Cruelty and You:
The discipline of great suffering
in Nietzsche’s philosophy of agency

by

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ABSTRACT

The concept of cruelty in Nietzsche’s thought does not in actuality speak to malice or violence, rather it refers to a disposition to self and world that we must adopt in order to most effectively organize our capacities of agency. Nietzsche locates our profound need to situate ourselves interpretatively against a world characterized by meaninglessness as the source of agency, in so doing, we provide a build a frame within which our worldly actions can be infused with meaning, and thereby derive a sense of ontological security. Contemporary interpretations, Nietzsche charges, actually frustrate our meaningful exercise of agency insofar as the sense of security they engender is the product of interpretative avoidance of, rather than engagement with, the ‘real’ world, marked as it is by the presence of flux, change, death, and suffering.

Against these interpretations, Nietzsche asserts that we must be cruel to ourselves, adopting more realistic accounts of the world, and deriving our certainty from an ethic of challenge whereby we attempt to assert ourselves against the world. By recognizing constraint as the chief condition for freedom, Nietzsche suggests that we can adopt an attitude towards ourselves and the world characterized by self-discipline. In so doing, we can situate the products of our interpretive activity as the grounds for all value, and work to hold ourselves accountable to self-imposed standards that most permit the confluence of self-certainty in, and creative engagement with, the world.

Such an interpretation offers greater purchase on contemporary political and ethical concerns than readings of Nietzsche as an aristocratic radicalist, valuing the creation of higher men at the expense of the great majority of mankind. Instead, Nietzsche in this reading expresses a deep concern for creating better people in general. In this regard, Nietzsche’s philosophy of agency, and its close relationship to cruelty, can be deployed to interrogate contemporary interpretations and ethical commitments that may be hindering our ability as a culture to promote the meaningful self-experience of agency, and thus, enjoy both freedom and autonomy in Nietzsche’s terms.
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DEDICATION

“Over and beyond yourself shall you build. 
But first you must be built yourself, 
four-square in body and soul”
– Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1 §20)

To Nietzsche,

Though you are long dead, 
and misunderstood in life, 
you’ve given me the tools 
to understand my environment 
and the drive to build myself.
1. **Introduction**

To breed an animal **with the right to make promises**—is not this the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man? Is it not the real problem regarding man? (GM II.1)

Nietzsche’s question speaks to the fundamental concern with moral responsibility, agency, and autonomy, that defines his mature (post-*Zarathustra*) thought, and it provides an apt frame through which to begin an analysis of his philosophy of agency.

True to Nietzsche’s form, his language is highly revealing. His invocation of ‘breeding’ speaks to the duration and complexity of the task, while his characterization of ‘promising’ as a right suggests that the capacity for moral responsibility is something earned or accomplished, and not an innate quality that we possess from birth. This distinction is crucial, and indeed marks Nietzsche’s break with the modern moral philosophy that precedes his thought.

As Ken Gemes resumes aptly, Nietzsche avoids typical modernist questions (‘for what acts is one morally responsible? For what acts can one be punished or rewarded?’), in favour of the “arguably profounder question ‘What is it to act in the first place, what is it to be a self capable of acting?’”2 Indeed, Gemes’s first type of questions presuppose exactly such a ‘self capable of acting,’ and therefore provide us with little conceptual purchase on either our actions, or the normative criteria we employ to evaluate them.

Nietzsche is ultimately concerned, then, with determining the **conditions** for agency, that is, the conceptions of self and world we require in order to act in the first place. Moreover, Nietzsche’s analysis of the ‘paradoxical problem’ of creating a morally responsible agent illustrates a correspondingly strong desire to outline a normative account of what constitutes **acting well**. I propose to use the terms ‘agency’ and ‘autonomy,’ respectively, here, to speak to these related inquiries.
The uniqueness of Nietzsche’s account rests in the role played by self-reflective interpretation. His basic criteria for agency turns on the human ability to interpret the world in such ways as to engender a ‘feeling of power;’ that is, a belief that both one’s actions and the context within which they are performed (world, society, community, etc) are meaningful. If this interpretive activity stipulates the conditions for agency, Nietzsche’s normative account of autonomy – driven by his concern to outline what it is to act well – emphasizes the particular kinds of interpretations that make possible the higher-order actions involved in moral responsibility.

Readings emphasizing the centrality of Nietzsche’s philosophy of agency in his thought, however, have been offered before (most notably by Mark Warren). My intention here, then, is to refine this perspective by exploring the important role played by cruelty in Nietzsche’s account of autonomy. One of the most unique and compelling dimensions of this account is the fact that cruelty, for Nietzsche, actually means something rather different than we might expect. When considered in concert with his account of autonomy, Nietzsche employs the term ‘cruelty’ to describe the attitude we must adopt towards ourselves in order to best form our capacities of agency, and not as some expression of violence or malice. It speaks of a disposition towards world, and the self in the world, that most consistently permits a meaningful experience of the self as an agent.

The striving for this kind of experience, Nietzsche further demonstrates, actually undergirds what we would normally take to be the grounds of value. The feeling of purpose we derive from acting in accordance with different moralities, interpretations, or perspectives, Nietzsche’s account reveals, emerges in actuality from the self-experience of agency we achieve in so acting – from the fact that they allow us to situate ourselves meaningfully within the world. The chief normative criteria we can use, therefore, in assessing the relative value of these
different interpretations, then, is the frequency, character, and quality of the experiences of agency they offer. This, I shall demonstrate, has a number of philosophical, political, and ethical consequences, that speak to the significance of Nietzsche’s philosophy of agency on the whole.

My analysis proceeds as follows:

In the first chapter, I outline the core content of Nietzsche’s philosophy of agency, his response to the question of ‘what it is to act in the first place.’ Here I suggest that, for human beings, this constitutes a response to a feeling of ontological insecurity. In order to act, that is, we must situate ourselves interpretively in the world, and thus create a space within which our actions can be understood as meaningful. In so doing, we adhere to the ‘critical ontology of practice’ (to poach Mark Warren’s term) of the will to power.

In the second chapter, I illustrate how Nietzsche employs this basic account of agency to critique our current culturally available interpretations, ultimately demonstrating that they actually do a fairly poor job of allowing us to infuse our actions with meaning. This, I outline, is the result of the disconnects they encourage between interpretation and experience, arising from their unwillingness to attribute authorship of interpretation to humanity, and their insistence on interpreting away the worldly suffering integral to organic life, rather than affirming it in such a way as to allow for creative engagement.

In the third chapter, I turn from Nietzsche’s critique of our current interpretations to his account of the ‘cruel’ disposition we must ultimately adopt if we are to ‘act well.’ In this chapter I focus on the disposition towards the world that Nietzsche espouses. Here, I suggest, he exhorts that we must be cruel to our self-flattering portraits of the world and instead come to accept the fundamental place of suffering and death in our lives. In so doing, we begin to interpret our relationship to the world in terms of an ethic of challenge centred on deriving meaning for the
exercise of agency from struggle with, as opposed to avoidance of, the world and worldly suffering.

In the final chapter, I examine the ‘cruel’ disposition towards self-in-world that lies at the core of Nietzsche’s account of ‘acting well.’ By demonstrating that all morals and practices actually involve a measure of such self-directed cruelty, I argue that Nietzsche’s account of this disposition is characterized by self-discipline, the ‘joy in making oneself suffer,’ that recognizes constraint as a crucial condition for freedom. In so doing, I assert, we can situate the products of our interpretive activity as the grounds for all value, and work to hold ourselves accountable to self-imposed standards that most permit the confluence of self-certainty in, and creative engagement with, the world. Freedom and autonomy, then, can thereby be understood as “a self-correcting enterprise of self-invention that is coincident with discovery.”

I suggest that by interpreting Nietzsche in this way, we can locate the source of his accounts of cruelty and suffering in a general concern for creating better people. In so doing, we can move from attributing an explicitly aristocratic political vision to Nietzsche’s philosophy, to an understanding of it as an impassioned case for human potential on the whole. Nietzsche’s importance for contemporary concerns, then, lies not that in a demand that we rebuild our society to foster the creation of more Goethes and Napoleons, but rather in his call to re-evaluate how particular values and attitudes concerning cruelty and suffering are hindering our ability to create ‘good’ people – people who are not only agents, but autonomous ones, to employ my distinction.
all events in the organic world are a subduing, a becoming master, and all subduing and becoming master requires fresh interpretation (GM II.12)

Prior to providing an account of what it is to act well, Nietzsche must situate what it is to act in the first place, and detail the grounds or conditions for exercise of agency. The epigram above obliquely locates these conditions at the intersection between ‘organic exigency’ and human willing. Specifically, it highlights three key considerations meriting closer examination: first, the character of the organic world itself; second, the role human interpretive activity plays in response to that world, and third, how this interpretation actually enables meaningful action – or, mastery, in Nietzsche’s terms. In unpacking these considerations, we can discern the outlines of Nietzsche’s basic philosophy of agency.

2.1. Survival, ontological security, and the reactive grounds of agency

Life in the organic world, for Nietzsche, consists of a series of assertive reactions against natural circumstances. In this regard, animal agency consists of instinctive responses in the service of survival. The uniqueness of the “human animal,” however, lies in consciousness. We need not only to survive, but also to understand why we exist as a condition of our survival.

For Nietzsche, nature itself provides few resources from which to derive such an understanding. “Think of a being such as nature is,” Nietzsche demands, “prodigal beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without aims or intentions, without mercy or justice, at once fruitful and barren and uncertain; think of indifference itself as a power – how could you live according to such indifference?” (BGE 9)

Nietzsche’s description is a powerful one. Nature is by no means ordered, just, or purposive; rather, it is indifference embodied, with no inherent regard for human action, intentions, or even life. The final phrase, therefore, implies – for beings endowed with
consciousness – that living in accordance with nature, and thus indifference embodied, is impossible. The very fact that we can self-analyze and seek justification seals the purely instinctive path to agency against us.

Indeed, absent such justification, as Nietzsche elsewhere argues, “something was lacking [...] man was surrounded by a fearful void—he did not know how to justify, to account for, to affirm himself; he suffered from the problem of his meaning” (GM III.28). As conscious and self-conscious creatures, then, human beings have a need for ontological security – for a sense of certainty of self in the world – over and above the constant need for physical security inherent to all drives for survival in the organic world.

Indeed this latter need, Nietzsche demonstrates, pales in comparison to the demands of consciousness. Physical pain and hardship, as the most common expressions of worldly suffering, can be accounted for interpretively. Thus Nietzsche avers that, “what really arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering as such but the senselessness of suffering” (GM II.7). His language of justification, accounting, and affirmation is particularly telling in this regard: that we suffer at the hands of an indifferent nature is given; our need for ontological security manifests itself in our desire to understand ‘why’ this is the case.

The human race, Nietzsche accordingly argues, “cannot thrive without a periodic trust in life—without faith in the reason in life!” (GS 1) In this vein, he concludes, “man has gradually become a fantastic animal, that must fulfil one condition of existence more than any other animal: man must from time to time believe he knows why he exists” (GS 1). For Nietzsche, then, the sort of ‘existential’ suffering (the absence of meaning) involved in conscious life carries far greater weight than the worldly suffering (the omnipresence of death and change) inherent to mortal life. In this sense, human beings are unique, as the need for ontological security trumps or equals the need for physical security as a condition for survival.
Thus, returning to his earlier account of nature, Nietzsche questions: “to live – is that not precisely wanting to be other than this nature? Is living not valuating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different?” (BGE 9) Over and against the inherent meaninglessness of the world, Nietzsche suggests, human beings have the capacity to create meaningful justification for their activities – and in so doing are able to ‘explain’ the inherent ‘indifference’ and ‘prodigality’ of the natural world.

*Human* life, then, is far from indifferent; indeed, it is this very desire to move away from *indifference*, to interpret our existence in such ways as to empower our actions within the world, that is in fact constitutive of our humanity. Our interpretive reactions to base conditions of uncertainty, then, constitute the genesis of agency in Nietzsche’s account. Inasmuch as it allows us to understand our actions as meaningful, it provides the grounds for any subsequent action. Accordingly, our unique status as a ‘fantastic animal’ rests in the fact that interpretation plays such a central role in the promotion of life.

2.2. **Being in control: the will to power and interpretive mastery**

What remains to be determined, however, is *how* the interpretive process works, how the need for ontological security can be assuaged, and how Nietzsche believes agents situate themselves in the world so as to be able to act meaningfully. Though developed in response to natural exigencies, the relationship Nietzsche traces between nature (or ‘reality’) and the interpretive act is a complicated one, and it merits unpacking to further grasp its significance.

The human need for ontological security, Nietzsche proposes, is met in the attempt to organize the disparate contents of experience into an intelligible framework that can serve as the basis for action. Though this seems simple enough, the terms Nietzsche employs to outline this process suggest otherwise. “The falsest judgments,” he suggests paradoxically, “are the most
indispensable to us, that without granting as true the fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the purely invented world of the unconditional and self-identical, without a continual falsification of the world by means of numbers, mankind could not live —“ (BGE 4). Therefore, precisely because the world as Nietzsche understands it is so fundamentally chaotic, human beings must invent new means to organize and interpret it in order to survive.

By labelling these important interpretations as ‘false,’ though, Nietzsche establishes a crucial break between the ‘actual’, ‘real’, or ‘organic’ world, and the world as interpreted by human beings – thereby creating a tension between our world and our most fundamental response to it. In the process of crafting these base interpretations, Nietzsche implies, a certain degree of reality is necessarily ‘falsified;’ by categorizing and rationalizing the chaos of experiential phenomena in the natural world, parts of experience are obscured. Nietzsche therefore implies that, despite their necessity for life, the more comprehensive our interpretations become, the further we estrange ourselves from the raw, chaotic experience of the ‘actual’ world.

Crucially, though, in speaking in terms of ‘falsification,’ ‘fiction,’ and ‘invention,’ Nietzsche concurrently stresses that either the omission or the elevation of any particular facet of experience in an interpretation speaks not to the value of that facet in itself; rather, its relative value is dictated only by its usefulness in enabling action. The important question, Nietzsche avers in this regard, “is to what extent it is life-advancing, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-breeding” (BGE 4). In this manner, the indispensability of these interpretations, regardless of the degree to which they may misrepresent ‘reality,’ is in the feeling of self-certainty they proffer in so doing.

Nietzsche details this process in his account of ‘spirit,’ which he describes as an internal imperative “to be master within itself and around itself and to feel itself master.” In order to establish a base level of ontological security, the spirit must “appropriate what is foreign to it” –
we must *account* for new experiential phenomena conceptually in order to respond to them in action. “Out of multiplicity,” he outlines, “it has the will to simplicity, a will which binds together and tames, which is imperious and domineering” (BGE 230).

By ‘simplifying’ the inherent ‘multiplicity’ of external phenomena, then, we commit the interpretive falsification Nietzsche highlights, and derive a feeling of control therefrom. Nietzsche describes this as “a strong inclination to assimilate the new to the old, to simplify the complex, to overlook or repel what is wholly contradictory,” through “the incorporation of new ‘experiences,’ the arrangement of new things within old divisions.” This interpretive process of accounting, for Nietzsche, constitutes “growth, that is to say; more precisely, the *feeling* of growth, the feeling of increased power” (BGE 230). The striving for mastery, then, is a manifestation of the basic process of agency.

Moreover, Nietzsche’s description of this ultimately ‘false’ process of categorizing and organizing experience in terms of will, struggle, and mastery, is crucial. In so doing, he suggests that despite the fact that the interpretive act at the heart of agency emerges from a reaction *against* nature, it is, in effect, an expression of the same aggressive, expansive forces constitutive of nature itself. In this regard, he stresses that the “needs and capacities” of our basic interpretive gesture “are the same as those which physiologists posit for everything that lives, grows, and multiplies” (BGE 230).

Indeed, in the same passage from which the epitaph for this chapter is drawn, Nietzsche stresses: “whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master requires fresh interpretation” (GM II.12). Paradoxically, then, the needs and desires operating
behind this process of interpretation are in actuality driven by the same essential force behind the chaos they seek to navigate – by will to power.

Yet Nietzsche locates a significant difference in human activity. In unselfconscious organic life, Nietzsche infers, this process of reinterpretation is *physical* – a violent act of predation, plants forcing their way through a cliff face, and so on. In the human case, however, the development of self-consciousness allows for the possibility that re-interpretation *can be divorced from physicality*. As Paul Patton outlines, “given the self-conscious, interpretive element in every human act of will, it follows that mankind is the one animal in which the feeling of power is divorced from any direct relation to quantity of power.” Rather than needing to *physically* dominate a particular environment (though this certainly never hurts), human beings can derive a sense of ontological security if they can *identify themselves* as in position of mastery. In this regard, the feeling of security is no longer tied directly to the *performance* of mastery in the world.

To summarize, then, human beings can express the natural striving for mastery – characteristic of life as will to power – at either the interpretive or physical level. Nietzsche’s analysis suggests, however, that our status as ‘fantastic animals’ lies in the extent to which the interpretive element has taken priority in our case. “In being conscious and self-conscious,” Mark Warren resumes, “humans increasingly strive less for external goals than for the self-reflective goal of experiencing the self as agent.”

Warren’s conclusion is significant, as it stresses the role of interpretation as the engine of Nietzsche’s account of human agency. The salience of this account lies in its insightful generality: any interpretation, worldview, or set of beliefs giving rise to practice therefore operates in this way, be it religious, rational, mythical, or otherwise. All of these different means of situating ourselves in the world consist, at their core, of responses to the fundamental absence
of extra-personal meaning, and the ontological insecurity resulting therefrom. In offering avenues for the experience of the feeling of power involved in ‘subduing’ the exigencies of the external world into a meaningful frame, these interpretations lay the foundation for the performance of agency, through which action in the world can be self-reflectively understood as meaningful.

It is in this light that Nietzsche comes to describe “psychology” as “the development-theory of the will to power” (BGE 23). He thereby infers that will to power is uniquely attenuated in the human context; beyond manifesting itself as a strictly instinctual drive to act, it becomes the means through which we come to organize our capacities as agency in order to act.

Yet here it is important to recall the earlier distinction between agency and autonomy; Nietzsche, in my view, is ultimately concerned with determining how to act well. Thus, by tracing the character of the foundation required for action in general, Nietzsche gives us the tools to analyze the higher-order systems of interpretation we use to situate ourselves today – only from there can we begin to assess whether or not these systems are conducive to the sort of action Nietzsche ultimately values.
3. MODERN MYOPIA: INTERPRETATION GONE WILD

We are from the very heart and the very first – accustomed to lying. Or, to express it more virtuously and hypocritically, in short more pleasantly: one is much more of an artist than one realizes. (BGE 192)

Moving from an analysis of the fundamentals of agency to Nietzsche’s normative account of autonomy involves a more critical turn. If the basic substance of agency turns on our ability to interpret the world so as to create space for meaningful action, then Nietzsche’s diagnosis of our current culturally available interpretations is that they actually do a fairly mediocre job of infusing our worldly activity with meaning.

Both the modern, secular, liberal-scientific worldview and its Christian predecessor, Nietzsche suggests, have succeeded in providing a sense of relative self-certainty for their adherents. Yet Nietzsche charges that this certainty has been the product of a series of interpretive illusions, and thus offers existential grounding in spite of engagement with worldly experience. In this way, these common interpretations engender the disconnect between interpretation and actual lived experience that Nietzsche characterizes as “nihilism.”

The possibility for this disconnect is the unique product of our potential to achieve self-certainty on purely interpretive grounds. Precisely because the feeling of power can be divorced from the experience of power in practice, Nietzsche argues, we can create interpretative structures increasingly removed from lived experience. Such a possibility can create bizarre circumstances where, though our interpretations infuse our experience with meaning, and thereby create the possibility for action and meaningful self-identification required of agency, their content is such as to limit the actual exercise of action within that world. This occurs for a variety of reasons, the analysis of which constitutes the struggle against “nihilism” that animates Nietzsche’s critique of modernity.
For the purposes of this analysis, I will focus on how Nietzsche suggests that our current culturally available interpretations suffer from this interpretive disconnect. He outlines this at two key levels:

First, in developing ever more complex structures of interpretation, we fail to recognize that the concepts we have at our disposal to understand our world actually originate in interpretation, and are therefore contingent and historical, as opposed to fixed, unconditional verities. In crafting interpretations that predominantly demand the latter, we set ourselves up for interpretive frustration, as this demand is simply never met in reality.

Second, we attempt to interpret away the worldly suffering that is integral to all organic life. Nietzsche, recalling the first chapter, insists that worldly suffering must be placed in a meaningful context to sustain agency. In denying or attempting to shift suffering into a metaphysical beyond, modern interpretations misrepresent the world of lived experience, and frustrate potential for agency in so doing.

By exploring each of these disconnects in turn, I hope to demonstrate Nietzsche’s belief that, in clinging to these sorts of interpretations, we set ourselves up for failure: we employ interpretive illusions to create a false sense of self-certainty that is bound to be frustrated when our experience of the world in effect consists of change and suffering, and not the stability of meaning and peace we want to read into it. We are thereby barred from the sort of self-consciousness about the conditions for our agency – that is, the character of the real, organic world itself and our natural response to it – that would allow for the cultivation of a sense of self-certainty derived from engagement with the world.
3.1. The omnipresence of interpretation

As detailed in the previous chapter, Nietzsche’s account of the interpretive grounds of agency details that all of our various interpretations are, at their core, a purposive striving to enable the experience of the self as an agent. This observation, as Mark Warren outlines cogently, has some marked consequences, on the ontological, valuative, and epistemological planes.

Ontologically, Nietzsche places the organization of our powers into agency as the central aspect of the human condition. As outlined in the first chapter, no activity is possible is prior to this process. Consequently, “what this means,” Warren suggests, “is self-experiences of agent-unity—experiences of freedom, volition, control over one’s future—are the grounds of value.”

This means that for Nietzsche the adequacy of any interpretation can only be accounted for in terms of how it enables (or constrains) agency in practice.

Moreover, given that it is human interpretation of an extra-individual world that enables action within that world, human beings alone are the source of agency, and therefore, of any ascription of value. “Whatever has value in the present world,” Nietzsche explains, “has it not in itself, according to its nature – nature is always value-less – but has rather been given, granted value, and we were the givers and granters. Only we have created the world that concerns human beings!” (GS 301). Nietzsche therefore pulls the metaphysical rug out from under any justification of action; under these criteria no way of perceiving the world can be said to be valuable in itself. Thus, while the natural world exists independently of our interpretations, how we interpret ourselves (and our possibilities within that exogenous world so as to enable meaningful action) is uniquely human. That we employ categories to interpret sense experience, then, does not mean that these categories exist mind-independently, although, to be absolutely clear, the phenomena that they attempt to describe very much do.
“Stated slightly differently,” Warren elaborates, “Nietzsche asserts that highly organized, highly individuated power is the value that sustains other values—such as rationality, moral responsibility, autonomy, and freedom.” Accordingly, none of these values, regardless of how traditionally highly regarded they have been, have any inherent value for Nietzsche. Values are ‘valuable’ only insofar as they offer us interpretive purchase on the external world, allowing us a feeling of power concomitant with the sense that we possess some measure of control over our lives.

Epistemologically speaking then, truth and our capacities to assess truth-claims are similarly tied to practice. It is in this way, Warren suggests, that Nietzsche “judges that some kinds of interpretive phenomena—some truths, some ideals, some moral notions—are means to individuation.” What we find to be true is what enables us to form the capacities of agency, and therefore situate our actions within a nexus of meaning. As Warren explains, “interpretive aspects of practice once though to possess value in themselves possess value only insofar as they are means to ‘life’ or individuated power.” Truth is accordingly historical, contingent, and culturally bounded.

To summarize, then, interpretations, as varied, contingent, and historically-situated responses to fundamental conditions, Nietzsche thereby implies, can be considered valuable only insofar as and to the degree that they are a means to individuation—consequently, no interpretation is sacred. His philosophy of agency thereby empowers us to interrogate any and all interpretations, using the degree to which each can engender the feeling of individuated power—or, whether or not they stand as a means to ‘life’—as the chief evaluative criteria.

The implied critique in this revelation is that our current culturally available interpretations do not offer us the resources to ask these questions. Inasmuch as their positions are derived from absolutes (God, reason, a priori judgments, ‘fundamental truths’, etc), modern
interpretations compromise our very awareness that an interpretation is taking place. By demanding transcendental grounds for certainty, they obscure the interpretive act (and the human originator) at the heart of their very perspective, while simultaneously dismissing the value of any meaning that is ‘merely’ originated by human beings.\textsuperscript{14}

Warren’s suggestion, then, that the criteria for determining value lie in the extent to which interpretations are a means to ‘life,’ is an important one. It speaks to the second of the disconnects outlined above, that is, that modern interpretations provide a sense of self-certainty \textit{in spite of} and not as a result of engagement with the world, or life, itself.

\textbf{3.2. Interpretation tainted: hunger, weakness, need, and sickness}

The essence of the interpretive disconnect Nietzsche traces in modern culture lies in its attempt to stave off \textit{all} suffering at an interpretive level, not just the core \textit{existential suffering} that Nietzsche locates at the heart of agency. There is a subtle distinction to be drawn, then, between these different levels of suffering and our interpretive responses to them.

In his later works, particularly \textit{The Gay Science}, Nietzsche characterizes our profound cultural discomfort with worldly suffering through a series of oppositions: weakness vs strength, being vs becoming, hunger (or need) vs superabundance, and sickness vs health. Nietzsche employs these binaries interchangeably to challenge the (explicit or implied) modern goal of a world free of suffering. In this vein, Nietzsche outlines, “every art, every philosophy can be considered a cure and aid in the service of growing, struggling life: they always presuppose suffering and sufferers” (GS 370).

Two important points are reiterated here:

First, Nietzsche reasserts the place of suffering as the locus of \textit{all} interpretive activity. Philosophizing itself stands as our interpretive response – an expression of that our most spiritual
will to power – to the threat to ontological security posed by the presence of, and our need to account for, worldly suffering.\textsuperscript{15}

Second, his invocation of ‘growing, struggling life’ speaks to the character of that life itself. The human condition is invariably marked by a endless struggle against death, suffering, and exogenous change. Thus suffering and sufferers are omnipresent.

Crucial, though, is the \textit{character of our interpretive response} to that suffering. Here, Nietzsche outlines an important difference:

\begin{quote}
But there are two types of sufferers: first, those who suffer from a \textit{superabundance of life} – they want a Dionysian art as well as a tragic outlook and insight into life; then, those who suffer from an \textit{impoveryishment of life} and seek quiet, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and insight, or else intoxication, paroxysm, numbness, madness. (GS 370)
\end{quote}

For the time being, I will focus on the latter in order to speak to the disconnect Nietzsche identifies as most problematic. The impoverishment Nietzsche highlights is a feeling of ontological discomfort in the world, an \textit{aversion} to the inherent harshness of existence that demands a particular, ‘quiet’ interpretation through which to organize agency. He draws a distinction in this opposition here, however, between \textit{accounting} for suffering, and \textit{soothing} suffering. Given the harshness of nature, to seek stillness in this way is tantamount in Nietzsche’s view to merely closing ones eyes in the face of an oncoming train. It constitutes an attempt to reassure ourselves that everything will be okay, without actually \textit{doing anything to guarantee that reassurance}. In this way, Nietzsche, as Warren accordingly outlines, “emphasizes that imaginary satisfactions produce an inability to act, to change one’s situation and with it the cause of the problem. They are, in Nietzsche’s terms, a ‘formula for decadence’ because they destroy the individual’s ability to engage reality.”\textsuperscript{16}

At a cultural level, in Nietzsche’s analysis, we are constantly guilty of this sort misrepresentation. “We are from the very heart and the very first – accustomed to lying.”
Nietzsche explains in a noteworthy formulation, “or, to express it more virtuously and hypocritically, in short more pleasantly: one is much more of an artist than one realizes” (BGE 192). Our interpretive capacities are powerful, then, and Nietzsche’s use of both ‘artistry’ and ‘lying’ to describe this phenomenon is especially apt. His purpose is to stress that while a degree of misrepresentation of the world is a natural consequence of our efforts to organize our powers as agency, we are also equally capable of using this same deep interpretive capacity to project false hopes, ideals, and images of ourselves onto the world.

Nietzsche traces a very subtle distinction, then, between interpreting the world ‘artfully’ so as to allow for both self-certainty in and engagement with reality, and ‘lying’ in our interpretation such that we achieve self-certainty at the expense of this engagement. In other words, we all need to philosophize to account for suffering, but the ‘impoverished’ need their philosophy to go further, to abolish suffering, and thus they seek a particular kind of interpretation, offering the kind of calm, stillness, numbness, etc., demanded by such a need.

Simon May captures this mindset succinctly. “In refusing to affirm that life is structured by the possibility of loss,” he details, “they imagine an ideal order out of which this possibility has been conceptually airbrushed, an order that is clearly not the one into which humans are born.” For Nietzsche, this ‘ideal order’ manifests itself consistently throughout modern and pre-modern world views: Christian Salvationism, the Hegelian unfolding of reason in history, the scientific ideal of future, perfect, knowledge, and so on. Indeed, as Mark Warren outlines, Nietzsche even charges that such a desire also animates liberal democratic politics, inasmuch as he understood them “to be based on a demand that the actual world embody the Christian-moral promise—that is, on a politicization of the ideals of brotherhood, equality of rights, happiness, and peace.” Rather than providing an accurate account, then, such interpretations simply
project human ideals, values, and sentimentality onto world of flux, uncertainty, and multiplicity that is simply indescribable in those terms.

As Nietzsche asserts, “your pride wants to prescribe your morality, your ideal, to nature, yes to nature itself, and incorporate them in it” (BGE 9). That is to say, this ‘prideful’ behaviour consists of the desire for one’s own, current interpretation to be transcendentally or timelessly situated. “Individuals,” Warren outlines in this vein, “often reify their own interpretive practices. That is, they confuse the limits of socially constructed consciousness with the limits of the world in which they live.”19 In ascribing their own moral behaviour to the concept of what is ‘natural,’ and mistakenly reading their own interpretation into nature thereby, the interpreters betray a deep insecurity about the value of their precepts and their own sense of comfort in the world. To demand such a timeless justification for a particular set of practices, in Nietzsche’s eyes, is to demand fixity from a world that is fundamentally in flux, and thus to guarantee future frustration.

When evaluating these disparate interpretations, then, Nietzsche’s critical account of agency demands that we ask whether “hunger or superabundance” have “become creative,” or have structured the content of the interpretation in this manner. He insists that we investigate whether “a desire for fixing, for immortalizing, for being, or rather by a desire for destruction, for change, for novelty, for future, for becoming” animates the perspectives we use to situate ourselves in the world (BGE 370). Echoed here, to summarize, are Nietzsche’s different types of ‘sufferers.’ The weak/impoverished sufferer, desires a fixed, stable, and timeless wellspring for self-certainty, and thereby risks alienation from a world ultimately characterized by ‘destruction, change, novelty, future, and becoming.’

Warren illustrates this potential for alienation on two fronts. “Where value is understood to reside in categories of ‘being,’ “ he outlines, “we are led to judge negatively the changing, the sensuous, the differential, and appearances generally.”20 One is accordingly more likely to shun
interpretations derived from the senses – from human experience – in favour of the timelessness and fixity of metaphysics. Second and consequently, such interpretations limit the possibility for action in that real world. “When categories of ‘being’ are seen as true in themselves,” Warren explains, “they do not permit engagement of present conditions, precisely because, in contrast to presence, these truths are unconditional.”

The inevitable outcome, then, is a disconnect from life itself. “What is definitive” of this kind of ‘needy’ interpretation, Mark Warren resumes, “is that they institutionalize horizons of consciousness in which one condition of willing—the ‘natural’ world of experience—is hidden from view.” This obfuscation of the ‘world of experience,’ then, is the common denominator among Western interpretations of existence, and the result, Nietzsche charges, is a sick or nihilistic culture that proves exceptionally difficult to displace.
4. The Cruelty of Existence:  
Or, How to Embrace Life as Exploitation

*a living thing desires above all to vent its strength – life as such is will to power* (BGE 13)

4.1. Illusionary Interpretation and Self-Flattery at Play: A Practical Example

“For far too long,” Nietzsche therefore asserts, “we have interpreted [the world] falsely and mendaciously, though according to our wish and will for veneration, that is, according to a need” (GS 346). The solution to this problem lies, Nietzsche implies, in cultivating a more ‘honest’ perspective of the world, one capable of resisting the temptation towards flattery and purely imaginary satisfactions to our base need for ontological security. Nietzsche’s language implies, as we have seen in the previous chapter, that the tendency towards ‘flattery’ and ‘veneration’ in our interpretive activity is all too common.

Indeed, we can draw an interesting practical example of this from child psychology. Claudia Mueller and Carol Dweck devised a series of experiments where 5th grade children were made to answer different mathematical questions, and subsequently given praise at random, either about their intelligence (how smart they were) or their ability (how hard they had worked or how well they had answered the question). Their performance on subsequent questions was then evaluated in terms of the feedback that they had received.  

The results of the study prove fascinating. The children praised for intelligence alone proved less able to shrug off failure, as they more closely associated their performance to a fixed, stable identification of themselves as intelligent. Consequently, “after they faced failure, these children used low-ability, rather than low-effort, attributions to account for their poor performance more than did children praised for hard work, who preferred to ascribe their failures to low effort.”  

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The former, operating under a fixed assumption about the world (that they were smart) floundered when reality (their failure to answer the question and thereby ‘prove’ their intelligence) differed from that interpretation. Most revealingly, the study suggested that these children were accordingly more likely to believe that their performance was an indication of their intelligence, to value occasions where they could exhibit the perception of intelligence more highly than ones where they could learn new strategies to actually improve performance, and, consequently, to lie about their results in order to sustain their self-perception as intelligent, regardless of their actual successes.24

The latter, on the other hand, given a more accurate base interpretation – that their performance was tied to effort – simply applied themselves more on subsequent questions. They thereby exhibited an ability to operate with a more malleable understanding of their own intelligence, conceiving it as a product of both motivation and knowledge, and not some immutable capacity that they either did or did not feel they possessed.25

Nietzsche’s account of how we ‘lie to ourselves’ in creating a type of agency built on interpretive illusion, then, suggests that, at a cultural level, we are guilty of a similar self-attribution, but with much higher (existential) stakes. That is to say, as products of modern society, we want to be ‘praised’ – to identify ourselves – as existentially grounded, to believe ourselves to be real agents, but are unwilling to adopt the appropriate disposition and undertake the kinds of actions that such grounding truly requires.

Nietzsche uses an apt scientific metaphor to sketch the outlines of such a disposition, and his analysis proves helpful in framing the forthcoming discussion of what, precisely, he understands ‘acting well’ to mean. In order to “become who we are,” he outlines, “we must become, the best students and discovers of everything lawful and necessary in the world: we
must become *physicists* in order to be creators in this sense – while hitherto all valuations and ideals have been built on *ignorance* of physics or in *contradiction* to it” (GS 335).

Our current interpretations, in failing to grasp the *processes of agent-formation* that have actually animated valuations and ideals hitherto, Nietzsche infers, have led to the establishment of false causalities about the origins – and, subsequently, the normative content – of human action. To be a physicist, then, is to begin with a different theoretical framework (his philosophy of agency) and proceed to discover a new causality (‘everything lawful and necessary’) therefrom. Nietzsche’s purpose, then, in adopting this peculiar choice of term is to point to the type of *rigour* he demands of this perspective.

The key to success here, Nietzsche suggests, is *more cruelty*, and his criticism points to two different facets where a more ‘cruel’ disposition is necessary:

First, Nietzsche states that we must be *cruel to our interpretations* of the world. Against our instincts for flattery, then, we must operate with a realistic portrait of what drives the world, and what attitude to adopt to it. Second, Nietzsche believes that we must be *cruel to ourselves*; we must embrace the challenge of living in a cruel world through the exercise of discipline. I will explore the first selection suggestion below, while the analysis of the second will be reserved for the final chapter.

**4.2. Embracing exploitation: an ethic of challenge**

What we need, then, is to cultivate a far ‘stronger’ interpretation of reality. In keeping with the scientific analogy, we have to return to the ‘basic principles’ of the genesis of our feeling of power; that is, the feeling of supremacy we derive from asserting ourselves against others, and the strength inherent in self-identification with mastery. In short, we need to reconnect with the same will to power that sets the natural world against us in the first place.
The type of ‘strength’ Nietzsche demands from ‘better’ interpretations therefore has little to do with actual physical strength. In the same manner that the quantity of material power is irrelevant to the experience of the feeling of power in Nietzsche’s basic philosophy of agency, strength in this context must be understood in existential terms – in terms of will to power internalized and exhibited as an assertion of self against the world. Strength, then, is a measure of situated-ness in the real world, and this entails a high degree of awareness about both the character of the world itself, and self-awareness about our own needs therein.

Indeed, consider the following critique. “Who are the only people motivated to lie their way out of reality?” Nietzsche asks, “People who suffer from it. But to suffer from reality means that you are a piece of reality that has gone wrong…” (A 15). Nietzsche reiterates here that to suffer in reality is a given. To be a ‘piece of reality’ gone wrong, though, and to suffer from reality, is to forget, dismiss, or otherwise try to ignore the omnipresence of that suffering. It must be accounted for, and Nietzsche ultimately suggests that if we are account for it well it must be affirmed. Our relationship to reality, then, is the crucial marker of strength.

Affirming suffering as a condition of life, therefore, is to be an active ‘piece of reality,’ and it is this type of interpretation that demands strength. Only in such interpretations can the sense of self-certainty required for agency emerge from “creative engagement” with the world, and not in the kinds of “interpretive illusions” that Warren suggests provide fertile grounds for ‘decadence’ and inactivity. To engage creatively with the world, then, we must be cruel to our interpretations – to our rosy or otherwise self-flattering portraits of the world – and acknowledge the suffering integral to the human condition.

“One has to think this matter thoroughly through to the bottom to resist all sentimental weakness:” Nietzsche asserts in a famously strong statement, “life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition
of one’s own forms, incorporation and, at least and mildest, exploitation – “ (BGE 259). This is a strong statement indeed, but to interpret it well we must catch the subtle message Nietzsche conveys in his choice of language. The fact that Nietzsche prefaces his remarks with a call to resist weakness immediately attributes a polemical quality to the ensuing statement; the terms Nietzsche uses to describe the world, therefore, are controversial precisely because he means to challenge the ‘weakness’ of common interpretation, and the moral bias we read into these concepts.

Nietzsche makes this abundantly clear in the continuation of the above passage. “But why,” he asks of terms such as appropriation and exploitation, “should one always have to employ precisely those words which have from of old been stamped with slanderous intention?” (BGE 259). Thus, despite the ‘negative’ or ‘evil’ character of the world he presents by invoking terms such as ‘exploitation,’ Nietzsche wants to paint a picture of the natural world on its own terms. “ ‘Exploitation,’ Nietzsche elaborates, “does not pertain to a corrupt or imperfect or primitive society: it pertains to the essence of the living thing as a fundamental organic function, it is a consequence of the intrinsic will to power which is precisely the will of life…” (BGE 259).

As we have seen, life as will to power is defined precisely by these aggressively expansionary forces.

I should stress, however, that he does not thereby advocate a political order founded on direct exploitation. Here the context of the passage is critical. Immediately prior to his argument that “all life is essentially appropriation,” he writes, “to refrain from mutual injury, mutual violence, mutual exploitation, to equate one’s own will with that of another: this may in a certain rough sense become good manners between individuals if the conditions for it are present” (BGE 259). This is an intriguing frame. Life itself, then, though it consists of exploitation at its essence,
need not necessarily be exploitative in practice, provided we can succeed in maintaining our engagement with the world when we internalize will to power as our interpretive base for action.

Nietzsche, therefore, is hesitant to support any interpretation that enshrines comfort and even ontological security at an unconditional or transcendent level. That is to say, when we believe that the world that we live in is fundamentally safe, happy, and peaceful, we presuppose that this is the case, and limit the scope of our possibilities for agency accordingly. Instead, Nietzsche speaks of peace and restraint from violence here as a possibility only. In this way, he allows for both the affirmation of the nastier, exploitative, elements of natural life, and a potential for improvement; he creates the conditions and space for goal-directed action towards peace, rather than simply presupposing them. The crucial distinction then, is that Nietzsche demands the affirmation of worldly suffering, and not necessarily the celebration, promotion, or perpetuation of it.

Indeed, recalling some of his positive binaries from the previous chapter (particularly ‘strength’ and ‘superabundance’), Nietzsche stresses

He who is richest and fullest in life, the Dionysian god and man, can allow himself not only the sight of of what is terrible and questionable but also the terrible deed and every luxury of destruction, decomposition, and negation; in this case, what is evil, nonsensical, and ugly almost seems acceptable because of an overflow in procreating, fertilizing forces capable of turning every desert into bountiful farmland. (GS 370)

Nietzsche speaks here to the inherent ambivalence of both nature and human action, and the interchangeability of creation and destruction in their manifestations. Therefore, to understand the ‘evil, nonsensical, ugly’ qualities inherent to death and change in the world is to affirm their necessity, only in so doing do they become ‘almost’ acceptable. In this, we can glimpse the will to power at work, we need only recall his claim (invoked in the first chapter here) that “whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpretated to new ends, taken

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over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it” (GM II.12). The sort of ‘reinterpretation’ that Nietzsche describes in the natural world here is precisely that which is involved in the cycle of death, decay, and rebirth which defines the natural order. In uniquely human terms, this embrace of Dionysian forces manifests itself as the exercise of the more “spiritual” will to power involved in philosophizing (BGE 9). In interpreting our experience we must continually destroy, discard, and rebuild prior and competing accounts of reality, and, in so doing, we ‘vent our strength’ upon the world (BGE 13).

It is in this manner, therefore, that Nietzsche suggests that “the desire for destruction, for change and for becoming can be the expression of an overflowing energy pregnant with the future (my term for this is, as is known, ‘Dionysian’)” (GS 370).28 Embracing life as exploitation, then, requires an acceptance of the fluidity and contingency of the natural world, and, consequently of all interpretations we can provide thereof.

Ultimately, the essential component of accepting the inherently ‘cruel’ and exploitative nature of the world is to adopt a disposition towards the world that is favourable to the meaningful organization of our capabilities as agents. To strive to meet Nietzsche’s ideal of “[making] oneself at home on the earth,”29 then, (to borrow Robert Pippin’s concise phrase) means to embrace its exigencies. The world threatens us with cruelty – in response, we must assert our powers in the face of it, and vent our strength by deriving interpretive self-certainty from engagement with that fundamentally cruel world. By affirming ‘life as exploitation,’ Nietzsche therefore suggests, we adopt an attitude of challenge towards our circumstances, and thereby set the stage for the kinds of creative engagement he views as essential to acting well.
5. LIVING BY OUR OWN LIGHTS: 
CONSTRUCTION AND THE DISCIPLINE OF GREAT SUFFERING

Where lie your greatest dangers? – *In compassion*. (GS 371)

Given the value Nietzsche places in cultivating an ethic of challenge as our fundamental disposition towards the world, we now require an outline of the disposition *towards the self* that Nietzsche views as critical to sustaining such an ethic. Such a disposition, like that which we adopt towards the world, must equally be driven by the relentless pursuit of honesty demanded by the ‘physics’ of Nietzsche’s philosophy of agency.

Ultimately, this particular combination of dispositions toward world and self constitutes Nietzsche’s account of what it is to act well. For this, Nietzsche implies, we need not only to be cruel to our interpretations, we need also internalize our inherent *desires to be cruel* into a type of inward-directed joy in suffering, a deep self-discipline grounded in the drive to *master ourselves*. In so doing, we establish the measure of *accountability* to ourselves that for Nietzsche constitutes the ‘right to make promises,’ highlighted at the very outset of this reading.

In this final chapter, then, my intention is to tease out the links Nietzsche draws between process of internalizing the desire for cruelty, self-discipline, and their ultimate relationship to his ideal of autonomy.

5.1. Cruelty as honesty; or, being honest about cruelty

My suggestion in the previous chapters has been that our current culturally available interpretations have done a poor job of actually imbuing our *worldly* actions with meaning, despite their success in offering us a measure of ontological security. As detailed, this has been in large part due to the ‘flattery or ‘weakness’ inherent to their core accounts of world and self.

In terms of our disposition towards ourselves, Nietzsche traces an interesting consequence of our unwillingness to accept the place of cruelty in the world: that we also fail to grasp the
cruelty inherent in many of our current practices and self-interpretations. By desiring to live in a world less cruel than that in which actually find ourselves, Nietzsche infers, we ‘airbrush out’ our very own need for, and use of, cruelty. The ‘physicist’s approach’ demands, then, that we re-situate the fundamental place of cruelty in our causalities.

The end product of cruelty in any context is suffering of some kind. Human beings suffer at the hands of an inherently cruel world. The feeling of power enjoyed by the perpetuator of an exploitative act is the result of cruelty in practice, and suffering on the part of the victim is an inevitable byproduct. Indeed, recalling the earlier arguments about the fundamental character of the world, in Nietzsche’s reading this is simply the unfolding of life as “essentially appropriation” – all such occurrences are embodiments of life as will too power. Living life consequently demands the exercise of cruelty in some form, and thus, the creation of exploitative relationships characterized by suffering. Yet, once again, Nietzsche outlines that this does not mean we must encourage the perpetuation of physical or violent exploitation to expand our opportunities to experience the feeling of power.

In fact, he states emphatically that “we must put aside the thick-witted psychology of former times which had to teach of cruelty only that it had its origin in the sight of the sufferings of others: there is also an abundant, over-abundant enjoyment of one’s own suffering, of making oneself suffer” (BGE 229). Critically, Nietzsche does not make this claim as a normative demand, an ought, or an ideal; rather, he suggests that our ‘thick-wittedness’ consists in our very ignorance to the omnipresence of cruelty within our current interpretations. “Almost everything we call ‘higher culture’,” he accordingly details, specifically highlighting tragedy, acts of pity, and ascetic practices (religious or otherwise), “is based on the spiritualization and intensification of cruelty” (BGE 229).
At this juncture, the account of interpretive vs physical means of generating feeling of power I offered earlier needs to be attenuated. In the first chapter, I suggested that it was possible in the human case to divorce the feeling of power completely from physicality by means of interpretation. Likewise, in the previous chapter I also suggest that our need to vent strength in accordance with life as will to power can be similarly met. That this is the case remains a central facet of Nietzsche’s account.

What needs to be situated now, however, is the cost of this process of internalization. This Nietzsche details at great length in his account of the revolt of ‘slave morality’ in The Genealogy of Morals. The aggressive and expansive forces inherent to life as will to power, Nietzsche outlines, invariably demand an outlet. His argument that higher culture is derived from cruelty, then, speaks to the process of internalizing cruelty that first occurs in the establishment of settled society – under the stress of “that change which occurred when he found himself finally enclosed within the walls of society and of peace” (GM II.16). Lacking an obvious physical outlet, our need to experience the physical feeling of power involved in outward cruelty was internalized, and thus “the material on which the form-giving and ravishing nature of this force vents itself [came to be] man himself—and not, as in that greater and more obvious phenomenon, some other man, other men” (GM II.18).

Thus the non-violent expression of the will to power involves the redirection of “hostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in change, in destruction […] against the possessors of such instincts.” This results in the creation of the self-interpretive phenomenon Nietzsche identifies as ‘bad conscience’ (GM II.16). The target of this internalization of our aggressive instincts is correct – the problem Nietzsche identifies in the unfolding of this process in the Western-Christian context has been in its self-interpretation: the “whole mysterious machinery of salvation” that the Christian reads “into suffering” (GM II.7) and the enormous quantities of
guilt produced when he holds himself accountable to this interpretation through the exercise of ‘bad conscience.’ Consequently, the value of the internalization of cruelty is lost in the ensuing interpretive disconnect, identified by Warren as nihilism.

Nietzsche accordingly comes to describe the bad conscience as an illness, “but an illness as pregnancy is an illness” (GM II.19). The image is a powerful one: despite the nihilistic culture it has created, the bad conscience is also the genesis of the profound capacities for self-interpretation, self-criticism, and self-reflection that are essential for accountability, and thus, autonomous engagement with the world.

Nietzsche therefore recommends a divorce of the process of bad conscience from the interpretations that have given rise to it:

Man has all too long had an “evil eye” for his natural inclinations, so that they have finally become inseparable from his “bad conscience.” An attempt at the reverse would in itself be possible—but who is strong enough for it?—that is, to wed the bad conscience to all the unnatural inclinations, all those aspirations to the beyond, to that which runs counter to sense, instinct, nature, animal, in short all ideals hitherto, which are one and all hostile to life and ideals that slander the world. (GM II.24)

To return to the physics analogy, then, our misinterpretations have created false causalities such that the real engine of our feelings of self-certainty – the feeling of mastery derived from inward directed cruelty – has been ignored. Through these false causalities, though, we have developed a unique capacity for self-examination and accountability in the faculty of bad conscience, though the character of the values that we have held ourselves accountable to have effectively hindered our ability to engage with the world.

It is for this reason, then, that Nietzsche elsewhere characterizes the bad conscience as having “created in Europe a magnificent tension of the spirit such as has never existed on earth before: with so tense a bow one can now shoot for the most distant targets” (BGE, Preface). If we turn the critical and disciplinary qualities of the bad conscience against our
misinterpretations, Nietzsche therefore suggests, we create the possibility for the unique confluence of engagement and with, and self-certainty in, the world. Thus Nietzsche suggests that we have the *tools* to generate a purely interpretive (and therefore non-violent) expression of will to power derived from creative engagement with the world; we now need only the discipline (the commitment to self-cruelty) and the strength (the desire to engage the world creatively) to do so.\(^\text{30}\)

### 5.2. Great suffering: deriving accountability from constraint

Nietzsche’s reference to strength in his exhortation to wed the critical faculties of bad conscience to our *unnatural* inclinations is significant, as it highlights the inherent *difficulty* of such an attempt. Despite our deep need to experience interpretive self-mastery by incorporating new experiences and organizing them to provide a stable ontological horizon, Nietzsche suggests that the *scope* of our capacities to do so is actually rather limited (BGE 230). A particular type of strength is required, then, to forcefully expand our horizons, and interrogate the prior interpretive commitments that may be keeping them narrow.

That is to say, while we *need* to achieve a sense of interpretive self-certainty, we have an unconscious desire for this interpretation to be as uncomplicated as possible. In this regard, he traces a deep tension “of the spirit” between a “will to simplification” and the “sublime inclination in the man of knowledge which takes a profound, many-sided and thorough view of things.” The detailed, “physicist’s” desire to inquire deeply into his commitments, therefore, is a painful one, inasmuch as it challenges our unconscious tendency to the uncomplicated (and therefore uncritical) integration of new experiences into our interpretive horizon. Nietzsche accordingly describes the physicist’s inquiry aptly “as a kind of cruelty of the intellectual conscience and taste” (BGE 230).
Thus, to “confront man henceforth with man in the way in which, hardened by the discipline of science, man today confronts the rest of nature,” (BGE 230) is to make a commitment to ‘cruelty of the intellectual conscience,’ to a radical honesty that offers itself no interpretive comforts in hopes of cultivating the maximum possible degree of engagement with the world.

To summarize, not only do we generally fail to recognize the role played by cruelty in our current culture and interpretations – triggered by our profound need for cruelty itself – honesty of the type Nietzsche esteems requires the explicit promotion of cruelty and suffering in our intellectual practices. Thus he asserts polemically, “you want if possible – and there is no madder ‘if possible’ – to abolish suffering; and we? – it really does seem that we would rather increase it and make it worse than it has ever been!” (BGE 225).

This statement is obviously an offensive one to contemporary sensibilities, but its intelligibility, and even its great insight, is clear if we keep Nietzsche’s particular emphasis on the different ‘types’ of suffering that he values in mind. The suffering Nietzsche describes here is accordingly not the type derived from the suffering of “some other man, other men,” but rather that located in the “this uncanny, dreadfully joyous labor of a soul voluntarily at odds with itself that makes itself suffer out of joy in making suffer” characteristic of bad conscience (GM II.18). Nietzsche’s esteem for cruelty, therefore, lies in its proximity to discipline and constraint.

Recall that, at the core of his account of agency, Nietzsche paints a portrait of man as a fundamentally reactive creature. The process of interpretation underwriting agency emerges only as a result of an external constraint – the omnipresent threat of death in the nature. At base, Nietzsche therefore diagnoses, we are lazy creatures: if we require the threat of something as vast as meaninglessness to jump-start our core interpretive responses, it is unsurprising that afterwards we rarely seek to expand our horizons without further compulsion. Constraint, then, is
both the spark that ignites our initial activity in the world, and the means of stimulating deeper engagement therewith. It is only fitting in this regard that Nietzsche’s ideal of autonomy demands the escalation of constraint to a fever pitch.

Thus, in the continuation of Nietzsche’s exhortation to increase suffering, he argues:

The discipline of suffering, of great suffering – do you not know that it is this discipline alone which has created every elevation of mankind hitherto? That tension of the soul in misfortune which cultivates its strength, its terror at the sight of great destruction, its inventiveness and bravery in undergoing, enduring, interpreting, exploiting misfortune, and whatever of depth, mystery, mask, spirit, cunning and greatness has been bestowed upon it – has it not been bestowed through suffering, through the discipline of great suffering? (BGE 225)

Exigency and hardship, therefore, bring out the best in humanity – though certainly in some cases these exigencies are the product of violence, disaster, and other otherwise unsavoury occurrences. Nietzsche’s implication, however, is that these can also be the product of internal pressure: internalized cruelty directed at the expansion of power. It precisely this kind of suffering that Nietzsche wishes to perpetuate, and, crucially, my contention is that Nietzsche believes this is possible almost uniquely through the self-imposition of constraints.

The use of constraint in this manner is far from foreign though. Indeed, as Nietzsche outlines:

Every morality is, as opposed to laissez aller, a piece of tyranny against ‘nature’, likewise against ‘reason;’ but that can be no objection to it unless one is in possession of some other morality which decrees that any kind of tyranny and unreason is impermissible. The essential and invaluable element in every morality is that it is a protracted constraint. (BGE 188)

The difference in Nietzsche’s emphasis on the centrality of constraint for autonomy again consists in the self-awareness that we are the only originators of constraint. This emphasis underwrites his mocking invocation of ‘tyranny,’ as any interpretation that can animate action with meaning must necessarily exclude, forbid, or obscure certain kinds of action, phenomena, or experiences.
Thus Nietzsche continues:

But the strange fact is that all there is or has been on earth of freedom, subtlety, boldness, dance and masterly certainty, whether in thinking itself, or in ruling, or in speaking with persuasion, in the arts as in morals, has evolved only by virtue of the ‘tyranny of arbitrary laws’; and, in all seriousness, there is no small probability that precisely this is ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ – and not their laissez aller! (BGE 188)

The critique of nature (‘nature’ vs nature) he expounds here is crucial to my reading. In this dual invocation, Nietzsche highlights our particular cultural fixation with interpreting freedom as an absence of constraint. Despite the abundance of modern thought, from Locke, to Rousseau, to Mill, highlighting the importance of challenge and discipline, Nietzsche traces a counter-current of permissiveness in laissez aller that persists to this day, particularly in parenting and childhood education. Though Nietzsche should in no way be understood to champion a belief that children should be made to suffer, his observations above speak to the importance of constraint as a means of creating space for freedom and activity. That is, the accomplishment of anything of significance, Nietzsche suggests, requires rules, standards, goals, objectives, and so on, to channel our creative energies. When we decry the presence of rules, then, we risk losing sight of the fact that constraint of some kind is actual integral to our agency.

Indeed, as Robert Guay outlines aptly, “our actions as unconstrained render us not independent so much as ungrounded; the absence of constraint leaves us without the resources to make sense of our actions or ourselves.” In my terms, constraint lies at the heart of Nietzsche’s account of agency inasmuch as our primary response to the fundamental indifference of nature is to create an interpretation of the world that establishes the perimeter of our actions. We then fill this space with rules, practices, values, etc., that assign meaning to our actions within that outline.

Nietzsche uses the ‘artist’ as a metaphor to further reinforce this conclusion:
Every artist knows how far from the feeling of letting himself go his ‘natural’ condition is, the free ordering, placing, disposing, forming in the moment of ‘inspiration’ – how strictly and subtly he then obeys thousandfold laws which precisely on account of their severity and definiteness mock all formulation in concepts (even the firmest concept is by comparison something fluctuating, manifold, ambiguous –). The essential thing ‘in heaven and upon earth’ seems, to say it again, to be a protracted obedience in one direction: from out of that there always emerges and has always emerged something for the sake of which it is worthwhile to live on earth, for example virtue, art, music, dance, reason, spirituality – something transfiguring, refined, mad and divine. (BGE 188)

This metaphor, as Alexander Nehamas’s interpretation stresses aptly, is central to Nietzsche’s account of ‘literary’ self-creation. In my reading, it stands as a representation of autonomy, and his usage speaks to the importance of establishing self-imposed standards to achieve this status. David Owen captures this reading perfectly in his suggestion that, “to submit to one’s taste or one’s own law is, thus, to be bound by constraints or, more precisely, to bind oneself to constraints that, at least in advance, ‘defy all formulations through concepts’—and this is to affirm such constraints as conditions of one’s agency.”

The combination of self-reflective faculties developed over time in ‘bad conscience’ and the ruthless, physicist’s pursuit of honest knowledge therefore allows us to grasp the fundamentality of constraint as a condition for agency. In Nietzsche’s more forceful terms, this would constitute the “secret self-ravishment, th[e] artists’ cruelty, th[e] delight in imposing a form upon oneself as a hard, recalcitrant, suffering material and in burning a will, a critique, a contradiction, a contempt, a No into it,” (GM II.18) that should lead us to desire the discipline of great suffering, to actively establish standards to hold ourselves accountable to, and thereby to infuse our actions with genuine, world-engaging, meaning. This type of accountability to self and self-interpretation, then, stands as the ‘right to make promises’ Nietzsche attributed to the Sovereign Individual, invoked at the outset of this reading; our being worthy of promising is
intimately tied to whether we possess the ability to be accountable to ourselves in the deep way Nietzsche outlines.

Precisely this kind of accountability lies at the heart of the ‘right to make promises’ invoked in the introductory epitaph. One ‘earns’ this right by virtue of having developed the kinds of capacities involved in acting well. That is, one is in possession of a sense of comfort in the world, derived from an understanding of its ‘true’ character as will to power. One is in possession of a sense of certainty in the self, a belief in the standards one lives by (while also recognizing their contingency and scope for change), and, most importantly, a trust in one’s own mechanisms of self-discipline such that one can stand firm for what one promises – that one has the discipline and strength of character both to make promises worth keeping and to actually keep them in practice.\(^\text{34}\) This, for Nietzsche, constitutes true autonomy.

In sum, to act well requires first an awareness of what it is to act in the first place, that to act involves an interpretive response a world of suffering and death that stands as an assertion of meaning against that world. Wrapped up in this awareness is the fact that this response, whether individually forged or culturally received, originates in a human, interpretive act. Consequently, we must take active control of this process of cruelty and constraint, and devise self-imposed standards by which to evaluate the proximity of our actions in the world to ‘life’ itself.

As Guay details succinctly, acting well, and thus ‘freedom’ in Nietzsche terms, therefore consists of “a self-correcting enterprise of self-invention that is coincident with discovery. In other words, the standards by which our freedom is to be assessed are: the ones that we make up, but also the ones that we find to be structuring the way of life we lead and revise by our own lights.”\(^\text{35}\) Ultimately, it thereby requires an acknowledgment that the enablement of the experience of agency in practice is the only criteria by which different interpretive responses can
be assessed, and the explicit promotion of those practices that we determine, *through our acting them out*, offer us such an experience.
6. CONCLUSION: BEYOND NIETZSCHE
MAKING A COMMITMENT TO MAKE BETTER PEOPLE

What is good? – Everything that enhances people’s feeling of power, will to power, power itself.
What is bad? – Everything stemming from weakness.
What is happiness? – The feeling that power is growing, that some resistance has been overcome. (A 2)

The significance of Nietzsche’s account of agency and autonomy – of what constitutes acting and acting well – is far reaching, from both critical and normative perspectives.

Consider, as a potentially trivial example, the application of this line of inquiry to some contemporary ethical pronouncements like, for instance, that offered by news media in response to the series of riots that rocked the United Kingdom in early August. The Economist described the unrest in the burroughs in terms of an “absence of internal, moral restraints” on the part of “a cadre of young people in Britain who feel they have little or no stake in the country’s future or their own.”

Such hand-wringing over states of moral malaise begs the question as to why these ‘young people,’ in this one instance among many, may feel this way to begin with. Nietzsche’s account of agency can provide us with some potentially uncomfortable, but no less significant, answers: because our culturally available interpretations of experience do not offer us the capacities to understand why we really act in any way in the first place; because our rigid demands that our values be anchored transcendentally necessitate crises of meaning as circumstances change over time; because, in our unwillingness to deeply interrogate our cultural convictions, we assume phenomena such as ‘power’, ‘agency’, ‘individuality’, and ‘freedom’ that we ought to be explaining; because, flying in the dark as we are without any meaningful conception of agency, we make no commitment to actually trying to ‘make’ good people.

Indeed, Warren captures this sentiment brilliantly in his criticism that “rather than thinking through the relation between power and agency,” modern political thinkers – and, by
extension, the rest of us who must suffer to live in the products of their thought – “very often combine metaphysical assumptions about the subjective grounds of power (assumptions about desires, interests, rationality, and free will) with sciences purporting to explain the socially structured manifestations of power.”37 This leaves us, he concludes, with “metaphysical placeholders” instead of problems demanding solutions.

These assumptions accordingly leave us in a cultural situation where packets of unsituated norms demand our adherence, while our interpretations of our lives offer little incentive – or even capacity – to adhere to them. By consistently trying to structure our lives and the values that animate them by exogenous standards, we forget that we in fact are the originators of all such values. Accordingly, we lose sight of the enormous potential inherent in our very abilities to create and adhere to meaningful, life-affirming standards.38 As Nietzsche laments in this vein, it is “precisely this knowledge we lack,” and thus we are “neither as proud nor as happy as we could be” (GS 301).

The epigram above, in contrast, though drawn from one of many critiques of Christianity in Nietzsche’s especially polemical Antichrist, speaks remarkably cogently to the intimate relationship between Nietzsche’s core philosophy of agency, constraint, and the possibility for normative judgments. When considered in terms of the bare philosophy of agency, this aphorism could in fact serve as a description of any successful ‘morality,’ while leaving its content unspecified. The ‘good,’ in this analysis would be that which allows for the organization of our capacities as agency. That it spans feeling of power, will to power, and power itself suggests that the self-certainty it produces derives from creative engagement with the world, from a desire for mastery properly internalized as self-discipline. The end product of this ‘good,’ then, is the deep confluence of honesty and accountability Nietzsche locates in “the right to make promises,” the
ability to devise, commit, and hold ourselves to standards of our own making – in short, autonomy.

The ‘bad,’ accordingly speaks for the opposite tendencies, those that seek to derive self-certainty from illusory flattery, and all manner of interpretive disconnects diagnosed by Nietzsche as ‘nihilistic.’ Lastly, happiness would stand as the smooth operation of these processes. The invocation of resistance and growth, moreover, suggests the degree of self-reflective, interpretive malleability required of an account in tune with the flux and change of everyday experience. These three ‘values’ therefore illustrate Nietzsche’s analysis of what ought to underwrite our normative judgments of different interpretations; the ‘good’ being that which works in service of ‘life,’ the ‘bad’ being that which encourages ‘world-denial’ in the manner detailed in his critique of the Christian-moral world view.

It is the generality of Nietzsche’s account – the fact that the content of such a morality can in fact be left undefined – that speaks to the depth of its explanatory potential. “The concreteness of Nietzsche’s approach here,” Warren outlines, “consists in the fact that his analysis of the will gives it only as much substance as it has power in practice. Although the desire to be an agent motivates an act, one becomes an agent […] only by actualizing the desire in practice.” What the specific manifestations of constraint are, within the interpretation in question, can indeed be left blank, or, more likely, given the space to change and grow along with its practitioners. For Nietzsche, we can now see, the content is unimportant, provided that agency can be enabled in practice; it is the simultaneity of its fluidity and explanatory scope that anchors the significance of his account.

How awareness of this structure can empower the performance of these practices, and shape the content of future moralities accordingly, is more significant still. “By claiming that the will is the self-reflective effect of historically situated actions,” Warren suggests, “Nietzsche is
shifting the locus of the will from metaphysical certainty to a historically contingent process. The metaphysical concept of the agent now appears as *a value and goal*, rather than as a metaphysical entity or fact."⁴⁰ This is an important observation, and it speaks equally to the import of understanding self-imposed standards and constraints as the core criteria through which we can assess value. “In the absence of external measures,” Guay captures succinctly, “the status of our freedom depends on whether we can succeed in inventing our own objectivity by affirming a life in which meaningful distinctions and applicable, guiding standards obtain.”⁴¹

What these different conclusions point to, then, is the fact that we *can* make and sustain commitments to self-imposed standards, provided we are self-conscious about the realities of such a process, and, can correspondingly be confident in its product. We must, in other words, make a commitment to making good people, rather than assuming that successful agents will simply be born knowing how achieve a sense of self-certainty, how to actualize themselves, and thus how to operate within the wide systems of constraints we establish as a society.

Nietzsche’s account of agency therefore offers us a normative portrait of what ‘good’ action should look like, and consequently allows us to think about, and try to change, the way we actively go about this business of *building people* in our society. I want to stress the plural in ‘people’ here rather emphatically. Contrary to the aristocratic radicalist interpretations that thrive on stressing the incompatibility of Nietzsche’s normative account of autonomy to democratic (or even any contemporary) society, I assert that his emphasis on understanding agency is universally accessible. I return here to the *Antichrist*, where, Nietzsche outlines:

> The problem I am posing is not what should replace humanity in the order of being ( – the human is an *endpoint* –): but instead what type of human should be *bred*, should be *willed* as having greater value, as being more deserving of life, as being more certain of a future. (A3)⁴²
This passage, in my reading, speaks to a general concern with making better people, with interrogating the conditions for agency in order understand why we act, and how it is we can come to act in the more ‘valuable’ manner that Nietzsche suggests may grant us more assurance of a future. Though a more radical interpretation might focus on Nietzsche’s assertion that this type of breeding would require deeply entrenched inequality, I contend that such a reading places too much weight in other-relations, rather than self-relations, of cruelty. I assert that Nietzsche’s analysis of constraint reveals that we can indeed strive for the complete annihilation of other-related cruelty through the establishment of self-imposed standards, however difficult this may prove to be in practice. The difficulty of the accomplishment, then, should not preclude our establishing it as political and ethical goal.43

Indeed, developing a more sustainable relationship to existence, to put it in different terms, certainly need not be as complicated as aristocratic radicalist interpretations would suggest. It need not even be as complicated as what I have outlined here. That is to say, I firmly believe in the possibility of developing a cultural disposition to the world that includes precisely the kind of attitude of accountability to self-imposed, non-metaphysical standards Nietzsche values. Moreover, I believe that this can be achieved without each of us individually having to go through the lengthy, existential rigmarole involved in understanding the finer points of Nietzsche’s philosophy of agency. As Warren’s, Guay’s, and my own reading suggest, the proof of success rests precisely in the type of practices our interpretations give way to, and the degree to which these practices allow for the meaningful experience of agency.

This would suggest that those of us who are taken with the problem of what constitutes acting well can work to establish practices that capture the spirit of these insights into the fundamental processes of agency that ultimately underwrite the moralities, interpretations, and worldviews that we value. Our efforts, then, should be directed to the fields of ethics, education,
and culture, examining – with all the rigour of Nietzsche’s physicist – the types of practices *that we currently engage in* that are conducive to the meaningful experience of agency, and which are less so, striving above all to burn a commitment to making better people our efforts at large.

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NOTES

1 Note on citation: I will cite Nietzsche’s primary text parenthetically, employing the standard English abbreviated title of the work, followed by the aphorism number of the referenced text (i.e., BGE 12 refers to §12 of Beyond Good and Evil, GM II.2 refers to §2 of the second Essay of The Genealogy, etc). Much of Nietzsche’s own text is italicized for emphasis; any emphasis added on my part will be clearly indicated. Citations from other sources will conform to Chicago style.


3 Indeed, my work is heavily indebted to Warren’s. Though he has since ‘quit’ Nietzsche, his work has provided me with the vocabulary and concepts to explore Nietzsche’s fascinating account of agency. Consequently, I borrow much of his language in offering my own reading. The various scholars contributing to Ken Gemes and Simon May’s edited volume Nietzsche on Autonomy and Freedom also offer such accounts, though markedly less comprehensive than Warren’s.


6 David Owen captures this sentiment equally admirably. “It is with the development of consciousness,” he writes, “that the feeling of power becomes mediated through meaning. For a human being to experience his or her self as powerful requires that s/he experience the world as meaningful.” See Owen, Nietzsche, 43-44.


8 Warren, 156.

9 Indeed, this is a refrain running continuously throughout Nietzsche’s philosophy of mind. Cf BGE 1-23, GM III.12, etc.

10 Warren, 156.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Venturing deep into the epistemological reeds here rests outside the scope of the current enterprise. Suffice it to say for now that I wholeheartedly accept Warren’s argument that Nietzsche’s epistemology is deeply tied to practice. Warren summarizes this position as follows: “whereas epistemological approaches presuppose a knowing subject and then ask how knowledge of the world is possible, Nietzsche presuppose[s] the reality of worldly practices, and then ask[s] how knowing subjects and worldly objects become categories of consciousness.” (95) I find this reading much more satisfying than the more commonly exalted interpretation of Alexander Nehamas, who, spends far too much time oscillating between intelligent praise of Nietzsche’s ‘perspectivist’ epistemology and overly academic concerns about “relativism.” On pp.34-35 of his text, for instance, Nehamas waffles at length about how it may be impossible to judge between particular interpretations if everything remains, after all, only interpretation. Warren’s reading refutes these concerns by emphasizing that, far from being relativist, Nietzsche uses whether or not interpretations satisfy the core criteria of enabling agency in practice as criteria to distinguish their relative strengths. This captures the same fluidity as Nehamas’s ‘perspectivism,’ while also offering us criteria to evaluate the worth of a given perspective (in terms of its “adequacy to ‘life’”). Bill Connolly also captures some of this sentiment in his assertion that truth for Nietzsche dispenses with solidify, while preserving fundamentality. Nehamas seems comparatively unwilling to part ways with solidify, for all his other strengths. See Alexander Nehamas, Nietzsche: Life as Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 34-35, 172-3, cf Nietzsche GM III.12, and William Connolly, “Suffering, Justice, and the Politics of Becoming,” in D. Campbell ed, Moral Spaces: Rethinking Ethics and World Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 132-135.

14 I expand this thought further in my analysis of Nietzsche distinction between being and becoming below.

15 Indeed, Nietzsche makes the link between interpretation and philosophy abundantly clear in §2 of the preface to The Gay Science, in his suggestion, “assuming that one is a person, one necessarily also has the philosophy of that person; but here there is a considerable difference. In some, it is their weaknesses that philosophize; in others, their riches and strengths.” By stressing the idea of possessing a philosophy as a pre-requisite to personhood, Nietzsche speaks to the centrality of the interpretive act to human existence.

16 Warren, 65-66. Simon May makes a similar argument in his claim that “if our morality bids us to minimize suffering—and even bids us engage in the fantasy that suffering can be ‘abolished’ (BGE 225; cf. 202)—then that morality will not just obstruct, but will, in effect, prohibit us from achieving responsibility for our own nature and

May, 89.


Ibid., 55.

Ibid., 32.

Ibid.


Ibid., 48.

As Mueller and Dweck outline: “That children praised for intelligence after success adopted the tendency to measure their ability from their performance also was evident in the ways in which they reported their performance to others. Children praised for intelligence showed a greater tendency to misrepresent their scores on the problems than did children praised for effort, in spite of the fact that their reports were anonymous and were not seen by the experimenter. This result suggested that children praised for intelligence learned to equate high performance with high ability in their own right and not for the benefit of an evaluator.” (48-49)

Mueller and Dweck, 49.

In this sense, recall Mueller and Dweck’s findings that children who operated with fixed understandings of themselves as intelligent were more interested in measuring themselves against others (or misrepresenting themselves in so doing) than actually “demonstrat[ing] their continued interest in mastery by preferring to receive strategy-related information” and improve their chance of future performance in so doing. (Mueller and Dweck, 48.

This particular disposition is captured in the idea of Amor Fati, or 'the love of fate’, and plays a prominent role in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, and in the wider 'life-affirming’ aspects of Nietzsche’s thought. A detailed analysis of the relationship of his philosophy of agency to these accounts, however, is beyond the scope of the current analysis. For more, see the inclusions by David Owen and Simon May in the Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy volume, as well Robert Guay’s piece, all cited here.

Nietzsche also stresses that he desire for destruction “can also be the hatred of the ill-constituted, deprived, and underprivileged one who destroys and must destroy because what exists, indeed all existence, all being, outrages and provokes him.” The difference, again boils down to strength and weakness, insofar as a weak interpreter is enraged by the omni-presence of change and death, and consequently lashes out destructively.

Robert Pippin, “How to Overcome Oneself: Nietzsche on Freedom,” in K Gemes and S. May ed Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 75. It is here that my reading diverges significantly from that of Frederick Appel, who ardently espouses a more aristocratic radicalist (AR) approach. He views Nietzsche’s account of Christian bad conscience in largely pejorative terms, arguing that while Nietzsche values the creativity he sees in ascetic accounts, they nevertheless stand in contrast to a “noble form of value creation” basing itself “on the truths of science.” What Appel neglects to consider here is that (in my reading) the very abilities of the nobles to grasp these truths are impossible without the spiritual deepening provided by bad conscience. I find this desire to create a strict divide between noble and base values symptomatic of AR readings in general, insofar as they neglect the awareness and explicit move to control the process of agency inherent to any ‘future’ noble valuation in Nietzsche’s work. See Frederick Appel, Nietzsche contra Democracy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 36-37, cf. 154-155.

I should note here that this in no way contradicts my earlier claim (ch 2) that Nietzsche in fact doesn’t aspire to the promotion of suffering. The crucial distinction once again is in physicality. My reading of BGE 259 remains that Nietzsche finds the promotion of worldly suffering to be unnecessary, provided (in line with this reading of BGE 225) we can promote the degree of intellectual struggle (and suffering) requisite for the ‘proper’ development of human beings in Nietzsche’s view.

W. Guay, 308.


Aaron Ridley outlines this idea of ‘standing firm for what promises’ in great detail in his contribution to the Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy volume. He does an excellent job of distinguishing between autonomous agents, and ‘feeble windbags’ (also invoked in Nietzsche’s account of the Sovereign Individual in GM II.1-3), who haven’t the right to make promises inasmuch as they speak a great many promises without actually having the deep capacities to meet them. He therefore suggests (rightly, in my view) that Nietzsche reserves the idea of promising for those who have the deep capacities to invent their own standards, and stay committed thereto without external
compulsion. Only these types, in Nietzsche’s view, can be considered both ‘honest’ and ‘accountable’ enough (to employ the terms common to this chapters) to follow through. See Aaron Ridley, “Nietzsche’s Intentions: What the Sovereign Individual Promises,” in K. Gemes & S. May eds., *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 180-195 (192-194 especially).

35 Guay, 313.
37 Warren, 154.
38 Ibid., 313.
39 Ibid., 129.
40 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
41 Guay, 316. Emphasis mine.
42 Some might indeed read this as a sanction that a particular elite type of human in effect need to be valued over all other types of (inferior humans), and this would be wholly congruent with readings such as those of Bruce Detwiller or Frederick Appel, both of whom are consistent on the primacy of external constraint and a strict, rank-ordered society to permit the flourishing of higher types. (Detwiller makes such claims throughout, specifically, see his 11-15, 96, 190-193. In Appel’s case, see 2-4, 32-34, and much more besides) On the other hand, though, I assert that although Nietzsche often focuses on how only a select few can achieve the complete autonomy he associates with pure artistry, geniuses, Napoleon, and ideal philosophers, we have no reason to infer therefrom that Nietzsche would be displeased if all human beings could achieve a measure of legitimate, world-engaging self-certainty. In this regard, then, if we can commit ourselves to making better people in general, then Nietzsche’s insights into how we act and what constitutes acting well can be actualized without having to dismantle democracy, and we can feel empowered.

In this I follow Warren to some extent in attempting to divorce the consequences of Nietzsche’s thoughts on agency to the particular expressions of radical aristocracy that pepper his work. In any case, though, I feel the disconnect between the potential Nietzsche identifies in mankind and the means to that potential he develops is wide enough that to emphasize the ideal proves just as compelling as to trace the explicit outlines of a ‘Nietzschean politics.’ This way of reading, I stress, also allows us the most scope for political change in a contemporary context anyway, and that too should deserve at least some consideration given our interest in political philosophy, after all.

43 Indeed, this difficulty is a common refrain in the work of Gemes, Ridley, Janaway, and even Owen, though to a lesser extent. Though such interpretations are perhaps more faithful to the spirit of Nietzsche’s politics, they limit the scope of our ability to respond most meaningfully to Nietzsche’s analysis.
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Primary Text


Secondary Text


