A Companion to Nietzsche

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In his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche expressed great skepticism about the moral psychology presupposed by the proponents of "slave morality," the institution that we know as anti-egoistic, universalist, and egalitarian morality *simpliciter*. He claimed to identify the foundational claim in such a moral psychology — belief in "that little changeling, the 'subject'" (GM I. 13) — and he then offered a historical and psychological narrative about the origin of the notion. His story purported to show why a certain type (the weak) would try to justify its position relative to the stronger type by portraying the master's expression of strength as evil, and the situation of the defeated slave as good. This, in turn, if it was to be an effective *condemnation* rather than a mere report of the facts, had to go one step farther than characterizing those who end up by nature as such overpowering types, one step farther than just characterizing the weak type, those who happen to be in their deeds meek, humble, sympathetic to the suffering of others, and so forth. The real genius of the slave rebellion, according to Nietzsche, lies in its going beyond a simple inversion of value types, and in the creation of a new way of thinking about human beings: the creation of a subject "behind" the actual deed, one who could have acted to express his strength (or virtuous weakness) or not, and who thus can be condemned and held individually and completely responsible for his voluntary oppression of others, even as the slave can be praised for his supposedly voluntary and so praiseworthy withdrawal from the struggle, in the service of supposedly higher ends. Nietzsche's psychological narrative points to a distinct motive that explains this ideological warfare and invention — his phrase is, "thanks to the counterfeit and self-deception of impotence" — and he draws a conclusion about the realization of this motive, such that the slave can act.

just as if the weakness of the weak — that is to say, their essence, their effects, their sole ineluctable, irremovable reality — were a voluntary achievement, willed, chosen, a deed, a meritorious act. This type of man needs to believe in a neutral independent "subject," prompted by an instinct for self-preservation and self-affirmation. (GM I. 13)

The experience of the two differing motivations cited in these two passages is obviously supposed to be linked. Nietzsche appears to assume that the experience of
such impotence itself is, if confronted unadorned, unbearable in some way, threatens one’s very “self-preservation,” requires a “self-affirmation” if one is to continue to lead a life. Hence the “self-deception,” the compensatory belief that one’s “impotence” is actually an achievement to be admired. In sum, this invention of a subject: (or soul) independent of and “behind” its deeds is what “the sublime self-deception that interprets weakness as freedom, and their being thus-and-thus as a merit makes possible” (GM I. 13).

However, as in many other cases, Nietzsche is not content merely to ascribe these psychological motivations to the originators of some moral code. Even if the slaves had such a “need,” establishing that would not of itself establish the further claim that this slavishly motivated commitment is actually false, necessarily deceived. Nietzsche clearly realized this, and he certainly wanted to establish that further point. He suggests how he intends to demonstrate that in a famous simile proposed in GM I. 13, just before the passages cited above. The simile appears to assert an ambitious, sweeping metaphysical claim, all despite Nietzsche’s frequent demurrals about the possibility of metaphysics. His main claim is stated right after he notes that there is nothing surprising or even objectionable in the fact that “little lambs” insist that the greatest evil is “bird of prey” (Raubvögeln) behavior, and that the highest good is little lamb behavior. Nietzsche goes on:

To demand of strength that it should not express itself as strength, that it should not be a desire to overcome, a desire to throw down, a desire to become master, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs, is just as absurd as to demand of weakness that it should express itself as strength [...] For just as the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for an action, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was free to express strength or not to do so. But there is no such substratum; there is no “being” behind doing, effecting, becoming; “the doer” is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything. (GM I. 13; see also BGE 17)

This denial of a subject behind the deed and responsible for it is so sweeping that it immediately raises a problem for Nietzsche. It is the same question that would arise for anyone attacking the commonsense psychological view that holds that a subject’s intention, normally understood as a desire for an end, accompanied by a belief about means or a subject’s deciding or “willing” to act for some purpose or end, must stand both “behind” and “before” some activity in order for the event to be distinguished as a deed at all, as something done by someone. We must be able to appeal to such a subject’s “intending” in order for us to be able to distinguish, say, someone volunteering for a risky mission from steel rusting or water running downhill or a bird singing. The identification of such a prior condition is, in Wittgenstein’s famous words, what would distinguish my arm going up from my raising my arm. It is “behind” the deed in the sense that other observers see only the movements of bodies – say, someone stepping out from a line of men – and must infer some intending subject in order to understand and explain both what happened and why the action, someone volunteering for a mission, occurred. If there “is” just the deed, we tend to think, stepping out of line is just body movement, metaphysically like the wind blowing over a lamp. A subject’s intention is “before” the deed because that commonsense psychological explanation typically points to such a prior intention as the cause of the act: what best answers the question, “Why did that occur?”

Now Nietzsche is often described as a “naturalist,” perhaps a psychological naturalist in his account of moral institutions. Nowadays, naturalism is understood as the position that holds that there are only material objects in space and time, perhaps just the entities and properties referred to by the most advanced modern sciences, and that all explanation is scientific explanation, essentially subsumption under a scientific law. However, even with such a general, vague definition, it is unlikely that Nietzsche accepts this sort of naturalism, especially the latter condition. In GM II. 12, he rails against the “mechanistic senselessness” of modern science, and he contrasts what he here and elsewhere calls this democratic prejudice with “the theory that in all events a will to power is operating.” But many people think he accepts at least the former condition, and that such acceptance may partly explain what is going on in the denial of any separate soul in GM I. 13; i.e. that Nietzsche mostly means to deny “free will.”

Nietzsche’s descriptions of the strong and the weak in GM I. 13 have indeed already expressed the anti-voluntarist view that the strong can “do nothing else but” express their strength. He seems to treat the commonsense psychology just sketched as essentially and wholly derivative from the slave or ultimately Christian compensatory fantasy of self-determining subjects and a “could have done otherwise” sense of freedom. This all does make it tempting to regard him as indifferent to the distinction between ordinary natural events and actions, and as perfectly content to consider the “reactive force” most responsible for the slave rebellion – ressentiment – as one of the many natural forces in the world we will need to appeal to in order to account for various social and political appearances. All this is in contrast to a separate subject which could act or not, depending on what it “decides.” We could interpret GM I. 13 as only denying the possibility of this metaphysically free subject behind the deed and attribute to Nietzsche a broadly consistent naturalism. Nietzsche certainly believes that the free will picture is a fantasy (BGE 19, 21), and in GM I. 13 he obviously thinks that the classic picture of a commanding will and the resultant action give us, paradoxically and unacceptably, two actions, not one, and that it pushes the basic question of origin back yet again.

The trouble with proceeding very far in this direction is that Nietzsche does not seem interested in merely naturalizing all talk of motives, goals, intentions, and aversions; he denies that whole model of behavior. The passages just quoted do not appear to leave room for corporeal states causing various body movements, as if, for example, a subject’s socially habituated fear for his reputation (where fear is understood as some sort of corporeal brain state or event) were “behind” his stepping out of line and acting in a way he knew would count for others as volunteering. If that model were adopted, we would still be pointing to some determinate causal factor “behind” and “before” the deed. The lightning simile is unequivocal, though, and we would not be following its
suggestion if we merely substituted a material *substance* (like the brain or brain states) for an immaterial soul. Moreover, such a naturalist account relies on the material continuity through time of some identical substance in order to attribute to it various manifestations and expressions as interconnected properties. If there were no substance or subject of any kind behind or underlying various different events, it is hard to see how we might individuate these expressions of force, and even if we could, how we might distinguish a universe of episodic, atomistic force-events from the world that Nietzsche himself refers to, a world of slaves, masters, institutions, priests, and so on. He nowhere seems inclined to treat such a world as arbitrarily grouped collections of force-events (grouped together by whom or what?), as if these were either “becoming master” events or “becoming subdued by” events, etc. We thus still need a credible interpretation of the following claim: “But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed— the deed is everything” (GM I. 13). Materialist or naturalist bloody-mindedness is not going to help.

Likewise, in the Second Essay, he talks freely of such things as a “struggle between power-complexes” (GM II. 11).

On the other hand, Nietzsche would seem to be right in GM I. 13 about the *ininitely* substantializing tendencies of language itself, even throughout his own account. Immediately after his claim using resentment as the subject of a sentence, he cannot himself resist parsing *this* as “the resentment of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge” (GM I. 10). This reintroduction of the substantive bearer of the property, “natures,” who express resentment, rather than any claim about resentment-events occurring, is also more consistent with the overall psychological manner of explaining morality. It is hard enough to imagine appealing to something like forces without substrates in which they inhere, of which they are properties, but the core idea of Nietzsche’s account is a picture of a social struggle, lasting over some time, among human beings, not forces, which results in a situation of relative stability, a successful subduing and a being subdued, wherein, finally, the reaction of the subdued finds another outlet of response than a direct counter-force. This last is caused by a feeling that is apparently unbearable, impotence, responsible then for a reaction motivated by an attempt to revalue such impotence. So, as he must, Nietzsche refers both to “the noble mode of valuation” as explicans and directly to “the noble man” as someone with motives, intentions, a self-understanding, a certain relation to the slavish, etc. I say that Nietzsche “must” so refer because, as several others have pointed out (Bittner 2001 with regard to Nietzsche; Honneth 1991 with regard to Foucault), there cannot just “be” subduing and subdued events. Someone must be subdued and be held in subjection, be prevented from doing what he might otherwise do, by the activities of someone else who is not so restricted. Otherwise, we don’t have a *Herrwerden*, just a quantitative more or less. Even the “will to power” passages cannot end by pointing to a mere “becoming master” event. If such a striving is successful, what we are left with is a *master*, and thereby correspondingly a slave.

Throughout the *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche treats his own explanation of the slave revolt in morality as something not acknowledged by, something that would be actively disputed by, the proponents of such a revolt, and for such an account to make sense there must be proponents, quite complex proponents, it turns out. That is, while he might invoke the language of psychological naturalism, the language of instincts, to account for this moralizing reaction, he also notes that this instinctual force is not “for itself” what it is “in itself,” to adopt a non-Nietzschean form of expression. The “moral reaction” is not experienced by such a subject as what it really is, even though the reaction could not be satisfying unless also “experienced,” somehow, as some sort of revenge. Morality is a counterfeit and self-deception, and its effectiveness as a weapon against the master would disappear if it were correctly understood by its proponents as a psychological ploy or strategy in the search for an indirect route to power over one’s oppressors. In fact, Nietzsche thinks that the Christian imperative to complete honesty about one’s motives will eventually precipitate exactly this sort of “crisis of honesty,” will make known to its adherents the origins of Christianity in hatred and a desire for revenge on the masters (cf. GM III. 27; GS 357).

But then, it would seem, it cannot be that “the deed is everything.” Nietzsche himself, it would appear, is only able to account for the deed being what it is, a reactive,
revenge-inspired rebellion, motivated by the frustrations of impotence, by appeal to the standard psychological language of a subject’s “true intentions,” the struggle to realize those intentions, and the conflict with other subjects that this produces, and, as we have just seen, he must also be able to refer even to the possibility of a self-conceived commitment to an intention, acting for the sake of an end one consciously and sincerely would disavow. Nietzsche’s claim is that the deed in question was not a discovery, or even the attempt at a discovery, of the true nature of good and evil, but a revolt, because it is motivated by a vengeful reaction. But if there were “only the deed, not a doer,” the question “What deed?” would, it appears, be unanswerable, or at least it could not be answered in the “divided subject” way Nietzsche appears committed to. Indeed, in pursuing that question, we are not only back with a “subject” and a subject’s intentions behind the deed, but involved in a hunt for true, genuine intentions, lying “back there” somewhere, but unacknowledged.

Finally, the whole direction of Nietzsche’s narrative seems to depend on what GM I. 13 denies. Since the revolt is something the slaves did, is a deed, and not something that happened to them, or merely “grew” in them, it is something that can be undone, that, in the right situation, can be countered by a new legislation of values, once the crisis of Christian honesty occurs. Oddly, this alternative deed, or revaluation, seems to be both an idea that Nietzsche accuses the slave of fabricating in order to focus absolute blame on the master, and a possibility Nietzsche himself seems to want to preserve, the possibility of an eventual “self-overcoming.” All of this requires not only subjects of deeds, but even possibilities inhering yet unrealized in such subjects. Again, the denial of a causally autonomous soul, the free will, and freely undertaken commitments does not get us very far in understanding Nietzsche’s own enterprise in a way that is consistent with GM I. 13. And so we need to think again about what “the deed is everything” might amount to.

4

Now it may be that Nietzsche is such an unsystematic thinker that at some point in any philosophical reconstruction one will simply have to pick and choose, follow one of the paths Nietzsche opened up and ignore another, inconsistent path that he also pointed to. But if we reject the substantilizing of the will to power, or any substantilizing, the social account that results from an application of it would look so many heterogeneous episodes of conflicting and discontinuous fields of contingent forces and it would resemble not at all the typology that Nietzsche so clearly relies on. Accordingly, Rüdiger Bittner has encouraged us to discard the “will to power” explanation as a dead end, one ultimately wedded to a “creationist” and projective theory of value, and to concentrate on what Bittner thinks is closer to Nietzsche’s interest: an adequate account of life and living beings, and with the instability and provisionality of any substance claim. To understand the domain of “life,” we have to rid ourselves of substance presumptions and concentrate on subject-less “activity” itself. Bittner also wants us to take GM I. 13 as the heart of Nietzsche’s project, and to abandon completely the language of subjects who create value (Bittner 2001).

But, as we have seen, if we accept GM I. 13 at face value, and insist that there is no doer behind the deed, we have to give up much more than the metaphysics of the will to power, and its assumptions about exclusively created value. We will make it very difficult to understand the whole of Nietzsche’s own attack on the moral psychology of Christian morality, since he appears to rely on a traditional understanding of act descriptions, appears to claim that the act is individuated as an act mainly by reference to the agent’s intentions, and he invokes a complex picture of unconscious motives, operative and motivating, but inaccessible as such to the agents involved. Not to mention that we shall be left with little coherent to say about Nietzsche’s BGE 23 claim about “psychology,” “now again the path to the fundamental problems.” Without Nietzsche’s own, prima facie inconsistent, doer-deed language, the question of what is supposedly happening in the slave revolt, which in his account clearly relies on notions of subjection to the will of others, resentment, and even “madness” (GM II. 22), will be difficult to understand. Values cannot be said to simply “grow” organically, given some sort of context. For one thing, as Nietzsche famously remarked, we must make ourselves into creatures capable of keeping promises, and this requires many centuries of commitment and perseverance and so the unmistakable exercise of subjectivity. It seems a question begging evasion to gloss all such appeals as really about “what happens to us,” what madness befalls us, in situations of subjection. There would be little reason to take Nietzsche seriously if he were out to make what Bernard Williams has called the “unnerving” claim that “we never really do anything, that no events are actions” (Williams 1994: 241).

However, before returning to GM I. 13, the suggestions just made about Nietzsche’s reliance on what appears to be some notion of subjectivity should be expanded a bit. Two points are especially relevant. The first concerns Nietzsche’s essentially genealogical and so historical treatment of the issue, and the second involves the highly literary or figurative attempt to explain what is involved in what he calls in GM II. 2 the historical creation of the “sovereign individual.”

His historical narrative of the development of a creature able to make and keep promises makes two substantial if also fairly minimal assumptions about the “nature” out of which such historical development proceeds. As he puts it in the first paragraph of the Second Essay of the Genealogy, the problem of breeding an animal capable of promising is a task that nature “has set for herself.” His first assumption is that nature “sets the task” that human beings must complete in historical time because any conceivable human situation is one where suffering is unavoidable. His second assumption, manifest throughout the last two essays of the Genealogy, is that it is suffering that in effect shocks, forces human beings into a distinct reaction – not just reactions of avoidance and prudence. He gathers whatever historical, anthropological, literary, and philological elements he can muster to try to demonstrate that a species-distinct reaction is also provoked: that is, the burden of the question of the meaning of suffering is taken on. He assumes that we are so disposed that the deepest suffering we can experience is from a lack of any sense in the suffering. Consciousness itself is often
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treated by Nietzsche as such a reactive phenomenon, as if human beings do not merely suffer, but, given the intensity of their suffering and some sort of disposition to react against it, they can be said also to be jolted into the awareness that one is suffering, and this not just as a kind of second-order neutral self-monitoring. Such second-order awareness is originally reactive and negative, seeks to cancel out in some way what injuries so meaninglessly. (As in many accounts of origin — by Rousseau, Hobbes, Hegel, and even Freud — the "state of nature" is unbearable and requires its own negation and the creation of a second nature. Being human cannot function like a standard natural predicate, like being white or being an animal, but involves not being, and negating, what our natural endowment would require.) In the case of primitive injuries by others, Nietzsche tries to show that we can retroactively render the act in some way sensible by requiring recompense from the offender. "What suffering means" is that a balance has been upset and can be restored, usually by payment in the suffering of the offender; more precisely and gruesomely, by pleasure in watching the other suffer. His story then develops into the famous account of bad conscience, internalization and sublimation, guilt and debt, the ascetic priest and ascetic ideal (see GM III. 15).

The details of this famous genealogy would take us far afield. It is well known that Nietzsche believed that the interpretation of suffering provided by "morality" — that the reason for suffering was the subject’s own sinfulness, and the picture of guilt and conscience that such an account requires — actually succeeded in creating conditions of commitment, sacrifice, and dedication, but it ultimately exacted far too high a price. It thus eventually left us "a nook of discontented, arrogant, and repulsive creatures" (GM III. 11). This double rhetoric is also on view in the laudatory introduction of the "sovereign individual," even as Nietzsche is preparing the reader for the inevitably self-destructive nature of the main weapon "against himself" that permits this admirable sovereignty — conscience, ultimately "bad conscience."

For the moment, the second important element in this narrative of a "subjective" mode of self-understanding is Nietzsche’s formulation of just what has been achieved, this "power over oneself." In Thus Spoke Zarathustra Nietzsche has Zarathustra announce the advent of nihilism in this way: "At last the time is coming when man will no longer shoot the arrow of his longing beyond man, and the string of his bow will have forgotten how to whirr" (Z. prologue, 5). In the preface to Beyond Good and Evil he notes that our long struggle with and often opposition to and dissatisfaction with our own moral tradition, European Christianity, has created a "magnificent tension [Spannung] of the spirit the like of which never yet existed on earth: with so tense a bow we can now shoot for the most distant goals." But, he goes on, the "democratic enlightenment" also sought to "unbend" such a bow, "to bring it about that the spirit would no longer experience itself so easily as a 'need'" (BGE, prologue). This latter formulation coincides with a wonderfully lapidary expression in Gay Science. In discussing the "millions of Europeans who cannot endure their boredom and themselves," he notes that they would even welcome "a craving to suffer" and so "to find in their suffering a probable reason for action, for deeds"; that is, "neediness is needed!" (GS 56). In sum:

with the appearance on earth of an animal soul turned against itself, taking sides against itself, something so new, deep, unheard of, enigmatic, contradictory, and full of future

had come into being that the appearance of the earth was thereby essentially changed. (GM II. 16)

This "tension" amounts to Nietzsche’s term for self-consciousness, the possibility of some distance from oneself that makes possible everything from there being possible addressees of Nietzsche’s rhetorical appeals, to rendering intelligible that one could not be who one is, and so might have to become, would want to become, who one is. Nietzsche clearly also wants to raise in these terms the question of whether the threshold in accepting our natural situation of ignorance and suffering has come to be significantly lowered in bourgeois Europe, and he is clearly worried that it has sunk far too low, that we have lost the capacity to feel any self-contempt at our animal status.

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Part of what is involved in the weakening of this tension, failure of desire, or unbending of bows is the central picture of a subject separate from and absolutely responsible for its deeds. Nietzsche has proposed that we need a new way of understanding ourselves, given the historical fate of this Christian notion, one wherein "the deed is everything," and we have been trying to understand the implications of this alternate picture. We might do better, I want now to suggest, to attend more closely to the surface meaning of the claims made in GM I. 13. As we see in GM II. 12, the notion of an "activity" functions as a "fundamental concept" in what Nietzsche himself claims, and he insists in that passage on a contrast between such an activity and the "mechanistic senselessness" of the ordinary modern scientific worldview. We thus need to return to GM I. 13 and appreciate that Nietzsche is not denying that there is a subject of the deed: he is just asserting that it is not separate, distinct from the activity itself: it is "in" the deed. He is not denying that strength "expresses itself" in acts of strength. He is in fact asserting just that, that there is such an expression, and so appears to be relying on a notion of expression, rather than intentional causality, to understand how the doer is in the deed. "To demand of strength that it should not express itself as strength" is the expression he uses. He does not say, "there are just strength-events." The appeal to expression is quite an important clue. He is not denying, in other words, that there is a deed, and that it must be distinguishable from any mere event. He maintains that distinction. However, because he has introduced the category of deed or activity (his "fundamental concept") so quickly and metaphorically, it is difficult to flesh out what he means. Indeed, there are other such metaphorical expressions which are both striking and somewhat mysterious, as well as indications of how important the issue is to Nietzsche. In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, he writes: "Oh, my friend, that your self be in your deed as the mother is in the child — let that be your word concerning virtue" (Z II. "On the Virtuous").

This suggests a very different relation between self and deed than cause and effect, but we would first have to know how, for Nietzsche, a mother can be said to be in her child before we can appreciate what is being suggested, and that would require at least a separate essay. Put in terms of the image we have been exploring, we cannot say "there are only deeds," no agents, just as we cannot say that the flash is just
an electrical discharge in the air. Clearly, a certain sort of meteorological event is "expressed," and so a phenomenally identical "flash" might not be lightning, but could be artificially produced. It would be a phenomenally identical event, but not lightning.

In order to understand this claim about a deed "in" the deed, I want to suggest a comparison with another philosopher that will seem at first glance quite inappropriate. Assume for a moment that there is a brotherhood of modern anti-Cartesians, philosophers united in their opposition to metaphysical dualism, to a picture of mind shut up in itself and its own ideas and so in an unsolvable skeptical dilemma about the real world, and opposed as well to the notion of autonomous, identifiable subjects, whose intentions and acts of willing best identify and explain distinct sorts of events in the world, actions. There is a range in such a group, including Nietzsche and Wittgenstein and Heidegger, but surely a charter member is also Hegel. Hegel formulated this issue of how "find" the agent "in" the deed in a way that suggests something of what Nietzsche may have been thinking. Consider:

The true being of a man is rather his deed; in this the individual is actual, and it is the deed that does away with both aspects of what is [merely] "meant" to be: in the one aspect where what is "meant" has the form of a corporeal passive being, the individuality, in the deed, exhibits itself rather as the negative essence, which only is insofar as it supersedes [merely] being. Then, too, the deed equally does away with the inexpressibility of what is "meant," in respect of the self-conscious individuality. In such mere opinion the individuality is infinitely determined and determinable. In the accomplished deed this spurious infinity is destroyed. The deed is something simply determined, universal, to be grasped in an abstraction: it is murder, theft, or a good action, a brave deed, and so on, and what it is can be said of it. It is this, and its being is not merely a sign, but the fact itself. It is this, and the individual human being is what the deed is. [. . .] even if he deceives himself on the point, and, turning away from his action into himself, fancying that in this inner self he is something else than what he is in the deed. (Hegel 1977: §322 [pp. 193–5])

And, even more clearly, in §404:

Whatever it is that the individual does, and whatever happens to him, that he has done himself, and he is that himself. He can have only the consciousness of the simple transference of himself from the night of possibility into the daylight of the present, from the abstract in-itself into the significance of actual being, and can have only the certainty that what happens to him in the latter is nothing else but what lay dormant in the former. [. . .] The individual, therefore, knowing that in his actual world he can find nothing else but its unity with himself, or only the certainty of himself in the truth of that world, can experience only joy in himself. (1977: p. 242)

Modern Hegel scholarship owes a great debt to Charles Taylor for having focused so much of our attention on this "expressivist" notion of action, as opposed to an intentionalist or causal account, and it is quite relevant here for understanding how Nietzsche could appear to deny any standard picture of agency and of normal volitional responsibility, and yet still speak of actions, and of the expression of a subject in a deed, indeed wholly in the deed (Taylor 1977, 1985). The main similarity turns on what might be called a non-separability thesis about intention and action, and a corresponding non-isolatability claim about a subject's intention, the claim that the determinate meaning of such an intention cannot be made out if isolated from a much larger complex of social and historical factors.

According to the first or non-separability thesis, intention-formation and articulation are always temporally fluid, altering and being transformed "on the go," as it were, as events in a project unfold. I may start out engaged in a project, understanding my intention as X, and, over time, come to understand that this was not really what I intended; it must have been Y, or later perhaps Z. And there is no way to confirm the certainty of one's "real" purpose except in the deed actually performed. My subjective construal at any time before or during the deed has no privileged authority. The deed alone can show one who one is. This means that the act description cannot be separated from this mutable intention, since as the intention comes into a kind of focus, what it is I take myself to be doing can also alter. This is partly what Nietzsche has in mind. I think, when he objects to the way other genealogists search for the origin of punishment, by looking for a fixed purpose which subjects struggle to realize with various means.

This is why, in the next section, Nietzsche writes that "only that which has no history is definable," and that we must appreciate "how accidental the 'meaning' of punishment is" (GM II. 13).

Likewise there is a common "non-isolatability" thesis between Hegel and Nietzsche: attending only to a specific intention as both accounting for why the act occurred and what is actually undertaken distorts what is necessary for a full explanation of an action. In the first place, the conditions under which one would regard an intention as justifying an action (or not) have to be part of the picture too, and this shifts our attention to the person's character and then to his life-history and even to a community as a whole or to a tradition. We have to have all that in view before the adoption of a specific intention can itself make sense. Indeed this assumption is already on view from the start in Nietzsche's genealogy, since he treats the unequal distribution of social power as an essential element in understanding "what the slavish type was attempting." The psychology that Nietzsche announces as "the queen of the sciences" is also a social and historical psychology.

In addition, while, on the standard model, the criterion for success of an action amounts to whether the originally held purpose was in fact achieved, on this different model "success" is much more complicated. I must be able to "see myself" in the deed, see it as an expression of me (in a sense not restricted to my singular intention), but also such that what I understand is being attempted and realized is also what others understand. I haven't performed the action, haven't volunteered for the mission, if nothing I do is so understood by others as such an act. We could use Robert Brandom's pragmatic terminology to make this point and say that for an action to be successful
the commitments I undertake must be those also attributed to me by others; we thus make room for the original uncertainty "for me" in just what I am undertaking, and the unacceptability of any one-sided answer (as in "just what others attribute to me": Brandm 1994).

Now Hegel and Nietzsche are going to part company radically very soon in this exposition, but it is important to have in view this way of understanding action as "mine" without our needing to say that some prior "I" caused it by deciding it should happen. On this model, as Hegel notes, we should understand successful action as a continuous and temporally extended, everywhere mutable translation or expression of inner into outer, but not as an isolated and separated determinate inner struggling for expression in imperfect material. Our "original" intentions are just provisional starting points, formulated with incomplete knowledge of circumstances and consequences. We have to understand the end and the reason for pursuing it as both constantly transformed, such that what I end up with, what I actually did, counts fully as my intention realized or expressed.

Thus, if I start out to write a poem, I might find that it does not go as I expected, and think this is because the material resists my execution, my inner poem, and so what I get is a "poorly expressed poem." This is a very misleading picture on this account, as misleading as the commanding will of BGE 19. The poem is a perfect expression of what your intention turned out to be. To ask for a better poem is to ask for another one, for the formation and execution of another intention. If the poem failed: everything has failed. It, the expression of what has turned out to be the intended poem, just turned out to be a bad poem: not a bad expression of a good poem. As Nietzsche keeps insisting, our egos are wedded to the latter account; but the former correctly expresses what happened.

Now, philosophically, a great deal more needs to be said before this understanding of "the doer in the deed" could be defended. The anti-Cartesian and broadly anti-Christian account asks for something quite unusual. These passages in Hegel and Nietzsche seem to be asking us to relocate our attention when trying to understand an action, render a deed intelligible, from attention to a prior event or mental state (the formation of and commitment to an intention, whether a maxim, or desire-plus-belief, etc.) to "what lies deeper in the deed itself" and is expressed in it, where "deeper" does not mean already there, hidden in the depths, but not yet fully formed and revealed. Rather, the interpretive task focuses on a continuing expression or translation of the subject into the actuality of the deed, and conversely our translation back into "who the person is." As Hegel put it in his clearest expression of this anti-intentionalist position: "Ethical self-consciousness now learns from its deed the developed nature of what it actually did" (Hegel 1977: §469 [p. 283]).

This can all sound counter-intuitive because it seems obvious that the final deed may not express the agent simply because some contingency intervened and prevented the full realization, thus reinstituting a "separation" between the subject in itself and the deed that actually resulted, shaped as it so often is by external circumstances and events. Or we easily accept that if someone did something unknowingly and innocently, he cannot be said to be properly "in" the deed, even though the deed came about because of him and no one else, as when someone genuinely does not know that he is revealing a secret, and does so, but, we want to say, guiltlessly.

The issues are quite complicated and cannot be pursued here. The central question is: should not Nietzsche be aware that, by eliminating as nonsensical the idea that appears to be a necessary condition for a deed being a deed – a subject’s individual causal responsibility for the deed occurring – he has eliminated any way of properly understanding the notion of responsibility and a place for criticism of an agent? If strength is not at all "free" to be weak, is not free to express that strength in any way other than by "a desire to overcome, a desire to throw down, a desire to become master, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs," in what "responsibility sense" is the agent in the deed if not "causally" (GM I. 13)? A plant's life-cycle might be said to be "expressed" in its various stages, but, as we have seen, Nietzsche rejects such a reductionist reading; he shows no indication of wanting to eliminate his fundamental concept, activity.

Now it is true that sometimes Nietzsche seems content with a kind of typological determinism. People just belong to some type or other, whether biological or socially formed, and some just are weak, base, vengeful, and ugly; others are strong, noble, generous, and beautiful (cf. BGE 265). There is no way to justify these distinctions: that is the ("Socratic") trick the former group tries to play on the latter. The whole point is that you have to be a member of the latter group to appreciate the distinction. Nietzsche’s own evaluations are not so tied to this fixed typology. About the weak he says: "Human history would be altogether too stupid a thing without the spirit that the impotent have introduced into it" (GM I. 7). Likewise, he certainly seems to be criticizing the nobility by contrast when he says:

"it was on the soil of this essentially dangerous form of human existence, the priestly form, that man first became an interesting animal, that only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire depth and become evil – and these are the two basic respects in which man has hitherto been superior to other beasts! (GM I. 6)

Such passages suggest a radical flexibility and indeterminateness in the normative value of such distinctions, an unpredictability in what they "turn out" to mean, as if Nietzsche thinks that such oppositions look one way in one context and another in another context. That raises the question of how this variation works, how this interpretive struggle is to be understood, and what its relation might be to the psychological struggle.

Nietzsche has a great many things to say about this hermeneutical warfare, but we should note that his remarks confirm attributing the "non-isolatability" thesis to him, as noted above, and the second "success" condition for actions, as understood on this alternate model. Not only is the determinate meaning of a subject’s intention not a matter of inner perception and sincerity but rather a function in some way of a certain social context, but also what "is going on" in such a context is itself constantly contested among the participants. As he put it in the famous passage quoted earlier, "all events in the organic world are a subduing, a becoming master, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous 'meaning' and 'purpose' are necessarily obscured or even obliterated" (GM II. 12).

He makes the same sort of point about the variability and contestability of the various understandings of punishment (GM II. 14) and notes that even the noble man needs
the appropriate enemies if his actions are to have the meaning he sees expressed in them (GM I. 10). In such cases, "the subject" is not absent; he is "out there" in his deeds, but the deeds are "out there" too, multiply interpretable. These interpretations are themselves already expressions of various types that cannot be isolated from historical time and from the contestations of their own age. They are not existential "projections," motivated by some sort of self-interest or self-aggrandizement. And we already have good reason to be cautious of interpreters who think that there must be something appealed to, underlying Nietzsche's account, as a kind of criterion: "life" and/or "the will to power," to cite the most frequent candidates. If life must also turn against itself to be life, and if we don't know what really counts as having established power, or even what power is, we have only returned again to a social struggle about the meaning of deeds. In other words, if the most important deed is the legislation of values, what actually is legislated cannot be fixed by the noble man's strength of resolve alone, or guaranteed by his "pathos of distance." There is a difference between "actually" legislating values, that is, succeeding in doing so, and, on the other hand, engaging in a fantasy of self- and value-creation.

It is at this point that the similarities between Nietzsche and Hegel end. In a sense one can read Nietzsche's infrequent, published references to the "will to power" as attempts to dramatize the simple claim that there is no best, appropriate, finally reconciling resolution to these sorts of conflicts. "There is" only the conflict at once potentially tragic and ennobling, and potentially dispiriting, a source of nihilistic despair. Hegel of course claims that such conflicts have an inherent "logic," that a developmental story can be told, say, in the Phenomenology of Spirit, from the conflict between Antigone and Creon, to the partial overcoming of morality in forgiveness, and that the heart of that story is the ever more successful realization of freedom as a kind of rational agency. There is no corresponding logic or teleology in Nietzsche; just the opposite.

I want to conclude by returning to the intuitive difficulties created by GM I. 13, especially about responsibility. We should try to understand Nietzsche's own response to the responsibility question—how, on his picture of how an agent is wholly in the deed, not separate from it, such reactions as regret, sorrow about what one did, and so forth, might be understood.

Not surprisingly, given their similarities on so many issues, Nietzsche turns to Spinoza to make his point, and his remarks in GM II. 15 are perfectly consistent with, and I think confirm, the position attributed to him above. He muses that Spinoza might one afternoon have asked himself, given that there is no "free will" or separate subject underlying the deed in Spinoza's own system, what could remain in that system of the morsus conscientiae, the sting of conscience. This is the very intuitive or commonsense question I posed above. Nietzsche first appeals to Spinoza by making his own attempt at a "becoming master" as a "new interpretation" of Spinoza, invoking essentially Nietzschean language (especially "innocence"), and announcing: "The world, for Spinoza, had returned to that state of innocence in which it had lain before the invention of the bad conscience." But then he notes that Spinoza reinvented this morsus conscientiae in Ethics III. 18. 1.

"The opposite of gaudium," he finally said to himself — "a sadness accompanied by the recollection of a past event that flouted all of our expectations." [ ] Mischief-makers overtaken by punishments have for thousands of years felt in respect of their "transgressions" just as Spinoza did: "here something has unexpectedly gone wrong," not: "I ought not to have done that." (GM II. 15)

So disappointment that I was not who I thought I was, sadness at what was expressed "in" the deed, replaces guilt, or the sort of guilt which depends on the claim that I could have done otherwise. Indeed, it is a kind of regret that depends on my not really having had the option to do otherwise; or at least that counter-factual option, on this view, is like considering the possibility that I might not have been me, a fanciful and largely irrelevant speculation, a mere thought experiment.

None of this settles the many other questions raised by Nietzsche's position. What are the conditions necessary for rightly identifying what it was that I did? What role do the judgments of others properly play in that assessment? Deeds, even understood as expressions, rather than caused results, conflict, express incompatible—if also provisional and changing—purposes. How do we, as non-participants, understand or evaluate such conflicts? Are not our interpretations the expressions of current contestations, and if so what would count as success, as prevailing now? How much of "who I am" can be said to be expressed in the deed? How might I distinguish important "discoveries" about myself that I had not known and would have denied, from trivial or irrelevant revelations? If whatever it is that is expressed in such deeds is not a stable core or substantial self, neither as an individual soul nor as a substantial type, what could form the basis of the temporal story that would link these manifestations and transformations?

These are difficult questions, but, I have tried to show, they are the right sort of questions raised by Nietzsche's remarks in GM I. 13, and they are very different from questions about metaphysical forces, naturalized psychologies, instinct theories, or existential, groundless choices, leaps into the abyss. Whether Nietzsche has good answers to such important questions is another story.

See also 16 "Phenomenology and Science in Nietzsche"; 17 "Naturalism and Nietzsche's Moral Psychology"; 21 "Nietzsche and Ethics"; 24 "Nietzsche contra Liberalism on Freedom"

Notes

1 Although Nietzsche does not treat "morality" as a univocal term and certainly not as a phenomenon with a single necessary essence, it is clear that he has a standard form of nineteenth-century Christian morality often in his sights. See Guess 1999: 171.

2 That is, deciding what to do, and then deciding to act. See Williams 1994: 242. John Searle (2001) multiplies matters even more, adding our persistence in the deed once undertaken.

3 There are, of course, several other genealogical origins of morality sketched in GM: suffering itself seems inevitably to require a compensatory mechanism; there is the feeling of guilt
traced back to debt: the internalization of aggression, turning it towards oneself, and so on. But all of these, I would argue, raise the same problem, the compatibility of their "psychological accounts" with GM I. 13.

4 See Williams’s remark: “With Nietzsche [...] the resistance to the continuation of philosophy by ordinary means is built into the text, which is booby-trapped, not only against recovering theory from it, but in many cases, against any systematic exegesis that assimilates it to theory” (1994: 242).

Editions of Nietzsche Used


References


