

***‘Nothing is Really Equal’: Nietzsche on Democracy and Self-Creation*¹**

Abstract

This article has two main aims. The first is to challenge an interpretive assumption shared by Nietzsche scholars from seemingly opposite sides of a divide concerning the relationship between self-creation and democracy. Doing so makes clear the nature of Nietzschean self-creation, what it means to be committed to democracy, and the relationship between the two. The second is to examine and interrogate the conception of the self on which Nietzsche grounds his notion of self-creation; namely, that of radical uniqueness. I dispute Nietzsche’s conception of the radically unique self that causes us to reject democracy; instead, I argue that as human beings, we are both alike and unique, and it is precisely the ways in which we are alike that make significant certain rights whereby all individuals are protected.

Introduction

There has been no shortage of scholarship concerning Nietzsche’s ethics, his politics, and the relationship between the two. Some scholars emphasize Nietzsche’s aristocratic elitism; they argue that given Nietzsche’s interest in promoting self-creation and his view that self-creation is only achievable by the few, society ought to be structured to encourage the self-creation of the few at the expense of the many². They argue that Nietzsche’s ethics and his politics cannot be easily separated, and therefore, they see his elitist ethics and elitist politics as parts of a continuous whole. For example, Ruth Abbey and Fredrick Appel argue that because Nietzsche is ultimately concerned with the flourishing of the few noble souls, as opposed to the flourishing of all, “it is therefore the responsibility of the few to restore this proper balance to social and political organization and to

¹ References to Nietzsche’s works appear with their abbreviated titles and page number. The abbreviations are: AC = *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1989); GM = *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); GS = *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974); HAH = *Human, All-Too-Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); D = *Daybreak*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); SE = *Schopenhauer as Educator*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); TI = *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Z = *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1972)

² Ruth Abbey and Fredrick Appel, “Nietzsche and the Will to Politics,” *Review of Politics*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter 1998): 83-114; Peter Berkowitz, *Nietzsche; The Ethics of an Immoralist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Daniel Conway, *Nietzsche and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1997); Bruce Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Thomas Pangle, “The Roots of Contemporary Nihilism and Its Political Consequences According to Nietzsche,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol 45, No 1 (January 1983): 45-70.

appreciate that the mass is there to serve them in their quest for heightened nobility”³. While not all scholars who emphasize Nietzsche’s aristocratic elitism think that the few noble souls will be political rulers, they agree that the new social and political order will be structured to encourage the flourishing of the few, rather than the many. For example, while Peter Berkowitz argues that the new philosophers will not themselves be rulers, he agrees with the view that the “philosopher of the future is the peak of the aristocracy that Nietzsche envisages.”⁴ More specifically, “political rulers stand decidedly higher in the order of rank than the ruled, but those who are free of the need to be commanded as well as of the need to command others occupy the highest ranks because they are free to command the greatest things.”⁵ Politics, according to aristocratic elitist interpreters, ought to be structured to enable the self-creation of the few⁶.

Other scholars who often identify themselves as radical democrats, however, view Nietzsche’s ethics of self-creation as egalitarian, and therefore, they argue that Nietzsche’s ethical thought harbors democratic possibilities⁷. For example, Christine Daigle argues that Nietzsche’s ethical thought is a form of virtue ethics that seeks to establish human flourishing by way of character development. The ideal character consists in the *Übermensch*, who creates his own values, and is an ideal towards which all individuals can aspire. As Daigle writes, “Every individual should emulate [the *Übermensch*] as an illustration of what one can become if only one were to engage

³ Abbey & Appel, 101

⁴ Berkowitz, 247

⁵ Berkowitz, 246

⁶ For a similar view, see Detwiler’s *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism*, which views Nietzsche’s new aristocratic order as a response to the death of God, or the problem of meaning. Like other aristocratic elitist interpreters of Nietzsche, Detwiler agrees that Nietzsche ultimately wants a new aristocracy (36) in order to promote the highest type of man (102). However, unlike Abbey & Appel, he does not think that Nietzsche’s ‘new philosophers’ will be political leaders (144).

⁷ William Connolly, *Political Theory and Modernity* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988); Christine Daigle, “Nietzsche: Virtue Ethics ... Virtue Politics?” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, No 32 (Autumn 2006): 1-21; Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); David Owen, “Equality, Democracy, and Self-Respect: Reflections on Nietzsche’s Agonal Perfectionism,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, No 24 (Fall 2002): 113-131; Mark Warren, “Nietzsche and Political Philosophy,” *Political Theory*, Vol 13, No 2 (May 1985): 183-212.

oneself in the way of creation.”⁸ Because Nietzsche’s ethics is something that can be attained by all—for “it is only a matter of the individual choosing to actualize his or her own self as will to power”⁹—failure to cultivate oneself into the *Übermensch* is simply because one has chosen not to do so. Likewise, William Connolly views the problem of *ressentiment* as a phenomenon that characterizes all individuals due to the way we all seek meaning in suffering¹⁰, such that what used to be a political struggle between masters and slaves is now “reduced to an interior struggle within the self”¹¹—presumably, within *all* selves. As a result, all individuals ought to accept the ambiguity of existence in themselves and others, enabling all to engage in the activity of self-creation¹². In a similar vein, David Owen also affirms the egalitarian nature of Nietzsche’s self-creation, characterizing it as a “perfectionist view of equality in which *everyone* is called on, *and aided*, to develop their capacities for self-government”¹³. More specifically, Owen argues that the Nietzschean capacities and dispositions of self-rule are cultivated through citizens engaging agonistically within and over the terms of democratic citizenship¹⁴.

To be clear, it is not because radical democrats are blind to Nietzsche’s elitist political prescriptions that they embrace a Nietzsche amenable to democracy. Rather, while radical democrats recognize the clash between Nietzsche’s ethics and politics, they argue that, for various reasons, we ought to dismiss Nietzsche’s political prescriptions for a hierarchical social order, and instead, focus on the democratic possibilities of Nietzsche’s ethics of creativity and individual agency¹⁵. For example, Mark Warren squarely faces up to the clash between Nietzsche’s egalitarian ethics and

⁸ Daigle, 8

⁹ Daigle, 9

¹⁰ Connolly, 153

¹¹ Connolly, 154

¹² Connolly, 163

¹³ Owen, 120, author’s emphasis

¹⁴ Owen, 128

¹⁵ Others, such as Connolly and Honig read Nietzsche’s story of slave and master morality not as a struggle between different kinds of people, but rather, as an internal struggle within all people (Connolly, 154; Honig, 8, 65, 74).

elitist politics, and argues that because Nietzsche's elitist politics rests on untenable assumptions, we ought to dismiss them and instead focus on the democratic possibilities of his ethics. Nietzsche's ethics, or his "philosophy of power", according to Warren, is centrally about "individuality, positive freedom, and plurality"¹⁶, rendering it "politically indeterminate"¹⁷. Warren argues that because Nietzsche's aristocratic prescriptions depend on untenable assumptions—namely, assumptions about the division of labor in terms of a need for a slave class in order to sustain a cultural elite; that weakness is a biological or physiological condition, as opposed to a social or a political one; and his inability to understand the power of markets and bureaucracies in creating modern mass societies¹⁸—we ought to discard his politics and focus on his ethics that contain broader democratic political possibilities. Others, such as Connolly, argue that Nietzsche's political prescriptions are unsustainable, and therefore, reject them. Because the new aristocratic order cannot help but reproduce the *ressentiment* of ordinary human beings against the elite, according to Connolly, it is ultimately self-defeating¹⁹. As Connolly writes, "But Nietzsche's aristocratic solution ... spawns the condition Nietzsche has already diagnosed: it recreates the very resentment it seeks to redress and sets its own aristocracy up to be its target"²⁰. Similarly, Keith Ansell-Pearson argues that the problem with Nietzsche's aristocratism is that it is fundamentally justified "in terms of an untenable naturalism"²¹, which ultimately makes the new aristocracy unstable. More specifically, given that Nietzsche has exposed the lie of natural slaves and natural masters for what it truly is, it is unclear as to who will actually submit to such an aristocratic order. As such, Ansell-Pearson argues, "Nietzsche fails to appreciate that his new aristocratic order, which institutes itself through compulsion and violence, must give rise to permanent class conflict, to a politics of pride and glory, on the one hand,

¹⁶ Warren, 201

¹⁷ Warren, 187

¹⁸ For Warren's full explication of Nietzsche's untenable assumptions, see Warren, 205-208.

¹⁹ Connolly 159-160

²⁰ Connolly, 159-160

²¹ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as a Political Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 41

and one of envy and resentment, on the other.”²² Finally, Bonnie Honig rejects Nietzsche’s aristocratic elitism on grounds that the overman is not a particular individual for whose sake the herd exists, but rather, is a component of all selves; consequently, “to treat the overman as a part of all selves is to democratize the [the overman] and its effects.”²³ By engaging in an internal struggle between ‘herd’ and ‘overman’ moralities, each individual must strive to shape his or her own individuality²⁴. To put it another way, radical democrats hold to an egalitarian view of Nietzsche’s ethics, recognize his aristocratic politics, and discard the latter while favoring and focusing on the democratic possibilities of the former²⁵.

As such, the disagreement between aristocratic elitist interpreters and radical democrats does not concern the identification of Nietzsche’s overt political positions; there is a general consensus that Nietzsche’s explicit political prescriptions are aristocratic and elitist²⁶. Rather, the disagreement centers on whether his ethics and his politics can be separated such that his ethical philosophy can harbor democratic possibilities. While no one doubts that Nietzsche’s writings portray only a few who are noble souls who create their own values, and the many as members of a passive herd that consumes and accepts dominant moral values, the question is whether there is anything that destines one for greatness or dooms one to weakness. Is it possible for a member of the herd to transform

²² Ansell-Pearson, 41

²³ Honig, 8

²⁴ Honig, 63

²⁵ Amongst radical democrats, Honig is the most explicit about this; she writes, “Nietzsche’s connection of great politics with the overman is less disturbing than provocative, however, if we continue to read the overman as a personification of the parts of the self that are resistant to the formation of responsible subjectivity. In this way, we can build on the politicizing impulses of Nietzsche’s recoveries of responsible subjectivity without endorsing his vision of “great” politics as such (*there is, in any case, no necessary connection between the two*).” (Honig, 74, my emphasis)

²⁶ However, there are other scholars, such as James Conant and David Owen, who resist this view. See James Conant, “Nietzsche’s Perfectionism: A Reading of *Schopenhauer as Educator*” in *Nietzsche’s Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche’s Prelude to Philosophy’s Future*, ed. Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and David Owen, “Equality, Democracy, and Self-Respect: Reflections on Nietzsche’s Agonal Perfectionism,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, No 24 (Fall 2002): 113-131

himself into a noble soul, and vice versa? The disagreement is therefore centrally over whether or not noble souls and herd animals are *essentially* the way they are.

The existing debate, while important, has exclusively focused on the question of who, according to Nietzsche's account, is capable of self-creation, and this exclusive focus has foreclosed our ability to consider the relationship between the activity of self-creation and democracy. While the interpretive divide in Nietzsche scholarship is vast, they share an important assumption that this article challenges. Namely, both aristocratic elitist interpreters and radical democrats assume that we ought to read Nietzsche's ethics and his politics as parts of a seamless whole. Specifically, aristocratic elitist interpreters argue that because Nietzsche's ethics are elitist, this necessarily results in the elitist, aristocratic politics that he explicitly promotes. And while radical democrats recognize the disjunction between Nietzsche's egalitarian ethics and his hierarchical politics, they argue that we ought to interpret his egalitarian ethics as harboring democratic possibilities. In other words, both sides of the interpretive divide operate on the assumption that the range of persons who are capable of self-creation dictates what kind of political order Nietzsche supports, or can be said to support.

Here, I challenge the assumption that settling the question of whether Nietzsche's ethics are elitist or egalitarian can easily produce a 'Nietzschean' political position. In doing so, this article shifts the interpretive debate from one that aims to determine Nietzsche's politics as a function of his ethics, to thinking about what the activity of self-creation entails for those who are committed to democracy. I argue that even if self-creation is achievable by all—that is, even if Nietzsche's ethical thought is, in fact, egalitarian—it stands in tension with the rule of the people. To put it another way, aristocratic elitist interpreters of Nietzsche are right for the wrong reasons: self-creation and democracy do have a contentious relationship, but not because self-creation is achievable only by the few whom the many ought to serve, but rather, because the radical uniqueness of individuals that is at the core of Nietzschean self-creation results in a radical subjectivity of values that is problematic for democracy.

Moreover, I argue that while Nietzsche is right to draw attention to the diversity within humanity, he problematically extends this to the point of radical uniqueness, such that individuals seem to have in common little that is worthwhile. I argue that individuals are both alike and distinct from one another, and it is precisely the ways in which they are alike that make significant a political order where these common needs are protected. To demonstrate this, the article moves in four parts. Part One describes the kind of being that Nietzsche conceptualizes as fully human; that is, as one who creates one's own set of values. This idea is at the heart of Nietzsche's affirmation of the authority of the individual with respect to values; as a *human* being, distinct from animals, he must create value, and as an *individual*, distinct from other individuals, he must create his own values that are particular to himself. Part Two explicates what it means for such an individual to create his own values, and elaborates on one's relationship to these created values. Part Three takes up the interpretive puzzle of why, despite Nietzsche's seeming openness regarding the substance of one's values, he consistently denounces certain values, such as democracy. Such denunciation indicates that Nietzsche is not as agnostic about the substance of values as his theory of self-creation suggests. Here, I show that it is democratic equality's tendency towards uniformity—both with respect to the range of values that it encourages people to affirm and with respect to its response towards suffering—that Nietzsche thinks hinders the cultivation of value-creators. Part Four evaluates both Nietzsche's conception of values and his argument concerning democracy's relationship to self-creation.

Part One: Distinctly Human, Distinctly Individual

In affirming the authority and sovereignty of the individual, Nietzsche advances two related notions concerning how individuals relate to their values: first, it is only human beings that give values their authority; and second, the radical uniqueness of individuals entails that the authority of values is radically subjective. Through these two notions, Nietzsche shifts the locus of authority from an objective reality not only to a world of subjective human wills, but also, to the particular will of

the individual. Because humans are not animals, humans must create values, and because each human is an individual, distinct from other individuals, each must create his own values.

First, according to Nietzsche, dominant narratives, epitomized by Platonic Christianity, have problematic views concerning the nature of values and therefore, how individuals ought to relate to these values. Values, on the dominant narrative, have authority independently of human beings affirming them, whether their authority derives from the divine or from their inherent worth. The Platonic Christian framework therefore views values as ‘out there’, to be discovered and grasped by human beings. “Up to now,” Nietzsche writes, “the moral law has been supposed to stand *above* our own likes and dislikes: one did not actually want to *impose* this law upon oneself, one wanted to *take* it from somewhere or discover it somewhere or *have it commanded to one* from somewhere.”²⁷ Moreover, because these values, typically understood, have authority independent of human affirmation, they are thought to make claims upon and bind human beings. However, Nietzsche argues, values do not exist ‘out there’, but rather, they are variable expressions of the human will. As Zarathustra declares: “Truly, men have given themselves all their good and evil. Truly, they did not take it, they did not find it, it did not descend to them as a voice from heaven”²⁸. While historically, people have thought of these values as waiting to be discovered, they have always been creating values, even as they have not been aware of what they have been doing.

Over time, however, people have realized that values are not ‘out there’ and given by God, which means that nothing has value independent of human affirmation; it is this realization that Nietzsche labels ‘the death of God’. Furthermore, it is Nietzsche’s hope that by undertaking a genealogy of morals, human beings will see that all appeals to objective values have been strategic endeavors to make the subjective values of particular individuals appear as objective claims that

²⁷ D 63-64, author’s emphasis

²⁸ Z 85

others ought to obey²⁹. Human beings will now see values for what they truly are: subjective and variable expressions of the human will that have no divine or inherent authority to bind them. And because all values are simply the variable expressions of the human will, the only values that exist are those that people affirm. In contrast to objective values that human beings grasp, “there is only a perspective-seeing, perspective-knowing.”³⁰ Each society has its own distinct ‘table of values’, or systems of value that denote what each society consider to be good, bad, and evil. Crucially, Nietzsche’s point is that this diversity of value-systems is all there is. And although people have always been creating values, the death of God entails that what people used to do unconsciously, they will now do consciously³¹. Man will now relate to his values as expressions of his own will, and he will consciously submit only to values he has created.

Nietzsche’s rejection of an external reality that gives values their authority dovetails with his affirmation of the nature of human beings, distinct from animals, as valuing beings. Unlike animals, human beings possess a “metaphysical disposition”³² as creators of value, or as beings that can evaluate. As Zarathustra proclaims: “Evaluation is creation: hear it, you creative men! Valuing is itself the value and jewel of all valued things.”³³ More specifically, while both human beings and animals suffer, only humans are able to evaluate and give meaning to their suffering; it is because human beings are “profoundly indignant at the sight of senseless suffering”³⁴ that they not only

²⁹ For example, priests use terms such as ‘the will of God’ in order to create and maintain their domination over people. See *The Anti-Christ*, p 23 for a further description.

³⁰ GM 119

³¹ As Nietzsche writes, “But men are capable of *consciously* resolving to evolve themselves to a new culture, whereas formerly they did so unconsciously and fortuitously.” (HAH 25, author’s emphasis).

³² SE 158

³³ Z 85. This notion is expressed in Nietzsche’s later writings; in fact, Nietzsche thinks that evaluation is what constitutes thinking: “Setting prices, determining values, contriving equivalences exchanging—these preoccupied the earliest thinking of man to so great an extent that in a certain sense they constitute thinking *as such* ... man designated himself as the creature that measures values, evaluates and measures, as the ‘valuing animal as such.’” (GM 70)

³⁴ SE 157

invent narratives to give meaning to their suffering³⁵, but they also seek out suffering if they think that it has a purpose³⁶. In fact, Nietzsche goes so far as to argue that man's inability to answer the question, "Why do I suffer?" is itself a form of suffering³⁷. It is therefore unsurprising that Nietzsche refers to modern man as a 'herd animal' not only because of the way he tends to blindly conform to the herd of mass society, but also because, in such a condition, resembles an animal that is incapable of reflecting on and giving meaning to human suffering and existence.³⁸ So to the extent that an individual "hang[s] onto life madly and blindly, with no higher aim than to hang on to it; not to know that or why one is being so heavily punished but, with the stupidity of a fearful desire, to thirst after precisely this punishment as though after happiness,"³⁹ one is no different from an animal, and by extension, one is not, in Nietzsche's sense of the word, fully human⁴⁰.

However, even if the capacity to evaluate or give something meaning, distinguishes human beings from animals, Nietzsche makes it clear that the exercise of this distinctive capacity does not come easily to human beings; he remarks, "usually we fail to emerge out of animality, we ourselves are the animals whose suffering seems to be senseless"⁴¹. While it may be our nature to evaluate, we do not do so easily or automatically. In fact, Nietzsche suggests that to become who we ought to be,

³⁵ Nietzsche's paradigmatic example of how human beings have given meaning to their suffering is Christianity's reinterpretation of suffering as guilt for one's sins.

³⁶ GM 162

³⁷ "[Man] did not know how to justify, to account for, to affirm himself; he *suffered* from the problem of his meaning. He also suffered otherwise, he was in the main a sickly animal: but his problem was *not* suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, "*why* do I suffer?" (GM 162, author's emphasis)

³⁸ SE 157

³⁹ SE 157

⁴⁰ Of course, the ability to make sense of one's suffering is not the only characteristic that distinguishes human beings from animals. In *The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Nietzsche identifies memory as a distinctly human faculty; it is because man has the capacity to remember, that he not only possesses a sense of time, but also is capable of being bored. Animals have no memory, so they cannot experience boredom.

⁴¹ SE 158

we must counter, through a great deal of effort and courage, what comes to us automatically. We must be awakened from our “dreamlike condition”⁴², but this is not easily accomplished.

Second, Nietzsche affirms the radical subjectivity of values as a function of the radical uniqueness of individuals. He therefore rejects the notion that these values can be extended beyond the individual who creates them; in this sense, values are not universally applicable or binding. Because individuals are radically unique, each individual ought to create his or her own values. This notion is emphasized in one of his early essays, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, which opens with a description of modern men that is familiar to anyone versed in nineteenth century depictions and critiques of mass society⁴³. Modern man is a herd-animal, conforming to dominant ways of thinking and acting. Fearing what his neighbor will say about him if he were to deviate from convention, he conforms, thereby making him “seem like [a] factory product[.]”⁴⁴ Instead of looking to himself as a source of authority regarding how he ought to think and act—and thereby liberating himself from traditional figures of authority⁴⁵—he submits himself to be ruled by public opinion. Such a man, according to Nietzsche, “has evaded his genius and ... now looks furtively to left and right, behind him and all about him”⁴⁶. This individual is vacuous, and ultimately, “in the end such a man becomes impossible to get hold of, since he is wholly exterior, without kernel, a tattered, painted bag of

⁴² SE 159

⁴³ Most notably, Mill and Tocqueville.

⁴⁴ SE 127

⁴⁵ Nietzsche often describes the realization and embracing of one’s true identity as a radically unique being—that is, as a free spirit—in terms of liberation from existing loyalties to religious and political authorities. The free spirit is one who “has had its decisive experience in a *great liberation* and that previously it was all the more a fettered spirit and seemed to be chained for ever to its pillar and corner. What fetters the fastest? What bonds are all but unbreakable? In the case of men of a high and select kind they will be their duties; they will be their duties; that reverence proper to youth, that reserve and delicacy before all that is honoured and revered from old, that gratitude for the soil out of which they have grown, for the hand which led them, for the holy place where they learned to worship.” (HAH 6-7, author’s emphasis) Elsewhere, Nietzsche describes the free spirit as the one who has a “mature freedom of spirit which is equally self-mastery and discipline of the heart” (HAH 8).

⁴⁶ SE 128

clothes, a decked-out ghost that cannot inspire even fear and certainly not pity.”⁴⁷ To have substance is to be truly oneself—or more specifically, to be one’s own source of authority—as opposed to subordinating oneself to the authority of others by merely adopting their opinions or ways of life. All of this is unsurprising to any reader of nineteenth century political thought.

What is striking about Nietzsche’s description of the masses, however, is that he argues that everyone is aware of the condition they are in; they know that who they are is not who they ought to be. They are characterized by a kind of hypocrisy: each knows that he is radically unique, and yet he chooses to conform to everybody else. Nietzsche declares, “In his heart *every man* knows quite well that, being unique, he will be in the world only once and that no imaginable chance will for a second time gather together into a unity so strangely variegated an assortment as he is: he knows it but he hides it like a bad conscience.”⁴⁸ Even while aware that “every man is a unique miracle ... uniquely himself to every last movement of his muscles, more, that in being thus strictly consistent in uniqueness he is beautiful, and worth regarding, and in no way tedious,”⁴⁹ he subordinates himself to dominant ways of thinking and acting. What is significant to note here is the egalitarian nature of this awareness of one’s uniqueness: “*every man*”⁵⁰ knows this truth, even as he tends not to live according to it. Nietzsche argues that “*every youthful soul*” hears the call of his conscience, which declares to him: “Be yourself! All you are now doing, thinking, desiring, is not you yourself.”⁵¹ It is not a doctrine open only to the elite, or a message that must be kept from the masses. As such, Nietzsche suggests that the struggle and the work of self-creation is something that everybody is theoretically capable of: “Each of us bears a productive uniqueness within him,”⁵² such that “we are

⁴⁷ SE 128

⁴⁸ SE 127, my emphasis

⁴⁹ SE 127

⁵⁰ SE 127

⁵¹ SE 127, my emphasis

⁵² SE 143

all *able* to educate ourselves *against* our age.”⁵³ That most people fail to liberate themselves and live according to the truth of their radical uniqueness is not because this truth is esoteric and therefore, only accessible to the elite, but rather, due to the fact that knowledge alone cannot motivate action.

So Nietzsche is arguing that the knowledge of one’s uniqueness cannot motivate one to act according to it. For once individuals go beyond simply knowing, but also embrace how radically unique they are—that in no other time or place is there anyone exactly like themselves—they will be motivated “to live according to [their] own laws and standards.”⁵⁴ To do so, according to Nietzsche, is to be responsible for oneself and “to be the true helmsman of [one’s] existence.”⁵⁵ But why is it that human beings are reluctant to act in ways that will bring about their liberation? According to Nietzsche, human beings are not only aware of their uniqueness as individuals, but they are also aware of what would be demanded of them if they are truly to embrace their uniqueness, and as a result, they “fear most of all the inconveniences with which unconditional honesty burden them.”⁵⁶

Paradoxically, while Nietzsche describes the embracing of one’s identity as an act that liberates individuals, he also makes it clear that this liberation involves taking up new burdens, invoking the image of bondage: “a chain of toil and burdens is suspended from this uniqueness”⁵⁷. It is an odd image for liberation; on the one hand, to develop one’s own values in response to one’s unique identity is to be liberated from the burden of tradition, and yet, being liberated consists in taking up and dragging around new burdens that weigh one down. More specifically, to take up this chain entails that “life withholds almost everything—cheerfulness, security, ease, honour—that he desired of it in his youth; solitude is the gift his fellow men present to him; let him live where he will, he will

⁵³ SE 126, author’s emphasis

⁵⁴ SE 128

⁵⁵ SE 128

⁵⁶ SE 127

⁵⁷ SE 143

always find there the desert and the cave.”⁵⁸ What Nietzsche argues, then, is that liberation, while a worthwhile act, often results in being ostracized by others; liberation, while freeing one from the burdens of conventional values and their authority, causes one to take up new burdens—most notably, the burden of solitude, or a life outside of the community that has, until now, provided the individual with the normative bearings that constituted one’s membership in his community⁵⁹.

⁵⁸ SE 143. Later in the essay, Nietzsche puts the point more forcefully; describing the free spirit, he writes, “He will, to be sure, destroy his earthly happiness through his courage; he will have to be an enemy to those he loves and to the institutions which have produced him; he may not spare men things, even though he suffers when they suffer; he will be misunderstood and for long thought an ally of powers he abhors; however much he may strive after justice he is bound to the human limitations of his insight.” (SE 153)

⁵⁹ While Nietzsche does not elaborate in SE about how and why ostracism occurs in these contexts, passages in *Daybreak* and *Human All Too Human* that detail the power of custom, moral values, and tradition provide insight into this process. According to Nietzsche, communities are defined, bound, and preserved by certain moral values, which are, “nothing other (therefore *no more!*) than obedience to customs” (D 10)—customs that are rooted in habit. Because habitual actions are pleasureable and useful to an individual, one prefers to act habitually, for one is familiar with these actions, in contrast to actions that one has not attempted. “Custom is consequently the union of the pleasant and the useful,” (HAH 52) or to put it another way, custom is a type of “practical wisdom.” (HAH 52) And once an individual who has certain habits is in a position of power, he will compel others to live according to his own habits. Over time, however, the compulsion becomes diffuse, such that “a community of individuals likewise compels each separate individual to observe the same custom,” (HAH 52) and these customs are “above all directed at the preservation of a *community*.” (HAH 51, author’s emphasis) The logic that animates such compulsion is as follows: because the custom makes one happy and/or is useful, therefore it must be necessary, such that in the absence of this custom, one cannot be happy. It is therefore this belief in the custom’s necessity for happiness that motivates people to continue to uphold customs as powerfully as they do, and this also accounts for social coercion. It does not occur to people that “the same degree of wellbeing can also exist under different customs or that even higher degrees are attainable.” (HAH 52) To act according to custom—with respect to both motivations and actions—is what it means to be morally good, while to deviate from it is to be evil. As such, to depend on custom is to be morally good, but to be “*determined* to depend upon himself and not upon a tradition” or to be independent, defines an individual as “free, capricious, unusual, unforeseen, incalculable” (D 10) and hence, evil. Furthermore, the power of custom (and morality) is augmented by tradition, or “a higher authority which one obeys not because it commands what is useful to us, but because it *commands*.” (D 11) Custom, and hence, moral values, now appear lofty and sacred, and appear increasingly so with time, for the all-too-ordinary origins of these customs are forgotten. As Nietzsche writes, “Every tradition now continually grows more venerable the farther away its origin lies and the more this origin is forgotten; the respect paid to it increases from generation to generation, the tradition at least becomes holy and evokes awe and reverence.” (HAH 51-52) Nietzsche is therefore implying that moral values, which individuals often take to be sacred and impartial, are, in fact, simply preserving the social group of which one is a member. And while it is Nietzsche’s hope that once individuals recognize the all-too-human origins of moral values, these values will be demystified, and individuals will be free to “liv[e] experimentally and of be[] allowed to offer [themselves] to adventure.” (HAH 8) However, Nietzsche is aware of the obstacles to this; to see oneself as radically unique involves calling into question the moral values of the group, and thereby, calling into

As a result, because individuals are aware of the burden that truly embracing their uniqueness would bring upon them, they devise a number of strategies to evade this burden; for example, they employ essentialist assumptions about “great” and “little” men, and they maintain busyness in order to foreclose the solitude required for value creation. In the first instance, Nietzsche argues that it is easy to assume that what distinguishes great men from ordinary people is that the great man does what is noble because he possesses a unique gift that he exercises “for [his] own satisfaction or by a mechanical operation and in blind obedience to this inner compulsion”⁶⁰. That is, people often assume that the great individual possesses a gift or a calling, and therefore, that he cannot help but achieve great things. Conversely, people also assume that because they themselves do not possess a gift or calling, that they cannot achieve greatness or nobility. If, after all, the great man must be great and he cannot be otherwise, and the masses that lack the gift of greatness also cannot be otherwise, neither side can be praised nor blamed for achieving or not achieving greatness. However, Nietzsche views the rhetoric of a ‘gift’ or an ‘inner compulsion’ that is innate and specific to great men as an excuse for average individuals to evade their own responsibility to cultivate and transform themselves: “But being gifted or being compelled are contemptible words designed to enable one to ignore an inner admonition.”⁶¹ Moreover, the rhetoric of innate talent, which the great man cannot help but cultivate, devalues and mocks the real effort that he has put forth in his achievement; such rhetoric “slanders on him who has paid heed to this admonition”⁶². Furthermore, the essentialist rhetoric causes us to overlook the fact that the temptation to relent from striving towards one’s self-

question one’s very identity as a member of the community. What Nietzsche seems to be getting at here is that human beings are deeply social beings that acquire their normative bearings and their sense of self from these communities. As such, to call into question the foundations of these communities is to be ostracized and to lose everything with which one is familiar—not unlike Mill’s description of the social consequences of dissenting in “Utility of Religion” (especially UoR, 411). The stakes, as presented here, are high, and hence, it is unsurprising that embracing one’s radical uniqueness is portrayed as rare, even as everyone is capable of it. In fact, given the power of custom in establishing and maintaining moral values, it is surprising that anybody would be motivated to challenge their values.

⁶⁰ SE 154

⁶¹ SE 154

⁶² SE 154

transformation is common to both great and ordinary individuals, for “[the great man] knows as well as any little man how to take life easily and how soft the bed is on which he could lie down if his attitude towards himself and his fellow men were that of the majority.”⁶³

Nietzsche’s point is not that there are not real inequalities in the capacity to cultivate oneself. Arguably, Nietzsche does not even deny that some individuals may objectively be capable of greater things than others; rather, what he denies is that the condition that people are currently in, whether admirable or ordinary, is the result of a nature that destines or dooms one forever. Moreover, Nietzsche’s point is that those who are currently ‘little men’ hide behind essentialist rhetoric in order to justify their inactivity and thereby foreclose the possibility of their own self-creation. There is no guarantee that if all individuals were to embrace their individuality, they would all be equally creative. But Nietzsche’s claim is relative; it is possible for ordinary men to become greater than they currently are, and what obstructs this possibility is the rhetoric of natural talent or virtue that destines some for greatness and others for weakness. More specifically, it obstructs the development of creative, heroic lives—lives that are within the reach of all, even if in varying degrees⁶⁴.

Second, it is man’s fear of the solitude that is a precondition for “the task[] we actually ought to be performing”⁶⁵—that of creating one’s own values and meaning. As a result, we distract ourselves with a multitude of activities—labor, politics, and science, just to name a few—so that we do not have to carry out what Nietzsche considers the highest of man’s activities: self-creation.

Nietzsche describes modern man’s avoidance of self-creation in the following terms:

“In individual moments we all know how the most elaborate arrangements of our life are made only so as to flee from the tasks we actually ought to be performing, how we would like to hide our head somewhere as though our hundred-eyed conscience could not find us out there, how we hasten to give our heart to the state, to money-making, to sociability or science merely so as no longer to possess it ourselves, how we labor at our daily work more ardently and thoughtlessly than is necessary to sustain our life because to us it is even more necessary not to have leisure to stop and think. Haste is universal because everyone is in

⁶³ SE 154

⁶⁴ SE 155

⁶⁵ SE 158

flight from himself; universal too is the shy concealment of this haste because everyone wants to seem content and would like to deceive more sharp-eyed observers as to the wretchedness he feels.”⁶⁶

The crucial point here is that if average, ordinary individuals do not engage in the kind of life that makes one fully human—if they fail to transcend their animal tendencies—then it is not because they are by nature incapable of it, nor is it because some elite group of free spirits must exclude lesser souls from self-creation in order to promote the self creation of elites⁶⁷. If there is any exclusion from self-creation, it is we who have excluded ourselves, by prioritizing qualitatively lesser activities over the highest of human activities.

More broadly, combining the notion of individuals as radically unique with the view that humans are value-creating beings, suggests an individualistic view of self-creation whereby all individuals ought to invent their own unique moral values. Nietzsche writes, “Let us therefore *limit* ourselves and the purification of our opinions and valuations and to the *creation of our own new tables of what is good.*”⁶⁸ To restrain oneself from imposing one’s own values on anyone else does not, however, mean that one does not have anything to do with the value creation of others. In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche proposes that while we ought not impose values on others, we can recommend values, goals, and courses of actions. Imposing and recommending are crucially distinct from one another in that while the former is a command that binds and subordinates one individual to another,

⁶⁶ SE 158

⁶⁷ James Conant, for example, argues by way of a close reading of one of Nietzsche’s early essays, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, that the role of the exemplar, which is a superior individual who exceeds others in his capacity for creativity, is to educate others into their own unique paths to self-creation. To the extent that individuals are excluded from self-creation, Conant claims, it is because they consciously act in ways that exclude themselves, not because there is any natural defect that inherently excludes them from self-cultivation: “A careful reading of SE reveals that Nietzsche understands the process of exclusion with which the work is concerned to be one that is self-imposed.” (Conant, 198)

⁶⁸ GS 265-266, author’s emphasis. Also, the fact of each individual’s radical uniqueness prompts Nietzsche to go so far as to argue that this should result in the cultivation of one’s own opinions that are distinct from the opinions of others, on all matters: “I believe that everyone must have his own individual opinion concerning everything about which an opinion is possible, because he himself is an individual, unique thing which adopts a new posture towards all other things such as has never been adopted before.” (HAH 133)

the latter is a suggestion that is open to being rejected or accepted. When we recommend a goal, “the goal is then thought of as something which *lies in our own discretion*,”⁶⁹ and it is precisely this discretion that affirms the authority of each individual to judge for him or herself. Should an individual decide that the recommendation is in fact, conducive to oneself, then one can impose the recommendation on oneself. As such, the locus of authority lies squarely with in the individual, as opposed to God or other people, for Nietzsche’s commitment to cultivating human beings as independent value creators is the highest expression of the authority of the individual. In short, the Nietzschean individual takes the following position regarding the creation of value: because we are not animals, but humans, we must create values, and because I am not like everyone else, I must create my own values. Moreover, because we are all humans, self-creation is an activity that belongs to every individual.

Part Two: Freedom, Slavery, and the Creation of Value

But why does it matter that one creates one’s own values? In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche explicates the importance of creating one’s own values, as opposed to submitting to values that one has not authored, and he does so in terms of freedom and slavery. “Convictions are prisons,”⁷⁰, Nietzsche states firmly, and these convictions are borne out of an individual’s “need for faith, for some unconditional yes or no”⁷¹. Such individuals are, Nietzsche argues, “dependent people”⁷², enslaved to an external set of rules that dictate their beliefs and actions. As a “regulative guideline as an external principle of bondage or mooring”⁷³, a conviction has sovereign authority over individuals. In submitting to a conviction, the individual subordinates himself to something outside of himself, whether it is a moral principle, value, or ideal. On this reading, Nietzsche is not primarily objecting to the content of religious beliefs, but rather, to their sovereignty in having the ultimate say

⁶⁹ D 63

⁷⁰ AC 53

⁷¹ AC 54

⁷² AC 54

⁷³ AC 54

over the terms of human life—a sovereignty that rightfully belongs to human beings. As such, the problem with religious asceticism is precisely its denial of the possible authority of other perspectives. for “it permits no other interpretation, no other goals, it rejects, denies, affirms, and sanctions solely from the point of view of *its* interpretation.”⁷⁴ In other words, the defect of religion (and of any value that claims authority over individuals) lies in its desire “to be ultimate ends and not means among other means.”⁷⁵

In contrast to the enslavement of individuals to convictions, Nietzsche describes the free spirit as a skeptic, or one who employs perspectivism in order to create his own values: “The freedom from every sort of conviction, being *able* to see freely, is *part* of strength”⁷⁶. One is self-reflexive through perspectivism: that is, one sees oneself in context of one’s environment. And one must do so from the standpoints of “five hundred convictions beneath you, behind you.”⁷⁷ As a result, one avoids identifying oneself through the perspective of any one conviction, but instead, one is a skeptic of all convictions, for to fail to do so is to be mastered and to belong to “an unconditional yes or no”⁷⁸, which would constrain one’s vision into believing that the conviction is the one and only truth. Furthermore, in abiding by convictions, one disciplines and sacrifices oneself for an external goal rather than positing oneself as a goal that convictions ought to serve⁷⁹. Rather, one ought to be a skeptic who is ungoverned by convictions, thereby understanding oneself in relation to the history and psychology of one’s environment. One will “pass through the whole range of human values and value feelings and ... be *able* to see with many different eyes and consciences, from a height and into every distance, from the depths into every height, from a nook into every

⁷⁴ GM 146, author’s emphasis

⁷⁵ BGE 74

⁷⁶ AC 53

⁷⁷ AC 53

⁷⁸ AC 54

⁷⁹ AC 54

expanse”⁸⁰—and one does not merely undergo this exercise in order to declare that all moral systems are relative. Rather, by taking a perspectival approach, one will better understand oneself and how one has come to be a certain way in his particular time. And in light of this knowledge, one will select elements from a variety of moral systems and construct values that are particular to oneself—a set of values that one believes is particular to one’s needs for flourishing and increasing one’s will to power—for “the most basic laws of preservation and growth require ... that everyone should invent his own virtues, his own categorical imperatives.”⁸¹ Moreover, the free spirit will understand the particularity of one’s morality for oneself, and will not insist on extending it to others; the radical uniqueness of individuals entails that the values that are beneficial for one are not necessarily beneficial for another⁸².

This does not mean that values or ideals are powerless, but rather, that individuals ought to see them for what they are: entities that one chooses to endorse, and whose authority derives solely from this choice. Values ought not to be sovereign over individuals, but rather, individuals must be sovereign over values, for it is only when an individual is properly a master over one’s values, that Nietzsche thinks one is truly free, as opposed to “the ‘man of faith’ [who] does not belong to *himself*.”⁸³ The free, independent individual does not submit to values as goals to achieve, but rather, posits himself as a goal, out of which he determines what kinds of values he ought to hold. Nietzsche makes clear how such an individual will relate to his values for the sake of his independence:

“*Not to remain stuck* to a person—not even the most loved—every person is a prison, also a nook. *Not to remain stuck* to a fatherland—not even if it suffers most and needs help

⁸⁰ BGE 136

⁸¹ AC 10.

⁸² It is for this reason that at times, Nietzsche adamantly resists prescribing what the free spirit will look like with any specificity: “Insofar as the individual is seeking happiness, one ought not to tender him any prescriptions as to the path to happiness: for individual happiness springs from one’s own unknown laws, and prescriptions from without can only obstruct and hinder it.” (D 108)

⁸³ AC 54. Nietzsche also put the same point forcefully in his middle period; addressing the free spirit, Nietzsche writes, “You shall become master over yourself, master also over your virtues. Formerly *they* were your masters; but they must be only your instruments beside other instruments.” (HAH, 9, author’s emphasis)

most—it is less difficult to sever one’s heart from a victorious fatherland. *Not to remain stuck* to some pity—not even for higher men into whose rare torture and helplessness some accident allowed us to look. *Not to remain stuck* to a science—even if it should lure us with the most precious finds that seem to have been saved precisely for us... *Not to remain stuck* to our own virtues and become as a whole the victim of some detail in us, such as our hospitality, which is the danger of dangers for superior and rich souls who spend themselves lavishly, almost indifferently, and exaggerate the virtue of generosity into a vice. One must know how to conserve oneself: the hardest test of independence.”⁸⁴

To emphasize the importance of making each individual the locus of authority, Nietzsche draws a parallel between one’s physical health and one’s values⁸⁵; he writes, “It seems to me that an invalid is more frivolous when he has a physician than when he has taken care of his health himself.”⁸⁶ The problem with physicians, according to Nietzsche, is that patients tend to blindly obey whatever the physician prescribes, becoming dependent on and resigning one’s own judgment to the judgment of others. However, in taking care of one’s own health without a physician, an individual will think more carefully about the kinds of prescriptions that will restore and promote his own health. In doing so, we “notice much more, order and forbid ourselves much more, than would happen at the instigation of the physician.”⁸⁷ This is presumably because when we take charge of matters, we not only think more carefully about the purpose behind actions, but we are also more willing to investigate unorthodox solutions, than if we blindly obey externally imposed rules. In entrusting ourselves to ourselves, we mindfully take responsibility for our health in a way that is less likely when we entrust ourselves to doctors. By drawing a parallel between physical health and one’s values, Nietzsche implies that there is something about following externally-imposed rules that causes individuals to resign their judgment and thereby forfeit their distinctive humanity. So in the

⁸⁴ BGE 52, my emphasis

⁸⁵ Nietzsche often draws parallels between the physical body and non-physical entities (such as moral values or opinions), presumably to convey that we ought not to draw sharp distinctions between the material and non-material worlds. Elsewhere, Nietzsche writes, “Freedom of opinion is like health: both are individual, from neither can a universally valid concept be set up. That which one individual needs for his health is to another a cause of sickness.” (HAH 133)

⁸⁶ D 159

⁸⁷ D159

same way that individuals ought to live without a physician to restore physical health, they also ought also to live without “the divinity as their physician”⁸⁸—and arguably, other individuals—to dictate their values⁸⁹.

To put it another way: one of the problems that Nietzsche identifies with an unconditional, externally imposed morality is not that it demands too much and is therefore too difficult for people to obey, but rather, that it makes a complex set of questions and issues too easy. Conventional values, whether grounded in God or the opinions of others, demands not too much, but too little of individuals. Through the “complete subordination to the will of another or to a comprehensive law or ritual ... the ascetic ... seeks to make his life easier for himself.”⁹⁰ Unconditional obedience negates individual judgment, discretion, and therefore, the notion that one might, in some cases, have to make an exception, rendering one’s obedience conditional. The individual who unconditionally obeys, Nietzsche writes, “is afraid of depending *on himself alone, of improvising.*”⁹¹ Because individuals are unique, judgment regarding values is complicated, if only because there is no single set of straightforward, imperatives that everyone must obey. What Nietzsche seems to think is that if each individual properly understands his own uniqueness and thereby, creates his own values, then society will be characterized by diverse individuals who see themselves as sovereign authorities over their own diverse sets of values.

⁸⁸ D 160

⁸⁹ The difficulty with this metaphor, one might say, is that Nietzsche seems to dichotomize too sharply; one either fully relies on and follows doctor’s orders unthinkingly, or one avoids the medical profession. This analogy does not acknowledge the fact that physicians have specialized knowledge that puts them in a position to know what is in one’s best interest regarding physical health, and that the discerning individual would be wise to take the expertise of others seriously. Furthermore, there is a balance between blind obedience to medical authority and a rejection of expertise; one can take expertise seriously without resigning one’s individual judgment. Despite the problems with this analogy, it is clear that Nietzsche’s aim is to put the individual at the center of judgment, as one who exercises his own reason, as opposed to letting it be done by others. Individuals, on Nietzsche’s account, must be active agents and not passive observers of their own lives.

⁹⁰ HAH 75

⁹¹ D 207, author’s emphasis

Part Three: Democratic Equality and Uniformity

As described above, Nietzsche's conception of self-creation centers on the authority of individuals in determining their values, and as such, it leaves open what values individuals can affirm. Unsurprisingly, it is precisely this openness that has led philosophers and theorists of every stripe to claim Nietzsche as their own⁹². On this reading, Nietzsche's writings are centrally about the authority of our values rather than about the substance of the values themselves⁹³. One can be a Nietzschean socialist, a Nietzschean democrat, a Nietzschean feminist, and the list goes on. So long as one sees oneself as the authority of one's own values, one is free to affirm any value one wants.

However, as scholars have noted, Nietzsche is far from agnostic regarding what substantive values individuals ought to affirm—values such as “extravagant honesty”⁹⁴, courage⁹⁵, curiosity⁹⁶, aristocraticism, responsibility, and having a firm grip on reality (namely, on this world) are prized by Nietzsche, while values such as equality, anti-natural causality, and pity are condemned⁹⁷. While at times, Nietzsche emphasizes how we ought to affirm our values, leaving open the content of the

⁹² See Charles Larmore, “Nietzsche's Legacy” in *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

⁹³ For example, Alexander Nehamas argues that Nietzsche's ideal individual is purposely underspecified. Because Nietzsche seeks to promote a true individual who gives us own style to his coherently bound actions, thoughts, and desires, distinct from the world whose rules he breaks, this necessarily means that there can be no formula for such individuals to follow. As Nehamas writes, “A true individual is precisely one who is different from the rest of the world, and there is no formula, no set of rules, no code of conduct that can possibly capture in informative terms what it is to be like that. There are no principles that we can follow in order to become, as Nietzsche wants us to become, unique.” (Nehamas, 225) For more, see Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁹⁴ BGE 161. Earlier in the text, Nietzsche goes so far as to say that honesty is the one virtue that free spirits cannot abandon: “Honesty, supposing that this is our virtue from which we cannot get away, we free spirits—well, let us work on it with all our malice and love and not weary of ‘perfecting’ ourselves in *our* virtue, the only one left us.” (BGE 155, author's emphasis) Also, in *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche writes, “the service of truth is the hardest service—So what does it mean to be *honest* in spiritual matters? That you are strict with your heart, that you look down on ‘beautiful feelings’, that you make your conscience from every yes and no!” (AC 49, author's emphasis)

⁹⁵ BGE 155

⁹⁶ BGE 155

⁹⁷ Specifically, see Berkowitz for the view that Nietzsche does not advocate a free-for-all regarding what kinds of values we ought to affirm, but rather, has a concrete set of values we ought to affirm (Berkowitz, 15).

values, at other times, he seems to be specifying what values we ought to affirm. But which argument takes priority remains unclear. Is Nietzsche arguing for both notions equally?—namely, that we must transform not only our values, but also, how we relate to these transformed values? Or would it be adequate to affirm our existing values, but simply in a non-foundational way? Would it be acceptable to affirm different ideals, but still view them as being grounded in something outside of ourselves? These questions challenge us to think more precisely about Nietzsche’s worries about democracy and its cognate values, such as equality. If Nietzsche is centrally interested in how individuals orient themselves towards their values, rather than the substance of the values they affirm, then being a Nietzschean democrat should not be problematic. And yet, throughout his writings, Nietzsche is clear that democracy is not a political institution to be praised, but rather, is itself the decay of mankind⁹⁸. What exactly should we make of this complex set of views?

Given that Nietzsche is ultimately interested in cultivating radically individualistic value-creators, then to the extent that democracy hinders the cultivation of these value-creators, democracy is not to be welcomed. More precisely, it is because of the way that democratic equality produces uniformity, which has detrimental consequences for cultivating value-creating beings that Nietzsche objects to democracy. Equality gives rise to two phenomenon that Nietzsche objects to: first, a uniformity (or homogenization) of values (which discourages individuals from creating their own values), and second, a uniform response to abolish suffering everywhere it is found. As such, some substantive values are, in Nietzsche’s view, incompatible with the production of value-creating beings, and as a result, these values must be excluded from the set of substantive values that individuals can affirm.

Nietzsche demonstrates the importance of holding to the right kinds of substantive values through his disdain for the value of equality in terms of its detrimental effects on producing a value-

⁹⁸ As Nietzsche writes, “The democratic movement is not only a form of the decay of political organization but a form of the decay, namely the diminution of man, making him mediocre and lowering his value.” (BGE 117)

creating being. First, Nietzsche argues that while most people have abandoned the belief in God, as well as related theological concepts such as sin, salvation, and redemption, they have not abandoned the Platonic notion that value is discovered, not created, nor have they abandoned the Christian doctrine of equality in its secularized form. The justification for equality is not located in the divine—in some sense, the justification has simply dropped out—but the doctrine of equality is still powerfully upheld. Modern men have ceased to be Christians, but they have not ceased to be religious⁹⁹. Instead, they have secularized and politicized the commitment to equality, which no longer referring to one's status in relation to others when standing before God with respect to eternal salvation, but rather, to the notion that all individuals ought to have an equal voice in political life. This, according to Nietzsche, is how Platonic Christianity has given rise to democracy.

And the problem with the commitment to equality that is at the heart of democracy is that it encourages people to see similar objects as equal, which Nietzsche views as worrisome because “nothing is really equal.”¹⁰⁰ And the fact that nothing is really equal not only has obvious implications for democracy, but on a more basic level, on the universality of moral values. In declaring individuals to be equal to one another, we imply a kind of uniformity or sameness. This uniformity entails that moral standards and laws are equally binding on all, and it implies that the differences that distinguish individuals from one another—differences of race, gender, financial status, ancestral heritage, skills, and talents—are of secondary importance. In the most fundamental way, individuals are equal, and hence, alike. Moreover, in insisting on a fundamental sameness of individuals, we overlook the particular traits that make individuals radically unique, and this has the effect of discouraging individuals from disrupting convention and inventing new ways of life. Equality, according to Nietzsche, binds people to living according to uniform standards, and prevents

⁹⁹ BGE 66

¹⁰⁰ GS 171

them from seeing themselves as unique individuals who are capable of creating their own distinct moral standards.

Moreover, modern individuals have continued to propagate the equality of men through their political institutions—namely, democracy. Democracy has led to “the diminution of man, making him mediocre and lowering his value”¹⁰¹; specifically, it has transformed him into a “perfect herd animal”¹⁰². As a political institution, democracy has pernicious effects regarding the kind of individual it produces. In espousing the equality of individuals, democracy has produced a homogenized herd, thereby discouraging exceptional, creative individuals from disturbing the status quo. Fearing the exceptional individual who might threaten the integrity of the group, the group promotes its homogeneity by labeling “everything that elevates an individual above the herd and intimidates the neighbor ... [as] evil.”¹⁰³ Furthermore, the group encourages actions that further shore up its homogeneity by honoring qualities such as being “fair, modest, submissive, [and possessing a] conforming mentality.”¹⁰⁴ In other words, democracy produces a certain kind of timid individual who is afraid to be exceptional relative to his peers. The problem is the universality of moral values that demands that everyone be subject to them¹⁰⁵ by virtue of individuals being equal to one another, which discourages individuals from expressing “the will to be yourself, to stand out.”¹⁰⁶

Drawing a parallel between physical health and the health of one’s soul, Nietzsche writes, “Even the determination of what is healthy for your *body* depends on your goal, your horizon, your energies, your impulses, your errors, and above all on the idea and phantasms of your soul.”¹⁰⁷ And the more we recognize the radical uniqueness of each individual, the less we will insist on imposing any one conception of ‘health’ or ‘morality’ on anyone. This argument does not necessarily depend

¹⁰¹ BGE 117

¹⁰² BGE, 118

¹⁰³ BGE 114

¹⁰⁴ BGE 114.

¹⁰⁵ BGE 115

¹⁰⁶ TI 212

¹⁰⁷ GS 177

on hierarchical distinctions between superior and inferior individuals, but rather, simply on distinctions across different kinds of individuals. “The more we abjure the dogma of the ‘equality of men,’” Nietzsche writes, “the more must the concept of a *normal* health, along with a normal diet and the normal course of an illness, be abandoned by medical men.”¹⁰⁸ The notion of equality, in other words, unsuitably and violently imposes a uniformity of values on diverse individuals. Rather, one ought to engage in self-creation by imposing one’s own morals on oneself: “We, however, *want to become those we are*—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.”¹⁰⁹

Second, not only does the democratic commitment to equality give rise to the uniformity of values, but it also gives rise to a uniform, blanket response to all suffering, which Nietzsche views as obstructing individual self-creation. Nietzsche argues that the sentiment of pity has infected the political realm, such that political groups that appear to be on fundamentally different ends of the political spectrum—such as democrats and anarchists—are more alike than we often think. Specifically, they are one in their “deadly hatred of suffering generally” and “in their almost feminine inability to remain spectators, to *let* someone suffer.”¹¹⁰ By taking pleasure and pain as its starting points by which to measure the value of conditions or activities, democratic politics has become shortsighted. In the same way that modernity has retained the Christian doctrine of equality, albeit without the metaphysical justification, the same thing has occurred regarding the Christian doctrine of pity. As a sentiment that causes individuals not only to sympathize with, but also to eradicate the suffering of those whom they count as equals, pity is not inherently democratic. However, once democratic equality takes hold, the range of persons whose suffering counts as

¹⁰⁸ GS 177, author’s emphasis

¹⁰⁹ GS 266, author’s emphasis

¹¹⁰ BGE 116

significant and to be pitied, widens¹¹¹. As a result, democratic individuals are motivated to sympathize and eradicate suffering almost everywhere that they find it, and this has detrimental effects on self-creation. Specifically, Nietzsche argues that pity is detrimental both for those whom pity motivates to alleviate the suffering of others and for the sufferers who are the objects of pity. In the first instance, pity denies sufferers the means of self-creation, and in the second instance, to pity the suffering of others distracts one from one's own self-creation. Suffering, according to Nietzsche, is an extremely personal experience that others can never fully understand—it is “incomprehensible and inaccessible to almost everyone.”¹¹² Moreover, one's suffering is a complex matter, involving particular processes, such as “the way new springs and needs break open, the way in which old wounds are healing, the way whole periods of the past are shed”¹¹³ and that may be necessary for one's self-creation.

Furthermore, Nietzsche recognizes that the pain that one individual requires for personal growth may not be the same as the pain that another requires for growth. The problem with pity, then, is twofold: first, it misunderstands the complexity and personal nature of another's suffering; that is, “it strips away from the suffering of others whatever is distinctly personal”¹¹⁴. When one pities, one interprets a complex phenomenon as though it were fundamentally uniform and simple. And because one's pity reflects and produces a mistaken view of another's suffering, this leads to a uniform response: the “wish to help ... and they believe that they have helped most when they have helped most quickly.”¹¹⁵ As a result, the pity that motivates people to alleviate the sufferings of others forecloses the opportunity for sufferers to experience the distress that is necessary for their personal growth, for “the path of one's own heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of one's

¹¹¹ Alexis deTocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 535

¹¹² GS 269

¹¹³ GS 269

¹¹⁴ GS 269

¹¹⁵ GS 269

own hell.”¹¹⁶ Those who pity and strive to eliminate the suffering of others are effectively short-circuiting the sufferer’s cultivation.

Not only is pity detrimental to the sufferer’s prospects for self-creation, but it also hinders the pitier’s prospects for development by distracting the pitier from the difficult work of self-cultivation. “Our ‘own way’,” Nietzsche writes, “is too hard and demanding and too remote from the love and gratitude of others”¹¹⁷. And because the work of self-creation is difficult, it requires a kind of single-mindedness that often demands that one ignore the temptation “to flee into the conscience of the others and into the lovely temple of the ‘religion of pity’.”¹¹⁸

As a result, democracy, with one of its central commitments as the equality of men, hinders the cultivation of radically individualistic value-creators. It is important to note that in rejecting the notion that laws and moral standards are equally binding on all, Nietzsche is also rejecting something much deeper: that individuals are fundamentally, on some level, the same. One’s identity is the source of moral value; as such, if everyone is different on a fundamental level, then we ought to expect differences in the values that people create. Nietzsche therefore rejects that standards are equally binding on all and the uniform response to eradicate suffering everywhere we find it, as functions of his rejection of the idea that all people are, on some fundamental level, the same.

As such, Nietzsche seems to be arguing that we not only must transform how we relate to our values (as objects of our own creation), as well as transform what our values are (from those that diminish our capacities as creators to those that affirm them). To put it bluntly, we must affirm the right values in the right way. To present Nietzsche’s philosophy of self-creation as either exclusively affirming any values in a subjective manner or as promoting life-affirming values in an objective way is to miss the force of Nietzsche’s views. It is not the case, after all, that Nietzsche would be satisfied if people created their own values, but the values were the wrong ones—ie the ones that are “life

¹¹⁶ GS 269

¹¹⁷ GS 270

¹¹⁸ GS 270

denying.” To love equality and to affirm the sentiment of pity, even if not grounded in God, is still problematic, largely because these values encourage an uncreative life that is afraid to make an exception for oneself in moral and political matters. And to simply invert the substantive values—from love of neighbor to cruelty, or from equal rights to unequal rights—would also miss Nietzsche’s aim, for it would fail to transform the way we think about the authority of those values. In other words, Nietzsche seems to want us to engage in both a critique of the authority of our values, as well as a critique of the substantive values themselves—ultimately with an eye towards the goal of self-creation, or to see oneself as the source of authority.

As a result, it seems that Nietzsche rejects democracy as a substantive concept because of the way it hinders the cultivation of radically unique value-creators. While it is true that the substance of some values that Nietzsche promotes (such as warrior-like strength or courage) can easily be distinguished from the authority of those values, the substance of other values cannot so easily be separated from their authority. Rather, the substance of the value is intertwined with its authority. Democracy and its cognate values, such as equality, I argue, are values of this kind. Specifically, Nietzschean self-creation centers on the notion that values that one authorizes as one’s own are binding only on oneself, and cannot be extended to bind others. Such a notion therefore stands in tension with democracy, where certain values are equally binding on everyone. Democracy is committed to the view that on some basic level, individuals are equal by virtue of certain attributes they have in common, and that this equality warrants that some laws, standards, and norms are equally binding on everybody. As such, there is a contrast between the view that one can only be bound by one’s own endorsed standards, and the view that the standards that bind others also bind oneself. This entails that democracy will condemn attempts by individuals to create exceptions for themselves. Democracy implies that one can be bound by something not authorized by one’s own will, such that one cannot create values that violate certain democratically-determined values. To put it another way: one is bound by values that one has not necessarily authorized; more specifically, one

is bound by values that the collective has authorized. The relevant distinction is therefore about the kinds of values that can bind an individual, or about the authority and hence, the applicability, of values. This does not necessarily mean that all values that an individual creates have to be generalizable, but rather, that if and when one's own values conflict with the equally binding values of the democratic polity, that one must yield to the values of the demos. And what this ultimately means is that individual values cannot be truly sovereign in the way Nietzsche wants them to be. Rather, what Nietzsche objects to when he objects to democracy is that values determined by the demos, as opposed to individuals, are sovereign such that at times, they limit the particular values of individuals. The notion that everyone is, by virtue of their equal moral status, bound by the same values prohibits individuals from seeing themselves as radically unique and thereby creating their own values.

This is the force of Nietzsche's critique of the substantive value of democracy: democracy obstructs human beings from cultivating themselves as individualistic value-creators who submit only to their own authority. To submit to anyone or anything else, whether God, others, or moral demands themselves, is tantamount to slavery. Because the goal is to cultivate value-creators, the substance of values is open, except for those that inhibit the cultivation of value-creators. In this sense, the substantive values are not fully open; rather, the values must work in conjunction with (or at the very least, they cannot obstruct) the broader commitment to cultivate value-creators who see their values as expressions of their own authoritative will.

Part Four: Evaluation.

Before evaluating Nietzsche's views on the tenuous relationship between democracy and self-creation, it is worth thinking through Nietzsche's conception of self-creation, and hence, whether it is coherent. Given Nietzsche's description of how we ought to relate to our values—as means to ends, or as principles that can help guide us in the pursuits that we choose—one might wonder

whether there is any notion of commitment in Nietzschean ideals¹¹⁹. After all, if the only authority that a value has for an individual is that one sees it as important, then is there anything that prevents an individual from discarding the value when it is inconvenient to uphold it? More specifically, we might wonder whether these ideals can bind or constrain individuals; namely, can they intervene in situations where one's desires, preferences, or interests compete with values in determining what one ought to do in any given situation? It seems that on Nietzsche's account, there is not, for to be bound by a value that one does not (or perhaps no longer) fully endorses is to subordinate and thereby, to lose oneself to the authority of the value—it is to see the value as possessing an authority that does not solely derive from oneself. But if all values are subordinate to the will of the individual, it is not obvious that ideals have a status or power distinct from more temporal considerations, such as desires, preferences, or interests.

It would be surprising if Nietzsche's conception of a value were to resemble a 'value' in the traditional sense of the word, but if that is the case, such a conception lacks a notion of commitment that is necessary if an individual is to sustain a self that thinks and acts in non-arbitrary ways. After all, the function of values, conventionally understood, lies not only in the way they give shape to our plans, helping us prioritize the sorts of activities on which we ought to spend our time and resources, but also, in the way they re-direct our plans when we are led astray by more temporal considerations, such as desires or interests. This, of course, does not preclude the possibility that we might change our values; upon reflection, we may find our values mistaken, and we may replace them with new ones. However, there is something in the very nature of values that implies commitment; values are meant to withstand, or have the ability to overcome other fleeting considerations that threaten our ability to commit to our values. What is commitment, if not (at least, in part) the ability to sustain our

¹¹⁹ For a similar concern, see Robert Pippin, "Nietzsche and the Melancholy of Modernity," *Social Research*, Vol. 66, No. 2, Hope and Despair (Summer 1999), 508

values in the face of temporal considerations? We are beings who commit to values and feel bound to them in such a way that we cannot easily discard them when they inconvenience us.

Undoubtedly, Nietzsche would resist this depiction of ideals, arguing that putting individuals at the mercy of anything other than oneself is tantamount to slavery. However, this depiction results in a conception of the self that is fragile at best, and schizophrenic at worst. If ideals have the same status as temporal considerations, such as desires, preferences, and interests, then it is unclear how individuals can be said to commit to anything. Their actions seem arbitrary, moving from one activity to the next on the basis of shifting inclinations. In fact, there does not seem to be any factor that can adjudicate between the competing values, desires, interests, and inclinations that present themselves to individuals.

If we find this conception of values to be problematic, then this may go some way to explain why holding to a value of democracy in a Nietzschean manner might be difficult. If, as Nietzsche argues, we ought to hold to our ideals in a contingent manner, such that we can relinquish them whenever we choose, then this raises the question: what would it mean to hold to a value of democracy in this way? The rule of the people is a value that will undoubtedly inconvenience us as individuals at times; for example, it requires that individuals honor the outcome of a decision-making procedure, even when they are on the losing side, and it demands that individuals respects the equal weight of each vote, even if some are convinced that not all vote with an eye towards the common good. And yet, to affirm democracy is not simply to affirm it instrumentally, and to be abandoned, for example, when a collective decision does not accord with one's judgment. As such, it seems that Nietzsche cannot affirm the value of democracy in a way that is intelligible to us; however, to be fair, the inability to affirm is as a function of his conception of values, and not a function of his conception of democracy.

But is affirming democracy in a Nietzschean manner problematic, not only as a function of Nietzsche's conception of values, but due to the very conception of democracy? As this article aims

to show, Nietzsche's portrays his ethical ideal as a being that is radically individualistic, submitting to the authority of no one except for oneself, in contrast to herd animals that submit to all authority figures except for oneself, whether it be God or others. In disdaining what is common because it implies what is alike or the same, Nietzsche is surely right to highlight the ways that exclusively focusing on what makes us alike blinds us to the very real differences that distinguish individuals from one another and therefore, precludes us from seeing individuals in their uniqueness. There is a multitude of ways in which we are distinct from one another; talents, virtues, and our capacities to create are not equally expressed or distributed across all individuals, and Nietzsche's writings helpfully counteract the democratic tendency to view all humans as the same as one another.

However, where Nietzsche goes wrong is in conflating the part with the whole; simply because individuals are unequal to one another with respect to certain traits does not mean that individuals are unequal in every way. We do have some things in common with others, or are equal to others in certain ways—for instance, our need for survival, the fact of our mortality, and crucially, (as Nietzsche is at pains to emphasize) our nature as valuing beings. Even if Nietzsche is right in his insistence that difference is significant because it refers to the unequal capacities for individuals to engage in the very activity that distinguishes humans from animals, the fact that we are alike in important ways renders his claim that we are radically unique individuals problematic. We are both alike and different from one another, and it is precisely the ways in which we are alike—in our need for physical survival and our nature as evaluating beings—that make the kind of politics that defends certain rights and protections for all individuals, a good idea. This view defends, from the starting point of traits we have in common, the need for rights in common. Such a view might also posit that the desire to have one's voice taken seriously with respect to the terms of collective life as common to all individuals, and as such, one might extrapolate to the need for democratic institutions. While this article is not centrally about outlining the precise contours of the ideal political regime, the point is that our notions of what human beings share (or do not share) in common is significant for

determining the kind of politics we ought to support. Nietzsche's political and philosophical thought remains, then, as a continuous challenge to those who find themselves drawn towards his critique of democratic life, and yet find themselves unable to embrace his rejection of it.