

Nietzschean Self-Cultivation

Connecting His Virtues to His Ethical Ideal

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1 Introduction: Two Puzzles in Nietzsche's Moral Philosophy

Interpretations of Nietzsche as a virtue theorist have proliferated in recent years as commentators have sought to read him as a modern eudaimonistic philosopher while also attempting to show what makes his contribution to this tradition valuable and distinctive.¹ While some commentators still contend that interpreting Nietzsche as a eudaimonist is antithetical to his overtly-stated philosophical aims,² over the last decade there has been an upsurge of support for such readings, especially from commentators who emphasise what they claim is the pervasive influence of the Hellenistic tradition on his work. Keith Ansell-Pearson has argued that Epicurus was a key influence on Nietzsche's middle period, for example; whereas Michael Ure has claimed that the Stoic thought of Seneca and Epictetus was also highly influential.³ Nevertheless, even those commentators who agree that Nietzsche can be informatively situated, or is even best situated, within the Hellenistic tradition cannot agree on two seemingly-intractable puzzles which any virtue-theoretical reading must solve in order to give a full account of his moral philosophy. The puzzles can be stated as follows:

¹ Harcourt 2007; Harris 2015, 2017; Swanton 1998, 2015.

² Annas 2015; Berry 2015: 369; Foot 2002: 69–79.

³ Ansell-Pearson 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Ure 2007, 2008, 2009. Regarding the other Hellenistic schools see Jessica Berry's and Melissa Lane's accounts of the respective importance of Nietzsche's engagements with the Sceptic and Cynic Hellenistic schools (Berry 2004, 2010; Lane 2007).

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Puzzle 1: Which character traits does Nietzsche endorse as virtues?

Puzzle 2: What is Nietzsche's ethical ideal?

This article offers an exegetical strategy to shed light on both puzzles, especially the first one regarding which character traits Nietzsche endorses as virtues which, as we shall see, is tougher to answer by a straightforward appeal to his texts. To elucidate this puzzle, I will propose that his approving comments regarding excellence-based moral philosophy indicate that his own ethics is also structured in terms of an ethical ideal with a requisite set of virtues which, following his ancient philosophical influences, he views as fundamentally connected. As Julia Annas notes, one the most distinctive 'assumptions which ancient theories make [is] the relationship of [our] virtues to our final end',⁴ and given Nietzsche's interest in, and apparent endorsement of, ancient eudaimonism – especially compared to his invariably scathing remarks on the modern deontological and utilitarian traditions – we have reason to think that he shares this view.⁵ What is significant for this article, however, is that Nietzsche's commitment to a kind of eudaimonism modelled on the ancient world offers a potential way to solve both puzzles. If his virtues and ethical ideal are connected in a similar way to ancient eudaimonistic theories, then understanding his ethical ideal allows us to infer which character traits he endorses as virtues, and vice versa. Although it might be objected that a method tackling both puzzles in tandem would be unworkable if their solutions were contained in each other, in what follows I will show that Nietzsche's extensive comments on his ethical ideal of 'becoming what one is' positions us in a strong position to infer which character traits he prizes most highly. I will call these character traits 'virtues of self-cultivation'.

1.1 The Puzzle of Nietzsche's Virtues

Early in the debate Thomas Brobjer argued that Nietzsche's virtues are adequately captured by his two lists of 'cardinal virtues' which he offers in his middle and late periods. In *D* 556, Nietzsche tells us that 'honesty', 'bravery', 'magnanimity', and 'politeness' are the four virtues he prizes most highly; whereas five years later in *BGE* 284, he modifies his list to 'courage', 'insight', 'sympathy', and 'solitude'.⁶ Contra Brobjer, although adopting a similarly textual approach, Robert Guay argues that 'curiosity' [*Neugierde*], 'multiplicity', and 'cruelty' should be regarded Nietzschean virtues because Nietzsche explicitly names them as such in the 'Our Virtues' chapter in *BGE*.⁷ Perhaps in response to the incommensurability of these lists, both with each other and with the many other character traits that Nietzsche names as virtues, Robert Solomon observes that 'many of Nietzsche's virtues are disjunctive', so that we would need to employ what he calls a 'cubist hypothesis' to

⁴ Annas 1993: 12.

⁵ See Harcourt 2007 for an persuasive account of how Nietzsche's occasional attacks of 'eudaimonism' in his published works betray a fundamental commitment to this position.

⁶ Brobjer 1995: 175.

⁷ Guay 2005: 74.

explain them.⁸ Solomon proposes that in addition to the numerous traditional virtues that Nietzsche endorses,⁹ there are also a set of unnamed character traits that should be considered ‘distinctively Nietzschean virtues’, including ‘exuberance’, ‘style’, ‘depth’, ‘risk-taking’, ‘fatalism’, ‘aestheticism’, ‘playfulness’, and ‘solitude’. Of course even understanding how these wide-ranging virtues could be said to function together would require sophisticated exegetical work, but over a decade on from Solomon’s observation scholars in this area have even added additional virtues to his original list. This is well illustrated by the articles in the 2015 special issue on Nietzsche and the virtues from the *Journal of Value Inquiry*. Here many of the top commentators in the field pick out strikingly different kinds of virtues that they believe to be quintessentially Nietzschean: Christine Daigle tells us that the ‘virtue of authenticity is paramount’, whereas virtues relating expressly to ‘life affirmation’ (Bamford), ‘honesty’ (Harper), ‘truthfulness’ (Jenkins), ‘patience’ (Pianalto), and ‘proficiency’ (Reginster) are singled out as vitally important by other contributors.¹⁰ So what is the source of this disagreement? Should we blame it on textual inconclusively or on an overwillingness within the scholarship to take the character traits that Nietzsche lists as virtues at face value?

While Nietzsche clearly thinks that some character traits are always virtues (the ‘cardinal’ virtues of ‘courage’ (*Muthes*) or ‘bravery’ (*Tapferkeit*) mentioned in both his lists, for example), there is also an important theoretical reason for the diversity of virtues Nietzsche countenances, one which has motivated scholars such as Mark Alfano¹¹ and Lester Hunt¹² to propose that Nietzsche is committed to what I will term a ‘relativity of virtue thesis’ (*RV*), which can be formulated thus:

RV: Character traits can be virtues or vices depending on whether they interact positively or negatively with the rest of the psycho-physical features of the individual.¹³

⁸ Solomon 2004: 173.

⁹ Solomon 2004: 159. Solomon refers to ‘courage’, ‘generosity’, ‘temperance’, ‘honesty’, ‘honour/integrity’, ‘justice’, ‘pride’, ‘courtesy’, ‘friendship’, ‘wittiness’ as a ‘somewhat traditional list’ of virtues, although he cautions that we should not assume that ‘what Nietzsche means by these virtue names is what other philosophers, including Aristotle, meant by them’ (2004: 147–48).

¹⁰ See Daigle 2015: 405. On ‘life affirmation’ (Bamford 2015: 437); ‘honesty’ (Harper 2015: 367); ‘proficiency’ (Reginster 2015: 453). See also ‘truthfulness’ (Jenkins 2016: 1); ‘patience’ (Pianalto 2016: 141).

¹¹ For Alfano: ‘virtue consists in the alignment of one’s drives, that is, in the fulfilment of one’s type’ (2015b: 435).

¹² For Hunt: ‘virtues belong uniquely to oneself. One discovers which virtues are one’s own by discovering the goals toward which one’s psychic energies should be directed’ (1991: 113).

¹³ Rendered in Nietzsche’s terminology, our ‘drives’ are virtuous or vicious depending on how they interact in terms of our overall ‘constellation of drives’. In *D* 560, for example, Nietzsche urges ‘dispos[ing] of one’s drives like a gardener and [...] cultivat[ing] the shoots of anger, pity, curiosity, vanity as productively and profitably as a beautiful fruit tree on a trellis’, and in what follows I will use the terms ‘drive’ and ‘character trait’ interchangeably, following the influential ‘dispositional’ account of drives in the recent scholarship. Christopher Janaway defines a ‘dispositional’ interpretation as one which views Nietzschean drives as ‘relatively stable tendenc[ies] to activate behaviour of some kind’ (Janaway 2007: 214). Janaway’s dispositional interpretation is shared by Cox 1999: 126–27; Hunt 113–115; Schacht 1983: 279–80. For an extensive overview of this literature see Katsafanas 2013: 727–32.

Versions of *RV* feature throughout Nietzsche's oeuvre, with its first clear articulation occurring at *GS* 120 and perhaps its maturest and most sophisticated one occurring in *AC* 11 (and in concomitant *Nachlass* notes). In *GS* 120 Nietzsche modifies Ariston of Chios's dictum that "'virtue is the health of the soul'" to "'*your* virtue is the health of *your* soul'" (emphases added), explaining that only by locating the 'virtue peculiar to each man in [the] health [of his soul] can we see that health 'in one person [can be] the opposite of health in another.' For Nietzsche, just as a universalist account of what is healthy for all individuals is unsustainable, so too is a universalist account of which character traits are virtues. Although *GS* 120 offers an early version of *RV*, Nietzsche puts the doctrine in increasingly stronger terms in the post-1886 work. In *KSA* 12 7[6] [*WP* 326] he tells us that:

Virtues are as dangerous as vices in so far as one lets them rule over one as authorities and laws from without and does not first produce them out of oneself, as one should do, as one's most personal self-defense and necessity, as conditions of precisely *our own* existence and growth, which we recognize and acknowledge independently of whether other men grow with us under similar or different conditions.¹⁴

Set out in these terms Nietzsche's idea appears straightforward enough: those character traits that we should view as virtues, he argues, must strive to do nothing else but provide the unique conditions of '*our own* existence and growth'.¹⁵ Indeed, there seems to be *prima facie* plausibility to this position. When considering non-moral excellences, for example, we can readily understand that the character traits for creative excellence in a miniaturist and a watercolourist necessarily diverge. For the miniaturist, fastidious attention to detail, diligence, and patience are the character traits which will be vital; whereas for the watercolourist it is quickness, lightness of touch, and sensitivity to mixing colour that are to be valued. In this case we can readily understand how specific character traits would be necessary conditions for the creative flourishing – his or her 'existence and growth' as Nietzsche puts it – in the life of an individual with certain artistic aims, although not in the life of another. But for Nietzsche's position to be philosophically interesting and distinctive it must extend to the moral domain. How does Nietzsche's position fare when we consider it in the context of moral virtues? So far, stated in terms of non-moral virtues such as creative excellences, no ancient eudaimonist or any contemporary virtue ethicist would disagree with in this position, but they would flinch upon applying this insight to the moral realm. Aristotle, for instance,

¹⁴ In *AC* 11 Nietzsche attributes this desire for homogeneity regarding virtue as a feature of Kant's moral philosophy. He writes: 'Whatever is not a condition for life *harms* it: a virtue that comes exclusively from a feeling of respect for the concept of 'virtue', as Kant would have it, is harmful. 'Virtue', 'duty', 'goodness in itself', goodness that has been stamped with the character of the impersonal and universally valid – these are fantasies and manifestations of decline, of the final exhaustion of life [...]. The most basic laws of preservation and growth require the opposite: that everyone should invent his own virtues, his own categorical imperatives.'

¹⁵ There is some ambiguity here. In the two passages cited above, Nietzsche refers to individual idiosyncrasy, although elsewhere he refers to a broader conception of anthropological character type ('masters', 'slaves', etc.). But whether he thinks virtuous character traits depend on an individual's idiosyncrasies or depend on its anthropological 'type', does not alter his commitment to *RV*.

famously makes room for the idea that Milo the wrestler will need more sustenance than the average person, while also thinking that his ethical conduct must be able to be judged as virtuous or vicious in precisely the same way as the rest of us.¹⁶

In contrast to Aristotle, Nietzsche's own examples indicate that he is committed to *RV* applying to the moral realm as well as to non-moral excellences. We see this in his discussion of the theological virtue of chastity in *TSZ*. Responding to the question, 'Do I advise chastity?', Zarathustra replies: 'In some chastity is a virtue, but in many it is almost a vice'. As he explains, prescribing chastity for those whose sexual drives are naturally strong typically results in 'sensuality, leer[ing] with envy out of everything they do'. This can be avoided, so his argument runs, by recognising that it can be virtuous for those with a strong sexual urges to succumb. At this point Nietzsche's remarks may bring to mind the notorious provocateur in the ancient debates on virtue, the sophist Meno, at least to how he is characterised in the eponymous Platonic dialogue. Here, much to Socrates' consternation, Meno tells us that there are different moral virtues for 'men', 'women', 'children', 'the elderly', as well as for 'freemen and slaves'.¹⁷ For Meno, different character traits can be considered virtues depending on the role of the individual concerned. But while this might appear to be similar to *RV*, if we examine it closely we can see that it is not. Meno's position is that the character traits we regard as virtues or vices in specific individuals depends on their *role*, so he offers us a *role*-dependant model of virtue which bears more similarity to the way virtue is related to social roles in Confucianism or how contemporary virtue ethicists have explored how professional roles can be connected to certain supererogatory virtues.¹⁸ Nietzsche's position is more radical. He does not think that the psycho-physical features of an individual depends on its role, but that each individual's conditions of 'existence and growth' are uniquely calibrated to its, as he puts it, 'constellation of drives' as well as other environmental particularities.¹⁹

One interesting upshot of distinguishing between Meno's 'role-dependant' position and the one Nietzsche gives in *GS* 120 and *KSA* 12 7[6], is that it gives a reason to be wary of the version of *RV* proposed by Alfano. As we saw above (footnote 11), for Alfano, virtuous character traits are those contributing to the 'fulfilment of one's type'.²⁰ Because Alfano thinks types are fundamentally important to Nietzsche's conception of virtue, he situates the notion of type at the centre of his version of *RV*. Alfano writes:

Nietzsche held a person-type-relative unity of virtue thesis, according to which what's intrinsically good for a particular person is to develop and act from particular character traits that "fit" her type.²¹

¹⁶ 1106a24–1106b7.

¹⁷ 71e–72a.

¹⁸ See Ames (2011) for an introduction to role ethics in Confucianism. See Oakley and Cocking (2001) for an overview of the contemporary literature on virtues and professional roles.

¹⁹ *WP* 551; cf. *AO* 58, *WS* 551, *D* 199.

²⁰ Alfano 2015b: 435.

²¹ Alfano 2015b: 418.

But as we have seen by reading Nietzsche's articulation of *RV* alongside similar versions of it from the ancient world, the former differs from the latter because its range of applicability is strictly limited. Nietzsche is not concerned with the virtues that apply to a particular role or – as Alfano would have it – 'type' of individual; rather, both versions of *RV* we cited above explicitly state that a unique constellation of character traits should be considered as an individual's virtues.²² Moreover, when we discuss Nietzsche's account of 'uniqueness' in the next section, we will see that his emphasis on bringing out what is distinctive in a particular individual further disqualifies the view that virtues are character traits exemplifying a certain type.

From our discussion of *RV* we can now see how Nietzsche differs from ancient eudaimonists and why he endorses a plurality of character traits as virtues in his texts. We can also see why the scholarship in this area remains inconclusive. To search for a definitive list of Nietzsche's virtues will be a fruitless task until we acknowledge that there is a substantive reason why his virtues are incommensurately plural. Only by understanding that Nietzsche is committed to *RV*: that is, first, that he believes that virtues must be calibrated with one's goals and abilities, and second that he regards these abilities and goals as varying amongst individuals, can we come to see why he insists that the very same character trait can be a virtue in one individual and a vice in another. As we shall see, it is the presence of *RV* in both his accounts of the virtues and his ethical ideal that requires that we tackle the question of the identity of his virtues and his ethical ideal in tandem.

1.2 The Puzzle of Nietzsche's Ethical Ideal

In Section 1.1 I claimed that puzzles 1 and 2 can only be solved together, and in 2.1 I suggested that this is because of Nietzsche's commitment to *RV*. In the latter section I also noted that it is fortunate that there is less scholarly disagreement on the question of Nietzsche's ethical ideal as this avoids the solution to one puzzle being contained in the other in a way that would cut us off from accessing either. Regarding the question of Nietzsche's ethical ideal, commentators have either posited that he is committed to an abstract ideal – power [*Macht*], autonomy, unity of character [*Einheit*], the pursuit of knowledge, have all been suggested²³ – or they have proposed more quintessentially Nietzschean ideals such as the 'Free Spirit' [*Frei Geist*], the 'Sovereign Individual', *amor fati*, or the *Übermensch*.²⁴ In addition

²² This is clear in the English translations we have cited above, but Nietzsche's emphases in the German make this even more explicit: in *GS* 120 he stresses that virtues must be our own ('Deine Tugend ist die Gesundheit deiner Seele'), which he re-emphasises in *KSA* 12 7[6] ('Bedingungen genau unserer eigenen Existenz und Wachstum').

²³ Swanton has argued for power as Nietzsche's ideal ('Nietzsche's conception of ethics (properly conceived) as being (on my view) essentially connected with "will to power" through ideas of strong, healthy productivity and creativity.' Swanton 2015: 31); Gemes proposes autonomy (2009); Nehamas (1985) and May (1999) both propose *Einheit*.

²⁴ Most pointedly, in the blurb to the second volume of *HH*, Nietzsche writes: 'This book marks the conclusion of a series of writings by FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE whose common goal is to erect a new image and ideal of the free spirit.' Also see Daigle who writes: 'The overall goal of these works was to draw a new portrait and ideal of the free spirit. While Nietzsche will later reject this ideal as too moral, an examination of his middle period works shows that the free spirit is Nietzsche's ethical ideal at that time'

to these ideals, recent scholarship has directed much attention to Nietzsche's enigmatic ideal of 'becoming what one is', an ideal that shares features with both the abstract and concrete ideals listed above. Nietzsche is of course an extremely fluid thinker, so it may be misleading to assume that his ethical ideal is stable or even singular. His abstract formulations of the ideals of power, health, flourishing, etc. as ideals clearly receive different levels of attention across his oeuvre, whereas their more concrete instantiations – 'Free Spirits', *Übermenschen* – are even more period-specific, often appearing and disappearing without trace. Furthermore, we should be aware that some of his ideals operate as synonyms. Nietzsche closely associates the abstract ideals of flourishing, health, and power with one another, as well as the concrete ideals of the Free Spirit and 'becoming what one is'.²⁵ Despite these caveats, are any of these ideals more plausible or persistent than others, either on the basis of textual evidence or by being persuasively argued for by the scholarship? We can answer this in the affirmative, since both the textual evidence and the recent scholarship indicate that Nietzsche can be said to be consistently committed to his ideal of 'becoming what one is'.

Three textual reasons support viewing 'becoming what one is' as Nietzsche's chief ethical ideal: first, is the frequency and longevity of his use of the formulation; second, is the strategically important places the formulation occupies in his oeuvre; third – perhaps most importantly – is the fact that he explicitly uses it as an ethical imperative, directly urging his readers to take it up. Examples of all three abound. Nietzsche first uses the imperative in his 1860s juvenilia,²⁶ and from *GS* onwards he strongly connects it to his own philosophical identity. In *GS* 270, he asks his readers 'What does your conscience say?', answering with the rejoinder "'You should become what you are"', and in *GS* 335 he uses '*wir*' [we] to collectively identify both himself and his readers with those who pursue the ideal, telling us that:

We [*Wir*] [...] *want to become those we are* – human beings that are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.²⁷

In a similar vein, three years later in *TSZ* the eponymous hero is addressed with a version of the formulation, 'Zarathustra, who you are and must become' [*'Zarathustra, wer du bist und werden musst'*] and, in the fourth and final part of the same work, Zarathustra – who could be fairly described as Nietzsche's

Footnote 24 continued

(Daigle 2015: 405). As we will see, as well as stressing that Nietzsche's Free Spirit should be considered as his ethical ideal, Daigle also explicitly connects this to his ideal of becoming what one is (see footnote 25 below).

²⁵ Daigle argues that Nietzsche's ideal of the Free Spirit and his ideal of 'becoming what one is' are connected, and are just different iterations of the same thing. She writes: 'The free spirit is the being who seeks authentic becoming and thereby *becomes what and who she is* thanks to the virtues of authenticity and probity that she cultivates.' [emphasis added] (2015: 405–06).

²⁶ For Nietzsche's first use of the formulation in a letter to Erwin Rohde see Förster-Nietzsche and Schöll 1923: 52. For other early uses see *RWB* 1, *HH* 225, *HH* 263, *AO* 227. The imperative derives from Pindar's enigmatic phrase, γένοι' οἷος ἐσσί μαθὼν [become the one you have learnt to be]. See Hamilton 2004, Babich 2003, and Blue 2016: 274–76. For Pindar's original lines, see Snell and Maehler 1987: 72.

²⁷ *GS* 335.

mouthpiece – takes up the formulation as his own motto, declaiming ‘Become what you are!’ [‘*Werde, der du bist!*’]. Finally, most famously, Nietzsche uses ‘become what one is’ as the subtitle to his own autobiography, changing the imperative into a description to form: ‘How One Becomes What One Is’.²⁸ A synopsis of Nietzsche’s remarks on ‘becoming what one is’ reveals three overlapping themes:

- *Uniqueness*. Nietzsche tells us in *GS* 335 that ‘becoming what one is’ involves recognizing one’s inherent uniqueness (‘new, unique, incomparable’), and organising one’s life in a way that is deeply informed by one’s singularities (‘giving oneself laws’, ‘creating oneself’). This is by far the most constant theme in all Nietzsche’s articulations of the formulation. In *SE* 1 he tells us that it is vital we acknowledge the ‘law that every human being is a unique miracle’ (‘uniquely himself to every last movement of his muscles’, ‘strictly consistent in uniqueness’, and that ‘no imaginable chance will for a second time gather together into a unity so strangely variegated an assortment’). Furthermore, he implores us to accentuate our uniqueness in *GS* 304 (‘to do something [...] as well as *I* alone can!), and similarly in an allegorical passage taken from *TSZ* (republished in *EH*) Nietzsche tells us that it is vitally important to create an ethical ideal that does not slavishly imitate others but is uniquely one’s own (‘do not let a statue slay you’ / ‘only when you have denied me [by creating an ideal of your own] will I return to you’). As we will explore in the next section, uniqueness has two aspects: first, it refers to the configuration of one’s drives (for example to Richard Wagner’s complementary ‘two drives’ which Nietzsche suggests gave rise to the musician’s genius in *RWB* 2); second, it refers to the specific environmental milieu in which one lives (see Nietzsche’s analysis of *amor fati* and how his response to his own unique endowment and circumstances allowed him to ‘become what he is’ in *EH* ‘Clever’).
- *Conscience*. As we saw in *GS* 270, Nietzsche frequently tells us that ‘becoming what one is’ involves listening to one’s ‘intellectual conscience’ [*intellektuelles Gewissen*].²⁹ He notes in *GS* 335 that there are ‘there are a hundred ways in which you can listen to your conscience’. Actively listening to one’s conscience by interrogating its judgements is only possible by discerning the ‘conscience behind one’s “conscience”’,³⁰ Nietzsche tells us, which is the conscience that critically evaluates one’s subconscious motivations for action. This is because one’s ‘judgment “this is right” has a pre-history in [one’s] instincts, likes, dislikes, experiences, and lack of experiences’, and the conscience must adjudicate between competing sets of reasons, ignoring those that derive from habit or convention (‘all that you are now doing, thinking, desiring, is not you

²⁸ Such longevity of usage is rare in comparison to the other ethical ideals we have canvassed: the sovereign individual disappears without trace after it appears in *GM* II 2, the *Übermensch* only appears in the post-1882 work, while the Free Spirit – perhaps the nearest contender – seems to undergo significant critical revision in *BGE* compared its initially glowing exposition in the middle period.

²⁹ See also *GS* 335; cf. *GS* 2, 344, *SE* 1.

³⁰ *GS* 335.

yourself”), and prioritises those that relate to the task of ‘becoming what one is’.³¹

- *Courage*. Nietzsche invariably associates ‘becoming what one is’ with courage, telling us that this virtue is required in order to break the ‘chains of fear and convention’, and claiming that humans have an inherent tendency to timidity insofar as they embrace ‘conventionality’ and strive to avoid the ‘inconveniences’ with which ‘unconditional honesty and nakedness would burden them’.³² Interestingly he also connects courage to the two themes examined above, telling us that is required in order to acknowledge one’s ‘uniqueness’ and to follow the dictates of one’s ‘intellectual conscience’. Furthermore, as we saw when examining first-wave accounts on Nietzsche’s virtues, the two German synonyms for courage (*Muthes*) and bravery (*Tapferkeit*) always both appear in Nietzsche’s two lists of ‘cardinal virtues’.

Even this relatively cursory overview of Nietzsche’s remarks indicates that ‘becoming what one is’ is an important and long-lasting ideal for Nietzsche, and this has naturally been reflected in the reception of the formulation by the scholarship. Simon May tells us that of all the Nietzschean ideals which scholars have proposed ‘the ideal that best embodies Nietzsche’s new ethic [...] is “to become what one is”’, an ideal that May argues is more important than reaching ‘sovereign individuality’ (‘unattainable and undesirable’) and ‘affirming amor fati’ (‘neither necessary nor unique to “life-enhancement”’).³³ May is not alone here, as scholars from a wide range of theoretical positions concur that Nietzsche attaches explicit importance to ‘becoming what one is’, and that this must be reflected in any reading of his work.³⁴ While these scholars offer significantly different (and often ingenious) interpretations of the formulation, they all emphasise that 1) ‘becoming what one is’ is Nietzsche’s principle ideal, and 2) that it primarily involves expressing those highest aspects of one’s character that distinguish oneself from others. May’s interpretation of the formulation captures this succinctly:

To become “what one is” is [...] for an individual to actualize his or her highest possibilities – i.e. to find the most life-enhancing ways) in which someone with his or her particular endowments of nature, nurture, and life-circumstances (and hence particular historical inheritance) could live.³⁵

Without digressing into the precise details of May’s interpretation, we can say that his outline fits plausibly with the textual evidence we have examined above. Nietzsche’s ideal of ‘becoming what one is’ involves reaching one’s highest possibilities by accentuating our inherent uniqueness, understood as a mix of one’s factual life circumstances and one’s natural drives. ‘Becoming what one is’ involves discovering the specific conditions under which one can attain such an elevated

³¹ SE 1.

³² SE 1.

³³ May 1999: 107–08.

³⁴ Nehamas 1985; Alfano 2015a, b; Daigle 2015.

³⁵ May 1999: 108–09.

state, and then responding appropriately to the specificity and uniqueness of this ‘endowment’, understood summatively – to borrow May’s gloss – as one’s ‘nature, nurture, and life-circumstances’. But as well as fitting with the textual evidence, this interpretation shows why Nietzsche is committed to *RV* in his account of the virtues, that is, shows why the various character traits he considers to be virtues depend on the unique endowment of the individual who manifests them. How might this work? And is how is Nietzsche’s ideal of ‘becoming what one is’ distinctive from some of the other conceptions of flourishing which we have looked at from the ancient world?

2 Connecting Nietzsche’s Virtues to His Ethical Ideal

On the basis of the textual evidence and the recent scholarship we are in a better position to solve the puzzle concerning Nietzsche’s ethical ideal than the puzzle of which character traits he endorses as virtues. While the character traits Nietzsche explicitly endorses are diverse and wide-ranging – and those canvassed as likely candidates for his implicit endorsement by the scholarship are even more so – when he characterises his ethical ideal he is relatively consistent. As we have seen, there is strong textual evidence and scholarly agreement that ‘becoming what one is’ is one of Nietzsche’s most longstanding ideals, and that he views it as synonymous with other important ideals such as ‘free-spiritedness’. Furthermore, we have seen there is a scholarly consensus that an individual ‘becomes what it is’ by making the most of the unique specificities of its ‘endowment’ (its ‘nature, nurture, and life-circumstances’, in May’s terms). Understanding why the character traits Nietzsche advocates as virtues are connected to his ethical ideal involves revisiting *RV*. As we saw in 2.1, Nietzsche is committed to a version of *RV* that is unconnected to one’s ‘type’ because he thinks virtues provide the ‘conditions of precisely *our own* existence and growth’ both insofar as they are involved in accentuating the dimensions of our characters that are uniquely our own and insofar as they are instrumental in causing these dimensions of ourselves to flourish. Since these conditions are idiosyncratic (*‘our own’*), it makes sense to think of the character traits that do this as similarly disparate, which explains the wide variety of character traits which Nietzsche directly tells us are virtues, as well as the various character traits which have been adduced as Nietzschean virtues in the scholarship. For a character trait to be a Nietzschean virtue, it must capitalise on our individual idiosyncrasies, since it is the expression of these character traits, rather than the individual’s type, that we have seen are prioritised in Nietzsche’s ethical ideal. As we saw in our synopsis of ‘becoming what one is’ in the previous section, Nietzsche closely connects his conception of flourishing to the expression of our inherent ‘uniqueness’,³⁶ and time and time again stresses the importance of organising one’s life in such a way that this uniqueness is fostered (‘giving oneself laws’, ‘creating oneself’). Transposed into May’s terms, ‘becoming what one is’ involves living in the ‘most life-enhancing’ way by taking into account one’s ‘particular endowment’

³⁶ *SE* 1.

(‘nature, nurture, and life-circumstances’), so we should conclude it unsurprising that Nietzsche explicitly countenances a wide range of character traits as virtues in his texts. This means that Nietzsche is open on the question of *how* this ideal will manifest itself in the life of any given individual because he recognises – and typically goes to great lengths to emphasise – that individuals are endowed multifariously.³⁷ While Nietzsche is committed to the view that all individuals should strive for the same ethical ideal – that is, they must all strive to ‘become what they are’ – he believes it is necessary that each individual achieves this in its own idiosyncratic way. As anticipated in my discussion of ‘uniqueness’ above, this gives us a further reason to rule out Alfano’s suggestion that we should view virtue as expressing character traits that relate to an individual’s type. Not only is the term ‘type’ absent when Nietzsche discusses his virtues or ‘becoming what one is’, but he always animates his discussion with terms such as ‘uniqueness’, ‘ownmost’, ‘incomparableness’, language which effectively precludes Alfano’s contention that Nietzsche understands virtues as character traits exemplifying the quintessential features of one’s type.

To understand how Nietzsche envisages this process to function we must return to his allegorical remarks on the ‘On The Gift-Giving Virtue’ [*schenkenden Tugend*] passage in *TSZ*, which we examined when discussing ‘uniqueness’ in 2.2. Here Zarathustra warns his followers against imitating others (‘do not let a statue slay you’),³⁸ but also advises them against imitating himself (‘You say you believe in Zarathustra? But what matters Zarathustra?’). Finally he tells his disciples: ‘I bid you lose me and find yourselves’ because it is ‘only when you have all denied me will I return to you’.³⁹ Although encoded in allegory, Nietzsche’s message is clear: although Zarathustra is nominally an exemplar insofar as he is his disciples’ teacher, he only has this status insofar as he advocates that his disciples embark on a process of discovering their own ideal or, in other words, embark on a process of ‘becoming who they are’. Given what Nietzsche says about the singularity of each individual’s endowment, we can see why the character traits that allow each individual to do this will vary strikingly, as is stressed forcefully in Hunt’s account of *RV* (footnote 12). Hunt’s view is that *RV* explains the diversity of character traits that Nietzsche endorses as virtues because he thinks that ‘one’s virtues belong uniquely to oneself’.⁴⁰ Compared to Alfano, Hunt offers a narrower interpretation of the scope of *RV* because he views Nietzsche as regarding virtue as consisting in the *individual*

³⁷ *TI*, V, 6 provides a forceful characterisation of Nietzsche’s views of this: ‘let us think how naive it is to say “this is the way people should be!”’. Reality shows us an enchanting abundance of types, a lavish profusion of forms in change and at play: and some worthless idiot of a moralist sees all this and says: “no! people should be different from the way they are”!?’ (*TI*, V, 6).

³⁸ Nietzsche employs the statue analogy to illustrate an similar processes that aim to disrupt the status quo elsewhere: in his early lecture course on education he writes that ‘philologists have been trying, with ever-failing strength, to re-erect the fallen statue of Greek antiquity’, but due to the magnitude and splendour of the Greek ideal the ‘column is scarcely lifted from the ground when it falls down again, crushing the luckless wrights beneath it’ (*FEI* 2004: 75). Similarly in *EH* he writes: ‘I won’t be setting up any new idols; let the old ones learn what it means to have feet of clay. *Knocking over idols* (my word for ‘ideals’) – that is more my style’ (*EH*, Preface, 2).

³⁹ *TSZ* I, ‘Gift-Giving’.

⁴⁰ Hunt 1991: 113.

expression of a unique constellation of character traits, which gives a more plausible account of the textual evidence we have cited in 2.2 than Alfano's account of how one's virtues must be calibrated in terms of the type to which one belongs.

Nevertheless, even if we acknowledge that Nietzsche's ethical ideal commits him to endorsing a wide variety of individually-specific character traits, we should not understand these character traits as Nietzschean virtues in the full sense of the term because some of them will only be virtuous character traits in the context of a given individual's life. This means that we can say that while commentators may be right to say that Nietzsche often endorses, for example, 'honesty' (Harper), 'truthfulness' (Jenkins), 'patience' (Pinault), or 'proficiency' (Reginster), we should be wary of understanding any of these character traits as Nietzschean virtues *per se*. Since the character traits needed to 'become what one is' will vary depending on how a given individual's endowment governs the way it can actualise this ideal, the virtues cited by commentators apply, at best, to some individuals, and only in the specific contexts which Nietzsche mentions them. We saw this illustrated in Nietzsche's discussion of chastity. Here he emphasises that chastity can be a virtue or a vice depending on whether it fits with one's unique endowment of drives and particular environment, that is, in May's terms, the unique features of one's 'nature, nurture, and life-circumstances'. This flexibility also allows us to understand the times Nietzsche appears to vacillate in his appreciation of specific character traits; for example, despite his appraisals of 'patience' or 'truthfulness' (quintessential Nietzschean virtues for Pianalto and Jenkins respectively) he often explicitly criticises these traits, associating patience with the ascetic ideal⁴¹ or saying remarkably positive things about those who lie and dissemble.⁴² This suggests that 'patience' or 'truthfulness' are not fully-fledged Nietzschean virtues, but must be thought of as responding to – and depending on – one's endowment. As we have seen Nietzsche regards character traits that accentuate our 'particular endowment' as virtues, whereas he views those traits that ignore or stifle what is unique about ourselves as vices.

Before moving to examine the character traits that are best candidates for fully-fledged Nietzschean virtues, we should examine Hunt's answer to this aspect of the question, since he also recognises that '*some* traits [...] are always virtues', that is, 'there are some traits of character that all virtue-seeking individuals will need'.⁴³ Although Hunt does not think of such character traits as necessary precursors to 'becoming what one is', he is right to think that truly Nietzschean virtues can only be thought of as those character traits that all virtue-seeking individuals share. The problem with Hunt's account is that when he speculates on the identity of these so-called 'second-order virtues' he tells us these are listed by Nietzsche in the 'Our Virtues' chapter of *BGE*, effectively returning to Guay's reading of these virtues which we examined in 2.1. To facilitate his interpretation of the three virtues

⁴¹ *GM* III 26; cf. *BGE* 221.

⁴² *EH* 'Preface' 3. Here Nietzsche strongly implies that the virtues of honesty or truthfulness is *relative* to an individual's endowment, asking 'how much truth does a spirit *endure*, how much truth does it *dare*?'. His thought here is that an individual with a more robust endowment would be able to tolerate a greater degree of truth.

⁴³ Hunt 1991: 113.

Nietzsche mentions in this passage (curiosity, multiplicity, cruelty) as ‘second-order’ ones, however, Hunt is forced to engage in a lengthy exegetical analysis of the virtue of cruelty, which he interprets extremely liberally to give it scope to underlie the wide range of first-order character traits Nietzsche mentions. More worryingly, however, when reaching the limits of a plausible interpretation of this virtue, Hunt eventually adjusts his account of *RV* to bring it closer to a type-dependant account (reminiscent of Alfano’s), telling us that the kind of ‘second-order cruelty’ that Nietzsche cites as a virtue in *BGE* only applies to ‘a certain group of people [...] who are of the very highest rank’.⁴⁴ Although Hunt does not discuss curiosity and multiplicity, the other second-order virtues he cites, the disadvantage of viewing these character traits as underling all other first-order virtues is clear. Taking curiosity, for example, any plausible interpretation of this character trait as a second-order virtue must either interpret it so widely that it becomes unrecognisable from how it is ordinarily understood,⁴⁵ or we must construe curiosity in a more conventional and restricted way which precludes it from underlying the host of other first-order virtues Nietzsche mentions.

In the next section I will propose that a revised version of *RV* can solve the problem more simply and decisively than either Alfano and Hunt propose. To do this, I will circumscribe a new class of virtues – virtues of self-cultivation – that are specifically involved in attaining Nietzsche’s ideal of ‘becoming what one is’. These virtues are not the specific character traits that Nietzsche regards as ‘first-order’ virtues, nor do they resemble Hunt’s revisionary account of *BGE*, the so-called ‘second-order’ virtues of curiosity, multiplicity, and cruelty. Instead, virtues of self-cultivation are character traits that foster, improve, and develop the first-order traits that constitute the unique character of an individual who ‘becomes what it is’. By focusing on these virtues, we can fully understand the character traits that Nietzsche thinks are involved in ‘becoming what one is’, as well as understanding the breadth of his commitment to *RV*. Perhaps the greatest advantage of my revised version of *RV*, however, is that it does not rely on Nietzsche’s comments regarding type which, as we saw in 2.2, he never invokes in his discussion of ‘becoming what one is’. In fact, not only does Nietzsche consistently emphasises qualities that would be inimical to the achievement of a fixed and stable entity such as type (‘uniqueness’, ‘singularity’, ‘originality’) when discussing ‘becoming what one is’, but he also deploys these terms to describe the other candidates for his ethical ideal, such as in his account of the ‘Free Spirit’. Taking on this insight will allow us to prise apart *RV* from its dependence on type, which is what is misleading in the accounts of Alfano and Hunt, and will allow us to furnish Nietzsche with a conception of virtue that can fully account for the connection between the variety of character traits he regards as virtues *and* the heterogeneous nature of his ethical ideal.

⁴⁴ Hunt 1991: 115.

⁴⁵ In an earlier attempt at identifying Nietzsche’s virtues, Alfano does precisely this while still pushing his account of type. He tells us that ‘Nietzsche picks out a unique constellation of intellectual virtues, curiosity chief among them, appropriate to himself and those of his type. [E]ven when he praises seemingly moral virtues, such as honesty and courage, the praise is typically best understood in the light shed by his valuation of curiosity.’ (2013: 769).

3 Virtues of Self-Cultivation

I have proposed we must understand Nietzschean virtues as ‘virtues of self-cultivation’, that is, character traits which involve identifying, developing, and accentuating our psycho-physical endowment. I have also argued that there are strong reasons to dismiss Hunt’s claim that the virtues of ‘curiosity’, ‘multiplicity’, and ‘cruelty’ are Nietzschean virtues in a second-order sense for two reasons: first, these virtues are simply too specific to underlie all the first-order character traits that Nietzsche admires; second, the reinterpretation of cruelty which Hunt offers distorts this character trait beyond recognition. Furthermore, I have cited the textual evidence which disqualifies Alfano’s view that Nietzsche’s ethical ideal involves exemplifying one’s type. Instead of type, I have showed in 2.2 that Nietzsche’s ideal of ‘becoming what one is’ systematically involves accentuating what is unique about one’s individual endowment. We now turn to examine virtues of self-cultivation more closely. Which character traits does Nietzsche endorse that can be viewed as virtues of self-cultivation? And precisely how does he envision these traits as connected to his ethical ideal?

Nietzsche is remarkably consistent when discussing such virtues of self-cultivation, but identifying these virtues still requires exegetical work. We already have a clue regarding the identity of one virtue of self-cultivation, however, from our observation in 2.2 that Nietzsche invariably associates ‘courage’ with the process of ‘becoming what one is’, a trait that he views as required because of the inherent challenges of expressing one’s uniqueness. Moreover, each of the German synonyms for courage – *Tapferkeit*, *Muthes* – appear in Nietzsche’s longstanding lists of cardinal virtues, offered in 1881 and 1885 respectively. Another promising candidate for a virtue of self-cultivation is Nietzsche’s 1881 cardinal virtue of *Redlichkeit*,⁴⁶ but there are other virtues that we may wish to consider, some of which appear in his texts over and over again. Nietzsche’s aphorisms that explore the nuances of ‘circumspection’ [*Besonnenheit*],⁴⁷ ‘self-mastery’ [*Selbstbeherrschung*], ‘self-overcoming’ [*Selbstüberwindung*], ‘self-legislation’ [*Selbstgesetzgebung*],⁴⁸ and ‘self-determination’ [*Selbstbestimmung*]⁴⁹ each seem to be amenable to being interpreted in this way, as these virtues aim directly at the self-directed discovery of one’s the specifics of one’s endowment, as well as steering the process of accentuating it. Similarly, Ure’s contention that ‘self-observation’, ‘self-endurance’, and ‘self-analysis’ are quintessentially Nietzschean virtues, could also be said to pick out character traits that are specifically geared towards self-

⁴⁶ Nietzsche writes: ‘Honest [*Redlich*] towards ourselves and whoever *else* is a friend to us’ (*D* 556). Cf. *BGE* 230.

⁴⁷ *WS* 294. Here Nietzsche tells us that circumspection is the ‘virtue of virtues, their great-grandmother and queen’.

⁴⁸ *SE* 1.

⁴⁹ See Nietzsche’s references to these character traits as virtues in the following places: ‘self-mastery’ (*HH* P6), ‘self-overcoming’, ‘self-legislation’ (*SE* 1), and ‘self-determination’ (*AO* 223). As well as these virtues, in his analysis of the virtues of the free spirit Simon Roberson also makes reference to ‘self-reverence’ (*GS* 287, 290, 334; *BGE* 287) and ‘self-sufficiency’ (*GS* 55; *BGE* 44, 212, 260, 274, 284) which are also good candidates for virtues of self-cultivation (2011: 594).

cultivation.⁵⁰ All these character traits require that individuals cultivate themselves in a way that advances their flourishing in line with the various dimensions of ‘becoming what one is’ which we set out in 2.2 (uniqueness, conscience, courage), while none of them view this process as type-dependant.

As well as praising virtues that are directly involved in the cultivation of character, in *WS 267* Nietzsche offers more evidence that he privileges these kinds of virtues, where he describes the value of an educational culture that supports character traits pertaining to self-cultivation. Although Nietzsche is also committed to more traditional pedagogic processes elsewhere,⁵¹ in this aphorism he claims that there is an important dimension to education that does not involve learning from ‘elders and teachers’ because it is essentially self-directed. To entrust this kind of teaching to others either results in a futile ‘experiment [...] on an as yet unknown and unknowable subject’ or precipitates ‘levelling [...] to the customs and habits then prevailing’.⁵² What is required for this dimension of individual education is that one ‘discovers oneself’, which he suggests can only be achieved with the help of ‘one who has educated himself’ by using processes and practices of self-cultivation. Interestingly, the passage effectively anticipates the step-by-step process that Zarathustra recommends his disciples follow in the process of ‘becoming what one is’ which we examined in 3. Here we saw Zarathustra warning against the dangers of direct imitation because this avoids the essential requirement that one ‘becomes what one is’ by accentuating one’s own idiosyncratic endowment. Zarathustra does not require that his disciples exercise any specific set of character traits, nor does he indicate that any such character traits should be regarded as virtues. Rather, Zarathustra warns that the only essential part of ‘becoming what one is’ pertains to employing those character traits that allow us to cultivate ourselves in accordance with what is unique about ourselves.

While Zarathustra’s warning gives us further reason to disagree that any of the virtues currently attributed to Nietzsche can be done so wholesale, there is some room to categorise the virtues that scholars have highlighted in the terms of what I’ve termed his ‘virtues of self-cultivation’. To do this involves reframing existing accounts to show how the character traits they prioritise can only be considered to be virtues insofar as they contribute to Nietzsche’s ideal of ‘becoming what one is’. In other words, there is some room to incorporate virtues that facilitate or indirectly contribute to this process into a wider canon of virtues of self-cultivation. Although it may be difficult to reframe either Pianalto’s account of ‘patience’ or Jenkins’ account of ‘truthfulness’ as fully-fledged Nietzschean virtues because of Nietzsche’s explicit hostility regarding these traits,⁵³ both Harper’s account of ‘honesty’ and

⁵⁰ Ure 2008: 122; Ure 2008: 15.

⁵¹ *FEI* epitomises this.

⁵² *WS 267*.

⁵³ Jenkins may be able to escape my dismissal of truthfulness as a Nietzschean virtue because he concedes that ‘Nietzsche is critical of truth *in a particular context*’ (2015: 2). Nevertheless, Jenkins’ own account of ‘truthfulness’ [*Wahrhaftigkeit*] does not readily suggest it as a virtue of self-cultivation, because Nietzsche typically prioritises *Redlichkeit*, which is best understood as ‘self-directed truthfulness’ or, as he glosses it in his list of cardinal virtues, ‘honesty towards oneself’ (*D 556*). See my incorporation of Harper’s account of honesty below.

Reginster's of 'proficiency' are perhaps more amenable to be interpreted as ancillary traits promoting self-cultivation. We have already seen how this might work in the case of honesty when we discussed *Redlichkeit* in 2.1. Here we focused on how there is direct textual evidence that Nietzsche endorses it as a virtue, and – especially if we follow his gloss of it as 'honest towards oneself – it is easy to see how we could interpret Harper's emphasis on it as contributing to the process 'becoming what one is'. In fact Nietzsche begins *GS* 335, his most sustained articulation of 'becoming what one is', by asking 'how many men are there who know [...] how to observe themselves?' from which he concludes that modern man typically exhibits a woeful lack of the virtues associated with this process. Nevertheless, we should also note that although honesty could be considered as one virtue of self-cultivation among others, it is clear that significantly more virtues need to be involved in attaining Nietzsche's ethical ideal. This means that, while honesty may well be useful in the process of 'becoming what one is', fully understanding Nietzsche's virtues involves attending to all those character traits that are involved in attaining this ideal.

Reginster's account of 'proficiency' may also have a useful role to play in enriching my account of virtues of self-cultivation, although on my account neither Harper's or Reginster's virtues can be endorsed as Nietzschean virtues in the full sense of the term. There are different reasons for this, however. Proficiency, for Reginster, 'expresses the "will to power"', which he describes as the 'capacity to govern oneself and shape one's environment in accordance with one's will'.⁵⁴ For Reginster the:

[A]gent who exercises the virtue of proficiency will engage in innovative or creative activities, the pursuit of which is difficult, and the outcome of which is uncertain, and he will relish both the difficulty and the risk attendant upon innovation.⁵⁵

From this we can see, while Reginster stipulates that the virtue of proficiency allows one to 'govern oneself', this virtue is general enough to apply to any practical process, even those not linked to attaining Nietzsche's ethical ideal. So while Reginster is not required, like Hunt, to engage in lengthy reinterpretations of his chosen virtue, the explanatory breadth of proficiency turns out to be its weakness because it applies to *any* practical process, not just attaining 'becoming what one is'. To see why this is a problem we need to recall my initial contention that Nietzsche regards his virtues and ethical ideal as necessarily connected. If we accept that Nietzsche's virtues and ethical ideal work in tandem, we must dismiss so-called Nietzschean virtues that do not lead, directly or otherwise, to attaining this ethical ideal. While it may be advantageous or instrumentally valuable to be proficient at competitive games, social relationships, or cooking, proficiency at any of these traits cannot be thought of as virtuous in Nietzsche's terms as they do not directly relate to the process of 'becoming what one is'. This suggests although both Harper's and Reginster's accounts can be aligned with my account of Nietzsche's virtues of self-

⁵⁴ Reginster 2015: 455. See also his 2009 work which offers a more detailed account.

⁵⁵ Reginster 2015: 463.

cultivation, neither account offers a comprehensive account of his virtues because neither account fully calibrates them in terms of his ethical ideal.

4 Conclusion

I have argued we can solve the problem of which character traits Nietzsche endorses as virtues once we understand how they are connected to his ethical ideal. Because the first-wave of scholarship on Nietzsche's virtues has neither considered the radical nature of his ethical ideal, nor linked this ideal to his virtues, I proposed that none of the character traits these scholars propose can be Nietzschean virtues *simpliciter*. Commentators such as Alfano and Hunt who attempt to explain the diversity of Nietzsche's virtues by appealing to his implicit endorsement of a relativity of virtue hypothesis, do significantly better in this regard. Nevertheless, for different reasons, the versions of *RV* they offer are unsatisfying: Alfano understands character traits as virtues depending on the 'type' to which the individual belongs; whereas Hunt's second-order virtues of curiosity, multiplicity, and cruelty are impossible to square with the various first-order character traits that Nietzsche tells us are virtues without a staggering amount of interpretative work. By contrast, understanding Nietzsche's virtues as those character traits that enable an individual to 'become what it is' makes better sense of the textual evidence. It shows why Nietzsche does not understand virtues to relate to the type to which one belongs, but rather that he thinks an individual's virtues are those character traits that allow it to express its unique endowment.

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