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II. Nietzsche

Keith Ansell-Pearson

It has long been customary to identify Nietzsche, along with Kierkegaard, as a nineteenth-century precursor of existentialism. His links with existentialism have been established on the basis of his celebration of radical individual freedom and his general campaign against all beliefs and philosophies which ascribe to the world, human existence and history a purpose or goal other than the meaning imposed by man himself (Copleston, 1965, p. 194; see also Blackham, 1961). However, as a number of recent commentators have pointed out, Nietzsche's denial of free will – at least as conceived as a metaphysical *causa sui* – and his biological naturalism places him at a distance from existentialism (Reynolds, 2006, p. 9; see also Cooper, 1999, p. 9; for new research on Nietzsche and free will see Gemes, 2006). As Reynolds notes, Nietzsche is an enigmatic figure in the history of philosophy, one not easily reducible to *any* school or movement of philosophy.

The current climate in Nietzsche scholarship is largely hostile to construing Nietzsche as an existentialist. For example, even someone like Robert C. Solomon, who has long read Nietzsche as an existentialist, felt compelled in his final study to ask the question, 'Is Nietzsche an existentialist?' (Solomon, 2003, p. 206). Richard Schacht, one of the most eminent Anglo-American

commentators on Nietzsche, has gone so far as to advise that we 'try to forget about existentialism' if we wish to get Nietzsche aright on matters concerning morals and normativity (Schacht, 2001, p. 151). There have been several notable trends in recent scholarship that in their different ways call into question the value of approaching Nietzsche as an existentialist. I regard these efforts as misguided and am keen to defend Nietzsche's project as one of authenticity. Some commentators on Nietzsche express an antipathy towards existentialism on account of its alleged idealistic and romantic claims for independence and self-expression or self-assertion (informing Schacht's judgement above is the view that existentialism is a form of radical individualism). Thus, in his instructive reading of Nietzsche as an ethicist, Simon May contends that Nietzsche is not an existentialist at all since the latter presupposes a voluntaristic break with tradition, history and the past that Nietzsche does not entertain. Freedom presupposes, as its condition – as 'fate' or 'necessity' – 'the reality of our nature, nurture, and life-circumstances, and hence of our individual past "Freedom of the will" – which, for him, means mastery of ourselves and thus of circumstances – is unattainable without maximally expressing what he calls the "necessity" of our own nature' (May, 1999, p. 21). This point does not rest on a denial of contingency; it is rather the recognition that what may be contingent as one's history is necessity as one's fate; 'only by maximally expressing – i.e. "willing" – that necessity can one be free' (p. 22).

Arguably this rests on a caricature of existentialism, and certain self-proclaimed existentialists, such as Merleau-Ponty, never construed freedom in the way suggested here (Merleau-Ponty, 1989, III: 3). Moreover, as Heidegger would point out, fate requires, as the ontological condition for its possibility, the state of Being of care or temporality: 'Only if death, guilt, conscience, freedom, and finitude reside together equiprimordially in the Being of an entity as they do in care, can that entity exist in the mode of fate' (Heidegger, 1980, pp. 436–7). For Heidegger, as Mulhall points out, the heritage of one's culture, into which one is thrown and dispersed, and the heritage of oneself, as the potentiality for authentic individuality, 'fuse in a mutually revivifying way' (Mulhall, 1996, p. 170). Only by grasping the finitude of my existence, which serves to make it something fateful, am I 'snatched back', Heidegger says, from an endless multiplicity of possibilities and in fact brought into contact with the simplicity of *Dasein's* fate. As Mulhall notes, what Heidegger is offering is a vision of freedom peculiar to a finite and conditioned being (mortal freedom): '*Dasein's* capacity to choose how to live and who to be is real and distinctive. But it cannot choose not to have this capacity, and it must exercise it in circumstances that it has not freely chosen and upon a range of possibilities that it has not itself defined' (Mulhall, 1996, p. 171). This can only mean that my freedom comes to fulfilment not through an attempted transcendence of limits and constraints,

but through a 'resolute acceptance of them as they really are – through a clear-sighted acknowledgement of the necessities and accidents of one's situation and one's fate' (p. 171).

The dominant trend in recent scholarship is to interpret Nietzsche as a naturalist. However, Nietzsche has been linked with several different naturalisms: methodological (Leiter, 2002), existential (Hatab, 2005) and artful (Acampora, 2006a; see also Acampora, 2010). In some cases Nietzsche's naturalism is seen to conflict with existentialism, in other cases not. Hatab construes Nietzsche's project as one of 'existential naturalism' which is, he says, not a reductive naturalism in terms of the categories of science, 'but an embrace of the finite limit conditions of worldly existence as the new measure of thought' (2005, pp. 7, 14). With the death of God we are left with a choice of either a nihilistic collapse of meaning or a revaluation of meaning in terms of the immanent conditions of finite life. Leiter, by contrast, develops his interpretation of Nietzsche as a naturalist and fatalist by contesting the so-called existentialist reading developed by the likes of Alexander Nehamas (1985) and Richard Rorty (1989), and which, it is alleged, has its source in Karl Jaspers's 1936 interpretation of Nietzsche as an ethicist of self-creation (Jaspers, 1965, pp. 151–62). For Leiter, Nietzsche is a naturalist in the sense of someone who holds that the claims of philosophy should be continuous with the methods and insights of natural science, and he is a fatalist because for him the basic character of an individual's life is fixed in advance by virtue of the largely immutable physiological and psychological facts that make the person who s/he is (Leiter, 2001). Leiter has been taken to task by Owen and Ridley, who seek to demonstrate the roots of Nietzsche's thinking on fate in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), for whom there is no fatal opposition between fate and the assumption of creative agency (Owen and Ridley, 2003). When they point out that for Emerson the strong human being views fate – the inevitable appearance of chance and necessity in our lives – not simply as a negative constraint but as providing the materials and means for freedom, one gets the distinct impression that this is an anticipation on Emerson's part of the well-known dialectic of facticity and transcendence that lies at the centre of existentialist thinking on agency and our being in the world. For Owen and Ridley the self is never a fully developed fact but something that works out 'possibilities' (2003, p. 67). Indeed, a stress on there being 'possibilities of life' is a recurring refrain of Nietzsche's thought and famously he describes man as the as-yet-undetermined animal (*Beyond Good and Evil* 62).

The key point is that constraints are not opposed to freedom, but are its condition. As Guay has noted in an article on 'Nietzsche and Freedom': 'Constraints are thus productive: they create the possibility of novel activities' (2002, p. 308). 'Morality' in Nietzsche's eyes is that mode of thought which fantasizes about a metaphysical subject that bootstraps itself into existence and so encourages

'a quite peculiar conception of autonomy' (Ridley, 2005, p. xiii). On this conception the self is only properly self-governing and responsible for its actions to the extent that what it does is the product of freedom of the will in the superlative metaphysical sense, the sense that Nietzsche takes to task, for example, in *Beyond Good and Evil* (e.g. sec. 21) as the desire to pull oneself into existence by the hair and out of the swamps of nothingness. This supposes a freedom that makes it independent of our nature – be it a first or second nature – and of our circumstances. As Ridley further points out, for Nietzsche 'necessities' have to be acknowledged and worked over and considered 'as material to be exploited and, where possible, affirmed' (2005, p. xiii; see, for example, *The Gay Science* 290 and *Beyond Good and Evil* 188). This explains why Nietzsche famously says that to become creators we must also become 'the best learners and discoverers of everything that is lawful and necessary in the world: we must become *physicists* in order to be able to be *creators*' (*The Gay Science* 335). We may note that the early Nietzsche conceived of education as first and foremost an instruction in what is necessary (nature) and then in the changing and the variable (civil society). It is here that the question arises concerning whether things must be as they are (e.g. are the laws of civil society invariable?). History is the inquiry into how things have become what they are and shows that things could be different. The task is to ascertain how much power the human being has. The Greeks, for example, show us how different human existence can be, while the Romans show us how things became what they are for us (KSA 8, 5 [64]). The aim of education is not to teach submission to necessity, since we have to know first what is necessary and there might be many necessities (KSA 5 [21]).

Although Leiter has pertinent criticisms to make of the overly voluntarist readings of Nietzsche we encounter in Nehamas and Rorty, when the attempt is made to then discredit Nietzsche's credentials as an existentialist it is more often than not a straw man of existentialism that is being denounced. As several commentators have pointed out, existentialism does not rest on a disavowal of contingency, the past, history, and so on, since in a condition of pure possibility nothing would motivate or compel us with any degree of urgency (Reynolds, 2006, p. 33). Although 'possibility' has an ontological priority in existentialist thinkers such as Heidegger and Sartre, it is not thought independently of the dimensions of facticity and actuality (Reynolds, 2006, p. 34; Gerner, 2007, p. 79), and thus to portray existentialism as advocating romantic self-creation – self-creation in the bootstrapping sense – is to produce something of a wild caricature. As Jaspers points out, Nietzsche's thinking suffers when he denies 'transcendence' or the domain of existential possibilities and reduces living to the domain of biological or natural actualities. At the level of existence, he notes, it is impossible to separate the physiological or causal – as well as the psychological and sociological – from 'Existenz', so that whatever we come to know of ourselves through the investigation of science is so intimately

bound up with us that we could not exist without it. At the same time it is important we recognize that existential possibility and physiological and psychological actuality are involved with each other. He notes that Nietzsche himself denies the doctrine of the unchangeability of character and condemns the average man's belief in himself as a fully developed state of affairs (see *D* 560). Nietzsche's adherence to Pindar's maxim, 'become what you are!', is rendered meaningless if it is made to refer merely to 'an innate just-being-so as a psychological state of affairs' (Jaspers, 1965, p. 159). This is arguably what Leiter's naturalist and fatalist reading of Nietzsche on how one becomes what one is does. As Jaspers astutely notes, in the maxim it is not a definite law or objectively derivable obligation that decides, but rather 'reliance on the "creative" source in me', which may be lacking (1965, p. 159). We should also note the placing of 'creative' in scare quotes (which Leiter does not acknowledge), since, as Jaspers also observes, 'creation' is one of those 'signs' of Nietzsche's philosophizing that, like life, eternal recurrence, and will to power, is never fully or adequately conceptualized (1965, p. 152). In addition, as Janaway has noted, although the precise extent to which Nietzsche is successful in seeking to combine his naturalistic accounts of the human being with an account of 'creative agency' may be subject to debate, 'it is wrong to think that he wishes to exclude creative agency from his picture of humanity' – without it his critique of moral values and task of learning to think and feel differently (*D* 103) makes little sense (Janaway, 2007, p. 123).

In the rest of this entry I want to focus on what I see as the core issue in considering Nietzsche's relation to existentialism, namely, the extent to which, and the ways in which, he anticipates existentialism's search for an authentic mode of existence. In thinking through this question, I am influenced by the claim that existentialism introduces into philosophical discourse a *new* norm – that of authenticity – for understanding what it means to be human, and that this is different to the norm of truth championed by natural science and the norms of the good and the right that lie at the heart of moral theory (see Crowell, 2010, p. 2). This norm is tied to a distinctive, post-Cartesian concept of self as practical, embodied, being-in-the-world (2010, p. 25). I find it uncontroversial that Nietzsche is a thinker of such embodied agency. Moreover, as David E. Cooper has stressed, a persistent theme in the writings of existentialists is the contrast between the life of the authentic individual and the life immersed in the anonymous crowd, herd, or mass (1999, p. 110). Along with Kierkegaard, Nietzsche is one of the first modern writers to paint such a contrast and to do so by making *explicit* reference to the task of the authentic human being. In the literature to date this has not been sufficiently demonstrated (but see Guay, 2002, for a good attempt).

Today notions of autonomy and sovereign individuality have been placed under suspicion in many quarters of philosophy and in some quarters of

Nietzsche studies (see Acampora, 2006b). Although a postmodern audience appears embarrassed by such notions, it remains the case that they inform Nietzsche's thinking on the tasks of philosophy at a very deep level. Sometimes it is flatly stated that Nietzsche denies the self without further investigation or any deep appreciation of his oeuvre (see Sorabji, 2006, p. 17). Other arguments offered against construing Nietzsche as a thinker of sovereign agency and autonomy include construing him as a thinker of fate, which he clearly is, though I see no good reason why he cannot have both a doctrine of fate and of sovereignty (on fate and freedom in Nietzsche see Richardson, 1996, pp. 208–9, and Acampora, 2010). The two concepts run throughout Nietzsche's oeuvre. Moreover, Nietzsche thinks that for us moderns existence often assumes the site of a tragic equivocation, structured as it is by an antinomy of fate and freedom (see *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 'On Old and New Tablets', p. 9). The sovereign individual is depicted by Nietzsche as an agent that has an awareness (the conscience) of power and freedom; it is master of a 'free will' (the power to make an independent decision, *Beyond Good and Evil* 208); it has an 'enduring, unbreakable will' and 'its own standard of value', and is 'strong enough to stand upright in the face of fate (*Schicksal*)' (note: it does not conquer fate, which is impossible) (*On the Genealogy of Morality* II, 2). In a notebook from 1873–1874 he says that the aim of wisdom is 'to enable a human being to face all the blows of fate (*Schicksalsschläge*) with equal firmness, to arm him for all times' (KSA 7, 30 [25]).

Nietzsche, I would contend, is a strong thinker of authenticity, which is arguably the core notion – and value – espoused by existentialism. Nietzsche opposes all attempts to define the human being through abstract or general categories, maintaining 'that the life of the individual cannot have its meaning in something historical, in his disappearance into some category' (KSA 7, 34 [32]). He first uses the expression 'authentic human being' in the *Unfashionable Observations* (1873–1876), although I think his overall free-spirited philosophy can, if one pays attention to its most essential tasks, be construed as a unified search for an authentic mode of existence. In the unfashionable observation on history Nietzsche draws a contrast between 'the common human being' who clutches at their animal existence with greed and gloomy earnestness, and those noble natures who live life heroically, bequeathing to posterity 'the signature of their most authentic being' (*das Monogramm ihres eigensten Wesens*), be it a work, a deed, or a creation (UO II: 2, p. 98; KSA p. 260). In the search for genuine or authentic (*Aechtheit*) personality Nietzsche subjects to criticism the cult of inwardness, the machine-like existence demanded by contemporary culture, and uniformity. Our age prides itself not on being the era of 'harmonious personalities' who are complete and mature, but of common, utilitarian labour: 'That simply means: human beings must be broken in to serve the purposes of the age, so they can be put to work' (UO II: 7). In the unfashionable observation on Schopenhauer as educator Nietzsche invites us to encounter, 'the fundamental law' of our 'authentic self' (*eigentlichen Selbst*) and

seeks to awaken the individual to engage in a battle with everything that prevents it from achieving self-liberation: fear, cowardice, laziness, herd opinions, and custom and convention (UO III: 1). For Nietzsche each individual is confronted with a 'task' but finds it necessary to flee from it and drug itself with sociability (UO III: 5). Nietzsche attacks the 'morality' (*Sittlichkeit*) of education that holds sway in his time – 'a speedy education so that one quickly becomes a moneymaker' – which looks upon the education that makes human beings solitary and sets them goals beyond money and acquisition, as nothing more than refined egoism or immoral cultural Epicureanism (UO III: 6).

In *The Gay Science* 335 (1882) Nietzsche advises us as follows: 'Let us therefore limit ourselves to the purification of our opinions and valuations and to the creation of our own new tables of what is good.' In the unfashionable observation on Schopenhauer this works as the 'law' of the authentic self and higher life: 'your true being does not lie deeply hidden within you, but rather immeasurably high above you, or at least above what you commonly take to be your ego' (UO III: 1). In *Schopenhauer as Educator* it is the job of conscience to awaken the self to its task: "'Be yourself! You are none of those things that you now do, think, and desire'" (UO III: 1). In *The Gay Science* 335 it is the job of the 'intellectual conscience', the form of conscience superior to the moral conscience: what Nietzsche calls the conscience behind our conscience. Whatever the name of this conscience, the end is the same: to become what one 'is', where this refers to that which is 'unique, singular, incomparable'.

This preoccupation with identifying an authentic mode of existence, against the claims of common utilitarian morality, continues into Nietzsche's later texts. Let me take as my example *Dawn* (*D*) from 1881, part of Nietzsche's 'free-spirit' trilogy of 1878–1882 and also part of his so-called positivist or naturalist phase (see Abbey, 2000, pp. 7–10). Here Nietzsche argues that hitherto individuals have lived in fear and as conforming herd animals; they have concealed themselves in the communal generality of the concepts 'human being' and 'society'. Today the prejudice holds sway in Europe that the sympathetic affects, compassion and actions deemed to be congenial, disinterested or of general utility, define the moral. Although Nietzsche mentions Schopenhauer and Mill as famous teachers of this conception of morality, he holds that they merely echo doctrines that have been sprouting up in both fine and crude forms since the French Revolution (*D* 132). Central to modernity, as Nietzsche perceives it, is the idea that the ego must deny itself and adapt itself to the whole and as a result the 'individual' is debilitated and cancelled: 'one never tires of enumerating and excoriating everything evil and malicious, prodigal, costly, and extravagant in the prior form of individual existence . . . compassion for the individual and passion for society here go hand in hand' (*D* 132).

In an aphorism on 'pseudo-egotism' Nietzsche notes how most people live their life by doing nothing for their ego but live in accordance with the 'phantom

ego' that has been formed in the opinions of those around them and is conveyed to them. The result is that we live in a fog of impersonal or half-personal opinions and arbitrary evaluations: 'one person always in the head of another and then again this head in other heads: a curious world of phantasms that nonetheless knows how to don such a sensible appearance!' (D 105). Even the modern glorification of work and talk of its blessings can be interpreted as a fear of everything individual. The subjection to hard industriousness from early until late serves as 'the best policeman' since it keeps everyone in bounds and hinders the development of reason, desire and the craving for independence. It uses vast amounts of nervous energy which could be given over to reflection, brooding, dreaming and working through our experiences: 'a society in which there is continuous hard work will have more security: and security is currently worshipped as the supreme divinity' (D 173). Nietzsche claims that it is the moral fashion of a commercial society to value actions aimed at common security and to cultivate above all the sympathetic affections. At work here he thinks is a collective drive towards timidity which desires that life be rid of all the dangers it might have once held: 'Are we not, with this prodigious intent to grate off all the rough and sharp edges of life, well on the way to turning humanity into *sand*!' (D 174). In place of the ruling ethic of sympathy and self-sacrifice, which can assume the form of a 'tyrannical encroachment', Nietzsche invites individuals to engage in self-fashioning, cultivating a self that the other can behold with pleasure, a 'lovely, peaceful, self-enclosed garden . . . with high walls to protect against the dangers and dust of the roadway, but with a hospitable gate as well' (D 174). Before an individual can practise benevolence towards others he has to be beneficently disposed towards himself, otherwise he is running from and hating himself, and seeking to rescue himself from himself in others (D 516).

Nietzsche notes that we typically adopt the evaluations which guide our actions out of fear and only pretend that they are our own; we then grow accustomed to the pretence that this ends up being our nature. To have one's own evaluation of things is something exceedingly rare (D 104). It is necessary to contest the idea that there is a single moral-making morality; every code of ethics that affirms itself in an exclusive manner 'destroys too much valuable energy and costs humanity much too dearly' (D 164). In the future, Nietzsche hopes, the inventive and fructifying person shall no longer be sacrificed and numerous new attempts at living life and creating community shall be undertaken. When this takes place we will find that an enormous load of guilty conscience has been purged from the world. Humanity has suffered for too long from teachers of morality who wanted too much all at once and sought to lay down precepts for everyone (D 194). Clearly, Nietzsche is not advocating the abolition of all possible types or forms of morality. Where morality centres on 'continual self-command and self-overcoming . . . in great things and in the smallest', Nietzsche is a champion of it (*The Wanderer and His Shadow* 45). His concern is that 'morality' in the forms it has assumed in the

greater part of human history, right up to Kant's moral law, has opened up an abundance of sources of displeasure and with every refinement of morals the human being has only become more discontented with itself, its neighbour, and its lot (D 106). The individual in search of happiness, and who wishes to become its own lawgiver, cannot be tended with prescriptions for the path to happiness, simply because individual happiness springs from one's own unknown laws and external prescriptions only serve to obstruct and hinder it: 'The so-called "moral" precepts are, in truth, directed against individuals and are in no way aimed at promoting their happiness' (D 108). Up to now, Nietzsche notes, the moral law has been supposed to stand above our personal likes and dislikes; we did not want to impose this law upon ourselves but preferred to take it from somewhere or have it commanded to us. Nietzsche looks ahead to a possible future lawgiving, 'founded on the idea "I submit only to the law which I myself have given, in great things and in small"', and observes: 'There are so many experiments still to make! There are so many futures still to dawn!' (D 187).

Nietzsche, it should be clear, is a thinker of authenticity and one who paved the way for some radical currents in existentialist thought. However, this should not be taken to mean that he advocates a romantic kind of isolated individualism (see Hicks and Rosenberg, 2008, p. 152). As one commentator has recently pointed out, at stake for Nietzsche are not a few individuals but the future of humankind. This is his perfectionist demand that we do all we can to enhance the level of the species by extending the range of human possibilities: 'Exceptional or singular individuals figure *not* as the exclusive beneficiaries but as the great experimenters, as the key to realizing a perfectionist demand that has a *generic* or *general* orientation towards humankind' (Siemens, 2009, p. 30).

Abbreviations

- D *Dawn*, trans. Brittain Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).
- KSA *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977).
- UO *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. with an afterword, Richard T. Gray (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

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