

### Nietzsche, the Mask and the Problem of the Actor

Readers of Nietzsche are not unfamiliar with the thought that his philosophical writings contain numerous at least apparent contradictions. We begin with one of them. On the one hand, Nietzsche takes pride of place in the canonical parade of theatre-haters.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, he himself demands inclusion: ‘I am essentially anti-theatrical’.<sup>2</sup> This antipathy appears to extend to the actor’s ‘inner longing for a role and mask’.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Nietzsche is known as an *advocate* and admirer of the mask: ‘everything profound loves masks’ reads one of his best-known lines.<sup>4</sup> Mask-wearing, whatever that turns out to be, is not only a social strategy, but also a philosophical or intellectual one, as we shall see. The mask has a variety of associations, of course, but a salient one, for Nietzsche, was its relation to the actor, beginning with its use in Greek tragedy.<sup>5</sup> Thus we seem to find a Nietzsche who on the one hand opposes the theatre and the actor’s role-playing and mask-wearing and, on the other hand, who encourages the mask, which he himself associates with acting and theatre.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, this tension has potential implications for our understanding of Nietzsche's antipathy to theatre. To take one example, he seems to connect theatre with lack of honesty, including to oneself (GS 368). And yet some have taken Nietzsche as ‘masking’ his own thoughts, as a means to avoid being honest with himself.<sup>7</sup> If Nietzsche can advocate masking, and if masking includes not being honest, even to oneself, then why is he and why ought he to be anti-theatrical? But before diving into the details, it is worth noting why this tension might be of some significance for those interested in Nietzsche's philosophy more broadly,

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<sup>1</sup> Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translate by Josef Nauckhoff (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001) (henceforth ‘GS’), Section 368. Unless otherwise stated, references to Nietzsche's works will give the standard aphorism number rather than the page number. For other broadly anti-theatrical passages, see his *The Case of Wagner* (henceforth ‘CW’), sections 8-12 and *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), volume 12, p. 475 and volume 13, pp. 242, 403 (henceforth ‘KSA’, followed by volume and page number).

<sup>3</sup> GS 361.

<sup>4</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by W. Kaufmann in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000) (henceforth ‘BGE’), section 40; for a sample of apparently positive remarks about the mask, see KSA 10: 13; BGE 190, 278; KSA 11: 451. We discuss others in more detail in due course

<sup>5</sup> KSA 1: 533; GS 80.

<sup>6</sup> I do not present this tension as my own discovery: Ernst Bertram, *Nietzsche: Versuch einer Mythologie* (Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1920), pp. 157-180, marked it in an early study of Nietzsche, but Bertram’s remarks are too scattered to be a major focus here.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Alderman, ‘Nietzsche’s Masks’, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1972): 365–88, p. 368.

beyond just his analysis of theatre. The reason is that Nietzsche’s remarks about the mask have been taken by a wide variety of commentators as a way into reading his philosophical method. Frequently, his mask-advocacy is understood as an indication that all it is not what it seems, either with respect to particular remarks or with respect to his philosophical enterprise as a whole.<sup>8</sup> Related to this is another oft-repeated claim, namely that Nietzsche’s mode of doing philosophy is intrinsically theatrical or dramatic.<sup>9</sup> Commentators vary greatly, of course, on what they take the exact nature of a masked, theatrical, or dramatic philosophy to be. But I am particularly interested in one potential implication of a ‘masked’ philosophy: namely that, in advocating mask-wearing, Nietzsche implies that his own philosophical claims are, at some general level, not to be taken as sincere – that he is not in fact asserting what he takes himself to believe.<sup>10</sup> I choose this definition of sincerity<sup>11</sup> because it highlights that one can be sincere and also wrong about oneself (if, for example, I tell you I am not resentful, and I believe I am not resentful, but on some level, in fact, I am), just as one can be insincere and yet still, despite one’s best efforts, communicate quite accurately (for example, involuntarily). If this way of understanding his mask-advocacy were correct, it would be as though I were to place a footnote in this paper which said ‘it’s a thoroughly good idea to dress up one’s real and best ideas in confusing ways’: whatever else, you ought probably to think twice about taking everything I said as a sincere report of my own views. There is no reason why a philosopher should not decide to write in such a way, and, if executed

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example: Karl Jaspers’ remark that for Nietzsche ‘masks necessarily belong to the truth’, where masks are understood, in part, as ‘indirect communication’ (reprinted in Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian, 1954) 165; Walter Kaufmann’s footnote to BGE 40 in his *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern library, 2000), 241; Raymond Geuss, ‘Introduction’ to Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999) viii-ix; Laurence Lampert, ‘Nietzsche’s Free Spirit Mask: Beyond Good and Evil’, *International Studies in Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (1986): 41–52.; Alderman, ‘Nietzsche’s Masks’; Robert B. Pippin, ‘Irony and Affirmation in Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra’, in *Nietzsche’s New Seas*, ed. Tracey Strong and Michael Gillespie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 66.

<sup>9</sup> Alderman, ‘Nietzsche’s masks’, 386; Peter Sloterdijk, *Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche’s Materialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Martin Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations In Theater And Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); David Kornhaber, ‘The Philosopher, the Playwright, and the Actor: Friedrich Nietzsche and the Modern Drama’s Concept of Performance’, *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 1 (2012): 29; Peter Holbrook, ‘Nietzsche’s Shakespeare’ in *Shakespeare and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Jennifer Ann Bates and Richard Wilson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 76.

<sup>10</sup> For an early instance of masking as insincerity, see Ernst Bertram’s suggestion that doctrines like the *Übermensch* and the eternal recurrence are ‘great pedagogical lies in the mask of “absolute truths”’ (*Nietzsche*, 151).

<sup>11</sup> From Richard Moran, ‘Problems of Sincerity’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105, no. 1 (June 2005): 325–45, 343.

thoroughly and brilliantly, that philosopher might end up writing like Nietzsche. On the other hand, it would be worthy of comment, at least, if such a philosopher were also to *attack* acting and mask-wearing itself. The point is not that such an attack on mask-wearing would be illegitimate because inconsistent: inconsistency of some kind may well be permissible, even necessary, for the mask-wearing philosopher. Indeed, many have taken Nietzsche's mask-advocacy together with his attack on conventional notions of truth to form these sorts of conclusions. Rather, the point is that the self-declared mask-wearer who attacks mask-wearing – like the actor who attacks acting or the poet who attacks poetry – appears as a moment of irony. And irony, as Nietzsche surely knew, has a habit of drawing attention to itself. We should give this irony the attention it demands.

This is an essay about these two thoughts in Nietzsche: on the one hand, his advocacy of the mask; on the other, his criticism of the actor. It is, therefore, an exploration of Nietzsche's philosophy of theatre but also of the sense in which his philosophy itself might be claimed as dramatic or theatrical, as it so often has. The former, I argue, gives us the tools we need to understand the latter. We first examine what Nietzsche writes about theatre and acting in their artistic context, and then in their social or everyday contexts; with these contexts in mind, we shall turn to his remarks about philosophy itself and its implications for how to understand him.

### Masks and Sincerity

One can easily see why advocating the mask might mean advocating insincerity. But we are not entitled to form a general conclusion about Nietzsche's philosophical writing simply on that basis. Three barriers threaten to undermine such an inference.

First, we would want to be sure that, when Nietzsche advocates mask-wearing, mask-wearing really does imply insincerity. At times, to be sure, it seems that masking is associated by Nietzsche with lying, deception, insincerity, or seeming to be the very opposite of what one is.<sup>12</sup> Yet, conceptually and textually, we cannot unthinkingly help ourselves to this connection. Take the masked intruder, for example: he does not wear the mask to make you think he is someone else; he wears it so that you don't know who he is – but it is perfectly obvious *that* he wears it and why. If masking simply means concealment, as with the masked

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<sup>12</sup> KSA 11: 452; BGE 40; BGE 194; BGE 230-1.

intruder, then, while we can freely acknowledge that no writer reveals all of her thoughts, no deception is necessarily involved. Some of Nietzsche's own comments on the mask do not meet this first hurdle. Mistaking someone's 'mask' for their deeper personality, he suggests in one place, means treating how they are in some particular situation (the mask) for something deeper about their general character that we posit as lying behind the mask.<sup>13</sup> BGE 40, in which Nietzsche makes his famous remark that everything profound loves masks, includes as one kind of 'mask' the (probably misleading or inaccurate) conception that everyday people have of the profound spirit: *your* mask, in this case, is *my* confused idea of what you are, regardless of how you intended to come across to me. Or take Nietzsche's remark that 'everyday honesty is a mask without knowing it is a mask'.<sup>14</sup> Here, masking is obviously not a matter of insincerity: whatever he is trying to say about masking, it relates to everyday *honesty*, i.e. what happens when people try, in good faith, to be honest with one another. To be sure, he suggests that everyday honesty is non-transparent and perhaps is no guide to how the honest person really is, but presumably the everyday-honest person is reporting what she takes herself to believe. As we saw from our chosen definition of sincerity, it is possible to be sincere and also (unwittingly) to mislead others about oneself. If mask-wearing means something like oblique or indirect communication, as BGE 40 in part suggests, then that too would not entail insincerity. In sum, when Nietzsche talks about masking he sometimes does and sometimes does not imply insincerity.

Second, we would want to be sure that Nietzsche is treating mask-wearing as something that he in particular (or his ideal philosopher) is doing or advocating, as opposed to something that all philosophers, or some other philosophers, are doing for the wrong reasons. That's because the claim that we should not read Nietzsche at face value is typically a claim that Nietzsche is (for Nietzsche and for us) doing something unusual as a philosopher. If he writes that *all* philosophy is masked in some way<sup>15</sup>, or if he writes that some particular philosophers are masked in very specific ways that do not apply to him, then we cannot draw any inference about his own philosophy. As for the latter, Spinoza's geometrical method is described as a mask he wears to intimidate.<sup>16</sup> Supposing Spinoza to have been aware of his flaws, there

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<sup>13</sup> KSA 11: 248.

<sup>14</sup> KSA 10: 13.

<sup>15</sup> BGE 289.

<sup>16</sup> BGE 5.

would certainly be a deliberately deceptive and perhaps insincere element to his philosophy. But this kind of mask-wearing is clearly not generalizable, since most other philosophers, including Nietzsche, do not write as Spinoza did.

Finally, if we want to draw general conclusions about Nietzsche's philosophical method, we would want some evidence that the masking he advocates applies to all of his work, not just to some specific part of it – say a particularly provocative or dangerous idea. Indeed, Nietzsche does suggest that some of his specific moral views (for example, his anti-egalitarianism) are too incendiary for his age and that, therefore, he must disguise those views in particular.<sup>17</sup> That in itself is worth noting, of course, but it does not follow that he has a general strategy of insincerity. One could, perhaps, try to demonstrate that *all* his philosophical thinking is connected to these moral ideas and therefore that he had grounds to disguise his ideas in general. But such a strategy would be difficult to carry through in this case, mostly because, whatever misgivings he may have had, Nietzsche is perfectly explicit about his anti-egalitarianism in a number of published works.<sup>18</sup>

As we have seen, ‘masking’ means a variety of different things to Nietzsche and consequently a masked philosophy may have various implications: misunderstood by others; an act of concealment, perhaps concealing the author’s more controversial ideas; deceptively intimidating in its style; the opposite of what it appears to be. Two conclusions should be drawn at this point. First, we can say something regarding the tension we began with, which compared Nietzsche's mask-advocacy to his attack on the actor: the variety of things Nietzsche seems to have in mind with the mask make this tension less self-evident. For example, everyday honesty is a kind of mask, and presumably acting is nothing like everyday honesty. So we will need to look more closely at the context in which Nietzsche advocates the mask for the philosopher, but we will also need to look more carefully at his conception of acting to see how it compares with his discussion of the mask.

Second, as regards the question of insincerity, surprisingly few of Nietzsche's remarks on the mask meet the three criteria we set out, if they are have the consequence that we ought to treat his philosophy as insincere. There is, therefore, a risk of loading his positive remarks

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<sup>17</sup> KSA 11: 559.

<sup>18</sup> KSA 6: 136-40.

about the mask with a meaning that he did not intend. Of the various candidates for an aphorism which meets these criteria, the best is BGE 25, which we have not analysed. In that section his mask-advocacy arguably asserts that masking is a kind of insincerity, that other philosophers have not been masked in this way, and that masking is (or ought to be, on the grounds he provides) a feature of his own philosophising in general. Here too, if we want to understand Nietzsche's broader concern in that section and come to a better understanding of its implications for his philosophy, it is necessary to have more of his specific concerns about theatre and acting in mind. It is to these we now turn, before returning to BGE 25 and some of its related aphorisms.

### Three kinds of theatrical acting

Nietzsche often implies that the actor acts primarily for the sake of the immediate effect that he brings about, as opposed to having any more substantial commitments or interests. The critique of Wagner-as-actor is, in part, that his music is written for show, with big gestures and individual scenes designed to excite a weary audience.<sup>19</sup> But what does Nietzsche understand acting to be and how does one achieve such effects? A writer in the nineteenth century had three significant models to turn to in thinking about the nature of acting and, I suggest, Nietzsche implicitly appeals to all three. As we analyse these models, it will help us to have four dimensions or variables in mind in any instance of theatrical acting: the actor's inner experience; her outer appearance; her object of imitation; the state of the spectator. These are clunky terms for simple things. Suppose you are an actor in a naturalistic theatrical performance, playing the part of Tesman, Ibsen's well-meaning, fearful academic specialist. The imitated object is a real, well-meaning, fearful academic; your outer appearance copies that of the imitated object – a tweed jacket or a nervous twitch. Your inner experience is whatever you, the actor, experience during the course of your performance: you might be nervously scanning the audience or you might be completely engrossed in the part. The state of the spectator is whatever *she* experiences during the course of the performance: boredom, rapture, illusion, enlightenment, empathetic identification and so on.

On the first model, the 'immersive' actor, the actor's inner experience matches that of the character, the imitated object. The best way to communicate a certain feeling or to convince

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<sup>19</sup> See WC 5, 8, 9, 12.

the audience that you hold a certain belief, so the thought would go, is to feel and to believe these things yourself, or to get as close as you could to doing so. The actor’s inner experience matches that of the character; therefore her outer appearance matches that of the would-be character; *consequently* the spectator feels what the actor (and imitated object) feels or, at least, responds to the actor as she would to the imitated object. As Horace put it in his *Ars Poetica*: ‘if you wish me to weep, you must feel sorrow yourself.’ For our purposes, a key point here is that, taken to its limit, this actor is not *insincere*: fully immersed, she really feels sorrow herself and the spectator who responds accordingly is not duped.

Some of Nietzsche's remarks on acting appear to take this view. Indeed, *The Birth of Tragedy* and its related preliminary materials locate the origins of acting not at a theatre, with spectators to be moved or deceived, but in states of intoxicated ecstasy in which a reveller simply believes himself to be another.<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche recognises that full immersion in the part means, in an important sense, not really acting: the Dionysiac revellers who imagine themselves to be satyrs (natural, pre-civilised worshippers of Dionysus) are ‘*unconscious* actors’ because each sees himself and the others as really transformed. There are moments in Nietzsche’s later writings in which some version of the ‘immersive’ analysis is offered. The discussion of acting and self-deception in *Human, All too Human* suggests that deceiving others into thinking that one is something that one is not requires, at a deep level, self-deception, a real belief that one *is* that something else.<sup>21</sup>

The notion of immersion, when applied to the modern stage, was open to criticism. The genuinely angry or grieving actor would lack the technical ability to perform his task: remembering lines, knowing where to stand. Hence, the inner experience of the actor *cannot* match that of the imitated person. Moreover, the outer appearance of the imitated person – genuine grief and genuine anger, for example – might be quiet and unimpressive on stage. The combination of these thoughts led to scepticism about whether ‘real feeling’ was appropriate either as a description of what actors do or as an aspiration. Denis Diderot, who pressed claims of this kind against the immersion model, had a second, different analysis – I’ll call it the ‘gymnastic’ model – which combined two distinct claims. The first was that

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<sup>20</sup> KSA 1: 521; *The Birth of Tragedy* translated by Ronald Speirs, Cambridge: CUP, 1999, Section 8 (henceforth ‘BT’).

<sup>21</sup> *Human, All too Human* translated by R Hollingdale (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), part I, sections 51-2 (henceforth ‘HA’).

outer appearance does not match the imitated person: on-stage gestures and behaviours were nothing like their real-life counterparts. At best, on-stage emotion is a kind of caricature or a symbolic language which audience members learn to read. Second, the actor’s outer appearance – for example, the emotion she imitates – does not correspond to her inner experience: there is no shared feeling between actor and character. The actor remains cool, calm and distanced, although, as a physical trial, the routine of acting may be very exhausting (hence the ‘gymnastic’ label). In sum: neither the actor’s inner experience nor the actor’s outer appearance corresponds to that of the imitated object.<sup>22</sup>

Both components are present in Nietzsche’s work. GS 78 has theatre as the art of putting us on stage in front of ourselves, but specifically in a simplified and transfigured form. In the Greek case, he claims, the theatre presented the flattering but false impression that humans, in the throws of the most desperate passions, still produce beautiful speech, which of course they do not.<sup>23</sup> The suggestion is therefore that acted persons and acted passions are sufficiently like us to be plausible but nonetheless unlike us in a flattering way. In the modern context, Nietzsche focuses on a description of acting by the great French actor, Talma: the actor describes practising his emotional parts many times and drawing on real life emotional experience, but never actually feeling anything like them when on stage. Talma recounts a performance in which he is close to being overcome with emotion by the performance of a fellow actor who, on noticing his response, warns him to pull himself together. Nietzsche’s lesson, from Talma, is that, in theatre, that which is to seem true, or have the effect of truth, must not, itself, be true: if actors like Talma really feel, the audience will not buy into the performance.<sup>24</sup> In one note, Nietzsche’s posits, as a ‘first law of all theatre-optics: what should seem true must not be true.’<sup>25</sup> This second kind of acting, as Nietzsche’s ‘law’ suggests, would certainly imply insincerity on the part of the actor, since successfully conveying some supposed inner experience precludes actually having it.

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<sup>22</sup> See Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, translated by Walter Pollock (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883). For Diderot’s claims in more detail, see T. Stern, *Philosophy and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2013) 115-124.

<sup>23</sup> GS 80.

<sup>24</sup> See WC 8-9; KSA 13: 30-1, 209, 244.

<sup>25</sup> KSA 13: 244.



The third model was the ideal of the graceful, non-conscious marionette, spelt out in Kleist’s story.<sup>26</sup> The marionette, so the story goes, is the perfect performer, partly because it does not need to take a reflective stance towards its own performance: it has no inner experience at all. In one of Kleist’s examples, a youth adopts the pose of a well-known sculpture: he can do so perfectly well as long as he isn’t trying to, but the effort of deliberately recreating it in front of a spectator erodes his imitative abilities and his gracefulness. Kleist’s marionette ideal is less an instruction on how to perform and more a lamentation on the fact of human mindedness. There is indeed a hint of this in Nietzsche’s early analysis of the death of tragedy at Socrates’ hands: it was and ought to be ‘natural’ and ‘instinctive’ rather than artificial and over-thought; moreover, we have been living too long under the spell of the Socratic, anti-instinctive attitude.<sup>27</sup> In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche calls the actor an ‘ideal ape’, who mimics the outer appearance of the imitated object without feeling anything of its inner experience.<sup>28</sup> The ‘ideal ape’ model combines an ideal of verisimilar external appearance (from the first model) with highly dissimilar inner experience (from the second model). Here, though, the disconnect between the inner and the outer is not a matter of deliberate choice or technique, but rather a matter of insufficient understanding: the actor simply does not realise that there is more to someone than how they appear on the outside. There is something of Kleist’s model, then, in the ‘ideal ape’, and in Nietzsche’s subsequent suggestion that the ‘great actors’ are those who do not believe in essence and interiority *at all* – as though understanding the inner experience associated with some action would undermine the actor’s ability to imitate it on stage.

These three models do not exhaust Nietzsche’s claims about acting. The main point is that ‘acting’, in each case, suggests very different and in some cases opposing accounts of what is going on. The first model has a kind of self-deception or self-transformation at its core. The second requires a clear division, and an awareness of that division, in which inner experience and outer appearance are no longer matched up, and neither is there a match between the actor’s appearance and that of the imitated person. Here, if a spectator were to believe that the

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<sup>26</sup> Kleist, H. ‘Über das Marionettentheater’ in *Werke und Briefe* ed. Siegfried Streller (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1978) vol. 3, 473-480.

<sup>27</sup> BT 13

<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, translated by R J Hollingdale (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), Section 324 (henceforth: ‘D’). Nietzsche, here, is talking primarily about historical figures, so there would have been a real, inner experience.

actor’s outer appearance is a genuine expression of her inner experience then she would be deceived. The third, in a sense, seeks self-eradication – or at least the eradication of conscious reasoning. What is more, there is a sense in which the metaphor of the mask fits each of these instances: the first, because although the actor is immersed, actor and character are not ultimately, deeply identical; the second, because the actor is deliberately deceiving the spectator; the third, because the actor, at the limit, *becomes* a mere appearance or a mask. To speak of Nietzsche's philosophy as masked or theatrical is to speak highly ambiguously, as we see when we examine his own claims about acting and masking.

### The Social Actor

Nietzsche’s remarks on acting are not, however, restricted to the artistic, theatrical context. He has a great deal to say about social acting, which is to say, everyday non-theatrical contexts in which what we do counts as ‘acting’ in some sense. While a full survey isn’t possible in this context, we can helpfully divide many of his remarks along the immersive, gymnastic and marionette-like lines sketched out in the discussion of theatrical acting.

As for immersion, Nietzsche has social ‘actors’ as those who can really perform a variety of different tasks. Here, as with its theatrical counterpart, the social actor is not pretending or deceiving, since he really is competent.<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere, the actor is associated with having varied kinds of knowledge – again, no deception or insincerity is implied.<sup>30</sup> Of course, being good at many things may include being good at deception and Nietzsche remarks on the figure of Odysseus who is talented both at performing many different tasks and at deception. His point is that the Greeks do not condemn his lying, instead seeing it as part of an admirable set of skills. These are positive connotations to immersive social acting, but there are also more dismissive accounts. In particular, Nietzsche associates it with the risk, at least, of permanently becoming what you intended to be only temporarily (a worry which has been associated with acting at least since Plato).<sup>31</sup> This is a worry about conformism: pretending to be like everyone else solidifies into actually being like everyone else.

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<sup>29</sup> D 306.

<sup>30</sup> BGE 28.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. KSA 6: 122-3. On the general worry about the actor becoming the character, see Stern, *Philosophy and Theatre*, 116-7.

As for the gymnastic model, sometimes the social actor’s talent is straightforwardly one of dissembling: some people are honest, Nietzsche suggests, simply because they aren’t good enough actors to be successful hypocrites.<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche attributes to the actor ‘falseness with a good conscience’<sup>33</sup>, i.e. a lack of particular concern about whether one is deceiving or not. As we saw with the Odysseus ideal, this need not in itself be a negative feature, but what he terms the ‘problem of the actor’ occurs just when deception changes from a useful tool to a kind of need in itself: dissembling turns from means to end. This is not the same as the conformism we encountered earlier: the conformist genuinely changes with the prevailing winds, but presumably stays the same when the prevailing winds do not change. Unlike the conformist, the problematic actor would continue to dissemble even if fashions were to hold still, since dissembling is the end goal. Here, then, social acting is clearly associated with seeming to be other than you are. Elsewhere, Nietzsche describes the action of trying to move a crowd of people as one in which one must exaggerate, simplify and coarsen one’s emotions, becoming ‘an actor playing the role of himself’.<sup>34</sup> The idea of getting a crowd going – something Nietzsche strongly associates with Wagner – is therefore connected with overwrought gestures, and it is partly in the context of Wagner’s works that Nietzsche invokes Talma’s gymnastic acting (see above).

Finally, we come to the marionette ideal. Nietzsche was certainly concerned with what happens when we start to think of ourselves as observed – as with the youth imitating the pose of the statue in Kleist’s story. The consequences are by no means altogether negative. BT’s aesthetic justification of our existence has everyday humans as aesthetic objects for a quasi-divine world-artist. This is a justification because it offers a positive purpose for our lives, from a perspective which we can, in some sense, occasionally share. Nietzsche would return to the need of the Greeks for an audience for their actions, in this case the gods, and he would also encourage readers to view their own everyday activities and those of others as a kind of performance at which they are spectators, as a means to cope with highly charged circumstances.<sup>35</sup> Another aphorism has the actor as he who cannot help but imagine the effect of his ‘performance’ on others. Hence ‘even when in the deepest distress’ – Nietzsche’s

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<sup>32</sup> D 418.

<sup>33</sup> GS 361.

<sup>34</sup> GS 236.

<sup>35</sup> *On the Genealogy of Morality*, translated by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), second essay, section 7 (henceforth ‘GM’ followed by essay and section number). See also D 509.

example is the death of a child – the actor will ‘weep over his own distress [...] as his own audience.’<sup>36</sup> One becomes one’s own spectator in order to change one’s own inner experience.

### Masked philosophy in the light of Nietzsche’s concerns

I indicated, above, that even a cursory overview of Nietzsche's remarks about the mask suggest that a ‘masked’ philosophy might mean many different things. Now, we can see that the same is true with respect to theatrical philosophy, understood as ‘acted’ philosophy. Immersive philosophical acting suggests really changing your views over time, rather than maintaining any kind of core value or belief. Hence, the immersive philosopher seems to be what she is, but what she is changes. Nietzsche sometimes appears to endorse such a mode of philosophising. In his *Genealogy of Morality*, for example, he specifically advocates completely changing one’s mind, at least as a preliminary step.<sup>37</sup> BGE 205 has the real philosopher as one who experiments and is tempted by many different things, though note that this is in contrast to the philosopher as ‘actor’, which, in this aphorism, means a kind of con-artist. The gymnast model allows for the philosopher to maintain her own views all along, but *seem* to have a different view when it suits. The marionette ideal, in as much as it can be applied here, downplays the role of taking any reflective stance towards your own philosophical work – and, indeed, there are moments when Nietzsche opposes self-observation on the part of the philosopher-psychologist.<sup>38</sup> Only in the second case would a theatrical or actor’s philosophy suggest a lack of sincerity.

Amid all this variety, are there general concerns to be brought out? Our discussion of theatrical and social acting has certainly shown that sincerity as such is not central to Nietzsche's analysis of the actor. Earlier, we set out a first concern about acting: when Nietzsche wants to criticise Wagner as an actor, one aspect of this is playing to a crowd for effect rather than being interested in anything of substance. Two further general problems are, according to Nietzsche, associated with the actor. In both cases, his interest lies not in acting as such but in an individual’s communication with an audience and specifically in

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<sup>36</sup> HH I 51.

<sup>37</sup> GM III 12

<sup>38</sup> KSA 13: 230.

what happens to the individual who becomes concerned with how the audience will think about him.

The second is that convincing communication of inner experience at least *can* require a distortion of some kind. This can be a mismatch between outer appearance and the 'real' version of the imitated object: consider the gymnastic models of theatrical and social acting, for example, when I have to exaggerate my emotional behaviours in order to be convincing. Or it can be a matter of mismatch between inner experience and the imitated object: this is suggested by the gymnast and marionette models – for example in the idea that the most convincing actor is the one who has no notion of the interiority of the character he plays.

The third is that attempted communication alters one's own inner experience: it is difficult to remain constant when one steps out onto the literal or the social stage. We have seen that this is not always negative, as in the almost therapeutic process of becoming your own spectator, with the transformation of inner experience which that induces. But there were more troubling versions of this when the focus is on producing an effect in others: in Nietzsche's worry about conformism, for example, and in his discussion of pathological dissembling, in which the actor-type becomes addicted to seeming to be other than he is. This was contrasted with dissembling for a particular purpose, as in the Odysseus case – to which Nietzsche offers no objection.

We have reached the point where we can turn to BGE 25, the section in which philosophical masking is advocated and seems to encourage insincerity. When we do so, it will be helpful to keep these three concerns in mind. The communication of philosophical ideas, for Nietzsche, raises the aforementioned problems of what happens to the individual on the stage. This includes the question of how to respond when one's views are challenged or criticised, which is in fact the main focus of the aphorism. But Nietzsche makes two relevant further claims in that aphorism, which lie in the background of his discussion. First, any philosopher must acknowledge that, given how things have turned out for past figures in the history of philosophy, their ideas are probably false or at least misguided ('you know that no philosophy so far has been proved right'). At the very best, one might hope to add one's name to a long list of canonical figures, each of whose philosophies contained its fair share of poor argument, confusion and falsehood, together with a degree of hubris. It is hard to see why this would stop us from trying out an idea, but it might give us pause for thought before

defending our own ideas too vigorously, at least if we accept that we are likely to be clouded by our desire to be seen to get things right. Second, Nietzsche suggests that if the goal is to display our honest commitment to the truth, then that would in any case be better displayed by attacking our own positions, not in defending them. The point of this appears to be to pull apart two intentions and to set them in opposition: truth-seeking inquiry on the one hand, and convincing others that we are truthful inquirers on the other. This is another instance, then, of the second concern (above) that the act of persuading others to accept something about oneself can require undermining that very quality in oneself: I want to convince you that I am right about something; to do so, you need to think I am an honest truth-seeker; to convince you that I'm an honest truth-seeker, I may need to attack my own views – precisely those views I set out to persuade you were true. Of course, if my self-criticism is successful then my own views will have changed (this is a version of the third concern, above).

In BGE 25, I would suggest, the masking Nietzsche advocates relates closely to the three concerns I set out above and hence to his general analysis of acting: it is intended to prevent the philosopher from thinking too much about how others think about his philosophy. But it is important to see that masking and acting come apart in this aphorism, for Nietzsche claims that the *unmasked* philosopher who defends his work in public ultimately becomes an ‘actor’. The philosopher is unmasked, as I suggested, in that he is unprotected against his own concerns about how others think of him. By becoming an ‘actor’, Nietzsche seems to mean two things. First, that – consciously (gymnastically) or unconsciously (immersively) – he acts as though his view is better grounded than it really is. Second, the philosopher-actor begins to play to the crowd, to seek out approval or applause rather than serious philosophical engagement with his ideas. He loses touch with the basis of his ideas. Recall the criticism of the Wagnerian actor as playing to the crowd. Recall, too, the notion of playing the role of oneself: the exaggerating, play-acting and coarsening which is required to move the crowd. While this might in theory be persuasive or successful as a strategy for convincing others, we have seen that Nietzsche holds such pretence and exaggeration to be unstable: we are not good, he thinks, at maintaining the line between what we seem to be and how we are. Finally, Nietzsche suggests that playing to the crowd, engaging in very public defence of this kind, turns one into a clownish figure in the minds of those watching. The original intention had been to seek the truth, defend it, promote it and be better understood. The result in each case is a failure. One has become a mere entertainer.

The mask ideal of BGE 25, then, is meant to oppose this by allowing and encouraging misunderstanding: ‘have your masks and refinement [Feinheit], that you may be mistaken for what you are not’.<sup>39</sup> As regards the three concerns given above, the masked philosopher is not trying to communicate successfully or trying to entertain – this avoids the problem associated with Wagner’s showiness. As for the second concern, not thinking about how others think of you protects against distortion. By analogy, whereas (on the gymnastic model) the actor who wishes to persuade a crowd that she is angry had better not be angry, the person who really is angry, and is not concerned about whether others believe her, can do as she pleases. It follows – and here is the answer to the third concern, above – that the philosopher who is not concerned with persuading others will not experience a problematic change in inner experience and will be able to maintain a grip on her ideas rather than turning into the Wagnerian entertainer of BGE 25 or the pathological dissembler.

My interest in Nietzsche's analysis has been guided, first, by the apparent tension between his attitude to the mask and the actor and, second, by the spectre of insincerity in interpreting his works. The discussion up to this point has moved us towards a better understanding of the first: here in BGE 25, at least, Nietzsche advocates the mask strategy precisely to avoid some of the dangers he associates with the actor. We are left with the question of sincerity. It is clear why BGE 25 permits the philosopher to court misunderstanding and to be taken for what he is not: the concern that others understand and agree with us has (so Nietzsche thinks) the negative consequences he sketches. Masking seems to mean building into one’s philosophical activity the awareness that one is unlikely to persuade, an awareness which brings constancy and security in comparison to the disintegration of BGE 25’s actor. The masked philosopher is like a person who, being pursued by a pack of angry dogs, throws some red meat at the dogs and therefore enjoys brief respite while the dogs tear apart the meat: now the dogs are not chewing on *her*, but on the meat she threw at them, and so she has time to reflect. Equivalently, it is as though the philosopher were to say to herself: ‘look, I’m *so* unruffled by what others think of me that I’m going to write in such a way that I’m likely to be misunderstood.’ (My readers are chewing on the meat from a different animal.) Nietzsche, indeed, is certainly capable of suggesting that he himself tries to be hard to

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<sup>39</sup> BGE as a whole, it is worth saying, is characterised by a particular concern with protection against the impact on oneself of dealing with others. We find elsewhere, for example, a fear of letting others into our reasons and our thoughts and consequently the suggestion that we hide them (BGE 284).

understand.<sup>40</sup> One can see, furthermore, why this way of seeing things might justify concealment, deception and insincerity. But we can also see that going out of our way to deceive, or setting for ourselves the goal of conveying false things about ourselves and our views, is itself difficult to unite with the mask ideal: for masking is meant, in part, to protect *against* thinking too hard about how others think of us – these were precisely problems associated with the actor, as set out above. And this brings us to a problem: for how else but by thinking of how others think of me could I form an opinion of what will make my writing hard to understand?

If we are to accept Nietzsche's analysis, we will have to agree that there is a distinction between the masking which protects me and the acting which risks a destabilising emphasis on how I appear to others. The former amounts to something like *indifference* to the opinion of others, whereas the latter would be committed to successful deception. The effect of this distinction is clear: in the one case, my focus is on protecting myself and in the other my focus is on producing an effect on others. But from the point of view of the philosopher who wishes to take his advice, or indeed from the point of view of Nietzsche's reader, knowing where to draw this line in practice is not going to be easy. Nietzsche, as I have interpreted him, has reasons to make his views difficult to understand, but he also has reason not to spend too much of his time planning out the intricacies of exactly how his writings are to be difficult to understand. One might imagine, then, something like an instinctive and not overly considered way of keeping one's distance. I shall return to this thought shortly.

### Three Objections to Philosophical Masking

The analysis I have given sets out what Nietzsche claims about masking and acting, both in general and specifically as it relates to the question of how we might interpret him. Of course some concerns remain. The first and most obvious objection would be to Nietzsche's conception of philosophy as I have presented it here. It comes naturally, since Plato's dialogues, to view philosophy as a truth-seeking activity which develops through interpersonal interaction. One ground for this is precisely that others can point to flaws in our arguments – flaws which, for whatever reason, we do not notice ourselves. For the truth-seeker, then, the correction and development of ideas that comes from sharing them with

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<sup>40</sup> BGE 27. The immediate reference, I take it, is to his use of Sanskrit – but it could be applied more broadly.



others ought to be welcome progress, not a matter of shame or embarrassment. Yet Nietzsche’s mask-advocacy, as I have presented it, is predicated on the idea that it is better to be misunderstood, at least probably wrong, and convinced of one’s own rightness than to be corrected in public. It appears anti-philosophical in its attitude. It imagines someone philosophising for show, rather than trying, in good faith, to move towards the light. A second and related objection to this way of going about things looks to the difference between the theatrical actor and the philosopher. In the theatrical actor’s case, the central and most plausible example was the communication of an emotion. The communication of philosophical theories and arguments works very differently. When Socrates discusses mathematics with Meno’s slave, he is not communicating his own inner experience as such: he is taking the slave through the stages of a mathematical proof. The sorts of concerns sketched above ought not to apply.

The way that Nietzsche would respond to these objections is at least revealing for coming to an understanding of how he thinks about philosophy at this stage of his writing. As to the first objection, this is a partly matter of empirical prediction: he just thinks that, in fact, we don’t respond to correction by admitting defeat and changing our views. Generally, he supposes that the conscious, rational deliberation of the kind to which the first objection appeals is rare and ineffective. In a sense, this reorientation confronts the second objection, too. An individual’s philosophy is not merely, and indeed not mostly, a matter of reason, but a matter of a particular configuration of non-conscious drives or desires. To produce philosophy is to be governed by some particular non-conscious drives and, again, the interpreter of a philosophical text is, as with any act of interpretation, subject to her own drives.<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche does not, to my mind, produce a sufficiently robust account of the drives to ground a theory of philosophical interpretation.<sup>42</sup> But it is obvious that, to him, treating philosophy of any kind as cold, scientific investigation and communication is going to lead to deep-seated misunderstanding. If we are in any way trying to be truthful in and about philosophy, we must confront philosophy as something to a great extent non-rational and as something which cannot simply be a matter of the abstract communication of ideas through a shared and

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<sup>41</sup> On the relative insignificant of conscious deliberation and rationality in philosophy, see BGE 3, 5.

<sup>42</sup> I analyse Nietzsche’s use of drives at length in Tom Stern, ‘Against Nietzsche’s “Theory” of the Drives’, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1, no. 1 (March 2015): 121–140.

neutral process of reasoning. From that point of view, the second objection has less force, at least for Nietzsche.

A third objection, however, proves more pressing, and brings us to a more central concern within Nietzsche's own work. I have spoken, as does Nietzsche, about trying to be truthful or truth-seeking in philosophical work. It was, recall, the starting point of BGE 25's mask advocacy that one was seeking to be and to appear truthful. The problem was that what we might take to be the best way of doing so – making one's views as clear as possible and defending them in public – turns out to undermine this very project: by the end, one neither appears to be nor is in fact a truth-seeker. But a premise of that discussion was that one's views (like those of most philosophers) are likely to be deeply flawed. In places, in BGE, Nietzsche is even more overtly sceptical about both the *possibility* and the *desirability* of genuine truth-seeking. You are somewhere between probably and certainly wrong; and, if by any chance there are truths accessible to you, they are as likely as not to be harmful.<sup>43</sup> It would not be unfair, therefore, to ask what Nietzsche could take to be the purpose of truth-seeking, masked or otherwise. The answer he gives also makes reference to the mask and leads us, I argue, to a final, deeper problem.

#### The deeper problem: masking and philosophical expression

A well-known statement and oft-quoted statement of Nietzsche's philosophical intention occurs at BGE 229-30: to ‘translate man back into nature’. This means, in other words, to take the same attitude towards human beings as we do to the rest of nature, to treat ourselves as natural entities. There can be no doubt that this description fits with broad swathes of the later Nietzsche's philosophical project and this particular remark of his has justly been described as ‘pivotal for the ‘naturalistic’ reading of Nietzsche’ which has recently gained some popularity<sup>44</sup> – though one should note that what Nietzsche himself understands as ‘natural’ is idiosyncratic and undoubtedly brings its own difficulties.<sup>45</sup>

However, it is rare to see any discussion of the immediate context of Nietzsche's statement of intent. For one thing, he goes on immediately to suggest that he has no idea what the point of

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<sup>43</sup> See BGE 4, 11, 24, 25.

<sup>44</sup> Joel Westerdale, *Nietzsche's Aphoristic Challenge* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 76.

<sup>45</sup> See Tom Stern, ‘The Problem with Nietzsche's Ethics of Affirmation’ (forthcoming).

carrying out this task could be, other than the mere fact that it is a task. More importantly for our purposes, it comes as Nietzsche re-describes truth-seeking activity as a kind of self-directed cruelty. Humans, Nietzsche claims, are guided by two drives or tendencies which conflict with the truth-seeking endeavour: first, we jump to conclusions (making helpful or useful mistakes in the process) and, second, we avoid harmful truths, are content with certain falsehoods, and generally work to keep ourselves and others in the dark, where remaining in the dark is helpful for us. Truth-seeking is cruel to the truth-seeker in that it attacks both of these natural and self-preserving tendencies. It is, in short, a kind of self-denial. Belonging to the second of these two tendencies which are opposed by the truth-seeker, Nietzsche claims, is a kind of mask-wearing: ‘the spirit enjoys the multiplicity and craftiness of its masks, it also enjoys the feeling of its security behind them: after all it is surely its Protean arts that defend and conceal it best.’ In sum, then, truth-seeking activity of the kind that Nietzsche's later project seeks to carry out is self-directed cruelty precisely because it opposes the natural activity of the mind, which uses deception and mask-wearing as one of its tools.

The crucial point for our purposes is that Nietzsche's natural-translation project is anti-mask in just the sense that BGE 25 encourages the mask. Note that the masking he describes, this feeling of being secure behind a mask, echoes BGE 25's understanding of the mask as that which protects us from the effects of thinking about how others think about us. BGE 230 has masking as protection against unwanted truths; BGE 25 also has masking as protection, in part, against unwanted truths (i.e. fair challenges to one's philosophical views with which it will be harmful for you to engage), but more generally it is a protection against forces in ourselves and others which will likely undermine us, once we aim to produce certain effects in others. Truth-seeking, in BGE 230, precisely operates *against* the instinctive masking activity which seems required by BGE 25 for the stable expression of the results of truth-seeking.

Readers of Nietzsche will be familiar with the challenge he poses to the truth-seeker: truth-seeking at all costs is an outgrowth of the ascetic ideal and hence the subject of a sustained critique by Nietzsche, as both Christian and anti-natural.<sup>46</sup> However, I am pointing to a further complication, relating not merely to the task of philosophy as a truth-seeking activity,

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<sup>46</sup> See GS 344 and GM III.

but to the task of philosophical expression, where the latter interferes with the former. To translate man back into nature is, he says, to attack the masks that we naturally wear, the masks which we hide behind and which afford us protection and security: this is the clear message of BGE 229-30, in which Nietzsche sets out his translation task. Yet without just these tools, the philosopher runs up against the problems of philosophical expression set out in BGE 25 – problems which undermine the search for truth, and hence the translation project itself.

We began with the question of Nietzsche’s apparent contradiction: the mask-advocacy on the one hand and, on the other, his apparent hostility to the actor and the theatre. Behind his remarks about mask, actor, and theatre, there lie many different notions and, in addition to the complaint of Wagnerian showmanship, I drew out two particular concerns which reappear in various forms. These concerns were shown to lie behind a central case of mask-advocacy, BGE 25, which in fact casts mask-wearing as a means to *prevent* the philosopher from turning into the actor. But ultimately Nietzsche’s grounds for encouraging philosophers to be masked reveal a further, deeper tension. For he leaves his readers in a difficult position. On the one hand, there is his translation project, reworking our self-conception in the light of (what Nietzsche takes to be) our status as ‘natural’ beings, together with the implication this has for our values: to translate man back into nature. On the other hand, there is the self-critical project, which takes it as part of the truth-seeking enterprise to rake over our own habits, motivations and needs, including those that relate to the expression and communication of our ideas. The concerns about ‘acting’ and communication show how the second project relates to the first. Ideally, these two enterprises would complement one another: what we found about ourselves as natural creatures would help us to understand how to go about formulating and communicating our ideas. But what Nietzsche offers is a conflict: the truth-seeker attacks the conditions for the stable expression of the results of truth-seeking (in as much as such a thing might be possible). The important conclusion for the Nietzsche reader, therefore, is not so much a warning not to treat Nietzsche as sincere, but a tension in his own philosophical project which, knowingly or not, he brings to our attention. The pursuit of the naturalist philosophy will naturally undermine the possibility of its successful pursuit.

Many of us will not be tempted to follow all of Nietzsche's steps in the argument I have presented on his behalf. His conception of philosophy is unorthodox, as we have seen, and his cynicism about a philosopher's interactions with others may strike us as overblown – or, at least, as far from universally applicable. Indeed, the mask appears much less in Nietzsche's writings after BGE, so perhaps he himself ceased to worry about how to communicate his translation project. But he was nevertheless right, it seems to me, to draw our attention to the communicative and interactive aspects of philosophical activity and to see that how we do philosophy cannot easily be separated from its content and its effectiveness. To ignore the relation between the two would be to lead an unexamined life.

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