

*Nietzsche's Moral Methodology**Paul Katsafanas*

Nietzsche is widely reputed to have a novel approach to moral philosophy. Georg Simmel called him the “Copernicus of philosophical ethics,” presumably intending to convey by this that Nietzsche recentered the perspective from which philosophical ethics is conducted (Simmel 1992: 124). And Nietzsche himself agreed: “I hope people forgive me the discovery that all moral philosophy so far has been boring” (*BGE* 228),<sup>1</sup> he writes, and presents himself as offering a new approach. His “project is to traverse with quite novel questions, and as though with new eyes, the enormous, distant, and so well-hidden land of morality – of morality that has actually existed, actually been lived; and does this not mean virtually to discover this land for the first time [*GM* P:7]?” The project of philosophical ethics must be rethought: it must be conducted in a different way, employ different methods, and pursue different aims.

I'll attempt to set out this Nietzschean moral methodology. Nietzsche calls for a rejection of previous approaches and promises a new approach. But what, exactly, are these new approaches that Nietzsche takes to moral philosophy? How does he think that philosophical ethics should proceed? And how does his approach differ from the tradition? Is Simmel right that he inaugurates a Copernican shift in philosophical ethics? Or is Nietzsche's impact more modest, consisting merely of one more entry into the standard philosophical debates? I'll attempt to answer these questions here.

Section 9.1 and 9.2 review some standard assumptions about the way in which philosophical ethics should proceed. I argue that Nietzsche rejects many of these assumptions. Given his rejection of orthodox philosophical ethics, some readers conclude that Nietzsche is a moral skeptic who holds that no justification of normative claims is possible. Section 9.3 argues that this reading is untenable. The remaining sections review the way in which

<sup>1</sup> The following translations are used: *A* (1954); *BGE* (1968); *CW* (1967); *EH* (1968); *GM* (1968); *HH* (1996); *TI* (1954); *Z* (1954).

Nietzsche's philosophical ethics actually proceeds. I argue that Nietzsche defends the following idea: although there is no uniquely justified set of normative claims, we can engage in rational, comparative assessments of competing normative claims. In particular, I argue that Nietzsche articulates various rationally defensible constraints on acceptable normative claims. An acceptable set of normative claims must not presuppose false claims about human agency (see Section 9.4); it must not issue prescriptions that ultimately undermine human flourishing (see Section 9.5); it must secure some set of higher values (see Section 9.6); and it must avoid promoting certain forms of moral pathology (see Section 9.7). We can use these constraints to engage in comparative assessments of moralities (or, more generally, sets of normative claims).

### 9.1 Ethical Foundations

Philosophical ethics is typically understood as the attempt to provide a rationally defensible answer to the question of how we should live. Rather than taking for granted our intuitions about moral cases, the culturally dominant ways of classifying and categorizing rights and wrongs, our thoughts about which kinds of lives are better than others, and so forth, philosophical ethics asks what might justify these normative claims and concerns.

How might such a justification of normative claims proceed? Many philosophers have sought to justify ethical claims by providing some sort of *foundation* from which they can be derived. Consider several possibilities. Aristotle thinks he can start with a conception of the human function and derive from it an account of the good life. Hume thinks that he can start with a rationally defensible account of human nature and derive from it an account of the moral sentiments. Kant thinks he can justify certain claims about rationality and freedom in an *a priori* fashion and derive, from them, the Categorical Imperative. Bentham and Mill think that they can start with a rationally defensible account of our basic motivations and derive from it the principle of utility. And so on. In each case, the philosopher attempts to establish one or more foundational claims in a rationally justifiable, theory-independent manner, and then proceeds to show how substantive moral content can be derived from the foundational principle(s).

It's important that the justification for the foundational claim is in each case taken to be theory-independent. Suppose, for example, that Kant could only establish our commitment to the Categorical Imperative if we assumed, at the outset, that his substantive ethical claims were true.

This would be of little interest. It would not give a skeptic any reason to accept the theory. If, on the other hand, Kant could start with very minimal and uncontroversial claims about agency or rationality, and show that our acceptance of these claims commits us to accepting the Categorical Imperative, then his account would be important and interesting.

Let's now consider Nietzsche's reaction to these approaches. He has several objections.

First, and most obviously, Nietzsche thinks that each of the philosophical theories mentioned fails on its own terms. Kant makes mistaken presuppositions about agency; his account of the Categorical Imperative doesn't follow from his account of agency; and, even if it did, it wouldn't generate any content. Sentimentalists make false presuppositions about the human passions. Utilitarians rely on false presuppositions about our relationship to pleasure and pain, and, aside from that, illegitimately assume that concerns about these states should be weighted equally across persons. Or so, at any rate, Nietzsche argues.<sup>2</sup> Many of his arguments for these points are subtle and interesting, but I'll pass over them here. While the individual critiques are interesting, their structure is perfectly familiar: like many other philosophers, Nietzsche simply critiques the presuppositions and the internal logic of these theories and finds it wanting. In short: he thinks that there have been no successful ethical theories so far.

Of course, the fact that there have been no successful ethical theories *so far* does not establish that there couldn't be one in the future. But Nietzsche has a more powerful objection: he rejects the idea that there could be any such thing as a theory-independent foundation for normative claims. For he claims that there are no uninterpreted givens from which we can construct theory-independent, presuppositionless philosophical or scientific accounts. He claims that there are no "immediate certainties" and mocks the idea that knowledge can get "hold of its object purely and nakedly" (*BGE* 16). Even our most basic relationship to the world, via sense perception, is mediated by value judgments:

There is no doubt that all sense perceptions are wholly permeated with *value-judgments* [*gänzlich durchsetzt sind mit* Wethurtheilen]. (*KSA* 12:2[95])

We cannot, he suggests, get past this to some perspective-free way of accessing the world. Again, he writes:

<sup>2</sup> See Katsafanas (2013) for discussion of these points.

Strictly speaking, there is no “presuppositionless” knowledge, the thought of such a thing is unthinkable, paralogical: a philosophy, a “faith” always has to be there first, for knowledge to win from it a direction, a meaning, a limit, a method, a *right* to exist. (Whoever understands it the other way round and, for example, tries to place philosophy “on a strictly scientific foundation,” must first *stand on its head* not just philosophy, but also truth itself). (*GM* III:24)

In rejecting the very possibility of presuppositionless knowledge, Nietzsche is claiming that every justification will be internal to a certain set of assumptions. What looks like theory-independent justification will, in fact, rely on certain background assumptions, which are themselves in need of justification.

Consider an example: Kant thinks he can specify a conception of free, rational agency and use it to derive his Categorical Imperative. Nietzsche’s point is that this specification of free, rational agency is already theory-laden: it assumes a sharp distinction between active reason and passive sensation; it identifies the agent with a characterless and (Nietzsche thinks) causally undetermined capacity for choice; it treats punctual moments of choice as determining the character of the agent’s actions; it assumes that we can identify a unique maxim or intention for each action; and so on. We needn’t accept these claims (see Katsafanas 2013 and 2016 for the details).

So we have two problems: there have been no successful defenses of foundational claims thus far; and we have good reason for believing that there can be no theory-independent foundational claims in the first place. Let’s turn to a third problem: Nietzsche thinks that when we consider the *conservatism* of these theories, it casts serious doubt on their credentials. Ethical theorists typically try to justify a set of moral claims that approximates their current moral code. Kant, for example, thinks that something like the whole of late eighteenth-century Prussian morality can be derived from his allegedly *a priori* account of the Categorical Imperative; Aristotle thinks that his articulation of human flourishing is in broad conformity with the *endoxa*; and so on.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Not every moral philosopher is this conservative. Bentham, for example, thinks that his utilitarian theory shows that many of the moral beliefs of his day are mistaken (thus, he argues for the decriminalization of homosexuality, universal suffrage, and so on). Hume thinks his theory undermines the “monkish virtues.” So some moral philosophers believe that their moral theories issue in a certain number of revisionary claims. Notice, though, that the revisions don’t go very far: we don’t find these philosophers critiquing central Enlightenment values such as dignity, equality, freedom, and beneficence. This marks one dramatic difference between the traditional ethical theorists and Nietzsche, who questions these central values.

Why is this conservatism suspicious? Nietzsche thinks it points to the way in which unwarranted assumptions enter these allegedly impartial theories. He claims that “all our philosophers demanded something far more exalted, presumptuous, and solemn” than a critical examination of moral codes: “they wanted to supply a rational foundation for morality – and every philosopher so far has believed that he has provided such a foundation” (*BGE* 186). But this “makes one laugh,” because close examination reveals that these philosophers simply take morality “as ‘given’.” In particular,

What the philosophers called “a rational foundation for morality” and tried to supply was, seen in the right light, merely a scholarly variation of the common faith in the prevalent morality; a new means of expression for this faith; and thus just another fact within a particular morality; indeed, in the last analysis a kind of denial that this morality might ever be considered problematic – certainly the very opposite of an examination, analysis, questioning, and vivisection of this very faith. (*BGE* 186)

Attempts to provide a rational foundation for morality end up taking for granted central elements of the philosopher's current moral code. It's not hard to spot these unwarranted presuppositions in any given ethical theory. For example, consider Kant's incredible claim that we can get the content of Prussian morality out of an entirely formal conception of rationality. It's obvious to anyone who reads his attempts, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, to force the Categorical Imperative into yielding prohibitions on suicide, masturbation, and homosexuality that he needs to appeal to background moral assumptions, ideas of natural functions, and so on, none of which are supposed to be legitimate sources of normative authority within his framework.

## 9.2 Ethics without Foundations: Coherentism and Reflective Equilibrium

We've reviewed Nietzsche's critique of attempts to provide theory-independent foundations for ethical theories. However, in recent philosophical work, it's common to back off from these grand attempts to provide theory-independent foundations. Instead, a number of ethical theorists rely on the claim that we can generate an acceptable moral theory by bringing our normative judgments into reflective equilibrium. So, we begin with various intuitions about what's right and wrong, where these concern both particular cases and general principles. We locate various conflicts and tensions between these judgments and attempt to eliminate them.

Although explicit discussions of reflective equilibrium obviously post-date Nietzsche, he does have criticisms of the assumptions that animate the quest for reflective equilibrium. First, notice that reflective equilibrium may not take us to a unique set of normative claims. Suppose we have two groups: one starts with something like our own moral code and tries to work it into reflective equilibrium; another starts with moral judgments that don't contain any aspirations to equality and tries to bring that into reflective equilibrium. They won't end up in the same place. If this is right – if we can have multiple, mutually incompatible yet internally consistent sets of normative commitments – then we face a problem: we won't be able to rank or compare these normative commitments unless we have some criterion other than mere coherence.

This brings us to a second point. Notice that we can construct internally consistent sets of claims, all of which are false. We can construct internally consistent sets of principles that are wholly imaginary and make no contact with reality. Think, for example, of literature about fantastical realms: the way in which magic operates in the Harry Potter books may be internally consistent, but it doesn't correspond to anything actual. Or, to use a more controversial example: the theological claims articulated by Aquinas may be internally consistent, but they refer to an imaginary entity. So a system of claims can be internally consistent, but float free of any contact with reality. And the project of seeking reflective equilibrium about ethical claims can be interpreted in this way.

So this is the alternative model: we could see the moral convictions shaping reflective equilibrium as giving us insight into some moral reality. Suppose, for example, that we somehow know that inflicting needless suffering is wrong, that people ought to have equal moral status, and so on. We could then condemn certain internally consistent moral codes for failing to respect these claims. In the limiting case, we might get only one moral code that is in reflective equilibrium and respects these judgments; more plausibly, we'd get several.

The free-floating version of reflective equilibrium is going to be unappealing to many philosophers: after all, many moral philosophers take themselves to be engaged in something more than pure invention. These philosophers think that they are not merely articulating coherent, internally consistent sets of claims; in addition, they typically assume that these claims are making contact with the structure of ethical reality.

The alternative model attempts to anchor the coherent set of ethical claims in some kind of moral reality. Can it succeed? Nietzsche has several objections. First, as I discussed in the previous section, Nietzsche rejects

the idea that there *have been* any successful justifications of the anchoring claims. Moreover, he rejects the idea that there *could be* any such anchorings: there is no theory-independent proposition that could provide a check on these theories. He aspires to show that even seemingly innocuous claims such as “suffering is bad” or “equality is good” have many presuppositions and may, in fact, be false.<sup>4</sup>

Second, both versions of the approach grant initial credibility to a range of moral convictions, but it's not clear why this is supposed to be warranted. To see this, notice that some of Rawls' particular examples of “considered judgments” are staggeringly naive from a Nietzschean perspective:

It seems to be one of the fixed points of our considered judgments that no one deserves his place in the distribution of native endowments, any more than one deserves one's initial starting place in society. (Rawls 1971: 104)

These are exactly the sorts of starting point that are culturally and historically relative. This allegedly settled conviction arose fairly recently, historically speaking. It was not present in antiquity, as Nietzsche's discussions in *GM I* illustrate.

Of course, this is not a decisive objection. It's possible to argue that these changes are the result of moral progress. True, past ages would have come up with different sets of moral convictions. However, optimistic philosophers think this is a sign of progress: our moral convictions are in better shape than the earlier ones.

But Nietzsche is skeptical: he thinks we can give debunking explanations of many of these moral convictions. *On the Genealogy of Morals* is but one example. Part of what the *Genealogy* tries to demonstrate is that transitions in moral convictions cannot be explained as mere refinements of earlier values, but must instead be seen as discontinuous breaks and leaps; moreover, the *Genealogy* tries to show that these discontinuities are better explained by psychological and social factors than by epistemic considerations (see Katsafanas 2013: 8–16). If this is right, appeals to moral progress will look unwarranted.

So we have two problems: reflective equilibrium doesn't yield a unique set of normative claims; and, if it isn't somehow anchored, it could be a process of pure invention. But there's also a third, deeper problem. Nietzsche

<sup>4</sup> On suffering, see *HH* 235; *BGE* 202, 225, 229, 230, 260; *GMP*:6, III:11; *ZI* “Prologue” 5; and *EH* “Destiny” 8. On equality, see *TI* “Skirmishes” 37; *BGE* 203, 257–258; and *KSA* 9:3[38], 11:26 [282].

emphasizes the way in which various moral codes are massively contradictory, internally inconsistent, and so forth. Nietzsche thinks that attention to our actual moral code reveals that it is rife with contradictions, tensions, incompatible claims, and so forth. It is a motley arising from diverse sources, with no common core (see especially the *Genealogy*). The very aspiration to bring a moral code into consistency assumes that consistency is valuable or desirable. But why is this supposed to be the case?

It's not obvious that internal inconsistencies are particularly troubling to Nietzsche. Consider his encomiums to attic culture in *The Birth of Tragedy*: there, one thing that he emphasizes is the productive tensions that are encouraged by competing and ultimately irreconcilable ideals. This is a claim that, in one form or another, is ubiquitous in Nietzsche's texts: conflict and internal tensions as such are not problematic; they are problematic only when they can't be *managed*. In short: *some* internal inconsistencies are problematic, but it's not clear that Nietzsche thinks that *all* are. So we'd need some reason for aspiring to reflective equilibrium. Absent a justification for this aspiration, the project of securing reflective equilibrium is unmotivated.

### 9.3 Skepticism and Pure Subjectivism

To review: particular moral judgments would have to be justified either via appeal to theory-independent considerations or via reflective equilibrium. But Nietzsche denies that any moral judgments can be justified in a theory-independent fashion: there are no *a priori* moral truths, there's no way of limning moral reality (no "telephone to the beyond" [*GM* III:5]), in fact there is no moral reality to limn. So the aspiration for theory-independent moral grounds is rejected. Appeals to reflective equilibrium do no better: they fail to yield a unique moral code, they uncritically take certain moral judgments for granted, and they rely on faith in the value of normative coherence.<sup>5</sup>

If Nietzsche rejects all of the previous philosophical attempts to justify moral claims, what remains for him? Many commentators think that Nietzsche endorses a skeptical stance according to which any attempt to offer theory-independent rational considerations in favor of normative claims is doomed. To mention a few examples, Jessica Berry (2015), Robert Pippin (2010), and Bernard Williams (1993) argue that Nietzsche

<sup>5</sup> See also Loeb (2016) for a helpful overview of the way in which Nietzsche rejects standard methodological assumptions not just in moral philosophy, but in philosophy more generally.



aims to debunk various attempts at moral theorizing without putting anything substantive in their place.

I've argued against the skeptical readings elsewhere (Katsafanas 2013). Here I will simply point out that philosophical ethics does not have to be all or nothing. There is a middle ground. Suppose that, although we lack any way of justifying a *unique* moral code, we do have a way of specifying constraints on *acceptable* moral codes. In light of these constraints, some moral codes can be ruled out, some can be ranked superior to others, and so on. This, I suggest, is what Nietzsche does. Rather than trying to move from rationally unimpeachable, theory-independent premises to a uniquely justified moral code, Nietzsche wants to use rationally unimpeachable principles to critique contingent normative commitments. This will result in some moral codes – including, importantly, the Judeo-Christian moral code – coming out as unsatisfactory.

I take it that this is part of what Nietzsche has in mind when, in *BGE* 186, he mentions an *alternative* to the attempt to find rational foundations for moral codes:

Just because our moral philosophers knew the facts of morality only very approximately in arbitrary extracts or in accidental epitomes – for example, as the morality of their environment, their class, their church, the spirit of their time, their climate and part of the world – just because they were poorly informed and not even very curious about different peoples, times, and past ages – they never laid eyes on the real problems of morality; *for these emerge only when we compare many moralities*. (BGE 186, emphasis added)

We don't need to find moral foundations or derive morality from rationally unimpeachable premises; we can, nonetheless, comparatively assess many moralities. Let's look at how Nietzsche does this.

#### 9.4 Constraints on the Presuppositions of Moral Theory

Let me start with the most obvious point. Nietzsche thinks that ethical theories and moral codes are criticizable if they rely on demonstrably false factual claims. Consider Aristotle's moral theory: arguably, it relies on an outmoded natural teleology that implies that human beings have a function. Or, take Kant: he is committed to the idea that we can individuate actions in terms of the maxims upon which they are performed, so that each action has one corresponding maxim. But Nietzsche thinks that psychological considerations show us that this is misguided: there is not a uniquely correct way of individuating actions, nor is there a uniquely

correct way of identifying the maxims for actions. Each action is produced by a plurality of interacting motivational forces; the attempt to isolate some unique maxim for a human action is analogous to the attempt to isolate a unique cause for a historical event such as World War II or the Great Depression. Any attempt to isolate *one* cause, or even some small set of causes, is bound to leave out a great deal of complexity, emphasizing certain factors at the expense of others.

Insofar as ethical theories require or presuppose these kinds of indefensible claims about human beings, they are unacceptable. Thus, we frequently find Nietzsche voicing objections of the following form: Plato, Kant, Mill, or some other philosopher has a defective or erroneous account of agency; recognizing this fact undermines the philosopher's ethical theory.<sup>6</sup> I've discussed these constraints at length elsewhere (see Katsafanas 2013, 2016), so I won't belabor them here.

### 9.5 Appeals to Flourishing

Especially in his later works, Nietzsche's most common form of objection to a moral theory is that it undermines life, power, flourishing, or health (for example, this is a dominant theme in the *Genealogy* and the *Antichrist*). This is a familiar philosophical move. Ethical theories are often taken to be recipes for the good or flourishing life. Showing that an ethical theory fails to achieve that goal – or, worse still, showing that it actively impedes or undermines that goal – is a good way of critiquing the theory.<sup>7</sup>

This project can be conceived in two ways. First, we could accept some moral code's specification of flourishing and show that its substantive prescriptions actually undermine that goal: following the code's prescriptions makes it less likely that one will flourish. This would be an internal critique; it would simply show that the ethical theory impedes its own aims. Some of Nietzsche's criticisms take this form. However, he also critiques theories and codes in a second way: for failing to realize the putatively *correct* form of flourishing (see Katsafanas 2011 for discussion).

This second conception is much more controversial, because there can be substantive disagreements about what constitutes the good life. Suppose

<sup>6</sup> For a few examples, see *BGE* 32; *GM* I:13, II:2; and *TI* "Four Errors."

<sup>7</sup> Actually, things are a bit more complex, because theistic ethical theories often deny this point. In *GM* III, for example, Nietzsche points out that Judeo-Christian moral codes subordinate human flourishing to devotion to God. Devotion to God is the primary requirement; insofar as fulfilling this requirement conflicts with human flourishing, flourishing is to be repudiated. See Katsafanas (2011) for discussion.

I assert that the flourishing life is the one devoted wholly to alleviating the sufferings of sentient creatures. This is a widely accepted and intuitively appealing conception of the good life: versions of it are present in Schopenhauer, Buddhism, recent animal rights movements, and so on. But Nietzsche thinks this conception is misguided.

So, if Nietzsche wants to critique various ethical theories for reducing flourishing, he needs to make two things clear: (1) which conception of flourishing he is employing, and (2) why we should accept this conception of flourishing. Elsewhere, I've argued that Nietzsche understands flourishing in terms of will to power: to simplify a bit, an individual flourishes, or is healthy, to the extent that she maximally actualizes her capacity for will to power.<sup>8</sup> Why should we accept this conception of flourishing? Nietzsche's answer, as I read him, is simple: every individual already does aim at power (often in a conflicted, bungled, or suppressed fashion), and this aim is both pervasive and ineradicable; any attempt to give it up will be self-defeating. So, when Nietzsche claims that some set of moral claims undermines *the correct notion of* flourishing, he can be understood as mounting a deeper form of internal critique: he is appealing to something that the proponents of the moral code already have reason to accept, although they may not themselves see this (see Katsafanas 2013 for the details).

Suppose we accept this claim. Applying these points to sets of normative claims, we would say that normative claims are objectionable when their general acceptance tends to undermine will to power. Thus, we can assess moralities as a whole, or particular normative claims within a given morality, in terms of their effects on power.

Again, this is a bit of a simplification: a morality or normative claim that undermines power in one type of person might promote it in another; a moral code that undermines power in one cultural context might promote it in another; and so on (see Katsafanas 2013 for discussion). Moreover, there is scholarly dispute over whether Nietzsche is interested in assessing the effects of normative claims merely on *some* individuals, *all* individuals, or on culture more generally. Some hold that he is only interested in great individuals; others, that he is only interested in culture; others, that he cares about both. Although I won't defend this point here, I think the last option is the correct one.

<sup>8</sup> This simplifies a bit because health can be understood as a tendency toward *growth* in power. I elide these complications as they won't be relevant for our purposes. See Dunkle (2018) for a helpful analysis of Nietzsche's conception of health.

For our purposes, the important point is simply this: we can use will to power as a constraint on acceptable normative claims. If we have a normative claim whose general acceptance impedes power, this gives us a *prima facie* reason for rejecting or modifying the claim. If we have two sets of normative claims – say, ancient morality and modern morality – and one of them impedes power to a lesser extent than the other, then we have reason to prefer the former to the latter. Or, operating within a morality: if we can see ways in which modification or abandonment of some particular aspect of our moral code would generate fewer conflicts with will to power, we'd have *prima facie* reason to modify or abandon the problematic values. (Nietzsche's critiques of democratic movements, aspirations for equality, valuations of compassion, and so on have this form.)<sup>9</sup>

Let's pause for a moment to consider a potential worry. I pointed out that Nietzsche is skeptical of the search for moral foundations. Doesn't will to power, as I've described it, count as a moral foundation? After all, it is an appeal to an aspect of human nature and it is taken to ground certain normative or evaluative principles. Doesn't Nietzsche then become a sentimentalist with a new account of the sentiments, or an Aristotelian with a new account of human nature?

The answer is: yes and no. Yes, Nietzsche does share with the Aristotelians and the sentimentalists the aspiration to let an account of human nature inform his ethical theorizing. In this respect, he shares with them a form of naturalism in ethics. However, he rejects all of the particular claims that Aristotle relies upon: that there is a human function, that we get a unique specification of the good life out of the account of human nature, and so on. Moreover, he sees the sentimentalists as relying on moralized conceptions of the sentiments; as ignoring the historicity and malleability of the affects; and as failing to see the profound and ubiquitous influences that the unconscious has on our conscious life and our behavior more generally. In all of these ways, he departs from the sentimentalists and the Aristotelians.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In addition, Nietzsche sometimes employs *life affirmation* as a standard of assessment. Suppose one moral code generally inclines individuals to condemn life, whereas another moral code generally inclines individuals to affirm life. To use Nietzschean examples: Schopenhauer's moral code, or Judeo-Christian morality, or Buddhism, will supposedly lead to life-negation; ancient morality, as well as the values that Nietzsche propounds, will supposedly lead to life-affirmation. Insofar as we have reason to prefer life-affirmation to life-negation, we'll have a reason to prefer codes that promote life-affirmation to codes that promote life-negation. (But *why* might we have reason to prefer life-affirmation to life-negation? That's a complicated question that I cannot address here – see Katsafanas [2013]).

<sup>10</sup> I discuss this in more detail in Katsafanas 2013 and 2016.

So, too, Nietzsche's account of will to power does not operate in anything like the way that the sentimentalist and Aristotelian foundations operate. The sentimentalists and Aristotelians think that they can provide moral foundations from which we can derive substantive conclusions about the good life. As I've explained, nothing of substance is *derivable* from the claim that we will power. Rather than serving as a foundation from which we extract substantive content, the will to power operates as a constraint on evaluative commitments that arise from contingent sources.

In short: will to power doesn't generate a unique set of normative claims and doesn't justify our own moral commitments (in fact, it requires us to give up core commitments of our current moral code).

## 9.6 Higher Values

So far, we've uncovered two ways of comparatively assessing moral theories: we can assess the factual presuppositions of theories and we can examine their effects on flourishing. While the details of these Nietzschean critiques are distinctive, their general structure is not; other philosophers conduct analogous critiques. Let's now move on to some more novel and distinctively Nietzschean forms of critique.

The first is this: Nietzsche sometimes critiques moral values and ethical theories for fostering *nihilism*. He distinguishes several variants of nihilism, but the one that I'll focus on here is nihilism as loss of higher values. He writes, "What does nihilism mean? – *that the highest values devalue themselves* [dass die obersten Werthe sich entwerthen]" (KSA 12:9[35]/WLN 146).

To understand this claim, we need to know what "higher values" are supposed to be. Elsewhere (Katsafanas 2015), I've argued that Nietzschean "higher values" are a subset of final values (things valued for their own sake) with the following features:

- (1) Higher values are overriding and incontestable: if a higher value conflicts with some other value, the other value must be set aside.
- (2) Higher values are associated with a characteristic set of affects: such as hatred, love, veneration, and contempt (KSA 12:10[9], 12:1[22]).
- (3) Higher values typically entail subjective meaningfulness.

With regard to (3), I can regard something as meaningful without viewing it as instantiating a higher value (a past experience can be seen as meaningful or important because of what it enables or produces; a stone picked up on a beach can be subjectively meaningful because of what it evokes;

and so on). However, treating something as a higher value typically leads one to see it as having an existential significance. If some value is perceived as overriding all others, if it invokes reverence and dread, if it seems entirely incomparable to other values, then we might express this point by saying that the value *matters* in a way that other values don't.

Religious and core moral values are paradigmatic higher values. Thus: "moral values have hitherto been the highest values" (*KSA* 12:10[89]), and Nietzsche claims that religions have "cultivated in the masses" the sense

that they are not to touch everything; that there are holy experiences before which they have to take off their shoes and keep away their unclean hands – this is almost their greatest advance toward humanity. Conversely, perhaps there is nothing about so-called educated people and believers in 'modern ideas' that is as nauseous as their lack of modesty and the comfortable insolence of their eyes and hands with which they touch, lick, and finger everything. (*BGE* 263; cf. *GM* I:6)

To see why higher values are important, suppose we lack them. Suppose we value various things, but these valuations are all fungible; we can trade one against another. There is no value that resists all trade-offs, all exchanges. Utilitarianism would be one example of an ethical theory that embodies this view.

What might be problematic about a view of this form? In eroding all hierarchies, it initially seems to be good common sense. And Nietzsche can't object to it, as traditional ethicists could, by claiming that it ignores independent truths about what's of value.

But suppose, instead, that this erosion of all hierarchies generates a form of pathology. Nietzsche has a name for that pathology: being a last man. The last men are described as follows:

The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest. "We have invented happiness," say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth . . . Becoming sick and harboring suspicion are sinful to them: one proceeds carefully . . . One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing. One no longer becomes poor or rich: both require too much exertion. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion. No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels differently goes into a madhouse "Formerly all the world was mad," say the most refined, and they blink . . . One still quarrels, but one is soon reconciled – else it might spoil the digestion. One has one's little pleasure

for the day and one's little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health. "We have invented happiness," say the last men, and they blink. (Z: I "Prologue" 5)

There are several important features here. First, the last men have an abundance of values: they value comfort, warmth, happiness, mild work, freedom from quarrels, and so on. Second, the last men lack higher values. There is nothing that they treat as warranting sacrifice, deep commitment, and strong passions such as reverence and dread. Indeed, they don't even understand how one could have such values: "formerly all the world was mad." In particular, the world was mad because people displayed strong, lasting commitments to hierarchically structured values; the world did not see all values as fungible. Third, the last men are presented as insipid and trivial. The last men avoid any difficult endeavors, any struggle, any strong exertion.

Elsewhere, I've argued that these features are connected (Katsafanas 2015). Suppose you have many values but think that all values are fungible. No values present themselves as demanding, as not to be compromised; all can be exchanged or abandoned. Then it would be odd to remain committed to goals requiring strenuous exertion or difficult struggles. After all, if goal A is easily achieved and goal B requires difficulty and struggle, and if A and B are tradeable, it makes sense to choose the more easily attained goal. Why struggle to attain something difficult when something equally valuable is readily attainable?

Some individuals will be inclined toward the more difficult endeavors: some will climb mountains while others watch TV. But, when asked *why* they do so, *why* they pursue these challenges, they'll have little to say: they can appeal only to brute preferences. What they cannot do is claim that the difficult activity is more valuable or more worthwhile than the easy activity. So, in the aggregate, there will be a cultural tendency to abandon the difficult endeavors and to default toward more easily attainable goals.

Suppose this is right: suppose that the lack of hierarchically structured values leads a culture toward trivial, insipid goals rather than difficult ones. In order for this to qualify as a problem, we need to have some reason for thinking that this sort of culture is criticizable. And there are two possibilities.

One is aesthetic: the last men just look aesthetically unappealing. They lack passion, they live their lives in pursuit of trivial goals, and so on. Certainly there is an element of this in Nietzsche: his descriptions of the last men and related individuals emphasize their bovine mediocrity, the colorless and lifeless existence that they lead, and so on.

Another appeals to philosophical psychology. Suppose we have some motivational tendency that is frustrated or unfulfilled when we avoid difficult endeavors. If we embrace a set of normative claims that presents all difficult endeavors as ultimately unjustifiable, then this motivational tendency will be frustrated, for its pursuit will look senseless.

Nietzsche does think we have such a tendency. He argues that we have an ineradicable motivational tendency that he names will to power. Although there are controversies about the details, it's now widely agreed that will to power is, at least in part, a tendency to seek challenges, obstacles, or resistances (Katsafanas 2013; Reginster 2006). Nietzsche argues that this tendency is both ineradicable and pervasive. Again, the details are controversial, but I've argued that Nietzsche thinks this tendency is present in all action: it describes the form that drive-motivated actions take. But the details don't matter; let's just grant Nietzsche the claim that there's a pervasive and ineradicable tendency to seek challenges in order to overcome them. The last men don't do this, so they'll experience frustration of this tendency.

Consider now how this tendency interacts with higher values. Moralities that incorporate higher values will deem certain struggles and difficulties meaningful, for some values will be uncompromisable. This will give us at least some venues in which to express power in a way that is subjectively meaningful. However, a morality that treats all values as fungible gives us no lasting reason to pursue difficult ends. Thus, in order to avoid frustration of our deepest motivational tendency, we'll need some set of higher values.

If this is right, then we have a constraint on acceptable moralities: they must countenance some set of higher values. Moral codes that lack higher values are inferior to those that possess them.

### 9.7 Moral Pathologies

I've just shown how lack of higher values generates a pathology: it encourages individuals and cultures to frustrate their deepest aim. But this isn't the only pathology that normative commitments can induce. Consider three more: decadence, hypertrophy, and mendacity.

Nietzsche offers a straightforward definition of (one type of) decadence: "what one ought to shun is found attractive" (*CW* 5).<sup>11</sup> A decadent person

<sup>11</sup> See also *EH* "Wise" 2 (which characterizes the non-decadent individual). I don't think this is the only way in which Nietzsche uses the term "decadence." Nietzsche sometimes uses "decadence" as a



(or culture) will be attracted to things that reduce flourishing and averse to things that promote flourishing. Now, this definition of decadence can be understood substantively or formally. Substantively, we could specify what flourishing actually is and show that a particular morality inclines individuals toward things that undermine flourishing and away from things that promote flourishing. Formally, we'd leave open what qualifies as flourishing, and we'd simply say that whatever the morality identifies with flourishing is actually undermined, rather than promoted, by the morality.

Nietzsche employs both understandings of decadence. Sometimes, he'll call a morality, individual, or culture decadent when it undermines will to power. Thus, a large part of the *Genealogy* is devoted to showing that Judeo-Christian morality systematically undermines power by associating things that actually enhance power with things that reduce flourishing, and things that actually reduce power with things that enhance flourishing (see Owen 2007 and Katsafanas 2011). At other times, he'll lean on the formal definition. Thus, even if we accepted (say) an account that treated avoidance of suffering as a flourishing life, Nietzsche will try to show that the particular valuations (compassion, etc.) actually magnify suffering. Insofar as a morality promotes decadence, we have reason to avoid it or modify it.

Second, consider hypertrophy or what's more commonly called scrupulosity. Today, scrupulosity is understood as a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder focused upon moral or religious principles. This can take different forms, but typical traits include obsessive concerns with whether an action meets a particular principle; extraordinary doubts about whether one has fallen short of a principle; and what Summers and Sinnott-Armstrong (2015) describe as a thought-action fusion, in which merely thinking about potential violations of a principle is experienced as just as aversive as actually violating it.

Now, scrupulosity is typically understood as arising in the same way as other obsessive-compulsive disorders: they're forms of individual pathology. However, Nietzsche's texts suggest that there are cultural manifestations of scrupulosity. In particular, consider Nietzsche's discussion of the ever-heightening concerns with guilt in the *Genealogy*.

We can reconstruct Nietzsche's view as follows: let's stipulate that the term "bad conscience" refers to a kind of free-floating anxiety (*GM* II:16–17). One cause of anxiety is the suppression of drives (*GM* II:17). The Judeo-Christian moral interpretation teaches us that this anxiety is

general term of disapprobation; at other times, he uses it to refer to decline of any type (e.g., *A* 19); at others, he uses it to pick out a particular kind of psychic disharmony (e.g., *TI* "Socrates" 11).

actually a result of guilt, and that guilt results from the failure to suppress certain drives (*GM* II:20–21). This interpretation disposes us to attempt to repress additional drives or additional manifestations of drives. When those additional drives are suppressed, though, more anxiety arises (*GM* II:21, III:15, III:20). So there's ever-increasing anxiety as ever more drives are repressed. Thus, although repression is presented as a cure for anxiety, each successful instance of repression actually generates *more* anxiety. So each successful instance of repression creates the need for even more repression.

This is why Nietzsche writes that the person who interprets bad conscience as guilt resulting from sin, “when he stills the pain of the wound he at the same time infects the wound” (*GM* III:15). A bit later, he says that by reinterpreting the bad conscience as guilt,

The old depression, heaviness, and weariness were indeed overcome through this system of procedures . . . one no longer protested against pain, one thirsted for pain; “more pain! more pain!” the desire of his disciples and initiates has cried for centuries. Every painful orgy of feeling, everything that shattered, bowled over, crushed, enraptured, transported. (*GM* III:20)

In its most extreme forms, this attitude can even be directed at thought. Merely thinking about certain kinds of activities (which would be the expression of natural instincts) is taken to be a defect, and those thoughts are repressed. Guilt spreads.

This is just one example. The general point is that certain values magnify or reinforce the very traits that they deem immoral. Values that promote these kinds of pathologies are to be avoided.

Finally, consider a third moral pathology: mendacity. In the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche argues that the priests who engage in revaluation are necessarily self-deceived. The priests bear a form of psychic tension, for they continue to desire that which they reflectively condemn: power, health, dominance, and strength (*GM* I:8). Accordingly, the priest is self-deceived: he cannot, in full consciousness, acknowledge his own desires and the role that they play in his psychic economy, for to acknowledge them would be to disrupt their functioning (*GM* I:10, I:13). Thus, “the human being of *ressentiment* is neither sincere, nor naïve, nor honest and frank with himself” (*GM* I:10). By way of illustration, Nietzsche quotes passages from Aquinas and Tertullian in *GM* I:15. These passages speak of the good taking delight in witnessing God's torturing and tormenting of the nobles. This obvious revenge fantasy conceals a hidden desire for power and dominance (or so Nietzsche suggests).

Insofar as a normative commitment promotes or even requires this kind of mendacity, Nietzsche suggests that we have reason to reject or modify it.

But why? As I read him, Nietzsche doesn't claim that mendacity or self-deception as such is problematic; rather, it is problematic only insofar as and to the extent that it undermines will to power.

## 9.8 Summary

Nietzsche does not think we can defend any set of normative claims as uniquely justified, as the unique product of rational reflection. But this does not entail that assessments of normative commitments are nothing more than expressions of personal preference. What we can do, in order to assess competing normative claims and theories, is examine their conformity with a set of constraints. I've mentioned the following constraints: the theory must not be dependent on false presuppositions about human agency; it must not instantiate norms that conflict with flourishing; it must provide us with some higher values; it must not foster moral pathologies such as decadence, hypertrophy, and mendacity. We can see these as constraints on acceptable normative commitments. Judeo-Christian morality fails all of them: Nietzsche argues that it depends on false assumptions about freedom of will; that it instantiates norms that conflict with flourishing; that it used to provide higher values, but that its valuation of truth has rendered these higher valuations untenable; and that it fosters various pathologies. This, Nietzsche thinks, gives us reason to look for a new set of values, a new morality that could avoid these problems while providing us with ideals toward which we might strive. And he urges us – or some very small subset of us at any rate – to promote the emergence of these new values.

In closing, let's return to our original question: Does Nietzsche have a distinctive approach to moral philosophy? Does he deserve Simmel's title of the Copernicus of philosophical ethics? I think the answer is mixed. We've seen, in the first two sections, that Nietzsche does reject standard approaches to philosophical ethics. And we've seen, in Sections 9.6 and 9.7 that some of his concerns are quite novel: he wants to assess moral theories with regard to whether they can sustain higher values and the extent to which they generate pathologies. Other concerns, though, are more traditional: whether the theory makes false presuppositions (see Section 9.4) and whether it conflicts with flourishing (see Section 9.5). But, even in pursuing these traditional approaches, Nietzsche diverges from the mainstream. For example, I've pointed out that his account of flourishing is based in his will-to-power theory, which is in turn based on his drive psychology.

So the normative claims that Nietzsche endorses will be quite different than those endorsed by traditional theorists. Moreover, notice that engaging in this Nietzschean type of philosophical ethics requires that we assess whole sets of normative commitments and the way in which they interact with cultures, individuals, and societies. These critiques don't concern particular individuals, but types and tendencies fostered within a society; the critiques tend to trace developments over long stretches of time, rather than momentary problems; and some of the things critiqued are not problematic in their individuality, but only when seen as fostering certain pathologies. As a result, many of these problems won't be visible until the morality is lived.

This is why Nietzsche's critiques of normative commitments and ethical theories tend to employ genealogies and histories: the sorts of problems that he is interested in show up over long stretches of time, and may not be detectable merely by considering the propositions endorsed by the morality. Rather than asking whether a claim such as "promises must be kept" is justifiable, we can ask how such a claim functions within a particular morality. What does it promote? How is it lived? Those are the questions that will bring into view the pathologies, conflicts, and tensions within the code.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For extremely helpful comments on this paper, thanks to Paul Loeb, Matt Meyer, Justin Remhof, and the participants in the 2018 Nietzsche Rome Workshop.