

# Beyond nihilism: Self and other between Nietzsche and Levinas

Bart Nooteboom, October 2018

## Nihilism

Western culture has harboured a deep urge, and still lingers in that urge, towards the certainty of ideals or values that are objective, that is: '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*.

Nietzsche, the philosopher with the hammer, destroyed the idea of a universal, the idea as something that is absolute. The universal arises by making things equal that are not equal. It transcends reality to claim that it is the only reality. Old absolutes, such as the ideas of the true, the good, and the beautiful, 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. Nietzsche's stand has been seen as nihilist.

Nihilism has several meanings or interpretations. Karen Carr gave the overall characterization that I like best: 'Loss of all sense of contact with what is ultimately true or meaningful'<sup>i</sup>. 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 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.<sup>ii</sup>

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.<sup>iii</sup> *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.

## Beyond nihilism

Nietzsche demolished absolutes in all areas, of God, knowledge, ethics and art. The basic idea is that of *perspectivism*: 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 yield 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 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.

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<sup>iv</sup> 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*<sup>v</sup>: nothing is ever final, can be improved, but perfection is never achieved.

## Transformation

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. 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'.<sup>vi</sup> 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.

If indeed the underlying, fundamental value of Nietzschean philosophy lies in ongoing change, this implies change and the will to power are themselves 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?

## Nietzsche as a pragmatist

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?<sup>vii</sup> 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.

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<sup>viii</sup>, at least not to theistic religion. If, however, one adopts a wider view of religion, 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.

## Nietzsche and Aristotle

I adopt 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. The classical, cardinal values, around which all turns, are reasonability, courage, moderation and justice.

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 do in fact lead to struggles of power and force, since they do not allow for leniency, compromise or hybrid.

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'.

## Levinas: philosophy of the other

From the traditional centrality of the self in Western philosophy it is difficult to find a foundation for benevolence or altruism. Emmanuel Levinas turns it around: the ethical call for benevolence is primary, precedes the self and all consideration of self-interest, and protection of one's interests is a compromise on that. One can and in conditions of real life in society inevitably does compromise on the ethical call, but the call remains valid to maintain an ideal of conduct that we should not forget.

For Levinas the feeling of responsibility for the other is not a rational choice but something that happens to you and that you experience as being chosen or 'elected' and that makes you unique, irreplaceable for the unique other. The ethical call is to surrender to the other, and to suffer from his suffering, an imperative that precedes all other consideration. Levinas speaks of giving oneself as a 'hostage'. With this he means that the self becomes 'victim without being guilty'.<sup>ix</sup> Responsibility and dedication to the other go so far that they apply also when the other obstructs or even persecutes one.

In the earlier work of Levinas (*Totality and the infinite*, 1987)<sup>x</sup>, to which I limit myself here, the self is, in first instance, tied to itself, which is in due course experienced as frightening, oppressive, or generates boredom, and evokes an urge to escape. 'Evasion' he calls that in one of his earliest works (1982).<sup>xi</sup>

In his novel 'More die of heartbreak', Saul Bellow speaks of the 'claustrophobia of consciousness'. The self needs the other to escape from himself not only for cognitive reasons, as I have emphasized earlier in this blog, but also for emotional, spiritual reasons. The opening to the other is, in other words, not only a search but also a flight.

Levinas concludes that the flight from the self requires that we must not judge or approach the other from the perspective of our existing views. If we do that we never get away and beyond our present self. As long as one takes oneself as point of departure in the approach to the other we remain locked up in ourselves. We must be open to the other without evaluating or judging in advance and without the pretension to ever completely grasp the other.

Levinas says that this opening is not 'receptivity', in which one remains as one is while receiving the other. It is not opening the door for another to enter your house, but letting the other help build your house. One should not expect the other to satisfy one's expectations, but see how the other can employ his potential. We require what Levinas calls 'passiveness': one should not determine the terms but surrender to the terms of the other. Levinas uses a metaphor of breathing, and letting oneself be literally inspired

(breathed into) by the other.<sup>xii</sup> Breathing also is not based on a choice on the basis of an evaluation of what it will yield. It is something you undergo. That is the spirit in which one should set oneself aside.

## Nietzsche and Levinas

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.<sup>xiii</sup>

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.

## Nietzsche's error

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, 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.

## Conclusion

Levinassian openness, passiveness towards the other, is not necessarily antithetical to the Nietzschean urge to transcend oneself: one needs the first to achieve the latter. They are both part of the flourishing of self and other.

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<sup>i</sup> Karen Carr, 1992, *The banalization of nihilism*, State University of New York Press, p. 2.

<sup>ii</sup> I adopt this distinction between despair and disorientation from Bernard Reginster, *The affirmation of life; Nietzsche on overcoming nihilism*, Harvard University Press, 2006.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>v</sup> Bart Nooteboom, 2014, *Beyond nihilism: imperfection on the move*, Kindle.

<sup>vi</sup> Quoted in Nimrod Aloni, 1991, *Beyond nihilism: Nietzsche's healing and edifying philosophy*, University Press of America, p. 28.

<sup>vii</sup> Cf. Rossella Fabbrichesi, 2009, Nietzsche and James, A pragmatic hermeneutics, *Economic Journal of pragmatism and American philosophy*.

<sup>viii</sup> See Richard Rorty, 1998, *Berthelot: pragmatism is romantic utilitarianism*, in Morris Dickstein (ed), *The revival of pragmatism*, Duke University Press, p. 21-36.

<sup>ix</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 1995, *Altérité et transcendance*, Montpellier: Fata Morgana, p. 115.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid., 1961, *Totalité et Infini*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid., 1962 (1982), *De l'évasion*, Montpellier: Fata Morgana.

<sup>xii</sup> In: *Totalité et Infini*.

<sup>xiii</sup> Jill Stauffer and Bettina Bergo, 2009, *Nietzsche and Levinas*, New York: Columbia University Press.