**SUMMARY NOTES ON NIETZSCHE’S ETHICS**

**Introduction**

In an ideal, ordered world, answering metaethical questions (such as “what is goodness?” and “how can we tell the good from the bad”) would lead to statements about morality (principles set out for making decisions, having intentions and taking actions). However, the world is not ideal or ordered, and in life principles for moral action are based on various beliefs, religions and cultures and most of all by the background of the actor him/herself.

What is ethics anyway? Why do we bother so much about it? In its widest sense, ethics comes from the Greek, *ethikos,* which in turn derives from *ethos,* meaning habit or custom. Ethics to the Greeks meant investigating the best way to live. Value judgements on which ethics are based are usually hazy. We may refrain from taking an action because the consequences are undesirable, or because it is illegal, or merely because it is impolite. Some actions are the subject of considerable and interminable public debate: killing in war, abortion, euthanasia, or neglecting to take action to stop something bad happening like continuing to pollute the biosphere.

In real life we have to make judgements. They need to be ethical if they are to be to everybody’s advantage. Metaethics is a (maybe forlorn) effort to promote a science of ethics, to say what ultimate standards should be defined for good and bad. Consider a loose analogy: the system for physical measurement standards in the UK - the standards for mass, length and time - are maintained by the National Physical Laboratory; all other countries have similar laboratories (or access to them) and they compare their work. There are no equivalents for ethics - no country has a National Ethical Laboratory. Churches and the justice system have a lot to say about some aspects of our behaviour. But those big words “should” and "ought" in ethics are not related to any ultimate standards.

This corresponds to the view of the great German philosopher Frederik Nietzsche, who Simon Blackburn (Blackburn, 2005) refers to as the “arch debunker”. Blackburn rates Nietzsche as “currently the most influential of the great philosophers” and there is certainly an arguable case for that assessment. Nietzsche is regarded as the bad boy of philosophy, the writer who speaks the unspeakable. But his ideas have been taken up by philosophers who came after him like no other. His views (along with Kierkegaard’s) lead to existentialism. Heidegger based much of his writing on Nietzsche, and the questions Nietzsche raises (but does not necessarily answer) about epistemology, ethics, religion, psychology, and the way we live our lives are profound and still puzzle modern philosophers and social scientists.

**Aspects of Nietzsche**

The first thing to realise about Nietzsche is that he does not write like other philosophers. Instead of tight, reasoned argument, we get aphorisms, diatribes and even ranting. His writing is often dramatic and poetic, and the reasoning is sometimes hidden behind the stylistic quirks. He raises questions by taking plausible partisan and (even now) unconventional positions. As Brian Leiter (Leiter 2015) says “[There exists] an important misunderstanding of Nietzsche's critique, which is not, we might say, about philosophical theory but rather about the real nature of culture.”

It has been claimed that Nietzsche was one of the first existentialists. He was certainly interested in life as it lived by the actor. He saw that however objective we try to be when we make an observation or try to take in a situation, each one of us has a point of view which intrudes if not on the observation itself then on our interpretation of it. This was a theme taken up by the later existentialists, for example Merlot-Ponty (1962).

What were his major themes?

Nietzsche is the first philosopher to face up to the loss of faith and religion in the west. He said we need to choose our values, and that we must collectively create our values. His most famous statement on this is worth reading in full:

“God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives –who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it?” (GS 125)

Because “God is dead”, we must re-evaluate our values in the light of our own honest feelings and beliefs. Does that mean we need a metaethical system? God used to set standards; can human investigation re-establish them?

Nietzsche was against several common approaches to this basic problem. He railed against traditional beliefs such as (4):

- Christian morality

- Secular morality of traditional philosophers

- Every day morality of the people ( “herd values”).

He was against Christian compassion and pity because, he said, it prevents people living life to the full. Likewise, he criticised secular and herd morality because both appeal to a common denominator and again prevent people living life to the full. He respected heroes - a great man is a law unto himself. He thought that culture should allow us to make our own values; he was against scientistic "systems", not least for establishing metaethical principles. Indeed, he had a dim view of knowledge, seeing it as provisional, individual and open to the possibly of dangerous misuse if believed too passionately.

Even though he was the arch debunker, Nietzsche was for some things:

For being yourself: in modern existential parlance, for authenticity. But he was indifferent to its consequences. He thought that authenticity would mean conquering the comfortable, the cowardly, and the lack of adventure in oneself, thereby understanding (but not necessarily having compassion for) the weaknesses of others. He wanted to say "yes" to life in the fullest sense. We then take all rationality and standards from ourselves, or from great leaders and teachers. He saw life evolving, and morality and truth evolving with it.

In such a brief summary, this may look unsafe and unjustified by any proper evidence. This is certainly what some critics have concluded. But closer examination reveals something much more interesting and nuanced.

**Nietzsche, Existentialism and Metaethics**

Nietzsche believed that however objective we try to be our point of view obtrudes on our objectivity, so absolute knowledge is not possible. We could follow him from here into his epistemological pronouncements, but I want first to try to set out his view in context. He thought that we need to look at our knowledge and see where it comes from - it's genealogy. This way, we see our illusions clearly, are more sure of ourselves, and become more vital and assertive. How we live our life is up to us, not up to any God, mentor or father figure. He was for freedom, choice, action and self-control (i.e. control by the self, not from on high). This can be seen as the basis of modern existentialism. As Kevin Aho (Aho 2014) says:

“…existentialism offers a clear vision of what a valuable or praiseworthy way of life is. It is a life that faces up to the inescapable freedom and vulnerability of the human situation, and takes responsibility for the fact that our actions have consequences and impacts on the lives of others”.

All that, but without, at least in Nietzsche's view, having restrictive Christian, secular or herd rules for behaviour.

This makes Nietzsche a prototype existentialist, but how does it reflect on metaethics?

**Free Will**

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Nietzsche believed that our background determines what we do and our power to use our intellect to stop ourselves behaving in ways that are characteristic of each of us individually is limited.

We cannot act autonomously, because we cannot control our thoughts. We act by instinct. This instinct comes mainly from our upbringing and the culture of our tribe. It is at least partly a herd instinct that makes it hard to question because it has developed over millennia and has been passed on in genes, epigenes and custom. Nietzsche claims that we are no more than a collection of chemical processes which stimulate bodily drives and that moral judgements and evaluations are merely a linguistic expression of nervous stimuli.

Our assessment of acts as good or evil (HA 99) are also related to the drive for preservation and/or to the individual’s intention of procuring pleasure and avoiding displeasure. We also believe that our benefactors and persecutors have free will, and so we feel entitled to so make judgements on them. If an inanimate object or lower animal is the cause of our happiness or distress, we do not make the same sort of judgement.

Nietzsche thus sees freedom of the will as a psychological phenomenon. He appears to have no consistent interest in the nature of freedom in general. He is talking about our surprising lack of self control. In that he is in tune with Patricia Churchland (Churchland 2013), who calls the notion that there are chains of causality back to the big bang whereby everything is predetermined, “metaphysical goofiness”. Nietzsche would agree with her when she says that “we care about free will because we care about assigning responsibility". What is important is the extent to which we have self control - there is an "evolutionary rationale" for that. With self control we survive, even advance. We can maintain goals, avoid distractions. There is, according to Churchland, plenty of neurological evidence that our brains have evolved to do that. Nietzsche might also agree with the novelist Ian McEwan: “I see no necessary disjunction between having no free will (those arguments seem watertight) and assuming moral responsibility for myself. The point is ownership. I own my past, my beginnings, my perceptions. And just as I will make myself responsible if my dog or child bites someone, or my car rolls backwards down a hill and causes damage, so I take on full accountability for the little ship of my being, even if I do not have control of its course. It is this sense of being the possessor of a consciousness that makes us feel responsible for it.” (Strawson, 2010)

Our justice system assumes that we exercise free will and expects us to have the self-control to obey the law. But individually, we may have more or less difficulty complying with the law, due to our background perspective. Similarly, if metaethics could derive a clear moral law, then we would have varying difficulty is complying with it too.

**Individual Perspective**

Where have we acquired our ethical outlooks?

Throughout his writing, Nietzsche appears to have two particular themes: the capacity of humans to cloud reason with emotion; and the influence of custom and what other people do. The former links to Ayer’s accusation that ethics is no more than emotivism, (Ayer 1936); the latter to Heidegger and Sartre’s emphasis throughout their work on authenticity and the influence of other people.

First, let us consider emotion. Nietzsche emphasises “the importance of the biological body, dynamic conference of physiological drives and instincts that unconsciously guide our choices.” (D 119). “The idea that we have transparent mastery over all thoughts and actions is affectation ”. Also: “Our moral judgement and your valuations are only images and fantasies based on a physiological process unknown to us, a kind of acquired language for designating nervous stimuli.” (D 119). We struggle to find causes for events and to classify those causes as likely to have good or bad consequences. But our reason is clouded by emotion. Our reaction to events is conditioned by other people, and has been over evolutionary time. Although elsewhere Nietzsche was a critic of Darwin, he seems to accept that our behaviour is conditioned by evolution. The entire phenomenon of morality is thus basically animal, even chemical: “The beginnings of justice, as of prudence, moderation, bravery –in short, of all we designate as the Socratic virtues, are animal: a consequence of that drive which teaches us to seek food and elude enemies. Now if we consider that even the highest human being has only become more elevated and subtle in the nature of his food and in his conception of what is inimical to him, it is not improper to describe the entire phenomenon of morality as animal.” (D 26)

So Nietzsche believes that “we are compelled to act on the basis of a multiplicity of forces and drives and we are not (and can never be) fully conscious of.” (Aho, page 76)

What do we want? Do we want to be good? This throws us back into the question of defining the good, and the lack of standards. Nietzsche tells us that “good” and “evil” are just human reactions, determined presumably by our physiology (as argued above). Man’s motivations are at root mental, and so biological, and ultimately chemical, (HA 107). When a person’s desire changes, their judgement changes, and their concept of morality with it. Good and evil are not, as Kant would have us believe, defined or abstract qualities. What tends to happen is that we define good and evil for ourselves, and attribute good and evil actions to the motives of others, then to their natures. We look at what is in it for us. We take a personal, often unreasoned view. If we have been slighted by someone, then we don’t like that person. Consciousness, when we reason, is ruled by a subconscious which gives an emotional steer to its activities.

A particular manifestation of our emotions in metaethical form is altruism. Nietzsche (HA 57) sees self-sacrifice as a matter of personal ego, even stubbornness. He anticipates Freud with his ideas of conscious and subconscious. Man, he says “divides his nature, and sacrifices one part of it to the other”. Man loves his ideas, and does not want to give them up. According to Nietzsche, and put into modern parlance, much altruism is better described as cognitive dissonance. And of course (GS 214) belief in virtuous acts of this kind makes people feel good.

**Custom**

The sum total of our failings in moral assessment, our “errors of accountability”, are carried forward into the mix of values around us, and are picked up by others in the herd. While Heidegger and Sartre have taken up the role of other people in society in the context of their influence on the authentic behaviour of the individual agent, Nietzsche goes further, and sees “the other” as one of the main influences on how we define our moral behaviour and ultimately our metaethical principles.

Our physiology and mental processes may have developed as a result of evolution, but here and now it is custom that influences our evaluations, (HA 96). “To be evil is not to act in accordance with custom, to resist tradition however rational and stupid that tradition may be”. Guilt becomes devoid of all logic. Witches are persecuted, so are those who oppose the political status quo as in McCarthyism. In some countries, women who are raped rather than the rapist are assumed to be guilty of a crime.

Why? Because we are brought up to do it, and because our behaviour is “above all directed at the preservation of our community”. Whilst such actions may have started as generous and unegoistic, and many may even now in practice be so, the reason for following custom is because respect for a particular custom grows over time. Reverence develops for it, and eventually a “morality of piety” asserts itself and the original moral motivation is forgotten, (WS 40), (GS 116).

Rules have grown from customs, are presented without reasons, and we absorb these rules, (WS 48). Some examples might be:

* "the community is worth more than the individual"
* "an enduring advantage is to be preferred to a transient one".

Both of these beliefs allegedly lead to an arrangement which benefits the whole community.

But this adherence to the guidance of custom puts the new at a disadvantage; it discourages innovation and change, (AOM 90, also GS 4). In a passage in Daybreak (D 9) Nietzsche praises Socrates and Christ as innovators. They lifted morality above the tradition of the time, which in both cases was to obey the commands of the community. “Those moralists who, following in the footsteps of Socrates, offer the individual morality of self control and temperaments as a means to his *own* advantage, as his *personal*  key to happiness are the exceptions and if it seems otherwise to us that is because we have been brought up in their after effects”. (The emphases are mine.) Likewise, a virtuous Roman would see a Christian who “considered first of all his own salvation” as evil. Of course, both Socrates and Christ, the innovators, were put to death for their heresy in going against the current herd values. Nietzsche says (D 98 also D 131) that since morality is changed by innovators it exhibits, in modern parlance, paradigmatic shifts.

Elsewhere in Daybreak (D 132) he has a great deal to say about the way herd morality how has evolved in both the short and long term. Having praised early Christians as innovators, and promoters of individual moral salvation, he castigates them for glorifying pity as good. They imply that there should be some pity in all our feelings. This started out as the glorification of love of one’s neighbour and developed from there. In modern times, pity has been further promulgated by a Voltaire, Comte, J S Mill and the French Revolution. Everybody is now supposed to feel that they ought to be useful and act so as to secure the happiness of their fellow man. The ethos has mutated towards society and away from the striving individual.

Nietzsche is against utilitarianism and the lauding of the useful, (GS 4). He seems to see it as shortsighted, a effort to preserve herd values, while change and damage in the short term often lead to progress. Pity and usefulness are bars to the authentic development of the individual to attain his full potential, which was a cardinal principle espoused by Nietzsche.

The result of this adherence to the moral values and customs of the herd is now plain to see in Nietzsche's premonition of globalisation. There are many cultures with different moralities. Are we growing more moral then? No, says Nietzsche. But people are becoming softer, weaker, delicate and more vulnerable. Political correctness and the rule of the expert becomes the norm. Individual expression and innovation are discouraged as big battalions take over. People are also becoming more similar. (T - Expeditions of an Untimely Man 37). We seek equality or at least “equal rights”. “The range between extremes is growing less and less, the extremes themselves are obliterated to the point of similarity”.

Nietzsche's most complete exposition of the problem of universal standard setting appears in Genealogy of Morals (GM 2, 4, 5, 11, 13): he reiterates the idea that the good has a genealogy. This develops from a master slave situation where the master makes rules which work to his own advantage and where the slave obeys. At the other end of the line we have the herd morality, where society creates customs and rules which work to some sort of average advantage, and where everyone is enjoined to comply.

How did this happen? The master feels good and positive about his action. Why would he not? It leads to his well-being. Eventually, the slaves say “no”. Theirs is a negative morality, and they start to rebel. Eventually the slaves get concessions, which they guard from any interference and say “no” to the different, "no" to any change. *Ressentment*, the politics of envy soon develops. The master tries to sweep on, shrugging off the passing phase. But the weak, unaspiring slaves bemoan the change that comes with action with “the revengeful cunning of the impotent”.

There are no moral facts (T - The Improvers of Mankind). Philosophers should recognise this and “place themselves beyond good and evil”.

As for national ethical laboratories to which we can turn to set fundamental standards, Nietzsche has something to say on the subject of research forming moral standards. In the Gay Science (GS 7) he considers the amount of genealogical work required to identify various actions (presumably of a general type, unspecified) and to work out their moral standing. “Every sort of passion has to be thought through separately and followed separately through the ages… all reason in them and all their evaluation and illuminations should be brought to light… where is there a history of avarice, envy, conscience, piety, cruelty? Even a comparative history of punishment is completely lacking." He goes on: “Supposing all this work has been done. Then the trickiest of all questions steps into the foreground: whether science is in a position to provide goals of behaviour.” This passage raises questions for modern sociology and psychology in respect of of our limited ability to agree and accept the same derived rules and then follow them. Can we even set standards in any objective way? And can we meet them from our meagre resources of willpower and differing cultures and individual backgrounds? What do we think? Do we know? Do we even think what we think we think?

Law books say “thou shalt” but do not give the genealogy or reason for the law (A 57). Laws erect walls against innovation and experimentation. The law is claimed as a given, even that it is not of human origin although it has actually evolved and lost its meaning; even though, at one time, everything in the law has been demonstrated through experience. Laws therefore need constant updating.

Any moral judgement is just a sign derived from emotion or culture that we accept but do not understand epistemologically. Rulers have found that people, like animals, have to be tamed to make them useful. Is that improving then? Does training improve animals from their own point of view? Therefore, there is no metaethics. We start with motive, the masters take over, the herd reacts emotionally, and these commands and reactions become customs and all initiative and innovation is gone.

**The Ubermensch and the Will to Power**

What is Nietzsche's solution to what he sees as this metaethical morass? In a word, it is the *ubermensch*. Who is he? Nietzsche never really says. Perhaps the best short definition is by Kaufmann: a symbol of a man that creates his own values.

The *ubermensch* may or may not be be good for society, but above all he is powerful. (HA 45). "Our present morality has grown up in the soil of the ruling tribes and casts." Nevertheless, the learned think they know best (D 2). “… it is a prejudice of the learned that we know better than any other age”. We are taught our duty according to the bidding of the learned, such as Mill or Kant. Nietzsche says that duty leads to servility (GS 5). We search for the spurious morality to justify it.

Elsewhere (D 189) Nietzsche says: “ The great conquerors have always mouthed the pathetic language of virtue” and “[there is a] strange madness of moral judgements. When man possesses the feeling of power he feels and calls himself good”.

This is all part of what Nietzsche calls “the will to power”. He puts it succinctly in Daybreak (D 356): “ The first effect of happiness is the feeling of power: this wants to express itself, either to us ourselves, or to other men, or to ideas or imaginary beings”. Also in the Gay Science: “ He who feels ‘I am in possession of the truth’, how many possessions does he not let go in order to rescue this sensation!”. Essentially, in man Nietzsche believed that the will to power dominates all other willing. The will to truth is subordinate to it (Z II Of Self-Overcoming). The will to power reaches its zenith in the *ubermensch* and will define what we think of as morality. He sums it up in Beyond Good and Evil: (BGE 19): “In all willing it is absolutely a question of commanding and obeying, on the basis, as I have said already, of a social structure composed of many ‘souls’: on which account a philosopher should claim the right to include willing as such within the field of morality”. But a will to power can lead to exploitation. He therefore does not see the will to power as good or bad - just a fact of life (BGE 259).

And finally, “What is good? –All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man. What is bad? –All that proceeds from weakness. What is happiness? –The feeling that power increases –that a resistance is overcome.” (A 2).

So we will a self: (AOM 366): “Active, successful natures act, not according to the dictum ‘know thyself’, but as if there hovered before them the commandment: will a self and thou shalt become a self.” Nietzsche had no time for the timid or unassertive.

The *ubermensch* therefore develops who sets examples, defines morality and becomes a leader. He may be a false prophet, Nietzsche admits that. Some are not. But nobody, not even the *ubermensch* have ultimate knowledge of good and evil because nobody can have that. (BGE 260) The master morality can therefore be noble or despicable. In the *ubermensch*, power comes from altruism as well as cruelty. Slave morality is the morality of duty and utilitarianism. A good master makes demands.

Rulers of states maintain discipline and this leads to bad feelings about disobeying the rules, or bad conscience. The *ressentiment* which follows can lead to rebellion, overcoming the bad conscience. So “a bad conscience is an illness but an illness like pregnancy is an illness”. (GM ‘Guilt,’ ‘Bad Conscience’ and the Like 16–19)

Finally, Nietzsche is thrown back on man releasing his potential, creating his own place in the world. (Z II On the Blissful Islands): “And you yourselves should create what you have hitherto called the world: the world should be formed in your image by your reason, your will, and your love! And truly, it will be to your happiness, you enlightened men!”

**The Eternal Recurrence**

So morality is indefinable, but the will to power is real. How can we test our progress in “creating our place in the world”. Natures solution to this is the eternal recurrence.

“What if a demon crept after you one day or night in your loneliest solitude and said to you: ‘This life, as you live it now and have lived it, you will have to live again and again, times without number; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and all the unspeakably small and great in your life must return to you, and everything in the same series and sequence –and in the same way this spider and this moonlight among the trees, and in the same way this moment and I myself. The eternal hour-glass of existence will be turned again and again –and you with it, you dust of dust!’” (GS 341).

This is eternal recurrence: all our actions, willing, intentions and thoughts should be such that we would be willing to repeat them eternally again and again *ad* *infinitum*.

The quotation above from the Gay Science is in a form to which most people can readily relate. However, the idea of eternal recurrence crops up again in Nietzsche's writings. Sometimes it is given a more mystical account, as if Nietzsche sincerely believed that we are reincarnated. For example:

“‘Behold, we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally and we ourselves with them, and that we have already existed an infinite number of times before and all things with us.” (Z III The Convalescent).

This more imaginative and magical interpretation is not to everyone’s taste. It seems to me overwhelmingly likely that Nietzsche was speaking rhetorically in Also Sprach Zarathustra, which is a highly poetic work.

How does this relate to Nietzsche's version of morality?

He was always keen to say that whatever we do we should bear responsibility for it. His attitude seems to be that as we go through life we make mistakes but these mistakes are part of our existence, and that moral judgement is not appropriate to them provided we aspire to the sort of ideals that he sets out. Thus eternal return becomes a way of examining that process.

In and interesting paper, LH Hunt (Hunt, undated) maintains, as I have, that Nietzsche “never describes any actions, classes of actions, or patterns of behaviour that his doctrine would *require* of us” (my emphasis). In the absence of such descriptions, the idea of recurrence could be of help to us in planning our lives and choosing between alternative courses of action.

Hunt refers to the fact that throughout Also Sprach Zarathustra, Nietzsche refers to the emotion of revenge as destructive of virtue. Revenge is negative. Eternal recurrence is a way of overcoming revenge’s ravages. We may see the past as unsatisfactory, even calamitous. There is a tendency to break our lives into past and future and we stand in between at any moment. We wish to avenge (or make up for?) the past in the future, by making changes. This may be impossible, and a far better way would be to live our lives in the knowledge that the future will be continuation of the past and no break is possible. Hunt says: “Time is not naturally divided into cycles which, like a replayed movie, have beginnings and ends.” Throughout life, “ever-increasing self-integration” will occur for those who are able to accept the concept of eternal return. It “is the source from which, for Nietzsche, new virtue comes into existence.”

**Criticism and Interpretation of Nietzsche's Ethics**

It goes without saying that many philosophers do not accept Nietzsche's analysis. One of the most trenchant and thorough modern critics of Nietzsche is Philippa Foot (Foot, 2001).

She looks first at his insistence that free will is an illusion. She dismisses this as irrelevant because even if he is right he is still unable to distinguish what voluntary action consists in. What leads to action is not obvious in philosophy in general, and, she says, citing Bernard Williams in support, “the integrity of action, the agent’s genuine presence in it, can be preserved without this picture of the will.”

She takes his attack on pity morality much more seriously, although even here admitting that there is something in it, citing everyday observation of self serving behaviour and false profession of altruism by both religious and non-religious people alike. But she is less enthusiastic about Nietzsche’s view of moral people as tamed or reduced, as wretched and fearful, tormented by their consciences. She particularly dislikes his assumption that it arises from the *ressentiment* of a slave morality, from repressed envy. Is it always the case that the charity is a sham? Sometimes, perhaps, says Foot, but not always. Charity is a natural emotion, and cannot be dismissed because its practitioners also feel that they are due others’ esteem, or want to increase their own self satisfaction or social status.

Foot is interested in, and appears somewhat perplexed by, Nietzsche’s insistence that acts themselves are not intrinsically good or bad, but the people who perpetrate them are. She admits that this attitude means that he can applaud virtues such as courage and integrity, while seeing malice and inauthenticity as divisive. Also that he was for creativity, self-confidence, lightness of spirit, daring and so on, not for castigation and putting a brake on humans achieving as much as they can, and creating their own values. This is all very well, Foot seems to think, but this drive for creativity is all based on the slender premise of a “will to power” which is unproven and simplistic in the extreme.

Even if Nietzsche is right about pity, he is not right about compassion. Foot’s real case against Nietzsche is based on her supposition, which she sees as natural, that “there is nothing human beings need more than protection from those who would harm and oppress them.” After this observation, she gives Nietzsche a devastating ticking off which if it were verbally delivered to him at close quarters, would have him quaking in his shoes. She goes through a litany of cases of severe oppression which she alleges Nietzsche's philosophy would allow, including the baneful activities of Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, Pol Pot, and Pinochet to name but a few. By ignoring the possibility of this sort of thing happening, Nietzsche is, according to her, at best naïve and at worst positively dangerous.

Nietzsche was on the side of life, and “needless to say there is some good in this”. But we have to have norms in order to function as a society. Indeed, his teachings are likely to lead to those who feel they are “exceptional to think that when they murder and torture they are doing nothing wrong.”

Bertrand Russell (Russell 1946) was an earlier critic of Nietzsche. He took a similar view to Foot though his criticism is less well worked out. Russell seems to think that Nietzsche takes an aristocratic view of the society, and favours the well born. If we interpret Russell as saying that Nietzsche has a rather right wing view, then his observation makes more sense. Russell makes the point that while Nietzsche is not primarily a political philosopher, it is difficult to separate his ethics from the effect they would have on society if they were widely applied. He absolves Nietzsche from being the architect of fascism since he could not of foreseen what would happen in the 20th century. However, he does warn that adherence to Nietzsche’s ethics could lead to this kind of development.

Russell famously imagines the Buddha and Nietzsche jointly advising God on how we should set up the world. The Buddha advises compassion, of course Nietzsche does not. This leads to no particular conclusion, since as Russell says there is no scientific or mathematical means of showing that compassion is vital to human existence. Russell admits that his opposition to Nietzsche is ultimately based on emotion.

Russell also has something to say about Nietzsche's assumption of the will to power. While Foot thinks this is based on weak and old-fashioned psychology, Russell has a more ethically based view. He says: “It never occurred to Nietzsche that the lust for power, with which he endows his superman, is itself an outcome of fear. Those who do not fear their neighbours see no necessity to tyrannise over them.”

Some modern philosophers offer a more sympathetic interpretation.

Maudemarie Clark (Clark, undated) has a particularly interesting take on Nietzsche's refusal to accept the compassion based teachings of, for example, the utilitarians and Kant. She thinks that Nietzsche sees humankind as turning away from anything majorly natural (the sort of thing which science studies) and instead “forming beliefs on the basis of what they would like to believe, what would make them happy". Humans also reject other beliefs that would give the natural world value such as the existence of God, of the immortal soul, and of other worlds. So nihilism takes over - there is nothing of real value left. Apart from a few who affirm life, including the *ubermensch*, many will become like the “last man”, nihilistic and given over to the pursuit of pleasure and merely amuse themselves while making as little effort as possible. In a perverse way this can be the fault of the thinkers, who start by damning the old truths while not replacing them with anything else.

Clark thinks that the will to power can be interpreted as the will to undergo effort to achieve understanding of higher concepts such as justice, reason, virtue, philosophy, spirituality and science. This makes for an ascetic life, one which is life affirming - not like the last man who cares only about comfort and pleasure.

Nietzsche’s idea of morality is thus not based on the concept of goodness or moral rules. He thinks such general rules cannot be defined and he turns to genealogy to unpack moral behaviour. From this he develops a more situational ethic.

The ascetic ideal is necessary, as God was previously necessary, to teach and inspire humans in the way of our social ethic. It becomes life affirming. The *ubermensch* has it in abundance (though even he is prone to mistakes). The “last man” does not. We are not *causa sui*, self determining, and society as a whole must embrace an ascetic ethic not determined by rules but understood by genealogy and observation of what is really going on and where it will lead.

To quote Lieter: “If we are trained always to think of happiness and comfort and safety and the needs of others, we shall cut ourselves off from the preconditions for creative excellence on the Nietzschean picture: suffering, hardship, danger, self-concern, and the rest.”

**Conclusion**

What are we to make of Nietzsche's ethics?

On the one hand he seems to be against rules of moral behaviour, and lists of generalised virtues pointing out ways to behave. On the other hand, he writes about himself as a virtuous man who appears to want to set out a way of living which is in his estimation better than what has gone before. He recognises that “God is dead”. This is not a statement intended necessarily to shock the religious, more a statement that people have stopped believing in God and moral laws set by him. What has been put in place of religious ethics is inadequate in his view. We have utilitarianism, consequentialist ethics, Kantian ethics, and the usual systems studied in philosophy courses. None of these satisfy Nietzsche. This has lead him to disparage most moral philosophers, to ditch the idea of morality and instead espouse a system that will lead to rule by the learned, and those who can achieve.

Arguments against Nietzsche must include the fact that he exploits the doubts about our ability to define metaethical rules without replacing his criticism with anything else which is usable. He criticised Kant and other western ethicists on the grounds that they assume freedom of the will, even though Kant goes to great lengths to justify it as a primary principle. But Nietzsche does nothing to refute Kant’s argument.

He criticised other moralists because they were negative - they presume happiness as desirable, or pity as undesirable, though suffering is a great teacher. Suffering, according to Nietzsche, is one of the basic components of a fulfilling life. But his lack of empathy if unrestrained could, as has been pointed out, lead to genocide.

He is surely right to maintain that much of what we ascribe to free will is hemmed in by our past, and that we espouse it as a way of allocating responsibilities for action, rather like an owner is responsible for the actions of his dog.

He is also surely right to point out that we don't actually think in the Kantian terms or in terms laid out by philosophers. Psychologically, he has a point. Our perspective is personal, and our motivation is something like a will to power, although this may be judged as a rather crude and unsubstantiated concept by modern psychologists.

Our reliance on custom, even when it is clearly illogical, is also a credible view. It goes along with Heidegger’s view of our inauthenticity under the influence of The They (other people).

Nietzsche's morality, insofar as he has any, is that we should aspire as far as possible to be like the *ubermensch* even if we can't attain his heights. We should get as much out of life by achieving all we can. In particular, we should espouse potential, and with it culture leadership and courage. If a few people get trampled on in the process, that is the price for fulfilment of the many. But against that it could be argued that there have to be some limits, some form of brake on cruelty and oppression. If our only brakes are derived from emotion, custom and herd ethics, then maybe our task is not to dismiss those sources, but understand them better.

KEY TO TITLE INITIALS OF NIETZSCHE’S WORKS

A   The Anti-Christ, 1895.

AOM   Assorted Opinions and Maxims, 1886.

BGE   Beyond Good and Evil, 1886.

D   Daybreak, 1886.

GM   On the Genealogy of Morals, 1887.

GS   The Gay Science, 1887.

HA   Human, All Too Human, 1886.

T   Twilight of the Idols, 1889.

Z   Thus Spoke Zarathustra. Parts I and II 1883, Part III 1884, Part IV 1892.

In the references to Nietzsche's works in the present article, the number after the initials indicates the section (not the page number).

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