

Haverford College

Generation(s) of Self:

Understanding the Nietzschean Alternative to Self as Causal Substratum

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Abstract

Nietzsche writes "The doer is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything" (GM I:13). And yet, though Nietzsche's rejection of the theoretical import of 'doers' in favor of an account of 'deeds' is clearly a central part of his philosophical approach, it is a move that is not sufficiently understood in the secondary literature. Many Nietzsche theorists struggle to accept the radical character of this assertion and instead attempt to integrate it into an account of human agency in which being is still more theoretically fundamental than doing. In this thesis, I will examine existing interpretations and attempt to offer a reading of Nietzsche's views on the self that more fully captures the radical nature of his disavowal of doers. The Nietzschean self is active—it *is* deeds, it does not cause deeds, and such a self destabilizes the notion of causal responsibility that we typically use to understand the connection between subjects and deeds. I propose that the dissolution of causal responsibility makes way for an alternative picture of responsibility as radical, active self-claiming. The Nietzschean self that is claimed in this picture is not a *substance* but rather an *inheritance of enacted relationships* in which doing is theoretically central and explanatory of anything that we might call 'being'. Nietzsche's account compels us to practice self-creation by embracing an understanding of the self as a transformative *process of becoming* in which change—rather than stability—is theoretically foundational.

We tend to think of subjects as theoretically prior to verbs. First, there *is* a subject, then they *do* something. Even in our language, the subject comes before the verb. For example, take the phrase “I went to the store”. The ‘I’, we tend to think, existed before the going, and in fact caused the going—there can be no “going to the store” without some ‘I’ to do it. Subjects thus seem to have a causal relationship to verbs—subjects bring actions and events about. Subjects also have a kind of permanence, while verbs are fleeting: I woke up, I walked to work, I ate lunch, I went to the store. *I, I, I, I...* The ‘I’ persists even as the action changes: the I refers to the same underlying being regardless of whether that being is waking, working, eating, going. Different subjects, we claim, are in different stable conditions, and these conditions of the subject determine how they act — I am smart, so I ace tests, I am petty, so I hold grudges, I am not athletic, so I run slow. There is something very comfortable about this picture of subjecthood: it suggests reliability, predictability: if you know who someone is on the inside, if you understand the properties of the object to which they are referring when they say ‘I’, then you know how they’ll act.

Yet, all these properties that we claim subjects have—smartness, pettiness, un-athleticness—seem as though they can in fact only be understood through the actions that allegedly proceed only in result of the causing qualities already existing. There seems something confusing about this — if we can only claim the presence of a certain quality by reference to certain actions, why is it that we suppose the quality is prior to and more fundamental than the actions? How can I be smart if never ace tests? Petty if I don’t act it? Unathletic if I run fast and lift heavy weights? It seems that all these states of being, these allegedly static ‘qualities’, can

only be ascribed on the basis of action—you understand a subject to be in a certain condition on the basis of how they act, not by accessing directly the internal qualities they possess.

If one were to suppose that being was in fact only possible through acting, phrases like “Be yourself” would begin to seem rather curious. Implied in the very directive to “be yourself” is that it would be possible to be anything other than yourself. Under such a view, your self is not sufficiently captured through your actions, which makes it possible to disavow certain actions as “unlike me”. Friedrich Nietzsche, however, is deeply skeptical of this vision of the self-as-causal-substance and takes it to be a decrepit product of Christian morality, which calls a doctrine “of *suppression* of self-affirmation” (WP 373). Thus, Nietzsche seems to understand the classical model self as an independent, rational actor to actually be destructive of self.

Indeed, he fully disavows the notion of a causal self-substance with statements like this one from *On the Genealogy of Morals*: “The doer is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” (GM I:13). And yet, though Nietzsche’s rejection of the theoretical import of ‘doers’ in favor of an account of ‘deeds’ is clearly a central part of his philosophical approach, it is a move that is not sufficiently understood in the secondary literature. Many Nietzsche theorists struggle to accept the radical character of this assertion and instead attempt to integrate it into an account of human agency in which being is still more theoretically fundamental than doing.

In the pages that follow, I will examine existing interpretations and attempt to offer a reading of Nietzsche’s views on the self that more fully captures the radical nature of his disavowal of doers. The Nietzschean self is active—it *is* deeds, it does not cause deeds, and such a self destabilizes the notion of causal responsibility that we typically use to understand the connection between subjects and deeds. I propose that the dissolution of causal responsibility

makes way for an alternative picture of responsibility as radical, active self-claiming. The Nietzschean self that is claimed in this picture is not a *substance* but rather an *inheritance of enacted relationships* in which doing is theoretically central and explanatory of anything that we might call ‘being’. Nietzsche’s account compels us to practice self-creation by embracing an understanding of the self as a transformative *process of becoming* in which change—rather than stability—is theoretically foundational.

The Self: Causal substratum?

“The doer is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” (GM I:13)

According to Nietzsche, euro modern notions of the self as persisting substance emerged out of a clever self-deception by society’s weakest people. The weak, slavish types, Nietzsche explains, took stock of what was harmful to them, and determined that what was harmful *to them* must be categorically *bad*. Finding that the strong and noble were a threat to them in their weakness, the slavish types determined that strength was evil. Nietzsche writes:

“That lambs dislike great birds of prey does not seem strange... And if the lambs say among themselves: ‘these birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey, but rather its opposite, a lamb—would he not be good?’ there is no reason to find fault with this institution of an ideal, except perhaps that the birds of prey might view it a little ironically and say: ‘we don’t dislike them at all, these good little lambs; we even love them: nothing is more tasty than a tender lamb’” (GM I:13)

Thus, instead of simply accepting their own impotence and inferiority to the strong and noble, the lambs—the weak, slavish types—made of their weakness a virtue, calling it humility, meekness, gentleness. Likewise, they made of strength an evil, called it tyranny, brutality, insensibleness. In so doing, they created a moral system around traits (strength and weakness)

that, upon reflection, seem not so obviously moral, but rather—under Nietzsche’s account—innate and inevitable, like an individual lamb or hawk’s inherited species.

According to Nietzsche, they further denied the fundamental nature of strength and weakness by supposing there is *choice* in how one manifests their goodness (weakness) or evil (strength). What they refused to understand is that strength consists only in strong actions, and weakness consists only in weak ones: “To demand of strength that it should *not* express itself as strength, that it should *not* be a desire to overcome, a desire to throw down, a desire to become master, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs, is just as absurd to demand of weakness that it should express itself as strength” (GM I:13). Thus, the weak cannot *be* anything other than they *do*, and nor can the strong. But, to take comfort and avoid the unpleasant fact of their impotence, the slavish types supposed that there existed a substance, an underlying subject causally ‘behind’ their deeds that was different from the deeds themselves, and thus they were able to conclude that their ‘good acts’ came from their own internal ‘goodness’ and that others’ ‘evil acts’ were caused by an internal ‘evilness’. Nietzsche, it is clear, rejects this characterization with his claim that ‘the deed is everything’.

This rejection has far-reaching consequences for how we think about the relationship between one’s deeds and what we would typically call one’s ‘character’ or ‘personality’. We tend to think that one’s actions stem from one’s character, and are reflective of it—people choose to act in certain ways because of who they are on the inside. However, if there is no subject (stable character) that is causally ‘behind’ a deed then the presumption of choice that grounds the modern subject-agent is already bankrupt. Put another way, how can there be such a thing as causal responsibility for actions if the existence of underlying causal agents is a myth?

Robert Pippin navigates this very line of concern and briefly explores a naturalist reading of Nietzsche, noting that if there are no subjects, and only events, then there is no way for us to distinguish between a body stepping out of line (something we might want to call a 'deed') and metal rusting (typically understood as merely an event). Pippin writes "We must be able to appeal to a subject's 'intending' for us to be able to distinguish, say, someone volunteering for a risky mission, as an ontological type, from steel rusting or water running downhill or a bird singing" (Pippin 133). In the absence of an intending, causal self perhaps they would both be just natural 'happenings'.

Yet Pippin ultimately rejects this naturalist reading, noting that it fails to actually account for Nietzsche's disavowal of causal selves and instead just offers a picture of a causal agent-substance that is defined materially (eg, biologically, neurologically) rather than immaterially (eg, self, soul) (134). More fundamentally, Pippin notes that the naturalist reading is problematic in that it fails to capture how Nietzsche's account "is a picture of social struggle, lasting over some time, among human beings, not forces" (135). Pippin's concern is that if we take Nietzsche to claim that there are no subjects, just events, then it will be impossible to reconcile that claim with Nietzsche's persistent interest in typology and social tension among individuals and (slave, master) types. It is paradoxical, for example, to talk of slave and master types as kinds of individuals and also to claim that there are no acting subjects, just natural events. Thus, "there cannot just 'be' subduing and subdued events. Someone must be subdued and be held in subjection" (136). Under Pippin's reading, it seems that Nietzsche still needs subjects—to do without them would be to dissolve into a pure materialist account of events that would preclude Nietzsche's rich account of 'will to power' as the social fabric of our world.

According to Pippin, then, what Nietzsche is trying to communicate through his apparent rejections of self as substratum is “the instability and provisionality of any substance claim” (137). The problem is not that people think there are self substrata when there are in fact not, but rather the difficulty stems from people clinging too tightly to the notion of self, and supposing the existence of stable, consistent selves that exist in isolation from action. From here, he offers an expressivist account of the self wherein the self is not related to deeds as their cause, but rather is expressed in them. For this reading, Pippin makes heavy use of Nietzsche’s lightning flash metaphor for the self. Nietzsche writes

“just as the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for an action, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so the popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was free to express strength or not to do so. But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing effecting, becoming; the doer is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” (GM I:13)

Pippin stresses the inseparability of self and deed in his account, arguing that “Nietzsche is not denying that there is a subject of the deed; he is just asserting that it is not separate, distinct from the activity itself, it is ‘in’ the deed.” (Pippin 138). The lightning is expressed through its flash just as the person is expressed through their deed: just as lightning can only flash, a person can only do what they are. Pippin further notes that once one rejects causal responsibility, considering ‘could-have-done-otherwise’ counterfactuals is like “considering the possibility that I might not have been me, a fanciful and largely irrelevant speculation” (144). Thus, though we may feel some sort of sadness at having done a deed we wish we had not, that sadness ought not to be guilt for our deed (for which we were not causally responsible, as we could not have done

otherwise), but rather something like disappointment that the deed revealed us to be something other than we had hoped we were (143).

Pippin's idea that our actions 'reveal us' however, seems misaligned with Nietzsche's actual view of the self in so far as it suggests that there is still some underlying self 'in' the deed that—like a piano waiting behind a stage curtain—exists *prior* to its being revealed. In offering this interpretation of a Nietzschean alternative to guilt, Pippin relies heavily on the following passage in which Nietzsche discusses Spinoza:

“‘The opposite of *gaudium*,’ he finally said to himself—’a sadness accompanied by the recollection of a past event that flouted all expectations.’ *Eth. III, propos. XVII, schol. I. II*. Mischief-makers overtaken by punishments have for thousands of years felt in respect of their ‘transgressions’ *just as Spinoza did*: ‘here something has unexpectedly gone wrong’ *not*: ‘I ought not to have done that.’” (GM II:15)

It seems to me that this passage does not well support Pippin's proposal that the sting of conscience is something like a disappointment that our actions *revealed* us to be something other than we thought we were. The focus is on events, not substance—something has *gone* wrong, nothing has been revealed to *be* wrong. Rather, I propose that the pain in this ‘flouting of expectations’ is something more like the pain of one self-interpretation superseding another, one self being lost and replaced by the next. When you betray a friend, that creates you as a betrayer—it doesn't *reveal* you as a betrayer. A betrayer is not a betrayer before they've betrayed.

Why does Pippin err here? Pippin writes that “disappointment that *I was not who I thought I was*, sadness at what was expressed ‘in’ the deed, replaces guilt, or the sort of guilt that depends on the claim that I could have done otherwise” (Pippin 143, emphasis added) Yet, note

that ‘here something has unexpectedly gone wrong’ has no ‘I’ in it—a stark contrast to ‘I ought not to have done that’ and *also* to Pippin’s ‘I was not who I thought I was’. There is a linguistic unnaturalness in using the phrase ‘here something has unexpectedly gone wrong’ to characterize a deed. The passive voice construction suggests that we are talking about deeds without prior subjects: not ‘I did’ but ‘was done’. This is troubling for us because our very language requires us to have a subject for every deed. In this way, our language traps us into supposing that subjects must exist before deeds can—a subject is, and then they do. Nietzsche outlines the fallacy of this supposition in a discussion of Descartes. He writes:

“‘There is thinking: therefore there is something that thinks’: this is the upshot of Descartes’ argumentation. But that means positing as ‘true *a priori*’ our belief in the concept of substance—that when there is thought there has to be something ‘that thinks’ is simply a formulation of our grammatical custom that adds a doer to every deed” (WP 484)

Nietzsche’s thinking here can be helpfully understood through the insight of Christoph Lichtenberg, who writes of Descartes’ proclamation that “We should say, ‘It thinks’, just as we say ‘It thunders’. Even to say *cogito* is too much if we translate it with ‘I think’. To assume the ‘I’ to postulate it, is a practical need” (Stern 270). Thus, even our very language is constructed in such a way that any doing requires a being, and so our grammar acts as a stumbling block in any attempt to give an account of doing as theoretically prior to being.

I suspect that Pippin has fallen victim to language in the very way that Nietzsche here describes: he has taken a grammatical rule too seriously, and it has cornered him into the position of taking the doer to have an ontological priority over the deed. A more radical, and I believe faithful, reading of Nietzsche acknowledges that nothing is *revealed* by a deed, but rather

created. To understand what Nietzsche is actually asking of us, I propose that we ought to look further at some of the slippages in our languages—the places where our nouns seem to buckle under the weight of all the action we are asking them to convey.

In different corners of the internet, I've seen a curious phrase: 'White people white peopling'. Usually, it accompanies some example of a white person doing some kind of action, and it is used to point out the *action* (and thereby the doer) as somehow deeply white. This is curious because it seems to go against our common-sense intuition that whiteness (as a racial characteristic) is merely possessed, not done. And yet, 'white people white peopling' is a phrase that is intuitively easy to understand, as any casual observer of race can see how it is often performed behaviorally. The phrase seems suggestive of this idea that race, in fact, is actively performed, not merely passively possessed as substratum.

To illustrate this point, imagine for a moment a young woman who fits certain stereotypes of whiteness such that she frequently prompts people to say things like "wow she's sooo white". People say this about her because of what she does: she shops at lululemon before spin class and then goes to Sweetgreen afterward, and frequently declares to her one POC friend that "I don't see color!". These kinds of actions occur within a network of meaning such that they create her as white, and also continually create the meaning of whiteness. She performs whiteness in her deeds in such a way that people identify her as deeply white like all the other 'white people white peopling', and also see her as reinforcing or adding to the existence of whiteness by her conformity to the kinds of actions in which whiteness consists and her introduction of ever new ways of 'white people white peopling'.

Some might object to this picture of race as a characteristic that is continually created through action rather than passively possessed. If race is about what you do and not some substratum, one might wonder, then could the person I've described make herself into another race by 'acting like' a person of that race? That is quite obviously problematic, and out of step with all of our common-sense intuitions about race. Furthermore, what about all of the non-white people who engage in stereotypically 'white activities' like those I've described above—surely those activities haven't 'turned them white'. Race, after all, is *physically embodied*, and though our bodies can tend to change in some ways over time, it seems that that change is constrained.

Yet, I propose that accepting race's status as an embodied characteristic is not automatically to also accept that race is not continually enacted and, as such, unstable. The mistake comes when we suppose that physically identifiable racial characteristics are not already laden with meaning, do not already constitute an act of interpretation. Suppose we say that a white woman's skin tone is light. Light as compared to what? As compared to a black person's? Another white person's? How could her skin tone possibly be light without some reference to others who have different features? To say that her skin is 'light' is already to suggest a normative spectrum of skin tones, with some sort of 'light end' and 'dark end', and to place her within a position on that spectrum. The spectrum, however, and any given individual's place on it, constitute unstable interpretations, as a person who is light-skinned within one social context is dark-skinned in another. Furthermore, any reference to 'lightness' cannot be disentangled from the word's other various uses and implications: brightness, goodness, purity. We think that a 'fact' (i.e. a light or dark skin tone) produces a symbol (a socially meaningful racial identity), but really the 'fact' does not even exist as such in any prior to an interpretive act of 'identification'.

Thus, the physical characteristics of a person are always already laden with meaning, and with reference to all the other possible physical presentations. In this way, our bodies are unstable inheritances and are always already integrated in a meaningful relational network of physical traits. The answer, then, to the objection that physically embodied qualities like race are simply possessed and not enacted lies in a reframing of ‘action’ that acknowledges that deeds (which include interpretive acts like ‘reading’ a subject racially) are not merely undertaken by various existing people, but rather continually bring those people into existence within an already present network of meaning. Much of that meaning, like racially meaningful physical traits, persists in a relatively enduring way, and yet over the long arc of history, all meaning is subject to transformation. In the following section, I will explore how the Nietzschean self can be understood as being like a genealogical inheritance, the very same mechanism through which we typically understand the conference of properties like race on an individual. I propose that this account of self better captures the radical nature of the claim that the ‘doer is a fiction added to the deed’ than does Pippin’s assertion that doers are ontologically prior and *in* deeds.

Self as Inheritance

“Let your self be in your deed as the mother is in the child” (Z II:5)

Christa Davis Acampora is sympathetic to some aspects of Pippin’s expressivist reading of Nietzsche. In particular, she appreciates how Pippin frames his account within the broader project of finding some kind of Nietzschean responsibility—some account of the relationship between selves and deeds—that is not rooted in the notion that the self ‘causes’ deeds. Yet, there

is an underlying problem with Pippin's account in that it seems puzzlingly inconsistent with Nietzsche's declaration that "the doer is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything". As I have noted, though Pippin's account dissolves the causal relationship between self and deed, it retains a commitment to a self that is 'in' the deed rather than 'behind' it, a distinction which is irrelevant if we take Nietzsche at his word when he claims that there is no doer. Acampora proposes that Pippin's commitment to the existence of a 'doer' stems from his implicit belief that any notion of responsibility requires the existence of prior agents in some form. She goes on to disagree with Pippin that a reformed notion of responsibility would "require the maintenance of the distinction between doer and deed even couched in a distinction between deeds and events" (Acampora 144).

In her own account, Acampora strives to offer a picture of the relationship between the deed and the Nietzschean self that can survive a full disavowal of the existence of causal 'doers'. As a foil to Pippin's chosen "lighting and flash" Nietzsche passage, Acampora tries to conceive of an agentless Nietzschean responsibility through Zarathustra's commandment "Let your self be in your deed as the mother is in the child. Let that be your word concerning virtue." (Z II:5) Acampora explores how the kind of intergenerational responsibility that a parent feels for a child might be of a different sort than agency-presuming causal models of responsibility. She writes:

"A mother's sense of responsibility for her child is nearly entirely future oriented (setting aside tantrums in public places, the boasting one does among family and friends, and the shame and regret one might suffer when the child does some monumental harm to others). In other words, the abiding sense of responsibility a mother has for a child, primarily and for the most part, stems not from the fact that she 'caused' the child in contributing genetic material and giving birth but from a form of love (and terror) that is given shape in the promise for the future of that child. It is care about the future of the child that typically and for the most part motivates a mother's (any parent's) sense of responsibility" (152)

Before I explore the merits of Acampora's account, I'll first note that I see some gaps in this particular image of maternal responsibility such that it is not yet convincingly distinct from garden variety causal responsibility. Indeed Acampora too-hastily dismisses several examples of the way in which a mother's sense of responsibility for her child does suggest a sense of causality—the pride and the shame that comes from having brought a human into the world and shaped them into a certain sort of being who does certain acts seems in many ways like an inextricably causal kind of responsibility. Further, it is not clear to me that causal responsibility need only be concerned with what effects you had, but might also be oriented toward the future effects you will have. Inevitably, the future will become the past, and 'what I want for my child' will become 'what I did for my child'. Acampora, attempting to present a maternal responsibility that is not reliant on the notion of an intending self as the cause of deeds, writes that "for one's children, one has hopes but not intentions" (150). Her assertion leads this author to wonder if she's ever had the distinct displeasure of interacting with helicopter parents, whose 'hopes' for their children tend to look a lot more like firm intentions to which the parents see themselves as causally related.

And yet, there's something in my snarky example that perhaps redeems Acampora's account: helicopter parents are rarely able to consistently act as causal agents in their children's lives. Kids will be kids: they'll stay out too late, fail calculus, date that person with the unfortunate tattoo, and—god forbid—major in philosophy. Thus, perhaps the helicopter parent's belief in their own control is more of a fantasy, akin to the fantasy of the self as causal substratum than it is a reflection of the actual nature of the relationship between parent and child, which is not causal but aspirational. We might be correct to think that a parent with a realistic

view of their own abilities is one who sees their role in much the way Acampora described: not as their child's cause, but as their precursor, paving the start for whichever unknowable course the child may take. The parent fades into the background and looks at the child with love and wonder as she embarks on a strange new journey, a journey on which the parent could never really hope to join her, except, perhaps, as an echo. To play out the analogy, then, we are constantly 'parenting' ourselves by trying to create the conditions under which our future, unknowable self may thrive, though we ultimately cannot control or even accurately predict who we will become.

This kind of responsibility is, Acampora states, a 'future oriented' alternative to the retrospective causal model of responsibility. Still, even with the sympathetic analysis I offer above, the concern that parental responsibility cannot be understood as distinct from causal responsibility cannot be fully escaped. After all, we blame our parents for everything: our neuroses, sharp chins and receding hairlines, our intellectual shortcomings. We tend to think that, by what they do and what they fail to do, and even by who they are, our parents are causally responsible for who we become. Thus, the responsibility of the parent to the child may not be the best metaphor to use if the task at hand is to develop a non-causal model of responsibility. However, Nietzsche's mother and child image might also suggest a retrospective kind of responsibility that is not causal: the responsibility that a child has for what they've inherited from their parents. How is it that we might be responsible for our eye color and stature, our cultural heritage, and for the family heirlooms and narratives without which we could not possibly exist as an individual and yet over which we have no control?

If we are taken to be causal agents, then we would have to be so in *spite* of these inheritances over which we have no control. To be a causal agent, we must be atomized—there must be something that we can point to as internal to us, and causally related to our actions. At some point, then, what we do needs to be severed from what we are as a historically constituted being. There must be some psychological facts that can be pinned down such that they belong to a single ‘doer’ and can be identified as the cause of that doer’s doing. Under such a picture, the buck stops with the individual, and an action’s cause can be identified without reference to the rich historical context in which it occurs.

Yet, if this classical account of the self as a causal agent requires us to accept that we have a potential for action that is not wholly determined by our inheritances then that leaves us to wonder: what ‘causal substance’ could exist without them? What could any of us possibly have that is severed from our historical and genealogical circumstances? It seems to me that I can only understand myself in relation to what I was *given*: my womanness, my whiteness, my language. And yet, these ‘character traits’, the alleged causal sources of our actions, cannot make *us* causes, as they are not strictly within us. Even the elements of my personality: my sense of humor, my likes and dislikes, my sore spots and insecurities—none of these parts of me could have come about but for the rich and already-meaningful network of relationality into which I was born, and am constantly reborn. There are no causes that can be traced back to a single being: we are not atomized in that way. The fact that we are historically contingent and constituted through our inheritances means that we can’t be causal agents. I propose, then, that perhaps the Nietzschean self (or, if it cannot be called self, whatever concept might supersede the

self-as-causal substratum) might be helpfully understood as a genealogy: *an inheritance of enacted relationships*.

It's important to note that with any inheritance the passage from one generation to the next is characterized by change as well as continuity. As Nietzsche writes "the entire history of a 'thing,' an organ, a custom, [is] a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion" (GM II:12). Thus, in inheritance, there is continuity and there is mutation. You are not causally responsible for either your inheritances or your mutations. You are constantly inheriting yourself plus a little bit of randomness such that you are all of your inheritances *and more*: you are your mutations as well.

Still, we can only understand our mutations through our inheritances. In the case of parental inheritance, we might see this through statements like "I've got a meaner sense of humor than my father" or when discussing our self-inheritance we might say "I wouldn't make a vulgar joke like that anymore—I used to be crass". Any benchmark by which we could possibly evaluate a self that belongs to us must already be relational: we are more or less funny than our parents, better or worse looking than our culture's beauty norms, smarter or duller than our siblings, and kinder or meaner than we were yesterday. As Nietzsche writes, "Everything bears witness to our being—our friendships and hatreds, the way we look, our handshakes, the things we remember and forget, our books, our handwriting" (SE 166). These are the elements that constitute our genealogies, our own personal mixture of inheritances and mutations, but, critically, they do not define us within a vacuum. Any interpretation of the self is a creation of

the self-in-world, and so who we are is inextricably tangled up with the world that makes our existence possible. Nietzsche writes

“False dogmatism regarding the ‘ego’: it is taken in an atomistic sense, in a false antithesis to the ‘non-ego’; at the same time, pried out of becoming, as something is a being. The false substantialization of the ego: (in the faith in individual immortality) this is made into an article of faith, especially under the influence of religio-moral training. After this artificial separation of the ego, and the declaration that it exists in and for itself, one confronted a value antithesis that seemed irrefutable: the single ego and the tremendous non-ego. It seemed evident that the value of the single ego could lie only in relating itself to the tremendous ‘non-ego’—being subject to it and existing for its sake.— Here the herd instincts were decisive: nothing is so contrary to this instinct as the sovereignty of the individual. But if the ego is conceived as something in and for itself, then its value must lie in self-negation.” (WP 786)

It is a non-starter to frame the self in terms of the non-self—these are false oppositions.

Any way of personal identity or self requires a deep and continually enacted relational flow with the world. The world creates you, and you it. You take on a morphing, unstable inheritance from one moment to the next, and it is in the claiming, the taking on, that you continually become yourself. Anything that we could try to identify as the ‘non-ego’ is already tangled up in the ‘ego’, and any attempt to separate the ‘ego’ from the ‘non-ego’ artificially severs one from the relational network through which the self-*in*-world is constituted, leaving one with a collection of meaningless splinters rather than the two objects sought. Identifying an ego that is walled off from a non-ego is a self-negating project.

Thus if any reference to self necessarily includes a reference to a broad network of relationships, the self is fundamentally a set of relational statuses and comparison. But, we must note, relationships are not stable qualities. Indeed, consider interpersonal relationships, for example: treating an interpersonal relationship as a fixed entity, a static quality of your being, is

in fact a recipe for that relationship's very destruction. This is what happens when we take our loved ones for granted—we suppose that an active, ongoing process of connecting to them is actually a stable quality of our being, and it is through this very belief that we can alienate our loved ones and lose them. When a relationship ends, it's not typically because someone has stopped *being* a certain way, it's because they've changed their behavior: they've stopped cooking dinner, started sleeping with someone else, stopped doing their share of the housework, or they've started fighting with their partner for not doing their share of the housework.

Relationships are activities, not entities.

This is not to say that relationships are always easily begun and ended—certainly, being in relationship with someone is an activity that has a certain kind of momentum—relationships are the kinds of things that tend to get inherited from one generation of self to the next. Some relationships can never really be severed, even as one renounces them: for example, no denial of one's parents and attempt to cut them out of one's life could ever truly rid ourselves of the inheritances they bestow upon us, though it might reform those inheritances' meaning. The same is true for all of the relationally meaningful aspects of our identity.

Consider again the example of race as continually enacted/performed. It can be enacted in very different ways, and those various enacted interpretations of race can change its meaning. However, one cannot simply disown or single-handedly change one's race: there's too much inherited meaning, too much momentum and relationality involved in a racial inheritance for such an atomized transformation to be possible. Any singular attempt to “change one's race” is destined to fail: consider, for example, Rachel Dolezal. The tremendous and near-universal public outcry to her claim of black identity eventually made it impossible for her to live ‘as a

black woman', navigating black community spaces. Thus, in an attempt to claim black identity, she ended up performing a new version of whiteness instead: in her efforts to reject her inheritance, she's in fact just illuminated the way in which no one is white or black in a vacuum, but in fact, we are all racialized subjects through the identity-generating interpretive acts we inherit.

This is not to say, however, that whiteness is a stable quality that persists in the same way throughout time. One need know only a little history to see that the social meaning of whiteness has changed greatly across times and places, and even from person to person: the whiteness of an abolitionist in the 1800s, a Klansman in the 1960s, of Rachel Dolezal in the present, and of the spin class and Lululemon enthusiast of the present, are interconnected and give meaning to one another, and yet they all manifest themselves very differently. They all constitute possible ways of being white. As new possible ways of enacting whiteness are created, the very nature of whiteness changes, but this does not happen all at once. This is the balance of inheritance: replication and mutation.

Notice that these examples suggest the ways in which race is at once complex and multiply meaningful within a historical moment and also temporal—always morphing and in flux. This is true of race as a socially meaningful idea, and also of its manifestation in a particular individual. Consider, for example, a person with one black parent and one white parent. If they are in a room with three other people, they might be read racially by one as black, another as white and the third as mixed-race. Furthermore, each of these readings is complex, and even if all three people in the room were to read the person as 'black' that is not to say that

the readings are the same, as the reading 'black' is itself an idiom that points to many meanings. Thus, at any given moment a person's race is complex and multiply meaningful.

But, a person's (complex, multitudinous) racial identity is also subject to change over time. Moving from one place in the world to another, being exposed to new ideas about race in writing or conversation, having a painful encounter with racism or experiencing racial pride, undergoing a change in physical appearance—any number of things might lead to changes in one's own racial identity as it is created interpretively by self and others. The self in this way is thus constantly born and reborn of multiple, complex, and changing identities. Yet, to re-emphasize an important point, the lateral and temporal multidimensionality of race do not entail that one's race (or many of the other relationally constituted interpretive acts that create the self) can be single-handedly and intentionally changed. There's flexibility to racial idioms, and they do change over time, but they can only flex so much at one moment, and they do not change all at once, but stepwise from one re-interpretation to the next, like a giant game of telephone.

Through examples like these, we can see that the picture of the self-as-genealogy seems to effectively capture Nietzsche's apparent typological determinism, his emphasis on the self as complex and multiple, and his emphasis on fluidity, change and randomness. To have a genealogical inheritance is to be constituted by types that are complex and unstably enacted. Thus, understanding the self as an inheritance of enacted relationships does not require the false belief "that *the strong man is free* to be weak and the bird of prey to be a lamb" (GM I:13). Being a bird of prey, after all, is only constituted through certain kinds of inheritances: the flying, preying kind, among others. Yet, we can still accept that through chance and randomness,

the bird of prey came about from something radically different: an amoeba, and later a dinosaur, and indeed the hawk's descendants will inevitably be vastly different from the hawk, and perhaps even un-bird-like and non-preying. Furthermore, hawk is multitudinous and indeterminate as a type: the kind 'hawk' signifies differently to the mouse, the ecologist, and the hiker. The hawk is thus both necessarily what it is through inheritance, and yet also complex and random as a genealogical moment. What we call a person, then, is similarly the complex-but-necessary output of the moments that came before (past selves, ancestors), and a product of chance mutations.

Thus, I propose the metaphor of self-as-inheritance as a new addition to the wealth of pan-Nietzschean metaphors for the self. The list of metaphors used by Nietzsche and those who study him to characterize self includes gardens, cities, literature. In the next few paragraphs and the section thereafter I will summarize a few of these metaphors for the self and compare them with that of the self as genealogy in order to illustrate the added value of this new contribution to the collection as a tool for understanding the Nietzschean self.

As Paul Franco notes, in *Human, All too Human* Nietzsche emphasizes the "fluidity and multifariousness of the self". According to Nietzsche, you mustn't focus on being a certain way, you must always be willing yourself to become a certain way, and then another way, and then another. There is no end goal—no static self that you need to achieve and, once achieved, remain: one must be always taking on 'brief habits' (see GS 295). A whole self is multitudinous: "the self does not conflict with the drives but is merely the site where the drives themselves conflict" (Franco 61). Franco's emphasis here is on the self as an organization of drives, or forces competing for dominance.

One of Nietzsche's metaphors for the self that Franco engages with in this discussion is that of the self as a garden. As Nietzsche writes:

One can dispose of one's drives like a gardener and, though few know it, cultivate the shoots of anger, pity, curiosity, vanity as productively and profitably as a beautiful fruit tree on a trellis; one can do it with the good or bad taste of a gardener and, as it were, in the French or English or Dutch or Chinese fashion; one can also let nature rule and only attend to a little embellishment and tidying-up here and there; one can, finally, without paying any attention to them at all, let the plants grow up and fight their fight out among themselves—indeed, one can take delight in such a wilderness, and desire precisely this delight, though it gives one some trouble, too. All this we are at liberty to do: but how many know we are at liberty to do it? Do the majority not believe in themselves as complete fully developed facts? Have the great philosophers not put their seal on this prejudice with the doctrine of the unchangeability of character? (D 560)

Thus, this metaphor emphasizes the idea that there are raw, natural materials that are given to you (drives) but you can choose to weed and nurture what you are given as you wish. If you are great, then you will form your garden into something unique and beautiful, you will weed what you can, nurture what you like, and present the distasteful things that you cannot remove as advantageously as possible, and if done successfully even the ugly parts of your garden (ugly drives) will fit beautifully into the broader whole.

This imagery of a garden is compelling insofar as it seems to capture both Nietzsche's rejection of classically conceived free-will as well as his seemingly contradictory directives to self-create. Gardening, it seems, involves both an acceptance of what is given (the soil, the weather, the features of the land) and a desire to reshape them into something new, beautiful, and temporary—at first glance all of this aligns well with the tension between Nietzsche's emphasis on the historical contingency of all things (including people) and his optimism nonetheless about the possibility of crafting oneself into something magnificent.

Yet, there is some trouble with this metaphor in that it imagines a self outside of oneself: the gardener is distinct from the garden and seems to be causally related to the development of the garden. The gardener, it seems, acts as an independent force operating on the garden from the outside, not a transformative power coming from within. Thus the vision of the garden seems to leave us, disconcertingly, with two selves of very different kinds: one that is historically contingent and the subject of continued transformation and one that is cut off from history and works as a transformative power from the outside. Nietzsche's choice of metaphor here does a disservice to the narrative he is actually advancing insofar as it inadvertently reinforces one widespread presumption of which Nietzsche is explicitly and repeatedly critical: that there is an unconstrained self (a gardener) which can act independently of its entanglement with the world, as if it were not already constituted by and through it. Yet, it is clear that Nietzsche's picture involves the (previously discussed) rejection of this "false dogmatism regarding the 'ego'" (WP 786), and that he thus does not actually think such a discrete, autonomous self is possible.

The concern that Nietzsche's vision is one of two selves (one that independently forms and one that is formed) seems at first to plague the image of self as genealogy as well: it seems that there is, under this picture, a self that bestows an inheritance (mother, past-self) and a self that receives it (child, new self). Yet, this worry can be allayed by recalling the image of the sign chain—the mother is not distinct from the child but is *in* the child. What is new is built perpetually on what is old, thus there is no separateness, no 'two selves': there are at once infinite selves (signs - genealogical moments) and only one (the sign chain - the entire genealogical line).

Returning again to Acampora then: she was spot on, I think, in her analysis of another passage from Zarathustra, which states that “To be the child who is newly born, the creator must also want to be the mother who gives birth and the pangs of the birth-giver” (Z II:2). Of this and related passages, she writes “It would appear that what Zarathustra has in mind is a kind of self that he conceives in terms of a *creative process* rather than as an enduring entity or substance. This suggests that one somehow, mysteriously, gives birth to oneself repeatedly and perpetually” (Acampora 147, emphasis added). She abandons the idea far too quickly, but I think that it may be crucially important in understanding Nietzsche’s disavowal of the self as causal substratum.

A self that is a ‘creative process’ rather than a substratum is not really a self at all in the way that we can readily understand it. Such a vision of ‘self’ aligns well with a literal reading of the claim that there are no doers, only deeds, and it does not require us to take Pippin’s approach of maneuvering around the issue by proposing a prior self that is ‘in’ and ‘revealed by’ deeds. Furthermore, I propose that such a vision of self as process allows us to understand that Nietzsche’s views on self are deeply and inextricably tied with the remarkable and mystifying process he calls self-creation, indeed, perhaps what Nietzsche has in mind is something like self as self-creation.

Self-Creation: Claiming One’s Inheritance

“What does your conscience say? You must become who you are” (GS 270)

This puzzling directive appears as an aphorism in the *Gay Science*, and elsewhere in Nietzsche’s work similar injunctions appear: “How one becomes what one is” is the subtitle of Nietzsche’s autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, and Zarathustra also commands “Become who you are!” (Z IV:1). Under the causal-substratum model of the self, this is a puzzling directive: How

could a person possibly become what they already are? It seems that if one is a thing, there is no becoming to be done. Furthermore, like the garden metaphor, this statement seems at first to imply two different selves: if you must become who you are, then it seems you are not already who you are, and so there is a you that is who you are and yet also a you that is not yet who you are. It is a proposition that seems to uproot the whole notion of identity, that a thing is what it is.

To make sense of this directive, some theorists focus on the lateral multiplicity ingrained in Nietzsche's account of the self as made up of drives. Alexander Nehamas, for example, proposes that self-creation is achieved through the harmonization of all one's actions, all the drives one has ever expressed, into a coherent, unified whole. While his account seems in some ways to capture the kind of radical self-acceptance that Nietzsche is suggesting, I propose that Nehamas' picture of self-creation is insufficient in that it fails to grasp the temporal multiplicity of the self, and thereby supposes that self-creation is a process that can end. A more faithful account of self-creation can be given through the metaphor for the Nietzschean self as an inheritance of enacted relationships. This kind of self-creation is a radical self-acceptance or *self-claiming* that involves embracing one's inheritances as productive of the self even as one understands that they are irrevocably complex, mysterious and changing. Under this picture, self is continually lost and brought newly into being (is continually created) through the interpretive act of claiming inheritances.

Alexander Nehamas's article "How one becomes what one is" utilizes Nietzsche's political metaphor of the self to present Nietzsche's doctrine of self-creation as the process whereby one forms the complex elements of the (laterally) multiplicative self into a coherent whole. Nehamas presents the central metaphor as follows:

“Since different and often incompatible character-traits coexist in one body, different patterns assume the ‘regent’s’ role at different times. Thus we identify ourselves differently over time; and though the ‘I’ always seems to refer to the same thing, the content of what it refers to does not remain the same, and may constantly be in the process of developing, sometimes toward greater unity” (Nehamas 400).

Under the political metaphor for the self, the body is the jurisdiction of warring drives, and so though the jurisdiction may be relatively stable, the interrelations of the ‘character traits’ within it will change. Some among us can experience ourselves as unified by simply denying the existence of certain countervailing drives that rise, fall, push and pull within the jurisdiction of our bodies: “The possibility of self-deception is always there; [the semblance of] unity can always be achieved simply by refusing to acknowledge an existing multiplicity” (Nehamas 405). Thus, some of us may convince ourselves that we are a robust and unified self by denying the conflict within us, but such a denial does nothing to change the fact that such selves are in fact disunified and characterized by tension and change in the relationship between one’s various character traits. Nehamas then goes on to outline how, out of this vision of a self that is only the sum of its disparate parts that exist in relationships characterized sometimes by conflict and sometimes by synthesis/collaboration, Nietzsche’s doctrine of self-creation emerges. He writes

“the self-creation Nietzsche has in mind involves the acceptance of everything one has ever done and, in the ideal case, its harmonization in a coherent whole. Becoming courageous involves avoiding all the cowardly sorts of actions one may have previously engaged and pursuing a new sort instead. Yet no specific pattern of behavior needs to be abandoned, or pursued, simply because one realizes that all one’s actions are one’s own” (408)

Thus, Nietzsche is not excessively concerned with the specific content of one’s drives, but rather that one not deny them: one must embrace the full force of one’s past actions as the self — the drives actualized through all past actions are you, those actions are you. Finally,

Nehamas goes on to introduce his notion of the Nietzschean self as literary. Nietzsche's concern with the self is a concern about form—the structure of one's character—rather than the moral or other content (Nehamas 413). Nehamas proposes that, as in literature, what makes a person great is not that they act in a certain way or even have certain 'good' characteristics, but rather

“their organization; the quality of their actions is secondary. In the ideal case, absolutely everything a character does is equally essential to it; characters are supposed to be constructed so that their every feature supports and is supported by every other one. In the limiting case of the perfect character, no change is possible without corresponding changes, in order to preserve coherence, in every other feature; and the net result is necessarily a different character” (414)

Thus, under Nehamas' reading, Nietzsche is advocating that the best of us will be like compelling literary characters — essentially ourselves in everything we do, and wholly complete through the sum of our actions. It is possible, or nearly possible, under Nehamas's account, to create some sort of final, aesthetic unity of the self.

Problematically, though the relationship between 'character-traits' changes under this account of self-creation, the actual traits do not. Indeed, though Nehamas's account seems to incorporate fluidity and change in so far as it describes a reorganization of the self, it's a narrow kind of change in which what's being re-organized doesn't itself change through that process. It is an excessively sterile picture of self-creation that neglects passages like this one: “You creators, there is much that is unclean about you. That is because you had to be mothers. A new child: oh how much new filth has come into the world with it!” (Z IV:12) In stark contrast to this repeated imagery of pregnancy and birth, Nehamas's self-creating subject seems impossibly walled off and contained: rather than mingling with, transforming, and being transformed by the world, the self creates itself in insolation. This is how it is possible that, under Nehamas'

account, self-creation is a project that can achieve completion: through a severing of the self from the world, from parentage, and through an un-Nietzschean atomization of so-called ‘character-traits’.

If we understand Nietzsche to be speaking of a self that is enacted relationally and mingled with the world, a self that exists as an active interpretation of re-interpretations, it becomes clear that any final success in self-creating is impossible. Self-creation, then, is the unending process by which we continually embrace unstable inheritances, and come to understand ourselves as our own descendants: it involves claiming what cannot but be yours, and claiming it as yours even as it is thrust (morphing, churning) upon you. It involves carrying these brimming gifts, these living relationships, all of that *momentum*, ceaselessly and unflinchingly with you into an uncertain future full of randomness and mutation. Importantly, self-creation is a lossful endeavor: “You must want to consume yourself in your own flame: how could you want to become new unless you first have become ashes!” (Z I:17) Thus, any wholeness, any unity you achieve, is strictly temporary—it is the unity of a fleeting generation of drives that have come together tastefully in a world of perpetual becoming.

The self under this picture is deeply mysterious, and it is a common urge to look away from this mystery, and suppose it isn’t there. Morality is one pernicious tool in denying and hiding the mystery of the self:

“Science—this has been hitherto a way of putting an end to the complete confusion in which things exist, by the hypotheses that ‘explain’ everything—so it has come from the intellect’s dislike of chaos.— This same dislike seizes me when I consider myself: I should like to form an image of the inner world, too, by means of some schema, and thus triumph over intellectual confusion. Morality has been a simplification of this kind: it taught that men were known, familiar.— Now we have destroyed morality—we have again become completely obscure to ourselves! I know that I know nothing about myself.” (WP 594)

Thus, it seems that the self cannot truly be ‘known’ in the way that science (allegedly) can because it is not a proper object of knowledge: it only exists as an interpretation in motion. The self is relational and in flux... the meaning of the self cannot be apprehended without a grasp of the shifting world in which the self is enmeshed. To claim myself as a woman requires knowledge of a broad world full of women like and unlike me, and I can never really know that world but through tilted, changing aspects of it—through women that I meet and commercials that I see, through products marketed towards me and through the news. Womanhood, in fact, consists *in* these tilted, changing aspects. Seeking self in womanhood involves connecting these scattered dots and representations into a part of some operative sense of self. Perhaps one woman I meet becomes a model to me of what a woman ought to be, and she dominates my sense of ‘woman’. Perhaps I read feminist literature and let it reform *my* womanness. Perhaps I have a child, and yet again ‘woman’ transforms itself within me as it mingles differently with ‘mother’. Mutations like these are constantly transforming me into a new being. Any sense of the self is thus convoluted with so many meanings and ever-changing ones at that. As such, the self can never truly be known.

There is certainly something terrifying and lossful about the unknowability of the self. Yet. An unknowable self is rife with possibility and opportunity—to know that one knows nothing of oneself is to know that one could be anything, and indeed to open one to the possibility of becoming anything. Self is a dangerous, exhilarating, gainful *becoming*, and such an existence seems much more like living than the stale permanence of statically being. Believing that the self is a knowable, static substratum prevents you from engaging in the process of self-creation, and yet it is only through that process of self-creation that the self

continually comes into being. When you suppose your self to be static and knowable, when you refuse to embrace the change and fluidity that is characteristic of this existence of ours it is self-negating, self-hating. It prevents you from becoming yourself. Nietzsche writes

“Let the young soul look back upon its life and ask itself: what until now have you truly loved, what has raised up your soul, what ruled it and at the same time made you happy? Line up these objects of reverence before you, and perhaps by what they are and by their sequence, they will yield you a law, the fundamental law of your true self. Compare these objects, see how one completes, enlarges, exceeds, transforms the other, how they form a ladder on which you have so far climbed up toward yourself. For your true nature does not lie hidden deep inside you but immeasurably high above you, or at least above that which you customarily consider to be your ego.” (SE)

Our true nature lies immeasurably high above us: it is in the climbing that we become ourselves, moment by moment, and that climbing can never stop. The moment that climbing stops is the moment you die—not a death of the body but a death of the self. Thus, in order that one not die a true death of the self—a fossilization of the self in stasis—one must die a thousand times over as one becomes the child and lets the mother die even as she lives on within one as an echo, as momentum: as one’s inheritance. Self-creation, then, requires many painful losses in order that the great new self may be perpetually born. As Zarathustra declares, “Creating—that is the great redemption from suffering, and life’s becoming lighter. But that the creator may be, that itself requires suffering and much transformation. Yes, much bitter dying must there be in your lives, you creators! Thus are you advocates and justifiers of all impermanence.” (Z II:2)

These losses, perpetual deaths of the self that make creation possible, are not ‘merely’ personal losses, and do not lead to merely personal creation. As discussed, the whole distinction between the ego and the non-ego involves an impossible severing that is destructive, not

productive, of self. In a social world built on inherited relationships, these sorts of losses and creations ripple through the relational network, changing its shape and structure—a change in one person, or in one tradition, is a change to the whole. Thus, the process of self-creation, it seems, transforms what it means to be human. Indeed, the process of self-creation can be seen in Nietzsche’s discussion of the Overhuman. He writes:

“What is great in the human is that it is a bridge and not a goal: what can be loved in the human is that it is a *going-over* and a *going-under*.

I love those who do not know how to live except by going under, for they are those who go over and across...

I love him whose soul squanders itself, who wants no thanks and does not give back again: for he always bestows and would not preserve himself.

I love him who is ashamed when the dice fall in his favour, and then asks: Have I been playing falsely then?—for he wills his own perishing.

I love him who casts golden words before his deeds and always keeps even more than he promises: for he wills his going-under...

I love all those who are as heavy drops, falling singly from the dark cloud that hangs over the human: they herald the coming of the lightning, and as heralds they also perish.

Behold, I am a herald of the lightning and a heavy drop from the cloud: but this lightning is called *Overhuman*” (Z I:1.4)

You have to ‘go-under’ (constantly perish) in order to go-over (self-overcome), just as the human race must ‘go-under’ (end in its current form) in order to go-over (be reformed into a race of Overhumans). Notice here Nietzsche’s reference to lightning: it suggests a striking parallel between his notion of the self as existing only through action and the way in which he thinks about human ‘progress’. The Overhuman, it seems, is not actually a goal to be achieved, as the imagery of a bridge might seem at first to suggest, but rather something that is enacted as a flash: it is not a state but a doing. As Zarathustra notes: “one must still have chaos within, in order to give birth to a dancing star” (Z I: Zarathustra’s Prologue). The Overhuman is like the

self that Nietzsche discusses in SE: not hidden deep inside the human “but immeasurably high above”. The ideal of greatness exists not so that it can be finally and fully achieved, but it is a moving target towards which we can continually strive.

Zarathustra’s speech on the Overhuman comes within the context of imminent death and becoming. He tells the story before the crossing of a rope-dancer (tight-rope walker) between two towers. Zarathustra and the people of the village look on as the rope-dancer begins to make his way across, but is chased along by a “motley fellow, looking like a jester” who outpaces the rope-dancer and passes over him, all the while chastising “you are blocking the way for one who is better than you” (Z I: Zarathustra’s Prologue). The rope-dancer, overtaken by the great, fearless, terrible stranger, loses his balance and crashes to the square below. As he takes his dying breaths, he laments the loss of his life to Zarathustra, who comforts him: “Your soul will be dead even sooner than your body: so fear nothing more!... You have made danger your calling, there is nothing in that to despise. Now your calling has brought you down: therefore will I bury you with my own hands.” (Z I: Zarathustra’s Prologue)

The motley fellow, it seems, is a metaphor for the Overhuman—always nipping at our heels, causing our death. Yet, we live on in that motley fellow: just as the rope dancer ‘made danger his calling’, so too does the new figure, but he does it with ever more vigor. One day, the motley fellow will himself be surpassed, will crash to his death as he makes way for another one who will do his job differently, with new life, creativity, and vigor. This is the work of self-creation, on the level of the person and on the level of humanity: it is a constant perishing and making way for novelty.

For a more topical illustration of this point, consider the experience of the hundreds of thousands of college seniors, including myself, who will not have a commencement this year. Graduation is supposed to serve as an important rite of passage for college students as they make their way into the world. These ceremonies also tend to be pretty formulaic, traditional affairs: caps and gowns, throngs of people, and tired teary platitudes. That is what college seniors are promised, and they nurture visions of themselves inhabiting that scene. My class year, however, has been thrown a curveball by the novel coronavirus, and with it a new identity to adopt: we will be the poor souls who've been robbed of commencement, we are the class of COVID-19. This condition of the world seems to many as if it cannot but be interpreted as destructive to us—we were *supposed* to have a commencement, we were *owed* it, and now we will be forever marked as the deprived ones. And yet, it seems that the breaking of this promise that was made to us opens us to new creative ways of being that were unthinkable prior to the destruction of this comforting, imminently boring dream.

For example, students at Wellesley College, upon hearing of their commencement's cancellation went ahead and graduated themselves. In a completely student-run ceremony that was not open to the public, they marked the moment in a way that was distinctly unlike the stuffy traditions of old. Instead of diplomas, they carried flowers. No deans were there to call their names, they announced themselves as they strode across a sparse stage. The only voices at the podium were the students'—no prominent figures of success to bestow tired 'words of wisdom'. These changes, it seems, constituted a radical re-interpretation of the ceremony: instead of being bestowed an honor, the students of Wellesley claimed an honor for themselves.

This claiming would not have been possible were it not for the death of the old tradition. As a local Wellesley newspaper remarked “Eliminating the endless, cliché-laden speeches by muckety-mucks could be a model for any future commencement ceremony. This seemed way more fun.” (The Swellesley Report) Wellesley students knew that they could not possibly recreate a traditional commencement, and it seems that they did not want to, as painful as that tradition’s loss surely was to them. The Wellesley students’ ‘faux-mencement’ seems a fine parallel for self-creation: don’t cling to old habits and ways of being, but rather let them die and, as you feel the full force of their passing, wield it as a generative energy in the creation of something new and brilliant.

Learning from Nietzsche: Embracing Loss

There are times when Nietzsche’s writing reads like the words of a motivational speaker. Indeed, he seems to take it as his project to slap mankind out of our complicity, our passive slipping into mediocrity and stasis, and to demand that we strive to embrace our losses as well as our inheritances, and from this perpetually disrupted momentum claim ourselves a thousand times over. He writes “We are accountable to ourselves for this existence of ours; and this is why we want to be the real helmsmen of our lives and keep them from resembling the mindless result of chance. One’s life must be lived with a certain danger and boldness since one will always, at best and at worst, lose it.” (SE 165)

In a moment like this, I propose that Nietzsche’s directive to embrace loss as a creative force has never been more important. We have lost our sense of safety, permanence, our very reality. We are in the throes of profound pain right now, the kind of pain out of which

generations are born. What Nietzsche teaches us is that such loss, such pain, is not only inevitable, it is powerful. This horrible moment through which we are living is cracking open the lie in which we have so comfortably wrapped ourselves: that our lives are only our own, that our selves are atomized and causal, that we are in control. That fragile shell, it seems, used to protect us, but it also contained us, and it's dissolution allows us to ask, with rare openness: what is next? It is in this moment that we must become our own midwife, and the world's, as we unflinchingly bring forth and nurture a reality that we cannot yet imagine.

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