Nietzsche, nihilism and beyond

By Bart Nooteboom

60. Nietzsche's error   published 1-12-2012

I endorse Nietzsche's passionate plea for an affirmation of life, in the flourishing of the creative and intelligent force of the human being, and transcendence of the self as the highest expression of the *will to power*. However, this path is blocked by his overestimation of the self and his condemnation of morality.

In his *Genealogy of morality* Nietzsche reconstructed the morality of compassion, altruism and self-sacrifice as a revolt of the weak ('slaves') in their resentment against the strong ('masters'). With the power of the majority, the slaves have appropriated morality, in an alliance with religion, in an exercise of their own will to power. Individual will to power of 'the strong' is curtailed by external forces of custom, law and punishment, and thus restrained it turns upon the self, to overwhelm it and to torture it in self-denial. The result is suffocation of the forces of self-realization. The shame that this brings about is diverted to a feeling of virtue in the claim that self-sacrifice is a sacrifice for the sake of a higher religious purpose.

Benevolence is particularly perverse when it turns into pity, which is demeaning to both the subject and the object of pity. It is often an expression of the will to power, in a revenge on the weak, in further degrading the weak, in elevating oneself above the object of pity, and imposing the demand of gratitude and obedience, and inviting applause. For the object of pity the feeling that he has a right to pity deflects attention from his weakness and efforts to overcome it. While in contrast with pity compassion may be genuine, with a concern for the dignity of its object, that still undermines the potential of the strong, detracts from the realization of his potential and negates life.

At a few places, Nietzsche recognizes that the self needs the opposition of others, friends and foes, to escape from illusions of the self (in *Human all too human*). He makes allowance for altruism between friends who may sufficiently know each other to achieve empathy. This is accompanied, however, by an equilibrium of power. He also allows for benevolence from the master to his slave, in a spontaneous overflow from the bounty of his supremacy. However, these points are swamped by an avalanche of diatribe against compassion, altruism and orientation towards the other. In the preface to his *Genealogy of morality* Nietzsche says that the 'regard outside, instead of back to the self, is part of slave morality. …. The real, noble spirit seeks opposition only in order to say yes to himself even more gratefully, with more alacrity'.

The error in this is the following. As I have argued in preceding items of this blog, and will argue further in later items, for transcendence of the self the self needs the other to oppose it, to correct its prejudice and errors, and to extend its mental and spiritual scope. And for that to work one must become a master in empathy and compassion.

63. Nietzsche and Levinas   published 8-12-2012

At first sight few views are so much opposed as those of Nietzsche in his rejection and Levinas in his radical acceptance of responsibility of the self for the other. At second sight there are also commonalities.

First, both use the perspective of embodied cognition, as I do in this blog. Impulses, perceptions and feelings precede cognition and ethics and form the basis for them. Second, both turn away from God. Third, both accept that God was invented as consolation for human vulnerability, and now we must find another way to deal with inevitable suffering. Fourth, for both the making of sacrifices for others is not a moral duty or limitation of freedom, but arises autonomously from inside, either as an overflow from the fullness of life (Nietzsche), or as a deep-seated feeling of responsibility that precedes the self (Levinas). Fifth, both try to say the unsayable, beyond established categories of thought and language. Sixth, both are suspicious of universals that cause neglect of diverse, individual, unique human beings. Seventh, both try to escape from the limitations of the self (transcendence). Eighth, for both identification between people, in reciprocation that results in a merging and equalization, is both impossible and undesirable. Ninth, both turn away from the *conatus essendi*, the drive to survive and manifest oneself, though in very different ways. Tenth, both (but Levinas more in his earlier than in his later work) take the sensual, feeling, exuberant self as a starting point.

But then begins the big difference. Nietzsche begins with the exuberant self, the child, and thinks he can find transcendence from within the autonomous self, from an internally generated fullness, without regard for claims from others or demands for self-constraint, a self that dissociates itself from the other, and in his philosophy he ends up again with the child. Starting with the self, Levinas veers away to the other and its ethical call on the self. For Nietzsche that is treason to the life forces of the self, in a hypocritical and crippling Christian morality of compassion. For Levinas, however, the ethical call to the other is not an appeal to asceticism, not a denial but an affirmation of the self, in being elected.

According to Nietzsche the self experiences a primitive excitement at the suffering of another, and no one benefits from pity, which only multiplies suffering. For Levinas the suffering of the other is unbearable and brought under the responsibility of the self. For Nietzsche suffering is a condition for transformation of the self by the self. For Levinas suffering is a condition for ethics and an escape from the self by the suffering of the other. For Nietzsche separation between self and other yields protection of the self in his emergence from himself, for Levinas it opens the self to the other. Thus, at third sight, in spite of the commonalities between Nietzsche and Levinas the difference is as big as it appeared at first sight.

64. Nietzsche, Levinas and me   published 12-12-2012Both

Nietzsche and Levinas wage opposition, as I do in this blog, to a number of fundamental intuitions in Western philosophy, going back to Plato, concerning being, rationality, knowledge, the self and the relation between self and other. The self is seen as autonomous, self-sufficient, and disconnected from its environment. The world, including the self, is supposed to be 'present' to consciousness. Knowledge is seen as 'seeing', 'grasping', 'comprehension'. Knowledge is reduction of experience into universal categories of thought. The pretension of the self is that thus it can contain everything from its environment, including itself. This idea has the pernicious ethical consequence that one also looks in this way to fellow human beings as something that one can absorb and 'make one's own'.

Levinas is to some extent an *existentialist* philosopher in the sense that like Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, and Gabriel Marcel he sees human existence as a process, as a participating, acting, being involved in the world. Acting is more fundamental than thinking. Abstract knowledge in the form of the assimilation of experience into categories, universals, is preceded and trumped by a much richer form of knowledge as experience in the practical handling of things in interaction with specific people in specific situations. His bent towards specific, individual people and their circumstances, and his mistrust of abstractions, universals, and the impersonal forces of ideology, state, market and technology that they produce, which lead to alienation of the human being, are a characteristic of existentialist philosophy.

With Nietzsche and Levinas I share the perspective of the bodily, physiological, emotional roots of cognition and ethics, the question what to do with human suffering, and the relinquishing of God as a way out. With Nietzsche I want to preserve, not subdue the life force and creativity of the human being, and I share his 'Dionysian' striving to transcend the self. With Levinas I share the idea that openness to the other forms the foundation of the self and a source of transcendence of the self. I radically disagree with Nietzsche's often-tacit presupposition that the self can do this by itself. On the other hand in my view Levinas goes overboard with his idea of the self as a hostage for the other. In my view the self not only has the right but also wisdom on his/her side to distance him/herself from the other when that seems needed. I even claim that this is a consequence of Levinas' thought itself.

The point is this. If the other in his/her opposition to me and in the ethical appeal to me to have concern for him/her is a source of transcendence for me, then I should also grant the same to him/her, in my opposition and appeal to him/her. I should be passive in the sense of being receptive to him/her but also active in helping him/her to receive me. Paradoxically perhaps, it would be egotistic of me to completely subject myself to the other.

143. Forms of nihilism   published 28-4-2014

Here I start a series on nihilism: what does it mean, what forms are there, what responses to it, how can one move beyond nihilism, what did Nietzsche propose for that move, and what is my proposal? Here, I elaborate on item 19 of this blog, with the title 'Beyond nihilism: Imperfection on the move'. I use bits from a book with that title that I am writing.

Western culture has harboured a deep urge, and still lingers in that urge, towards the certainty of ideals or values that are objective, i.e. 'outside' or independent from human cognition and inclinations, and absolute, that is: universal, unconditional, regardless of conditions and interests, and immutable, in other words applying everywhere and forever. This urge has been shaken by *nihilism.*

Nihilism is a complex notion, with a variety of meanings and interpretations. Karen Carr gave the overall characterization that I like best: 'Loss of all sense of contact with what is ultimately true or meaningful'[1]. This loss has led to despair, in a loss of meaning in life, a feeling that life is not worth living. This is called *Existential nihilism.* It is a derived form of nihilism, following from loss of faith in the old, absolute values, or in human ability to live by

---

[1] Karen Carr, *The banalization of nihilism*, State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 2.

them, or both. This can result in despair, if the old ideals are maintained, or in disorientation, if the desirability of the old ideas is in doubt or rejected.[2]

Nihilistic anxiety is not new, and arose before Nietzsche, but the spectre of nihilism manifested itself more openly and radically in his work, and it has been haunting philosophy ever since.

There are different forms of nihilism, according to the type of values lost. *Religious nihilism* results from loss of God, *ontological nihilism* from loss of reality as independent from human consciousness, *epistemological nihilism* from loss of objective knowledge, *ethical nihilism* from loss of objective morality, and *aesthetic nihilism* from loss of objective standards of beauty.

Epistemological nihilism can be traced to the scepticism of the ancient philosopher Pyrrho, and to the later Kantian revolution. According to Kant we can only perceive and interpret the world according to categories of time, space and causality that we impose. We have no access to objective reality as it is in itself. This destroys the *correspondence* view of truth as a correspondence between ideas and items in reality.

Kant did propound absolute standards of ethics, such as the *categorical imperative*, a form of the ancient *golden rule*: do (not) do unto others that you (do not) want done to yourself. The underlying idea is that reasons are sufficient only when based on absolute values, and that reason can grasp them, standing apart from inclinations and interests.

Nietzsche demolished absolutes in all areas, of God, knowledge, ethics and art. The basic idea is that claims to knowledge, ethics and art are always, inevitably, based on some contingent, non-absolute perspective, associated with interests, which could be different but nevertheless yields sufficient reasons.

For Nietzsche, the point was not only that the old absolutes couldn't be achieved but, more importantly, that they pervert, thwart life. What room is there for life and humanity, for creativity and invention, and corresponding error, when we are bound by universal, immutable ideas? In particular, Nietzsche rejected the morality of compassion and altruism, as hypocritical, a revolt of the weak against the strong, which destroys excellence and flourishing of life.

There is a distinction between *weak nihilism*: regretful loss of belief, and *strong nihilism*: no longer seeing such belief as desirable. Could one not make a step from disorientation to re-orientation, on the basis of values that are no longer claimed to be objective and/or absolute? Would that still be nihilism?

Nietzsche did not simply reject the old values as irrelevant, deserving indifference, as later postmodernists did (such as Richard Rorty). He also rejected indifference with respect to values, and passiveness, hedonism, and stoicism as an escape from the despair of nihilism. In his view that was as 'decadent', i.e. life thwarting, as the old absolutes.

He acknowledged the need for man to seek value and meaning, and rather than rejecting all values that go beyond the self, he sought a 'Revaluation of all values', with values that are not

---

[2] I adopt this distinction between despair and disorientation from Bernard Reginster, *The affirmation of life; Nietzsche on overcoming nihilism*, Harvard University Press, 2006.

absolute and yet contribute to the flourishing of life. This offers an escape from nihilistic despair, but the despair was needed to propel this revaluation. What that revaluation entails I will discuss in a later item in this series.

144. Responses to nihilism: faith, resignation and revolution   published 4-5-2014

Marmysz[3] defined 'pure' or 'radical' nihilism according to three characteristics:
1. Humans are unable to achieve absolute values of God, the true, the good and the beautiful.
2. This is not how it should be
3. There is nothing we can do about it

In combination these three points yield despair and the feeling that life is pointless. Responses to nihilism can be deduced as deviations from one or more of these premises.

A first type of response is to accept 1, maintaining absolute values, and drop 2, accepting that they cannot be achieved. Kierkegaard did this, and in a related fashion, so did Karl Barth (in his early work) and the 'dialectical theologians'[4]. Here, nihilistic despair produces a leap of faith. Despair of grasping God and approaching the absolute, in a 'sickness onto death', yields a positive impulse, evoking all the more awe for the absolute and infinite, and inspiring utmost dedication to it. Not being able to grasp God we should surrender to him. Paradoxically, despair is needed to leap into faith but then despair is also relieved.

From a more mundane positive perspective, inability to achieve perfection is seen as normal in human life, and it can serve to incite all the more effort, and may strengthen one's resolve to continue striving. To deal with the discrepancy between absolute values and our inability to achieve them, Marmysz proposed humour and laughter. That yields pleasure in discrepancies.

In a more passive as well as negative response, one can dodge despair by trying to ignore it and let oneself be engulfed in the trivia of daily life, in conformism to the powers of habit and custom, in what Nietzsche called 'the herd' and Heidegger called 'das Man' (the 'one' in the sense of what 'one does').

One may also seek recourse to hedonism, distract oneself in seeking pleasure.

Or one can also face despair and resign to it, accept imperfections, and try to make oneself immune to the resulting vulnerabilities and uncertainties of life, as the Stoics did, and Schopenhauer, in *ataraxia.*

The existentialist response (Sartre, Camus) is to have the courage to face up to despair, accepting the pointlessness of human life, but with some appreciation for its absurdity, with humanist sympathy for the predicament people are in together, even as an opportunity for emancipation.

A second type of response is to reject point 3, that there is nothing we can do about it, and to take action. This may take a violent, anarchistic, iconoclastic form of aiming to destroy the existing order that keeps us from achieving the absolute. The Russian anarchists come to mind (such as Bakunin).

---

[3] Marmysz, 2003, *Laughing at nothing; Humor as a response to nihilism*, State University of New York Press.
[4] See Karen Carr, *The banalization of nihilism*, State University of New York Press, 1992

Another option is to accept that absolute values are needed, and replace existing ones by new ones, in a revolutionary overthrow. Despair is resolved with the claim of offering an alternative, new absolute ideal, in a new religion or ideology that can be achieved, be it at the cost of sacrificing the existing order. This is often seen as nihilistic, but in fact it is opposite to it. It claims that we can achieve new absolutes, if we all make the necessary commitment and sacrifice. Such ideologies tend to be totalitarian, claiming the whole of life as its domain. They evoke missionary zeal.

Communism comes to mind, but also radical capitalist market ideologies. Communism needs no elaboration on this point, I think, but perhaps capitalism does. Its totalitarianism lies in the claim, and the mission, that market logic should apply universally, everywhere, regardless of history, society or culture, in commercial as well as cultural and private affairs.

A *third, radical response* is to reject that absolute values are needed or even desirable. That is the response of Nietzsche, and of postmodernists, such as Richard Rorty, but with an important difference between them. I turn to that in the next item.

145. Responses to nihilism: perspectivism   published 12-5-2014

A radical response to nihilism is to reject the claim that absolute values are needed or even desirable, and to seek life without them. Two forms are Richard Rorty's indifference and Nietzsche's passionate 'revaluation of all values'.

One can become indifferent, shrugging at nihilism. What is the point of regretting values that cannot be achieved? Let us rejoice in being freed from them. This is the stance of (some) postmodernists, notably Richard Rorty.

This yields a pragmatist view: ideas and actions are good if they are useful, contribute to a good life.

This entails *perspectivism*: what one considers valid or true, in some sense, or good, depends on one's perspective, which depends on history, circumstances, culture and personal perspective.

If the criterion for adequacy or validity is contribution to the good life, the question then is, of course, what the good life is and who determines that.

For Rorty that is a matter of consensus in some community, with different communities making different choices, without any perspective- and interest-free argument to adjudicate between them.

For Nietzsche the old absolutes were not just impossible to achieve but were inimical to the good life. Life entails variety and ongoing change of perspectives, and this is blocked by absolutes, any absolutes. For Nietzsche the good life is contribution to the flourishing of life, the furthering of human life and excellence, in an ongoing movement of self-transcendence and 'Dionysian' creative destruction, driven by the 'will to power'. I will discuss that in a later item.

Concerning knowledge, one can take refuge in epistemological scepticism, like Pyrrho, and later philosophers, such as Montaigne and David Hume. This skepticism can, but does not necessarily, lead to radical relativism: no claim to knowledge or truth is inherently better than any other.

An alternative to radical relativism is to accept that values can be legitimate and reasons can be sufficient without being absolute, while they are not arbitrary and are subject to debate and to improvement.

In pragmatism, absolute, objective truth is replaced by *warranted assertability* (which goes back to John Dewey). Something is to be accepted is there are good arguments for it, to be settled in debate. In pragmatism the central warrant for assertability is that it 'works', stands up in practice and furthers practical conduct.

As indicated, for Rorty the warrant lies in consensus in some community (in 'ethnocentrism'). Karen Carr argued[5], correctly in my view, that this entails a surrender to conservatism, the status quo. And if there is no basis for adjudication between different perspectives, ultimately it is a matter of force, the right of the strong.

I would add that it entails a surrender to what Nietzsche called the 'herd' and Heidegger called 'Das Man'. It entails surrender to suppression by the anonymous power of institutions, illustrated by Foucault. It entails surrender to the prisoners' dilemmas in which society has increasingly been caught (as in the case of banking, discussed elsewhere in this blog), where individual morality is strangled in collective interest.

Nietzsche acknowledged that man seeks meaning and value, but rather than accepting them from some outside authority, man produces them. Is his ultimate value as contribution to the flourishing of life not a new absolute, a new metaphysics? Does it yield an escape from relativism? That is the subject for the next item.

146. Meaning nihilism   published 18-5-2014

Meaning nihilism entails that words and expressions have no individual, determinate and fixed meaning, regardless of context, but depend on perspective and situational conditions. If one endorses the *correspondence view* of truth that certain elementary notions or expressions correspond with elements in objective reality, then meaning nihilism is related to *epistemological nihilism*, the lack of certain, objective knowledge and truth.

Wittgenstein (in his later work) and Heidegger proposed that in our cognition and language ideas and words have meaning not as individual, isolated entities, but only holistically, as a coherent system associated with a body of practice and discourse.[6]

Wittgenstein called those constellations 'language games' and 'forms of life'. Heidegger called it 'Being' as acting in the world. Knowledge, language and practical conduct are not

---

[5] Karen Carr, 1992, *The banalization of nihilism, Twentieth century responses to meaninglessness,* State University of New York Press.

[6] Cf. Lee Braver, 2012, *Groundless grounds; A study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger,* MIT press.

grounded in abstract, absolute, objective, basic notions and logic. It is the other way around: practice is primary and abstractions follow. Understanding is not contemplation of truths but ability to perform a practice. Mostly, we do not rationally develop and justify beliefs before we adopt them but take them for granted as we adopt them.

One absurd consequence of predetermined meanings would be that all future uses are enfolded in the beginning, which is equivalent to saying that there can be no future. Meanings change along with the practices in which they arise.

We are socialized and cognitively formed in practices that are taken for granted and form our terms of reference, which have no outside foundation and we cannot step out of. We can only point to established practice, in some community or context. There is no ultimate justification. Rationalization remains *internal* to the practice, delving from within the terms in which the justification is made. At some point all we can say is 'this is how it is done'. Notions of right and wrong can arise only within, not between language games. One can say in chess that a certain move is illegitimate, but one cannot say that chess is wrong.

This response to semantic nihilism yields the same cultural relativism as Richard Rorty's response to nihilism more widely, discussed in the preceding item in this blog: judgement of legitimacy operates only within cultures.

This is reminiscent of a famous debate in the philosophy of science, with Thomas Kuhn's notion of *incommensurability* between different *paradigms.*

As before, in the preceding item this blog, my problem with this is that if all attempts at debate across language games, paradigms or cultures are renounced as hopeless, the result is either mutual indifference and isolation or a settling of differences by power and violence. That would eliminate the potential of variety for intellectual and spiritual growth, and it would entail surrender to war and conflict.

While I admit that differences can be so fundamental as to preclude any meaningful debate, I think that most of the time some commonality can be found, in some similarity of experience, from which with clever metaphors some bridges of understanding can be built.

Earlier in this blog (in items 57, 58, and 66) I discussed this in terms of *cognitive distance* and attempts to bridge it. I discussed *meaning* and its change in items 37, 36, and 37.

147. Beyond nihilism: Nietzsche   published 26-5-2014

Old absolutes have produced their own demise. Religious transcendence led to a sacrifice of the self, a denial of earthly life and of the body. Nietzsche called it a form of decadence. And the relentless search for truth led to the discovery that we cannot know objective, absolute truth. To tell the truth: we cannot tell the truth.

According to Nietzsche the despair of nihilism should not produce a flight into triviality, hedonism, or indifference, which would constitute another form of decadence. Despair can be positive, producing a novel perspective, in a 'revaluation of all values'. Nietzsche preached truth relativism but not value relativism.

Reginster[7] proposed that a revaluation of all values is contradictory, self-defeating, because it negates also the value, the perspective from which the revaluation is done. However, if one rejects absolute values of the true and the good, then, to avoid a search without end, an *infinite regress*, one must stop somewhere, and take some value for granted. But to be consistent one must allow for the need to arise to change that principle. That is the idea of *imperfection on the move.*

Now the most fundamental value in Nietzsche's revaluation is change, a perspective of 'being' not as a noun but as a verb, as an ongoing process of transformation, Dionysian creative destruction. And change would include the change of change, perhaps a negation of change, which again would be temporary.

As I have argued at several places in this blog, stability and change alternate, in processes of transformation.

The central principle producing change that Nietzsche arrives at is the 'will to power'. Reginster proposed that the crux of it is an appreciation of overcoming resistance, not just the acceptance of it as the price to paid for transformation, but the lust, the delight, the relish of it.

As the will to power is turned to the change of ideas, some of the old values of the Enlightenment re-appear: the virtues of intellectual honesty, integrity, open-mindedness, and autonomy. Inspired by classical Greek thought Nietzsche added values of contest, courage, excellence, creative self-determination, and self-overcoming. The highest manifestation of the will to power is artistic creation.

The ultimate goal to which the will to power is the instrument is the flourishing, the vitality of life, and the 'elevation and strengthening', 'the advancement and prosperity of man'.[8] Here is the transcendent in Nietzsche's revaluation. However, it is not the transcendent of God or an afterlife, but the transcendent of a future of human flourishing.

The crucial question for me now is whether and how this can avoid relativism. Why adopt this perspective rather than any other? Did Nietzsche raise the will to power to a new absolute, or is it also subject to change?

Reginster argued that Nietzsche's stance was 'fictionalist'. Values are to be taken seriously, not ironically, as if they were absolute, in a suspension of disbelief, demanding commitment, without, however, falling back on any claim of absolute validity.

This seriousness is found in how children play ('and then you were the princess, and I the slayer of dragons …'), and how rules of games are observed. They are taken seriously, with full commitment, and with indignation when the rules are not observed, even while one is aware that they are not 'really true' or even relevant outside the game.

This make-belief and self-delusion would have been quite a step for someone as committed to the courage of ever seeking and facing the truth as Nietzsche was, and therefore I find it difficult to accept.

---

[7]Bernard Reginster, 2006, *The affirmation of life; Nietzsche on overcoming nihilism*, Harvard University Press.
[8] Quoted in Nimrod Aloni, 1991, *Beyond nihilism: Nietzsche's healing and edifying philosophy*, University Press of America, p. 28.

My view on the matter is as follows. As I indicated, the underlying, more fundamental value of Nietzschean philosophy lies in ongoing change. I think this must imply that the will to power is subject to revision. Indeed, I think that Nietzsche himself would not have wanted it otherwise.

What would he have thought if he could have witnessed the atrocities, in the holocaust, for which Nazism had usurped passages from Nietzsche's texts (e.g. on the 'blond beast')? I suggest that he would have revised his views, not on the fundamental value of Dionysian creative destruction, but on the principle of the will to power.

So, what might a revised endorsement of creative destruction, with a successor to will to power look like? That is the subject for the next item.

148. Imperfection on the move   published 3-6-2014

While I sympathise with Nietzsche's thought on several points, I deviate from it in several ways, to develop my perspective of *imperfection on the move*.

Like Nietzsche, I reject absolutes but take values seriously. I add that most often values are adopted tacitly, without any question of validity arising at all. I will return to that in a later item in this blog. But where critical reflection is possible and relevant, one can legitimately accept values (and truths), as temporary, currently the best we have, given language and largely tacit established notions, while remaining open to possible failure of our cognitive make-up and to the need for revision in the face of new experience, meanings, or arguments.

Instead of Nietzsche's Will to Power I posit a Will to Creation, including art as well as invention and innovation. That includes the need, and perhaps Nietzschean enjoyment, of overcoming resistance, but counter to Nietzsche, not as a fundamental value in itself, but as inevitable in creation. While for Nietzsche the will to power is primary, with creation as its highest manifestation, for me will to creation is primary.

Like Nietzsche I propose that one's own prejudice also yields a resistance one needs to overcome. Will to power should apply also to the self. However, Nietzsche sought that in rivalry with opponents. In contrast with Nietzsche I propose that instead of vanquishing others, one needs to be receptive and empathetic to them, to be open to their opposition. This is needed to achieve the highest form of freedom: the freedom to change what one wants to want, and to overcome one's prejudices. I argued this extensively in my book 'Beyond humanism', and in earlier items in this blog (49 and 60)

Here, I oppose enlightenment rhetoric of autonomous selves, in self-realization, and Nietzsche's extension of it into self-affirmation. Even according to Nietzsche himself there is no originary, unitary, given self to affirm. The self is multiple and in flux, and develops in interaction with especially the social environment.

As indicated earlier in this blog, I endorse the fallibilist view of pragmatism, and the related notion of 'truth' as 'warranted assertability', but with some modifications.

How relativistic is the principle of warranted assertability? The answer to the absence of absolute, objective values should not be relativistic surrender to the incommensurability of

values from different perspectives but, to the contrary, commitment to ongoing effort at debate between opposing views.

The criterion of warranted assertability is not only success in terms of utility, but also success more widely, in debate, with arguments that mobilize all relevant knowledge and experience, including facts.

While accepting the impossibility of achieving certain, objective truth, I re-institute facts and realism, in a non-absolute, contingent fashion.

Facts are indeed perspectival and theory-laden, but they are mostly less arbitrary and more reliable than theoretical speculation. In my practice as a scientist I have encountered situations where the perception of facts did vary with differences in theoretical perspective, but also cases where one could agree on them to settle differences in theory.

I do not believe in realism in the form of correspondence between ideas or perceptions with items in reality, but I do endorse realism in the sense that our ideas develop, mostly tacitly, without our being aware of it, in interaction with reality, as a function of experienced success, and in that sense somehow reflect them, though not as in a mirror. What, then, do we 'have in mind'? I will discuss that in a later in this blog.

Finally, how could and why should one adopt the basic value of creation that I propose? I think we *do have* the drive and ability to creation as a result of evolution: it has given the human species an advantage in survival. I think it is *advisable* to adopt creation as a value for the flourishing of one's own life and lives after that. Why? Does flourishing human life have absolute importance? I don't know, but since we have life it seems best to make the best of it.

How all this works out in life and society has been the subject of a number of previous items in this blog.

149. Nietzsche as a pragmatist   published 9-6-2014

There is an obvious connection, recognized by many, between Nietzsche and pragmatism. What they share is perspectivism and contribution to life as a criterion for validity. But how, in more detail, do they compare?

They both reject the separation of subject and object, of thought and world, as well as the separation of fact and value, of 'is' and 'ought'. The subject develops its knowledge and ethics in interaction with the world, and truth is judged in relation to purposes of actions.

In mainstream pragmatism (of Peirce, James, Dewey), ideas are revised when they fail in their application. I add, and I am sure Nietzsche would have concurred, that ideas also arise to create or respond to novel opportunities.

Mainstream pragmatism assumes that in the end knowledge will converge, in the limit, to objective truth. Nietzsche, by contrast, thinks of an ongoing creative destruction without any guarantee or indication, or even sense, of such convergence, and I go along with that.

According to mainstream pragmatism truth, or adequacy, or validity, is judged on the basis of utility or success in practice. Of course, that depends on the perspective one takes. In a wider view of pragmatism not everything is focused on practical ends. For Nietzsche, merit of ideas lies not in their direct contribution to utility, indeed Nietzsche despised that criterion. The criterion of usefulness or success raises the question: useful for what?[9] Lies and cheating can be very useful. Usefulness should be related to views of the good life. For Nietzsche that is life which contributes to longer term, supra-individual flourishing of human life, in spiritual growth, and self-overcoming. Lies and cheating don't offer that.

Earlier in this blog I adopted an Aristotelian virtue ethic, with multiple, often incommensurable values, including honesty, openmindedness, courage, integrity, and prudence, in finding a way between extremes, depending on conditions. One recognizes several of these values in Nietzsche.

I propose that one can debate dimensions of the good life across cultures and communities, often finding at least partial overlap, in some degree of family resemblance.

Some dimensions of the good life are incommensurable between cultures, and this is problematic but not necessarily insuperable. They can be incommensurable already within cultures and even within views of an individual. At least partial agreement need not be hopeless and there need not be surrender to power and force. The paradox is that while absolutes are supposed to provide the basis for adjudication between different perspectives, they doin fgact lead to struggles of power and force, since they do not allow for leniency, compromise or hybrid.

Nietzsche would have railed vehemently against Rorty's brand of pragmatism, with consensus in a community as the criterion of validity. He would have denounced that as a vile manifestation of the 'herd mentality'.

Nietzsche would be less sanguine than mainstream pragmatism concerning facts and empirical science, wary as he was of 'scientism'. Here, I take a middle position, with the view that while in principle facts are theory laden they can nevertheless often serve to settle disputes between theories.

Pragmatism is sympathetic to democracy and religion, while Nietzsche is not[10], at least not to theistic religion. If, however, one adopts a wider view of religion, as I have done in this blog, as a striving for transcendence including transcendence that is immanent, in this life, and horizontal, towards something bigger than the self, in this world, then I propose that Nietzsche would qualify.

What most distinguishes Nietzsche from pragmatism is his notion of the will to power, the overcoming of resistance as a value in itself. And I share the doubts on that, as I argued earlier.

285. Nietzsche and Aristotle   published 15-10-2016

[9] Cf. Rossella Fabbrichesi, 2009, Nietzsche and James, A pragmatic hermeneutics, *Economic Journal of pragmnatism and American philosophy*.
[10] See Richard Rorty, 1998, *Berthelot: pragmatism is romantic utilitarianism*, in Morris Dickstein (ed), The revival of pragmatism, Duke University Press, p. 21-36.

Nietzsche did not and Aristotle would not have adopted Christian ethics, utility ethics, and duty ethics. Notoriously, Nietzsche demolished Christian morality as a mask for the exercise of a universal will to power. Morals of humility, pity, modesty and self-sacrifice have arisen as the revenge or pre-emption on the strong by the weak, their victims. Being pre-empted in the exercise of their will to power on others, the strong then turn against themselves in guilt and self-sacrifice.

Here, Nietzsche went back not to Aristotelian virtues of the citizen in society, the *polis*, but to the Homeric virtues of the single hero, the man of action who wins and dominates.

But then Nietzsche ended up in a phantasy of the strong-willed, autonomous Overman, beyond good and evil, who creates his own values, independently from others, in what Alasdair MacIntyre called 'moral solipsism'.

Earlier in this blog, in item 60, I called this 'Nietzsche's mistake'. My argument was as follows. Will to power becomes acceptable, even a virtue, in a joy of overcoming obstacles, when it is not aimed at suppressing or dominating others, but is sublimated in overcoming obstacles in oneself in the effort to transcend oneself, in an Aristotelian striving after the good life. Nietzschean solipsism is self-defeating because one needs openness to the opposition from others to escape from one's own prejudices and blindness, which is the highest degree of freedom.

On the other hand, according to Alasdair MacIntyre, Aristotle, here in agreement with Plato, thought that in spite of the multiplicity and apparent conflict between multiple virtues harmony between them existed, and conflict between them was evil.[i]

There seems to be some tension between this and the acknowledgment, by Aristotle, of the difficulty of *phronesis*, practical wisdom, in finding a good balance between rival virtues, depending on the specific conditions at hand. What if in the exercise of his genius someone neglected his duties as a father? Or betraying a friend to save a country? Aristotle acknowledged that there are no universal rules for this, and that proficiency in phronesis is rare.

Nietzsche, by contrast, relished conflict as a source of renewal, in 'creative destruction' (a term from the economist Schumpeter, not Nietzsche). Pain is part of transformation and transcendence of a limited self. Here I side with Nietzsche.

Here there is a problem with Aristotle's view of virtues as needed to perform well in socially established and accepted 'practices', or language games, as discussed in preceding items in this blog. What if the practice is evil, or unduly constrains liberty?

Consider, for example, the present difficulty of getting away from the socially perverse practices of bankers and leaders of businesses more widely, in maximising their personal gain rather than the interest of society, indeed in damaging that interest, in avoiding taxes, destroying the environment, fooling customers, dodging rules, hiving risks off onto citizens. Some of them relish the virtue of being excellent in playing the game well, cleverly tricking customers to buy harmful financial products, and thereby violating the virtue of serving customers.

How to transform such practices, or escape from them? What are the implications for virtue? What are the virtues of rebellion? Where lies the boundary between having to accept and respect the rigours and virtues of how to perform a practice well, and the virtue of resisting and changing any perverse practice? That has been a major theme in this blog (see items 266 and 267). I still value that transformative, rebellious feature of Nietzsche.

---

[i] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame University Press, 2015 (first published in 1981).