

Democracy and the Nietzschean *Pathos of Distance*

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Abstract: In this paper I discuss the Nietzschean notion of a *pathos of distance*, which some democratic theorists would like to recruit in the service of a democratic ethos. Recently their efforts have been criticized on the basis that the Nietzschean *pathos of distance* involves an aristocratic attitude of essentializing contempt towards the common man that is incompatible with the democratic demand to accord everyone equal respect and dignity. I argue that this criticism is misguided and that the pathos in question involves encouraging the flourishing of higher types that give meaning and justification to the social order. For Nietzsche, the experience of living under a society that is thus organized leads to the psychological demand to search for spiritual states within a person that can make life worth living. I conclude by considering whether, so conceived, the *pathos of distance* is compatible with democracy.

Some commentators have argued that, despite being overtly anti-democratic, Nietzsche's philosophy contains elements that could be used in the service of a democratic ethos. Hatab (1995) has gone as far as claiming that Nietzsche *should have been* a democrat. More recently, authors like Connolly (2000, pp. 317, 322) and Owen (2008, pp. 220-2) have argued that the Nietzschean *pathos of distance* could be used to articulate a notion of agonistic respect that overcomes the perceived pitfalls of modern democracies, such as conformism and homogeneity (see also Hatab, 2002, pp. 142-5). In the view of these interpreters, the proposed form of agonistic respect would grant all citizens equal, essential dignity and opportunities, while simultaneously fostering their differences within a social practice of continuously contesting the terms of those power configurations (of domination and submission), and, therefore, hierarchies (or inequalities), that will inevitably structure their political participation as co-equal citizens. Against these efforts, Alfano (2018) has recently argued that the *pathos of distance* is incompatible with the democratic demand that people be accorded equal respect because it involves an attitude of essentializing contempt. In this paper, I will first look at some reasons why commentators may want to recruit the Nietzschean *pathos of distance* for a democratic ethos. I will then argue that Alfano is wrong

to suggest that this pathos involves essentializing contempt. Instead, the defining feature of this pathos is that it elevates a spiritually superior type to the level of meaning and justification of the social order, and that, for this reason, it gives rise to the demand for self-overcoming. Finally, I conclude by briefly considering whether, so conceived, this pathos could be developed within a democratic setting.

1.

There are good reasons for commentators to focus on the Nietzschean *pathos of distance* in order to reconceptualize democracy. After all, Nietzsche claims that from this pathos grows another more mysterious pathos, namely, “that demand for new expansions of distance within the soul itself, the development of states that are increasingly high, rare, distant, tautly drawn and comprehensive, and in short, the enhancement of the type ‘man,’ the constant ‘self-overcoming of man’” (BGE 257). Since these theorists would like to advance a reinvigorated notion of civic engagement according to which citizens should become self-responsible, active, and open-minded contributors to political rule by developing their own capacities for self-governance within a political arena that prompts and aids them to exercise those very capacities in a never ending process of self-overcoming (Owen, 2002, pp. 117-20), Nietzsche’s description of an individual who is possessed of a psychological pathos that pushes him precisely in the direction of self-examination, self-exploration, and self-enhancement, would appear to provide very suitable means to carry out that kind of reconceptualization.

Moreover, Nietzsche himself links the pathos to his own ideal of self-responsibility and sovereignty, which we can appreciate by looking at one important moment of internalization in *Genealogy*. As Beals (2013) observes in his perceptive essay, this happens in GM I.6, where we are told that “it is clear from the whole nature of an essentially priestly aristocracy why antithetical valuations could in precisely this instance soon become dangerously deepened, sharpened, and *internalized*” (GM I.6 [emphasis added]). To understand the importance of this passage, recall that the figure of the sovereign individual bears close resemblances to the Kantian autonomous agent. Not only does Nietzsche explicitly call the sovereign person “autonomous,” he also describes him as having “*mastery over himself*” partly as a result of the control he exercises over his desires, which allows him to keep his promises even if in the future he should find himself strongly inclined to break them, because “accidents” or “fate” tempt him to do so (GM II.2). The capacity to be master over one’s psychological states implies their *organization*, i.e., their coordination, subordination,

integration, and so on, in a scheme that is conducive to some sought-after end (e.g. that of keeping one's promises). In turn, this type of organizing labor implies a *normative capacity* that enables the person to situate his psychological states in evaluative relations, giving some superior value over others. If I am going to keep my promises in the face of accidents and even in the face of fate, it is because I have placed the fulfilment of my promises in such high esteem that it outweighs any other considerations of lesser worth, even my own welfare.

Accordingly, sovereignty requires the “*moralization*” of whatever self-examining process one may be engaged in. Here is where the internalization mentioned in GM I.6 becomes important. As Beals has remarked, it is not immediately obvious what attitude or tendency is being internalized when Nietzsche says that “antithetical valuations”—namely, those of “good” and “bad,” and, more precisely, those of “pure” and “impure”—become internalized in the priestly aristocratic type. However, one can infer that it is the *pathos of distance* that is being internalized if one recalls that in GM I.2 this pathos bestows on the noble types, in the first place, “the right to create values and to coin names for values” (Beals, 2013, p. 435).¹ In the priestly type, this pathos is redirected inward, thereby enabling *the right to create values* to spiritually carve the psychological avenues needed for *the right to make promises* (i.e. sovereignty) to become a reality.²

2.

I have argued that Nietzsche intimates a connection between the psychological, inner *pathos of distance* and his ideal of sovereignty and responsibility, and that, therefore, there are indeed good reasons for commentators to want to exploit this Nietzschean notion to develop a democratic ethos. Against these efforts, however, Alfano (2018) has recently argued that Nietzsche's *pathos of distance* is best understood as the virtue associated with essentializing contempt. Since such contempt is incompatible with the recognition needed for democratic agonistic respect, which implies acknowledging the dignity of persons as ends in themselves, any attempts to recruit this notion in the service of democracy are hopeless.

It is not altogether clear to me why Alfano believes that the Nietzschean *pathos of distance* involves essentializing contempt. Focusing on Nietzsche's claims in GM I.2, Alfano notes that the possibility of the psychological *pathos of distance* is predicated on the existence of hierarchical social arrangements that consist fundamentally in a contrast between what is noble, on the one hand, and what is plebeian and contemptible, on the other. Yet, in somewhat of a sleight of hand, he

concludes that the reason why such arrangements function as conditions for the psychological *pathos of distance* is that this pathos involves “contempt for others because of what they essentially are (which goes hand in hand with reverence for oneself in virtue of what one essentially is)” (Alfano, 2018, p. 133). Alfano (2018, p. 134) admits that Nietzsche himself did not think that belief in essential properties was correct, yet he insists that, for Nietzsche, the content of the attitudes involved in this pathos is essentializing nonetheless.

Although it is a thorny subject, and Alfano does not define what he means by an essential property, I take it that the point must be that, in holding the plebeian in contempt, the noble regards him, not only as straightforwardly situated below him, but also as being so situated because of what he irredeemably is and cannot help but continue being. In other words, under this reading, the contemnor believes that the object of his scorn could not be otherwise than contemptible. But, as far as I can tell, Nietzsche nowhere signals that such a thought accompanies the noble’s contempt. In GM I.4, he claims that the German word “schlecht” originally designated the common man but without an inculpatory implication, thereby suggesting that, for the noble, the plebeian is not to be blamed for his plebeianism since he did not choose his condition. But this need not imply that, in the noble’s mind, the plebeianism of the common man is an essential property of him, for he could just as easily regard it as accidental. In fact, if there is someone who seems to hold an essentialist view about the weak and lowly man in Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*, it is the weak themselves. According to Nietzsche, these weak men possess an inward-turned glance that “is a sigh! ‘If only I were someone else,’ sighs this glance: ‘but there is no hope of that. I am who I am: how could I ever get free of myself? And yet—I *am sick of myself!*’” (GM III.14). Precisely this essentializing self-contemptuous glance is the swamp out of which, Nietzsche thinks, grows the sort of poisonous revenge and vindictiveness that eventually overthrows noble values.

Perhaps the best support for the essentialist reading he is defending can be found in Alfano’s analysis of AC 57. As he observes, Nietzsche claims there that one of the fundamental features of the Law of Manu, which is founded on the *pathos of distance*, is that it grounds the cast order in nature, presumably fixing, thereby, the different strata in essentialist ways by suggesting that people possess inherited, inborn natural properties that immovably situate them in a class. Accordingly, this would seem to suggest that the noble person, who propounds this law, contemns the plebeian in essentializing ways. Still, some interpretative caution is warranted here. We must recall that, according to Nietzsche, the Law of

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Manu codifies the caste-order by cementing “the experience, shrewdness, and experiments in morality of many centuries” (AC 57). In other words, the goal of the law is to fix the prior efforts of the nobles to separate and select—or as Nietzsche is fond of saying—, *to breed* a spiritually more profound and refined type of person, their efforts to produce new and rarer forms of nobility. It is obvious that those efforts are governed by the *pathos of distance*. Were the attitudes of contempt involved in these many years of noble labor essentializing? I submit that they could not have been, since the very idea that these constituted *experiments* in breeding a type implies that, for the experimenters, the properties in question were not given, that they had to be manufactured, fixed, produced, and so on, by a process of selection, separation, planning, and designing. This means that, even if the content of the contemptuous attitudes becomes essentializing when they are codified into law, prior to this codification, the content of those attitudes was not essentializing at all. So, at best, Alfano can only establish that *some* versions of the *pathos of distance* involve essentializing contempt, not that *every* version does.

But quite apart from this problem, I think that Alfano’s position suffers from a kind of psychological incongruence. The inner *pathos of distance* is fundamentally about change and exploration within the soul, it consists in the search for spiritual states that are new, rarer, higher, and so on. This implies that someone involved in these psychological efforts does not see his spiritual states as fixed or immovable. But this means that he cannot be conceiving of his psychological conditions in essentialist ways, since, if he were, he would not be trying to change them. If this is correct, then we must ask how and why an external hierarchical order conceived along essentialist lines could, according to Nietzsche, give rise to such a radically non-essentialist psychological drive? It seems more reasonable to suppose that an external social order that fixes the different strata in essentialist terms, would produce a psychological tendency to view your spiritual states as immovable. Just as society places you within a class that represents you essentially and in which you must forever remain, the psychological *pathos of distance*, born from this system, should propel you to recognize the spiritual state you currently have as one that you are essentially condemned to endure and continue enduring, it should not develop in you the demand to seek different spiritual states. Alfano’s reading, therefore, makes psychological nonsense of Nietzsche’s suggestion that the inner pathos develops from the outer one.

3.

If Nietzsche’s *pathos of distance* does not involve essentializing contempt,

does this mean that the road to appropriate this pathos for a democratic ethos has been cleared? Answering this question in the affirmative requires dealing with a puzzling feature of the *pathos of distance* to which commentators have not paid sufficient attention: Why did Nietzsche make a connection between an aristocratic socio-political *pathos of distance* and the development of the psychological *pathos of inner distance* in the first place? The connection is puzzling, because hierarchical social arrangements are an unavoidable aspect of all societies, even the most democratic ones, where inevitably people must occupy political, professional, social, military, and other types of positions in which they will have to play the role of subordinate or superior to others. Even so simple a social unit as the family, involves hierarchical relations. If all that is required to develop the demand for spiritual self-overcoming is to experience differences in status between people, or to be exposed to the manner in which a superior “maintains an overview and keeps looking down on subservient types and tools,” or to be prompted to continuously “exercise [oneself] in obeying and commanding, in keeping away and below” (BGE 257), then joining the military or, as I said, having a family would seem to suffice. What is lacking in other social forms of hierarchy that is present in aristocratic ones, making them, in Nietzsche’s mind, the most suitable ground from which to grow the psychological *pathos of distance*?

One tempting answer might be that, unlike other hierarchical arrangements, aristocracies involve stratifications that are not open to all. A foot soldier could in principle ascend the ranks of the martial ladder all the way to the top and become a General, but in aristocratic arrangements you belong to a class in virtue of some natural attributes that are forever out of reach to those who are born without them. However, as was argued above, there are serious problems with this interpretation of what is special about aristocratic hierarchies, the most important of which is that such rigid essentializing designations of station do not seem well suited to foment a psychological drive towards spiritual self-overcoming. Instead, they should breed resignation and acceptance of one’s own spiritual lot, whatever it may be; or, perhaps, in the noble case: self-complacent satisfaction. This kind of psychological casuistry in a thinker who called for recognizing psychology as queen of the sciences would seem strange (BGE 23). Accordingly, we must look elsewhere for a more charitable reading of the connection Nietzsche draws between aristocratic arrangements and the development of the psychological *pathos of distance*.

In my view, the solution to the problem rests on Nietzsche’s observation that “the essential feature of a good, healthy aristocracy is that it does *not*

feel that it is a function (whether of the kingdom or of the community) but instead feels itself to be the *meaning* and the highest justification (of the kingdom or community),—and, consequently, that it accepts in good conscience the sacrifice of countless people who have to be pushed down and shrunk into incomplete human beings, into slaves, into tools, all *for the sake of the aristocracy*” (BGE 258). For Nietzsche, what is special about genuine, uncorrupted aristocratic arrangements, is that they organize society around the fundamental goal of promoting and enabling a select group of people to achieve and represent the highest form of spiritual profundity that is possible on earth. Thus, the *pathos of distance* involves more than feelings of superiority and dispositions to rule and obey. The distance involved in this notion is not purely a matter of space, vertical or otherwise. For the distancing that is produced in genuine aristocratic orders, as Nietzsche understands them, consists in making the noble *stand out and apart*, in the sense of situating him in a space that is *salient* because it irradiates and bestows *meaning* and *justification* to everything else, to every other aspect—specially the more oppressive aspects—of the social order. The meaning consists in releasing the dormant potentialities of the human animal so that it may “become fledged and divine, floating above life rather than in repose” (GM III.8); an animal that, in its nobility and power, in displaying proud, magnificent, ever more perfect states of soul, makes the spectacle of life worthwhile.

Consider now the problem of deriving the psychological *pathos of distance* in the light of these remarks. Focusing on the meaning bestowing function of aristocratic hierarchies allows us to give a psychologically more congruent explanation for the development of the drive towards self-overcoming. If citizens, and specially rulers, are used to living under a political scheme that organizes society for the benefit of a few, priced, higher forms of existence, whose very being is supposed to restore our trust in the future, in ourselves, in humanity, then it is not so strange that Nietzsche would think this external configuration would end up impressing itself in the soul by way of a demand to seek out spiritual states within oneself that could give meaning, not just to one’s own life, but to life as a whole. Accordingly, as is to be expected, the external social organization is mirrored in the internal economy of the mind.³

4.

I have argued that, for Nietzsche, the key element to generate the psychological *pathos of distance* from the socio-political *pathos of distance* is that one experiences a form of social organization that 1) values some people more than others because they represent the highest form of

sovereignty and spirituality attainable; and 2) coordinates and structures every aspect of the social body for the purpose of producing those higher types, who are the ultimate meaning and vindication of such social arrangements, and who, therefore, justify the suffering and oppression that the lower men may experience by allowing them to see their toil as a means to something greater than themselves.

In terms of deriving the inner *pathos of distance* from an aristocratic hierarchical system, for Nietzsche what is important is not so much the power dynamics of domination and submission that are at play in aristocracies, as the *sense-making* quality of those arrangements, their demand that they be justified only insofar as they enable the breeding of a spiritually superior type of existence, one that is constantly showing itself to be legitimately superior (GS 40). Since aristocracies justify by attempting to produce the highest power and splendor possible for the type man, their example naturally leads to an internal, psychological demand for states of soul that “are increasingly high, rare, distant, tautly drawn and comprehensive” (BGE 257), that is, for precisely the sort of spiritual states that would make life worth living and give meaning to the ascetic suffering that is the requisite of such spiritual explorations and conquests.

Assuming Nietzsche is right that, absent the social imperative to pursue the enhancement of the human being as a justification of existence, there would develop no internal imperative to do so, the question of whether the internal striving for the pathos can be preserved within a democratic setting would turn on the issue of whether or not democracies can be organized in such a way as to intentionally promote the production of spiritually profound, noble types. This would require reconceiving democracy as more than just an experiment in maximizing the welfare of its citizens, or in enabling their own conceptions of the good to coexist and flourish. What would be needed is for democracy to be equally preoccupied with developing a cultural and intellectual (or spiritual) hierarchy that, not only esteems more highly a select group of people, who represent the most supreme spiritual power and splendor possible for the human type, but also actively configures every element of society for their benefit and production. To entertain that possibility affirmatively is to suggest that government of the people, by the people, *for the best*, would be indeed possible on this earth.⁴

Endnotes

¹ Quoting the text, Beals characterizes this pathos as the “basic feeling of a higher ruling nature in relation to a lower nature, to a below.” As I will argue later, this is not the most important feature of this pathos, which consists instead in the feeling that one is significant, that one stands apart because one is the ultimate meaning and justification of everything else. Beals comes closer to this characterization later on in his essay when, quoting the text again, this time BGE 257 and 258, he notes that the *pathos of distance* seems to involve the *instrumentalization* of those of lower nature, their treatment as tools for some other end that the noble has in mind; see Beals (2013, pp. 436-7). But, again, it is not the instrumentalization of others itself that matters in Nietzsche’s characterization of this pathos, as much as the end-seeking part of it, the meaning bestowing function, for which the instrumentalization of others itself is a mere means and byproduct.

² May the reader forgive the rhetoric license in my formulation of this sentence, which trades on Kaufmann’s translation of “ein Tier... das versprechen darf,” as “an animal with the right to make promises” (GM II.2). Although in a strict sense Nietzsche does not speak of a right (Recht) to make promises in GM II.2, as he does speak of a “right to create values” (“das Recht, Werte zu schaffen”) in GM I.2, I believe there are good reasons for translators like Kaufmann to render the former sentence in the normatively laden way they do. I discuss some of these reasons in Zamosc (2012).

³ I thus disagree with Fossen’s claim that “the key to assessing the connection between social hierarchy and self-overcoming is Nietzsche’s account of morality as rooted in power”; see Fossen (2008, p. 302). If power is simply understood as the struggle of forces to dominate others, then, again, it would not be necessary to have aristocratic arrangements: any social hierarchy, including the family, in which are present power dynamics of control and subordination would suffice. What matters is the sense or goal that is suffused over the hierarchical arrangement, namely, that it is meant to organize society for the production and the raising of exceptional spiritual types up to their highest state of being, which state in turn, justifies and gives meaning to everything else.

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Works Cited

All my citations from Nietzsche’s texts use the standard abbreviations for their titles in English translation.

GS for *The Gay Science*

GM for *On the Genealogy of Morals*

BGE for *Beyond Good and Evil*

A for *The Anti-Christ*

The numbers following the abbreviation refer to section, chapter, and/or part numbers. I have used the Cambridge edition of Nietzsche's works, except for GM, for which I used the Kaufmann edition.

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