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SYSTEMS, VALUES AND EGALITARIANISM

Malcolm Bull's *Anti-Nietzsche* presents a fresh approach to, and an independent appropriation of, the work of Nietzsche, a thinker whose writings have been increasingly influential since the end of the nineteenth century. Bull's discussion is particularly laudable in two respects. First, he faces up to the fact that Nietzsche's repeated expressions of anti-egalitarianism and his hatred of democracy were not occasional aberrations or mere 'private' opinions that had little to do with the more exoteric parts of his philosophy. Nietzsche's hatred of democracy was all-encompassing and very deeply rooted, while his anti-egalitarianism expressed itself in, and was argumentatively closely connected to, most of his other characteristic beliefs. Second, Bull signally avoids taking cheap shots at Nietzsche's arguments or in any way discounting them because of their anti-egalitarian consequences. He has the courage to look at them on their own merits. However, despite my admiration for the synoptic power and originality of Bull's treatment, I have some reservations about his account. These concern the general structure of Nietzsche's views, the theory of valuation and the question of equality.

There have been two major ways of interpreting Nietzsche's work. The first was to assume that Nietzsche was trying to be a traditional systematic philosopher, that is, to develop, propagate and defend a fixed, closed, systematically interconnected body of doctrine on some of the recognized topics of 'philosophy'. Heidegger, who provides an instance of this

reading, goes as far as attributing to Nietzsche a metaphysics based on 'the will-to-power'.[1] The second way of reading Nietzsche claims that he conceived of philosophy as an 'experimental' or 'philological' (that is, interpretative) activity, rather than a closed body of beliefs.[2] The philosopher was to be someone who tries out different approaches, hypotheses, valuations and forms of life rather than a member of the Consistency Police. Montaigne is closer to being the model philosopher than Kant or Descartes. Nietzsche's work, then, contains lots of different strands of argument, which he explores and elaborates more or less fully: many of these are neither consistent nor inconsistent with each other because they are not developed at sufficient length for it to become clear what their consequences really would be—the very idea that one could elaborate '*all*' their consequences being one that Nietzsche would probably find completely unmotivated. This means that Nietzsche had no 'system', and wanted to have none. His work constitutes a succession of experimental hypotheses, suggestions and 'interpretations' that yield a series of different 'perspectives' on a variety of different subjects.

The proponents of the 'systematic' Nietzsche argue that 'interpretations' and 'perspectives' do not stand by themselves, arising out of nothing. Rather, interpretations must be propounded by some subject, and thus giving a full account of them would require providing something like a metaphysics of that subject. One must always ask: 'who' (or 'what') is doing the interpreting? The (final) answer will be that it is some form of the will-to-power expressing itself in any given interpretation. Proponents of a perspectivist approach counter this by pointing out that one of Nietzsche's best-known texts, his *Genealogy of Morality* (First Treatise) clearly argues that a 'subject' is not a necessary foundation for all action, but an interpretative construct added on *ex post*. To claim that some activity is 'grounded' in a subject, is just to give another (perspectival) interpretation of it, for which one may or may not have good reasons. Metaphysical doctrines like 'the will-to-power' are just one kind of interpretation. The doctrine of perspectivism does not mean, however, that any given view or belief is just one more perspective among others and therefore in no way better than any other (a position sometimes, rather misleadingly, called 'relativism'). The Nietzschean perspectivist

[1] Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 2 vols, Pfullingen 1961.

[2] For one of the earliest and most influential instances of this way of reading Nietzsche, see Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Paris 1962.

holds that human beliefs are like maps. There may be different maps of a given area: Ordnance Survey-style maps that mark topographical features like elevation through the use of contour lines, maps that specifically mark the birthplaces of literary figures, maps that show differences in population density, income, rates of unemployment or diabetes, by using a colour code. There is nothing to prevent the perspectivist from claiming that some of these maps are definitely *better* than others. If I am tracking the incidence of goitre, a map that marks occurrences of the condition is much better than one that does not, regardless of how complete and exact it is in other respects. Equally, however, a map that locates Aberdeen north of Edinburgh is (other things being equal) 'better than' one that places it south of York, although it is also the case that if I am really intending to use the map only to orient myself in East Anglia this will not matter much to me.

Nietzsche, then, is concerned not to deny that accuracy, correctness and other traditional epistemological virtues are usually desiderata for beliefs, but merely to affirm that they are sometimes more, sometimes less important, and that it is an open question in each case how much they matter. Thus, it behoves a philosopher to concentrate on discussing what does matter to whom, in what circumstances, and why. A map gives a perspective on the world; that perspective may be more or less accurate, more or less useful, and more or less comprehensive. All the perspectivist needs to deny is that there is, or must be, one single Supermap which combines all the virtues of all possible maps, without loss, and gives one a view of the world that has absolute priority over all others, independent of variations in human purposes, values, interests and context.

Valuations

Bull belongs with the group of 'systematic' readers of Nietzsche—not even mentioning 'perspectivism'. He focuses on one highly 'metaphysical' strand that definitely does exist in Nietzsche, and which seems *prima facie* particularly far from the strands that perspectivists have thought most interesting and important. He attributes to Nietzsche what is called a 'transcendental argument' about valuation.[3] The archetypes for 'transcendental arguments' are some claims put forward by Kant

[3] Malcolm Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche*, London and New York 2011, p. 90 (hereafter AN).

in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Roughly speaking, Kant asserts that all objects of human experience must have certain specifiable categorical properties—for example, that of standing in causal relations to other objects of experience—because certain categories, such as 'causality', form part of the apparatus *through which alone* humans can become aware of anything in the realm of sensation and perception. A transcendental argument thus moves from a relatively clear conception of how humans are constituted to a claim that some feature of our world is necessary and that there is no alternative to it. The world of human sensory experience *must* be one of spatial objects that stand in causal relations to each other, because otherwise we, given who we are as potential cognitive subjects, could have no awareness of it.

The 'transcendental argument' that Bull attributes to Nietzsche begins by observing that human beings engage in various forms of 'valuation'. I (positively) value thick curtains in my study, because they dampen sound; I like drinking tea, but cannot stand (i.e. value negatively, or 'dis-value') eggs; I enjoy reading Homer, Montaigne and Virginia Woolf, each for a different set of reasons, but actively dislike the linguistically flaccid platitudes of Wordsworth. I recognize that Dickens was a good, if excessively sentimental, novelist, but most of his work leaves me cold—that is, I am emotionally indifferent to it—and I do not think he is a patch on Balzac. I admire Nelson Mandela for his greatness of spirit and think Tony Blair is a war criminal who belongs behind bars. These are *prima facie* different kinds of value judgements: some are mere personal preferences (tea), others are more reflective aesthetic (Balzac), instrumental (curtains), ethical (Mandela) or political (Blair) judgements. In some versions of the argument Nietzsche extends the use of 'value' beyond the human world altogether into the biological realm, so that the phototropic behaviour of plants is construed as a way in which they positively value light.

Among this list of kinds of valuation, there are no positive or negative judgements that one would be likely to categorize as 'religious', such as 'I avoid eating XYZ because there is a divine injunction against it' or 'It is good to give to charity because God loves those who are charitable'. This is because I have no religious beliefs. Nevertheless, I can, of course, still positively value vegetarianism or charitable donation on non-religious grounds; or I can enjoy a traditional Catholic mass as a 'purely aesthetic' phenomenon. A disproportionate number of the value judgements cited

above relate to aesthetic or artistic matters. This seems not inappropriate in view of the significance aesthetic values have for Nietzsche and for many other contemporary thinkers, as Bull acknowledges. However, aesthetic valuation is only *one* kind of valuing.[4] Just as some individual may fail to engage in religious valuation, so, too, he or she can fail to ascribe any positive value to art, a position that Bull calls 'philistinism' and discusses at some length.[5]

What is finally most important is not whether or not a human individual or society engages in religious, moral or artistic valuation *per se*, but whether they can value anything at all, in any way. Nietzsche took very seriously the possibility that people in modern societies might lose the ability to value anything at all. He called the threat that this constituted 'nihilism'.[6] The 'transcendental argument' is directed against this possibility. I can fail to be committed to any particular religious values or to appreciate art, but no one can fail to value (the activity of) valuation itself, because *failure* to value is itself a way of valuing, or form of valuation. Just as for Kant all humans exhibit an awareness with a fixed structure that can be clearly described, so for Nietzsche (on Bull's account) all humans have a kind of inborn structure of valuing they cannot escape. Even (so the argument would seem to go) *not* valuing Wordsworth will not move you out of the domain of valuation altogether: it is just taking a position, albeit a highly negative one, in the necessary human game of valuing. Since Nietzsche also holds that 'social inequality is the source of our value concepts, and the necessary condition of value itself',[7] he concludes that our world, including our social and political world, *must* be inegalitarian. If this were to be correct, he would seem to have provided something like a transcendental argument for social inequality. Egalitarianism would undermine the very possibility of finding anything to be of value and thus lead to nihilism.

For a transcendental argument to carry conviction it needs to start from a relatively clear account of entrenched human capacities—with Kant, a structure of awareness or consciousness; with Nietzsche, a structure of valuation. It might be asked, then, whether 'valuation', in the sense in which the term is being used here, has an appropriate structure. The argument turns on the claim that not-valuing is itself a form of valuing.

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[4] AN, pp. 166, 46–8, 62–7.
[5] AN, pp. 1–26.
[6] AN, 55–104.
[7] AN, p. 153.

However, 'not-valuing' might be said to cover a number of very different phenomena:

1. I actively dislike the poetry of Wordsworth (my eyes glaze over as it rolls on and on down the page)

2. I am indifferent to, i.e. *fail to* value, most of Dickens (I have read some of the novels and can take them or leave them)

3. I am indifferent to the novels of . . . (some writer whose name I do not even know)

4. I lack any engagement with the dimension along which certain kinds of valuation take place (I am completely blind, so painting is not relevant to me at all; or like Freud, I cannot discover in myself any of the 'oceanic' feelings that constitute the origin of religions)

The last of these is particularly interesting in view of the formal parallelism that exists between Bull/Nietzsche's transcendental argument about valuation and similar *raisonnements* that have been put forward in favour of the existence of God. These range from the so-called 'ontological' argument to existentialist attempts at defining God as the 'final framework of meaning' or 'the object of ultimate concern', and at arguing transcendentally that even those who deny the existence of a divinity actually accept some principle of meaning or concern that, correctly understood, is identical to 'God'. It is not, however, obvious that my active dislike of Wordsworth is the same kind of thing as Freud's failure to appreciate 'oceanic feelings' or the blind person's indifference to painting, although all can in one sense be said to be an instance of 'not valuing'. The valuing dimension—from intense positive valuation to utter failure to value—lacks the degree of homogeneity the argument seems to presuppose. In taking it to be appropriately homogeneous, we would succumb to a trick of language of the kind that Nietzsche in many other contexts is keen to put us on our guard against.

To put the point in another way, many contemporaries are in one important sense *neither* theists *nor* atheists—it isn't so much that they think that God does exist or that he does not, or even that they are 'agnostic' in

the traditional sense. Rather, as Richard Rorty once said,[8] he just wished people would shut up altogether about the whole topic because for him and those like him the categorical dimension within which something like 'God' could—or could not—be said to exist has just disappeared (or been abolished). The question of the existence of some entity that might instantiate this category has simply lost all meaning or relevance. From the point of view of a religious believer this is the worst possible state of affairs: at least the militant atheist agrees that something very important is at issue in the discussion of 'God'. For a committed theist, Rorty's position would seem to be a particularly intractable form of what he or she would call atheism. Theologians might construct a dimension of self-instantiating meaning, or concern, which they call 'God', but this would not move Rorty. Equally, we can see how someone might artificially construct a self-validating concept of 'valuation' by putting together tropic behaviour on the part of plants, lack of enthusiasm for reading another novel by Dickens, disgust at the prospect of having to read another poem by Wordsworth and complete lack of interest in theological claims. Perspectivism can accommodate this kind of construction—it is the sort of fiction humans might engage in for any number of reasons, and might in some contexts be perfectly useful—but the perspectivist will not take the transcendental argument at face value as an expression of an invariant and universal necessary truth.

Kinds of inequality

Turning to the question of equality, we might think of Nietzsche as distinguishing two forms of egalitarianism. One of these we might call 'factual or real egalitarianism', that is, a set of structures or practices that reflect actually existing equality, especially equality of power, between different individuals or groups. So, at one point in the Melian dialogues, Thucydides has the Athenians say to the Melians that conceptions of justice, etc., are perfectly fine in relations between cities that are more or less equal in power, but have no place when such equality does not really exist (as between the Athenians and the Melians). The other form of egalitarianism is what we might call 'hypothetical' or 'ascribed' or 'ascriptional' egalitarianism, which is the attempt to recognize as equal even those who are patently not in fact equal, treat them as if they were such, although they are not. Discussions of 'egalitarianism' often depend on

[8] Private conversation.

unanalysed and—Nietzsche would claim—indefensible shifts between the two senses. Thus many common arguments have the form: 'all humans are equal', in that all are capable of ratiocination or all are capable of free choice, and *therefore* they ought to be treated as (political and moral) equals. For instance, their opinion on political issues ought to be solicited and given the same weight as the opinions of all others.

Nietzsche has a number of objections to this line of thought, the first of which is simply that all humans are not actually (equally) capable of ratiocination or of free choice in any interesting sense. If one means by 'ratiocination' or by 'choice' real, observable human powers—that is, characteristics achieved through cultivation and actually exhibited in human behaviour—then it is the reverse of obvious that humans are all 'equal' in this respect. Even if one emphasizes 'capable' in these statements—all humans are equally *capable* of reasoning or free choice—provided one is using 'capable' in an empirically determinate way, the claims seem false. So the temptation is to move from our normal empirical sense of 'capable' to a metaphysical construct, construing 'capable' as some kind of transcendent endowment, but this amounts, Nietzsche claims, simply to replacing 'real' equality with a particularly etiolated form of 'ascribed' equality, and thus begs the question at issue. Furthermore, even if this were not the case, even if contrary to fact, humans were all equal in ratiocinative powers, it would be utterly unclear why those powers 'ought' to be developed and deployed, or 'ought' to be recognized by others as a basis for any kind of entitlement. If there are reasons for this, what are they, and why are they so rarely expounded?

Nietzsche has no quarrel with 'real egalitarianism', the claim that (certain particular, specifiable) people actually are equal, in some respect; this claim is either true or false, and there is an end of it. It is 'ascribed egalitarianism' that is problematic, and Nietzsche makes two important further points about it. First, recall his distinction between a contingently adopted ascetic practice or set of practices, such as the disciplined abstention from alcohol by runners before a race, and what he calls an ascetic 'ideal'. The runners abstain for perfectly transparent, conditional and 'instrumental' reasons, namely in order to run the race faster. If they did not think that consumption of alcohol reduced performance, they would not abstain. In contrast, the ascetic 'ideal' is the view that it is unconditionally good in all circumstances to be ascetic; that self-abnegation is a value 'in itself'. Characteristic of such ideals is that no

external reasons are usually cited for them; when 'reasons' are given, they tend to be circular, self-referential, or exceedingly indeterminate: self-abnegation is a value in itself because it is 'the best way to live' or it is 'willed by God' or something equally uninformative. Ascribed egalitarianism is like the ascetic ideal, and unlike the 'conditional' ascetic practices Nietzsche is willing to accept, provided there are good instrumental reasons for them. Since no discernible, non-mythic reason is given why those who are manifestly unequal should be treated *as if* equal, there is a serious problem about motivation.

Nietzsche's second point is that ideal, ascriptional or hypothetical egalitarianism has within itself an inherent dynamism. It is not merely that equality is, as it were, good in itself. It is an inherent part of this ideational and social configuration that more and more social groups be 'included' among the community of Equals; and, in addition, that more and more aspects of human life be encompassed. Mere formal equality before the law, which was sufficient for the men of the French Revolution, is no longer enough: one needs equality of property, too, as demanded by various social-democratic political movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and then not only that but also, potentially, equality of genetic endowment, and so on. Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the dynamism of ascriptional egalitarianism is its ability to issue demands for *in*equality. It has a kind of Hegelian property of good infinity in that it can in some sense assimilate its opposite. Thus, because all 'really' are (or 'ought to be made') equal, we must devote *more* resources to those who are in fact weaker in order either to raise them to equality or somehow compensate them for their failure or inability to attain that level.

Bull is not exactly mistaken in what he says about Marx (whose role in *Anti-Nietzsche* is anyway peripheral) on 'equality' and egalitarianism, but, it seems to me, he gets the emphasis wrong. At the centre of his discussion he puts the idea of 'negative community', that is, the view that in an ideal society there will be no property rights at all.[9] Marx does hold to this view, but what is more important is to see that he is *neither* an egalitarian *nor* an inegalitarian, if by that one means that he holds that it is possible to make all people equal to each other in all respects and the only question is whether or not this is desirable. Rather, he thinks

[9] AN, pp. 156–9, 162.

that an increase in equality along any one dimension of human life will be associated with an increase of inequality along another.[10] All humans will get 'equal' healthcare only if those who are ill get more attention than those who are healthy, or if not everyone gets equally what he or she needs. Complete 'equality', then, if construed as an 'abstract' ideal, is neither good nor bad, but rather an *empty* conception. This reasoning interrupts the perceived connection between (the illusory idea of an abstractly construed) egalitarianism and permanent revolution—the extension of the body of people who are potential objects of egalitarian concern—and the destruction of cultural values.[11] There is thus no general presumption in favour of increasing egalitarianism. Rather, in each case one must decide which specific aspects of life will be improved by introducing equality, even at the cost of increasing inequality along some other dimension.

In fact, playing the egalitarian/inegalitarian game, one could easily make a case for Marx as a committed inegalitarian who construes 'inequality' as a kind of 'good infinity'. After all, he thinks that capitalism imposes an artificial 'equality' of economic circumstance on members of the proletariat, causing a stultification of human individuality, whereas in a post-capitalist society, by contrast, people will be able to pursue the cultivation of their natural talents and hence become less and less like each other. To present this argument seriously, though, means to miss the point that equal/unequal are two mutually dependent sides of the same relation, which can be separated only analytically, and thus that it is folly to try to isolate either one and set it up as an absolute ideal. This, of course, leaves the question of what specific kinds of equalities are worth preserving or enforcing, and at what cost. I merely note in closing that to this question Marx would have expected an answer that made reference to the requirements of a historically specific situation. There is no place in Marx for transcendental arguments;[12] their point is to turn us in precisely the wrong direction: away from history.

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[10] Karl Marx, *Marx–Engels Werke,* Berlin 1972, vol. 19, pp. 19–22 ('Critique of The Gotha Programme').

[11] AN, pp. 155–67.

[12] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx–Engels Werke,* Berlin 1972, vol. 3, pp. 13–77 ('The German Ideology: Book I').