

Nietzsche's (Im)moral Psychology: Competition, Distinction, and Inequality

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Abstract. Honouring our influences in academia often means disagreeing with them, and with the greatest respect for David Owen's insights into Nietzsche, this is exactly what I intend to do in this paper. I will focus on one question that is prompted by Owen's Nietzsche work: how and to what degree does Nietzsche's moral psychology depart from modern moral concepts and values? The relevant point of disagreement between me and Owen is whether Nietzsche's moral psychology is compatible with modern morality. For Owen, Nietzsche expands the repertoire of moral psychology beyond the narrowly moral to the ethical. I argue instead that Nietzsche does not merely expand moral psychology. Rather, he opposes the narrowly moral with an account of self-development, freedom, and the good that is resolutely immoralist.

Keywords: Nietzsche, moral psychology, immoralism, competition, inequality.

David Owen's work has had a significant influence on my reading of Nietzsche from the very first time I tried to do any research in this area. For me, trying to understand Nietzsche's social and political thought, and in particular the possibilities therein for unorthodox ways of expanding and revising fundamental principles of liberal democracy, will always involve returning to David's work in this area. And as a result of the fact that I have been interested in Nietzsche's anti-democratic thought since my doctoral dissertation, it is no exaggeration to say that no other writer has been as consistent a presence in my engagement with Nietzsche scholarship as David.¹

Yet honouring our influences in academia often means disagreeing with them, and with the greatest respect for David's insights into Nietzsche, this is exactly what I intend to do in this paper. David's work on Nietzsche is broad ranging and voluminous, and I cannot plausibly hope to address the virtues and limitations of all this work in one paper. Accordingly, I will focus on one question that is prompted by David's Nietzsche work: how and to what degree does Nietzsche's moral psychology depart from modern moral concepts and values? As will become clear in the sections to follow, the relevant point of disagreement between me and David is whether Nietzsche's moral psychology is compatible with modern morality. For David, Nietzsche expands the repertoire of moral psychology beyond the narrowly moral to the ethical (in a sense to be further explained in section 1). I argue instead that Nietzsche does not merely expand moral

[1] The formality of referring to David by his surname seems appropriate to me in the more recognisably academic sections of this paper, but not in this introduction in which I am trying to acknowledge my debt to him. Anyone who bristles at the informality of the introduction can be assured I will return to the more familiar surname-convention in the rest of the paper.

psychology; he opposes the narrowly moral with an account of self-development, freedom, and the good that is resolutely immoralist.

I. ETHICAL, MORAL, AND IMMORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Broadly speaking, Nietzsche thought that the way we understand human thought and action is driven by what we value, or what we consider to be important, and for him that cuts across a number of different disciplines, including philosophy, history, and philology.² In the case of moral psychology, the values that determine its remit might be said to be built into its name, if by moral psychology we understand the study of the nature of human thought and action as it is relevant to moral evaluation. This is not to say that the conclusions of moral psychology must themselves be moral judgements, nor that they should be guided by what we might hope to be the case from the point of view of morality. But it is because morality sets the agenda for moral psychology that Nietzsche thought it would lead us to prioritise certain things at the expense of others, and to make what Nietzsche thought were mistakes about moral psychology's subject matter, such as the metaphysical nature of the will and kind of freedom needed to warrant moral blame and responsibility (GM I 13; see also Williams 1993).

By contrast, Nietzsche's alternative to moral psychology casts a wider net, encompassing psychological and behavioural insights that are not constrained by the concepts and values required for moral judgements, and that are relevant to a broader, not necessarily moral account of what it means to be a good person or to live a life worth living. In this respect we can call Nietzsche's alternative to moral psychology an *ethical* psychology. This terminological distinction follows a distinction that Owen himself has used (Owen 2002) and that he inherits from Bernard Williams. The difference in Williams's terms is this: ethics can be understood to be 'any scheme for regulating the relations between people that works through informal sanctions and internalised dispositions' (Williams 1995, 241). Williams understood morality to be one such scheme that is distinctive to a particular period in history in a particular part of the world (Williams 1985). On Williams's account there are a number of features that distinguish what he called 'the morality system' from other ethical schemes, including its obsession with the concept of obligation, its distinctive way of thinking about guilt, its refusal to accept the possibility of moral luck, and a particular way of thinking about agency that warrants accountability and blame (ibid; see also Chappell and Smyth 2023).

There is some overlap here with Nietzsche's account of what is distinctive about modern morality. On Nietzsche's analysis modern morality has a distinctive obsession with obligation, duty, and law, and it operates with a concept of guilt that is in some

2] This is one facet of Nietzsche's perspectivism, that is, his position that all claims are in some sense dependent on and expressions of idiosyncrasies of the person making the claim. Illustrative passages include D 119, GS 301, and BGE 43, 187, 231.

respects more restrictive and demanding than the kinds of reflexive negative judgements that have been important to other ethical codes (this is the subject matter of the entire second essay of GM). Modern morality also, for Nietzsche, centres some distinctive values and virtues, foremost the values of good and evil (the subject matter of the first essay of GM), and the virtues of self-denial (BGE 33), humility (HH I.137, GM I 14), and pity (A 7). And it is a slave morality, in the sense that it is an ethical scheme that uses concepts and values that develop under conditions of domination and oppression and that are developed by those who suffer the sharp end of that oppression (BGE 260).

Even this more provocative characterisation of modern morality as a slave morality can at times arguably be found in Williams's description of morality, at least insofar as Williams refers to morality as 'the peculiar institution' (Williams 1985), a euphemism used in ante-bellum United States to refer to the institution of slavery. But Williams only follows Nietzsche so far in his more hostile characterisation of morality, and there is one particularly telling point of terminology where Nietzsche and Williams do differ. Williams never goes so far as to describe himself as an immoralist; Nietzsche not only described himself this way but, as he puts it in *Ecce Homo*, sees his immoralism as a 'badge of honour' (EH, IV, 6).

In this respect, where Williams offers a study of ethics that insists on a broader scope than that he thought allowed by narrowly moral concerns, Nietzsche offers a study of ethics that is by design a rival to moral ethics:

My word immoralist essentially entails two negations. First, I am negating a type of person who has been considered highest so far, the good, the benevolent, the charitable; second, I am negating a type of morality that has attained dominance and validity in the form of morality as such, - decadence morality or, to put it plainly, Christian morality. (EH, IV, 4)

That Nietzsche is hostile to Christian morality is of course no surprise to anyone who knows even a little about Nietzsche. But what is less often acknowledged is that Nietzsche's positive alternative to Christian morality is not just an ethics that is liberated from the restrictive confines of the morality system, not just a study of the virtue, freedom, and agency that comes into view when we stop obsessing over responsibility, duty, and guilt, but is rather much more radically opposed to the values of modern morality.

Nietzsche's ethical psychology is, in other words, an immoralist psychology, by which I mean that it is the study of the thought and behaviour of an ethical ideal that is incompatible with moral commitments and at times actively opposed to them. What emerges in Nietzsche's study of the psychology of this alternative, immoral higher type is a person who for anyone with moral sensibilities should seem not only strange and alien, in the way that Ajax might seem strange to a modern audience, but also objectionable, offensive, and unacceptable. And by extension, Nietzsche's own characterisation of flourishing ethical agency should be, to a modern moral reader, at

best unsettling and at worst repulsive. Or at least, this is the thesis I wish to make a case for in the rest of this paper.

I open with this rather abstract and broad-brushstroke picture of Nietzsche's ethical psychology because it is both influenced by and yet in important ways different from Owen's account of the same themes in Nietzsche. As I will recount below, albeit in an abbreviated form, Owen's work on Nietzsche rescues from him reflections on ethics and morality that tread a fine line, robustly challenging modern moral sensibilities while being acceptable to a broadly liberal readership who think that self-cultivation should be made available to all. This picture of Nietzsche is compelling, persuasive, and attractive, but I will argue that it can be so only by selecting away the more dangerous side to Nietzsche. In the sections that follow I seek to add this danger to Owen's account of Nietzsche's ethical psychology.

II. OWEN'S NIETZSCHE ON SELF-LOVE

To keep to a manageable scope I will select one theme from Owen's work on Nietzsche's ethical psychology to illustrate both its virtues and its selective attention. Owen's study of Nietzsche's ethical psychology has focused at times on what Nietzsche has to say about a collection of related reflexive, positively valenced attitudes, most notably self-love, self-respect, and self-esteem (Owen 2002, 2009). At its most general level, this work has generated a variety of important insights into the value that Nietzsche ascribed to thinking well of oneself. This work is also of particular interest for my purposes because of the way that Nietzsche's account of the nature and value of these reflexive attitudes departs from moral psychology in the narrow sense given to the term above.

Owen's account of Nietzsche on self-love is framed in part by a contrast he draws between Nietzsche and Kant. Owen observes that a central feature of Nietzsche's ethical psychology is to rehabilitate what a moralist might call egoistic attitudes, including self-love. In this respect Nietzsche differs fundamentally to Kant, at least according to Owen.³ According to Owen, Kant denied any moral value to self-love on the same grounds that he denied moral value to the virtue of beneficence; if putatively moral actions are motivated on the basis of a generous and kind attitude either towards others or towards ourselves, such actions are vulnerable to changes in our inclinations, in what we happen to favour (Owen 2017). Owen cites a number of passages in support of this reading of Kant; I will include just one for illustration:

This propensity to make oneself as having subjective determining grounds of choice into the objective determining grounds of the will in general can be called *self-love*; and if *self-love* makes itself lawgiving and the unconditional practical principle, it

3] I will defer to Owen on the details of Kant's thought on self-love and make no exegetical claims of my own about Kant.

can be called *self-conceit*. Now the moral law, which alone is truly objective (namely, objective in every respect), excludes altogether the influence of self-love on the supreme practical principle and infringes without end upon self-conceit, which prescribes as laws the subjective conditions of self-love. (Kant 1999[1788], 5: 74)

Self-conceit is particularly important for the contrast Owen draws between Kant and Nietzsche, because making the ‘subjective determining grounds of choice’ into a law is precisely what Nietzsche at times suggests his ethical ideal would do. There are two sources that are particularly helpful for understanding how Nietzsche understands and values the activity of being a law unto oneself.

The first is Nietzsche’s discussion of the sovereign individual in his genealogy of morality. Nietzsche’s sovereign individual is distinguished by what he calls their ‘prerogative to promise’, and their capacity to deliver on self-imposed commitments that are immunised against contingencies that would undermine the steadfastness of lesser individuals (GM II 2). On Owen’s account, one particularly important feature of the sovereign individual’s capacity to be their own law is that the laws they follow have success conditions that are internal to acting on them, and thereby success conditions that resist formulation in advance (Owen 2009). Thus the sovereign individual is capable of committing themselves to something for the long haul, but precisely what it means for them to deliver on this commitment is only discovered in the actual delivery of the commitment.

We might wonder what promising or committing to something has to do with self-love. This is where it helps to turn to the second relevant source. In a number of key passages in *The Gay Science* (Owen focuses on *inter alia* GS 276, 334, 341, and 361; see Owen 2009) Nietzsche reflects on what it takes to not just have the ability to stick to a commitment, but to find the content of that commitment within oneself, that is, to somehow take ourselves as the source of the values and norms that govern our actions like a commitment or a promise. On Owen’s account, these passages show us that part of Nietzsche’s ethical ideal involves coming to love oneself through navigating the values of self-acceptance and self-creation. This involves both learning to love what is given to us by fate, an honest and loving acceptance of who we are, but also coming to love ourselves through a creative engagement with our given nature, and having the strength to create a noble and in some sense higher version of ourselves that is nonetheless realistic, without succumbing to fantasy. In this regard, Nietzsche’s analysis of self-love stipulates that self-love is valuable when it has a few distinctive features: virtuous self-love both accepts what is given in our nature and also inspires us to mould that nature into something higher and noble; and virtuous self-love is put into action, it is lived, by taking the noble self we have created as a kind of ethical code, a guide for how we should live, that stands independently of the morality of the herd.

Now all of this might sit uneasily with the puritanism of Kant, or at least Owen’s Kant, but it’s not exactly incompatible with a more forgiving understanding of moral requirements. Perhaps coming to terms with one’s own nature and treating that nature

as an ethical guide has been too often neglected in modern moral philosophy and is difficult to sustain within the requirements of the morality system, that peculiar institution. But there is nothing evidently morally impermissible in learning to love oneself, to cultivate a kind of spiritual nobility, or to commit oneself to values and goals that resist formulation and that we learn to understand only in the process of delivering them. Perhaps, then, Nietzsche's ethics includes virtues that are outside of the scope of narrowly moral thought, but not incompatible with it.

This conclusion, however, would be too hasty, for there are other features of Nietzsche's account of following one's own law, and the self-love required to do so, that are not so morally acceptable. I recount some of these features in the remaining sections below.

III. INDIVIDUALITY

The first more radically immoral feature of Nietzsche's ethical psychology comes into relief when we dig a little deeper into what Nietzsche thinks it means to follow one's own law, and in particular what makes that law genuinely one's own. For Nietzsche, the morality he opposes is among other things a herd morality, a kind of conventionalism, that Nietzsche thinks erodes individuality and demands conventional, familiar, and routine behaviour (e.g. BGE 44, 199, 202). And Nietzsche considers valuable self-love a matter of discovering and learning to love what is singular in one's own nature, and taking that singular nature as a guide to how one ought to live.

We see this sentiment expressed in some of the *Gay Science* passages cited above, specifically those in which we find Nietzsche's reflections on learning to love ourselves. In one such passage (GS 334), Nietzsche considers the way we learn to love music, and suggests we can learn lessons from doing so about love in general and love for oneself. When we develop love for music, according to Nietzsche, we must first '*learn to hear* a figure and melody at all, to detect and distinguish it, to isolate and delimit it as a life in itself' (ibid). '[T]hen', Nietzsche says, 'one needs effort and good will to *stand* it despite its strangeness; patience with its appearance and expression, and kindheartedness about its oddity'. We then, according to Nietzsche, get used to the melody, come to expect it and miss it when it's not there, until finally we become 'enraptured lovers, who no longer want anything better from the world than it and it again'.

GS 334 immediately precedes a passage entitled 'Long Live Physics', which is cited a great deal in the scholarship on Nietzsche's thought about freedom and agency (e.g. Guay 2002, Janaway 2009, Pippin 2009, May 2009). The passage is much discussed for good reason, but what is rarely noted is that Nietzsche appears to open it as a continuation of his insights about learning to love music. GS 334 is among other things about learning to patiently observe a melody in order to understand it for what it is, and learn to recognise its distinctiveness. And 'Long Live Physics' begins:

'How many people know how to observe! And of these few, how many observe themselves!' (GS 335)⁴

As you might imagine, Nietzsche thinks proper self-observation, the kind that allows us to learn to love what is unique to us, is very rare. But this is how he describes the rare people who are indeed capable of self-observing:

he [who practices self-observation] would then know that there neither are nor can be actions that are all the same; that every act ever performed was done in an altogether unique and unrepeatable way, and that this will be equally true of every future act; that all prescriptions of action (even the most inward and subtle rules of all moralities so far) relate only to their rough exterior; ... that our opinions about 'good' and 'noble' and 'great' can never be *proved true* by our actions because every act is unknowable; that our opinions, valuations, and tables of what is good are certainly some of the most powerful levers in the machinery of our actions, but that in each case, the law of its mechanism is unprovable. Let us therefore *limit* ourselves to the purification of our opinions and value judgements and to the *creation of tables of what is good that are new and all our own*: let us stop brooding over the 'moral values of our actions!' (GS 335, italics in original)

I think this is quite a bizarre passage, not least because there are some claims in here that at first pass seem difficult to defend.⁵ But for the purposes of this paper we can restrict focus to Nietzsche's claim that successful self-observation would lead me to understand that my actions are unique and, on this basis, his recommendation that I resist the temptation to find a code of ethics that has general scope, and instead to create an ethics for myself that is unique to me, that applies to me and me alone. This is, as he puts it later in the same passage, how we 'become who we are: human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves'.

The point, then, is that Nietzsche suggests that one of the results of learning to love ourselves is that we come to understand and appreciate our individuality, and further that the right ethical response to this individuality is to create through our actions an ethical code, a law, that applies only to us. In this respect, following one's own law, for Nietzsche, means following a law that applies only to me.

What makes this a feature of Nietzsche's immoralism? It is conceivable that one might discover and follow a law of one's own that never leads one to evidently immoral action. Perhaps the kind of person I am, or as Nietzsche might say the kind of style I give to my life, is compatible with moral values because I am by nature compassionate, dutiful, benevolent, or whatever you think a moral life must involve. But the problem with a person living by their own code, from a moralist's perspective, is that if that code is indifferent to moral obligation, then it is always possible that there will come a time

4] Translation modified. Nietzsche's German reads: 'Wie viel Menschen verstehen denn zu beobachten! Und unter den wenigen, die es verstehen, — wie viele beobachten sich selber!'

5] Consider for instance: 'our opinions about good and noble and great can never be proved true by our actions because every act is unknowable'. Why think actions are unknowable? Why think that would stop us from proving our value judgements?

when the law of one's own and the requirements of morality do come into conflict. This is also a theme in Bernard Williams's work, and also in another 20th century critic of morality, Susan Wolf, who suggests a case to illustrate this:

Consider the case of a woman whose son has committed a crime and who must decide whether to hide him from the police. He will suffer gravely should he be caught, but unless he is caught, another innocent man will be wrongly convicted for the crime and imprisoned. I shall take it as needing no argument that impartial morality forbids protecting one's son at the expense of another innocent man's suffering. Impartial morality forbids it—but we are talking about a woman and her son. (Wolf 2014, p.39)

There are I think a number of ways of unpacking the ethical dilemma here, but there is one reading of this case that is particularly important for my purposes, which is that the dilemma here is a conflict between the requirements of morality and what it would take to continue to be myself. As Wolf herself puts it: 'if the meaning of one's life and one's very identity is bound up with someone as deeply as a mother's life is characteristically tied to her son's, why should the dictates of impartial morality be regarded as decisive?' (Wolf 2014, 41) In this sense, Wolf's case illustrates the conceivability of scenarios in which a person's identity, the things that distinguish them, that make them who they are, can generate ethical demands that do conflict with morality. And it is this possibility that makes Nietzsche's ethical ideal of following our own laws an immoralist ideal.

Nietzsche himself was of course very aware of this, and actively embraced, perhaps even at times exaggerated, the extent to which being a law unto oneself meant breaking with, and sometimes flying in the face of, moral requirements. To cite one more example, this time one of Nietzsche's own, consider the words he attributes to Napoleon, an example Nietzsche often uses of a great individual following their own law, in this case an example of world-historical proportions:

'I have the right to answer all charges against me with an eternal "That is me". I am apart from all the world and accept conditions from no one. I want people to submit even to my fantasies and to find it natural when I yield to this or that distraction.' That is what Napoleon once replied to his wife when she had reasons to question her husband's marital fidelity (GS 23)

This, according to Nietzsche, is how 'the seed-bearers of the future' (*ibid*) would see themselves and their freedom from the moral judgements of others. But I submit that, to a modern moral reader, responding in this way to the concerns of another (particularly if that other is our partner or spouse) is at the very least a less than palatable feature of Nietzsche's picture of Napoleon, and with it a feature of Nietzsche's ideal of living by one's own law that raises doubts about its compatibility with morality.

A second less palatable feature of Nietzsche's account of the person who follows their own law comes to light when we ask what it takes for a person to have such a high opinion of themselves that they are confident in the legitimacy of living by a code summed up by a simple "That is me". Nietzsche often associates such high self-regard with being noble (*vornehm*; see e.g. BGE 257-296) and sometimes deliberately trades on the ambiguity of this term, referring at the same time both to those who occupy a particular class in their respective society and those who either are, or are in a position of privilege that allows them to develop, a further spiritual nobility, a kind of ethical excellence.

Figures of nobility in Nietzsche's work often see themselves as the source of what is valuable. The noble or master classes detailed in the first essay of GM (see also BGE 260) are distinguished by the fact that their ethical code takes whatever distinguishes the identity of the nobles and turns that into an ethical good, as if the nobles take so much pride in themselves that they imagine there can be no way of understanding what it is to live a good life other than to be like them. Noble types in Nietzsche's work are also those who experience what Nietzsche calls the pathos of distance (BGE 257, TI IX.37), an awareness of privilege, rank, and higher social position, that Nietzsche suggests is necessary for a person to develop the motivation to cultivate oneself into something greater. As Nietzsche puts it:

Without *this* pathos [of distance], that *other*, more mysterious pathos could not have grown at all, 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" (BGE 257)

On Nietzsche's account it has been the case historically that societies that have operated with clear social stratification, and moreover evident patterns of social inequality, are the kinds of societies that have allowed some people, notably those who occupy positions of privilege, to think of themselves as higher types socially in order to then further think themselves capable of not just social superiority, but ethical, perhaps even spiritual superiority. Nietzsche seems to take this to support his claim that:

Every enhancement so far in the type "man" has been the work of an aristocratic society - and that is how it will be, again and again, since this sort of society believes in a long ladder of rank order and value distinctions between men, and in some sense needs slavery (BGE 257)

We should not be too quick to agree with Nietzsche that perfectionism requires stratified social inequality. Even if Nietzsche is right that social inequality has historically allowed some people to be proud enough to think themselves a legitimate source of an ethical code, this does not give us good enough reason to conclude that social inequality *must be* a necessary condition for such pride to emerge, still less that such inequality is a necessary condition for anyone to live by their own laws. Owen himself has pointed out that these observations do not commit Nietzsche to denying that an egalitarian society

might also find a way of democratising self-respect, and thereby democratising a form of self-love that can help us think of our own character as a legitimate source of ethical guidance (Owen 2002).

In section 5, I will push back a little against the view that Nietzsche's perfectionism does not give him reason to oppose, and might even provide reasons to support, egalitarianism. But even if we grant that Nietzsche's ethics do not commit him to favouring social inequality, he nonetheless was undeniably anti-egalitarian. Nietzsche's distaste for egalitarianism, and for related social and political movements including democracy, socialism, anarchism, and feminism, is very clear (see e.g. BGE 202), and over his later works (works after 1886), his distaste for social equality is consistent. Among Nietzsche's general expressions of disdain for egalitarianism and egalitarian social movements are at least three arguments against social equality that sit alongside his more specific claim that social superiority generates the pathos of distance needed to motivate ethical perfectionism.⁶

The first is a complaint about what Donovan Miyasaki names 'assimilation' (Miyasaki 2015), that is, the complaint that social equality results in the erasure of differences between people and encourages uniformity and conventionalism. Social movements looking to equalise and democratise are, according to Nietzsche, an expression of a herd instinct, and attempts to eliminate special privileges and rights in a social or political sense can be seen as an expression of a more fundamental hostility to distinctiveness, idiosyncrasy, and strangeness. In BGE 202, for instance, Nietzsche claims that the 'morality of herd animals' has pervaded modern Europe's political and social institutions, and in this regard 'the *democratic* movement is heir to Christianity' (BGE 202, italics in original). Similarly, Nietzsche complains in BGE 212 that the principle of equal rights leads to 'waging a joint war on everything rare, strange, privileged'. Similarly in TI IX.37 Nietzsche describes equality (*Gleichheit*) as 'a certain factual increase in similarity that the theory of 'equal rights' only gives expression to'.

Nietzsche's second case against egalitarianism is a levelling-down objection: increasing social equality inevitably involves decreasing the quality of life and character of the privileged, and in doing so erodes opportunities to generate great people and great culture. Thus Nietzsche continues his case against equal rights in BGE 212 on the grounds that the principle not only opposes 'everything rare, strange, privileged', but also 'the higher man, higher soul, higher duty, higher responsibility, [...] creative power and mastery'. Egalitarianism is, for Nietzsche, a threat not just to idiosyncrasy but also to superiority of character and ability. Note that this is one feature of Nietzsche's anti-egalitarianism that is demonstrably inconsistent over his works. The same objection appears in HH 300, but it is directed not at the desire for equality *per se* but at a particular kind of desire for equality, alongside a desire to 'raise oneself and everyone else up'.

[6] My categorisation of these arguments owes much to Miyasaki 2015, though our categorisations are not identical.

Sometimes, then, it seems Nietzsche does not think that egalitarianism inevitably 'levels-down'.

Third, and related to the levelling-down objection, Nietzsche sometimes claims that the cultural productivity of great individuals is possible only thanks to an unequal distributive pattern whereby the work of the many secures abundance of resources and leisure to allow a select few to be free to pursue greatness. This distributive thesis appears in *The Greek State* (I will cover this in more detail in section 5) and *inter alia* HH 439 ('A higher culture can come into existence only where there are two different castes in society: that of the workers and that of the idle, of those capable of true leisure') and BGE 258 ('the essential feature of a good, healthy aristocracy is that it does not feel that it is a function ... 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.')

Each of these arguments support Nietzsche's view that egalitarianism is likely to undermine the social conditions that help a privileged few work towards his perfectionist ethical ideal. Nietzsche came to believe in his later life that social equality could only be achieved at the expense of opportunities for spiritual and cultural self-development among those capable of greatness, either because it must eliminate the material conditions that allow a select few to thrive, or because egalitarian social movements tend to be hostile to individual self-development. Moreover, Nietzsche not only thought that some form of social inequality is necessary to allow some of us the pride to live by our own laws – his pathos of distance claim – but also that the erosion of this inequality would also erode any instincts some of us might have to stand apart, to break with conformity, and to create and live by an ethics of our own. In this respect, Nietzsche's ethical psychology is more closely connected to his anti-egalitarianism than we might prefer it to be.

V. COMPETITION

Nietzsche's position appears to be that only a clear social hierarchy would allow some people enough self-esteem to think themselves worthy of perfectionist self-cultivation, enough ego to think "that is me" is good enough of a reason to ignore moral and social norms. But is this really the only way that a person could think well enough of themselves to care about following their own law?

One could note that Nietzsche himself does sometimes acknowledge that herd morality can also generate a particular kind of self-confidence for a particular kind of person, specifically those who exhibit the virtues praised by herd morality, e.g. being peaceful, gentle, mild, and friendly (KSA 12.497). But this is clearly not a satisfactory option for Nietzsche's ethical psychology, for building the self-confidence of a person well-suited to herd-conformism is not going to lead to people living by their own laws.

An alternative route to generating self-esteem that has been considered by many Nietzsche readers – including Owen – is institutionalised struggle and competition, modelled on (a particular way of understanding) classical Greek agonistic culture (Acampora 2013, Connolly 1991, Hatab 1995, Owen 2002). The relevant argument in this reading begins with Nietzsche's suggestion that strength seeks to demonstrate itself (KSA 13.294), and that one of the proving grounds in which we can do this is in a struggle with opposition ('Am Meister lernen, am Gegner sich erkennen!' KSA 7.400). Competition, according to the agonistic Nietzsche, is one particularly valuable way in which we can distinguish ourselves in struggle against opposition, for competition also comes with the added benefits of channelling otherwise destructive and violent envy into a culturally generative form (a theme covered in some detail in Nietzsche's *Homer's Contest*). Thus the various forms of non-violent social competition that pervaded a period in ancient Greece⁷, at least according to a position popular among some German philologists in the early 1870s, provided opportunities to develop and display physical, intellectual, rhetorical, and political prowess without having to resort to violent conflict or outright war.

The best-known focal text for Nietzsche's account of Greek agonistic culture is his unpublished essay *Homer's Contest*, but the theme also arises in the form of violent conflict in another essay that Nietzsche wrote at the same time, *The Greek State*, which paints a very different picture than that relied on by agonistic readers of Nietzsche (more on *The Greek State* in a moment). The notebooks of the period, particularly those of 1871, also contain a significant number of notes related to competition, (e.g. KSA 7.394-408) including comments on competitions between poets, sometimes specifically competition between Hesiod and Homer, and references to Sophocles as a tragedian of the suffering of agonal individuals. Moreover, and continuous with section 3's theme of distinguishing oneself as an individual, Nietzsche's notes on Greek agonistic culture from 1871 also sometimes claim that competition can perform an individuating function, helping us to step out from the crowd without overinflating our ego (e.g. KSA 7.402). And if one excels enough in competition one might find oneself not only distinguishing oneself as a cut above the crowd, but also setting the standard by which others might judge themselves. Nietzsche noted that artists in particular would strive in competition with one another to outshine all others to the point where they would set a new norm, becoming an object of imitation of the next generation (for more on this see Pearson 2022, 103).

In this regard, it seems at least the Nietzsche of 1871 would agree that institutionalised competition could function as a way of building both self-esteem and the ability to distinguish oneself as a singular source of norms and values. As we have seen above, both of these capacities can help us live up to Nietzsche's non-moral standard of the good life. Most importantly, it has seemed to some Nietzsche readers (Connolly 1991, Hatab 1995, Owen 2002) that institutionalised competition could be a mechanism that provides these

7] Or at least the account of this period in Greece popular among some prominent German philologists in the 1870s, including Nietzsche himself, Jacob Burckhardt, and Ernst Curtius.

benefits without the need for Nietzsche's immoral social and political commitments, first and foremost his inegalitarianism. Agonistic readings of Nietzsche tend to emphasise the equality between competitors needed for any institutionalised competition to function, for too much inequality in ability between competitors would mean that the weaker opponent is incapable of posing a challenge to the stronger. Along these lines it is common for agonistic readings to cite Nietzsche's claim in *Homer's Contest* that the Greeks practised ostracism in order to eliminate competitors who became too powerful (KSA 1.788), and in doing so threatened the sustainability of the relevant competition (most notably competitions for political and social status, with ostracism serving as a mechanism to prevent tyranny). This feature of a well-functioning institutionalised competition is also at least ostensibly consistent with the value that Nietzsche finds in successfully seeking competitors equal to oneself and thereby capable of posing a worthy challenge (e.g. EH I.7)

But the problem for these readings is that Nietzsche's inegalitarianism is not independent of his positive evaluation of Greek agonistic competition; the two are more closely connected than the agonistic reading would have us believe. One reason for this is indicated by Nietzsche's inclusion of both *The Greek State* and *Homer's Contest* together in the same gift-package to Cosima Wagner of 'Five prefaces to five unwritten books'. The civilised and tamed Greek competitive spirit (examined in *Homer's Contest*) co-exists with jealous violent conflict (*The Greek State*) in the same account of Greek agonistic culture that Nietzsche offers over the two essays. And Nietzsche is clear in *The Greek State* that on his account the 'genius' that Greek competition helped to develop was also a product of stark social inequality. According to *The Greek State*, the connection between the state and the production of genius in classical Greece is that the former secures peace – a familiar Hobbesian approach to state legitimacy – but also prosperity, specifically by enforcing a pyramidal social structure in which a majority works, some as slaves, to produce the material abundance required for the leisure of a minority. Such a structure ensures, Nietzsche suggests, the material conditions for a creative minority to produce culture.

And this is not for Nietzsche simply an idiosyncrasy of the Greek context, as if modern Germany might be capable of the same cultural production without the same social hierarchy and division of labour. Nietzsche directs his readers to infer a modern lesson from what he takes to be ancient wisdom:

In order for there to be a broad, deep, fertile soil for the development of art, the overwhelming majority has to be slavishly subjected to life's necessity in the service of the minority, beyond the measure that is necessary for the individual. At their expense, through their extra work, that privileged class is to be removed from the struggle for existence, in order to produce and satisfy a new world of necessities. Accordingly, we must learn to identify as a cruel-sounding truth the fact that slavery belongs to the essence of a culture: a truth, granted, that leaves open no doubt about the absolute value of existence. This truth is the vulture which gnaws at the liver of the Promethean promoter of culture. The misery of men living a life of toil has to be increased to make the production of the world of art possible for a small number of Olympian men. (*The Greek State*, KSA 1.767)

With evidence drawn from *The Greek State* and from other passages concerning the nature and value of competition, we can identify two reasons Nietzsche gave for thinking not just that social inequality is valuable, but that (*pace* agonistic democratic readings) it is specifically a valuable feature of agonistic culture. The first is that social inequality allows a privileged class the time and leisure to engage in agonistic competition. This is a more specific application of Nietzsche's distributive anti-egalitarian thesis about the material conditions needed to allow some people – but crucially, not everyone – to flourish. It is, moreover, complementary to the analysis of the agon in *Homer's Contest*, for it is only thanks to the abundance produced by stark social inequality that a privileged class were afforded the leisure to cultivate and prove themselves in agonic contests. As James Pearson observes, Nietzsche shared this view with Jacob Burckhardt, who maintained it was only possible for Greek nobility to engage in apparently socially useless practices such as sporting contests thanks to the surplus labour of manual labourers (Pearson 2022, 92-93). Although some notes indicate that Nietzsche included labourers in his understanding of the Greeks who engaged in agon (KSA 7.396), he nonetheless considers the highest achievements of Greek culture to be the product of competitions of 'genius' that are made possible by the work of others.

The second reason Nietzsche had for thinking that social inequality is a valuable feature of agonism is that he thought competition valuable not just for its ability to incentivise self-cultivation and the pursuit of excellence, but also for its function of conferring distinction on those worthy of competition. In the Greek context, social stratification and division of labour play a role in Nietzsche's account of the distinguishing function of competition insofar as there are certain contests which only landed aristocracy are free to enter. But Nietzsche's focus on the distinguishing function of competition becomes much more prominent in later texts, particularly when he describes his own relation to his philosophical opponents. Consider for instance what Nietzsche has to say about his 'warlike nature' in EH I.7:

One way of measuring the strength of an attacker is by looking at the sort of opponents he needs; you can always tell when something is growing because it will go looking for powerful adversaries – or problems: since a warlike philosopher will challenge problems to single combat. The task is not to conquer all obstacles in general but instead to conquer the ones where you can apply your whole strength, suppleness, and skill with weapons, - to conquer opponents that are your equals . . . Equality among enemies - first presupposition of an honest duel. You cannot wage war against things you hold in contempt; and there is no war to be waged against things you can order around, things you see as beneath you. (EH I.7)

Democratic or egalitarian readings of Nietzsche's agonism tend to emphasise the fact that Nietzsche acknowledge the need for equality between competitors; indeed, as Nietzsche puts it here, 'equality among enemies [is the] first presupposition of an honest duel'. But as this passage also illustrates, Nietzsche thought that equality among equal

competitors goes hand in hand with a discerning selection of opponents, and contempt for those unworthy of opposition (see also BGE 260 and TII X.48).

The point for Nietzsche is, then, that competition is valuable in part because it is one means by which those who are in some sense superior can generate or reinforce their pathos of distance which, as we saw in the section 5, Nietzsche thought of as an important psychological precondition for perfectionism. A logic of inequality, Nietzsche claimed, is built into this function of competition.

VI. CONCLUSION

I do not mean to defend Nietzsche's anti-egalitarianism; I think this element of his work, indeed like quite a lot of his social and political thought more generally, is particularly crude, and much less perceptive than his analyses of religion, art, philosophy, and individual behaviour and psychology. It seems to me that particularly his claim that egalitarianism must bring with it conformity is completely off the mark. But this is nonetheless something that Nietzsche did himself think, and what I have tried to show is that his anti-egalitarianism is part of his broader immoralist account of what valuable self-love looks like, and what it takes for a person to develop the capacity to have enough self-esteem to live by an ethics that is uniquely one's own.

I have given a brief account of how Nietzsche thinks that being a law unto oneself requires living by an ethic that is at best indifferent to the requirements of morality, and is likely to at times force us to break moral rules in order to become who we are. I have also given a brief account of why Nietzsche thinks that social equality would stand in the way of anyone thinking highly enough of themselves to take a self-given ethic, a simple "This is me", to be enough justification for living by one's own law. And this in turn, for Nietzsche, justifies a blanket rejection of the value of equality, democracy, and universal rights. It is in this respect that I think that Nietzsche's account of freedom, agency, and virtue is not just an ethical but an immoral psychology.

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