

Moral Relativism and Perspectival Values

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Although the term ‘relativism’ entered the philosophical vocabulary as a *terminus technicus* only in the nineteenth century,¹ the philosophical position known as relativism can be traced back to Ancient Greek philosophy. As is known, the fundamental proposition of Protagoras of Abdera was that ‘man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not.’ (Plato, *Theaetetus*: 152a) Socrates’ refusal of Protagoras’ proposition in the *Theaetetus* has led and still leads many philosophers to think that relativism is self-refuting:

[Protagoras’ doctrine] has this most exquisite feature: Protagoras admits, I presume, that the contrary opinion about his own opinion (namely, that it is false) must be true, seeing he agrees that all men judge what is ... And in conceding the truth of the opinion of those who think him wrong, he is really admitting the falsity of his own opinion? ... But for their part the others do not admit that they are wrong? ... But Protagoras again admits *this* judgement to be true, according to his written doctrine? ... It will be disputed, then, by everyone, beginning with Protagoras – or rather, it will be admitted by him, when he grants to the person who contradicts him that he judges truly – when he does that, even Protagoras himself will be granting that neither a dog nor the ‘man in the street’ is the measure of

1 Maria Baghramian (2004: 11) points out that the first use of the term ‘relativism’ can be traced to John Grote’s *Exploratio Philosophica* (1865). Mi-Kyoung Lee (2005: 34), for his part, mentions an earlier use of the word in writings of Sir William Hamilton and puts forward the hypothesis that the term entered the English language from the German use of ‘Relativismus.’ As a matter of fact, as Bernd Irlenborn (2016: 7–8) indicates, the word ‘Relativismus’ can be already found in the fifth volume of Wilhelm Traugott Krug’s *Allgemeines Handwörterbuch der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, dating from 1838. Lee (2005: 34) also points out that ‘Relativismus’ was the term used by nineteenth-century neo-Kantian German philosophers and scholars to refer to the position that nothing can be known in itself, and that all we can know are appearances.’

anything at all which he has not learned. Isn't that so? ... Then since it is disputed by everyone, the *Truth* of Protagoras is not true for anyone at all, not even for himself? (Plato, *Theaetetus*: 171a-c)

Socrates draws attention to the fact that, if man is the measure of all things and, therefore, truth is relative to man, then Protagoras must concede the truth of the opinion contrary to his own doctrine, namely the opinion according to which it is false that man is the measure of all things. By doing so, however, Protagoras would be contradictorily committed to both the truth and falsehood of his own doctrine. In order to avoid falling into this contradiction, Protagoras must assume that there is at least one absolute truth, that is, the truth of the proposition 'man is the measure of all things.' But then, once again, this could be seen as a contradictory move, for Protagoras would be maintaining at the same time that all truth is relative and that there is – at least – one absolute truth, namely, that all truth is relative.²

As Neil Levy (2002: 19) has pointed out, unlike epistemic relativism, moral relativism is not vulnerable to the contradiction argument. Indeed, no contradiction is involved in claiming that 'moral claims are true only relative to some standard or framework' since this is not itself a moral claim. Even so, moral relativism faces other difficulties. Above all, opponents of moral relativism claim that if moral relativism is true, then we have no means to condemn morally actions that we find profoundly reprehensible or immoral if these actions are performed by members of a different culture than ours. This claim usually takes the form of a slippery slope argument: if we recognize that *a* (we do not have any absolute moral standards in the name of which we can denounce reprehensible or immoral actions), then the result *b* (the way is open for any kind of crime) inevitably follows. Moral relativism would thus fatally undermine morality: if moral relativism is true, so the criticism goes, then anything goes, that is, everything is permitted. But is it really so? Does this way of framing the problem really capture the subtleties and complexities of moral relativism?

It is interesting to notice how the terms in which the debate between moral relativists and moral absolutists is phrased recall the way

2 For a more detailed analysis, see Baghramian (2004: 18–31).

in which philosophers have interpreted and still interpret the relation between Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. Needless to say, the argument ‘if moral relativism is true, then everything is permitted’ has a clear Dostoevskian flavour. In Dostoevsky’s last novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan, one of the brothers Karamazov, puts forward the following idea: if there is no God and if there is no immortality of the soul, then everything is permitted. The parricide, around which the novel revolves, can be considered as a consequence of this idea, whereas the novel itself can be regarded as a grandiose response to it.

Ivan’s idea bears a striking similarity to the maxim ‘nothing is true, everything is permitted’ that appears in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, as well as in some posthumous fragments from 1884 and 1885. This similarity has not gone unobserved and, beginning from the end of the nineteenth century, Russian and European intellectuals have taken it as the key to read the relation between Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. The maxim ‘nothing is true, everything is permitted’ has been removed from context and read as summing up the core of Nietzsche’s philosophy. This has led to the controversial identification of Nietzsche’s moral perspectivism with Ivan’s moral indifferentism. As a result, Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov* has been seen as anticipation and critique *ante litteram* of Nietzsche’s perspectival philosophy.

Beyond the question of the philological and philosophical adequacy of this kind of interpretation,³ what should not be overlooked here is the logic underlying this kind of reading. Far from questioning whether the maxim ‘nothing is true, everything is permitted’ could be taken as summing up the message of Nietzsche’s philosophy, intellectuals have taken for granted that the logical and inevitable conclusion following from Nietzsche’s moral perspectivism (essentially read as a moral relativism) was that ‘everything is permitted.’ As one can see, what we have is, once again, the argument according to which, if moral relativism – or, in Nietzsche’s case, moral perspectivism – is true, then everything is permitted.

In what follows, we will tackle this argument. More specifically, we will take Nietzsche’s case as paradigmatically showing that a

3 On this, see the second part of Stellino (2015a).

relativization or *perspectivizing* of morality does not imply *ipso facto* that anything goes or that everything is permitted. In order to do this, we will consider two assumptions which are often made uncritically: (1) Nietzsche's moral perspectivism is essentially a moral relativism, and (2) the practical consequence deriving from Nietzsche's moral perspectivism is that everything is permitted.⁴

1. Moral Perspectivism

One of the aspects of Nietzsche's thought that in recent years has catalysed the attention of many scholars is 'perspectivism.' Although occurrences of this term are limited in number (at least, if we take into consideration only the *oeuvre*⁵) and time (they appear almost exclusively in the late period), this notion has been taken as indicating one of the fundamental theories of his philosophy. The reason for the importance that many scholars have given to this notion lies in the fact that perspectivism is considered as a key term used by Nietzsche to define, in a more synthetic and incisive way, his theory of knowledge. Within this context, scholars often focus on a famous passage from GM III 12 ('There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival 'knowing''), but scarcely consider GS 354, where Nietzsche relates what he considers 'to be true perspectivism' with the *morally-oriented* view of

4 Nietzsche's works are cited by abbreviation, chapter (when applicable) and section number. The abbreviations used are the following: BT (*The Birth of Tragedy*), HH (*Human, All Too Human*), GS (*The Gay Science*), Z (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*), BGE (*Beyond Good and Evil*), GM (*On the Genealogy of Morality*), TI (*Twilight of the Idols*), EH (*Ecce Homo*). The translations used are from the Cambridge Edition of Nietzsche's works. Posthumous fragments (PF) are identified with reference to the Colli & Montinari standard edition. The fragments which do not appear in the Cambridge Edition of the *Writings from the Late Notebooks* are translated according to the Kaufmann and Hollingdale edition of *The Will to Power* (see *References*).

5 See, particularly, BT, *An Attempt at Self-Criticism* 5; HH I, *Preface* 6; BGE, *Preface* and sections 11 and 34; GM III 12; FW 354 and 374.

the herd community. Similarly, the posthumous note 7[60], 1886–87 is often mentioned, but most of the time it is misleadingly and arbitrarily quoted with no reference to its context.⁶ Since in this note Nietzsche's aim is to criticize the attitude of positivism, scholars interpret the claim that 'there are no facts, only interpretations' – a statement often considered as summing up Nietzsche's perspectivism – as being exclusively linked to epistemology. By so doing, the same scholars ignore that Nietzsche had already published the maxim in section 108 of *Beyond Good and Evil* (which chronologically predates the posthumous note 7[60]) and that, in that book, the maxim was specifically referred to *moral* phenomena: 'There are absolutely no moral phenomena, only a moral interpretation of the phenomena ...'⁷

This does not imply the rejection of the many interpretations that give preference to the epistemological character of Nietzsche's reflections on perspectivism.⁸ Still, it is important to point out that, although Nietzsche's perspectivism is grounded on a specific epistemological view, the former cannot be reduced to the latter. Nietzsche himself suggests this idea, for instance, when he argues that our fundamental 'will to truth' forces us to recognize that 'it is no more than a *moral prejudice* that the truth is worth more than appearance' (BGE 34; our italics). On the contrary, Nietzsche writes, we have to acknowledge that 'life could not exist except on the basis of perspectival valuations and appearances.'

The maxim in BGE 108, which can be taken as the 'motto' of Nietzsche's moral perspectivism, reappears two years later and in a slightly different way in the following passage from *Twilight of the Idols*:

6 For a thorough examination of this note, see Gori (2016: chapter 2).

7 See also PF 1885–86, 2[165]: '*My main proposition: there are no moral phenomena, there is only a moral interpretation of those phenomena. This interpretation is of extra-moral origin.*' We can find perspectivism and morality strictly related in other posthumous fragments of Nietzsche's (e.g. PF 1884, 26[178] and 1885–86, 2[206]). In PF 1887, 10[154], Nietzsche writes: '*My intention* to show the absolute homogeneity in all that happens and the application of the moral distinction as only *perspectively conditioned.*' According to Robert C. Solomon (2003: 46), 'Nietzsche's 'perspectivism' is most in evidence and most at issue in his moral philosophy.'

8 On this, see, among others, Clark (1990) and Leiter (1994).

You have heard me call for philosophers to place themselves *beyond* good and evil, – to rise *above* the illusion of moral judgement. This call is the result of an insight that I was the first to formulate: *there are absolutely no moral facts*. What moral and religious judgements have in common is the belief in things that are not real. Morality is just an interpretation of certain phenomena or (more accurately) a *misinterpretation*. Moral judgements, like religious ones, presuppose a level of ignorance in which even the concept of reality is missing and there is no distinction between the real and the imaginary; a level where ‘truth’ is the name for the very things that we now call ‘illusions’. That is why moral judgements should never be taken literally: on their own, they are just absurdities. (TI, ‘*Improving*’ *Humanity* 1)⁹

According to Nietzsche, to deny the very existence of moral facts (or phenomena) means to deny the possibility of claiming that the same facts (or phenomena) are *intrinsically* moral. In Nietzsche’s view, reality is morally *neutral*. To believe that there are moral realities is the consequence of an illusion: what we do have is the existence of facts or phenomena, to which a moral interpretation is added by us depending on the specific moral perspective from which we judge. According to Nietzsche, the moral character of an action has thus not been *found* or *discovered*, but rather *introduced* in the action by the human being.

Here we face the question of the so-called *Sinn hineinlegen*, i.e. the ‘introduction of meaning’ into the world. As Nietzsche puts it in a well-known passage from section 301 of *The Gay Science*:

It is we, the thinking-sensing ones, who really and continually *make* something that is not yet there: the whole perpetually growing world of valuations, colours, weights, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations. ... Whatever has *value* in the present world has it not in itself, according to its nature – nature is always value-less – but has rather been given, granted value, and *we* were the givers and granters! Only we have created the world *that concerns human beings*! But precisely this knowledge we lack, and when we catch it for a moment we have forgotten in the next.

As this passage clearly shows, Nietzsche maintains a *projectivist* stance on valuations.¹⁰ The world appears to be valuable and meaningful

9 This passage is often quoted in order to support a reading of Nietzsche’s metaethics in the light of J.L. Mackie’s ‘error theory’ (see, for instance, Hussain 2007).

10 On this, see Stellino (2015b: 182–184).

because human beings previously gave value and meaning to a valueless and meaningless world. In other words, they projected moral, aesthetic, religious and other kinds of valuations and estimations onto it. By so doing, they created a perspectival and anthropomorphic world and then forgot about their creation, wrongly believing the world to be intrinsically beautiful and meaningful.¹¹

The awareness of the intrinsic meaninglessness of the world strongly characterizes Nietzsche's late philosophical thought. Whereas philosophers so far searched for a meaning *of* or *in* the world, Nietzsche becomes conscious that meaning or value has to be *created*. This creation opens up new, unexplored possibilities for the human being: this is the ultimate meaning of the metaphors of the 'new dawn' and the 'open sea' that Nietzsche uses in order to describe the free spirit's reaction to the news that 'the old God is dead' (GS 343). 'The world has once again become infinite to us,' Nietzsche writes in another section of the fifth book of *The Gay Science*, 'insofar as we cannot reject the possibility that it includes infinite interpretations' (GS 374).

A superficial reading of Nietzsche's philosophy could take these passages and metaphors as a confirmation that the reasoning mentioned above – according to which, if moral perspectivism is true, then everything is permitted – is validated by Nietzsche himself. As a matter of fact, if, according to Nietzsche's moral perspectivism, (i) every moral interpretation is relative to a judging perspective, and (ii) God is dead, that is, an absolute viewpoint (God's eye view) is lacking, then (iii) every moral interpretation seems to be as true, valid or justified as the others. In other words, everything would be *permitted*. Following this reasoning, Nietzsche is often interpreted as a supporter of an extreme moral relativism as well as of a radical form of normative ethical egoism according to which, given God's death and the perspectival character of reality, moral agents ought to do what is their own self-interest, even if this means to act in detriment to others' interest. In what follows, attention will be briefly focused on both views.

11 See also PF 1884, 25[505].

2. Individualism vs. Relationalism

In arguing against the view that takes Nietzsche to be a supporter of a radical form of normative ethical egoism, the following premise is needed: it is undeniable that in Nietzsche's writings and posthumous notes one finds abundant textual evidence in favour of moral individualism. In a passage from *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, for instance, Nietzsche writes as follows: 'He will have discovered himself who speaks: 'This is my good and evil.' With this he has silenced the mole and dwarf who says: 'Good for all, evil for all'.' (Z IV, *On the Spirit of Gravity*) This individualistic attitude – a peculiar feature of Nietzsche's philosophy – acquires its full meaning when contrasted with Kantian universalism. This contrast, in particular, is symbolised by the second metamorphosis of the spirit, who first becomes a camel ('Thou shalt') and then a lion ('I will').¹²

It is because of his strong opposition to Kantian universalism that Nietzsche puts particular emphasis, in *Zarathustra* as well as in other writings, on the point of view of the individual in morality. This emphasis has been, however, interpreted in the sense of a radical and extreme form of individualism, which would directly follow from Nietzsche's perspectivism. Nevertheless, although Nietzsche often makes reference to the human tendency to subjugate and tyrannize – a tendency which is the expression of the fundamental feature of the world, the well-known and widely debated 'will to power' – the perspectival talk of a multiplicity of different and opposed perspectives leads to quite different outcomes. This becomes evident when attention is focused on the key question of the *subject* of perspectivism.¹³

Contrary to what one may be led to believe, most of the time Nietzsche does not identify the human being (the individual) as the proper subject of perspectivism; rather, he refers both to supra-individual subjects (e.g. the species or society) and to infra-individual subjects (e.g. the centres of force). Moreover, no matter which is the subject of perspectivism (the individual, the supra-individual or

12 Z, I, *On the Three Metamorphoses*. See also GS 355, A 11, and TI, *Morality as Anti-nature* 6.

13 On this, see Cox (1997).

the infra-individual one), the reality lying behind it is always plural and dynamic. This reality is characterised by the mutual relationship between its component parts, according to the view of nature that Nietzsche defends as from 1881.¹⁴ Nietzsche's perspectivism is, therefore, grounded on a *relational model* with no privileged subject. Within this model, the validity of one specific perspective cannot be thought without any reference to the relation (be it conflicting or not) that this perspective entertains with other perspectives.

A brief scrutiny of the most interesting passages where Nietzsche talks about a 'perspectival seeing' can lend support to what has been argued. The wider subject of perspectivism that Nietzsche considers is the *species*, whose perspective on, or interpretation of, reality is shared by all the single individuals that have the same perceptive and cognitive apparatus. Nietzsche has in mind what we could define as a collective subject on a biological basis. During its evolutionary history, every species has developed a particular psycho-physiological structure which is functional to adaptation to the environment. Although each member of the species has a specific viewpoint of the world, she is still part of a wider interpreting perspective of reality which is the result of similar perceptive mechanisms.¹⁵

Nietzsche follows a similar line of thought when it comes to another wide subject of perspectivism, namely the *social collectivity*. In the well-known section 354 from the fifth book of *The Gay Science* – the only section of the published texts in which Nietzsche uses the term 'perspectivism' and explains what he considers to be 'true phenomenalism and perspectivism' – attention is focused on communication as a prerequisite for the creation of a society. In particular, Nietzsche points out that human consciousness 'actually belongs not to man's existence as an individual but rather to the community- and herd-aspects of his nature.' The herd is here the subject of a generalized and vulgarized

14 On Nietzsche's view of the world as an unrelenting dynamics of force-quantum in mutual relationship, and on the connection between this ontology and the idea of 'will to power,' see Abel (1998) and Gori (2007: chapter 3).

15 On this, see, e.g. GS 110; PF 1885, 43[1] and 5[36]; PF 1886, 7[2]. George Stack particularly focuses on the species as the main reference of Nietzsche's perspectivism. See, for instance, Stack (1991). See also Cox (1997: 274–275).

perspective, a dimension where any individual feeling and willing loses its value in favour of the usefulness to the herd.¹⁶

Species and society are two plural subjects of perspectivism in which individuality plays no fundamental role. On the contrary, when it comes to the *human being* – considered as the referent of a singular perspective determined not only by its space-time perception, but also by its specific interests and needs – individuality obviously has a more important position.¹⁷ On this level, we have a multiplicity of singular perspectives pertaining to individual subjects whose fundamental tendency, according to Nietzsche, is to affirm their own worldview (their own ‘taste’) over those of the other subjects. This picture can particularly lead to the dangerous idea that Nietzsche is a supporter of a radical form of normative ethical egoism for, given this conflictive picture, moral agents could seem to be justified in doing what is their own self-interest, even if this means to act in detriment to others’ interest.

Without denying that, in Nietzsche’s view, individual perspectives conflict with each other and often tend to overmaster different or opposite perspectives, it should be pointed out that this interpretation suffers one serious flaw: it overlooks the constitutive character that *relationalism* plays in Nietzsche’s perspectivism. As already mentioned, Nietzsche considers the individual as always making part of a species or a social collectivity. Within both of them, the individual is not like a monad, but is rather situated in a network of dynamic and interpersonal relations. Moreover, even when emphasis is put on the individual, it should not be forgotten that Nietzsche conceives the individual itself in terms of a plural multiplicity, a *collectivity*. This is evident, for instance, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where Nietzsche’s criticism towards the traditional view of the substantialist concept of ‘subject’ makes reference to ‘social structures’ like the *soul*, ‘a society constructed out of drives and affects’ (BGE 12), or the body, made of many souls from which the action that *we call* ‘individual’ arises (BGE 19).¹⁸ Thus, behind the

16 See on this Ibbeken (2008: 75) and Gori (2016: chapter 3).

17 Among others, Clark and Leiter argue that Nietzsche’s perspectivism is limited to human consciousness only. Their view is discussed in Cox (1997: 276 ff). On this, see also (Grimm 1977: 68).

18 See also PF 1880, 6[70]. According to Nietzsche, individuals are plural subjectivities made of drives and instincts acting at an ‘unconscious’ level (see, e.g. PF

individual, as well as behind the species and the social collectivity, there lies a network of relations between singularities, singularities that we ignore in favour of a more unitary and inclusive perspective.

What emerges from this picture is a plural conception of the human being: on the one side, we find a supra-individual (biological and/or social) perspective that includes the individual one; on the other side, there is the plane of the single entities that constitute the human being and that find in him a (merely illusory) unity.¹⁹ Behind these entities, there is the *last* subject that it is possible to find in Nietzsche's writings, namely the *single centre of force*.²⁰ Here, Nietzsche leads perspectivism to the extreme, considering that the plane of interpretation coincides with that of being, that is, with the plane of pure and necessary relationship among the different perspectives, which can be defined only from within their mutual relation:

As if a world would still remain over after one deducted the perspective! By doing that one would deduct relativity! Every center of force adopts a perspective toward the entire remainder, i.e., its own particular valuation, mode of action, and mode of resistance. ... The 'world' is only a word for the totality of these actions. Reality consists precisely in this particular action and reaction of every individual part toward the whole. (PF 1888, 14[184])

As the analysis developed shows, when Nietzsche talks of 'perspectivism' or 'perspectival seeing,' he always has in mind a relational dynamics. The different interpretations of the world (be they of theoretical or moral nature) are all expression of this dynamics, on the basis of which the internal articulation of the most complex structures existing in the world is grounded. Everything is based on a non-teleological and necessary, but constitutively unstable, action-reaction process. Value judgments can be defined only by reference to this relationship, where, at the micro-level, a centre of force gains 'power' only insofar as it exchanges energy with

1885, 40[42]). Within this picture, the *I* (or the subject) is a non-substance entity, a theoretical notion whose ontological ground is only that of the pure activity that we attribute to it. In other words, the *I* is 'a perspectival *illusion* – the illusory unity in which, as in a horizon, everything converges' (PF 1885–86, 2[91]; on this, see also BGE 16, 17 and 19, and, for an examination of this issue, Gori 2015).

19 On this, see Cox (1997: 290).

20 See, among others, PF 1888, 14[184] and [186].

other centres. The kind of mastery grounded on this relationship is therefore not fixed and immutable. On the contrary, once the power of a centre of force is exhausted, the equilibrium of the total mass of energy changes and another centre becomes ‘master’ for a limited period of time.

The reference to this dynamic relationship avoids the risk of interpreting Nietzsche’s moral perspectivism as leading to a form of autarchic individualism. The idea that different, conflicting interpretations can coexist follows indeed from the view according to which *relationship itself* is the constitutive element of a perspectival reality. In other words, we cannot define the centres of force outside their mutual relations or without making reference to the way they react to the obstacles they find when they discharge their energy. As a result, every perspective can affirm itself only through the relation with the other ones and, furthermore, *in alternation* with them. Thus, it would be wrong to think that, within Nietzsche’s worldview, a specific evaluative perspective could be valid *in itself*, that is, in isolation from a context that gives to it its specific meaning, or to claim that one can affirm his own view over the others once and for all. This does not amount to any rejection of the individualistic and affirmative tendency pertaining to each perspective. Still, it is important to emphasize that this tendency must face the same attempt of affirmation from other subjects. In this way, conflicting perspectives give birth to a relational dynamics.²¹

3. Relativism

Nietzsche’s moral perspectivism has been interpreted not only as an extreme form of ethical egoism, but also as a radical relativism according to which, as mentioned, since (i) every moral interpretation is relative to a judging perspective, and (ii) an absolute viewpoint is lacking, then (iii)

21 L. Hatab (1995: 160) argues that Nietzsche’s pluralistic perspectivism is different from any other view that defends the coexistence of multiple ‘truths’ because it puts emphasis on the *agonal* dimension, that is, on the conflict existing between different perspectives. Nietzsche’s perspectival view has been used by Günter Abel in order to develop an ‘interpretation ethics’ (see e.g. Abel 1995: chapter 24).

every moral interpretation seems to be as true, valid or justified (i.e. *permitted*) as the others. In order to understand why this kind of reading fails to capture the real meaning of the radical change that Nietzsche operates in the realm of morality, it is necessary to focus attention on the main goal of Nietzsche's late philosophy. The death of God announced by the madman of *The Gay Science* (§ 125), together with the collapse of the Christian-moral interpretation of the world, leave an axiological and normative void. Far from accepting this void as an inevitable existential condition, Nietzsche aims to face it 'fearless' and 'cheerful' (GS 343), and to fill it through the well-known *revaluation* of values. It is symptomatic, for instance, that although, on the one hand, Zarathustra (Nietzsche's alter ego) presents himself as 'the annihilator of morals' (Z I, *On the Adder's Bite*), on the other hand he puts strong emphasis on the need of creating new values. In other words, Nietzsche is well aware that a new evaluative interpretation must take the place of the former one, and much of his effort in the late period is focused on elaborating this new interpretation.

The attitude that, in the fifth book of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche claims to be that of the new philosophers and 'good Europeans' shows us that, according to him, one of the consequences of the death of God is the opening of what Karl Jaspers has defined as a '*positive, creative freedom*' (Jaspers 1997: 157) for the human being. In the posthumous fragment 39[15], 1885, Nietzsche clearly writes that, with the death of God, the Christian-European morality has become no longer necessary (the Christian God and morality held themselves together, he claims). Once traditional morality has been denied validity, Nietzsche exhorts the human being to become a self-legislator, that is, to give himself new values and ideals and to set new goals (GS 335). In other words, man must become *autonomous*. This autonomy, however, is not to be conceived in terms of an unlimited or licentious freedom.²² The consequence of the death of God is rather an assumption of both individual and collective responsibility.²³ This is a key point which Heidegger (2002 [1943]: 189) did not fail to notice, as the following passage clearly shows:

22 See on this e.g. Constâncio (2012).

23 On this, see Pfeuffer (2008).

It is easy but irresponsible to be outraged by the idea and the figure of the overman, which was designed to be misunderstood; it is easy but irresponsible to pretend that one's outrage is a refutation. It is difficult but for future thinking unavoidable to attain the *high responsibility* [*hohe Verantwortung*; our italics] out of which Nietzsche reflected on the essence of that humanity destined ... to undertake mastery over the earth. The essence of the overman is not a warrant for a fit of capricious frenzy. It is the law, grounded in being itself, of a long chain of the highest self-overcomings.

With these words, Heidegger gets at the heart of the problem: the axiological and normative void left by the death of God and by the collapse of the Christian-moral interpretation of the world is not conceived by Nietzsche as a 'warrant for a fit of capricious frenzy,' to use Heidegger's words. On the contrary, as already mentioned, Nietzsche calls humanity to an assumption of individual and collective responsibility, that is, to an attainment of the awareness that, since humanity's great values and ideals have proved to be hollow, new values and ideals are now required, i.e. must be created.²⁴

This is the chief reason for which Dostoevsky's and Nietzsche's answer to the question of the consequence of the death of God for morality could not be more opposite. As *The Brothers Karamazov* exemplary shows, Dostoevsky believes that God's existence and the immortality of the soul are two essential pillars of the moral edifice. Without them, what we have is a dangerous slope that leads from atheism to self-deification, and from self-deification to the breaking of all moral rules. This logic becomes evident in the following passage from the dialogue between the devil and Ivan Karamazov (fourth part of the novel):

Once mankind has renounced God, one and all ... then the entire old world view will fall of itself, without anthropophagy, and, above all, the entire former morality, and everything will be new. ... Man will be exalted with the spirit of divine, titanic pride, and the man-god will appear. ... The question now ... is whether or not it is possible for such a period ever to come. If it does come, then everything will be resolved and mankind will finally be settled. But since, in view of man's inveterate stupidity, it may not be settled for another thousand years, anyone who already knows the truth is permitted to settle things for himself, absolutely as he wishes, on the new principles. In this sense, 'everything is permitted' to him. Moreover, since God and immortality do not exist in any case, even if this period

24 See PF 1887, 11[411].

should never come, the new man is allowed to become a man-god, though it be he alone in the whole world, and of course, in this new rank, to jump lightheartedly over any former moral obstacle of the former slave-man, if he need be. There is no law for God! (Dostoevsky 1992: 648f.)

Unlike Dostoevsky, for Nietzsche the dichotomy ‘either God or amorality’ is a false dichotomy. Aware that, to put it with Kant (1998 [1786]: 12), ‘without any law, nothing – not even nonsense – can play its game for long,’ Nietzsche is far from being a supporter of the thesis ‘everything is permitted,’ at least when this thesis is understood as an absolute lack of laws and values. If so understood, this thesis leads indeed to the nihilistic attitude that Nietzsche diagnoses in the European culture of his own age (with its degenerative effect on humanity) and to whose opposition a large part of his late writings and *Nachlass* is dedicated. On the contrary, as one can read, e.g. in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (III, 27), Nietzsche shows a clear awareness of the fact that European nihilism can and has to be countered with a revaluation of values. This is the groundbreaking task that Nietzsche decides to face, as he himself confesses in his autobiography: ‘I have a hand for switching *perspectives*: the first reason why a ‘revaluation of values’ is even possible, perhaps for me alone’ (EH, *Why I Am So Wise*, 1).

One of the fundamental conditions of the new ‘doctrine and counter-evaluation of life’ to which Nietzsche makes reference in the new preface to *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT, *An Attempt at Self-Criticism*, 5) is, without doubt, the acknowledgment of the perspectival character of existence. This acknowledgment poses a classical problem to Nietzsche, namely that of the conflict between different moralities or different tables of values. Since there is no one absolute morality, but rather a plurality of (often conflicting) moral perspectives, how can one perspective claim to be better than another? Here, again, relativism seems to cast its shadow and one may be led to believe that there is no plausible alternative to the position according to which every moral interpretation seems to be as true, valid or justified (i.e. *permitted*) as the others. However, this would be wrong. Indeed, Nietzsche defends the idea that it is possible – in fact, according to him, necessary – to establish a rank order among values, valuations, men, individuals, types, affects, drives, forces, goods, types of life, societies and cultures. The *Nachlass* bears abundant testimony that this is one of the most pressing tasks of Nietzsche’s late philosophy. In

particular, the *problem of values* and the establishment of the *rank order of values* are considered by Nietzsche as *the future task of the philosopher*, as the following passage from the *Genealogy of Morality* clearly shows:

The question: what is this or that table of values and ‘morals’ *worth?* needs to be asked from different angles; in particular, the question ‘value for *what?*’ cannot be examined too finely. ... The good of the majority and the good of the minority are conflicting moral standpoints: we leave it to the naïvety of English biologists to view the first as higher in value as *such* ... All sciences must, from now on, prepare the way for the future work of the philosopher: this work being understood to mean that the philosopher has to solve the *problem of values* and that he has to decide on the *rank order of values*. –

There is little doubt that Nietzsche’s attempt to establish a rank order of perspectival values is problematic. Brian Leiter (2000: 277), for example, in his paper on Nietzsche’s metaethics, poses the following question: ‘is there any sense in which Nietzsche’s evaluative perspective can claim some epistemic *privilege* – being veridical, being better justified – over its target?’²⁵ In other words, as John Richardson (2004: 68) points out, Nietzsche’s attempt to establish a rank order of values generates an *interpretive puzzle*: how can Nietzsche reconcile his ‘emphatic ‘perspectivizing’ of all values, including his own, with his equally vehement ‘ranking’ of values – a ranking that so clearly purports to some privileged status?’²⁶ To provide an answer to these questions goes

25 Leiter seems not to take into consideration the possibility that the privilege claimed by Nietzsche’s evaluative perspective is not epistemic, but rather practical. See, for instance, Gerhardt 1989. On the primary function of every perspective as *sinnorientierend*, that is, as providing a meaning through which the human being can be *practically* orientated in the world, see Kaulbach (1980) and Gerhardt (1989).

26 Another way to put the problem is the following: how do we reconcile the metaethics of the values Nietzsche criticizes and the metaethics of the values he defends? As Robertson (2009: 67) puts it, ‘If Nietzsche denies the objectivity of value upon which morality’s claim to authority rests, he thereby deprives his own positive values of a legitimate claim to objectivity and authority; in that case, the values constitutive of his own positive evaluative outlook are no more objectively justified than or superior to those he rejects; there may then be no objective justification for the claim that we should alter our evaluative commitments or pursue the revaluation through to completion.’ On this, see Stellino (2015b).

beyond the scope of this paper. However, within the present context, we may observe that Nietzsche's insistence on the need of a rank order precisely constitutes the chief objection against those readings that equate Nietzsche's moral perspectivism with a moral relativism according to which all evaluative perspectives would have the same status or the same validity. For if Nietzsche would consider all evaluative perspectives to have the same status or the same validity, why would he feel the urgent need to establish a rank order of values?

Werner Stegmaier (1994: 202) stresses quite clearly Nietzsche's original attitude towards relativism:

According to Nietzsche, to think in a relativistic way means to search for a hold no longer on any highest point – with which, if proved to be untenable, everything would break down – but rather on a network of relations which maintain their hold on one another. For Nietzsche, nihilism was the groundless-becoming of every higher philosophy of absolute, while the relativism of his perspectivism was the disillusion that had to follow and a relief. Philosophy could now give up the search for ultimate criteria for the foundation of truth and good and, instead, explore the changing plausibilities according to which we generally validate truth as truth, good as good and grounded [*Begründen*] as grounded.

In this passage, Stegmaier particularly focuses on the connection between relativism and what we have defined as 'relationalism,' and stresses the importance of considering values and truths as generated by 'a network of relations which maintain their hold on one another' instead of with reference to a single, absolute principle. If we take this viewpoint, then it is easy to understand how a *relativization* or a *perspectivizing* of morality – which is Nietzsche's case – does not imply *ipso facto* that anything goes or that everything is permitted. As we have seen above, Nietzsche is highly aware that the risk of defending a perspectival view in the moral domain is that all evaluative perspectives can be considered to have the same status or the same validity, but he also defends a relationalistic view according to which each truth, each value can be judged only with reference to the network of which they are part. In short, Nietzsche thinks that there should be (or there *has to be*) a rank order of values and, furthermore, that the *criterion* or *standard*, which has to be defined in order to establish this rank order, must take into account the relationalism of values. Thus, the rank order of values cannot be grounded on some kind of individualistic principle or

normative ethical egoism.²⁷ As Nietzsche suggests in the passage from the *Genealogy* mentioned above, to define this criterion constitutes the future work of the philosopher.

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27 Scholars have usually identified this criterion in the will to power. See, among others, Kaufmann 1950, Schacht 1983 and Richardson 2004.

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