Making Sense of Nietzsche’s “Truths”: Slavery, Misogyny and Aristocracy

Nietzsche begins the final chapter of _Beyond Good and Evil_, entitled “What is Noble,” by offering a morally unsavory account of noble virtues. It appears that this set of views is intended to replace the decaying values he had relentlessly criticized, rooted as they were in Christianity and the ascetic ideal. The conditions for greatness are captured in societies of order and rank, where humans are not seen as equals, but are hierarchized based on their strength, power and nobility of soul. Three components of this structure are particularly startling to modern ears: the advocacy of slavery, the denigration of women and the blatant manipulation of the “common” man as a means to the ends of the nobility. As to the first of these, slavery, there are many places where Nietzsche talks about it, often in an indifferent, casual way, perhaps lamenting the loss of this tradition after antiquity (though its practice has never been completely eradicated), and usually recommending it as a positive feature of flourishing culture (See BGE 188, 239, 242, 257, 258).

Nietzsche’s views about women are equally as appalling and more explicit; often he relegates women immediately to the slave class, with no hope for anything more. There are

1 Nietzsche succinctly characterizes this vision in the form of an aristocratic caste system as follows: “Every enhancement of the type ‘man’ has so far been the work of an aristocratic society – and it will be so again and again – a society that believes in the long ladder of an order of rank and differences in value between man and man, and that needs slavery in some sense or other. Without that pathos of distance which grows out of the ingrained difference between strata – when the ruling caste constantly looks afar and looks down upon subjects and instruments and just as constantly practices obedience and command, keeping down and keeping at a distance – that other, more mysterious pathos could not have grown up either – the craving for an ever new widening of distances within the soul itself, the development of ever higher, rarer, more remote, further-stretching, more comprehensive states – in brief, simply the enhancement of the type ‘man,’ the continual ‘self-overcoming of man,’ to use a moral formula in a supra-moral sense” (BGE, 257). Abbreviations to Nietzsche’s work are as follows: _The Gay Science_ (GS), _Thus Spoke Zarathustra_ (Z), _Beyond Good and Evil_ (BGE), _Genealogy of Morals_ (GM), _The Twilight of the Idols_ (TI), _The Antichrist_ (A), _The Will to Power_ (WP). All references are to Walter Kaufmann translations (listed in the Bibliography) and refer to aphorism rather than page number. I remove the paragraph breaks Kaufmann adds in many aphorisms that aren’t there in the original German.

2 Nietzsche variously states, “When a woman has scholarly inclinations there is usually something wrong with her sexually” (BGE, 144); “A man […] must always think about woman as Orientals do: he must conceive of woman as a possession, as property that can be locked, as something predestined for service and achieving her perfection in that” (BGE, 238); and somehow he manages to “top” the previous two in a later passage, saying that “woman must
moments in Nietzsche’s texts (e.g. BGE, Preface and 86; Z, The Dancing Song) when he shows insight that anticipates contemporary feminist themes, yet more often than not, his discussions concerning women betray misogyny, personal ressentiment and ultimately ignorance.

The last aspect of the system of aristocracy, human manipulation, is in some ways slightly less reprehensible, but only in light of the heinousness of the previous two points of focus. A “good and healthy aristocracy” is one that is willing to make “the sacrifice of untold human beings who, for its sake [i.e. for the sake of the aristocracy], must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings, to slaves, to instruments” (BGE, 258). Nietzsche tries to justify this type of manipulation by saying that exploitation is a part of life. Any living organism will necessarily exploit other organisms just by struggling to survive and thus a caste system would only be another manifestation of this will to life (BGE, 259).

Nietzsche’s account of aristocracy gives rise to a host of interpretive difficulties. Most of his late work is predominantly critical (e.g. The Gay Science Book V, GM, TI, A); in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, we get the best statement of his general account of values; and in Beyond Good and Evil he provides a more specific version of this set of values in his talk of nobility. The latter comes as something of a surprise with respect to the rest of his work for two reasons. For one, it just doesn’t seem to cohere with his others texts. The tone and style are different – it is very heavy-handed and commanding. The content of his message also appears to go against the grain

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3 See, e.g. Oliver 1998 and Bergoffen 1998 (and others in Oliver and Pearsall 1998).
4 Clark 1998 tries to show that BGE Part VII (where some of the worst misogynistic remarks are made) was largely a rhetorical ploy intended to highlight both Nietzsche’s own commitment to honesty and his contemporaries’ misguided understanding of the “Eternal Feminine.” This may well be part of the story; but ultimately my interpretation runs counter to this, due to our different understanding of Nietzsche’s use of truth.
5 Nietzsche also provides a specific example for how members of the nobility (“we free spirits”) can use religion, an otherwise regrettable practice, to exploit the masses: “this philosopher will make use of religions for his project of cultivation and education, [...] religion is one more means for overcoming resistances, for the ability to rule” (BGE, 61). In this case, religion is used for its controlling and subduing effects on the masses, the very things Nietzsche never tires of criticizing in other contexts.
of the rest of his thought – isn’t value supposed to be self-created out of child-like innocence, and not gained only through the subjugation of others? What does the enslavement of the rabble even have to do with the creation of values at all?

The second startling aspect of this part of Nietzsche’s writing is simply the fact that Nietzsche would actually prescribe such cruelty. It is true that it only seems cruel through the lens of our modern, moralistic eyes and if Nietzsche is right about what he says concerning suffering – that it is an almost necessary pre-condition for human greatness – then inflicting pain upon the lower classes through slavery and manipulation could be a positive thing. Yet Nietzsche does not advocate enslavement for the sake of the masses, to enable them to achieve greatness, but only for the benefit of the noble. If Nietzsche is actually prescribing this as a value theory, then he runs into irresolvable problems. How can one possibly “self-create” value, if it is handed down from Nietzsche? What kind of “free spirits” depend on the slave class for their own values? My goal here is to resolve these interpretive dilemmas.

I. Will to Truth, Absolutes, Value-Creation

Given Nietzsche’s critique of morality and philosophy generally, it is difficult to see how he could posit a systematic value theory and understand it to have normative force. The ascetic ideal, which is at the heart of most systems of morality that Nietzsche criticizes, is not merely a set of particular moral virtues associated with the practice of asceticism (denial of life, the body, pleasure, etc.); it is also the will to truth. This means that denying ascetic virtues and replacing them with new values is not enough for Nietzsche (although this is surely part of the story). A revaluation of all values involves challenging the whole moral framework through which traditional values make sense. This includes the assumptions that moral truth is objective, that it
can be expressed as a universal, normative theory and that its propositions can be classified in a binary dichotomy, whether this be between good and evil, true and false or both.

If Nietzsche is indeed against the ascetic ideal in its manifestation as will to truth, then he cannot be committed to holding a theory of truth, and this includes moral truth. Perhaps this claim is dated, since what Nietzsche really wanted to argue against was theories of absolute truth. Very few contemporary philosophers subscribe to a view of absolute truth, but almost all are comfortable adhering to theories that maintain a weakened sense of objectivity, that basically “get things right.” This mindset is especially true in contemporary moral philosophy, where nobody wishes to be called a “relativist” or a “nihilist.” However, it is just this frame of mind that Nietzsche would never subscribe to. Ironically, in desperately trying to avoid nihilism by holding on to whatever shred of objectivity they can, the modern philosophers Nietzsche critiques decay ever further toward nothingness, since there is no “objectivity” to be had. Likewise, their theories appear ever more relativistic as they are based upon empty concepts, and probably just reflect the author’s own personal convictions (BGE 6). In accepting that there is no “absolute truth,” and weakening their concept of objective truth accordingly, philosophers have concealed the extent to which they still tacitly assume the will to truth (GM III, 24-25). Nietzsche believes that this castrates one’s ability to create values, by shifting the responsibility to create from oneself to the independent “objectivity.” It is in this sense that Nietzsche avoids nihilism without himself subscribing to a theory of moral truth. If he does not accept a moral theory, then surely he doesn’t prescribe one either.

Many commentators have tried to salvage some notion of truth (not necessarily moral truth) in Nietzsche (e.g. Clark 1990; Nola 1999; Schacht 1999; Welshon 1999). These interpretations often retain vestiges of the concept of truth subsumed under the ascetic ideal, and thus do not go far enough in understanding the radicality of Nietzsche’s critique of truth. If any notion of truth is to be gleaned from Nietzsche’s work, it is my contention that it will contain little to no remnants of its traditional meaning, and therefore using the term “truth” at all might even be misleading. Much more could be said on this issue, but unfortunately it would take us too far afield.
II. A First Attempt at a Charitable Interpretation Using Metaphor and Irony

If it is true that Nietzsche does not prescribe a moral theory, then there are several different ways to interpret the passages on nobility. Nietzsche rarely writes literally, employing multiple levels of techniques to express different layers of meaning. One such technique, one of his favorites, is metaphor.\(^7\) In the case of the slavery advocated in *Beyond Good and Evil*, I do not think that it can be understood in a purely metaphorical way. If however, this technique is supplemented with another, irony, then a reading of slavery that is less abject is possible.

A more charitable read would interpret slavery not as physical coercion, but as mental slavery to a set of values. This does not even necessarily involve the “mind-control” or brainwashing of one group of people by another. Each person that blindly accepted the values handed down to them, perhaps through religion or the state, would be enslaved by their own inability to create new values, depending on their “masters” for meaning. Evidence for this suggestion can be found in the following passage: “The noble human being must force himself, with the aid of history, to recognize that, since time immemorial, in all somehow dependent social strata the common man *was* only what he was *considered*: not at all used to positing values himself, he also attached no other value to himself than his masters attached to him (it is the characteristic *right of masters* to create values)” (BGE, 261). This quotation comes almost immediately after some of the worst passages about slavery, cited above. The masters in this case, are not part of the nobility *because* they have enslaved the lower classes, but rather, because they have created their own values. The slaves are incapable of value-creation and so in borrowing the value of those who do have this power, they have enslaved themselves, relying on their masters for meaning. Nietzsche has attacked Christianity, democracy and the tendency

\(^7\) There is a large body of literature on Nietzschean metaphor, irony and style in general. Unfortunately this is not the place to delve too deeply into those issues.
towards mediocrity and equality in society because this would mean that all are slaves, in this loose sense of slavery.

So, Nietzsche’s argument might run like this: (1) it is a fact of life that some people are not strong enough to create their own value; (2) the creation of value is one of the highest achievements possible as a human; (3) practices such as Christianity and democracy, that posit the equality of all humans, reduce each person to the lowest common denominator in society; (4) taking (1) – (3) together means that the practices of decadence incapacitate the ability for any human to create value; therefore (5) a system of aristocracy is more advantageous, since it at least ensures that some people will have the possibility of creating value.

In the most charitable way to read this type of argument, Nietzsche’s aristocracy would allow for the possibility that anybody could be noble. That is to say, nobody that has the ability to create value would be precluded from doing so (as presumably, the systems of mediocrity do). Unfortunately, this romantic ideal matches up neither with realistic common sense nor with Nietzsche’s texts. There is an abundance of evidence to show that a caste system would almost certainly preclude many from ever having the opportunity to even be in a social position privileged enough to enable them to create value. Furthermore, it could also be counter-argued that conditions of democracy (and its corollaries) do give rise to great individuals, the “free spirits” that Nietzsche talks of. My “charitable” read also does not fully cohere with Nietzsche’s texts because he doesn’t merely stop at mental slavery, but proceeds to describe actual, physical human enslavement. To make matters worse, we have gone no way towards explaining his views on women and the manipulation of the masses. However, I do think this first charitable interpretation is part of the story, even if it fails to capture it in its entirety.

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8 Nietzsche appears to recognize this at one point: “The very same new conditions that will on the average lead to the leveling and mediocritization of man – to a useful, industrious, handy, multi-purpose herd animal – are likely in the highest degree to give birth to exceptional human beings of the most dangerous and attractive quality” (BGE, 242).
III. A Second Attempt at a Charitable Interpretation: Masks of Perspectivism

Nietzsche’s entire positive philosophical project is rooted in perspectivism. This second interpretation then, will attempt to read the account of nobility as one of Nietzsche’s perspectives and assess the implications this involves. Nearing the end of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche instigates a mysterious dialogue following these two passages:

“In all kinds of injury and loss the lower and coarser soul is better off than the nobler one: the dangers for the latter must be greater; the probability that it will come to grief and perish is actually, in view of the multiplicity of the conditions of its life, tremendous” (BGE, 276);

“–Bad enough! The same old story! When one has finished building ones’ [sic] house, one suddenly realizes that in the process one has learned something that one really needed to know in the worst way – before one began. The eternal distasteful ‘too late!’ The melancholy of everything *finished!*” (BGE, 277)

The first passage indicates that Nietzsche has a lot at stake in this work, and the positive positions he has elaborated are at great risk, since he has put forth a set of values that are not based upon the tradition before him. Forming these opinions has clearly cost Nietzsche quite a bit (psychologically, emotionally and probably physically) and as such, failure could be devastating. The second aphorism hints that perhaps Nietzsche has learned some very valuable things in the course of writing the book that form an ironic tension. These insights would have been most helpful before he had begun the project, yet could only come to fruition at its completion, eternally too late.

Nietzsche sheds some light on these passages in the next aphorism, describing a “wanderer” who is “without scorn, without love, with unfathomable eyes” and has apparently been through a difficult journey, but now has “returned to the light, unsated, from every depth”

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9 In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche writes, “let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as ‘pure reason,’ ‘absolute spirituality,’ ‘knowledge in itself’: these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, [...] these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective ‘knowing’ [...]” (GM III, 12).
The wanderer is offered recuperation, recovery [Erholung] and responds asking for “Another mask! A second mask!” (ibid.).\textsuperscript{10} The wanderer, just like Zarathustra, cannot be isomorphically mapped onto Nietzsche’s own thought, though these characters often provide illuminating intimations. What this seems to indicate then, is that Nietzsche has taken a certain perspective (in this case his account of nobility) and pushed it to its logical conclusion, only to find out that these conclusions are no longer to his taste. If this is what this perspective amounts to, then it is time to move on, to put on a new mask.\textsuperscript{11}

This interpretation affords us some insight into Nietzsche’s philosophy as a whole. In the very last section of the work, Nietzsche reflects on what has been accomplished: “Alas, what are you after all, my written and painted thoughts! It was not long ago that you were still so colorful, young, and malicious, full of thorns and secret spices – you made me sneeze and laugh – and now? You have already taken off your novelty, and some of you are ready, I fear, to become truths [...]” (BGE, 296). Nietzsche’s uniqueness is unparalleled here. He has just finished writing one of his most important works, filled with positive ideas and a new set of values, and it is at just this point, when his thoughts have started to become “truths” that he is no longer enraptured by them. His reasons for this are interesting: “they already look so immortal, so pathetically decent, so dull! And has it ever been different? What things do we copy, writing and painting, we mandarins with Chinese brushes, we immortalizers of things that can be written – what are the only things we are able to paint? Alas, always only what is on the verge of withering and losing its fragrance” (ibid.). Most philosophers strive earnestly to arrive at truth and would be quite

\textsuperscript{10} A few aphorisms later, Nietzsche says, “Every philosophy also conceals a philosophy; every opinion is also a hideout, every word a mask” (BGE, 289).

\textsuperscript{11} On this point Nietzsche writes, “Probably all of us have sat at tables where we did not belong; and precisely the most spiritual among us, being hardest to nourish, know that dangerous dyspepsia which comes of a sudden insight and disappointment about our food and our neighbors at the table – the after-dinner nausea” (BGE, 282). It is possible that Nietzsche saw what his thoughts had come to and realized the kind of company he was in – a nauseating experience indeed.
pleased to know that their work had attained anything close to the status of “immortal.” But this kind of truth is exactly the kind that Nietzsche has always been criticizing. Aiming at static, unchanging, *immortal* truth is nihilism, the will to truth, the ascetic ideal. Once his own thoughts had begun to look this way, it is no wonder that Nietzsche wished to move on.

Nietzsche even hints in the above passages that our main way of communicating philosophical thought, through the practice of writing, lends itself to a stultifying view of truth. Once ideas have been written down, and particularly when they have been published, they take on a form that is solidified and codified in many ways. One can see Nietzsche’s own writing as an attempt to transcend this petrifaction of thought, using the various techniques we have discussed – metaphor, irony, masking and perspectivism. Of course, in a literal sense, he does not go beyond this petrifaction, since his own published writings will always have the same form (“the melancholy of everything finished”). But just as a good musician can channel expression through their playing of a piece of music, even if the piece is played with the exact precision and structure of its original form, so too does Nietzsche manage to pack his own set of multifarious expressions into his writing, even though the words are unchanging.

In the process of investigating the question of whether or not Nietzsche prescribes a moral theory, to which our answer must clearly be no, we have discovered something more important about interpreting his work in general. In order to prescribe a moral theory, there must be one there to begin with and it is doubtful that this is the case for Nietzsche. For one, the account that is supposed to serve as his normative prescription has been shown to be a perspective that Nietzsche has taken to its ripened fruition; he has explored the depths of its meanings and the ends of its implications. Like any other finite perspective though, it must decompose and become the soil for new perspectives. Furthermore, I think it is important to take
Nietzsche seriously as an artist or musician, with written word as his instrument. Interpreting him this way makes the task of searching for a final theory or prescriptive set of normative values appear misguided as a category mistake. One would not approach a work of art or a piece of music this way and I don’t think interpreting Nietzsche this way is appropriate either.

One final concluding note is in order. The argument put forth here has not been an attempt to pardon Nietzsche for the terrible things he wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil* and elsewhere. He consciously wrote them, published them and never fully retracted them, and for this he is ultimately responsible for these views, even if he did not normatively prescribe them, nor hold them as his own final opinions on the matter. My goal has been to look at these views in a different philosophical light, hopefully one that is Nietzschean.
**References**


