization.[[2]](#footnote-2) What most conceptualizations of culture have in common, is a more or less pronounced normative dimension. It’s thus not surprising that the German tradition of philosophy of culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a critical endeavor whose proponents engaged in critical reflections of modern culture and reconsidered the philosophical foundations of value theory, albeit from very different angles. Friedrich Nietzsche is a paradigmatic example of the attempt to re-evaluate the normative foundations of modernity by vigorously criticizing the philosophical tradition for what he regards as its moral prejudices.[[3]](#footnote-3) He rejects, first and foremost, the focus on moral values as universal principles of good life, advancing a kind of axiological particularism and embracing different types of goals as valuable. Since context matters for what counts as worthwhile endeavor, Nietzsche outlines his ideal of a meaningful life by way of example – especially the great individuals such as Goethe, Beethoven, or Napoleon he admires as representing human excellence.

In the following, I argue that culture plays a pivotal role for understanding Nietzsche’s own normative commitments, focusing on his mature thought in *The Gay Science* (1882/1887), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), and *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), yet also pointing to some continuities with his earlier views on culture in the *Birth of Tragedy* (1872).[[4]](#footnote-4) My argument develops as follows: *Section 2* shows that Nietzsche advances an ideal of self-cultivation (*Bildung*) which is derived from the existential role of culture, elevating a peculiar concept of artistic creativity to ground his perfectionist understanding of value. *Section 3* traces Nietzsche’s image of Goethe as exemplar of creative excellence. I contend that Nietzsche portrays Goethe as a *male* genius, rendering his concept of self-cultivation entrenched in the cultural imagery of his time. The fin de siècle was obsessed with the image of genius as well as the relationship of creativity and gender.[[5]](#footnote-5) Moreover, as towering figure of German culture after the founding of the German Empire in 1871, Goethe was a frequent example of creative genius.[[6]](#footnote-6)

*Section 4* deepens the discussion of the role of gender in Nietzsche’s concept of creativity, exploring how the essentialist gender psychology of his mature works curtails the creative potential of women and explains his dismissal of feminism. Note, however, that Nietzsche’s rejection of the women’s movement didn’t prevent a positive feminist reception from early on.[[7]](#footnote-7) In contrast to some recent approaches which either throw Nietzsche in the dustbin of history because of his alleged misogyny[[8]](#footnote-8) or try to exonerate him from the charges of sexism and full-blown anti-feminism,[[9]](#footnote-9) contemporary feminists such as Hedwig Dohm advanced ambivalent assessments.[[10]](#footnote-10) Dohm’s critical appropriation of Nietzsche’s concept of self-cultivation also helps to contextualize his thoughts on creativity and gender. In her critical essay *Nietzsche and Women* (1898), Dohm characterizes Nietzsche, on the one hand, as a “noble thinker” whose “thoughts often strike to the heart of prejudices and superstitions with razor-sharp, golden arrows.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Dohm agrees to a passage from the second book of *The Gay Science* in which Nietzsche lets a wise man say that “man makes for himself the image of woman, woman shapes herself according to this image”, [[12]](#footnote-12) interpreting it as insight into the arbitrariness and contingency of womanhood against the essentialist prejudices of the time. On her reading which anticipates progressive interpretations today,[[13]](#footnote-13) Nietzsche admits that the character of women is neither natural nor determined but cultural and created. This opens the path to women’s emancipation which Dohm also understands in Nietzschean terms as the creative activity of self-cultivation. On the other hand, she vigorously criticizes the images of women that Nietzsche advances in his own works, pointing out with sharp irony and biting humor their inconsistences and absurdities. He thus becomes an example of the “anti-feminists” whose attitude towards women is shaped by misogynist fantasies that prevent them from seeing the historically and culturally conditioned reality of women – as well as their potential. Dohm’s contemporary interpretation of the ambivalences of Nietzsche’s thought will be a useful foil for assessing his views on gender and creativity in *section 4.*

**2. The art of the self: Nietzsche’s perfectionist ideal**

The significance of culture for Nietzsche’s thought derives from his views on nature. Throughout his works, Nietzsche emphasizes the „indifference of nature“, describing its rule as „ruthless“ and „cruel”.[[14]](#footnote-14) Rejecting both organizistic and mechanistic interpretations as harmonizing images, experiencing nature becomes a challenging confrontation,[[15]](#footnote-15) devoid of the possibility to feel at home – a soothing prospect philosophical and religious ideologies have promoted for a long time. It’s this idea of being thrown into an alien world which grounds the existential role of culture in Nietzsche’s thought.[[16]](#footnote-16) The first section of *The* *Gay Science* attributes a species-preserving function to the „*teachers of the purpose of existence*“, concluding from their continual coming and going a general trait of humans: “Man has gradually become a fantastic animal that must fulfil one condition of existence more than any other animal: man *must* from time to time believe he knows *why* he exists; his race cannot thrive without a periodic trust in life – without faith in the *reason in life*!”.[[17]](#footnote-17) In his *Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche declares that the need for meaning is the key issue of humanity: “Man, the bravest animal and most prone to suffer, does *not* deny suffering as such: he *wills* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it, a *purpose* of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, *not* the suffering, was the curse that has so far blanketed mankind”.[[18]](#footnote-18) Put briefly, culture as giving meaning to the meaninglessness has become a necessity of humans to bear their existence. This hermeneutic aspect shapes the distinct character of humans as cultural beings, pointing to the special role of art for culture.

Already in the *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche praises the ancient Greeks for their insight into the “cruelty of nature” and their knowledge of the “terrors and horrors of existence”.[[19]](#footnote-19) The resulting “wisdom of the wood-god Silenus” that death is preferable to life is a key motif of Greek tragedy which makes the “terrible truth”[[20]](#footnote-20) about reality bearable by its aesthetic transformation. In taming “the terrible […] by artistic means”, tragedy offers „metaphysical solace”,[[21]](#footnote-21) demonstrating the existential role of culture as a source of meaning. Since the aesthetic delusion justifies the ubiquitous pain and suffering, the pessimistic conclusion of nature which suggests the meaninglessness of existence, is banned. It’s this tragic affirmation of life which makes the ancient Greeks the model of self-cultivation, which should, according to the early Nietzsche, the “renewal and purification of the German spirit”.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The ancient Greeks retain their place among the exemplary cultures in Nietzsche’s later thought, contrasting the Judeo-Christian spirit he despises.[[23]](#footnote-23) *Twilight of the Idols* praises their use of formative powers to cultivate an exceptional kind of “male beauty”, submitting that they became “the *first cultural event* in history”, since “they knew” the “right place” to “begin culture” and “did what needed to be done”.[[24]](#footnote-24) Nietzsche argues that, for cultivation, one need “to persuade the *body*” first and keep the discipline over time: “Strict adherence to significant and refined gestures and an obligation to live only with people who do not ‘let themselves go’ is more than enough to become significant and refined: two or three generations later and everything is already *internalized*. It is crucial for the fate of individuals as well as peoples that culture begin in the *right* place – *not* in the ‘soul’ (which was the disastrous superstition of priests and half-priests): the right place is the body, gestures, diet, physiology, *everything else* follows from this…”.[[25]](#footnote-25)

These passages clearly show that Nietzsche uses the concept of culture in a normative sense: both social groups and individuals can succeed or fail in cultivating themselves.[[26]](#footnote-26) Self-cultivation is a special achievement humans must strive for. We can thus read Nietzsche’s normative use of the concept of culture as perfectionist.[[27]](#footnote-27) Striving for excellence is the path to fulfill the human potential and explicitly contrasted with the “stunting and levelling of European man”.[[28]](#footnote-28) This dangerous result of the “herd morality” Nietzsche rejects as descent towards nihilism. Note that he understands excellence in a strictly elitist sense, restricting its achievement to exceptional agents. While we saw earlier in the case of ancient Greece that these exemplars of human culture can be a model for others, their value is not only instrumental.[[29]](#footnote-29) Nietzsche explicitly states for the case of “great human beings” that “you misunderstand [them] if you look at them from the pathetic perspective of public utility. Perhaps *not* knowing how to make use of them is *just another aspect of greatness* . . .”.[[30]](#footnote-30) Excellence is valuable for itself – an appraisal that has both subjective and objective meaning for Nietzsche. It’s part of the psychology of great individuals that they value their excellence for their own sake, even assuming society exists for their self-fulfillment.[[31]](#footnote-31) Yet their perfectionist value is not only a manifestation of individual self-affirmation. Nietzsche defines cultural exemplars as representatives of humanity who actualize its “highest potential power and splendour”.[[32]](#footnote-32) They provide “a glimpse of a man who justifies man *himself*, a stroke of luck, an instance of a man who makes up for and redeems man, and enables us to retain our *faith in mankind*!”[[33]](#footnote-33) This passage from *On the* *Genealogy of Morality* shows that excellence itself can give meaning to life, emphasizing the formal aspect of cultivation as an aesthetic means to overcome existential despair, amplifying the role of narratives.[[34]](#footnote-34)

In his later works, Nietzsche puts more emphasis on the exemplary character of exceptional individuals, since they represent the kind of cultural excellence that is available in modern societies.[[35]](#footnote-35) He develops his concept of self-cultivation as individual self-creation especially in *The Gay Science*.[[36]](#footnote-36) The “great and rare art” of giving “style to one’s character”[[37]](#footnote-37) is depicted as imposing form upon the raw material one is. Emphasizing the need to be aware of “all the strengths and weaknesses that their nature has to offer”, the creative agent attempts to “fit them into an artistic plan”[[38]](#footnote-38) – ”we […] want to be poets of our life”,[[39]](#footnote-39) Nietzsche exclaims in section 299. His concept of creativity is thus characterized by two distinct aspects: First, self-creation is a transformative activity that establishes a unified order where unbearable chaos has reigned so far. The multiplicity of drives that we are is moulded into a coherent whole by a deliberative effort that makes “the force of a single taste […] rule[] and shape[] everything great and small”.[[40]](#footnote-40) Using the analogy of gardens, “stylized nature” – including our own we can add – is defined as “conquered and serving nature”.[[41]](#footnote-41) Yet creativity is not freewheeling but bound by the possibilities the raw material provides, invoking the analogy to gardening again where the artificial forms that don’t occur in nature depends on the conscious manipulation of the given traits of a plant. The creative agent has to discern which style can be imposed onto himself and meticulously follow the necessities of what is given. This aspect is driven home especially in section 335, entitled “*Long live physics!*”, where Nietzsche contends: “We, however, *want to become who we are* – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves! To that end we must become the best students and discoverers of everything lawful and necessary in the world: we must become *physicists* in order to be creators in this sense.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

Note that Nietzsche does not claim that everything in the world is lawful and necessary but urges us to learn about what is “lawful and necessary in the world”. Similarly, he argues elsewhere that “at the bottom of us, really ‘deep down’, there is […] *something* unteachable, *some* granite of spiritual *fatum*, of predetermined decision and answer to predetermined selected questions”[[43]](#footnote-43)–implying that other aspects are malleable. Emphasizing this restricted scope of Nietzsche’s determinism, Aaron Ridley develops the analogy of gardening to dissolve the seeming tension between transformation and necessity in Nietzsche’s account of self-cultivation.[[44]](#footnote-44) Just as the gardener must consider natural facts about the environment, the species, the sub-species, and the specimen to grow a beautiful tree in a shape which wouldn’t occur in nature such as fan-shaped fig, we too have to know what is given about us to cultivate and, hence, form our character. Nietzsche thus acknowledges the potential of self-creation, yet roots it in constitutive necessities of ourselves which circumscribe our development in significant ways. Moreover, section 290 of *The Gay Science* makes clear that the ambivalent demands of self-creation presuppose a certain attitude that can only be found among “strong and domineering natures” who are equipped with a “tremendous will”.[[45]](#footnote-45) Self-creation is a “rare art” after all and, hence, not everybody is capable of such an achievement, according to Nietzsche. This raises the question what type of person lives up to his ideal. We thus must look at the exemplars of creative agents Nietzsche provides in his works, all men, and above all of them stands Goethe, besides Nietzsche himself.[[46]](#footnote-46)

**3. The male genius: Nietzsche’s idealization of Goethe**

The portrait of Goethe in section 49 of the chapter “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man” in *Twilight of the Idols* is the paradigmatic case of self-creation that also exemplifies the genius of a great artist, bringing together the two most important forms of artistry in Nietzsche’s work.[[47]](#footnote-47) Nietzsche describes the most important traits that characterize a creative agent who is capable of transforming self and world into artworks, exemplifying the special combination of deliberative effort and obedience that characterizes true artistry. Goethe is introduced as an individual who “he took as much as he could on himself, to himself, in himself”,[[48]](#footnote-48) characterizing him as someone who seeks out challenges and experiments with himself. The main challenge he confronted was forging antagonisms and differences into a “totality”[[49]](#footnote-49). Goethe’s unification project succeeded, of course, achieving a „unity-in-diversity“[[50]](#footnote-50), and in mastering this challenge, esp. by “practical activity”, he overcame his age, becoming independent from the external determinations of his cultural context.[[51]](#footnote-51) He, so Nietzsche about Goethe’s achievement, “disciplined himself to wholeness, he *created* himself”.[[52]](#footnote-52) By submitting that Goethe “conceived of” (“*concipierte*”) the kind of human he became, Nietzsche highlights the deliberate direction of the process of self-creation – as does the reference to Goethe’s ability to “take advantage of things”, even of the ones “that would destroy an average nature”.[[53]](#footnote-53) A creative agent has to be capable of directing his efforts and to use the available material for his own ends, effectively commanding and dominating their own nature as well as its environment. [[54]](#footnote-54) This picture is supported by Nietzsche’s insistence that Goethe was able “to keep himself in check”,[[55]](#footnote-55) adding the aspect of self-control to the kind of mastery over oneself that is outlined here. It is this sovereignty towards what there is in and around him that makes Goethe “a spirit […] who has become free”, grounding the affirmative attitude towards the totality of being, which Nietzsche calls “a cheerful and trusting fatalism”.[[56]](#footnote-56) This portrait of Goethe is a good example of Nietzsche’s key thought that the artistic transformation of the world makes our life at least bearable and, in the best case, so enjoyable that we can truly affirm it.

I contend that key traits of Goethe’s creative genius are best summarized by the concept of mastery, entailing the aspects of achievement, command, dominion, control, and sovereignty we found in the section from *Twilight of the Idols*. There is some preliminary evidence that this glorified image of Goethe is gendered. In the next section of *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche submits that while the nineteenth century aimed at the same objectives as Goethe, it turned out to be the opposite of him, “a *decadent* century” of “chaos” and “fatigue”. He lists a “feminism (*Femininismus*) in taste”[[57]](#footnote-57) among the features that contrast his age (as well as the eighteenth century) with Goethe’s creative greatness. Moreover, Goethe is explicitly introduced as a *man* in section 209 of *Beyond Good and Evil* where Nietzsche describes the emergence of a new “skepticism of a bold masculinity”[[58]](#footnote-58) in Germany which is capable of commanding, conquering, and dominating. Contrasting Napoleon’s response to Goethe with what he characterizes as the “boundless presumption” of Germaine de Staël’s romantic portrait of Germany,[[59]](#footnote-59) Nietzsche contends: “You can really understand Napoleon’s surprise when he got to see Goethe: it showed what people had understood by the term ‘German spirit’ for centuries. ‘Voilà un homme!’ – which was to say: ‘Now there’s a *man*! And I’d only expected a German!’”[[60]](#footnote-60) Nietzsche points to this encounter also in his Goethe portrait in *Twilight of the Idols*, characterizing Napoleon as Goethe’s “greatest experience”.[[61]](#footnote-61) The reference to Napoleon in the context of Goethe is relevant for the link between masculinity and the special brand of creativity the latter represents. Napoleon serves as first example of the “concept of genius”[[62]](#footnote-62) Nietzsche develops in *Twilight of the Idols* and later illustrates by his portrait of Goethe. Note that Nietzsche describes activities such as the violent submission and transformation of an unorganized population into a “structure of domination [*Herrschafts-Gebilde*]” as “instinctive creation and imposition of forms”,[[63]](#footnote-63) widening the scope of his concept of artistic creativity to a fieldin which Napoleon excelled. Moreover, he is praised as the agent of the “masculinization of Europe”[[64]](#footnote-64) Nietzsche embraces in *The Gay Science*. This process is characterized as the advent of the “*classic age of war*” through which “*man*” could “become master again in Europe”, “perhaps even over ‘woman’, who has been spoiled by Christianity and the enthusiastic spirit of the eighteenth century, and even more by ‘modern ideas’”.[[65]](#footnote-65) Similar to a passage in *Twilight of the Idols* , Nietzsche depicts the cultural contrast between ages in terms of gender, putting masculinity on the side he embraces and connecting femininity with the attitudes he despises.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Let me sum up. Nietzsche’s glorifying portrait of Goethe exemplifies his concept of creativity. His creative ideal of imposing form onto world and self by exceptional mastery is characterized by a gender aspect, attributing supposedly male characteristics to the highest form of creative achievement.[[67]](#footnote-67)It’s thus not surprising that section 262 of *Beyond Good and Evil* characterizes the “highest and best-turned-out type of ‘human’” who is “high and hard enough to give human beings artistic form” as “self-satisfied, *manly*, conquering, domineering”.[[68]](#footnote-68) That true greatness is reserved to a male-shaped type of the artist, is also supported by the lineage of creative geniuses Nietzsche embraces, which ranges from artists (esp. Goethe and Beethoven) to statesmen (esp. Caesar and Napoleon) to mythical figures (esp. Dionysus and Zarathustra).[[69]](#footnote-69) The gallery of male creators we find in his works serves as a model for how the highest form of creativity can be achieved, not least for Nietzsche himself. He creates the portrait of Goethe in his own image. Nietzsche’s highly successful attempt to self-canonization peaks in his supposed autobiography, *Ecce Homo* (1888/1908) where he portrays his own life as the kind of self-creation he admired in Goethe.[[70]](#footnote-70) That his selection of creative geniuses is guided by the principle of assumed elective affinities becomes especially clear when Nietzsche claims that “Julius Caesar could be my father”.[[71]](#footnote-71)

**4. Nietzsche and the „women’s question“**

Given Nietzsche’s image of Goethe, it’s not surprising that he explicitly links certain kinds of “genius” with what he regards as gender characteristics. Section 248 of *Beyond Good and Evil* introduces “two types of genius”, submitting that they relate to each other like “man” and “woman”. While one type “begets and wants to beget”, is “domineering”, “full of creative forces”, and the “cause of new orders of life”, the other is characterized by the “female problem of pregnancy and the secret task of forming, ripening, and bringing to completion”.[[72]](#footnote-72) In the following, I argue that this distinction between male genius and female genius maps very well on how Nietzsche describes the relationship between gender in his mature works. Take, for instance, section 68 of the second book of *The Gay Science*, entitled *Will and Willingness* – which we encountered already in Dohm’s reference to Nietzsche (sec. 1). Section 68 depicts a literary scene in which an unspecified crowd brings a young man to a wise man, claiming that he has been corrupted by women. The wise man objects to this judgement by arguing that men corrupt women, since the latter are shaped by men’s images. When accused of not knowing women, he justifies his assessment by asserting that it is the “law of the genders (*Geschlechter*)” that “the way of men is will; the way of women is willingness”,[[73]](#footnote-73) doubling down on the innocence of women, when it comes to their role in gender relations, and demanding mildness towards them. Finally, the wise man calls for men, not women, as another member of the crowd demands, to be “better educated”, inviting the young men to follow him. But the section concludes with the refusal of the invitation by the youth.

While section 68 partly supports a progressive reading that gender relations are malleable (as by, for instance, Dohm) and that men should take responsibility for the issues that arise from their power, it also contains an essentialist line of thought. The statement on the “law of genders (*Geschlechter*)” is not relativized to the cultural context but is meant to explain why men are and can be responsible for the images that shape women, hence attributing a basic character to both genders.[[74]](#footnote-74) Section 363 from the later published fifth book of *The Gay Science* takes up this contrast, arguing that the women’s conception of love is “total devotion” and they want to be “be taken, adopted as a possession”, but that men “precisely want […] this love from [them]”, thus understanding love as “will to possess” (*Haben-Wollen*). Moreover, Nietzsche explicitly links gender to sex by claiming that “a man who loves like a woman becomes a slave, but a woman who loves like a woman becomes a *more perfect* woman”.[[75]](#footnote-75) It is thus not surprising that contrasting attitudes towards love are characterized as a “natural opposition” that can not be overcome “through any social contracts or with the best will to justice, desirable as it may be not to remind oneself constantly how harsh, terrible, enigmatic, and immoral this antagonism is”.[[76]](#footnote-76) The last statement reminds of the insistence of the wise man of section 68 that the “law of genders (*Geschlechter*)” demands special mildness towards women.

Taken together, sections 68 and 363 suggest that Nietzsche understands the basic characters of genders as distinct psychological types that circumscribe the agency of the respective members of a certain sex. The adoption of gender roles is thus constrained (albeit not completely fixed): while a man can love like a woman, he does not become a woman but a slave. Moreover, Nietzsche explicitly characterizes the “masculinization of women“ he sees advanced by feminism as a “degeneration” (*Entartung*) – a thought that only makes sense if there is a connection between sex and gender.[[77]](#footnote-77) This underlining gender psychology should make us cautious against too progressive readings of the wise man’s advice in section 68 as putting responsibility on the shoulders of the male oppressors to realize and remedy their harm by corrupting women. Calling for a better education of men can be understood as simply following from their superior position in gender relations, that they are the willing part who is meant to take and shape. The wise man could have also demanded the education of women that they can liberate themselves from the problematic images of men that curtail their life – a position that was available to the author Nietzsche in the historical context, since it was advocated by contemporary feminists such as Dohm.[[78]](#footnote-78) Moreover, Nietzsche explicitly rejects the idea that the strong and powerful should be held accountable for the effects of their actions in other contexts.[[79]](#footnote-79) On the first glance, it seems that we have to conclude that Nietzsche does not apply his insight into the construction of gender roles to his own views on this topic. His frequent reflections on men and women, masculinity and femininity would be obviously inconsistent and indeed an example of an only “subjective truth” that should not be taken too seriously[[80]](#footnote-80) – a soothing conclusion, since the philosophically relevant aspects of Nietzsche’s thought could be neatly distinguished from bothersome statements that have been criticized as misogynistic or, at least, paternalistic.[[81]](#footnote-81) Furthermore, we can point to Dohm’s conceptualization of women’s emancipation as a progressive and sound application of his still valuable insights in the constructedness of gender. Yet Dohm’s example raises the question why Nietzsche has not gone down the same path, remaining a committed critique of feminism in his later period.[[82]](#footnote-82)

While it would be uncharitable to conclude that Nietzsche deprives women of any creative capacities, the male aspect of his concept of creativity clearly restricts the creative potential of women – also in regards of themselves. This point is especially important, since women were oppressed in the social context of Nietzsche’s time and contemporary feminists attempted to create new roles for women. From the perspective of his concept of creativity, it seems to be no accident that Nietzsche remained critical of feminism throughout his life, hence rejecting women’s attempt to create themselves in their own image, initiating a new order of life.[[83]](#footnote-83) This conclusion is supported by a note from 1884 in which Nietzsche suggests that feminists “shape themselves after the image of man today and seek *his* rights”[[84]](#footnote-84). The alleged “masculinization of women“ is characterized as a dangerous “degeneration” (*Entartung*), since it could deprive women of the “lenient and gentle treatment” they have received so far – a thought that is reminiscent of the wise man’s reference to the special mildness women deserve in section 68 of *The Gay Science*.[[85]](#footnote-85) The note also assumes that feminists do not create their own image of women but shape themselves according to an existing image, *yet* of man – another thought we know already from section 68.

That women occupy an only secondary role in the creative realm is also professed in section 361 of *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche explores the significance of the “histrionic instinct” for artistry, arguing that women must be “actresses first and foremost”.[[86]](#footnote-86)While he acknowledges that the traits of “adaptability” and “mimicry” belong to the “prehistory of the artist and often enough even of ‘genius’”,[[87]](#footnote-87) attributing some artistic value to it, an earlier section warns of the “performer’s faith [*Artisten-Glauben*]” for whom “all nature ends and becomes art”.[[88]](#footnote-88) Nietzsche defines this faith as a radical kind of social constructivism which rests on the conviction that everyone “can do just about anything *and* *is up to playing any role*”.[[89]](#footnote-89) When the faith in everyone’s flexibility takes charge of a society, turning it “truly democratic”, the actors begin to rule, ousting the “great ‘architects’” and discrediting the values that are necessary to build “*great edifice[s]*”.[[90]](#footnote-90) Such a society is deprived of the prerequisites of achieving cultural excellence. Again, we see Nietzsche advancing a position which doesn’t seat well with progressive readings: he dismisses radical social constructivism,[[91]](#footnote-91) preferring a stratified society whose members accept and affirm their respective roles, also in inferior positions, since only a few are capable of standing on the top and should be supported in their pursuit of excellence.[[92]](#footnote-92) Finally, the character of women is associated with the performative attitude that constitutes the dangerous tendency of democratic ages – an artistic type which isn’t without value but doesn’t leave up to his standard for human greatness.

**5. Conclusion**

My reading of Nietzsche presented him as a philosopher of culture par excellence. In *section 2*, we saw him defining culture in opposition to nature, carving out its existential role of aesthetic justification upon which his perfectionist ideal of self-cultivation is modelled too. Many of Nietzsche’s examples of human excellence come from the cultural realm, as evidenced by his glorifying portrait of Goethe who features as the paradigm of the art of the self throughout his works (see *section 3*). By idealizing Goethe, two key issues of contemporary culture, genius and gender, took center stage, embroiling Nietzsche in the “women’s question”, broadly understood. He clearly took sides against feminism. I thus cautioned against too progressive readings of his mature thought, emphasizing his gender essentialism instead: Nietzsche introduces a typology of gender, assigns a secondary role to women, and circumscribes their creative potential, since the highest type of art is characterized as distinctively male (*section 4*). His impact on the cultural struggles of his time was ambivalent, nevertheless. Feminists such as Dohm as well as misogynists such as Weininger were inspired by his philosophy, critically appropriating his thoughts on self-cultivation, creativity, and gender as conceptual resources. Both saw an ally and an opponent in Nietzsche, criticizing him as an “antifeminist” (Dohm) or a witty thinker for women(Weininger)[[93]](#footnote-93) while retaining some of his key motifs.

Nietzsche’s ambivalent reception in the gender debates of his time point to the tremendous influence his philosophy had on modern Germanic culture, becoming the model of cultural criticism of all stripes.[[94]](#footnote-94) Nietzsche thus epitomizes another key feature of philosophy of culture. Georg Simmel summarizes the reorientation of philosophy towards culture as a shift from asserting “dogmas”[[95]](#footnote-95) about special issues to embracing a certain attitude towards the world which can reflect on all kinds of topics. Conceived as “life or function”[[96]](#footnote-96), philosophy itself becomes a cultural practice. In Nietzsche we indeed see a philosopher at work and his intellectual style shaped the philosophical culture of his time.

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1. Mann (1987), 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an instructive history of the concept of culture see Hetzel (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This general orientation of Nietzsche’s philosophy of culture is also emphasized by Andreas Urs Sommer in Sommer (2012), 93f. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Works by Nietzsche are cited by section number. Changes to translations are indicated in the text. For the German original and Nietzsche’s notes (abbreviated NF and cited by year and number), I rely on the following: Kritische Studienausgabe, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For the “genius-fever” around 1900 and its gender imagery see Köhne (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Haas et al. (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the early feminist reception of Nietzsche see Diethe (1996), chap. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, e.g., Kennedy (1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See, e.g., Clark (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For similarfeminist readings of Nietzsche today, see, e.g., Verkerk (2017); Verkerk (2019), chap. 6; Higgins (1995); Higgins (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dohm (2021), 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See, e.g., Higgins (1995), Verkerk (2017); Verkerk (2019), chap. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 9, 32, 230; Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 112; see also Prelude 55, 109; Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This existential role of culture is emphasized by Andrew Huddleston(2019, chap. 1) who, however, doesn’t consider the relationship of culture to nature. For a more comprehensive examination of this relationship see Steizinger (2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 1; see also Nietzsche (1994), II, sec. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Nietzsche (1994), III, sec. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Nietzsche (1999a), sec. 7, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Nietzsche (1999a), sec. 7. See also Brennan (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Nietzsche (1999a), sec. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Nietzsche (1999a), sec. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See, e.g., Nietzsche (1994), II, sec. 23; Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Both individual (e.g., Goethe and Napoleon) and collective (e.g., ancient Greece, Rome, and the Italian Renaissance) examples of cultural excellence can be found throughout Nietzsche’s work, as Huddleston (2019, chap. 3) demonstrates correctly. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For an extensive discussion of Nietzsche’s brand of perfectionism see Hurka (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Nietzsche (1994), I, sec. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. As Huddleston (2019, 39–43) rightly emphasizes. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See, e.g., Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Nietzsche (1994), Preface, sec. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Nietzsche (1994), I, sec. 12; see, e.g., also Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. My reading thus amends Huddleston (2019, chapt. 1) who emphasizes the existential function of narratives and myths. Hurka (2007, 22–31) emphasizes that Nietzsche’s perfectionism focuses on the formal properties of activities which can be compatible with different substantive goals. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Contrary to Huddleston’s (2019, 55f.) suggestion that the liberalism of modernity favors individual excellence since social cohesion is missing, Nietzsche argues that the same forces which homogenize the many to an “able herd animal” can have the opposite effect on a few, turning “the democratization of Europe” into “an involuntary exercise in the breeding of tyrants–understanding that word in every sense, including the most spiritual.” (Nietzsche 2002b, sec. 242) [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Cf. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 290. For an illuminating account of the art of the self see Ridley (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 335. For the special character of artistic creativity see also Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 188, 213, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Section 231 of Beyond Good and Evil, as translated by Ridley (2016, 130 f.). Nietzsche refers to gender as an issue a thinker cannot relearn about but only completely discover what is established in him. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See Ridley (2016). Nietzsche uses the same analogy in *Daybreak*, emphasizing that we can “cultivate” our “drives” like a “gardener […] a beautiful fruit tree on a trellis” (Nietzsche [1997], sec. 560). It’s beyond the scope of this paper to explore the consequences of this interpretation for Nietzsche’s concept of autonomy. For this debate see Leiter (2015), 76–81. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. For the significance of exemplars for Nietzsche’s work and the exceptional role Goethe plays see Ridley (2013), 424; Martin (2008); Leiter (2015), 93; Berry (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Note that Nietzsche refers to Goethe himself, not a specific work of Goethe. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Hurka (2007, 24) points out Nietzsche doesn’t value just unity of action but the combination of diverse elements. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Hurka (2007, 27f.) emphasizes the originality of Nietzsche’s focus on practical goals in the perfectionist tradition. The portrait of Goethe also illustrates an influential reading of his concept of will to power as confronting and overcoming resistance (see Reginster [2006]). Reginster argues that artistic creativity is the key manifestation of will to power. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. See, e.g., Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 107, 290, 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. See Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 233 for another invective against de Staël that comprises Nietzsche’s rejection of women’s emancipation. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Nietzsche (1994), II, sec. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 362. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 362. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. See Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 50. See also Nietzsche (1994), III, sec. 25. Note that Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 362 argues that Napoleon saw a “personal enemy in modern ideas” and that “this enmity” made him “one of the as the greatest continuators of the Renaissance.” [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. And even when he uses the analogy of pregnancy for conceptualizing creativity he reserves “spiritual pregnancy” to men, defining them as “male mothers” (Nietzsche [2002a], sec. 72; cf. Nietzsche [2002b], sec. 20), as Verkerk (2019, 160) notes too. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Nietzsche (2002b), 262, my emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. To lesser extent, Frederick the Great (Nietzsche [1999b], sec. 60), Leonardo da Vinci and Homer also belong to Nietzsche’s pantheon. See, e.g., Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 200; Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 38; NF-1887,9[157], KSA 12; NF-1887,9[179], KSA 12; NF-1887,11[79], KSA 13; NF-1885,40[5], KSA 11; NF-1884,25[110], KSA 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Nietzsche composed his supposed autobiography in autumn 1888, just after finishing *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, and it was first published after his death in 1908. Although this work is generally approached with some degree of caution, it can be read, as Brian Leiter put it nicely, as one of Nietzsche’s “major self-reflective moments”, in particular when it comes to his self-image (Leiter [2015], 115). Here are some examples of motifs which resemble his characterization of Goethe: joyful fatalism; forging antagonisms and differences to a unity; taking advantage of his illness; self-mastery; (see Nietzsche [2005b], “Why I am so wise”, sec. 1, 2). That Nietzsche was received as a genius like Goethe already soon after his breakdown, is evidenced by the following note from the diaries of Arthur Schnitzler. He writes on the 21st of July in 1891: “Nietzsche! With nobody I have experienced so deep that there is something I can *not* become.” (Schnitzler [1987], 342 )For self-canonization as an aspect of the discourse on genius in the Fin de Siècle see Köhne (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Nietzsche (2005b), “Why I am so wise”, sec. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 68. The German term *Geschlecht* is ambivalent, since it can mean both sex and gender. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *Pace* Higgins (1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 363. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 363. See also Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. See also Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 144, 239. Note that even Otto Weininger (1903, 9 f.), one of the most vicious misogynists of the Fin de Siècle, distinguishes between sex and gender, assuming that all individuals are a mixture of male and female characteristics. He contends that men can turn into women, yet that women can only be male to a certain degree and should strive to eliminate their male traits as much as possible (Weininger [1903], 241 f.). Since Weininger identifies genius with masculinity, women cannot actualize the highest form of human excellence (Weininger [1903], 143 f.). Moreover, he too suggests that feminism is carried by “manly woman” whose strive for emancipation amounts to a degeneration of their actual character (Weininger [1903], 80 f.). See also Le Rider (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Note that Nietzsche, at times, seems to have held more positive views of women than in his later period, supporting, for instance, the admission of women to the University of Basel in 1874 (see Young [2010], 191). Even the less essentialist typology of his middle period is, however, ambivalent. While some sections of *Human, All Too Human* are critical of the fate of women in the patriarchal society of the 19th century (e.g., Nietzsche [1996b], sec. 270, 272) and show respect for the “female intellect” (Nietzsche [1996a], I, sec. 411), the latter is also characterized as full of contradictions (Nietzsche [1996a], I, sec. 419) and Nietzsche warns of the effects of women’s emancipation on society, denying them the capacity for doing politics and certain kinds of science (e.g., Nietzsche [1996a], I, sec. 416, 425). Moreover, he praises, of course, the “masculine culture” of ancient Greece and regards the social exclusion of women which reduced them to their natural function as cause of its long-standing youthfulness (Nietzsche [1996a], I, sec. 259). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. See, e.g., the mini-parable of the birds of prey and the lambs in Nietzsche (1994), I, sec.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Nietzsche (2002b), 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. For criticizing Nietzsche as a misogynist see, e.g., Kennedy (1987); as a “very traditional *paternalist*” see, e.g., Young (2010), 429. It’s beyond the scope of this paper, to critically examine Clark’s (1995) ambitious attempt to absolve Nietzsche’s texts from the accusation of misogyny completely. Yet I would like to note that her view depends on the acceptance of an ambitious interpretation of Nietzsche’s epistemology and, what she will later call, an esoteric reading of *Beyond Good and Evil* that assumes that there is a deeper meaning of the text beyond and often contrary to what it actually says; see Clark/Dudrick (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. See, e.g. Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 233, 239; Nietzsche (1994), III, sec. 25; Nietzsche (2005b), “Why I write such good books”, sec. 5. NF-1882,3[1], KSA 9; NF-1884,26[361], KSA 11; NF-1885,35[11], KSA 11; 1885,34[38], KSA 11; NF-1887,10[113], KSA 12; NF-1888,15[32], KSA 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. That Nietzsche has a double standard when it comes to women’s capacities has been demonstrated for other topics: for the overcoming of nihilism see Brennan (2021), 226f.; for friendship see Verkerk (2017), 151f. Clark’s (1995) charitable reading argues that Nietzsche criticizes a certain kind of feminism only that did not live up to his expectations of a liberation from traditional morality. Yet she fails to demonstrate that his criticism applies to the diverse emancipatory movement of the late 19th-century; that he believed that women are capable of going beyond good and evil; and that he thought that gender equality is a desirable goal. The latter is questionable, since he sees feminism as part of the democratic movement of his time he fundamentally rejects (see, e.g., Nietzsche 2002b, sec. 239). [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. NF-1884,26[361], KSA 11; my trans. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. NF-1884,26[361], KSA 11; my trans. Young (2010, 427–429) suggests that such a paternalism motivates Nietzsche’s critical views of the feminist movement of his time. See also Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 239, where he uses the term *Entartung* to characterize women’s emancipation. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 361. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 361. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Nietzsche (2002a), sec. 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. *Pace* Verkerk (2019) who reads Nietzsche’s identification of women as actresses as a source of the performative philosophy of transgender. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. See also Nietzsche (2002b), sec. 257, 258; Nietzsche (2005a), “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man”, sec. 40; Nietzsche (1999b), sec. 57. For a more comprehensive examination of this problematic aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy of culture see Hurka (2007), 17–19; Huddleston (2009), chap. 6; Sommer (2012), 95f. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. See Weininger (1903), 132 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. For the widespread and ambivalent reception of Nietzsche see Aschheim (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Simmel (1996), 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Simmel (1996), 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)