

## Introduction

Any author who wants to write about Nietzsche faces a number of challenges. The most striking is surely Nietzsche's style, which makes it difficult to find a firm footing. Amongst other things, his writing is exuberant, distractible, bet hedging, shape-shifting, grandiose, littered with familiar and unfamiliar names, often overtly fictional and, in turns, attractive and repulsive. Then again, at least it is finite. A second challenge comes from the seemingly limitless quantity of secondary literature: commentary, biography, philosophical exploration of his themes, not to mention tertiary literature: writing *about* writing about Nietzsche – all of which, taken as a whole, lends the impression that everything must surely have been said. These two challenges are especially daunting when combined, for the implication is that interpreting Nietzsche's philosophy is an impossible task that, in any case, has already been completed.

To my mind, though, a third challenge takes centre stage. It is the problem of not knowing which prejudices, faint associations, schools of interpretation, hopes and dreams or thorough-going enmities the reader brings with her or him to this man and his ideas. One can note, by all means, that there are many helpful explorations of, for example, Nietzsche and Nazism (Aschheim 1992, 232–71; 315–30; Golomb and Wistrich 2002), the Jews (Holub 2016), post-modernism (Koelb 1990; Gemes 2001), the legacy of his sister (Holub 2002), his illness (Volz 1990; Huenemann 2013), his philosophical and intellectual context (Small 2001; Brobjer 2008; Holub 2018) and his reception and influence (Aschheim 1992; Higgins and Magnus 1996, 281–383; Reckermann 2003; Woodward 2011). These are useful places to start if you think that Nietzsche was a proto-Nazi, or, conversely, that he wrote nothing troubling or offensive and was completely misunderstood and unjustly appropriated by the Nazis with the aid of his evil Nazi sister; likewise, if you think that he certainly died of syphilis, or that he was a visionary whose ideas arose free from any intellectual context or influence, or, indeed, a philosopher working with presuppositions and preoccupations more or less identical to our own. But there is something inhospitable about greeting the reader with a blizzard of references. Rather than attempting the impossible task of clearing away any prejudicial associations, I move to what I take to be the most feasible alternative: to be as clear as possible about the aims, method and scope of this account of Nietzsche's ethics.

This study focuses exclusively on Nietzsche's late works – that is, from 1886 until he ceased writing in 1889. More specifically, that means the following texts: *Beyond Good and Evil (BGE)*, *On the Genealogy of Morality (GM)*, *The Case of Wagner (CW)*, *Twilight of the Idols (TI)*, *The Antichrist (A)*, *Ecce Homo (EH)*, the prefaces he wrote in 1886 for his earlier works and, though to a lesser

extent, the unpublished notes of this era. Why focus in this way? First, this period includes *GM*, probably Nietzsche's most influential work in contemporary, Anglophone philosophical circles. We will look at this text in some detail, but it cannot be considered in isolation. Of the texts of this period, for example, Nietzsche seemed to place a greater weight on *A*: he spent many years promising a *magnum opus*, and in the end he claimed that *A* was that *magnum opus* (see Sommer 2013, 6.2:3–8). Second, the late works present, relative to some of his earlier works, a clearer, more unified ethical project. There is a distinct position to be explained and consequently, of course, a target at which to aim. This does not make the period in question better than his earlier writings in every respect: in being less definite, the earlier texts are probably more fertile and suggestive. But it does make the late works more suitable for this concise but comprehensive treatment. Third, in addition to presenting a more coherent position, the ethics of the late period are distinctive. There are traces of his late view in earlier writings, and traces of earlier views in the late writings, so one should not expect a perfectly neat division (for an overview, see Stern 2019b). But treating the late works as a distinct body of writing is a helpful point of entry, whereas, conversely, a detailed discussion of similarities and differences across all texts and periods would be disorientating. The virtues of clarity and focus have also determined the precise choice of texts. The work that falls just outside my chosen period – *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – was clearly considered, by Nietzsche, to be highly significant. It traditionally marks the transitional phase from the middle to the late works. The contested nature and status of *Zarathustra*'s claims, uttered by fictional characters and situated within a fantastical narrative, render it particularly ill-suited to clear exposition (for discussion, see Pippin 1988; Luchte 2008). However, nothing within that text casts doubt on the picture, drawn here, of the works that followed it. In sum: the late works have been chosen because they are more influential and more distinctive in both coherence and content.

There is also a further reason for focusing in this way – one that pushes us towards questions of method. Nietzsche's late ethical view, as presented here, has not yet been set out with sufficient clarity. Even allowing for Nietzsche's writing style, with all its pitfalls, the late ethical position is relatively clear. The late Nietzsche has not deserved the cacophony of differing interpretations that currently threatens to drown out the thinking, and sap away the confidence, of any student who approaches him. Why so many interpretations, if the underlying position is clear? Likely, there are many reasons. But one methodological feature of my approach may be a contributing factor and, in any case, it is well worth highlighting in its own right. I do not see this study as a *defence* of Nietzsche, as though his interpreter were a lawyer in the final court of

philosophical arbitration. Nor do I see it as a project of creative reconstruction in which an imagined figure called 'Nietzsche', or an appealing, Nietzsche-inspired philosophy, emerges from a series of present-day conversations. This may sound unremarkable and uncontroversial, even banal. But, in the context of what is now known as 'the History of Philosophy', and of Anglophone philosophical Nietzsche commentary in particular, it is not. Implicitly or explicitly, a great deal of philosophical writing about Nietzsche, and other historical figures, is creative in method and apologetic in aim. It looks to produce the 'best' Nietzsche (or equivalent figure) – the one most attractive to present-day Anglophone philosophers – and it is willing to do so at the expense of what its practitioners might see as an inflexible, antiquarian or even 'uncharitable' preoccupation with fidelity to the texts and their historical context (on the questionable ideal of charitable interpretation, see Melamed 2013; Stern 2016; for sceptical remarks on the use of text and history as constraints in contemporary Nietzsche scholarship, see Stern 2018).

My own intention is to stay very close to the texts, to read them in the light of what we know about Nietzsche's intellectual background, and to present the philosophical ideas found in them as clearly, neutrally and thoroughly as possible. While I know better than to predict with any confidence what the reader will make of Nietzsche's views, my guess is that the Nietzsche on display in these pages may seem, in places, dated, wrong-headed and extremely unappealing. So, I do not claim that this will be your favourite Nietzsche, only that it is the real one, or at least a great deal closer to him than much of what is currently available. It seems to me that there is a place – a gap in the market, if you will excuse the expression – for a relatively brief, clear, critical exposition of this real, historical Nietzsche's ethics. Insofar as this methodological stance puts me at odds with readers who want a creative, perhaps more appealing but less textually and historically constrained Nietzschean philosophy, then this will prevent us from talking past each other: such readers can conclude, presumably, that they are not interested in buying what I'm selling. Of course, if some readers imagine that fidelity to the text and context produces a very different result from the one presented here, then I hope to persuade them otherwise. If not, at least we can be assured that our disagreement is genuine.

I have chosen to set out Nietzsche's ideas in a manner that is very different from his own. Despite Nietzsche's explicit reproach, I make an attempt at a systematic presentation (cf. *TI* Maxims 26), along with clearer definition of terms and a great deal less flamboyance. I have not forgotten the student who, after years of studying philosophy at university, could hardly believe that Nietzsche was a philosopher because he was 'so much fun to read'. I suspect she would find it easier to believe that this study of Nietzsche was written by

a philosopher. It might be suggested that, by presenting his ideas in this way, they are altered in some sense. This, in itself, does not concern me: presumably, readers have chosen to read this analysis because they think a clearer and more focused presentation of Nietzsche's ideas will be useful. Whatever distortion may have arisen, it is a necessary outcome of such a presentation and nothing prevents anyone from going back to Nietzsche's own words.

A more specific charge might be that my presentation of Nietzsche clashes either with some of his alleged doctrines and stances (such as perspectivism or truth-scepticism), or with some of his specific claims about his own philosophical writing. As for the former, we look at perspective and truth-scepticism in more detail, once his ethics have been sufficiently explored (see Sections 7.1, 7.2). As for the latter, we can mention two examples here. First, he is the supposed advocate of a 'masked' philosophy. Perhaps his philosophical ideas are not put forward sincerely, whereas I present his claims as deeply held convictions? Nietzsche does indeed advocate philosophising with a 'mask' and, although that means a number of different things, one of them seems to entail a cautionary note about direct, open communication and defence of philosophical ideas, albeit for very particular reasons (e.g., BGE 25; for discussion, see Stern 2017). In the case of his later ethics, though, his principal experiment – or 'mask', if that is what it is – is thorough and sustained. It is also unique: there is no other 'mask', no rival view in these texts. If you permanently wear the same mask, then, in a sense, that mask just is your face. *Within* the broad framework of his ethical outlook, Nietzsche certainly tries different things out, some of which contradict others. But he does not step outside the framework. Indeed, as we shall see, matters are the other way around: the difficulties inherent in Nietzsche's framework compel him to experiment within it. A second variant of this objection might be, not that the views I present are a 'mask', but that they are exaggerations, which are not intended to be taken seriously or literally. After all, he subtitled one of our main texts, *GM*, a '*Streitschrift*' – a term that, loosely translated, means a 'polemic'. But we should avoid jumping to conclusions. If I write a polemical pamphlet as part of a dispute with a rival, it does not follow that I don't mean what I say, nor that one would be missing the point by taking my claims and arguments seriously. As it happens, in my view, Nietzsche's claims are indeed supposed to be taken seriously, but I do not attempt to persuade the reader on that score. All I mean to demonstrate is that, *if* you take him at face value, then this is what you get. Put another way: *even if* Nietzsche is making exaggerated claims, which are not intended to be taken seriously for some reason or other, then *these* are the exaggerated claims he is in fact making. Of course, it would be up to my opponent to provide an account of what the exaggerations are, and why they are made. I have not yet come across such an account.

Perhaps the best summary of these remarks would be the following: once we have taken the decision to set out Nietzsche's ethics from 1886 onwards as faithfully as possible, only more clearly and systematically than he does, and once we assume that he means what he says, then what follows is the ethical position we end up with.

The study begins by defining and setting out the key features of Nietzsche's ethics (Section 1) and his critique of Christian morality (Section 2). A central tension in Nietzsche's ethics is presented (Section 3) – one that helps us to understand the aims (Section 4) and content (Section 5) of his best-known work, *GM*, and of other, related histories. We can then assess how successful Nietzsche is in achieving these aims (Section 6). We examine some related and apparently conflicting strands of Nietzsche's philosophy (Section 7), ending with some remarks on how to categorise Nietzsche's ethics and, therefore, on what the future of Nietzschean ethics might hold.

## 1 Nietzsche's Ethics in Outline

### 1.1 Terminology

To begin with, it will be helpful to distinguish three things: (i) *a morality*; (ii) a particular instance of a morality, which I call *Christian morality*; and (iii) Nietzsche's own *ethics*.

- (i) A morality is a particular value system, belonging to a historical group or groups of people, arising among them for contingent reasons that can be the object of sociological study. Nietzsche has various different examples in mind, including Ancient Greek morality, Ancient Israelite morality and Christian morality.
- (ii) Christian morality is a particularly important *instance* of a morality, which can provisionally be thought of as Nietzsche's target, as the villain of Nietzsche's story – even if, as we shall see, the situation is more complicated than this provisional characterisation suggests. Christian morality is dominant and highly significant in modern Europe. Christian morality's adherents are not necessarily faithful Christians, nor are all faithful Christians adherents of Christian morality. It is best understood as a technical term in Nietzsche, not as a description of all-and-only Christian believers, but we will shortly explore its link to Christianity (Section 2.1).
- (iii) I will refer to Nietzsche's own moral outlook as his 'ethics'. Although 'ethics' and 'morality' are often synonymous in philosophical writing, I give them distinct definitions here because it would be confusing to speak

of 'Nietzsche's morality', given (i) and (ii). That is, it would suggest, wrongly, that Nietzschean ethics, like Christian morality, is just another instance of a morality. Once we understand his ethics, we quickly grasp that he does not see things this way (Section 2.5).

Though he clearly distinguished between these three things, this terminology is not Nietzsche's. He can use 'morality' to denote (i), (ii) or (iii). He does speak of 'Christian morality', but in fact he usually refers to Christian morality simply as 'morality' because it is the dominant form: for example, *On the Genealogy of Morality* is really a genealogy of *Christian* morality. He does not use the term 'ethics' at all, in my sense. However, my terminology enables us to set out the situation with greater clarity. For example, Nietzsche often argues that Christian morality is unethical, but he does not think that every morality is unethical. He also holds that ethical activity is Christian-immoral, that is, immoral by Christian standards, though not immoral by the standards of every morality.

Nietzsche's ethics, as presented here, combine a descriptive thesis and a normative command. We begin with the former.

## 1.2 The Descriptive Thesis: The Life Theory

When Nietzsche looks out at the realm of living things, what he sees is a domain necessarily characterised by power seeking. Organisms and, as we shall see, even *parts* of organisms, seek dominance and control; they look to increase whatever they have and to subordinate or exploit whatever they encounter. It is a shifting, unstable domain: one entity overwhelms, consumes, destroys or annexes another; or it is, in turn, overwhelmed, consumed and so on. Nietzsche does not deny the existence of cooperative behaviour, but he sees it as instrumental – a variety of power seeking, not a counterexample to it.

Power seeking is not merely Nietzsche's characterisation of how living things usually or often happen to behave: it is biologically essential. As Nietzsche puts it, life, when correctly understood, 'cannot be thought without' such a characterisation (*GM* II 11). *Living* and *power seeking* cannot be pulled apart, from the simplest to the most complex life forms.

In expressing this view, Nietzsche often appeals to something like a power-seeking force, which he variously calls 'Life', 'nature', 'will', 'will to life' or 'will to power'. This force accounts for the power-seeking behaviour inherent in the organic realm. I will refer to this force as 'Life', using the proper noun (including in some translated passages) in part to remind the reader that something unusual is being picked out here. I will still speak of 'life' in other contexts, to indicate, amongst other things, the organic realm as a whole, rather than the force that operates through it: thus, for example, one might say that, for

Nietzsche, Life governs all life. But readers should note that the Life/life distinction is not explicit in the texts, not least because all nouns are capitalised in German.

Life is often presented as an independent agent, a person-like entity with intentions (*Absichten*) (*TI* Morality 6; also, *GM* III 16) and interests (*GM* III 11; *TI* Untimely 36) set apart from our own. Life issues 'commandments', for example (*TI* Morality 4), it 'aims at' various outcomes (*GS* 344), plays tricks on us (*GM* II 7) and 'forces us' to do things (*TI* Morality 5, my translation). Life can 'gain advantage' from certain actions or types of people (*TI* Untimely 36). As might be expected, what Life aims at, what it gains advantage from, has something to do with power. So, we can sketch Nietzsche's view as follows: living things are necessarily governed by Life, a force that operates through them to achieve power-increasing ends. In this study, 'the Life Theory' is my name for this view.

In a number of respects, the Life Theory may appear peculiar to the present-day reader. What is the evidence for the theory? What kind of force are we talking about and by which mechanism does it operate? How could this force, 'Life', have its own goals and intentions? We can make the theory less alien by saying something about Nietzsche's sources and motivations; in any case, we need not pretend that the theory is free from ambiguity, nor that it is given adequate philosophical or empirical support in his texts. Ultimately, though, we should not lose the wood for the trees: the Life Theory is *presupposed* by Nietzsche's ethics, and questions about the theory's finer details, and about how he supports the theory, are less pressing than the question of what he needs it for and what he does with it.

We can therefore leave open the question of whether, for Nietzsche, the *inorganic* realm is also characterised by the same force that governs living things. Nietzsche at least entertains this more ambitious thesis (*BGE* 36; *KSA* 13: 14[121]), which had precedent in Schopenhauer, Mainländer and others. But his ethics do not depend on it. Similarly, we need not closely examine the troubling question of how Life has 'aims' and 'intentions'. While Nietzsche speaks of Life as an intentional agent, Life is not a transcendent deity that directs living things from without. For Nietzsche also insists that Life does not, strictly speaking, have conscious and causally efficacious intentions in the way that these formulations suggest (see *BGE* 9 on 'nature'). 'Of course', Nietzsche might say, 'Life does not want things in the way that we typically think of humans as wanting things. Speaking of Life's "intentions" is just a useful shorthand.' What, though, would talk of Life's 'intentions' be shorthand *for*? The answer would be complex: as we shall see, Life is portrayed as a dynamic force, which can be highly creative and tenacious in seeking out



quite specific ends. Reducing or naturalising Nietzsche's language of goals and commandments would not be easy. But, simply put, we don't need to worry about this. A study of Nietzschean metaphysics, teleology or biology might work with the texts, thin though they are in this regard, to speculate about his account of the underlying reality. But those interested in Nietzsche's ethics do not have to draw any firm conclusions about the metaphysical status of Life's goals. What matters for us is why he *speaks* this way. He asks us to think in terms of Life's intentions and interests because he is going to categorise human beings, their actions and their values, in terms of whether they work for or against what Life 'wants' (whatever that turns out to mean on a metaphysical level). He will therefore speak of those on Life's team, the 'party of Life' (*EH* BT 4), and those who at least seem to be on the opposing side (*EH* Destiny 8). Whatever the underlying metaphysical or biological commitments of the Life Theory, this is the division it needs to support: for Life or against Life.

To understand how Nietzsche's ethics puts the Life Theory to work, it will be helpful to say something more about Nietzsche's influences. One clue lies in Nietzsche's occasional adoption of the term 'will to life' (*Wille zum Leben*) to speak of Life, a term that clearly points back to Schopenhauer (*A* 18, 50; *TI* Ancients 4–5; *KSA* 13: 16[86], p. 516; 25[1], p. 637; Nietzsche also speaks of '*Lebenswille*', another Schopenhauerian term usually translated either 'will to life' or 'life-will', see *GM* II 11–12; cf. Schopenhauer 2014. Sections 54, 70, 2018, ch. 44). Schopenhauer had argued that something appropriately called 'the Will' was the thing-in-itself, the real, metaphysical basis of the everyday world as we know it. On Schopenhauer's account, this metaphysical entity operates through all living things, ensuring that biological life continues as it is. Schopenhauer often referred to the Will, when at work in the organic realm, as the 'will to life' (Schopenhauer 2014, sec. 54), primarily because it makes organisms pursue survival and reproduction. Our individual, human wills – our individual faculties of wanting or desiring – are the clear manifestation of what this will to life is aiming at on our behalf: hence, a human individual's will is at its strongest, and hardest to resist, in relation to matters of survival and especially the reproduction of the species. (The Will makes parents prioritise their offspring's survival at their own expense, so *individual* survival is not the ultimate goal, even in Schopenhauer, let alone in Nietzsche's development of Schopenhauer.) To speak anachronistically, the will to life programmes our individual wills for its own advantage. The idea of such a will underlying and controlling biological behaviour was, in the wake of Schopenhauer, extremely influential. Nietzsche was not just reading Schopenhauer, but also others who, following Schopenhauer, produced related but alternative versions, wills that



had slightly different programming (e.g. Hartmann 1869; Mainländer 1879; for discussion, see Beiser 2016; Stern 2019b).

Note that one can disconnect Schopenhauer's claim about the metaphysical Will – that there is a single thing-in-itself and it is best called 'Will' – from the biological model of a force (called 'will to life') that operates through all living things. This, in essence, is Nietzsche's move: he need not endorse the story about will as metaphysical thing-in-itself, but he maintains that something like the will to life, albeit with different programming, explains the organic realm.

In addition to Schopenhauer and Schopenhauerians, Nietzsche was also drawing, selectively and inventively, on contemporary scientific or at least quasi-scientific literature. His reading and use of evolutionary theory is particularly relevant (see Moore 2002; Sommer 2010; Emden 2014; Brobjer 2016; Holub 2018, 313–59). Nietzsche certainly knew about Darwin, albeit mediated through other commentators. But Darwin's ideas, though influential, were not universally accepted or understood at this time, even within the scientific community (on German reception of Darwin, see Richards 2013; Holub 2018, 322–9). There were other, non-Darwinian evolutionary theories, which did not seem as implausible as perhaps they would now. For example, one contemporary, Wilhelm Roux, argued that a sort of Darwinian struggle for survival is taking place not merely between animals but *within* them, within their organs and their cells, and that life would be impossible without this permanent struggle (Roux 1881; on Nietzsche's reading of Roux, see Holub 2018, 340–3). Another, William Henry Rolph, argued that life is characterised by permanent 'insatiability', even at the cellular level, and therefore by an ongoing, internecine 'war of aggression', in which each element, by nature never satisfied, sought to accumulate as much of the available resources as possible (Rolph 1884, 97; on Nietzsche and Rolph, see Moore 2002; Brobjer 2008, 170–3; Sommer 2010; Emden 2014, 176–83; Holub 2018, 343–51). Generally, Nietzsche brings together ideas of this kind: Life by necessity seeks increase and accumulation; it operates not just between living beings, but within them.

The combination of the Schopenhauerian and natural-scientific contexts led, in Nietzsche, to a 'will', Life, characterised more in terms of power, conflict, insatiability and exploitation than its Schopenhauerian counterpart. Nietzsche is attempting to correct Schopenhauer, for example, when he speaks of 'the true life-will, which seeks power' (*GM* II 11). What he means is: the correct version of the will that Schopenhauer was talking about, namely the one that seeks *power*, not mere survival and stable reproduction of the species. Nietzsche often emphasises that the 'true life-will, which seeks power', can or ought to ensure that certain individuals do *not* survive or reproduce (see Sections 6.2, 6.3).

Context can also help explain some of Nietzsche's vagueness, which he inherits from his interlocutors. Earlier, we noted Nietzsche's references to Life's aims and intentions, together with his official insistence that Life is blind. The same tension is found in Schopenhauer and even in Darwin, who often presents natural selection as an intelligent agent with specific aims. We might now naturally think of (Darwinian) evolution as goalless. In Nietzsche's time, though, there was considerable debate about the extent to which Darwinian theory implied that nature was goal-directed in a more substantial way (Richards 2009; Holub 2018, 328–9).

We are now able to understand why Nietzsche claims, for example, that 'life itself seems to me to be instinct for growth, for continuation, for accumulation of forces, for *power*' (*A* 6, translation altered), that 'the truly basic life-instinct [...] aims at *the expansion of power*', that the 'great and small struggle revolves everywhere around preponderance, around growth and expansion, around power and in accordance with the will to power, which is simply the will to life' (*GS* 349). Or, again: 'what man wants, what the smallest part of every living organism wants, is an increase of power' (*KSA* 13: 14[174], my translation; in this study, '[...]' indicates that I have omitted some of Nietzsche's text, whereas '...', without the square brackets, is Nietzsche's own punctuation). In such cases, his ideas, in context, would certainly have sounded less unfamiliar: they are developments and, he thinks, correctives of their contemporary counterparts.

The Life Theory draws, however idiosyncratically, on contemporary philosophy and natural science to posit Life, a Schopenhauerian 'will' of sorts, directing the organic realm – organisms and parts of organisms – towards the pursuit of power, without which they could not live. As an interpretation of Nietzsche's remarks on will to power, the Life Theory has plenty of competitors in the secondary literature. Some of these resemble it to an extent (for readings that agree closely with mine, see Hussain 2011; Holub 2018, 353; Porter 2013 treats some of the same material from a different angle; the account of Nietzsche's ethics given in Katsafanas 2018 bears a more superficial resemblance to the Life Theory, in part due to the emphasis he places on action and drives). To give some flavour of the available materials, one recent analysis lists eleven *categories* of will to power interpretation (Hatab 2019). But in the quotations just given, and in more to come, taking Nietzsche both in context and at his word yields this reading above all others. It also guides us through the aim and execution of his late writings. This does not mean that the Life Theory grounds Nietzsche's ethics *unproblematically*: indeed, my analysis will suggest the opposite (see Section 3.). Moreover, as made plain at the start, the Life Theory need not amount to the interpretation that is philosophically most