

Why Philosophy Matters

Why Philosophy Matters:

20 Lessons on Living Large

By

Raymond Angelo Belliotti

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To Marcia, Angelo and Vittoria

Meglio onore senza vita che vita senza onore

("Better to have honor without life than life without honor" or
"Better to die with honor than to live with shame")

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PREFACE

In September 2012, the philosophy department of which I am a member met with the Dean of Arts and Sciences for what everyone thought would be a routine session designed to put the finishing touches on a required five-year review of our academic unit. The external reviewer had given us high marks, our department enjoyed generally collegial relations, and all of our members were held in high regard by the undergraduates we taught.

The Dean, who often struggled with keeping his less admirable emotions in check, was somehow aroused by an innocuous comment uttered by one of my colleagues. The subject was collaborative research—students and instructors joining forces to advance the literature in their field. We expressed extreme doubt that undergraduates were prepared to contribute meaningfully to our research, especially given the fact that we had no straightforward empirical studies upon which they might labor. Then one of us added that “it took me many years of study before I could compose a publishable philosophical essay.”

This did not strike the rest of us as provocative in the least. Indeed, if anything, the statement expressed a trivial truth. But the Dean was strangely agitated. He accused the department of having a “superior” attitude. Soon thereafter he cited an article written by Stanley Fish in the *New York Times* that concluded that philosophy does not matter to everyday life. As you might suspect, the session degenerated thereafter. Gratuitously insulting one’s audience is typically not a sound recipe for productive dialogue.

Months later, recalling that meeting with the Dean, I decided to read Fish’s essay. The following captures the gist of his position:

But philosophy is not the name of, or the site of, thought generally; it is a special, insular form of thought and its propositions have weight and value only in the precincts of its game . . . The conclusions reached in philosophical disquisitions do not travel. They do not travel into contexts that are not explicitly philosophical (as seminars, academic journals, and conferences are), and they do not even make their way into the non-philosophical lives of those who hold them (*New York Times*, The Opinion Page, “Does Philosophy Matter?” August 1, 2011).

My first reaction was to wonder: If Fish is correct, how could such giants in the history of ideas such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Dante, Epicurus, and the like have been so deluded as to think that philosophical disputation was central to determining how human beings should live their lives? Worse, how could this delusion persist throughout the centuries and be promoted by thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre? Even worse, how could contemporary philosophers such as Robert Nozick, Joel Feinberg, Roberto Unger, and Peter Singer not have seen through the ruse?

In fairness, Fish's attack may have been directed to only certain types of meta-ethical and meta-epistemological questions. His essay focuses on the debate between moral relativists and moral absolutists, and concludes that a person's philosophical position on this issue will not affect his or her practical moral decisions. (I would argue that is not always the case.) Still, Fish presents his conclusions generally and expresses no appreciation for the practical benefits of philosophical reasoning. While Fish's conclusions warm the bosom of our contentious Dean, I find them grossly exaggerated and wildly irresponsible.

Such is the genesis of this work, which is designed to be true to its title: philosophy does matter to everyday living. In my judgment, people who ignore the enduring, fundamental questions of life thereby unwittingly relinquish part of their humanity. I hope to convince readers of this foundational truth.

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INTRODUCTION

The question—“How should I live my life?”—along with cosmological inquiries about the nature of the world, animated Western philosophy during its earliest recorded years. Given that belief in the Greek and Roman gods failed to provide substantive guidelines for everyday living, philosophy arose in large measure as practical instruction in the art of living the good human life. Thus, the predominant Greek philosophical schools—The Academy (originally Platonic), The Peripatetics (originally Aristotelian), Stoicism, and Epicureanism—offered different definitions of the good life; diverse recipes for attaining such a life; and competing accounts of why those recipes were successful.

Throughout its history, philosophy has chronicled vastly different answers to the question of “How should I live my life?” By studying carefully their definitions, recipes, and accounts of what constitutes the good human life we can understand better who we are and who we might be. In this work, I consider the answers provided by over thirty philosophers to various aspects of this persistent question. In so doing, twenty lessons for living a worthy life emerge.

In Chapter One, I examine the fundamental aspects of building character by explaining and critically assessing the work of Nietzsche, Sartre, Plato, Dante, Stoicism, Cicero, and Heidegger. Nietzsche argues that meaning and value arise from the process of life which is grounded in ongoing striving. In his view, our most basic general desire is to continue to have specific desires that we struggle to fulfill as we confront obstacles and endure suffering. The fulfillment of specific desires is at once satisfying and frustrating: we are satisfied in that we attained our goal but frustrated because we temporarily lack a specific desire to animate our sense of purpose. Thus, we continue the struggle and in so doing transform who we are. Nietzsche sets us on the correct path for character-building, but his understanding is contaminated by aristocratic excesses that must be adjusted or discarded. Sartre insists that we are condemned to be free, and explains what that provocative statement means. I conclude that a more precise rendering of Sartre’s idea is that we are condemned to act as if we are free and I address the implications of holding that conviction. Plato and Dante advance the intuitively unsettling notion that virtue is its own reward and vice is its own punishment. Most of us are convinced this

proposition is false, even if we wish that it was true. I argue that there is an important sense in which Plato and Dante are correct and connect their conclusions to structuring a worthy self. The Stoics theorized that human well-being flows from concerning oneself only with those matters fully under one's control: our own judgments, attitudes, and beliefs. I explain the respects in which the Stoics were correct and the ways in which they overstated their case.

The Romans, particularly Cicero, laid much of the groundwork for what became an influential notion of honor and deserved self-pride for centuries. Although invocations of "honor" strike many contemporary listeners as anachronistic and dangerous, I argue that honor and justified self-pride can play a crucial transformative role in modern society. Heidegger stressed the importance of leading an authentic human life. I analyze what he meant and argue that leading a genuine life is necessary but not sufficient for crafting worthy character.

In Chapter Two, I address the more important human relationships and the issue of what we owe other people by examining the work of Aristotle, Plato, and Peter Singer. Aristotle's seminal work in the area of friendship provides my point of departure in sketching the nature of salutary human relations. Plato's evolving understanding of love in two of his better known dialogues challenges us to explore our own erotic connections more deeply. Is love at bottom irrational and obsessive, and centered on the concrete particularities of another person? Or is it fundamentally an earthly attempt to reach for what is divine? Or is it something else? These questions are asked and answered. Finally, Peter Singer challenges our conventional understanding of what we owe others and argues that our duties to strangers in need are more extensive than we now suppose. In a secular rendering of the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, Singer, in effect, asks, "Who is my neighbor?" and "What is my neighbor's due?" I assess Singer's prescriptions in the light of the debate between moral partialists and moral impartialists. This chapter extends the project of building character from individual to communal concerns.

In Chapter Three, I deepen the communal aspect of character-building. Personal identity is not crafted in isolation. As members of commonwealths, we must examine what we should expect from our political leaders, what they should expect from citizens, and what citizens should expect from each other. The connection between worthy selves and the political contexts in which they are formed remains crucial. Machiavelli understood most acutely that given the nature of the world and the often zero-sum context of international politics, chief political officers must sometimes dirty their hands by using evil well. I explore the nature of the

problem, the inner conflict of chief political officers, and the role of citizens in facilitating appropriate political relations. Gramsci offers a leftist alternative to classical Marxism. His notions of ideological hegemony, historical bloc, counter-hegemony, and war of position provide insights into the possibilities for and prerequisites of radical social transformation. I critically examine Gramsci's philosophy and apply it to the involvement of coalition forces in Iraq. Roberto Unger invites us to go beyond capitalist and communist economics. His "super-liberalism" emerges from the internal development of existing legal, political, and economic policies and doctrines. Unger connects his political program to what he takes to be the one unconditional fact about human nature: its plasticity and yearning to transcend the cultural contexts that structure established forms of personal relations, intellectual inquiry, and social arrangements. I analyze Unger's program in an effort to cull what is most useful for the project of building character. This chapter manifests the importance of political and social contexts for the development and self-realization of human beings.

In Chapter Four, I confront the enormous issue of how, if at all, human beings can live a meaningful life. Camus posits cosmic meaninglessness as his starting point: the cosmos does not embody any inherent value, purpose, or meaning. He uses the ancient Myth of Sisyphus to illustrate the ultimate futility of a single human life and human life taken collectively. Yet he offers hope that we can transform our destinies through our emotions and attitudes. We can create fragile human meaning in the face of cosmic meaninglessness. I explore the power of Camus' vision and raise several concerns. Karl Marx renounces all thick theories of human nature and, instead, argues that we are most fulfilled when engaging in unalienated labor. He insists that creative expenditure of our energies and enthusiasms is the core of human satisfaction. Regardless of his association of unalienated labor with communist economics and politics, I argue that Marx identifies a paramount aspect of human fulfillment. Schopenhauer disputes the conventional notion that human life is valuable. He argues that human beings are doomed to a dreary journey on a pendulum of frustration because of the nature of our striving and the lack of intrinsically valuable objects. Because of the impossibility of any final fulfillment, human beings endure a life that is reduced to "a business that does not cover its expenses." I revert to Nietzsche in arguing that Schopenhauer, although uncovering a kernel of truth, is radically mistaken about the possibilities of human life and the nature of desire. Robert Nozick introduces an experience machine that is able to confer upon its users any positive experience or set of sensations that they can imagine.

Nozick argues that the vast majority of us would refuse to enter the machine and he explains why. His spadework is my point of departure in explaining why hedonism fails and in examining how a meaningful human life can be captured by the metaphors of a telescope and a pogo stick. Finally, I explain why happiness is overrated and why generating a robustly meaningful, valuable life is more important. This chapter links the project of crafting a worthy self to larger questions of meaning, purpose, and value.

In Chapter Five, I confront human mortality and discuss how we might die gracefully. I recall how forty years ago, James Rachels introduced me to the distinction between biographical and biological lives. I add the notion of autobiographical lives and explain how our biographical lives typically extend beyond our biological lives. This opens the possibility that our narratives persist in a sense beyond our deaths. I then examine Joel Feinberg's important work on posthumous harm. Feinberg argues that we must recognize a distinction between being harmed and being hurt. He denies the power of the experience requirement—the principle that insists that we must endure negative or positive sensations in order to be harmed or benefited, respectively, by an event. I use Feinberg's work to engage a wider inquiry into the possibility of posthumous wrongs and harms. In so doing, I examine the existence requirement—the principle that holds that the harm of evil and the benefit of good require an identifiable, living subject. I advance two theories that conclude that posthumous wrongs (or rights) and posthumous harms (or benefits) are possible. The final section of the book struggles with Pascal's gloomy depiction of human life: we are condemned to death, gathered in chains, and watch warily as others depart the earth as we await our turn. As an alternative, I portray mortality as a context for living and try to demonstrate that the way we die often casts glory or infamy on the manner we lived. Death may entail our destruction but it need not be our defeat. This chapter ties the lessons of the previous chapters into a coherent program of how to cope with finitude.

In my judgment, after reading this work, even Stanley Fish would admit that philosophical inquiry matters for everyday living. Even those who will disagree with the substantive conclusions I reach and the program for robust living I urge will recognize that the philosophers included in this work have served humanity by publicly pondering the enduring questions that define the human condition.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

As is the common practice, when I have cited from the writings of some prominent authors the references in all cases have been given immediately in the text and not in the notes. I used multiple versions of the texts in some cases. Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to sections or chapters, not page numbers. I have used the following abbreviations:

For Nietzsche:

BGE	<i>Beyond Good and Evil</i> (1886)
EH	<i>Ecce Homo</i> (1908)
GM	<i>On the Genealogy of Morals</i> (1887)
GS	<i>The Gay Science</i> (1882)
TI	<i>Twilight of the Idols</i> (1889)
UM	<i>Untimely Meditations</i> (1873-1876)
WP	<i>The Will to Power</i> (unpublished notebooks, 1883-1888)
Z	<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> (1883-1885)

BGE 13=	Beyond Good and Evil, section 13.
GM II, 12=	On the Genealogy of Morals, Book 2, section 12.
GS 125=	The Gay Science, Section 125.
WP 1067=	The Will to Power, section 1067.

EH,	“Why I Am So Clever,” 9: <i>Ecce Homo</i> , “Why I Am So Clever,” section 9.
UM,	“Schopenhauer as Educator,” 8: <i>Untimely Meditations</i> , “Schopenhauer as Educator,” section 8.
TI,	“Maxims and Arrows,” 12: <i>Twilight of the Idols</i> , “Maxims and Arrows,” number 12.
Z I,	“Zarathustra’s Prologue,” 5: <i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> , Book 1, “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” section 5.

For Epictetus:

EN	<i>Encheiridion</i> (Manual for Living)
EN 12=	<i>Encheiridion</i> , sec. 12.

For Cicero:

O De Officiis
 O 1.25= De Officiis, book 1, section 25.

For Plato:

PH Phaedrus
 R Republic
 S Symposium
 S 178a-180e= Symposium 178a-180e (Stephanus numbering)

For Aristotle:

NE Nicomachean Ethics
 NE 1103a14-1104b13= Nicomachean Ethics 1103a14-1104b13 (Bekker numbering)

For Machiavelli:

AW The Art of War
 D The Discourses
 FH Florentine Histories
 Ltr. Machiavelli's letters
 P The Prince

AW 2 45= The Art of War, Book 2, page 45 (Wood edition)
 D I 55 = The Discourses, Book I, chapter 55
 FH I 3 = Florentine Histories, Book I, section 3
 Ltr. 247: 1/31/15= Letter 247: January 31, 1515
 (Atkinson and Sices edition)
 P 18= The Prince, chapter 18

CHAPTER ONE

BUILDING CHARACTER

Is it possible that the fundamental human drive is the pursuit of power in some sense? Can human beings create meaning in an otherwise aimless world? If we are creatures lacking a final destiny can we nevertheless live meaningfully and die gracefully? To begin to answer such vexing, enduring questions and to initiate an inquiry into how to build character in a world not of our making, we should first consult Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) for his advice on how to conceptualize and experience the process of human life.

1. Luxuriate in the Process of Life: Friedrich Nietzsche

“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”
— Albert Einstein

Nietzsche advances a host of broad themes that underwrite his philosophical conclusions:¹

Understand that inner conflict is inescapable

Human beings embody multiple drives, deep ambiguity and ambivalence, and internally mirror the ongoing flux of the cosmos. Refusing to accept what he took to be the false consolations of religion, Nietzsche was convinced that our world lacks inherent meaning and value. Accordingly, our world is bereft of an intrinsic purpose which human beings might discover. We can call this a belief in “cosmic meaninglessness.” If Nietzsche is correct, the only meaning and value possible must be humanly constructed and thus fragile.

Love life

For Nietzsche, the lack of inherent cosmic meaning and purpose challenges us to respond positively: to accept our lives in their entirety and to fashion them in such a way that we luxuriate in our time on earth without the distractions of revenge and *ressentiment* (hostility directed at the perceived cause of a person's frustration or feelings of inadequacy) Nietzsche captures this response in his call for *amor fati* (love of fate):

I do not want in the least that anything should become different than it is; I myself do not want to become different . . . 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—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but love it (EH, “Why I Am So Clever,” 9, 10).

Amor fati, then, captures Nietzsche highest value: maximally affirming life with full understanding of its tragic dimensions. Suffering and adversity, instead of being avoided, should be crafted for practical advantage. Abundantly healthy spirits respect the order of human rank based on merit, cherish opportunities for self-transformation through struggle and rich exertion, seek personal challenges from motives of joy and love of life, and scorn cowardly hopes for salvation in an afterlife. Nietzsche's message is direct: This life is my only life and if I confront it with aesthetic creativity and a full heart it will be quite enough.

Exercise the will to power

The will to power connotes a process, which has growth, expansion, and accumulation at its core. The will to power does not seek final serenity or a fixed state of affairs. Nietzsche argues that the will to power is not fulfilled unless it confronts struggle, resistance, and opposition. Pursuing power, in the sense of increasing influence and strength, requires intentionally and actually finding obstacles to overcome. Indeed, the will to power is a will to the precise activity of struggling with and overcoming obstacles. Because suffering and pain attend the experience of such struggle, a robust will to power must desire suffering in that sense (BGE 225, 228). The resulting paradox is that the fulfillment of the will to power—the overcoming of resistance—results in dissatisfaction as the struggle has (temporarily) concluded. The will to power requires obstacles to the satisfaction of its specific first-order desires because beyond specific desires, the will to power has a more fundamental desire to struggle with and over-

come obstacles. In sum, the will to power deeply desires resistance to the satisfaction of its own specific first-order desires.

For example, a person's will to power is the drive to have ongoing desires. These ongoing desires are the specific first-order desires that constitute our goals. Suppose Smith desires to be a great baseball player. He invests considerable time, effort, and possibly expense in striving to fulfill that purpose. Along the way, he will confront obstacles, endure disappointments, and suffer in a variety of ways. Whether he attains his goal of becoming a great baseball player or not, if Smith approaches his journey with the proper attitude he will have strengthened his will to power (his desire to continuing desiring) and he will develop and pursue new goals. For Nietzsche, this is the process of life that builds character. Should Smith, if he should fail in his efforts to become a great baseball player, withdraw and wallow in disappointment he would be revealing and reinforcing the febleness of his will to power.

At times, Nietzsche suggests that the will to power is not only the fundamental but the only drive of life. Although he expresses this view in several of his writings, he most forcefully captures it in his *Nachlass*: "This world is the will to power—and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides! (WP 1067; See also, Z I, "On the Thousand and One Goals"; Z II, "On Self-Overcoming"; Z II, "On Redemption"; BGE 13, 36, 259; GS 349; GM II, 12). As such, one might be tempted to conclude that for Nietzsche human beings can strive only for power; that power is the sole motivating force in the world; and power is thus the only goal that can and is desired. On this reading, Nietzsche would open himself to the charge that he mistakenly reduces the complexity of human psychology and life to only one overly broad concept and that concept itself thereby lacks determinate meaning. Is it not plausible to believe that human beings are sometimes motivated by impulses other than the desire to grow and extend their influence? Must other possible motivations such as the pursuit of pleasure or happiness or intimacy be reducible always to an extension of power?

Although Nietzsche's notion of the will to power has been interpreted in many different ways, the most convincing view, in my judgment, is that the will to power is not the only drive or motivating force animating human life. Instead, the will to power is (a) a second-order drive to have and fulfill first-order desires and (b) to confront and overcome resistance in fulfilling first-order desires. When resistance is overcome and a first-order desire is fulfilled, the will to power is initially satisfied but soon frustrated because it lacks a first-order desire and resistance to its fulfillment. Thus, the will to power requires ongoing first-order desires and resistance to

their fulfillment. These first-order desires—for example, to compete in sports, master a musical instrument, drink in order to quench thirst, eat in order to relieve hunger, and the like—do not arise from the will to power. That is, the will to power itself does not determine which particular first-order desires we will pursue. Drives and impulses other than the will to power must provide the first-order desires that animate the will to power's activity. Thus, the will to power cannot be the only drive or impulse embodied by human beings. The desire for power alone cannot provide the necessary specific first-order desires.

The robustness of various wills to power can be evaluated based on the significance of the obstacles they are willing to confront and overcome, and the suffering they are willing to endure in the process. First-order desires can also be evaluated on a host of dimensions including the role they play in maximally affirming life, the opportunities to exhibit creativity they offer, the resistance they may encounter, and the ways they help build character.

Accordingly, the will to power cannot embrace final serenity or permanent fulfillment. The satisfaction of one specific desire brings both fulfillment, a feeling of increased strength and influence, and dissatisfaction, as resistance has been overcome and is no longer present. Only endless striving and continual conquests fuel a robust will to power. Nietzsche, then, embraces the criterion of power: exertion, struggle and suffering are at the core of overcoming obstacles, and human beings experience and truly feel their power only by avidly engaging in this process.

Avoid the indolent life

Nietzsche reserves special contempt for that most despicable human type he calls the “last man.” The last man shrivels before the thought that the cosmos lacks inherent value and meaning. In their search for security, contentment, and minimal exertion last men lead shallow lives of timid conformity and superficial happiness. They take solace in a narrow egalitarianism that severs them from the highest human possibilities: intense love, grand creation, deep longing, passionate exertion, and adventure in pursuit of excellence.

‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One still loves one’s neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth. Becoming sick and harboring suspicion are sinful to them: one proceeds carefully. A fool, whoever still stumbles over stones or human beings! A little poison now and then: that makes for agreeable dreams. And much poison in the

end, for an agreeable death. One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing. One no longer becomes poor or rich: both require too much exertion. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion . . . everybody wants the same, everybody is the same . . . ‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink (Z I, “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” 5).

The highest ambitions of last men are comfort and security. They are the extreme case of the herd mentality: habit, custom, indolence, self-preservation, and muted will to power prevail. Last men embody none of the inner tensions and conflicts that spur transformative action: they take no risks, lack convictions, avoid experimentation, and seek only bland survival. They invent “happiness” as the brutish accumulation of pleasure and avoidance of suffering. They “blink” to hide themselves from reality. They ingest “poison” now and then in the form of religious indoctrination focused on a supposedly blissful afterlife. Last men lack the vigor and exalted will to power that can view this world as it is, yet maximally affirm it.

Like cockroaches after a nuclear explosion, last men live the longest. Nietzsche understands that higher human types are more fragile, more likely to squander their abundant passions in acts of self-overcoming than last men who are concerned narrowly with species survival. Expanding one’s influence and discharging one’s strength often jeopardize self-preservation. For Nietzsche, the quality, intensity, and authenticity of a life are higher values than its duration.

But no project, however successful, can complete the self once and forever. Our lives, instructs Nietzsche, are processes that end only with death or from that moment when we lose the basic human capabilities required for self-making. Until then, a person should view herself as an elegant artist whose greatest creation is the character she continues to refine.

Reinvent yourself

To prepare to even approximate a higher human type, we must pass through “three metamorphoses” of discipline, defiance, and creation. The spirit, like a camel, flees into the desert to bear enormous burdens (the process of social construction); the spirit, like a lion, must transform itself into a master, a conqueror who releases its own freedom by destroying traditional prohibitions (the process of deconstruction of and liberation from the past); but the lion cannot create new values, so the spirit must transform itself into a child, whose playful innocence, ability to forget, and capability for creative games signals the spirit’s willing its own will (the

processes of re-imagination and re-creation) (Z I, “On the Three Metamorphoses”). This describes the full process of Nietzschean becoming—recurrent deconstruction, re-imagination, and re-creation—the virtues of the grand striver.

Embrace an ideal

Nietzsche offers a sketch of the process that higher human types might undergo and a host of general attributes they might embody:

- (a) *Rejoice in Contingency and Ambiguity*: we should nurture the ability to marginalize but not eliminate negative and destructive impulses within ourselves, and to transfigure them into joyous affirmation of all aspects of life; understand and celebrate the radical contingency, finitude, and fragility of ourselves, our institutions and the cosmos itself; and regard life itself as fully and merely natural, as embodying no higher meaning or value.
- (b) *Nurture a Pure Spirit and Appreciation of Process*: we should harbor little or no resentment toward others or toward the human condition; confront the world in immediacy and with a sense of vital connection; refuse to avert our gaze from a tragic world-view and, instead, find value not in eventual happiness, as conceived by academic philosophers, but in the activities and processes themselves.
- (c) *Pursue Growth and Overcome Obstacles*: we should refuse to supplicate oneself before great people of the past but, instead, accept their implicit challenge to go beyond them; give style to our character by transforming our conflicting internal passions into a disciplined yet dynamic unity; facilitate high culture by sustaining a favorable environment for the rise of great individuals; strive for excellence through self-overcoming that honors the recurrent flux of the cosmos by refusing to accept a “finished” self as constitutive of personal identity; and recognize that release from the tasks at hand are found only in death. Given the human condition, high energy is more important than a final, fixed goal. The mantra of “challenge, struggle, overcoming, and growth,” animating and transfiguring perpetual internal conflict, replaces prayers for redemption to supernatural powers. Part of our life struggle is to confront and overcome the last man within each of us, to hold our internal “dwarf” at bay.

If possible, aspire to perfection

Under philosophical doctrines categorized as “perfectionism” nurturing and refining the properties constitutive of human nature define the good life. Human beings should strive to maximize their higher potentials. But perfectionism need not and should not presuppose that *attaining* perfection in this regard is possible. Thus, Nietzsche is not a perfectionist in the sense that he believes that human nature is perfectible or that the majority of human beings will maximize their higher potentials or that there is one specific final goal to which all human beings should aspire or even that human beings can attain a final goal or constitute a finished product; but he is a perfectionist in a more modest sense.

Nietzsche’s perfectionism is individualistic and aristocratic. As such, he does not intend that his normative message be embraced by everyone. In fact, he speaks only to the few who have the potential to understand fully the tragic nature of life yet affirm life in all its dimensions. The crucial ingredients that define higher human beings, for Nietzsche, are the capability of enduring great suffering and turning it to practical advantage; the impulse to exert high energy and enthusiasm into projects requiring uncommon creativity; and full participation in the ongoing process of personal deconstruction-reimagination-re-creation. For the greatest among us, our paramount artistic project is crafting a grand self.

Nietzsche understands that greatness necessarily involves suffering and the overcoming of grave obstacles (BGE 225, 228). He evaluates peoples, individuals, and cultures by their ability to transform suffering and tragedy to spiritual advantage. We cannot eliminate suffering, but we can use it creatively. Suffering and resistance can stimulate and nourish a robust will to power. By changing our attitude toward suffering from pity to affirmation, we open ourselves to greatness. For Nietzsche, joy and strength trump the “happiness” of the herd, which is too often grounded in the values of last men.

Concerns

Although often inspiring, Nietzsche’s prescriptions must be modified because they are excessively aristocratic. For example, according to Nietzsche, my goal, as a person who cannot plausibly argue that he is a higher human type from a Nietzschean perspective (at best, I am only a member of the “scholarly oxen” class) should be expending my time, effort, and resources to advance the interests and perfectionist quest of the greatest exemplars in my society: “Mankind must work continually to produce

individual great human beings—this and nothing else is its task . . . How can your life, the individual life, retain the highest value? . . . only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable specimens” (UM, “Schopenhauer as Educator, 6; see also, BGE 126, 199, 265, GS 23) and “The essential characteristic of a good and healthy aristocracy . . . [is] that it accepts with a good conscience the sacrifice of untold human beings who, *for its sake*, must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings, to slaves, to instruments” (BGE 258). In sum, under the standard interpretation of his writings, Nietzsche’s perfectionism instructs the vast majority of us to devote ourselves only to nurturing the excellences of the great exemplars in our society and empowers the great exemplars to embrace our sacrifices and use our services with a good conscience.

While Nietzsche recognizes that insofar as all human beings embody the will to power, and power is the standard of excellence, all human beings have some value.² But he grades the quantity and quality of value by aristocratic criteria that conclude that the masses have value (beyond minimum species worth) only insofar as they serve a few “great” people who in turn care about the masses only to the extent that the masses can serve them. Even if we softened Nietzsche’s view by adding intermediate principles that recognize a hierarchy of graded degrees of excellence, the problem persists. The intermediate principles would give more reason to care for the “non-great” to the degree, however slight, to which they approach greatness, but would still not satisfy basic egalitarian inclinations. Nietzsche seemingly celebrates accomplishments and creative greatness by severing them from the lives that sustain them. Nietzsche ignores concrete human beings and wrongly amplifies artistic, philosophical, musical, scientific, and military creation in the abstract. He apparently would willingly sacrifice human lives for great works.

Nietzsche’s seemingly fatuous aristocratism and reptilian indifference to the lives of the masses are the low point of his work. All human beings, mediocre or potentially great, need a deep sense of purpose in their lives. Nietzsche would have us believe that such purpose should center on becoming great or serving those who can become great, where “greatness” translates to the creation of cultural artifacts and a vague type of self-mastery. Nietzsche may well be charged with focusing excessively on the self to the exclusion of real intimacy and community. We must find meaning, one would suppose, outside the self and beyond cultural creations. We need communal involvements in causes greater than nurturing cultural superstars. Would Nietzsche have us believe that Mother Teresa’s life—at least the part spent ministering to the poor and diseased—was in vain?

Was she only the queen of the herd? Did she merely waste time resuscitating the replaceable?

Nietzsche too easily identifies the masses with fungibility, as if all non-great human beings are akin to sparrows whose lives are indistinguishable. But, contrary to Nietzsche, greatness is not found only in art, philosophy, music, and science. Greatness is often embodied by those whose lives are among the simplest and who lack public renown. Such greatness is not focused on Nietzschean creativity or the trendy donning and discarding of personal masks. Instead, it is centered on love, caring, making the world a better place by deeply influencing those around you in uniquely positive ways, speaking to our higher instincts rather than obsessing about power and domination. Our choices are not simply herd conformity or Nietzschean greatness.

Accordingly, greatness comes in more forms than Nietzsche suggests. As reflective people grow, they come to realize that there are heroes all around them. Men and women of strength, honor, and courage who are capable of stunning self-sacrifice because they perceive themselves as part of a wider subjectivity, perhaps as a link in a generational chain that often stretches from an old country to the new. They are the giants upon whose shoulders many of us stood. Heroes do not always get their names in the newspapers; they do not always create great art, music, philosophy, or science. While Nietzsche rants and raves about the herd, and self-servingly positions himself above it, many of us will retain our faith in the immediacy of flesh-and-blood and in redeeming intimacy.

While we should not easily disparage the life of the interior, it is woefully insufficient for engaging the world. Private fulfillment is less purposeful than public involvement that requires passionate identification with particular communities. Such activity, horror of horrors, means mingling with the herd. Human beings have a need for belonging and much fear, insecurity, selfishness, and anxiety arise from the frustration of that need. This need does not flow from a herd instinct, at least not in a pejorative sense, but is a prerequisite for a highly textured and meaningful life. The lack of a robust sense of belonging undermines the development of the self.

Suppose that a person, Rizzo, through uncommon effort, will, and determination actualizes most of her higher human capabilities. The final product is someone who is only average or perhaps a smidgen above average when judged by Nietzschean vectors of creativity, zest for adventure, high artistic production, and the like. Rizzo has (nearly) maximized her positive potentials given her innate talents, initial starting position, and early socialization. For the sake of comparison, let's stipulate that she has

attained, say, 90% of her higher human capabilities. She has become (nearly) all that she could possibly be. Her neighbor, Leonardo, exerts less effort, will, and determination; he fails to actualize many of his higher human capabilities. But Leonardo enjoyed distinct advantages over Rizzo in terms of innate talents, initial starting position, and early socialization. As a result, although he attains, say, only 67% of his capabilities, Leonardo, when judged by Nietzschean vectors is clearly well above average in terms of final product. Leonardo has become only about two-thirds of what he could possibly be, but this still places him ahead of Rizzo when judged in terms of creativity, zest for adventure, high artistic production, and the like.

The question for Nietzsche is this: Who is the higher human type—the “average” person who became such by nearly maximizing her positive potentials or the “well above average” person who was blessed with much greater innate talents but developed only two-thirds of his positive potentials? The case for Rizzo is clear: she accomplished nearly everything she could possibly attain given her nature and environment; she became virtually all she could be; what more can we ask of a human being? The case for Leonardo lies in final product: he is simply more accomplished than Rizzo; perhaps Rizzo deserves a round of applause—in the same way that a donkey who gave its all in a thoroughbred race only to lose by three-quarters of mile merits a cheer for attaining its personal best time—but Rizzo’s best simply pales before Leonardo’s superior development even if we can reasonably claim that Leonardo underachieved (that he failed to become what he might and should have become given his innate talents and initial starting position).

The choice is between measuring greatness by (a) achieving one’s maximum positive potential (the Rizzo standard) or by (b) one’s overall positive development as such (the Leonardo standard). Nietzsche, it would seem, would be far more likely to embrace the Leonardo standard. In the instant case, he would surely conclude that neither Rizzo nor Leonardo is a higher human type—both fall short of Nietzsche’s highest aspirations. But when ordering the rank of human beings, Nietzsche seems to invoke the Leonardo standard. For Nietzsche, becoming all that one could possibly become is woefully insufficient for greatness in those cases where innate talents are ordinary. The higher human types are such by their exceptional attainments—as judged by Nietzschean vectors. Probably the greatest among us must have Leonardo’s talents and gifts combined with Rizzo’s drive and diligence, but surely to qualify as a higher human type invoking the Rizzo standard is insufficient in Nietzsche’s view.

Perhaps by jettisoning Nietzsche's commitment to the Leonardo standard we can salvage his general trajectory about the quest for human perfection. Much of what Nietzsche says resonates with modern readers. For example, Nietzsche insists that we understand fully the tragic dimensions of life and accept the challenges of cosmic meaninglessness. He unmasks the conceits and disguises of dominant society, and forces us to confront the "truth." He casts suspicion where smug assurance had reigned, and reminds us that striving toward worthwhile goals is accompanied by meaningful and valuable hardship. Nietzsche counsels love, laughter, and joy where resentment, mendacity, and envy had prevailed. He seeks disciples among the strong, hard, courageous, and creative, and then he implores them to go beyond his teaching. He insists that the cosmos is inherent meaningless, but emphasizes that the creation and imposition of value and meaning on our world is part of the human quest. Most important, Nietzsche underscores that a human life is an ongoing process that resists final fulfillment.

Having abandoned Nietzsche's aristocratic convictions and having replaced the Leonardo standard of measuring human perfection with the Rizzo standard, we are prepared to embark on our Nietzschean journey. In order to do so, we must now examine Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905-1980) understanding of human freedom.

2. Relish Freedom: Jean-Paul Sartre

"Most people do not really want freedom, because freedom involves responsibility, and most people are frightened of responsibility."

— Sigmund Freud

To what extent, if any, are human beings free and thereby responsible for their choices and actions? Are ultimate justifications that underwrite those choices and actions available to us? What implications for how we should live follow from our freedom? How is our approach to freedom critical to the characters that we construct?

For Sartre, we are living in good faith to the extent that we accept reality and assume our freedom. Human beings cannot choose not to choose.³ Freedom is the basis of our actions; we have the power to change. The anxiety often accompanying our deliberation about options arises from the lack of ultimate justifications for our decisions. Sartre ratifies Nietzsche: We live in a thoroughly conditional world and we are thoroughly contingent beings. The world could be otherwise. We could be otherwise. No pre-ordained master plan underwrites the universe or human choice. Lacking absolute grounds for our decisions, we must take recurrent

leaps of faith. Faith is understood in this context as maintaining robust belief and conviction, and resolutely choosing and acting in the face of radical uncertainty. A salutary sense of freedom is empowering, but is also a mixed blessing. The absence of enduring foundations that might guide human choice makes us completely responsible for the people we are becoming. No legitimate excuses are available to soften our burden or ease our responsibility.

For Sartre, human beings do not have a fixed nature. We are free, we choose, and we act on those choices. We are responsible for our actions and craft a self through them. Human beings are nothing else but the totality of their choices and actions, which make us who we are becoming. No necessary or inevitable grounds for our choices and actions are available to us. Thus, no ultimate justifications inform what we do or who we become. We are condemned to our freedom in that we cannot choose not to choose.

Sartre famously considers a moral dilemma involving a French youth during World War II. The young man senses a deep duty to join the military and help defend his country against Nazi aggression. But his mother is ill and needs him to remain at home. What should he do? According to Sartre, no moral code can generate the right answer. The young man will experience regret and a sense of moral failure regardless of his decision. The French youth must decide one way or the other, with full knowledge that no ultimate justification is available. He is free to decide either way. He must take responsibility for the decision he makes.

The process of exercising our freedom requires a radical conversion kindled by profound experiences of anguish. Anxiety reminds us that we are without excuses, but also without ultimate justifications; it reminds us that we must decide our future in confrontation with possibilities. We know we are free because of our experience of anxiety. Freedom is the burden we bear for our choices. Choosing and acting in the face of radical uncertainty requires a leap of faith. Our actions concern not only our interests but affect wider society, even the whole of humanity. Self-conscious choices are commitments that mold the people we are becoming. We must pursue interests, make commitments, and invest our energy in projects as our way of creating meaning through action. We attain no fixed, final goals, but if Sartre is correct, such a life is more genuine than not. To lead an intense, mostly genuine life, then, is a worthy human goal. We should all be so fortunate to attain that end.