

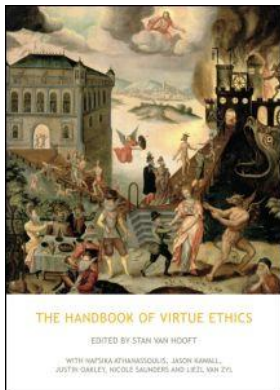
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The Handbook of Virtue Ethics

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Nietzsche's virtue ethics

Christine Swanton

For many, to speak of Nietzsche's virtue ethics is an oxymoron. Even now, Nietzsche is seen as an egoist in the worst sense, indeed an immoralist. Furthermore, even if he can be understood as having some sort of ethics it cannot be understood as an ethics within an objectivist tradition, where virtue ethics is characteristically seen as belonging. Yet not only are Nietzsche's texts replete with virtue and vice concepts, but he seems to be a moral reformer, arguing that traditional conceptions of virtue legitimized by the "slave revolt" in morals should be overturned. In that (Christian) revolt not only, for example, is cowardly fear transformed into the virtue of humility, the understanding of humility as a virtue is itself skewed. It is now a form of self-abasement as opposed to a sense of one's place in the world that is not tainted by forms of overweening pride.¹ For Nietzsche there should be a "revaluation of values" where genuine virtue expresses life affirmation and strength as opposed to weakness and life denial.²

There are two ways of reconciling this apparent tension. The first is to say that the "revaluation of values" is indeed a revaluation, but one that constitutes a deeply unattractive immoralist egoism. The second is to argue that Nietzsche's new way of thinking about ethics should be taken seriously, because his self-styled "egoism" is a *virtuous* form of egoism. This is the "egoism" of what he calls the "morality of the mature individual", an "egoism" that is opposed both to immature "contemptible" and "worthless" kinds of egoism, and to weak forms of self-sacrificing altruism. To read Nietzsche as a virtue ethicist is to adopt the second of these options.

To justify this reading we need to understand just what kind of egoism Nietzsche favours and what kind of altruism he rejects. This requires an understanding of Nietzsche's depth psychology, essential to his account of the virtues of the "virtuous egoist"³ by contrast with the correlative vices of the immature egoist and the self-sacrificing altruist. Defending this reading of Nietzsche is not yet to defend a reading of Nietzsche as a virtue ethicist. The next section interprets Nietzsche as a "virtuous egoist" while the following two take on the additional task of understanding his ethical views as a form of virtue

ethics. The remainder of the chapter has the dual purpose of overcoming objections to a virtue-ethical reading of Nietzsche and providing more content to that reading. These problems are:

- (a) Nietzsche's apparent relativism and perspectivism
- (b) Nietzsche's alleged communitarianism.

VIRTUOUS EGOISM: THE EGOISM OF THE "MATURE INDIVIDUAL"

There is no doubt that Nietzsche is both a self-styled egoist and explicitly rejects altruism. He says, for example:

we shall restore to men their goodwill towards the actions decried as egoistic and restore to these actions their *value* – *we shall deprive them of their bad conscience!*
(D: book 2 sect. 148, 93)

“Not to seek one's own advantage” – that is merely the moral fig leaf for quite a different physiological state of affairs: “I no longer know how to *find* my own advantage”. Disintegration of the instincts! Man is finished when he becomes altruistic.
(TI: sect. 36, 536)

Not knowing how to find one's advantage, or “losing one's way” in action valorized as altruistic is illustrated in many ways in Nietzsche. Consider, for example, a weak form of helpfulness: “rarely does our eye behold anything that does not require us to drop our own preoccupation instantly to help. I know, there are a hundred decent and praiseworthy ways of losing *my own way*, and they are truly highly ‘moral!’” (GS: book 4 sect. 338, 270).

Notice that Nietzsche wants us to restore the value of actions “*decried*” as egoistic. This leaves open the possibility that the folk's conception of egoism and the association of “egoism” so conceived with immoralism are faulty. Similarly, the folk's conception of altruism and the association of “altruism” so conceived with the morally good may also be flawed. That there are these faulty linkages is exactly Nietzsche's view. What are they? The folk conception of egoism is one where egoistic actions are selfish actions, and selfish actions are considered to be ones where the interests of the self are placed ahead of the interests of others, and are thereby immoral. There is no distinction between healthy and unhealthy “selfishness”; a distinction that Nietzsche (along with later psychologists such as Abraham Maslow [1968]) would make. The folk conception of altruism, by contrast, is one where altruistic actions are unselfish actions, and unselfish actions are those where one places others ahead of oneself. Since selfishness is seen as a vice and unselfishness a virtue, altruistic actions are automatically thought “highly moral”.

Nietzsche severs the links between egoism and immorality and altruism and morality in the following way. First he distinguishes between strong and weak forms of selfishness and strong and weak forms of selflessness. Second he provides a depth analysis of those distinctions overturning superficial understandings of the notions of selfishness and selflessness. Strong selflessness manifested in the “overflowing” virtues of, for example, generosity is in effect a kind of (healthy) selfishness; whereas weak selflessness, manifesting a form of

self-contempt, can be a kind of egocentricity. The following passage draws attention to the former phenomenon:

This is your thirst: to become sacrifices and gifts yourselves: and that is why you thirst to pile up all the riches in your soul. Insatiably your soul strives for treasures and gems, because your virtue is insatiable in wanting to give. You force all things to and into yourself that they may flow back out of your well as the gifts of your love ... whole and holy I call this selfishness.

This “healthy selfishness” is contrasted with the “sick selfishness” of the resentment-filled:

There is also another selfishness, an all-too-poor and hungry one that always wants to steal – the selfishness of the sick: sick selfishness. With the eyes of the thief it looks at everything splendid; with the greed of hunger it sizes up those who have much to eat; and always it sneaks around the table of those who give.

(Z: part 1, “On the Gift Giving Virtue”, 186–7)

The second phenomenon – the fundamental egocentricity of the altruistic pitying individual – is highlighted in the following passage:

An accident that happens to another offends us: it would make us aware of our impotence, and perhaps of our cowardice, if we did not go to assist him. Or it brings with it in itself a diminution of our honour in the eyes of others or in our own eyes. Or an accident and suffering incurred by another constitutes a signpost to some danger to us; and it can have a painful effect upon us simply as a token of human vulnerability and fragility in general. We repel this kind of pain and offence and requite it through an act of pity; it may contain a subtle self-defence or even a piece of revenge. That at bottom we are thinking very strongly of ourselves can be divined from the decision we arrive at in every case in which we *can* avoid the sight of the person suffering, perishing or complaining: we decide *not* to do so if we can present ourselves as the more powerful and as a helper, if we are certain of applause, if we want to feel how fortunate we are in contrast, or hope that the sight will relieve our boredom.

(D: book 2, sect. 133, 84)

The insight that much “selflessness” manifests a kind of egocentricity anticipates later depth psychology such as that of Karen Horney (1970)⁴ and later work on defective forms of altruism. Indeed, Nietzsche can be seen as a precursor of the growing interest in “pathological” and “maladaptive” altruism (Oakley *et al.* 2012). I do not have space to summarize this recent work and show links to Nietzsche’s claims, but it is now widely believed that there are many types of pathological altruism, both psychotic and non-psychotic, and associated with pathological forms of (some of) the traits identified in the Five-Factor Model of personality (Goldberg 1993), notably agreeableness.⁵

It may be thought puzzling that rather than decry altruism Nietzsche does not reconfigure how it should be understood. However, for Nietzsche, the baneful effects of self-sacrificing Christian morality has caused “altruism” to be particularly associated with an unhealthy kind of selflessness. Accordingly, he wishes to destroy the link between altruism

and virtue. This may be misleading, but the crucial move is undermining the virtually conceptual connections between egoism and immorality and altruism and morality. Nowhere is this clearer than in the following passage:

Let us for the time being agree that benevolence and beneficence are constituents of the good man; only let us add: “presupposing that he is first benevolently and beneficently inclined *towards himself!*” For without this – if he flees from himself, hates himself, does harm to himself – he is certainly not a good man. For in this case all he is doing is rescuing himself from himself *in others* ... to flee from the ego, and to hate it, and to live in others and for others – that has hitherto, with as much thoughtlessness as self-confidence, been called “*unegoistic*” and consequently “*good*”.
(D: book 5, sect. 516, 518)

It is one thing to sever the necessary linkage between altruism and virtue, and egoism and vice; it is quite another to provide a virtue ethics of egoism. The bare bones of a systematic positive view are found in Nietzsche’s discussion of the “morality of the mature individual”:

To make of oneself a complete *person*, and in all that one does to have in view the *highest good* of this person – that gets us further than those pity filled agitations and actions for the sake of others. We all of us to be sure, still suffer from the all-too-little regard paid to the personal in us, it has been badly cultivated – let us admit to ourselves that our minds have, rather, been drawn forcibly away from it and offered as a sacrifice to the state, to science, to those in need, as though what would be sacrificed was in any case what was bad. Even now let us work for our fellow men, but only to the extent that we discover our own highest advantage in this work: no more, no less. All that remains is what it is one understands by *one’s advantage*; precisely the immature, undeveloped, crude individual will understand it most crudely.⁶

The virtue ethics of virtuous egoism is in short the “morality of the mature individual”. First it is a morality contrasted with the “morality” of inferior states of egoism. A mature individual is one whose actions are “no longer directed to the procurement of momentary wellbeing”. In various phases of “maturation” he becomes “attuned to utility and purpose” without subordinating his ends to those of some whole. This morality does not preclude “working for one’s fellow men”; indeed, the mature individual “lives and acts as a collective-individual”.⁷ The creativity of the mature individual, whether in architecture, music, the trades, philosophy, doctoring or education, will quite routinely serve the interest of one’s fellows whether directly or indirectly. He also becomes socialized in developing a sense of honour: he “accords others respect and wants them to accord respect to him” (*ibid.*). Second, it is a morality contrasted with the morality of “sacrifice”. In cultivating the personal the mature individual acts in accordance with his “*own standard* with regard to men and things”. As we have seen, this standard is not that of the immature egoist: the “personal” is not construed in a way that is contemptible, worthless, shallow, crude, or pleasure driven.

The next section discusses types of immature egoism and altruism in greater depth through an analysis of their depth psychology. To grasp the essential connection between that psychology and Nietzsche's conception of virtue and vice it is necessary to consider the role of Nietzsche's notion of "will to power". Once this is done, we are able to understand Nietzsche as a virtue ethicist.

VIRTUE ETHICS AND WILL TO POWER

I have argued elsewhere (Swanton 2013) that in order for a moral theory to count as a virtue ethics virtue and vice notions must play a sufficiently central role in that theory. Of course there is room for debate at the margins about how central such notions should be, and much of that debate raises interesting issues of interpretation of such texts as those of Kant and Confucius. But Nietzsche, it may be argued, does not even come close to being a virtue ethicist, since "will to power" is central to his philosophy, and that is not a virtue (or vice) concept at all, but at best a psychological value which Nietzsche thinks should be maximized. I argue that such a reading fails to take seriously the idea of what I have called distorted will to power (Swanton 2005). Will to power is not in and of itself a "value": rather what is of value is the "will to power" of strong life-affirming individuals: those who do not suffer the manifold afflictions of the "ascetic ideal" (GM: Third Essay), are not filled with resentment, or exhibit the pleasure-seeking vices of mediocrity. Unsurprisingly the situation is more complex than this analysis would suggest since Nietzsche does see value in less than ideal states that are stepping stones to greater things, but I will not have space to discuss these complexities.

If what has value is undistorted will to power, and if that is essentially an *aretic* (excellence-related) notion, then it turns out that what is central in Nietzsche's ethics is not bare will to power understood as a will to a single thing, power, but the virtue and vice concepts themselves. For on this view what counts as undistorted is cashed out and explained by a normative depth psychological analysis of virtue and vice, and the various complex forms of motivation which they express. Undistorted will to power plays the same role in Nietzsche's conception of virtue as *phronēsis* plays in Aristotle's. Understanding and defending this idea will not only enable us to understand the virtues of the mature individual, the "virtuous egoist", but also enable us to see how Nietzsche can be regarded as a virtue ethicist.

What is will to power and what is it for will to power to be distorted or undistorted? Will to power as a genus must be distinguished from its species. As a genus, it is a highly general idea, applicable to all life forms:

A living thing desires above all to vent its strength – life as such is will to power
... (BGE: sect. 13, 44)

it will want to grow, expand, draw to itself, gain ascendancy – not out of any morality or immorality but because it *lives*, and because life *is* will to power.
(BGE: sect. 259, 194)

This need to “vent one’s strength” and expand is connected essentially with the nature of notably human beings as creatures who are active, growing and developing, rather than mere receptacles of pleasure or welfare.

First it should be noted that will to power admits of numerous species: it is not a will to a single thing, power, but a “will” to all kinds of things. Nietzsche speaks, for example, of the will to question, the will to truth, to justice, to memory, to system and, in a passage entitled “*Criticism of Modernity*”, even a “will to tradition, to authority, to centuries-long responsibility” (TI: sect. 9, 39). Second, some forms of the will to truth or the will to justice, for example, are distorted, since they are expressive of resentment, punitive cruelty or the ascetic ideal. Not all “wills” are lauded as expressive of a healthy drive for power. Third, the “will” should not be thought of as a mental entity which might be said to be free or unfree. Rather “will to power” is the most highly general and abstract description of our various motivational drives which are, at bottom, for Nietzsche, drives to grow or expand.

To understand the nature of such drives Nietzsche makes it clear that we need to investigate our depths. “For the longest time”, Nietzsche claims, “conscious thought was considered thought itself. Only now does the truth dawn on us that by far the greatest part of our spirit’s activity remains unconscious and unfelt” (GS: book 4, sect. 333, 262). This feature of human nature for Nietzsche has normative implications. For him, what has “decisive value” in action lies in its depths rather than in its surface intention (BGE: sect. 32, 63). As a result, for Nietzsche, psychology should be reinstated as the “queen of the sciences” (BGE: sect. 23, 54) if moral philosophy is to venture into the depths and escape the superficial “timidities” of traditional moral theorizing (BGE: sect. 23, 53). To understand the nature of the vices of the immature egoist and of the self-sacrificing altruist we have to uncover the nature of sickness itself. We cannot rest content with a superficial assessment of the apparently laudable intentions of one who just wants to seek truth, punish the wrongdoer, pity the suffering. We have to uncover the nature of distorted “will to power”: to investigate the sicknesses that animate and are expressed by these apparently innocent intentions. For according to Nietzsche, “man is more sick, more uncertain, more mutable, less defined, than any other animal ... he is *the sick animal*”; he “is the most chronically and deeply sick of all sick animals” (GM: First Essay, sect. 12, 28). Because of this, insights into human nature (as with Freud) are best achieved for Nietzsche through investigation into a variety of sicknesses, rather than by a detailed account of a perfected human being with a definite *telos*. Such an account is replaced by a philosophy for the “convalescent”, with emphasis on “overcoming”. As Nietzsche claims: “And life itself confided this secret to me ... ‘I am *that which must always overcome itself*. I must be struggle and a becoming and an end and an opposition of ends”, where I proceed on “*crooked paths*” (Z: part 2, 227).

In later psychoanalytic treatments the imperilled status of the human animal is largely laid at the door of vicissitudes endured in childhood, whereas in Nietzsche’s more holistic treatment, the “life denying” culture of Christianity is responsible for the malaise of the current “European” condition. For Nietzsche cultural sickness causes individual sickness, which in turn reinforces cultural sickness. Our expressions of a need to “vent our strength”, expand, incorporate and so on, are interpreted through, and have meaning within, our cultural practices and language.

What are the sicknesses which beset the “European” human of Nietzsche’s and no doubt our own times? Of paramount importance is what Nietzsche calls in *Beyond Good and Evil* the “Christian neurosis”. This is basically a form of self-hate, later described by Adler (1918,

1932) as the inferiority complex. Here a deep sense of impotence causes psychic conflict. More particularly, conflict occurs as a result of the gap between the self “experienced” at some level as worthless or impotent and the “ego-ideal” (such as living a life worthy of God’s love as opposed to that of a vile sinner). The conflict resulting from this gap demands resolution, many types of which are described by Nietzsche. His accounts anticipate many later taxonomies of neurotic resolutions, for example that of Karen Horney (1970). These include the resentment forming the basis of “slave morality” and the conception of what Nietzsche calls (in GM: Second Essay) the egalitarian conception of justice as “scientific fairness”; what Horney (1970) calls the “self-effacing solution” where one loses oneself through others in “pity filled agitations” characterizing “mutual do-gooding”; the cruel punitivism of those whose sense of justice lacks any kind of mercy or mildness (described in GM: Second Essay); the asceticism of the ascetic ideal where the neurosis takes the form of the “three dangerous dietary prescriptions” of the “religious neurosis”, “solitude, fasting and sexual abstinence” (BGE: sect. 47, 76); and the intellectual form of the “will to truth” and “hyper-objectivity” manifesting as the “will to a system”, a desire for purity and escape from the messiness and plurality of the real world.

The most well-known manifestation of the self-contempt derided by Nietzsche is, as we have seen, self-sacrificing altruism. However, this is not the only form of self-hate, one that characterizes the Christian neurosis; there are also forms of escape from self, criticized by Nietzsche, which are not specifically “Christian”. These are the distortions of will to power constituting crude and shallow forms of egoism which we briefly touch on now.

For Nietzsche, as I have argued elsewhere (2010), cruelty is a prime manifestation of “crude” egoism, a form of immature regression. Fundamentally, it is a perversion of a basic instinct for aggression. In a spectacular failure to act as mature “collective individuals” respecting others, the “nobles” “regress to the innocence of the predator’s conscience”, engaging without qualm in a “horrific succession of murder, arson, violence, and torture, as if it were nothing more than a student prank” (GM: First Essay, sect. 11, 26). The cruelty of the nobles is for Nietzsche a form of malignant aggression as Erich Fromm (1973) describes it – lustful, pleasurable, and having no purpose. The perpetrators experience a “horrific serenity and deep pleasure in all destruction” (GM: First Essay, sect. 11, 26). The root cause of this regression is the unbearable frustration caused by the social constraints; those of “custom, respect, usage, gratitude . . . consideration, self-control, tenderness, fidelity, pride, and friendship” (GM: First Essay, sect. 11, 25). The “tension” produced by these social constraints, and the need for freedom from them, require the invention of a category of the outside world: foreigners towards whom the nobles can behave as “predators on the rampage” (*ibid.*).

The crude egoism of the noble type described in *On the Genealogy of Morals* – he who is not mature enough to be “attuned to utility and purpose” or socialized enough to respect others – may be contrasted with the shallow egoism of the one who is “directed to the procurement of momentary wellbeing”. His will to power is distorted because, rather than grow and develop, he fails to “be the true helmsman of [his] existence”.⁸ There exists for Nietzsche “no more repulsive and desolate creature in the world than the man who has evaded his genius . . . he is wholly exterior, without kernel” (*ibid.*). His core vice is laziness, a laziness which drives his concern only for momentary well-being; only rarely, claims Nietzsche, is the problem modesty: “it is on account of their laziness that men seem like factory products, things of no consequence and unworthy to be associated with

or instructed” (*ibid.*: 127). Interestingly, for Nietzsche, an inability to deal with boredom is at the psychological heart of both crude and shallow egoism. “Lesser natures” cannot deal with boredom; they have to ward it off at any cost. By contrast, for strong creative individuals “boredom is that disagreeable ‘windless calm’” which is endured as a prelude to a “happy voyage” (GS: book 1, sect. 42, 108). A disposition to deal well with boredom is thus one of the many interesting but neglected virtues of the mature individual.

NIETZSCHE’S VIRTUE ETHICS AND PERSPECTIVISM

Virtue ethics is regarded by its proponents as an objectivist moral theory. Ascribing such a theory to Nietzsche faces the difficulty that many strands of his thought suggest a relativist reading. I shall argue in this section that if we distinguish relativism from other positions with which it is sometimes confused, a relativist reading of Nietzsche becomes much less plausible. I argue in this and the next section that:

- (a) Nietzsche’s perspectivism is compatible with a suitable form of objectivism in ethics;
- (b) Nietzsche’s view that virtues are relativized to, for example, types of human being is not to be confused with relativism;
- (c) Nietzsche’s pluralism is not tantamount to relativism.

The most important driver of a relativist reading of Nietzsche is his perspectivism. In a well-known passage in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche makes the following claim: “Perspectival seeing is the only kind of seeing there is, perspectival knowing the *only* kind of knowing and the *more* feelings about a matter which we allow to come to expression, the *more* eyes, different eyes through which we able to view this same matter, the more complete our ‘conception’ of it, our ‘objectivity’ will be” (Third Essay, sect. 12, 98).

Far from this passage suggesting that the perspectival nature of human knowledge is incompatible with objectivity properly understood, it suggests only that it is incompatible with what Nietzsche regards as flawed notions of objectivity: those that demand a removal of all perspective-relative features. Nietzsche’s points are, first, that we necessarily see things from within a perspective, second, that that perspective is limited, and third, greater objectivity is attained if we bring multiple perspectives to bear on an issue. Seeing something from one perspective only is to lack objectivity, even if we are virtuous “life affirming” strong individuals. The mistake is to think that this position (call it Nietzsche’s perspectivism) implies relativism. His position is compatible with the view that some perspectives (e.g. those of “life affirming” strong individuals) are better than others.

Though seeing things through multiple perspectives is necessary for objectivity, Nietzsche does not imply that it is sufficient. For Nietzsche further epistemic virtues are required for objectivity, such as open-mindedness, deploying a critical perspective, and knowledge of facts. Given that considering and integrating the strengths of multiple perspectives are generally social phenomena, we also need the dialogical virtues. We might call such a position, augmenting the bare statement above of Nietzsche’s perspectivism, virtue perspectivism. Unfortunately Nietzsche does not say much about the dialogical virtues necessary for virtue perspectivism, so I shall not investigate them here. However, an important virtue, open-mindedness, which Nietzsche describes in *Daybreak* (Preface,

sect. 5) as leaving doors open, does warrant discussion, since it is confusion between that virtue and closely related epistemic vices which leads to understanding perspectivism as either relativism or scepticism.

A crucial virtue of virtue perspectivism, open-mindedness, is contrasted with two vices, closed-mindedness and excessive open-mindedness. It is forms of excessive open-mindedness which I argue lead to misunderstandings about the nature of Nietzsche's perspectivism. We focus first on the epistemic vice of thinking that any perspective is as good as another, or that we have no right or ability to criticize perspectives. Let us call this vice excessive epistemic humility. Failure to recognize the vice of excessive epistemic humility may cause confusion between Nietzsche's perspectivism and relativism.

Excessive open-mindedness has another form which has become important in understanding Nietzsche's perspectivism. I call this vice epistemic cowardice to distinguish it from excessive epistemic humility as defined above. Berry (2011) argues persuasively that Nietzsche's perspectivism is not a theory of truth. Instead she attributes to him a sceptical reading arguing that his perspectivism is the view that we should suspend judgement for Pyrrhonian reasons: basically that one should not hold convictions since beliefs are perspectival, limited and open to competing opinion. On Nietzsche's view, I believe, a chronic disposition to suspend judgement for the reason that all knowledge is perspectival is to manifest a further vice of excessive open-mindedness, a kind of intellectual cowardice. One can scarcely imagine someone more firm in his beliefs concerning sickness, the roots of vice, and the nature and evil of mediocrity than Nietzsche.

Rather than suggesting a need for a general suspension of belief, the perspectival nature of knowledge demands discipline, intellectual effort, and courage in both forming and revising belief: "To see differently in this way for once, to *want* to see differently, is no small discipline and preparation of the intellect for its future 'objectivity' – the latter understood not as 'disinterested contemplation'" (GM: Third Essay, sect. 12). The nature of this discipline is described in several places: we need to "read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers" (D: Preface, sect. 5). Unlike the Pyrrhonian view that "arrival at judgement calls a halt to enquiry" (Berry 2011: 35), we must avoid the "petrification of opinions" (GS: sect. 296, 238), "leaving doors open" for refinement, revision and further explanation. It is "a sign of high culture" "to accept criticism and contradiction" (GS: sect. 297, 239) and to have "the courage for an *attack* on one's convictions" (GS: Kaufmann's n. 20, 238).

NIETZSCHE'S VIRTUE ETHICS AND PLURALISM

Nietzsche is pluralist in two different senses. First, virtue is not the same for all: he even goes so far as to say that we need "to find the peculiar virtue of each man in the health of his soul" and in "one person . . . this health could look like its opposite in another person" (GS: sect. 120, 177). Call this view virtue pluralism. Second, there can be more than one legitimate perspective. Call this view perspectival pluralism. We consider each of these pluralisms in turn.

Leiter distinguishes what he calls "relationalism": the idea that something may be good for one type of thing but bad for another, from relativism: "the view that judgments are only 'valid' relative to a 'framework' or 'perspective,' so that conflicting judgments can, in

principle, both be true” (2002: 44). There is no question that Nietzsche is a relationalist, but relationalism is of course compatible with objectivism: there may be objective truths that certain things are bad for the higher types, for example. Clearly Nietzsche thought that this is so: living in a climate of mediocrity and sickness is something from which creative types periodically need to escape. This kind of escape (escape *from* the sick) is for Nietzsche quite different from the escape *of* the sick (Z: part 3, “On the Mount of Olives”, 287): a resignatory disgust-filled escape from self and the world. Commensurate with Nietzsche’s idea that what is good for one may be poison to another is a thoroughgoing virtue relationality: virtue pluralism. “The virtues of the common man would perhaps indicate vice and weakness in a philosopher” (BGE: sect. 30, 61). Even where we can speak of virtues such as wisdom, justice, forgetfulness and objectivity (as opposed to perspective-free “hyper-objectivity”) as virtues proper to all, they may be “differentiated” according to whether, for example, one is “convalescent” or fully strong, or whether one is a herd type or a higher type. An important refrain in Nietzsche is that, while we should all self-overcome, we should not necessarily aspire to become equally strong, or directly emulate the higher types. “Do not be virtuous beyond your strength” (Z: part 4, sect. 13, 403) is not a mantra for complacency, clearly, but it is a warning.

What Nietzsche objects to is a pernicious form of universalism or non-relationality of virtue: namely that which leads to the mediocritization of society if such virtue is embraced as the “real virtues” for all types:

On the other hand, the herd-man of Europe today makes himself out to be the only permissible type of man and glorifies their qualities through which he is tame, peaceable and useful to the herd as the real human virtues: namely public spirit, benevolence, consideration, industriousness, moderation, modesty, forbearance, pity. (BGE: sect. 199, 121)

He is not necessarily asserting that none of these are universal virtues *in some form or other*: rather, the perniciousness lies in them being interpreted through the perspective of the herd *as having a single specific form*, and then regarded as universal in that form.

Consider now the idea that there may be a plurality of legitimate perspectives (perspectival pluralism). Such pluralism is compatible with the view that some perspectives are out and out damaging and wrong. That Nietzsche embraces the latter view seems clear:

Against this theologians’ instinct I wage war: I have found its traces everywhere ... This faulty perspective on all things is elevated into a morality, a virtue, a holiness: ... and no *other* perspective is conceded any further value once one’s own has been made sacrosanct with the names of “God”, “redemption” and “eternity”. I have dug up the theologians’ instinct everywhere: it is the most widespread, really *subterranean*, form of falsehood found on earth. (*The Antichrist*: sect. 9, 575–6)

The theological perspective is “faulty” as a normative perspective since it is expressive of “life denial” and distorted will to power, and in general reinforces the mediocrity afflicting society. However, this does not imply that there is only one true perspective through which to view the world. Julian Young argues persuasively that for Nietzsche “there is no

epistemological reason to privilege the everyday mortal-individual perspective over that of the poetic, Dionysian pantheism or vice versa" (J. Young 2006: 110). Perhaps the latter perspective is one which it is appropriate for the higher creative types to inhabit, at least some of the time, or for ordinary folk to inhabit at certain times. For example, though Young claims that, "[i]ntoxication' is no closer to truth than sobriety nor sobriety than intoxication", he also claims that "intoxication is what we *need* when we confront fear of death" (*ibid.*). However, a more mundane point should be made. Since perspectives are limited, we cannot either inhabit the "omniperspective" (a metaphysical fiction) or fully inhabit different cultural, historical, gender, age-related or status-related perspectives seriatim. This is not to say that all such perspectives are equally sound in every respect, but they cannot all be ordered from better to worse. There is, in short, a plurality of adequate but incomplete perspectives given human limitation, and greater objectivity is attained when we make an effort to understand them.

Nietzsche's pluralism seems to make him sceptical about traits of character, a feature incompatible with virtue ethics in orthodox forms. On closer examination we see this is not so. First, his views are motivated by a keen eye for the complexity of ethics and a hatred of oversimplification and excessive abstraction, including overly abstract characterizations of virtue. For him, virtue is highly differentiated or contoured according to "ages, peoples ... great and small individuals" (GS: book 1, sect. 7, 81) and roles (necessitating the study of the "manners of scholars, of businessmen, artists, or artisans") (GS: book 1, sect. 7, 82). A second motivation is his objection to "character" as construed by a society "still dominated by the herd instinct". Here character is understood in terms of a "firm reputation" and as "dependable" to the point that "all change, all re-learning, all self-transformation" is brought into '*ill repute*'" (GS: book 4, sect. 296, 238). None of this is opposed to a virtue ethics which emphasizes the "aspirational" character of virtue (Annas 2011).

NIETZSCHE'S VIRTUE ETHICS AND HIS "COMMUNITARIANISM"

It is often claimed that virtue ethics is individualistic since it has the following structure:

- (VE) The highest value or end is the flourishing of individuals, and from the perspective of those individuals their own flourishing in a life of virtue is their paramount practical concern.

By contrast, it has been claimed that Nietzsche's writings embody "*communitarian thinking*" in the sense that:

- (C) The highest object of [a society's] concern is the flourishing of the community as a whole (J. Young 2006: 1).

Provided this thesis is not confused with other theses, I take this reading to be correct. Most importantly, (C) should not be confused with two other theses, namely:

- (A) The highest value is the common good.

- (B) The interests of any individual should be subordinated to the interests of society as a whole.

Nietzsche is explicitly opposed to reducing the idea of the flourishing of society as a whole to any idea of the “common good”, claiming that the “expression is a self-contradiction: what can be common has ever but little value” (BGE: sect. 43, 71). As for (B), it is clearly in tension with Nietzsche’s claims that the “morality of the mature individual”, which I have called virtuous egoism, is not a morality of sacrifice to the state or the community in general, but a morality of cultivating the personal within one. Not only is the flourishing of society as a whole not reducible to the common good, but the interests of individuals are not reducible to that of society as a whole. What then does Nietzsche mean by the flourishing of society as a whole? What he means is quite simply the redemption of society from mediocrity; a cultural mediocrity that both reinforces and is reinforced by the mediocrity of society’s members, including that of the herd. Infected as they are with the values and psychology of slave and a mediocre herd morality, the herd provides a toxic environment for the “higher type”. Indeed, Nietzsche defines morality as “herd instinct in the individual” (GS: sect. 116, 175).

Let us return then to the idea that the “individualism” of virtue ethics is antithetical to the “communitarian” strand in Nietzsche’s thought identified by Young. It should be appreciated that not all virtue ethics need have the structure of (VE). Virtue ethics can come in many types: for example eudaimonistic, Humean, Confucian and Nietzschean. If indeed mediocrity (or its absence) in society is expressed through the mediocrity (or otherwise) of its members, and if that mediocrity is understood in terms of vices (of life denial, sickness and weakness, themselves manifesting the various distortions of “will to power”), while the absence of mediocrity is understood through virtues (of life affirmation, strength and health), then virtue and vice notions will indeed be at the heart of Nietzsche’s philosophy. An ethics subscribing to (C) can indeed be a virtue ethics.

CONCLUSION

Given the understanding of virtue ethics as a view of ethics in which virtue concepts are central, there is, I argue, a heavy presumption in favour of reading Nietzsche as a virtue ethicist. However, it may appear that this presumption is overturned by several factors: his apparent immoralism given his doctrine of will to power, his valorizing of egoism, his perspectivism and apparent relativism, and a pluralism and even communitarianism at odds with orthodox virtue ethics. In this chapter I have shown that none of these features defeat the view that Nietzsche should be read as a virtue ethicist.

NOTES

1. Nietzsche cites the following further examples: “submission to those one hates” is transformed into “obedience”; “the inevitability of his being made to wait” is understood as “patience”, “that is, as virtue *as such*”; “the inability to take revenge is called the refusal to take revenge, perhaps even forgiveness” (*On the Genealogy of Morals*: 31); conditions of poverty, chastity and lowliness are dignified by their association with virtues of abstemiousness and self-abnegation: the virtuous maintenance of a poverty-stricken state, chastity as a form of self denial, humility as self-abasement (*ibid.*: 88).

2. In what follows references to some of Nietzsche's texts are abbreviated as follows: D (*Daybreak*), BGE (*Beyond Good and Evil*), GM (*On the Genealogy of Morals*), GS (*The Gay Science*), TI (*Twilight of the Idols*), Z (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).
3. The term "virtuous egoist" was deployed originally by Smith (2006) to describe Ayn Rand's normative ethics. I am not here making any comparisons between Nietzsche's virtue ethics and that of Rand, but see further my 2011.
4. Distinguishing the depth phenomenon of egocentricity from egoism as more superficially and commonly understood, Karen Horney says the following: "the pride system removes the neurotic from others by making him egocentric. To avoid misunderstandings: by egocentricity I do not mean selfishness or egotism in the sense of considering merely one's advantage. The neurotic may be callously selfish or too unselfish ... But he is always egocentric in the sense of being wrapped up in himself" (1970: 292). This distinction is presupposed in Nietzsche's discussion of pity quoted above.
5. Pathological altruism in general "refers to the habitual, maladaptive and/or compulsive pursuit of the welfare of others" (Turvey 2012: 178). It is analysed by Turvey as a cognitive distortion involving the defence mechanisms of a mind in conflict with itself that "protects or defends against the full awareness of emotionally painful or otherwise harmful realities" (*ibid.*: 180). This dynamic depth psychological analysis was anticipated by Nietzsche in his discussions of, e.g., resentment, pity and the "religious neurosis". Turvey presents a "motivational typology" of forms of altruism, all of which can display pathological forms, both psychotic and non-psychotic. (Masochistic and malignant altruism are defined as maladaptive or harmful.) These are protective (where the individual "voluntarily places herself directly in harm's way for the explicit benefit of others out of some form of deep personal commitment" (*ibid.*: 182); defensive (involving "pleasure or satisfaction from the success, pleasure, and/or welfare of others") (*ibid.*: 185); masochistic (referring to a "maladaptive need to suffer or be the victim") (*ibid.*: 188); and malignant (referring to "pleasure or satisfaction gained from controlling or punishing others with self-sacrificing acts" (*ibid.*: 190). This latter form is "intended to service feelings of impotence or punish others for real or perceived wrongs that have been suffered" (*ibid.*). These depth motivations are frequent refrains in Nietzsche, particularly in *Genealogy of Morals*.
6. *Human, All Too Human*, "On the History of the Moral Sensations", "Morality of the mature individual", sect. 95, 50–51.
7. *Human, All Too Human*, "On the History of the Moral Sensations", "The three phases of morality hitherto", sect. 94, 50.
8. *Untimely Meditations*, "Schopenhauer as Educator", 128.