

On Nietzsche's Teaching of Self-overcoming

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The Highest stage of self-cultivation is reached when self-honesty has developed into a guiding light – a voice – by which the mind holds onto itself effortlessly and continuously. Nietzsche's teaching is most useful at this stage of self-transformation. The techniques he advocated, and practiced in his own life, are most effective in destroying the mechanisms which produce the illusion of a firm ego identity. I discern in Nietzsche's writings and in his life experience five such different techniques: 1) that of the cultivation of solitude, 2) that of the managing the dialectic between solitude and friendship, 3) that of aggressive writing, 4) that of discriminating nutrition, and 5) that of withdrawing from politics.

Solitude

The beginning of Nietzsche's destructive, no saying, labor of self-transformation consists in a ceasing of self-promoting actions, which in turn would give rise to a total acceptance of what it has become: a letting itself be. However, the clarity of seeing and hearing which results from

such self-acceptance cannot be attained by interacting with other "damaged" selves who would constantly reinforce one's own self-division. A society dominated by slave values merely reinforces the slave values inherent in one's own ego. Consequently, this requires a withdrawal from society into solitude. Solitude tends to produce an understanding of one's own limitations and the way to deal with them. It awakens awareness of those existential possibilities which are realistically available.

Friendship in Solitude

But the insights and greater self awareness attained in solitude need to be tested in the company of others who are also seeking their way out of slave-mentality. Hence, the search for friendship with like minded individuals: equal to or superior to oneself. Both solitude, and friendship with like minded individuals, had been provided in the setting of ancient philosophical schools such as Epicurus' Garden, or Plato's Academy, or later in Christian monasticism. In those schools self-observation could be felicitously combined

with the revelation of oneself to another in some confessional structure. This setting was not available to Nietzsche, but solitude and friendship were. Hence, Nietzsche constructed a technique consisting in a dialectic whereby retreating into solitude could be followed with entering in friendship with others. Solitude permits the self to transform its envy and its desire for vengeance against its own life into a virtuous envy. In a proper friendship with an equal, or with someone superior, the self can make use of the awareness of its own negative envy in the effort of self-overcoming aided by the desire to surpass an equal friend, or to become like a superior friend. In a proper friendship, narrow selfishness can be overcome by the newly awakened voice of conscience rising from a hitherto unconscious depth. This way of being-with the friend reveals the true dimensions of existence with all its limitations. Creative rivalry between friends repatriates envy into the desire of the self to overcome itself. The desire for overcoming on the part of the split self is still locked in a tension between the desire for greater strength and the desire for one's own demise. But, creative rivalry between friends permits the self to understand that its previous ego-illusion had been only a mask. It understands the mask *as* mask, and begins to realize that it is free to adopt other masks. Moreover, in such friendship relation both selves get the opportunity to don different masks and to experiment with them. Friendship, if it is animated by creative ("mimetic") rivalry, compels participation in such experimentation.

Nietzsche proposes a model of "true" friendship, quite unlike the model pro-

posed by Aristotle. According to Aristotle true friendship can occur only between "good" persons. But Nietzsche cannot rely on any pre-given notions of "goodness". For him, being a "good person" can only be the result, and not the precondition, of self-overcoming. Furthermore, being in a precarious cultural position where the search for the human good has been abandoned, Nietzsche turns to a new model of friendship, one that can rekindle the desire the search for one's own good in the relation of mimetic rivalry. Persons entering into friendship with that motive in mind know that they do not possess a clear notion of their own good, but that they have to search for it in a spirit of openness. They know that they relate to themselves by both friendship and enmity. This dialectic of friendship/enmity within the self is the source of creative rivalry with the other. Self-friendship is a condition of friendship with the other, and self-enmity is transposed, in the form of rivalry, to the mimetic other. This dialectic of friendship/enmity with the other fuels the search for the good in an enlightened *egoism a deus* which, at the same time, forces attention to oneself.

The dialectic of enmity and friendship, always silently present in any friendship, is consciously advocated by Nietzsche. He calls it the *pathos of distance*. This "pathos" exists already *within* each self, he claims, but it needs to be externalized in friendship. The resulting creative rivalry is characterized by an alternation of closeness and distance. Zarathustra's journey provides a striking example of the adventures of closeness and distance. He ascends to, and descends from, his mountain top:

he leaves, but he continuously returns to his friends. On the mountaintop he renews his wisdom, and takes cognizance of the masks he wore in their company. He devises new masks with which to try out new games with his friends. In solitude, he suffers of the distance separating him from his friends, and, in their company he suffers also - this time, of the insufficiency of all friendships. In this process he discovers that friendship will always contain an element of enmity. He realizes that the quest for the good is unending, and that self-overcoming is an open ended process. However much he despises baseness and stupidity in himself and in others, he knows that there is no final refuge: neither in solitude nor in friendship. This is the true meaning of their dialectic: the tragic play between the other in the self, and the self in the other, the play of mimetic rivalry.

Writing as a Form of War

Nietzsche's third technique of self-transformation served the destructive purpose of unmasking the various modern forms of the death instinct, and the ego-illusions on which they are based. This explains his warlike writing, one that is constantly on the attack, never in retreat. Writing permits the maintenance of newly acquired self-understanding by externalizing the inner observer. And, it played the same role in Nietzsche's works. In his case, however, it played the additional role of continuously pointing to his own self. ("Of all writings I love only that which is written with blood. Write with blood: and you will discover that blood is spirit".) Consequently, everything he wrote for publication can be seen as autobiography. No other type of writing could have served his quest of self-discov-

ery. ("Now I am nimble, now I fly, now I see myself under myself, now a God dances within me".) And because the process of self-overcoming is never finished, his writings are also necessarily open-ended, lacking in doctrinal completeness. They are, rather, invitations to his readers to embark upon their own quest of self-transformation. For example, in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he advises his disciples to "go away and be alone, for one repays a teacher badly if one remains only a pupil" ("Of the Bestowing Virtue".) And, he adds, "Now I bid you to lose me and find yourselves: and only when you have denied me will I return to you". Nietzsche's correspondence is a more palpable enactment of the *pathos of distance*. It is, at the same time, a record of mimetic rivalry, and a record of his own growth, as different new selves are integrated into old friendships.

You Are What You Eat

Throughout his life Nietzsche was selective in what he ate and, even more importantly, in what he read. Also, he went for lonely walks believing that taking in fresh air helps in the gestation of fresh ideas. However, he did not believe that the same nutrition was suitable for everyone. Each individual, he thought, must decide for *itself* precisely what nourishment, *it* needs.

One of Nietzsche's prime concerns was how practices of consumption might enhance or impede the possibility of cultural renewal. Nietzsche hated noisiness. He despised those who absorb only that which is crude and loud. ("A truth that penetrates only sensitive ears he calls a lie and a thing of nothing. Truly he believes only in Gods who make a great noise in the world", and,

he adds later in Thus Spoke Zarathustra that, "The greatest events are not our noisiest but our stillest hours". For these reasons he would condemn the indiscriminate consumption motivated by a gluttonous "will to truth": the reading of vast amount of mediocre material at an increasingly rapid pace: undigested, and unrelated to the task of crafting ones own self. According to Nietzsche, everything consumed has to be digested, "made one's own" before it can serve as true nourishment.

An Anti-political Politics

The state, according to Nietzsche, is an institution dominated by the life-denying values of the market place. He sees in it a powerful mechanism for perpetuating slave values. It gives the slave a false sense of power by allowing control over small things, and, at the same time depriving it of control over its own fate. Consequently, those who seek self-cultivation must stay away from political involvement. Yet, Nietzsche's teaching contains a profound political element: it aims to shape the future of humanity. And, self-cultivation must play a central role in that process. The question is: how to reconcile ethical activism with political in-activism? The answer is that there are cracks both within the market place and within the field of political power. The planet still contains enough emptiness in which free spirits can move. But, vigilance must be exercised in order to avoid direct contact with both contestants in the struggle for economic and political power, whether they are "rulers" or "ruled". This means that the only viable Nietzschean politics is the politics of self-overcoming. But this requires patience, the

attitude of "letting be". We may have no control over the "noisiest" events of history. But as Nietzsche says: "It is the stillest words which bring the storm. Thoughts that come on dove's feet guide the word".

Reading Nietzsche on the art of "soul craft" one is reminded of Foucault's last major work: The History of Sexuality. In that work Foucault does not dwell on Nietzsche's views on the subject. He puts emphasis, instead, on the practices of the self by the ancients - in particular by the Stoics. We know that Nietzsche was preoccupied with the world of ancient Greece. Reading him, especially his The Birth of Tragedy, one might get the impression that he cared more for the ecstatic than for the measured way of life. Yet, as I have tried to show in this essay, for the project of self-overcoming, Nietzsche requires both.



Edward Munch: „Nietzsche“