## STYLE, INDIVIDUALITY, AND WILL

## Some naive reflections on Nietzsche

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After experience taught me that all the ordinary Surroundings of social life are futile and vain;

I'm going to show you something very Ugly: someday, it might save your life.

Seeing that none of the things I feared contain In themselves anything either good or bad

What if you get caught without a knife; Nothing -- even a loop of piano wire;

Excepting only in the effect they had Upon my mind, I resolved to inquire

Take the first two fingers of this hand; Fork them out--kind of a "V for Victory"--

Whether there might be something whose discovery Would grant me supreme, unending happiness.

And jam them into the eyes of your enemy.

You have to do this hard. Very hard. Then press

No virtue can be thought to have priority Over this endeavor to preserve one's being.

Both fingers down around the cheekbone And setting your foot high into the chest

No man can desire to act rightly, to be blessed; . To live rightly, without simultaneously

You must call up every strength you own And you can rip off the whole facial mask.

Wishing to be, to act, to live. He must ask First, in other words, to actually exist.

And you, whiner, who wastes your time
Dawdling over the remorseless earth
What evil, what unspeakable crime
Have you made your life worth?

This poem is about Spinoza (well, half of it is by Spinoza)<sup>2</sup>; and my excuses for reading it here are (1) that Nietzsche said in "five main points of his doctrine" he recognized himself" in him; and (2) what the poem illustrates is

something that may or may not be one of those common points, which (3) I want to talk about.

Nietzsche is often said to be a philosopher whose style is inseparable from his philosophy. That is to say, he couldn't have said what he wanted to say using the sort of language that is used in contemporary analytic philosophy. Which isn't to say he couldn't have said it in many different ways, since he did, as a matter of fact, repeat many thoughts in many ways. But it's at least to warn against reading Nietzsche merely in order to carry away certain reidentifiable nuggets of philosophical doctrine. Now this question of style, as it happens, touches in two ways on what I want to do, or what I can do, today. First, it raises a question about the nature of individuality -- for of Nietzsche, if anyone, *le style c'est l'homme* is true (although as we'll see this is only *part* of the story.) I'll come to this. Second, it raises for me a very personal dilemma.

The dilemma is this. Should I read you a paper?

That is something I haven't done for roughly fifteen years. What's more, I have lost friends by berating them on this subject, but I've never actually talked about it in public. Perhaps this was for fear of giving offense, a nicely moral scruple; but then Nietzsche speaks of 'morality as timidity' (*JGB* 197) and this is surely a case in point. Why not just risk offense in the light of day rather than in the privacy of friendship? After all, what better time to be offensive than under the aegis of Nietzsche?

So I'll explain why I haven't been reading papers.

Just think about it, with Martian innocence: reading a paper in public to people who can read, and could read it better and faster by themselves, is a truly absurd thing to do, unless there is a national paper shortage, or unless you are a skilled performer of a *script*, to which your performance will bring nuances that would be missed in a silent reading. But the word *performance*, unfortunately or fortunately, applies to few of the paper readings that go on at our meetings.

When I ask people why they *read papers*, instead of *explaining* their interesting ideas, they sometimes pretext shyness, the inability to talk convincingly. (So what are they doing in classrooms for the rest of their life? No wonder newspapers howl for the abolition of tenure!) And of course there's simple laziness: if you read a paper, at least you don't have to *think*, once you're up here. The inertial mass of ink, the humanist's homage to Newton's first law: thoughts continue in a state of uniform motion -- or rest -- providing they are not acted upon by a force (such as a Chair calling time.)

But I think there's something deeper at stake here. I'll put it bluntly: I believe that if you *must* read a paper, it *must* be because there is *nothing that you have to say*, in one literal sense of this ambiguous phrase: no *content* to convey, that is, other than the words you want to utter in a certain order. And if you have, in this sense, nothing to say, then of course you have to say it *exactly*: the words have to be arranged in just the right sequence, in order to display your *style*.

To explain this, let me remind you of the distinction Nelson Goodman<sup>3</sup> makes between allographic and autographic arts. Painting is a typical autographic art: if I give you a copy of a painting, I have not given you the painting. A poem, by contrast, is allographic: to give you a copy is to give you "the poem". But at one remove from this literal sense, a poem is, on the contrary autographic, in the sense that it is this poem only if my copy is exact, word for word. To give you the idea is not to give you the poem. In this sense, a scientific idea is the paradigm of an allographic work. Each person who understands it can explain it in their own words, for nothing essential is lost in rephrasing. So I suggest that those who think of philosophy as aspiring to the condition of science, have ideas, repeatable ideas, that they want to impart: to impart ideas clearly, an oral explanation is a recitation of fine writing. Those who on the contrary want to display a certain kind of virtuosity, will cunningly arrange well polished phrases, or well polished arguments, without much regard to whether the listeners will retain anything they could repeat. Listeners will be bathed in style; and if they don't understand the content of what you are reading, they may still be impressed (it must have been clever and deep) or else they'll be able to take comfort in the typical expression of philosophical superiority: "Didn't understand a single word."

So should I read you a paper? If I don't, I must have interesting repeatable ideas to convey. But how likely is this? This is the Nietzsche society, and I have been invited here in full knowledge of my ignorance about Nietzsche, perhaps even as a small corollary of the transmutation of all values: what's so great about truth, knowledge, expertise? Let's have someone ignorant up

here say stupid things! Still, it's intimidating enough to make me want to read a paper. But if I do that, then I must defuse the implication that I can write sentences both worth reading out loud, and all the more worth listening to for having no content. And how can anyone without blushing make sentences under the gaze of Nietzsche's ghost?

When I was asked to take part in this session, I had not read Nietzsche since college. In those days I hadn't yet discovered dope, and instead locked myself up once or twice for an entire weekend of Nietzsche orgy. Like other orgies, it was memorable more in general than in particular. It left me with a general impression that here was someone smarter and wilder than everyone else, and that emulating him was hopeless; also, when one sobered up, that there was something not a little bit mad about all that genius even before the syphilis set in. And one wondered if there wasn't something a teeny weeny bit excusable about the Nazis, who never had the benefit of reading Walter Kaufman, so terribly "misunderstanding" Nietzsche. But how futile to criticize one so loftily contemptuous of all lofty contempt, one against whose irony all ordinary irony would seem merely clammy, and against whose headiness all heady thoughts would seem pompous and shapeless.

So I left Nietzsche alone for 35 years. I returned to read him, last week, more or less grown up, but still in a state of pristine naiveté. And my first reaction was to think, No wonder I liked this as an adolescent: it's an adolescent intellectual wet dream. So clever, so stupid, so penetrating, so obtuse, so right, so objectionable. And the *first* thing that strikes one is so much a matter of style, that I couldn't help first talking about style. The style, though not exactly disarming, certainly disarms. One always feels somewhat left behind, somewhat foolish, like someone who took a joke seriously and so missed the point. On the other hand, one can feel superior to him (and feel stupid for feeling superior) for saying all those asinine things: about women, about race, about heredity. But that's all right too, since in the spirit of Nietzsche what philosophy is all about is getting *behind* one's prejudices, and that wouldn't be an interesting thing to do if it were easy or even a finite or *possible* task.

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The anchorite ... will doubt, in fact, that a philosopher *

* can ever have an "ultimate and essential" opinion. He *

* will suspect behind each cave a deeper cave, a more *

* extensive, more exotic, richer world beyond the surface,

* a bottomless abyss beyond every "bottom," beneath *

* every "foundation." (JGB 289)
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In fact, it's demonstrably impossible, since there is no presuppositionless argument and we can't be aware of an infinite number of presuppositions. None of the numberless tribe who have reiterated *this* eminently repeatable nugget to us in recent decades has ever put it better than Nietzsche in his wonderful sarcasm about philosophers dogmatic, sceptical, or critical.

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   ... the worst, most tiresome, durable, and most danger-
   ous of all errors so far was a dogmatist's error -- namely,
   Plato's invention of Pure Spirit and the Good in Itself.
      (JGB preface)
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    *********
   For skepticism is the spiritual expression of a
   certain, varied physiological quality which in common
   language is called nervous weakness or sickliness.
   (JGB 208)
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   How are synthetic a priori judgments possible, Kant
   asked himself. And what was actually his answer? By
   virtue of a virtue -- but unfortunately not in five
   words but so complicatedly, respectably, with such a
   show of German profundity and sinuosity, that one
   failed to hear the funny German simple-mindedness
   inherent in such an answer (JGB 11)
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This was my first reaction. My second, no doubt equally naive, was to hope to find in Nietzsche something interesting to say about a vast topic that I've been stalking, the topic of individuality. Stubbornly, I insisted on trying to take away -- from a very partial sampling -- some reidentifiable nugget of philosophical doctrine about that.

The word *individuality* connotes two things: uniqueness, and particularity. Corresponding to these are two conceptions of individuality: one stressing

difference, one stressing separateness. Leibniz notoriously merges them, or takes each to guarantee the other: this is a bold leap of faith, but not a very interesting notion, because it doesn't address the question of how these two notions are related. Does Nietzsche help? Clearly, he adverts to both. The first, stressing difference, is urged on us in the celebration of diversity, in the

idea of *perspective* as the rule of all life and understanding, in the insistent individuality of his own style. It is also in his repudiation of disciples and discipleship. My colleague Amy Mullin pointed out to me that both Nietzsche and Walt Whitman read Emerson, who first said: I want no disciples! Be an individual! Let's all be individuals! Let's all repudiate disciples and discipleship! Andre Gide, in *Les Nourritures Terrestres*, says almost

exactly that too.<sup>4</sup> Actually this is no criticism of any person who has repeated the injunction not to be a disciple: for that injunction is one that can be as safely followed as ignored. Either move is logically bound to fail both the test of *obedience* and the test of *disobedience*. For that reason, either choice is guaranteed to be *original*. Besides, logical quibbles apart, no one has earned better than Nietzsche the right to the repudiation of discipleship. Yet to find *merit* in it (which anyhow Nietzsche would find absurd) we would wish it to

rest on more than the kind of prejudice, or biographical accident, to which Nietzsche relegates philosophical doctrine. And this Nietzsche finds absurd.

If it does rest on something deeper, psychologically and logically, it would have to be on the doctrine that "life as such is Will-to-Power." Sometimes Nietzsche seems to say that the Will-to-Power manifests itself in the striving for difference. Perhaps this is implied in his perspectivism; or again, in his celebration of variety. But in the main the doctrine of the Will-to-Power

seems to me to belong to the other aspect of individuality, namely *particularity*. And from the Will-to-Power as particularity I can find no plausible route to the *value of uniqueness*.

Recently I asked an 8 year old boy what the super-heroes of videogames fight about. I don't think he'd ever thought about this, yet he seemed to have no hesitation in answering: "Land," he said. And that's a profound, Nietzschean answer to the question: Who should be my enemies? If you were *rational*, wouldn't your only enemies be those that were irrational? If you were *right*, wouldn't your only enemies be those that were *wrong*? Not for Nietzsche:

What he says about enemies makes it sound as if the point were merely to have fun: there's no intrinsic rational reason for them to be my enemies, there is only the fact that as manifestations of the Will-to-Power we both tend to want to occupy the same space. So the 8 year old was right onto Nietzsche's point. It is intrinsic to the condition of finite particulars, real individuals in space and time, that they can fight about space, even though there is nothing else that separates or even differentiates them. It seems to make more sense to be fighting about ideology, but it's more *natural* to be fighting about land.

There are three ideas on which to meditate here. First, what, in this *perspective*, ("the basic condition of life") is the individual: this space holder, space hoarder, space invader? Second, if Will-to-Power is neither "free-will" nor "non-free will", what then is it? Third: How can I apply to *myself* the idea of life, *my* life, as Will-to-Power? I want to sketch why, on the first point, Nietzsche failed me, while on the other two he led me, I think, to something interesting and new.

(i) Nietzsche anticipates Strawson's demonstration<sup>5</sup> that any world recognizably like ours has to have reidentifiable particulars occupying space in time. But such particulars, unlike Leibnizian monads, might be indistinguishable in all respects other than their spatio-temporal position. Does it matter if one is no different from the next? In everyone's favourite Nietzschean fantasy, Eternal Recurrence, this is just how things are -- in time, though not in space. So what's the objection to spatial recurrence? Are not all space invaders, all super-heroes, all fighters, all noble wills, no less pointlessly *the same*, no less boringly uniform, than rational souls, or their own eternally recurring avatars?

To find a route from particularity to uniqueness, we would have to argue that the space Will-to-Power contends for is not, unlike time, homogeneous. It is *quality* 

space. (And quality space is *quality space*!) I don't know enough to say whether this thought finds explicit expression anywhere in Nietzsche. (Except everywhere, in that all too imitable style.) But either way, this idea leads to an impasse. Without it, the Will-to-Power hypothesis is impotent to explain diversity, the aspiration to variety. With it, it becomes an even more gratuitous metaphysical hypothesis: "virtus diversificativa."

(ii) The Will-to-Power is not "free will". Nietzsche's avowed affinity with Spinoza on the will is a clue to the meaning of a certain conception of the individual: rooted in the will, in a certain sense, yet coupled with the rejection of the notion of *freedom* of the will. But if the will is not free, what is it? (it isn't "non-free will", either. Nor is there any such thing as "I.")

There are just these potentially conflicting centers of Will-to-Power, natural objects fighting for space. Some are strong, some are weak.

Since the will must work through time, it must be thought of as dynamic. This suggests one possible line of thought. One might adapt a well-known idea of Harry Frankfurt about the freedom of the will to Nietzsche's conception. In Frankfurt's scheme, freedom of the will has something to do with the existence of second-order desires. This doesn't fit in too badly with Nietzsche's insistence that the will is not "something" because it is really many things, it is

"complicated". Where Nietzsche would object is that second order desires are also either strong or weak; they also just come to us rather than being the actions of an "I". In this sense, then, Frankfurt's scheme doesn't solve, but merely duplicates the problem of the will.

If Frankfurt's idea doesn't really help with free will, one can put it to different use. There is a rather ordinary sense of *integrity* as being "entire" in one's will, which Frankfurt's scheme can help to explicate. In this sense one could speak of a person being in a state of integrity if there is a harmony between their first order and second order desires. If disharmony arises, this could be the beginning of change. This change might be "free" in the limited sense that it is not necessarily conditioned by the infringement of another Will-to-Power, a "will acting on a will". If it means rejecting the monistic, or

monomaniacal, aspect of Nietzsche's theory, well so be it. But note then that the relation between autonomy and integrity is not a simple one. For in my own perspective, or one of my own perspectives, I may view some of "my" own desires as somehow more alien to me than others, as outside the sphere of my *self*.

Viewed from the outside, I can think of the large circle as integrating the smaller (Fig. I), or else on the contrary of that section growing so that the little circle engulfs the larger (Fig. II).

All moral progress, perhaps, is of that form, leading to a harmony of first and second order desires like that which Confucius described as the achievement of his seventies ("At seventy I could do whatever I wanted and never contravene a rule"), and which from the outside might look just like the primitive "integrity" of a being altogether lacking higher order desires, a "wanton". But the level of integration must have gone down during the process on the way to the "higher" integration. *All moral progress involves a loss of integrity*.

(iii) Nietzsche says the Will-to-Power is not self-preservation (explicitly repudiating what he calls "Spinoza's inconsistency" (*JGB* 13); but the fact is

that if not interpreted biologically this is just metaphysical rubbish. What sustains it, as far as I can tell, is only Nietzsche's curiously puritanical "economy of principles," (ibid) as well as his inability to make sense of teleology as a reducible principle in biology, without accepting it as a metaphysical dogma in Aristotle's sense.

But actually it makes no interesting difference whether the Will-to-Power is self-preservation, or has self preservation as a consequence, or whether it's the one unique principle, or a metaphor that describes the consequences of our status as carriers of selfish genes. It makes no difference to what matters, which is the deep inaccessibility of our own determinations, the instinctive nature of our own consciousness.

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* [T]he largest part of conscious thinking must be con-

* sidered an instinctual activity, even in the case of

* philosophical thinking..... Even behind logic and its

* apparent sovereignty of development stand value judg-

* ments, or, to speak more plainly, physiological demands

* for preserving a certain type of life. (JGB 5)
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Sometimes what Nietzsche seems to be arguing is simply that morality is simply a disguise for nature: thus it makes no sense to take sides with the

lamb against the bird of prey. But of course that immediately gets you into having to distinguish *levels* of the natural, since in a purely naturalistic perspective everything is exactly as natural as anything else: slaves are as natural as masters, and who then can be complacent about his own smell? And indeed the Will-to-Power itself seems to manifest itself as the drawing of

distinctions, wanting to be different. (Although as I've argued there no reason why it should.) And this leaves quite open the attitude that one might have

oneself to one's own animality. One might endorse it, of course, or one might even wallow in it like the "so called cynics"; but one might also be disgusted by it.

Suppose one is. What of this disgust aroused by one's own biological nature? (By my biological nature, I don't here mean my messy guts but my beastly impulses.) Is it not *natural* too? Nietzsche sometimes writes as though this kind of disgust had to have a religious origin, something perverse, despicable, "morbid" (but from what perspective?) Why not ask instead: what are its

biological roots? Before the biological imperative that rules me, I seem to have two options: one is to endorse it and say: I am this biological animal, this blond beast (or brown or black or carrot) which wills this and that, and while it may disgust me, this is just because of the traces of slave morality still sticking to my brain. The other is to say: I reject nature. I loathe myself. But what is the point, of loathing myself, what does it bring me? It seems that Nietzsche *recommends* the first: having no choice, I might as well say Yeah.

Or I might say Nay. Nietzsche's way, it seems, is to be an *inconsistent* nihilist: to *preach* the transvaluation of all values -- a pragmatic contradiction in itself -- but not to scruple to undermine the very plurality of his own perspectives.

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Nothing is so nauseating in the so-called cultured

intellectuals, the believers in "modern ideas" as their

lack of shame, their complaisant impudence of eye and

hand with which they touch, lick, and finger every

thing. (JGB 263).

But inconsistency is only such *at a given moment*: perspectivism allows, perhaps, that as beings ineluctably in time, our contrary thoughts merely express different sides or times of our individuality. Having thus lowered the minimum standards of consistency, Nietzsche can make the grade -- not without having contributed a new, Proto-Parfitean, way of thinking about individuality through time.<sup>7</sup>

According to this criterion of consistency through time, no inference can be drawn from the fact that I have *read* you a paper, now at an end.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Snodgrass, W. D. Selected Poems 1957-1987. New York: Soho, 1987.

Whitman: "He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher." ("Song of Myself". In *Poet to Poet: Whitman selected by Robert Creeley*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, 107.)

Gide: "Ne t'attache en toi qu'à ce que tu sens qui n'est nulle part ailleurs qu'en toi-même, et crée de toi, impatiemment ou patiemment, ah! le plus irremplaçable des êtres." (*André Gide*, Les Nourritures Terrestres 190). I'll bet Khalil Ghibran says is too, somewhere.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> (cf. Spinoza, De Intellectus Emend. 1; Ethica IV-22, 21)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Emerson: "This is my boast that I have no school and no follower." (R.W. Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960. 14:258.)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: an Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Anchor, 1963.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Frankfurt, Harry G. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." In *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Clarendon, 1984.

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