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Nietzsche, Virtue, and the Horror of Existence

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Abstract

Robert Solomon argues that Nietzsche is committed to a virtue ethic like Aristotle's. Solomon's approach seems unaware of Nietzsche's belief in the horror of existence. A life that contains as much suffering as Nietzsche expects a life to contain, could not be considered a good life by Aristotle. To go further, as Nietzsche does in his doctrines of eternal recurrence and *amor fati*, to advocate *loving* such a fate, to refuse to change the slightest detail, Aristotle would find debased. Nietzsche is committed to a virtue ethic, but not an Aristotelian one.

I

It has been argued that Nietzsche is committed to a virtue ethic.¹ Solomon, for example, claims that Nietzsche is more like Aristotle than Kant. Aristotle's ethics, he holds, is not one of rules and principles—especially not universal ones. It is concerned with excellence and is still involved with the Homeric warrior tradition. The purpose of such an ethic is to maximize people's potential and that will always be unequal for

Aristotle as well as Nietzsche. Solomon thinks Nietzsche wants to return to the values of masterly virtue.² The *Übermensch* is Aristotle's *megalopsychos*—the great-souled man.³

I have argued in another paper that it is a mistake to see Nietzsche as returning to the values of master morality.⁴ But further than that, Solomon's whole approach seems unaware of Nietzsche's belief in the horror of existence. While Nietzsche might have been impressed by Aristotle's *megalopsychos*,⁵ Aristotle would be appalled by Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. A life that contains as much suffering as Nietzsche expects a life to contain could not be considered a good life by Aristotle. To go further, as Nietzsche does, to advocate *loving* such a fate, to refuse to change the slightest detail, Aristotle would find debased—perhaps even demented. At any rate, the life of the *Übermensch* is not a flourishing life in Aristotle's sense. These claims will have to be explained and defended.

II

At the center of Nietzsche's vision lies his concept of the "terror and horror of existence."⁶

As he puts it in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

"There is an ancient story that King Midas hunted in the forest a long time for the wise Silenus, the companion of Dionysus.... When Silenus at last fell into his hands, the king asked what was the best and most desirable of all things for man. Fixed and immovable, the demigod said not a word, till at last, urged by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and broke out into these words: 'Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is—to die soon.'"⁷

Why is it best never to have been born? Because all we can expect as human beings is senseless suffering—suffering for no reason at all.⁸ In Nietzsche's view we live in an empty, meaningless cosmos.⁹ We cannot look into reality without being overcome. Indeed, in *Beyond*

Good and Evil, he even suggests that "it might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish..."¹⁰

And it was not just intellectual reflection that led Nietzsche to a belief in the horror of existence. He lived it *himself*.¹¹ In a letter of April 10, 1888, he writes:

Around 1876 my health grew worse... There were extremely painful and obstinate headaches which exhausted all my strength. They increased over long years, to reach a climax at which pain was habitual, so that any given year contained for me two hundred days of pain... My specialty was to endure the extremity of pain... with complete lucidity for two or three days in succession, with continuous vomiting of mucus.¹²

It is also Nietzsche's view that if we look deeply into the essence of things, into the horror of existence, we will be overwhelmed—paralyzed. Like Hamlet we will not be able to act, because we see that action cannot change the eternal nature of things.¹³ We must realize, Nietzsche says, that "a profound *illusion*... first saw the light of the world in the person of Socrates: the unshakeable faith that thought... can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it. This sublime metaphysical illusion accompanies science as an instinct..."¹⁴ In Nietzsche's view, we cannot change things. Instead, with Hamlet we should "feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that [we] should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint."¹⁵

Knowledge of the horror of existence kills action. Action requires distance and illusion. The horror and meaninglessness of existence must be veiled if we are to live and act. What we must do, Nietzsche thinks, is construct a meaning for suffering. Suffering we can handle. Meaningless suffering, suffering for no reason at all, we cannot handle. So we give it a meaning. We invent a meaning. We create an illusion. The Greeks constructed gods for whom wars and other forms of suffering were festival plays and thus an occasion to be celebrated by the poets. Christians imagine a God for whom suffering is punishment for sin.¹⁶

Even if we were to reject Nietzsche's view, even if we refuse to accept the notion that it is impossible to significantly reduce suffering, the whole question may well become moot.

Nietzsche tells a story:

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of "world history," but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die.¹⁷

Whatever progress we might think we are making in reducing suffering, whatever change we think we are bringing about, it may all amount to nothing more than a brief and accidental moment in biological time, whose imminent disappearance will finally confirm the horror and meaninglessness of existence.

I do not think we can dismiss Nietzsche's view simply because it goes counter to mainstream assumptions. And we certainly cannot dismiss it if we hope to understand Nietzsche.

III

Let us try to draw out the philosophical implications that follow from the horror of existence. If existence really is horrible, if to know it completely, as Nietzsche suggests in *Beyond Good and Evil*, means we are likely to perish,¹⁸ then knowledge of the truth cannot be good for us. The horror of existence, if we think through its consequences, will put us radically at odds with perhaps the most fundamental assumption of philosophy since Plato and Aristotle, namely, that the true and the good coincide. Philosophers assume that the truth—far from being harmful—will be good for us. And what is really good for us will necessarily be something that is not an illusion or a lie but the truth. As Nietzsche puts it:

"All supreme values are of the first rank, all the supreme concepts...the good, the true...neither can these supreme concepts be incommensurate with one another, be incompatible with one another..."¹⁹ Nietzsche also says, "I seek to understand out of what idiosyncrasy that Socratic equation reason = virtue = happiness derives: that bizarrest of equations and one which has in particular all the instincts of the older Hellenes against it."²⁰ For Socrates, the true, the good, and also happiness coincide.

So also, in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle tells us that the highest happiness is activity in accord with the highest excellence, that is, the contemplative activity of the intellect.²¹ Why should intellectual activity necessarily make us happy? There is a hidden assumption buried in Aristotle's argument. If we were to look back to Sophocles, it would not at all be the case for him that the life of the intellect—theoretical wisdom—could be expected to make us happy. Such wisdom would allow us to see more deeply into the truth of things and thus to see what a miserable, terrible, and alien cosmos we live in. We would see into the horror of existence. Sophocles too quotes the wisdom of Silenus. Best never to have been born; second best, die as soon as possible. All we can expect in this world is to suffer.²²

This, obviously, is not Aristotle's view. In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle tells us, approvingly, "that Anaxagoras answered a man who was...asking why one should choose rather to be born than not by saying 'for the sake of viewing the heavens and the whole order of the universe!'"²³ For Aristotle, "existence is to all men a thing to be chosen and loved..."²⁴ For Aristotle, human beings fit the cosmos, they belong, they are at home. It is as if the cosmos and human beings were designed for each other.

For virtue to be compatible with happiness it is necessary that the individual acting virtuously fit the world. We cannot be happy if we continually grate against existence. So also, if knowing the truth about existence is to be compatible with happiness, the truth cannot be that existence is horrible and terrifying. If to be happy, we must avoid knowing the truth, if we must conceal it, if we must lie about it, then the true and the good are not compatible. If the truth is that existence is horrible and terrifying, then the life of the intellect cannot produce happiness, and the good for human beings cannot be the contemplative life of the intellect. Truth, goodness, and happiness would not accord.

But for Aristotle they do accord. And for Plato, if we could free ourselves from our chains, if we could climb up out of the cave, if we could get used to looking at the sun, we would see that the idea of the good is not only compatible with, but is the very source of, the true.²⁵ The last thing we would want would be to return to the bottom of the cave. Contemplating the true and the good, for Plato, would be the highest happiness.²⁶ Here, the truth is not horror and terror.

So also, the view of modern science is that human rationality can discover the truth, that this is good for human beings, and that it will lead to overall progress for humanity, that is, to increasing happiness.

Nietzsche rejects all of this: "For a philosopher to say, 'the good and the beautiful are one,' is infamy; if he goes on to add, 'also the true,' one ought to thrash him. Truth is ugly.... We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*."²⁷ He also says, "There is no preestablished harmony between the furthering of truth and the well-being," that is, the good, "of humanity."²⁸

There is nothing Nietzsche would reject more, we might say, than Plato's allegory of the cave.²⁹ We cannot climb up out of the cave and look directly at the truth. It would probably kill us. There is a reason why we are down in the cave with our backs to the truth. It is true that the shadows at the bottom of the cave are illusions, distortions, lies. But it is not true that the shadows lock us into a prison. They keep out the horror. They preserve life. Life exists, *only exists*, at the bottom of the cave.

The truth is not good for human beings—the truth is horror. Reality as it truly is, is not beautiful—it is terrifying. To pursue the truth, far from pursuing the good and achieving happiness, as most all philosophers have assumed, would have the consequence of plunging humankind into the abyss, of rubbing their noses in the horror of existence. Life requires lies, illusion, art, veiling. Life must shun the truth. Life is not possible with the truth. To pursue the good, what is best for human beings, requires rejection of the true.³⁰

One might try to respond that while it is obviously the case that some things are not good for us, nevertheless, *knowing the truth* is always good for us. It is certainly best for us to know what is bad, dangerous, threatening, and so forth. It might help us to avoid such things. But if existence is truly alien, if to come to know the truth means we are likely to perish, if it is at odds with human life, if existence is *ontologically* horrible (not just occasionally irritating), then Jocasta is right, *knowing* the truth is not good for us.³¹ That is the subversive proposition Nietzsche wants to force us to think about.

IV

Nietzsche embraces the doctrine of eternal recurrence for the first time in *The Gay Science*:

The greatest weight.—What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have

lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine." If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to *crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?³²

It is not enough that eternal recurrence simply be believed. Nietzsche demands that it actually be loved. In *Ecce Homo*, he explains his doctrine of *amor fati*: "My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it...but love it."³³ In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche says: "To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all 'it was' into a 'thus I willed it'—that alone should I call redemption."³⁴ To turn all "it was" into a "thus I willed it" is to accept fate fully, to love it. One would have it no other way; one wants everything eternally the same, "'Was *that* life?...Well then! Once more!'"³⁵

How are we to understand these doctrines? The first thing we must do is notice that the philosopher who introduces eternal recurrence and *amor fati* is the very same philosopher who also believes in the horror and terror of existence—a point that is never emphasized by commentators. Lou Salomé tells us that Nietzsche spoke to her of eternal recurrence only "with a quiet voice and with all signs of deepest horror...Life, in fact, produced such suffering in him that the certainty of an eternal return of life had to mean something horrifying to him."³⁶

Imagine yourself with the worst migraine possible. Imagine yourself in a feverish state experiencing violent nausea and continuous vomiting. Imagine that this sort of thing has been going on for years and years, and that you have been unable to do anything about it. Extreme care with your diet, concern for climate, continuous experimenting with medicines, all accomplish nothing. You are unable to cure yourself. You have been unable even to improve your condition.³⁷ You have no expectation of ever doing so. Suppose this state has led you to see, or perhaps merely confirmed your insight into, the horror and terror of existence. It has led you to think that Silenus was right. Best never to have been born. Second best, die as soon as possible. All you can expect is suffering, suffering for no reason at all, meaningless suffering. You have even thought of suicide.³⁸ Now imagine that at your worst moment, your loneliest loneliness, a demon appears to you, or you imagine a demon appearing to you. And this demon tells you that you will have to live your life over again, innumerable times more, and that everything, every last bit of pain and suffering, every last migraine, every last bout of nausea and vomiting, will return, exactly the same, over and over and over again.

What would your reaction be? If your reaction were to be negative, no one would bat an eye. But what if your reaction was, or came to be, positive? What if you were able to love your life so completely that you would not want to change a single moment—a single moment of suffering? What if you were to come to crave nothing more fervently than the eternal recurrence of every moment of your life? What if you were to see this as an ultimate confirmation and seal, nothing more divine? *How could you do this? Why would you do this? Why wouldn't it be madness? What is going on here? How has this been overlooked by all the commentators? This cries out for explanation.*

Eternal recurrence, I think we can say, shows us the horror of existence. No matter what you say about your life, no matter how happy you claim to have been, no matter how bright a face you put on it, the threat of eternal recurrence brings out the basic horror in any life. Live it over again with nothing new? It is the 'nothing new' that does it. That is how we make it through our existing life. We hope for, we expect, something new, something different, some improvement, some progress, or at least some distraction, some hope. If that is ruled out, if everything will be exactly the same in our next life, well that is a different story. If you find people who claims to be supremely happy with their life, just see what happens if they start to think that they will have to live it again.

Suppose that you can, as Aristotle suggests, look back over your life as a whole and feel that it was a good one—a happy one. Would that make you want to live it again? Would you at the moment in which you feel that your life was a happy one also "*crave nothing more fervently*" than to live it again? What if your life was a joyous life or a proud life? It is quite clear isn't it that you could have a very positive attitude toward your life, and not at all want to live it again? In fact, wouldn't the prospect of eternal repetition, if the idea grew upon you and gained possession of you, begin to sap even the best life of its attractiveness? Wouldn't the expectation of eternal repetition make anything less appealing? Wouldn't it empty your life of its significance and meaning? Most commentators seem to assume that the only life we could expect anyone to want to live again would be a good life. That makes no sense at all to me. On the other hand, most would assume that a life of intense pain and suffering is not at all the sort of life it makes any sense to want to live again. I think Nietzsche was able to see that a life of intense pain and suffering is perhaps the *only* life it really makes sense to want to live again. This requires explanation.

For years Nietzsche was ill, suffering intense migraines, nausea, and vomiting. Often he was unable to work and confined to bed. He fought this. He tried everything. He sought a better climate. He watched his diet fanatically. He experimented with medicines. Nothing worked. He could not improve his condition. His suffering was out of his control. It dominated his life and determined his every activity. He was overpowered by it. There was no freedom or dignity here. He became a slave to his illness. He was subjugated by it. What was he to do?

At the beginning of the essay, "Concerning the Sublime," Schiller wrote:

nothing is so beneath the dignity of a human being as to suffer violence....whoever cowardly suffers it, tosses his humanity aside....Every human being finds himself in this position. He is surrounded by countless forces, all superior to him and all playing the master over him....If he can no longer oppose physical forces with a corresponding physical force, then nothing else remains for him to do to avoid suffering violence than *to do completely away with a relation* so deleterious to him and to *destroy conceptually* a brute force that he in fact must endure. However, to destroy a force conceptually means nothing other than to submit to it voluntarily.³⁹

While Nietzsche does not go about it in the way Schiller had in mind, nevertheless, this is exactly what Nietzsche does. What was he to do about his suffering? What was he to do about the fact that it came to dominate every moment of his life? What was he to do about the fact that it was robbing him of all freedom and dignity? What was he to do about this subjugation and slavery? He decided to submit to it voluntarily. He decided to accept it fully. He decided that he would not change a single detail of his life, not one moment of pain. He decided to love his fate. At the prospect of living his life over again, over again an infinite number of times, without the slightest change, with every detail of suffering and pain, he was ready to say, "Well then! Once more!"⁴⁰ He could not change his life anyway. But this way he broke the psychological stranglehold it

had over him. He ended his subjugation. He put himself in charge. He turned all "it was" into a "thus I willed it." Everything that was going to happen in his life, he accepted, he chose, he willed. He became sovereign over his life. There was no way to overcome his illness except by embracing it.

V

Let us now turn our attention to virtue. While it can easily be shown that Nietzsche believes in virtue, I do not think he believes in ordinary virtue. He says: "One should defend virtue against the preachers of virtue: they are its worst enemies. For they teach virtue as an ideal *for everyone*; they take from virtue the charm of rareness, inimitableness, exceptionalness and unaverageness—its aristocratic magic."⁴¹ In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he also says: "It is probable that we, too, still have our virtues, although in all fairness they will not be the simpleminded and foursquare virtues for which we hold our grandfathers in honor—and at arms length."⁴² Nietzsche thinks that "each one of us should devise *his own* virtue..."⁴³

He says that he is "actually the very opposite of the type of man who so far has been revered as virtuous."⁴⁴ In fact, he thinks that any virtue "becomes a virtue through rising against that blind power of the factual and tyranny of the actual...It always swims against the tide of history..."⁴⁵ This suggests that a figure like King Vishvamitra, who Nietzsche describes in the *Genealogy of Morals*, could be a model for the development of virtue:

As men of frightful ages, they did this by using frightful means: cruelty toward themselves, inventive self-castigation—this was the principal means these power-hungry hermits and innovators of ideas required to overcome the gods and tradition in themselves, so as to be able to *believe* in their own innovations. I

recall the famous story of King Vishvamitra, who through millennia of self-torture acquired such a feeling of power and self-confidence that he endeavored to build a *new heaven*—the uncanny symbol of the most ancient and most recent experience of philosophers on earth: whoever has at some time built a "new heaven" has found the power to do so only in his *own hell*.⁴⁶

To overthrow the tyranny of the actual, to overcome the gods and tradition, one must develop new powers, new self-confidence, new capacities, new virtues. We must:

confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were *a posteriori*, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate...⁴⁷

The old virtues are at odds with the type of person Nietzsche wants to realize. This person will require the development of new and different virtues. It is even the case that: "what is good and evil *no one knows yet*, unless it be he who creates. He, however, creates man's goal and gives the earth its meaning and its future. That anything at all is good and evil—that is his creation."⁴⁸ Only when a Vishvamitra has created a new heaven, that is, a new meaning structure, a new moral paradigm, will we be able to tell what is good and evil and develop new virtues accordingly.

A virtue ethic is capable of asking what is good for a certain type of person, rather than what is good for everyone or for the majority, and it can take what is good for this person as *good*. Nietzsche thinks that as we move past the ancient world, as we move through Christianity and into the modern world, we move further and further from understanding good in this way. We understand it more and more as the utilitarian does—as what benefits the greatest number. Nietzsche wants to return to the question of what is good for a certain type of person. In this respect Solomon is quite correct in

claiming that Nietzsche is much the same as Aristotle. But I do not think that Nietzsche and Aristotle have in mind anything like the *same* type of person.

Aristotelian virtue is completely at odds with Nietzsche's vision of the horror of existence and the need to conceal it. If we ask the simplest of questions, if we ask how we should value the traditional virtue of truthfulness, we quickly see that Nietzsche and Aristotle would be deeply opposed. For Nietzsche, we cannot give anything like the traditional answer, the answer Aristotle's would certainly give. For Nietzsche, we need illusion, we need art, we need lies.⁴⁹ We must conceal the truth—the horror of existence. The *Übermensch* must build up the power to create a grand illusion.⁵⁰ We do not, for Nietzsche, live in a world where the good and the true will agree. The truth is that reality is horrible—not good. If we seek what is good for us, if we seek human well-being, if we seek a flourishing life, if we seek happiness, we must shun the true. Traditional morality, however, assumes that the good and the true coincide. If the good does not coincide with the true, if we must choose between the good and the true, then we cannot have anything like an Aristotelian virtue ethic. If virtues are characteristics, dispositions, or powers that enable us to do what is good for us, and if this must leave out what is true, indeed, even serve to hide what is true,⁵¹ then we cannot have anything like an Aristotelian notion of virtue. For Aristotle, if we develop a characteristic or power that works to hide the true, it would not be a virtue but a vice. For Aristotle, "reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good..."⁵² If, however, the true is horrible, if it is terrible, then characteristics or powers that enable us to hide the true, characteristics that would normally be called vices, become virtues.⁵³

Nietzsche is definitely committed to a virtue ethic. He attends to characteristics, dispositions, and powers that he wants developed in individuals (at least some individuals), but the characteristics he values, that he takes to be good, that he takes to be virtues, are not ones that enable us to find the true or to live in accord with it.⁵⁴ Rather, Nietzsche seeks the very opposite, powers that hide the true, that make life possible, powers that would normally be called vices. Thus, in *Will to Power*, he says:

Let us not hide from ourselves this most curious result: I have imparted to virtue a new charm—the charm of something forbidden.... Only after we have recognized everything as lies and appearance do we regain the right to this fairest of falsehoods, virtue.... only by exhibiting virtue as a form of immorality do we again justify it...it is part of the fundamental immorality of all existence...the haughtiest, dearest and rarest form of vice.⁵⁵

It is true that Nietzsche seeks the sorts of virtues that would empower the great man or the *Übermensch* and allow him to flourish. But this is a radically different kind of flourishing than Aristotle had in mind. As MacIntyre puts it, for Aristotle, virtues enable us to realize our true nature and reach our true end.⁵⁶ In realizing our nature, in becoming what we should become, in realizing our true end, we will achieve our good, that is, we will flourish and be happy. This implies and requires a fit between the human essence and the world. It is as if they were designed for each other—certainly they cannot be alien and opposed to each other. For Nietzsche, this is ridiculous. To realize our nature as Aristotle understands nature, to achieve our good as Aristotle understands good, that is, a good that accords with the true, far from allowing us to flourish, far from making us happy, would plunge us into the horror and terror of existence. We live in an alien and hostile cosmos and we need lies to conceal this fact from ourselves.

Moreover, we need the power to create and maintain these illusions. Such powers are virtues. They build a certain kind of character. They build a disposition. They enable

one to function in a certain way. To this extent we have a virtue ethic. But it does not realize our essence. If, for Nietzsche, we can even be said to have an essence, it would be some sort of Dionysian chaos, and the task of any virtue would be to conceal it, not realize it.⁵⁷ As far as our true end goes, if we can in any way be said to have one, it would be horror and terror, something we do not want to realize, something we want to conceal.

If we can look back over our entire life and say it was a good one, then, for Aristotle, it was a happy life. If in looking back over our entire life, we must instead admit that it was a life of horrible and meaningless suffering, then, for Aristotle, it would be impossible to say it was a happy life.⁵⁸ If it is necessary to lie, to live in illusion, in order to conceal this meaningless suffering, then, for Aristotle, it would be impossible to say it was a good life.

What if, however, one was able to look back over such a life and was able to love it? What if one would not be willing to change a single moment of suffering? Would that make one's life a *happy* one? Certainly not for Aristotle. Nietzsche, at least at times, will suggest that it could.⁵⁹ But what does he mean by happiness? Certainly not the good life in Aristotle's sense. Happiness is understood as power,⁶⁰ or is replaced by power.⁶¹ In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche says:

Every animal—therefore *la bête philosophe*, too—instinctively strives for an optimum of favorable conditions under which it can expend all its strength and achieve its maximal feeling of power....(I am *not* speaking of its path to happiness, but its path to power...and in most cases actually its path to unhappiness).⁶²

Virtue, for Aristotle, allows us to fit with reality, be at home, and be happy. Virtue, for Nietzsche, allows us to construct a new heaven, conceal an alien cosmos, and experience the satisfaction of power—not happiness.

Something is a virtue for Aristotle if it contributes to living a good life, a happy life. Something is a virtue for Nietzsche if it enables you to love your fate, live with suffering, not want to change a single moment:

Every basic character trait that is encountered at the bottom of every event, that finds expression in every event, would have to lead every individual who experienced it as his own basic character trait to welcome every moment of universal existence with a sense of triumph. The crucial point would be that one experienced this basic character trait in oneself as good, valuable—with pleasure.⁶³

If you look back over your life, for Nietzsche, you do not ask the same question Aristotle would have you ask. You do not ask if it was a good life, let alone the best life. If you ask that, you would immediately see that any life could be improved by changing this or adding that. To dwell on such concerns, however, would threaten to re-enslave you to your suffering. Instead, you must have unqualified love for every detail of your life.⁶⁴ Why? Not because every detail deserves it, not because your life was the best life in Aristotle's sense, not because it could not be made better in Aristotle's sense, but because if you do not, then the pain and suffering of your life could begin to reassert itself, eat away at you, subjugate you. If you do not love *every* moment of your life, those moments you do not love, may begin to reassert their psychological stranglehold. They may begin to dominate you. You will begin to wish you did not have to suffer through so many of them, you will try to develop strategies for coping with them, you will worry about them, and pretty soon you may again be enslaved by them. Your attitude toward any moment cannot be a desire to avoid it, change it, reduce it—or it may

begin to dominate you.⁶⁵ Such love, Aristotle would consider abject and degrading.

Aristotle would completely reject the *Übermensch*.

On the other hand, though, if in looking back over your life, for Aristotle, you *were* to find it a good one, a happy one, *even* the best life, there would be nothing about it that would necessarily make you want to live it again. And if one day you were informed by the demon that you *had* to live it again over and over an infinite number of times, even Aristotle, as this idea gained possession of him, might "throw [him]self down and gnash [his] teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus..."⁶⁶

Notes

¹ R.C. Solomon, "A More Severe Morality: Nietzsche's Affirmative Ethics," in *Nietzsche as Affirmative Thinker*, ed. Y. Yovel (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), 69-89. Also, T.H. Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Ethics of Character: A Study of Nietzsche's Ethics and its Place in the History of Moral Thinking* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1995). Also L.H. Hunt, *Nietzsche and the Origin of Virtue* (London: Routledge, 1991). Also, M. Slote, "Nietzsche and Virtue Ethics," in *International Studies in Philosophy*, XXX:3 (1998), 23-7.

² Solomon, 74-6, 85.

³ Solomon, 83. Also see Brobjer, 241-62. Magnus argues against this view, see B. Magnus, "Aristotle and Nietzsche: *Megalopsychia* and *Übermensch*," in *The Greeks and the Good Life*, ed. D.J. Depew (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 260-95.

⁴ See my "Nietzschean Genealogy and Hegelian History in the *Genealogy of Morals*," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 26 (1996), 123-48.

⁵ See, e.g., *The Anti-Christ* (hereafter *AC*), in *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), §50, p. 167. I have used various translations of Nietzsche and, for the German, *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (hereafter *NWKG*), ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967ff.). I will cite the page of the translation but also the section so that any editions may easily be used.

⁶ *The Birth of Tragedy* (hereafter *BT*), in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), §3, p. 42. For earlier and lengthier versions of Sections II and III of the present article, see my "Nietzsche, Truth, and the Horror of Existence," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 23 (2006), 41-58; also my "Nietzsche, Eternal Recurrence, and the Horror of Existence," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 33 (2007), 53-67.

⁷ *BT*, §3, p. 42. Nietzsche also speaks of the "original Titanic divine order of terror" (*BT*, §3, p. 42) and of the "terrors of nature" (*BT*, §9, p. 67). He also speaks of the mere thought of pain as a "reproach against the whole of existence"; *The Gay Science* (hereafter *GS*), tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), §48, p. 113. He speaks of Christianity as creating "sublime words and gestures to throw over a horrible reality"; see *The Will To Power* (hereafter *WP*), tr. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), §685, p. 364. He also speaks of the world as "false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, without meaning" and of "the terrifying and questionable character of existence" (*WP*, §853, p. 451). See also *WP*, §4, p. 10.

⁸ *On the Genealogy of Morals* (hereafter *GM*), in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1969), III, §28, p. 162.

⁹ *GM*, III, §28, p. 162. See also *WP*, §55, p. 35.

¹⁰ *Beyond Good and Evil* (hereafter *BGE*), tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage 1966), §39, p. 49. Also see *WP*, §822, p. 435.

¹¹ See L. Salomé, *Nietzsche*, tr. S. Mandel (Redding Ridge, CT: Black Swan Books, 1988), 10.

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- ¹² Nietzsche to G. Brandes on 10 April 1888, in *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, tr. C. Middleton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 294.
- ¹³ *BT*, §7, p. 60.
- ¹⁴ *BT*, §15, p. 95.
- ¹⁵ *BT*, §7, p. 60. Also see *Twilight of the Idols* (hereafter *TI*) in *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, "Morality as Anti-Nature," §6, p. 46.
- ¹⁶ *GM*, II, §7, pp. 68-9. See also *Daybreak* (hereafter *D*), tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), §78, p. 48.
- ¹⁷ "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, tr. D. Breazeale (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), §1, p. 79.
- ¹⁸ *BGE*, §39, p. 49. Also see *WP*, §822, p. 435.
- ¹⁹ *TI*, "'Reason' in Philosophy," §4, p. 37. Also see Plato, *Republic*, in *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (New York: Pantheon, 1961), 505a-505b, 508d-509b, 515c-516b.
- ²⁰ *TI*, "The Problem of Socrates," §4, p. 31. See also *BT*, §14, p. 91; also §12, p. 84.
- ²¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*), in *Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), II, 1177^a.
- ²² Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, in *Sophocles I*, tr. D. Greene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 64, 69. Also, *Oedipus at Colonus*, in *Sophocles I*, tr. R. Fitzgerald, 134.
- ²³ *Eudemian Ethics*, in *Complete Works of Aristotle*, II, 1216^a.
- ²⁴ *NE*, 1168^a.

²⁵ *Republic*, 517b-c.

²⁶ *Republic*, 519d-e.

²⁷ *WP*, §822, p. 435.

²⁸ *Human, All Too Human, I* (hereafter *HAH, I*), tr. G. Handwerk, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. B. Magnus (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), III, §517, p. 269; also §36, p. 44.

²⁹ See, e.g., *TI*, "How the 'Real World' at last Became a Myth," pp. 40-1.

³⁰ *WP*, §853, p. 451. Also *GS*, §110, p. 169. *T&L*, §1, pp. 79-81. *BGE*, §24, p. 35. *TI*, "'Reason' in Philosophy," §5, pp. 37-8.

³¹ *Oedipus the King*, 52, 57.

³² *GS*, §341, pp. 273-4. See also, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (hereafter *Z*), tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1966), III, "On the Vision and the Riddle," §2, pp. 157-9; "The Convalescent," §§1-2, pp. 215-21. *WP*, §§1057-67, pp. 544-50. For a discussion of earlier approximations to the doctrine of eternal recurrence in the history of philosophy, see Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 47-68. For a lengthier version of the material that appears in Section IV of the present article, see my "Nietzsche, Eternal Recurrence, and the Horror of Existence."

³³ *Ecce Homo* (hereafter *EH*), in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, "Why I Am So Clever," §10, p. 258.

³⁴ *Z*, II, "On Redemption," p. 139. See also, *Z*, III, "On Old and New Tablets," §3, p. 198.

³⁵ *Z*, IV, "The Drunken Song," §1, p. 318.

³⁶ Salomé, 130.

³⁷ See Kaufmann's Preface and Notes to *Z*, pp. xiii-xiv, 4-5.

³⁸ *BGE*, §157, p. 91. Nietzsche to F. Overbeck on 11 February 1883 and on 24 March 1883, in *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 206, 210.

³⁹ F. Schiller, "Concerning the Sublime," in *Friedrich Schiller: Essays*, ed. W. Hinderer and D.O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1998), 70-2. Nietzsche makes a very similar point himself in *TI*, "Expeditions of an Untimely Man," §36, pp. 88-9. Also, Nietzsche's sister tells us that even as a schoolboy at Pforta Nietzsche once, without flinching, burned his own hand; see Frau Förster-Nietzsche, *The Young Nietzsche*, tr. A.M. Ludovici (London: William Heinemann, 1912), 81.

⁴⁰ *Z*, IV, "The Drunken Song," §1, p. 318.

⁴¹ *WP*, §317, p. 175. Also, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, in *Human, All Too Human*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), II, §34, pp. 318-9.

⁴² *BGE*, §214, p. 145.

⁴³ *AC*, §11, p. 122. See also, *HAH*, I, §94, pp. 71-2. Also, *GS*, §120, pp. 176-7; §335, p. 265. Also *WP*, §326, p. 178. There are passages, however, in which Nietzsche rejects virtue; see *HAH*, I, §56, p. 58.

⁴⁴ *EH*, "Preface," §2, p. 217.

⁴⁵ *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* (hereafter *U&DHL*) in *Untimely Meditations*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), §8, p. 106.

⁴⁶ *GM*, III, §10, p. 115. See also, *D*, §113, pp. 68-9.

⁴⁷ *U&DHL*, §3, p. 76.

⁴⁸ *Z*, III, "On Old and New Tablets," §2, p. 196.

⁴⁹ Owen, for example, thinks that truthfulness and integrity are virtues for Nietzsche; D. Owen, *Nietzsche, Politics and Modernity: A Critique of Liberal Reason* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 143, 118.

⁵⁰ Plato did not like artists. He thought their creations were three removes from the Forms—three removes from the truth (*Republic*, Bk. 10). Artists distort reality; perhaps there is even something dishonest about them. For Nietzsche, art is necessary for life.

⁵¹ Thus creativity becomes one of the highest virtues.

⁵² *NE*, 1139^a.

⁵³ Thus, contrary to Slote, I think Nietzsche holds to (rather than rejects) an agent-independent theory of virtue—that is, one in which the agent sees and enacts what is morally called for in various situations. And so, in this respect (again contrary to Slote), Nietzsche is *like* Aristotle; see Slote, 24-5.

⁵⁴ So also Nietzsche does not endorse the "ancient notion of a life according to nature," as Schatzki suggests he does; see T.R. Schatzki, "Ancient and Naturalistic Themes in Nietzsche's Ethics," *Nietzsche-Studien*, 23 (1994), 156ff.

⁵⁵ *WP*, §328, p. 179. See also *WP*, §308, p. 172; also §272, p. 155. Also see, *TI*, "The 'Improvers' of Mankind," §5, p. 59. *HAH*, I, §40, p. 49. *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, §190, pp. 357-8. *GS*, §347, p. 287. *WP*, §306, p. 171. It is not only the case that virtue is incompatible with the true, but virtues are also incompatible with each other. Nietzsche completely rejects anything like an Aristotelian unity of the virtues (*NE*, Bk. VI, Ch. 13): "*By which means does a virtue come to power?—By exactly the same*

means as a political party: the slandering, inculpation, undermining of virtues that oppose it and are already in power, by rebaptizing them, by systematic persecution and mockery. Therefore: through sheer 'immorality'" (*WP*, §311, p. 172). Indeed, Zarathustra holds that it is difficult to have more than one virtue—they conflict (*Z*, I, "On Enjoying and Suffering the Passions," p. 37). We do not have anything like an Aristotelian virtue ethic here.

⁵⁶ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 52.

⁵⁷ *U&DHL*, §3, p. 76.

⁵⁸ Aristotle does say that no virtuous man can become miserable, but he admits that one who meets with wretchedness like that of Priam, "no one calls happy" (*NE*, 1100^a-1101^a).

⁵⁹ *EH*, "Human, All-Too-Human," §4, p. 288. One might do better looking to Cicero rather than Aristotle as the model for a Nietzschean virtue ethic. Cicero argues that one can be happy even while undergoing torture; see Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, tr. J.E. King, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), Bk. V.

⁶⁰ *AC*, §2, p. 115.

⁶¹ See *WP*, §688, p. 366.

⁶² *GM*, III, §7, p. 107. Nietzsche contrasts eudaemonistic philosophers to the pre-Socratics, who lack "the detestable pretension to happiness"; see "The Struggle Between Science and Wisdom," in *Philosophy and Truth*, §193, p. 133.

⁶³ *WP*, §55, p. 36.

⁶⁴ *EH*, "Why I Am So Clever," §10, p. 258.

⁶⁵ For a lengthier discussion of this matter, see my "Nietzsche, Eternal Recurrence, and the Horror of Existence," esp. Section III.

⁶⁶ *GS*, §341, p. 273. For a discussion of other differences between Aristotle and Nietzsche, see F. Cameron, *Nietzsche and the 'Problem' of Morality* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 152-7.