

THE PERFECTIONIST DIMENSION IN FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF MORALITY¹

ALESSIO VACCARI

“La Sapienza” Università di Roma

RESUMEN

La cuestión de la vocación ética del pensamiento de Nietzsche está despertando un creciente interés en la historia de la ética de tradición analítica. Los estudios recientes han buscado sobre todo disolver los conflictos que surgen del intento de reconciliar su abierto inmoralismo con su proyecto de revalorización de todos los valores. De acuerdo con John Rawls, Nietzsche es un elitista moral: el valor que atribuye a las vidas de los grandes hombres, como Sócrates o Goethe, muestra que la búsqueda del conocimiento y el cultivo de las artes por unos pocos individuos capaces es suficientemente importante para justificar el sacrificio de valores tales como la libertad y la justicia. Esta lectura no puede explicar el especial papel educacional que Nietzsche reconoce a los grandes artistas y a los grandes filósofos. Para fundamentar esta hipótesis, analizaré el significado de la cuestión del auto-perfeccionamiento en *Schopenhauer como educador*. Siguiendo la lectura de James Conant, quiero sustentar la idea de que Nietzsche puede ser situado dentro de la categoría de lo que Stanley Cavell llama perfeccionismo moral. Mi conjetura es que la línea del perfeccionismo recorre todo el pensamiento de Nietzsche y constituye la base de las diversas líneas de crítica en su análisis crítico de la moralidad.

Palabras clave: Nietzsche, perfeccionismo moral, auto-perfeccionamiento, elitismo, crítica de la moral.

ABSTRACT

The subject of the ethical vocation of Nietzsche's thinking is arousing increasing interest in the history of the ethics of the analytic tradition. Recent studies have sought above all to dissolve the conflicts that arise from the attempt to reconcile his open immoralism with his project of revaluing all values. According to John Rawls, Nietzsche is a moral elitist: the value that he attributes to the lives of great men such as Socrates or Goethe shows that the search for knowledge and the cultivation of the arts by a few capable individuals is important enough to justify

1 Recepción: 31 de agosto de 2010. Aceptación: 20 de diciembre de 2010.

the sacrifice of values such as freedom and justice. This reading cannot account for the special educational role that Nietzsche recognizes in the great artists and great philosophers. In order to ground this hypothesis, I shall examine the significance of the subject of self-elevation in Schopenhauer as Educator. Following James Conant's reading, I want to support the view that Nietzsche can be placed within that register of the moral life that Stanley Cavell called moral perfectionism. My conjecture is that the perfectionist line runs through the entire arc of Nietzsche's thinking and is the basis of the various lines of criticism in his critique of morality. **Keywords:** Nietzsche, moral perfectionism, self-elevation, elitism, critique of morality.

The subject of the ethical vocation of Nietzsche's thinking is arousing increasing interest in the history of the ethics of the analytic tradition, showing the richness of the intellectual lines in his philosophy. Studies of the more directly practical aspects of his thought have sought above all to dissolve the conflicts that arise from the attempt to reconcile his open immoralism with his project of revaluing all values. Previously the main theory was that his critique of morality was the expression of an aesthetic conception of value that was constructed on the image of the extraordinary individual. According to Philippa Foot, Nietzsche had every right to be considered an immoralist as fundamental moral ideas such as those of justice and the common good were completely absent from his evaluative perspective.² But new readings, which began to appear from the 1990s onwards, have claimed that Nietzsche's devaluation of morality is the expression of needs that are themselves part of ethics. Nietzsche claimed his own special conception of ethics and believed that, to be accepted, it would have to get rid of those particular interpretations of it embodied by Christian and modern morality. Those who take this line share the view that Nietzsche's doctrine of value should be included in the category of virtue ethics.³

2 P. Foot: "Nietzsche: The Revaluation of Values". In R. C. Solomon (ed.), *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Garden City (NY), Anchor Books, 1973, pp. 156-68, reprinted in Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2002 (first ed. 1978), pp. 81-95.

3 See Lester H. Hunt, *Nietzsche and the Origin of Virtue*, London, Routledge, 1991; Michael Slote, Nietzsche and Virtue Ethics, "International Studies in Philosophy" 30/3 (1998), pp. 23- 27; Robert C. Solomon, *Nietzsche's Virtues: A Personal Enquiry*, in Richard Schacht (ed.), *Nietzsche's Postmoralism. Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future*, pp. 123- 148, in the same volume see also Alan White, *The Youngest Virtue*, pp. 63-78. For a more recent reading that interprets Nietzsche's ethics as a perfectionist version of virtue ethics revolving around an original conception of the will to power see Christine Swanton, *Nietzschean Virtue Ethics*, in Stephen M. Gardiner (ed.), *Virtue Ethics Old and New*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2005, pp. 179-192.

Another way of reconsidering Nietzsche's thought has sought to deepen our understanding of some differences with the critique of moral theory advanced by the ethics of virtue. One of these lines insists on the importance Nietzsche attributes to the criticism of Christian and modern moral culture – a subject distinct from the traditional concern of analytic virtue ethics with the inadequacy of contemporary utilitarian and Kantian moral theory.⁴ What I am wanting to claim is that Nietzsche's polemical aim is not to demolish philosophical theories but combat a culture that impoverishes humanity and thwarts individual perfectionism. To do this, in the first part I shall examine the significance of the subject of self-elevation in his early work *Schopenhauer as Educator*. Following James Conant's reading, I want to support the view that Nietzsche can be placed within that register of the moral life that Stanley Cavell called moral perfectionism. My conjecture is that the perfectionist line runs through the entire arc of Nietzsche's thinking and is the basis of the various lines of criticism in his critique of morality.

1. AN ELITIST CONCEPTION OF MORALITY?

The first treatment of the theme of individual perfectionism appears in Nietzsche's writings in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, a youthful work written in the early 1860s, a period that was a laboratory in which he gradually set about elaborating some of the ideas that found expression in the works of the 1880s. This theme derives from a combination of heterogeneous philosophical influences, from English and European Romanticism to Emerson's philosophy. The failure to include *Schopenhauer as Educator* as part of this complex story has led some interpreters to attribute to Nietzsche a version of moral perfectionism that we might consider a radical form of moral elitism.⁵

The elitist reading owes much of its popularity to some observations that John Rawls formulated in his *Theory of Justice*. Rawls describes Nietzsche's ethics as a teleological theory "directing society to arrange institutions...so as to maximize the achievement of human excellence

4 See Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche and the Morality Critics*, "Ethics" 107 (1997), pp. 250-285.

5 See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1971, pp. 272-278. For a reading that follows Rawls' elitist interpretation and then tries to specify the supposed principles of distributive justice that are the basis of Nietzsche's political philosophy, see Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 75-6. The elitist element in Rawls' interpretation has had a strong impact on so-called naturalist readings of Nietzsche. For naturalists the central theme of Nietzsche's philosophy consists in accounting for human behaviour, and the disciplines and institutions it creates, through scientific explanations that refer to psychic and

in art, science and culture".⁶ Following Philipp Pettit's method of classification, we might define this way of understanding perfectionism with the expression consequentialism of excellence.⁷ The perfectionism described by Rawls is indeed a theory that identifies good with excellence in the arts and sciences and defines as just the actions that maximize good in this sense. For Rawls the value that, from *Schopenhauer as Educator* onwards, Nietzsche attributes to the lives of great men such as Socrates or Goethe shows that the search for knowledge and the cultivation of the arts by a few capable individuals is important enough to justify the sacrifice of values such as freedom and justice.

This reading cannot account for the special educational role that Nietzsche recognizes in the great artists and great philosophers. A recurrent theme in Nietzsche's early writings, particularly in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, is that a concrete representation of what we admire in others helps us to focus what we really are, or our true self. And it is precisely fidelity to this self that characterizes the virtuous life. In the first part of this work I intend to illustrate this point. In the second I shall try to suggest that the critique of morality should be explained starting from this non-elitist interpretation of perfectionism that Nietzsche has: the devaluation of values is an attempt to demolish a culture that suffocates the development of a fully individual and authentically moral life.

2. MORAL PERFECTIONISM IN *SCHOPENHAUER AS EDUCATOR*

Schopenhauer as Educator, or the third Untimely Meditation, opens with a violent attack on the idleness and timidity that characterize the modern individual and make him unable to claim to be "unique".⁸ Nietzsche claims that each individual is aware of his own uniqueness, but tends to hide this awareness from himself, not only for fear of others, who demand we respect the conventions, but above all out of adaptability and sloth. We

physiological facts about people. According to Brian Leiter, the most authoritative exponent of this current, Nietzsche embraced a conception he describes as a "doctrine of types", by which each human being has a particular psycho-physical constitution that makes him a person of a certain type. Leiter attributes to Nietzsche a theory of human nature that gives a biological foundation to elitist readings. For Leiter, not only do our psycho-physical characteristics necessarily determine who can become a great artist, but are responsible for the fact that what determines good and the flourishing of "creative talents" cannot be harmful to other human beings, see B. Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 10; p. 105.

6 John Rawls, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

7 See Philip Pettit, *Consequentialism*, in Peter Singer, *A Companion to Ethics*, London, Blackwell, 1991, pp. 230-240.

8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, in *Untimely Meditations* edited by D. Breazeale, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997 (2010), p. 127.

prefer to appear as “factory products”⁹ than risk the unpleasantness and suffering that would be imposed on us by “unconditional nakedness”¹⁰ and loyalty to it. For Nietzsche this condition has determined the disappearance of what has authentic value and is identified with that life that lives its uniqueness with rigorous coherence.

The fundamental question of *Schopenhauer as Educator* is whether there are means by which human beings can find themselves again. Nietzsche's thesis is that the path of knowledge leading to our true self necessarily passes through those exemplary figures we admire and that we can rightly regard as our educators.

Paradoxically the place in which Nietzsche described this perfectionist theme most clearly is precisely section 6, the very place from which Rawls' elitist interpretation starts. It is worth recalling the text in its entirety:

“Mankind must work continually at the production of individual great men – that and nothing else is its task. [...]

For the question is this: how can your life, the individual life, receive the highest value, the deepest significance? How can it be least squandered? Certainly only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable exemplars, and not for the good of the majority, that is to say those who, taken individually, are the least valuable exemplars. [...]

By coming to this resolve he places himself within the circle of *culture*; for culture is the child of each individual's self-knowledge and dissatisfaction with himself. Anyone who believes in culture is thereby saying: ‘I see above me something higher and more human than I am; let everyone help me to attain it, as I will help everyone who knows and suffers as I do [...].’¹¹

The whole passage revolves around the significance in our lives of our relation with those we regard as exemplary figures. As James Conant claimed, “exemplar” is a term that recalls the debate on Kant's concept of genius that developed within German Romantic philosophy in the XIX century.¹² In this context exemplary individuals are those who have achieved excellence in qualities that are common to all human beings. A genius does not possess special talents or natural gifts that make him

9 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, p. 127.

10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, p. 127.

11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, 161-162

12 Against the current of readings influenced by Nietzsche's criticism of the writings of the Schlegel brothers on Greek tragedy, which tend to understate Nietzsche's debt to the German Romantics, Conant has brought out profound affinities between Nietzsche's moral perfectionism and Friedrich Schlegel's. See James Conant, *Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of Schopenhauer as Educator*, in R. Schacht, *Nietzsche's Postmoralism. Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 181-257, in particular pp. 191-96.

constitutionally different from us: what separates him from us is not a difference in kind but of degree, depending on the perseverance with which the exemplary figure has cultivated his combination of qualities. In the Romantic framework it is precisely the resemblance between us and those we admire that is the basis of their educational power. If their exemplary character does not depend on the exercise of an innate talent, the admiration they arouse is not a mark of the distance that separates the work of genius from its audience, but of its capacity to arouse in those that admire it a desire to emulate what is exemplary in it but without imitating it.¹³

Conant claims that the numerous textual recurrences of the term “exemplary” in *Schopenhauer as Educator* should be read in the light of this context. I should like to demonstrate the suggestiveness of this conjecture by dwelling on the way in which it accounts for Nietzsche’s conception of value following a perfectionist rather than an elitist line. The central idea in the passage quoted above is that each of us can answer the fundamental ethical question “how can my life take on value and meaning?” only by living for the good of the most valuable exemplary figures. According to the elitist interpretation, Nietzsche’s suggestion is justified by the fact that only the lives of the “great artists” have moral value, and so the only way in which human beings without talent can act well is by working to encourage the birth and development of the most capable. This conjecture conflicts with many passages in the third Untimely Meditation in which Nietzsche firmly claims that not only the “great artists”, but all human beings, have value in that they all have individual creative uniqueness. On this point, for example, he writes:

“Each of us bears a productive uniqueness within him as the core of his being; and when he becomes aware of it, there appears around him a strange penumbra which is the mark of his singularity.”¹⁴

In contrast with the elitist reading, Nietzsche claims that what confers value on the life of each human being is the fact that it exemplifies an individual life that cannot be reduced to the others – not in the banal sense

13 According to Conant, it is precisely on this last point that the Romantic position differs from Kant’s. While Kant claims that the genius’ exemplary work constitutes a model to imitate, the Romantics claimed that the concept of imitation should have no place either in the arts or in morality (see Conant, *op. cit.*, p. 193).

14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, p.143. See also p. 163, when he claims: ‘[...] so that the men we live among resemble a field over which is scattered the most precious fragments of sculpture where everything calls to us: come, assist, complete, bring together what belongs together, we have an immeasurable longing to become whole’.

of being numerically distinct from the others, but in a qualitative sense by which each of us has individual creative uniqueness.

Recalling the Romantic theme of the educational role of the great artists, Nietzsche claims that awareness of oneself as unique and original comes from an emulative and not imitative relation with the figures we admire. As part of the relation with our exemplar a special movement takes place which consists in the transition from an initial admiration for what is perceived as outside our self and as a prerogative of the master, to a gradual awareness of the existence of a better self; something that we are not yet but that we might be and that shames us for what we are at present. This aspect places Nietzsche in that register of the moral life that Stanley Cavell called moral perfectionism.¹⁵ In this tradition the very idea of a divided self means that there is a perspective of judgment on oneself that reveals the gap between us as we are and how we might be. This perspective, which is always constructed inside a dialectical relation with one's educators, tends to express disapproval for the present situation and to arouse a desire for inner reform.¹⁶

In the perfectionist context "living for the good of the exemplar" does not mean imitating him or sacrificing one's life for his fulfilment, but is the condition for discovering one's individuality, one's true self, and for giving sense and value to one's life.

"But how can we find ourselves again? How can man know himself? [...]. This, however, is the means by which an inquiry into the most important aspect can be initiated. Let the youthful soul look back on life with the question: what have you truly loved up to now, what has drawn your soul aloft, what has mastered it and at the same time blessed it? Set up these revered objects before you and perhaps their nature and their sequence will give you a law, the fundamental law of your own true self. [...] for your true nature lies, not concealed deep within you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least above that which you usually take yourself to be. [...] your educators can be only your liberators."¹⁷

The relation with the exemplar causes two profoundly interlinked effects: self-knowledge and anxiety. Comparison with what we admire reveals the existence of a higher self – a self in the light of which what we are seems now false, deceitful and empty, a self with which we can no longer fully identify. Yet, what Nietzsche calls our higher self appears as

15 Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words. Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, Cambridge (Mass.), The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 2.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, p. 129.

something that we are not yet and that is distant from us. This relation is the source of a special anxiety, caused by the gap between what we are now and what we perceive as our real self, which is still distant from us. This feeling of dissatisfaction is the source of the desire to look beyond the present self and try to achieve our higher self. According to Nietzsche this aspect is the kernel of the transforming power of every educational relation with our master, which is always emulative and not imitative.

For Nietzsche each individual compares himself sooner or later with his higher self. The real difficulty of the perfectionist route is not in gaining access to a critical perspective of what we are and discovering a future self that we have yet to achieve, but in overcoming the adversities that are inevitably linked to the imperative to remain loyal to this discovery.¹⁸ In *Schopenhauer as Educator* Nietzsche describes the difficulty of loyalty to ourselves with the image of the bridge over life that only we can build.

“No one can construct for you the bridge upon which precisely you must cross the stream of life, no one but you yourself alone. There are, to be sure, countless paths and bridges and demi-gods which would bear you through this stream, but only at the cost of yourself: you would put yourself in pawn and lose yourself. There exists in the world a single path along which no one can go except you: whither does it lead? Do not ask, go along it. Who was it who said: ‘a man never rises higher than when he does not know whither his path can still lead him?’”¹⁹

It is an individual path that generates what for Nietzsche is our moral duty *par excellence*, which he identifies with the virtue of authenticity.

Nietzsche, unlike the claims of the elitist reading, is not interested so much in the works of the great artists as in our relation with them and the capacity of this relation to arouse forms of admiration that can elevate us. Experiencing this relation means placing “within the circle of culture”.²⁰ Only real culture, “child of each individual’s self-knowledge and dissatisfaction with himself”²¹ can unmask the inclination to idleness that is the basis of our false sense of virtue and encourage self-transformation.

18 Loyalty to oneself can be described through both purely ethical and aesthetic concepts. Ethically, it is the most important virtue: the duty to cultivate what Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo* calls “giving a style to one’s character”, on this point see Alexander Nehamas’ excellent reconstruction in ‘*How One Becomes What One Is*’, “*Philosophical Review*” 92 (1983), pp. 385-417. Considered in its aesthetic aspects, loyalty to oneself is identified with the determination to live a life that expresses one’s originality. On the difficulty of keeping the ethical and aesthetic dimensions distinct see Conant, *op. cit.*, p. 206 and pp. 216-226.

19 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, p. 129.

20 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, p. 162.

21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, p. 162.

Nietzsche calls this intimate and personal aspect of our life in culture the “*first consecration to culture*”.²² What criticism has neglected is that there is also a “second consecration of culture”.

“This sum of inner states is, I said, the first consecration to culture; I now have to describe the effects of the *second* consecration, and I realize that here the task is more difficult. For now we have to make the transition from the inward event to an assessment of the outward event; the eye has to be directed outwards so as to rediscover in the great world of action that desire for culture it recognized in the experiences of the first stage just described, the individual has to employ his own wrestling and longing as the alphabet by means of which he can now read off the aspirations of mankind as a whole. But he may not halt even here; from this stage he has to climb up to a yet higher one; culture demands of him, not only inward experience, not only an assessment of the outward world that streams all around him, but finally and above all an act, that is to say a struggle on behalf of culture and hostility towards those influences, habits, laws, institutions in which he fails to recognize his goal: which is the production of the genius.”²³

The thesis I want to advance is that Nietzsche's critique of morality in the later works is the completion of this project. One of the main reasons the elitist interpretation has been misunderstood has been neglect of the link between *Schopenhauer as Educator* and the writings of the 1880s. In the light of this connection, Nietzsche's work can be regarded as an attempt to create culture in its two main dimensions. On the one hand, through his writings he aims to embody the function of the moral educator able to bring about in his readers a process of inner transformation. On the other, he undertakes to demolish the dominant moral pseudo-culture, showing its tendency to debase what gives meaning and value to the lives of human beings.

3. NIETZSCHE'S IMMORALISM

In *Schopenhauer as Educator* the exemplars able to kindle a process of self-transformation are described as authentically moral figures. On the subject of the lack of masters, Nietzsche writes

“[...] then one finally asks oneself: where are we, scholars and unscholarly, high placed and low, to find the moral exemplars and models among our contemporaries, the visible epitome of morality for our time?”²⁴

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, p. 163.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, p. 163.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, p. 132.

The vocation of *Schopenhauer as Educator* seems in conflict with the devaluation of morality that is at the centre of the writings of the 1880s and with the inclination to define himself the “first immoralist”.²⁵ To examine this point we need to briefly consider the argumentative strategy behind Nietzsche's immoralism. An important indication can be found in the penultimate chapter of *Ecce Homo*, entitled “Why I am a destiny”. Only a few years after the writing of his most famous works, such as *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil* and the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche claims that he at last knows his true self. His mission consists in bringing about the transvaluation, or the change, of all values.²⁶ After praising his discovery, Nietzsche explains the rhetorical strategy that directed the announcement of this message of truth in his earlier works. He wanted to use an openly provocative language: he described himself as an immoralist.

“Do you want a formula for a destiny like this, one *that becomes a human being?* – You will find it in my *Zarathustra*.

- and whoever wants to be a creator in good and evil first has to be a destroyer and smash values.

Thus the highest evil is part of the highest good: but this is the creative good.”²⁷

Further on, on the subject of his immoralism

“Have I been understood? – What sets me apart, what singles me out over and above the rest of humanity is the fact that I *uncovered* Christian

25 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols* edited by A. Ridley and J. Norman, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 145. Recent studies have recognized the presence of two different meanings of “morality” in Nietzsche's writings, but have advanced inadequate or partial explanations of the distinction. One interpretative line, defended by Brian Leiter, claims that the distinction refers to the difference that exists between values that foster the wellbeing of great artists and those that are useful for the survival of “mediocre” individuals who lack the talents required for producing works of genius. See B. Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 2002, chap. 4 – a reading that is unacceptable for reasons similar to those we have mentioned in connection with Rawls' interpretation. A second line, defended by Maudemarie Clark, offers a detailed account both of the false premises – the connection with an unacceptable idea of voluntariness – and the philosophical errors – the confusion between regret and shame – linked to the prevailing morality, but has not characterized exhaustively the positive meaning of morality. See M. Clark, *On the Rejection of Morality: Bernard Williams's Debt to Nietzsche*, in R. Schacht, 2001, pp. 100-122. Clark rightly claims that for Nietzsche positive morality must distance itself from an ascetic ideal of purity linked to a nihilistic perspective, which is the basis of Christian morality, but does not grasp that the reasons for which Nietzsche refused to identify the concept of morality with the nihilistic ideal depended on the fact that he accepted a perfectionist register of the moral life.

26 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 127.

27 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 144.

morality. That is why I needed a word whose significance lay in challenging everyone."²⁸

Nietzsche does not intend to get rid of morality, he wants rather that each of us once again gives a meaning to the evaluative terms that a culture dominated by Christian components has emptied of meaning. A theme already present in *Schopenhauer as Educator* is that moral education is a practice that does no more than transmit empty formulae: terms like good or virtue have become words that no longer make thought possible.²⁹ The only possibility for our evaluative language to once more express moral concepts is through a provocative use of language itself. Nietzsche discredits the word "moral" because he wants his readers to mistrust their linguistic means. They must be convinced that the words they use cannot express what has value.³⁰ Consequently, in this context immoralism does not mark a phase of rethinking the theme of the moral call in *Schopenhauer as Educator*. On the contrary, it is a necessary transition in the perfectionist strategy that emphasizes the fact that the process leading to a new meaning for moral language is a personal journey that is defined by the need to cultivate ourselves.

4. THE PERFECTIONIST DIMENSION IN NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF MORALITY

Nietzsche's immoralism, then, has meaning only in the light of the distinction between a positive and desirable concept of morality and a negative and regrettable one. I would like now to make the terms of this difference less blurred and clearer. My thesis is that an examination of the different characteristics of morality that Nietzsche wants to oppose supports the hypothesis that the positive concept of morality he wants to sustain develops from the perfectionist theses expressed in the third Untimely Meditation. The critique of morality is a fundamental passage in the broader critique of culture, the second consecration to culture, which thwarts the moral development of human beings.³¹ To this end, we can

28 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 148.

29 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, p. 11 – a theme taken up a few years later in Chapter Two of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*.

30 For the analogies between Nietzsche's rhetorical strategy and Emerson's concept of provocation see J. Conant, 2001, p. 217.

31 The reading proposed in this article differs from those interpretations that claim that Nietzsche's critique of morality can be assimilated to that formulated by the so-called "morality critics". Thomas Nagel has defended this position, claiming that in both cases the central theme is the conflict between the imperatives of the good life and the duties of the moral life, see ID., *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 196; see also R. Loudon, *Can We Be Too Moral?*, "Ethics" 98 (1988), pp. 361-80, p. 361. Nagel's view ignores an important point. What is peculiar to Nietzsche's critique is

divide Nietzsche's argument against the reigning moral culture in two parts. In the first he discusses the psychological motives that explain its genesis, particularly the resentment and hatred that one particular class of people nurtures for another.³² In the second, he examines its normative components, which he identifies with a certain way of understanding values like pity, altruism and the search for happiness.³³ The two parts of the argument throw light on the reasons that had convinced Nietzsche that the main components characterizing the moral culture in which he found himself are hostile to education and individual elevation.

This last hypothesis makes a good starting-point. In the first essay of the *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche claims that the morality associated with Christianity does not derive from a supposed divine inspiration, but is the creation of a particular social class of people, whom he calls variously "the mob", "the slaves", "the herd" etc.,³⁴ in a particular historical moment that can be placed roughly in the early centuries of the Roman Empire. Slaves create morality as a reaction to unfavourable economic and social circumstances: unable to overturn their oppressors with their physical strength alone, they invent a system of values that thwarts the development and survival of the master class. The main explanation of this

that the morality he wants to free us from is regarded as a cultural phenomenon, while the critique of the analytic tradition is mainly interested in undermining particular philosophical theories of morality. For an analysis of this difference see B. Leiter, *Nietzsche and the Morality Critics*, 1997, pp. 222-23.

While sharing Leiter's general judgment of the differences between the arguments of the so-called "morality critics" and Nietzsche's strategy, I disagree with his analysis of the comparison between Nietzsche and Bernard Williams. Unlike Leiter, I believe that Williams's critique of morality has important resemblances with Nietzsche's. In opposition to Leiter, one might claim that Williams's fundamental objection to morality does not concern the details of the philosophical idea of moral obligation, so much as its ideal of purity – an ideal that, for Williams, is now an essential part of our concept of morality, and that finds expression in the shared conviction that moral value is beyond any empirical determination, see *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1985. This aspect brings the two strategies closer. Not only do they address morality as a cultural phenomenon, but both criticize its nihilistic component – the thesis that, once its ideal of purity has been abandoned, there is no longer room for an evaluative perspective of the world. On this point see M. Clark, 2001, pp. 119-120.

- 32 Interpreters who claim that morality in its negative sense should be identified starting from its peculiar genesis include W. Kaufmann, *How Nietzsche Revolutionized Ethics*, in *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1959, pp. 213- 14; by the same author see also *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th edn, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1974, p. 374.
- 33 Those who claim that Nietzsche's critique of morality has pity and altruism as its object include P. Foot, *Nietzsche: The Revaluation of Values*, 1973; see also R. Schacht, *Nietzsche*, London, Routledge, 1983, p. 359ff.
- 34 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* edited and translated by M. Clark and A.J. Swensen, Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing, 1998, p. 18.

Christian process of revaluing aristocratic values rests on a psychological state that Nietzsche calls resentment. It is a particular type of hatred caused by the perception of an unwelcome state of things that we cannot modify. For Nietzsche this feeling is always associated with the creation of a system of values that tends to discredit the damaging status quo. Most interpreters tend to agree that the discussion of resentment is proof of the fact that for Nietzsche the causes of the distinction between positive morality (aristocratic) and negative morality (plebeian) should be traced back to the characteristics of the biological type or social group of those that endorse them. These readings ignore the fact that the explanatory work in the *Genealogy* is always performed by mechanisms that are found at a psychological level and that only contingently end up coinciding with the social level.³⁵

The focal point of Nietzsche's analysis is that resentment is the expression of a more general psychological orientation towards the world, which he calls reactive or "reaction".³⁶ For those in this condition evaluative judgments will tend to be a response to particular configurations of the world, that is to say, a reaction to something external to the self, rather than the expression of an inner certainty that derives from self-esteem. On this point Nietzsche writes

"Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant yes-saying to oneself, from the outset slave morality says "no" to an "outside", to a "different", to a "not-self": and *this* "no" is its creative deed. This reversal of the value-establishing glance – this *necessary* direction toward the outside instead of back onto oneself – belongs to the very nature of *ressentiment*: in order to come into being, slave-morality always needs an opposite and external world; it needs, psychologically speaking, external stimuli in order to be able to act at all, - its action is, from the ground up, reaction."³⁷

This aspect of his critique of morality is further developed in those parts of the *Genealogy* in which he underlines that while morality in its inferior

35 Nietzsche himself in section 260 of *Beyond Good and Evil*,azzino Montinari, in which he provides a summary of the arguments of the *Genealogy*, claims that the historical development of the two moralities eliminated sharp class divisions. The idea is that the reference to social classes, though it is fundamental for understanding the genesis of the distinction between the two moralities, cannot be regarded anymore as useful means for understanding the differences in the present.

36 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, p. 19. On the reactive orientation towards the world and its importance in Nietzsche's philosophy see Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983 (originally published in French in 1962); and J. Richardson, *Nietzsche's System*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996. For a more recent discussion, see S. May, *Nietzsche's Ethics and his 'War on Morality'*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999, pp. 42-50.

37 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, p. 19.

sense is directed at actions (good or wicked), primitive morality assesses people in terms of their nobility. What makes a person noble is never directly his behaviour, but certain aspects of his character³⁸, in particular what Nietzsche calls self-respect. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, written in the same years as the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche recalls

“- What is noble? What does the word “noble” still mean to us today? How do noble people reveal who they are, how can they be recognized under this heavy, overcast sky of incipient mob rule that makes everything leaden and opaque? – There are no actions that prove who they are, - actions are always ambiguous, always unfathomable -; and there are no “works” either [...]. It is not works, it is *faith* that is decisive here, faith that establishes rank order (this old, religious formula now acquires a new and deeper meaning): some fundamental certainty that a noble soul has about itself, something that cannot be looked for, cannot be found, and perhaps cannot be lost either. – *The noble soul has reverence for itself.*–³⁹

The positive ethic that Nietzsche opposes to Christian culture in the *Genealogy of Morals* involves this same primacy of self-respect that was the distinctive mark of the appeal to morality invoked in *Schopenhauer as educator*. It is precisely the perfectionist theme that explains the rejection of any morality founded on resentment. This psychological condition leads inevitably to considering the judgment of value as something that emerges from comparison with what is outside us. According to the concept of morality that Nietzsche defended this reversal seemed unacceptable because it did not grasp the fact that value derives only from the educational relation that each of us has with his higher self.

The thesis of the continuity of perfectionism in the works of Nietzsche's maturity is further confirmed if we interpret the critique of morality as an attack on a particular agenda of rules. Let us concentrate on two of its most significant components: 1) the idea that happiness is good and suffering is bad and 2) the idea that forms of moral scruple deriving from a certain interpretation of pity and altruism are virtues.

38 On this point see B. Leiter, 2002, p. 214, note 25. For a different interpretation, which claims that the virtue of nobility is expressed only through actions of a certain type, see Mark Bigotti, *Slave Morality, Socrates, and the Bushmen: A Reading of the First Essay of “On Genealogy of Morals”*, “Philosophy & Phenomenological Research” 58 (1998), pp. 745-779, in particular p. 749.

39 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and J. Norman, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002 (2010), p. 172. Respect is a primary idea in Nietzsche's thoughts on virtue. It is clearly a respect different from that central to Kant's ethics. For Kant moral action, or, more precisely, good will, depends on respect for the moral law, while Nietzsche claims that the respect that matters in morality is identified with loyalty to one's true self.

Nietzsche deals wide-rangingly with the supposed value of happiness in Part Seven of *Beyond Good and Evil*, entitled *Our Virtues*. The discussion opens with an observation that is at first somewhat obscure on the simple-mindedness of some moral conceptions. The utilitarian culture and more generally the ways of thinking that measure the value of things by pleasure and pain are naïve because they regard as important what is actually secondary. Pleasure and pain are simply concomitant states of thought. But it is thought, by virtue of its shaping powers, that has value, not its side effects. The appeal to the educational capacity of thought becomes clearer when Nietzsche claims that the doctrine that prescribes an increase in humanity welfare and the elimination of his suffering makes “humanity ... smaller”, “renders people ridiculous and despicable” and “makes their decline into something *desirable*”.⁴⁰ A little further on, the Benthamite doctrine of the happiness of the greatest number is compared to a philosophy for animals:

“Ultimately, they all want *English* morality to be given its dues: since it is best for humanity, for the “general utility” or “the happiness of the majority” – no! the happiness of *England*. They want, with all the strength they can muster, to prove to themselves that striving for English happiness, I mean for comfort and fashion [...] is the proper path to virtue as well, and, in fact, that whatever virtue has existed in the world so far has involved just this sort of striving. Not one of these clumsy, conscience-stricken herd animals (who set out to treat egoism as a matter of general welfare -) wants to know or smell anything of the fact that “general welfare” is no ideal [...]”⁴¹

The eudemonistic and utilitarian components of our moral culture debase human beings and make them like animals. A theme that has its roots in the context of the discussion in *Schopenhauer as educator* on the relation between culture and self-education. Nietzsche had claimed that the task of real art and real culture is to reveal our humanity, to educate us to recognizing what our real self is, while the lives of those in whom this precondition for the possibility of a moral life has not yet been fully achieved is characterized by “animality”.⁴² The search for happiness, which he describes in this essay as the aim of the pseudo-culture he calls *the greed of the money-makers*,⁴³ is precisely one of the clearest lines of demarcation between “real men” and “pseudo-men” or animals. Nietzsche writes

40 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 116.

41 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 119.

42 On this point see Conant, 2002, p. 224.

43 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, p. 164.

“Yet let us reflect: where does the animal cease, where does man begin? – man, who is nature’s sole concern! As long as anyone desires life as he desires happiness he has not yet raised his eyes above the horizon of the animal, for the only desires more consciously what the animal seeks through blind impulse. But that is what we all do for the greater part of our lives. Usually we fail to emerge out of animality, we ourselves are the animals whose suffering seems to be senseless.

But there are moments *when we realize this*: then the clouds are rent asunder, and we see that, in common with all nature, we are pressing towards man as towards something that stands high above us.”⁴⁴

The part of our moral pseudo-culture that prescribes the search for happiness is therefore an obstacle to achieving our humanity, which is the essential condition for a moral existence.

The negative judgment on the Christian interpretation of pity and altruism has similar origins. In the *Preface to the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche goes so far as to claim that, all things considered, the question of the current “*value* of morality” is reduced to that of “the value of the unegoistic”, or that combination of instincts deriving from compassion and sympathetic feeling.⁴⁵ Nietzsche criticizes these features, starting from two different types of consideration. First, they tend to be associated with dispositions such as abnegation and self-sacrifice, causing that general attitude towards the world that Nietzsche calls “selflessness”. Those affected by this pathology relate to moral questions with impersonal and cold detachment, as pure intellect, and for this reason they can never completely grasp them.⁴⁶ Secondly, sympathy for others is converted into a tendency to consider the elimination of suffering in others as the first principle of morality.⁴⁷ Nietzsche observes that this vocation to bring succour, even in cases in which it does not become a tyrannical imposition on others, is never really useful to people. Recalling the perfectionist theme of the third Untimely Meditation, Nietzsche claims that we act in the interest of others not when we help them but when we educate them.

“[...] by *creating* something out of oneself that the other can behold with pleasure: a beautiful, restful, self-enclosed garden perhaps, with high walls against storms and the dust of the roadway but also a hospitable gate.”⁴⁸

44 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, pp. 157-58.

45 See the *Preface of Genealogy of Morals*, p. 4.

46 See *The Gay Science and Idylls from Messina* edited by B. Williams, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001 (2010), p. 202.

47 See *Daybreak. Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* edited by M. Clark and B. Leither, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997 (2009), pp. 105-106.

48 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, p. 106.

Nietzsche's answer to the morality of pity that constantly requires us to look away from ourselves, "but to have lynx-eyes for all the distress and suffering that exists elsewhere"⁴⁹, is the perfectionist argument of the priority of duties towards oneself, which involve the cultivation of one's self, over those towards others. The cultivation of our genius is, then, a condition for being able to develop one's capacity to recognize and respond to real needs in other people. In Nietzsche's perfectionist framework, the best way of helping others is not choosing for them, but cultivating one's self and constructing one's example of how an individual life may receive the maximum value.

Alessio Vaccari
"La Sapienza" Università di Roma
e-mail: alessio.vaccari@gmail.com

49 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, p. 106.