

The Path Not Taken:
Self-Restriction in Nietzsche, Freud, and Plato

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ABSTRACT

The idea of a physical path is commonly used as a metaphor for different situations in life. Three different philosophers also make arguments that can be viewed in terms of a path. Nietzsche's notion of the promise in *On the Genealogy of Morals* is akin to a path in that the promiser vows to achieve a goal and follow a course of action that is required to get there. Freud's idea of normal human sexuality in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* can also be seen as a path in that he feels it is normal for a person to narrow down their initially vast sexual impulses and conform to the normal straight path. This idea is also expressed in Plato's *Phaedrus* when the character of Socrates claims that he never leaves the city walls because there is nothing to learn outside of them. All three of these philosophers promote the idea that sticking to a path is more valuable than deviating from it; deviating is seen as a sign of weakness, or psychological illness, or just valueless. Although these philosophers go to great lengths to promote these views, their arguments are undone by the internal contradictions and ambiguities of the arguments themselves. Nietzsche's promise is based on the existence of memory, but memory is actually a product of forgetfulness, which Nietzsche says is valuable, and could not exist without it. Freud concedes that there may be no person who actually follows his normal path of sexuality, and that to deviate from the path actually is normal. Plato's Socrates realizes upon deviating from his path that there is much to be learned outside the city walls, and that deviating from it can help him appreciate the path even more. Though this does not prove that deviating from the path is actually more valuable than sticking to it, it does suggest that such valuations are not as clear as the three philosophers would make it seem.

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The idea of a physical path is commonly used as a metaphor for different situations in life. A person has to pick a career path that they intend to follow. When things get confused in a person's life, they vow to get back on track. You can even get credit for taking a course in school and following it to the end. So many actions in life are compared to a sort of physical path, and sticking to that path is usually considered a good thing. A person following a career path is praised for knowing what they want to do and sticking to it. Friends are praised when they deal with their problems and get back on track. And once a student has completed his course, he is rewarded with a grade that lets him pass on to the next course. There is a positive value attached to sticking to a path and overcoming the challenges that would draw you off of it.

In this paper, I will focus on three texts that support this idea and examine the different notions of the paths put forward in each. All three works initially argue that being able to stick to a path is a thing of great value. In "On the Genealogy of Morals," Nietzsche argues that a man who can make a promise and keep it is the pinnacle product of society and more valuable than all those who cannot. Making a promise is a sign of great strength for Nietzsche, as the promiser picks a path (as made by the promise) and sticks to it no matter what challenges arise. The strength is in not deviating from the plan, indicating that doing so would be a sign of weakness and be of no value. In "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," Freud describes the development of human sexuality as a process of narrowing down numerous sexual desires until a person gets to the normal, straight path. The sexual instincts that a person is born with are far ranging, and the ones who can narrow this down are seen as "normal." The valuable course of

action for Freud is being able to repress the many sexual urges that would draw someone away from “normal” human sexuality. Plato’s “Phaedrus” provides the final example of someone lauding the virtue of sticking to a path. In it, the character of Socrates mentions to Phaedrus how he never leaves the city, and he is proud of this fact. He thinks that there is nothing of value that he can learn beyond the city walls. Staying in the city is the path that he has set for himself, and he sees no reason to deviate from it. It is only once he comes to a real path, one that takes him out of the city, that he realizes that there can be great value in deviating from the path one has set for oneself.

In this paper, I will assert that the arguments that these authors make, those giving greater value to sticking to a path instead of deviating from it, are actually contradicted by their own explanations of those paths. They go to great lengths to argue that deviating from the path is a sign of weakness or of less value than sticking to it, but in those very attempts to explain it, they reveal damaging contradictions, or at least substantial ambiguities, which leave their initial claims in much weaker positions. It is from the texts themselves that these damaging ambiguities arise.

NIETZSCHE

I will begin by examining Nietzsche’s notion of the promise as a type of a path. It is important to understand Nietzsche’s thoughts on the origin of the promise in order to understand the value he places on it. The ability to promise, according to Nietzsche, was not something that man was born with. Creating a man who could make promises was one of nature’s toughest tasks. “The breeding of an animal which is *entitled to make promises*—is this not the paradoxical task which nature has set itself with respect to man? Is this not the real problem

which man not only poses but faces also?” (Nietzsche 39). This task has been solved, Nietzsche says, but its realization is hindered in many men by the existence of forgetfulness. The paradoxical relationship between forgetfulness and memory will be addressed later, but for now it is only important to understand that forgetfulness is the enemy of memory. Only by conquering forgetfulness and forging a memory is man able to make promises. A memory, Nietzsche says, is not merely a passive remembrance of certain random things over others, but rather a much more active entity. Memory “represents rather an active *will* not to let go, an ongoing willing of what was once willed, a real *memory of the will*: so that between the original ‘I will,’ ‘I shall do,’ and the actual realization of the will, its *enactment*, a world of new and strange things, circumstances, even other acts of will may safely intervene, without causing this long chain of the will to break” (Nietzsche 40). A memory that can remember what was once willed is necessary for someone who wishes to make promises.

Making promises also requires that man be able to predict himself and know what he will do. It requires man to be more than just a collection of wills calling for different things. Nietzsche says that, “To think in terms of causality, to see and anticipate from afar, to posit ends and means with certainty, to be able above all to reckon and calculate! For that to be the case, how much man himself must have become *calculable, regular, necessary*, even to his own mind, so that finally he would be able to vouch for himself *as future*, in the way that someone making a promise does!” (Nietzsche 40). The development of this sort of self-knowledge was one of the effects of the “morality of custom.” The morality of custom produced a calculable man who obeyed conventions and who was predictable in his actions. This development served society because such calculability was necessary if society needed a man to do something he might not be inclined to do of his own volition, such as working a regular job or paying debts.

Though the morality of custom did produce many predictable men, this was not its main purpose. Nietzsche says that the ultimate goal of society and the morality of custom was to produce a man who could make promises, “the *sovereign individual*, the individual who resembles no one but himself, who has once again broken away from the morality of custom, the autonomous supramoral individual—in short, the man with his own independent, enduring will, the man who is *entitled to make promises*.” This sort of man is aware of himself as an achievement of society and feels the power and freedom of being a complete man. “How should he not be aware of how much trust, how much fear, how much respect he arouses—he ‘*deserves*’ all three—and how much mastery over circumstances, over nature, and over all less reliable creatures with less enduring wills is necessarily given into his hands along with this self-mastery?” (Nietzsche 41).

This picture that Nietzsche presents of the man who can make promises ties directly into the notion of following a path. Making a promise entails making a claim about a future state of affairs and a future action, and also having the ability to make the predicted result come to fruition. With a result in mind, the promiser vows to stick to a course of action, to a path, and that path leads to the desired result. Assuming for the moment that this could ever actually be possible, having this degree of perfect foresight, it would require a man that is calculable, as Nietzsche says. He must be able to predict himself and to know himself in the future, to “be able to vouch for himself *as future*.” He can promise at the outset that he will reach the end of the path. This superior man can best every obstacle that would try to push him off course because he has “mastery over circumstances, over nature, and over all less reliable creatures with less enduring wills.” The promiser sees his ability to stick to a path as a thing of value and one of the highest possible achievements of man. “And in him we find a proud consciousness, tense in

every muscle, of *what* has been achieved here, of what has become incarnate in him—a special consciousness of power and freedom, a feeling of the ultimate completion of man” (Nietzsche 41). He understands his very being as the culminating work of society and as the best society could do.

One of the troubling points for Nietzsche’s notion of the promise comes from this last claim, that the promiser has mastery over certain things. The most problematic of these things is the “mastery over circumstances.” In making a promise, a man says that he will do such and such in the future, but circumstances arise which would make completing this task difficult. Obviously if such a task were easy, he would have no need to show his mastery. Faced with such obstacles, what makes the promiser special here? The notion of mastery makes one think that if he were faced with circumstances in opposition to what he needed, he would be able to change them to his liking, but how could this work? What power does he have, solely by virtue of being a man who is entitled to make promises, that would allow him to deal with such a situation better than any other person could? For example, if the man promises his daughter that he will go to her favorite bakery and pick up her favorite cake for her birthday party later that afternoon, but upon getting to the bakery he sees that it is closed, making the fulfilling of his promise seemingly impossible, what can he do? He made a very clear promise to achieve this specific result, to get this specific cake from this specific bakery, and thus bound himself to this path, but there is no way he can actually fulfill it. What do his powers as a strong, supramoral being allow him to do? Nothing, it seems. He cannot find the baker, make him open the bakery, and get the cake back in time. His only option would seem to be to forgo his promise.

It might be argued that Nietzsche’s promiser would never make such a specific promise and would not bind himself to something dependent on chance, but this does not seem right.

Certainly there are broader promises that the man could make that would allow for more flexibility in their completion. He could promise, "I will follow the necessary steps in order to become a lawyer in 10 years," and he would be much more likely to succeed at this because he has left the details of his plan to fulfill the promise largely unspecified. He has not said that he will go to one specific school at one specific year or will be a specific type of lawyer, just that he will eventually gain this general title. Perhaps this sort of general promise is what Nietzsche is referring to, but this seems entirely too limited. There would almost certainly be occasions in the life of the promiser when he would be inclined to make more specific promises, such as in the example above. General promises are certainly a possibility, but if Nietzsche means to say that he could not make promises when it came time to be more specific or that he knew that this was one area where his sovereign powers did not apply, it would not seem right to call the promiser the elite man. Without being able to control specifics, he would hardly be in control of his own destiny. A real master over circumstances would be able to deal in specifics as well as generalities and overcome whatever obstructions arise.

This is the first example of how Nietzsche's insistence on sticking to a path might not actually be a sign of great strength. To say that the promiser has mastery over circumstances makes it seem as though he can control the state of the world solely by willing it, but as we have seen, there are situations when this is not the case and there is no way for him to fulfill his promise. What, then, is the best thing for him to do? Were he to blindly stick to the path he had set for himself despite the obvious impediments, surely he would look like a fool. He could bang on the bakery door all day and it still would not open. Nietzsche would have to agree that in this case, the best thing for the promiser to do would be to adjust his promise slightly and find a different bakery. That solution would not be the exact one that he originally promised, but that

alteration would surely produce a better result than if he refused to adjust his plan. If he continued to force himself down that impassable path, he might very well miss alternative solutions, some of which could actually be better than what he originally promised. Nietzsche would surely agree that it would be a sign of strength for the promiser to recognize that his initial plan is impossible and to then adapt to the circumstances as they present themselves. Such flexibility in the face of insurmountable obstacles could not be seen as weakness, but only as adaptive necessity, and having the courage to allow for this is certainly a sign of strength.

This idea ties into Nietzsche's claim that the promiser respects those who are like him: "Necessarily, he respects those who are like him—the strong and reliable (those who are *entitled* to make promises), that is, anyone who promises like a sovereign" (Nietzsche 41). Is this not obvious? If the sovereign promiser is so concerned with fortifying himself against uncertainty and protecting his interests, of course he will feel comfortable with those who share common goals. If one of the promiser's goals is to preserve predictability and avoid circumstances that challenge his set course of action, he would obviously try to avoid such challenges. These men who can also promise do not pose a challenge to him because they, too, like predictability. They guard themselves from the unknown and do everything they can to make sure that their paths are not challenged, and they would feel comfortable together in this shared goal. Since the promiser's main goal is preservation of his own pre-determined interests, those things which he has decided will be best for him, against challenges, then he would obviously not appreciate people who do present challenges to him.

What may be important about people who are not like the promiser is not their ability to make promises or not, but rather the threat that their unrestricted lives pose to the promiser. The threat is that these people can lead "successful" lives that the promiser might envy without

actually having made promises. This is the greatest challenge to the promiser because it shows that the promiser's way of doing things is not necessarily the best way to do things, and thus he may not actually be the pinnacle achievement of society. He may, in fact, be inferior in some ways to a person who cannot make a promise. Thus it is clear why the promiser would show contempt towards the non-promiser in an effort to discredit him. The promiser, with his high feeling of self-worth, does not want the non-promiser to be viewed on an equal level as him. This fear shows that the promiser may, in some part of himself, realize that his way of life, his incredible self-restriction, may not be the best way to live. He may come to resent not only the non-promisers, but also himself for not being able to change the way he goes through life. He may fear that his way of doing things will be shown to be less valuable than he has come to believe, and as we shall see next, fear plays an integral role in the life of the promiser.

Nietzsche describes the genesis of the promiser's feeling of self worth and control, which he considers to be a dominant instinct in the promiser, and he labels it "conscience." This conscience was slow to develop in the sovereign man. It requires, as Nietzsche has said, the ability "to be able to vouch for oneself, and to do so with pride, and so to have the *right to affirm oneself*" (Nietzsche 42). All of this was predicated on the development of memory, and along with that, the ability to remember.

This ability did not come easily, nor did it come without pain. He writes: "There is, perhaps, nothing more frightening and more sinister in the whole prehistory of man than his *technique for remembering things*. 'Something is branded in, so that it stays in the memory: only that which *hurts* incessantly is remembered'" (Nietzsche 42). Pain, then, is an inseparable characteristic of memory. So if the promiser is always in the process of remembering things, as Nietzsche says when he describes the "ongoing willing of what was once willed, a real *memory*

of the will,” then he must always be in pain. In order to not let go of anything that he needs to maintain a promise, he has to regularly and continuously subject himself to pain. Pain comes with the territory of remembering. Perhaps the promiser has, over time, learned of a way to lessen the pain or better deal with it, but pain still accompanies him everywhere he goes.

What does this actually mean for someone who makes a promise? Suppose the promiser had a negative experience as a child where his brother drowned in the ocean, and not wanting the same thing to happen to him, he vows never to go in deep water. All of his life he would carry with him this promise born of a painful memory. Whenever he is presented with an opportunity to go near deep water, he would immediately remember his promise, and with it, the pain that caused him to make it. By making a promise based on this memory, he forces himself into prolonging a pain that might actually be unnecessary. Instead of sticking to this promise, he could decide to take swim lessons and reduce his risk of drowning, but because of the relentless holding-on that Nietzsche’s promiser carries out, he would never be able to find a way to alleviate the pain. This is predicated on the assumption that the avoidance of pain is a good thing, but Nietzsche does not seem to argue that this sort of pain is something to be desired. Would we really think that someone who constantly rehashes the same pain over and over again is really the pinnacle of human achievement? It is difficult to see how Nietzsche could argue this.

Nietzsche also describes how promises were initially products of fear as well as pain, and one has to wonder even more why he values them so highly. A person would initially make a promise as a means to protect himself from violent punishment at the hands of society. Nietzsche describes a few of these punishments, including boiling in oil, breaking on the wheel, and being torn apart by horses. In order to avoid these horrors, man had no choice but to make

promises to not commit punishable offenses. “With the help of such images and procedures one eventually memorizes five or six ‘I will not’s, thus giving one’s *promise* in return for the advantages offered by society” (Nietzsche 43). In this case, the advantages were not being subjected to physical harm. If these were the first examples of promises in human history, then they were clearly not the valiant acts of autonomous strong-willed men who were above society’s moral code. They were actually fearful acts of a weak-willed man who feared doing anything other than what was dictated to him as right for fear of being punished.

Even considering promises in the context of contractual economic exchanges, as Nietzsche describes next, does not make them sound like acts of the supramoral autonomous being. Promises, he says, were commonly made by debtors to creditors about the former’s ability to repay a debt. “In order to give a guarantee for the seriousness and sacredness of his promise...the debtor contractually pledges to the creditor in the event of non-payment something which he otherwise still ‘possesses,’ something over which he still has power—for example, his body or his wife or his freedom or even his life” (Nietzsche 45). Promises were part of a transaction that was required because men inherently did not trust each other to fulfill debts. The words that Nietzsche uses to describe the development promises, both in the economic and punishment contexts are not positive words—guilt, punishment, torture, blood—and yet the man who makes promises inherently carries these associations with him. If the promise developed at some point along the way into a nobler act, Nietzsche does not tell us how, and so we have no reason to think of more recent promises as anything different than the early ones.

When viewed from this angle, promises are not the tools of a free, independent man, but rather a prisoner, and is this not what a man becomes when he makes a promise? The promiser is not free to do whatever he wants or follow his whims because he had tied himself down with a

promise that he has forced himself to keep. This is not to say that all promises are inherently negative in value or that it is better to break promises than to keep them, but rather that Nietzsche's notion of a promise developed out of fear and servitude. This fear is still a major factor for those who tie themselves to promises, and it is another example of how promises are not entirely valiant acts.

If this were not enough to cast doubt on Nietzsche's assertion that it is more valuable to stick to the path than to deviate, we should now turn to the internal contradiction of Nietzsche's argument that comes from his explanation of forgetfulness. Such an examination will, I hope, prove that while Nietzsche may not completely contradict himself, he does leave the value of sticking to the path in a state of ambiguity that calls his whole argument into question. In the opening of the second essay in *Genealogy*, Nietzsche says that the ability to make promises is countered by the force of forgetfulness. It is critical to note, however, that Nietzsche does not immediately discount forgetfulness as a negative thing. In fact, he calls it "an active—in the strictest sense, positive—inhibiting capacity." The "positive" label here is key. Forgetfulness limits the impact that the continuous flow of experience has on a person's consciousness. Forgetfulness provides "guaranteed freedom from disturbance by the noise and struggle caused by our underworld of obedient organs as they co-operate and compete against one another; a little silence, a little *tabula rasa* of consciousness." "Active forgetfulness," as he calls it, clears man's consciousness and makes room for the "superior functions and functionaries," those being governing, anticipating, and planning ahead. Active forgetfulness also enables happiness, and this makes sense given what Nietzsche says later about pain and remembrance, but this is not where the contradiction lies. The contradiction lies in the fact that Nietzsche says that active forgetfulness is a strength for man, describing "this necessarily forgetful animal—in whom

forgetting is a strength, a form of *robust* health” (Nietzsche 39). Active forgetfulness stands in direct opposition to the memory of the will. How is it possible that making a promise, something that requires memory, can be one of man’s greatest strengths, but that forgetfulness is also strength? Not only that, the necessary capabilities that enable man to promise (governing, anticipating, and planning ahead) are all enabled *by* forgetfulness. How can he privilege making promises over forgetfulness when the very capabilities that allow for promises are only possible *because of* forgetfulness? Faced with this paradox, a paradox which Nietzsche acknowledges, it is unclear why we should value the man who can promise over the man who can forget despite what Nietzsche would have us believe. It is not clear that he has provided a definitive solution to the paradox. Looking at this ambiguity in terms of the path metaphor, Nietzsche’s argument does not seem strong enough to solidify the idea that sticking to a path is more valuable than deviating from it. In fact, just as memory could not exist without the countervailing force of forgetfulness to define it, it is also true that a path can only exist because there is the possibility of deviating from it. If there were no such thing as deviating from a path, then there would be no need to differentiate what was on the path from what was not; everything would be one. This paradoxical relationship makes it difficult to value Nietzsche’s promiser over a non-promiser, and it leaves the situation ambiguous at best.

FREUD

I will now turn to Freud’s description of human sexuality for another example of the “sticking to the path” metaphor. I will first show that Freud’s path is that of “normal” sexuality and “normal” sexual development, and also that he privileges this path over other alternatives. I will then show the ways that Freud says people are forced onto this path and generally restricted

in their sexuality, just as Nietzsche's promiser has restricted himself to a certain course of action. From there I will show that although Freud goes to such great lengths to differentiate between those people who are on the path against those who are not, and in doing so conveys more value on the former group, he contradicts himself by conceding that every "normal" person deviates from the path in some way, and thus the very act of deviation is "normal." This calls into question whether Freud's "normal" path actually exists at all.

Freud's description of "normal" sexuality comes primarily in his first essay, "The Sexual Aberrations." This title itself implies that the topics covered therein are not normal and represent a deviation from the usual path. For each of the items included in this first essay, Freud is trying to figure out what is psychologically wrong with them, as their very inclusion in this essay indicates that there must actually be something wrong with them that causes them to deviate from the norm. The first group he covers in this essay he calls "inverts," which he describes as "men whose sexual object is a man and not a woman, and women whose sexual object is a woman and not a man" (Freud 2). In discussing the inverts, Freud attaches a negative value to the members of this group, as he does for the majority of these aberrations. In some cases, something may have gone wrong earlier in a person's life to drive them towards inversion. "Those cases are of particular interest in which the libido changes over to an inverted sexual object after a distressing experience with a normal one" (Freud 3). Whatever the cause may be, Freud makes it clear that inverts are outside of the norm, and that there is a negative stigma attached to them.

Freud's description of bisexuality and hermaphroditism further clarifies his understanding about normal sexuality and the way sexuality is narrowed down over time. He describes hermaphroditism as a condition where an individual's genitals can combine both male

and female characteristics. In some people, certain sexual characteristics and differentiations are unclear, and both can appear side by side. “The importance of these abnormalities lies in the unexpected fact that they facilitate our understanding of normal development. For it appears that a certain degree of anatomical hermaphroditism occurs normally. In every normal male or female individual, traces are found of the apparatus of the opposite sex.” These cases indicate that people may not be born with their sex completely pre-determined, but instead more open-ended. Although he does say that a certain degree of anatomical hermaphroditism occurs normally, he goes on to make it clear that this was only normal before evolution stepped in. Evolution restricted hermaphroditic ambiguity and turned it into one of the two more common forms. “These long-familiar facts of anatomy lead us to suppose that an originally bisexual physical disposition has, in the course of evolution, become modified into a unisexual one, leaving behind only a few traces of the sex that has become atrophied” (Freud 7). So this is apparent biological aberration is part of the development of “normal” sexuality. Humans started out less determined and more uncertain, but over time evolution caused them to narrow down their multi-sexual options down into a unisexual one. Freud uses this development as a model for the sexual development in an individual person’s life.

The sexual object that the invert attaches to also shows how an individual’s initially boundless number of sexual desires are narrowed down over time to a just a few. Freud says very clearly that, “the sexual object of an invert is the opposite of that of a normal person” (Freud 10). Right away this establishes that the invert’s interest differs from that which is “normal,” and his subsequent explanation shows how the “normal” interest draws from fewer sources. The inverted male, he says, desires as its sexual object the combination of a masculine body with feminine traits. Compare this to the sexual object of the non-invert. The male non-

invert desires a feminine body with feminine traits, and the female non-invert desires a masculine body with masculine traits. There is a singularity in the selection here. Though there are two categories to draw from (body type and trait type), the non-invert only chooses the two options that correspond to the same gender (masculine-masculine or feminine-feminine). The invert chooses the two options that do not correspond to the same gender (masculine-feminine or feminine-masculine), and because this combination draws from two genders instead of one, it is more complicated and wider reaching than the non-invert. Because of this combination, we can view the sexual object of the invert as being slightly more open and less restricted than that of the non-invert. Keep in mind, though, that Freud is highlighting the inverts as examples of what is not normal. He is implying that what is normal, what the standard path is, is a person who can simplify their desires to one simple thing and pare down the multitude of desires and options available to them. Anything other than that is an aberration.

In the subsection entitled “Deviations in Respect of the Sexual Aim” (a title which is itself telling for Freud’s value judgment), Freud describes people who have different sexual aims from what he considers the normal. He calls these “perversions,” a label which is telling in itself. These are things like using the mouth, anus, and other non-genital regions of the body for sexual pleasure. “The normal sexual aim is regarded as being the union of the genitals in the act known as copulation, which leads to a release of the sexual tension and a temporary extinction of the sexual instinct” (Freud 15). Again, and it seems unnecessary to belabor this point any further, Freud harkens back to normal sexuality and normal activity, establishing a standard upon which to judge other variations. Freud has made it clear that there is one path here (being “normal” sexuality), and there are deviations from it. One cannot be on the path and deviate from it as well; anyone who expresses an affinity for perversions is definitely not on the path.

As we shall see later, Freud will acknowledge that if this were the definition of “normal” sexuality, almost no one would be “normal.”

Before moving onto to show how the path to normal sexuality is restricting, it is helpful to address more thoroughly Freud’s use of the word “deviations.” He could not have picked a better word than this to help show the connection between “normal” sexuality and a path. To deviate from something is to actually turn away from it and pursue a new direction. It fits, then, that the deviants are those who have strayed from or never followed the path that Freud has defined as normal. One of the derivatives of “deviation” is “deviant,” a term that is commonly used to describe someone who transgresses the boundaries of what is acceptable, a rule breaker. This idea is helpful for understanding Freud’s value judgment of sexual deviations (regardless of whether or not Freud consciously chose to pick “deviation” knowing its connection to “deviant,” it does carry this associated meaning that he cannot deny). A deviant breaks from what is acceptable, and this carries a negative connotation. From this it is clear that Freud views those who do not follow the path of normal sexuality in a negative light.

Next I will describe the process and mechanisms that force sexual beings towards “normal” sexuality. First it needs to be shown that this normal sexuality is not already in place at the time of birth. Freud confirms that this is not the case. “There seems no doubt that germs of sexual impulses are already present in the new-born child and that these continue to develop for a time, but are then overtaken by a progressive process of suppression” (Freud 42). The child is born with a huge capacity for numerous sexual impulses, far from the singular normal path that Freud has described. The child has no pre-determined target or direction for its energy; “it has as yet no sexual object” (Freud 48).

As the child grows older, however, mental forces of suppression begin to develop that limit the multitude of sexual instincts. These forces are essentially the affective powers of societal stigmas that encourage or discourage certain behavior. “It is during this period of total or only partial latency that are built up the mental forces which are later to impede the course of the sexual instinct and, like dams, restrict its flow—disgust, feelings of shame and the claims of aesthetic and moral ideas” (Freud 43). These feelings force the child to reject certain sexual instincts that are deemed disgusting or immoral (instincts that may be similar to the perversions described earlier). But Freud has said that the “sexual aim of the infantile instinct consists in obtaining satisfaction by means of an appropriate stimulation of the erotogenic zone which has been selected in one way or another” (Freud 50). The aim is not to derive pleasure from one specific source or type of person, but rather the blind acquisition of pleasure. The child does not care where the pleasure comes from, but if it tries to get pleasure from a source deemed disgusting or immoral, it is shamed out of doing that behavior again. In this way, then, deviant behavior is discouraged, and the infant is shuddered onto the path of normal sexuality. This is akin to Nietzsche’s promiser being scared into making promises for fear of punishment.

I will now examine what Freud has said about the effects of this sort of limitation on the individual, and this will help to show how Freud fatally contradicts himself. It has been shown that the forces of suppression that a person encounters in virtue of being a member of a society have a major impact on the sexual development of the individual, forcing him onto the path towards “normal” sexuality. In order to comply with these forces and become “normal” sexual beings, individuals who might not otherwise have come to this path have to repress their more oppositional instincts. Freud says that this repression is a key factor in those exhibiting psychoneurotics. Psychoneurotics suffer from “hysteria, from obsessional neurosis...and

probably paranoia” (Freud 29). Sexual repression is a major contributor to this condition. “The character of hysterics shows a degree of sexual repression in excess of the normal quantity, an intensification of resistance against the sexual instinct (which we have already met with in the form of shame, disgust, and morality)” (Freud 30). According to Freud, the repression of these “non-normal” sexual instincts has caused these people a great deal of mental anguish.

After solidifying his description of the “normal” sexual path, one that is often not so “normal” for those who are painfully forced onto it, Freud makes the concessions that end up calling his whole assessment into question. Despite making numerous claims that show that he values those on the normal path much more than he values those who deviate from it, he admits that most people actually do deviate from it, and that deviation itself is “normal” to do. This admission comes during his description of perversions. An affinity for perversions, the deviations from the normal path, is actually found in nearly everybody. “Everyday experience has shown that most of these extensions [perversions], or at any rate the less severe of them, are constituents which are rarely absent from the sexual life of healthy people, and are judged by them no differently from other intimate events.” He admits that perversions are almost always a part of healthy sexuality, and that they are valued no differently than other sexual interests, presumably the “normal” ones described earlier. It is nearly impossible to see how this does not contradict Freud’s earlier description. He has spent so much time stressing the value of normative sexual behavior, and yet here he admits that the deviations he viewed as so abnormal are actually a components of the norm. Not only that, Freud says that perversions are actually a necessary part of a sexually healthy person, not just something they could potentially have. “No healthy person, it appears, can fail to make some addition that might be called perverse to the normal sexual aim; and the universality of this finding is in itself enough to show how

inappropriate it is to use the word perversion as a term of reproach” (Freud 26). There is not, according to Freud, a single person who sticks absolutely to the “normal” sexual path. These deviations are a necessary part of human sexuality and are not actually bad things.

This admission raises the question of whether Freud’s “normal” path even exists at all. If the “normal” path is defined precisely by its not containing perversions, but every person does (and needs to) embrace some perversions, then the norm is never actualized. No person exhibits the kind of sexuality that Freud describes, and even if there were a few who did, they would not be enough to constitute a norm. If he wants to include deviations in the norm, then it becomes really unclear what happens to his value judgments and if he still thinks deviating is negative. He has contradicted himself when he says that those who are normal also deviate, meaning they stray from the normal, and this makes it hard to see how the path he has set forth is not an unrealized ideal.

An interesting question is whether this contradiction has eliminated the existence of the “normal” path altogether. If it is true that no person actually follows this path in practice, then it could be argued that it does not exist. On the other hand, it could be preserved as a sort of generalizing concept to describe what people usually tend towards sexually. If this is to be the case, it must be thought of not as one path that a person can either be on or not, but instead a collection of paths which all have their “normal” descriptions. Some of these paths could be things like Freud’s sexual object and sexual aim. The “normal” answers to each of these would be heterosexuality and the union of the genitals, respectively. Each of these categories can be thought of as its own specific path, and a person can follow some of them and not others. A person might be heterosexual but not aspire to the union of the genitals, and so in one way they are “normal,” but in another not. Freud’s contradiction, however, means that no person is ever

“normal” in all of the categories, but they can still be in some. Although this alternative does preserve the notion of a “normal” path, it does not preserve Freud’s actual claim of there being one single type of “normal” sexuality. The concession that he makes does irreparable damage to this idea.

PLATO

The third example of the path metaphor can be found in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Although a physical path does play into the story, the metaphorical path in this example is Socrates’ commitment to never venturing outside the city walls of Athens. As we will see soon, Socrates does not see any value in leaving the city. This is the metaphorical course of action that he has set for himself; he has decided that staying in the city is of the highest value, and he will not allow himself to experience anything else. My examination will focus on what happens once Socrates does allow himself to leave the city and deviates from his path. I will show that the positive experiences that he does have would never have happened if he had not left the city, and that this deviating from the path actually changes the way he sees the world around him and reacts to it. In addition, Socrates’ leaving of the city and his normal path actually causes him to see the city in a new light and better recognize the role that it plays in his life.

The story begins when Socrates meets his friend Phaedrus inside the city walls, and they begin to talk about a speech that Phaedrus has recently heard. Phaedrus is walking around outside the city walls trying to memorize the speech, and Socrates, not one to pass on a good speech, decides to follow him, leaving the city. This departure from the city is not an insignificant action, and later in the story, once they have already left the city, Phaedrus comments on this.

Phaedrus: Not only do you never travel abroad—as far as I can tell, you never even set foot beyond the city walls.

Socrates: Forgive me, my friend. I am devoted to learning; landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me—only the people in the city can do that (Plato 510).

With this statement, Socrates has made his position clear and his path evident. He does not see value in any alternatives to the path that he has chosen. This is akin to Nietzsche's promiser who sees the highest value in upholding his promise.

The circumstances surrounding Socrates' departure and the course they take once they leave the city are telling to Socrates' coming revelation. Once he has been convinced to leave the city, he becomes the leader of the party, determining which route they shall take. Phaedrus tells him to "Lead the way, then," and Socrates obliges without argument (Plato 508). Surely this is a strange situation. Socrates, the man who never leaves the city and swears against doing so, has immediately become the leader. He very likely has little knowledge of the surroundings, and little thought as to where they are headed, but he leads on nonetheless. In terms of the metaphorical path, Socrates has willingly allowed himself to veer from his set course and venture into the unknown.

As they discuss the speech further, they continue to wander away from the city and find themselves walking on an actual path. Phaedrus, it appears, had been trying to memorize the speech for himself, but was still in possession of the book the speech was written in. Socrates convinces Phaedrus to read the speech aloud directly from the book, and they decide to find a place to stop. Phaedrus asks Socrates, who is still leading, where he would prefer to stop. Socrates replies, "Let's leave the path here and walk along the Ilissus; then, we can sit quietly wherever we find the right spot" (Plato 509). This statement is meaningful even beyond the obvious reference to the path, which still merits attention. If this significance were not already

immediately clear, Socrates is continuing to voluntarily move outside of his comfort zone and into an unknown situation. He has already left his metaphorical path, and even though he had retained some connection to the city by staying on the physical path that lead from it, now he is volunteering to leave the path altogether. Not only that, but he does not immediately try to nail down their course of action to give himself some certainty; rather, he says that they will stop whenever the spot feels right. This is a huge leap of faith for someone who had been so regimented about his lifestyle.

The two men continue their walk into a shallow creek and come to an area that reminds them of an old myth. The legend states that Boreas, the north wind, stole the daughter of the Athenian King away while she was playing in that very area. While they are talking, they come upon the tree where all this is said to have happened, and they decide to stop. It is at this moment, once they come to their resting place, that the benefits of leaving the city become apparent to Socrates. He is amazed by the beauty of the tree, which is in full bloom and producing wonderful fragrances. A small spring runs underneath it and cools their feet. Socrates is truly overwhelmed. “Feel the freshness of the air; how pretty and pleasant it is; how it echoes with the summery, sweet song of the cicadas’ chorus! The most exquisite thing of all, of course, is the grassy slope: it rises so gently that you can rest your head perfectly when you lie down on it. You’ve really been the most marvelous guide, my dear Phaedrus” (Plato 510). This statement is somewhat strange, for although Phaedrus had taken the lead midway through their conversation, it was Socrates who pushed him further and urged him to leave the path. Either way, Socrates’ reaction is the main concern. Soon it will become clear that this new location actually changes the way that Socrates thinks.

This intense reaction that Socrates exhibits upon reaching the tree has to be viewed in terms of its negative relationship to the city. The tree and surrounding area affect him so deeply because they differ so greatly from his norm. The fresh air is so noticeable to him because it cannot be found in the city, in his usual routine. This pleasure and exuberance comes precisely because he was pulled out of his comfort zone. These were sensations that he would never have gotten in the city, and not just sensations, but positive experiences. This event is quite different than what he usually experiences, and if he had not allowed himself to deviate from his path, he would not have had it.

The following series of events show just how much there is to be gained by deviating from one's path. Once they have found a comfortable place to rest, Phaedrus begins to deliver the speech (which happens to be about love). Socrates has some complaints and disagreements about it, and then Phaedrus convinces Socrates to give his own speech on the same topic. The ideas themselves in the speech are not as important as the energy and fervor with which Socrates delivers it. He delivers it with an uncharacteristically frenetic pace that startles the both of them.

Socrates: There, Phaedrus my friend, don't you think, as I do, that I'm in the grip of something divine?

Phaedrus: This is certainly an unusual flow of words for you, Socrates.

Socrates: Then be quiet and listen. There's something really divine about this place, so don't be surprised if I'm quite taken by the Nymphs' madness as I go on with the speech. I'm on the edge of speaking in dithyrambs as it is (Plato 517).

Notice what is happening here. Socrates' usual orations are, according to the two of them, usually more reserved and composed, and this style has been well ingrained through regular participation. But this is not the case here—his style is much different. And to what does Socrates attribute this change? The physical location itself, the location that differs from

his usual setting in the city. Being in this new locale excites something wild in Socrates, something he is unaccustomed to, and it takes him in an entirely new and unknown direction.

Socrates again acknowledges the power that the environment has on his psyche after he finishes the first speech. Phaedrus implores him to continue speaking and finish the argument, but Socrates is hesitant. “Didn’t you notice, my friend, that even though I am criticizing the lover, I have passed beyond lyric into epic poetry? What do you suppose will happen to me if I begin to praise his opposite? Don’t you realize that the Nymphs to whom you so cleverly exposed me will take complete possession of me?” (Plato 520). Leaving the city has taken Socrates so far outside of his comfort zone that he actually worries that it will irrevocably alter his way of thinking. When Phaedrus pushes him to continue speaking, Socrates clearly attributes the wildness and vivacity of his speech to the new surroundings. He recognizes that being outside the city has affected his behavior and expanded his oratory capability.

This exchange shows just how powerful and evocative it can be for a person when they leave their metaphorical path. Socrates is clearly uncertain about what is happening to him and where it will take him, but he does not seem scared. He acknowledges that he stands on the precipice of great uncertainty, not knowing what else this place might do to him if he allows it, but he does not guard himself against this uncertainty. He is certainly aware of it, which is why he warns Phaedrus about the possibility of madness, but he does not pull back. Considering this event in terms of his metaphorical path, he has completely left it and ventured off into an unknown area. He could not be farther from his comfort zone, in a wooded landscape instead of the walls of Athens, but he is not scared. Socrates shows that he has the strength to deviate from his usual course and be comfortable in that uncertainty.

Plato hints at this moment of realization at the beginning of the dialogue when Phaedrus first tells Socrates that he is going to walk outside the city walls. Phaedrus mentions the advice of their friend Acumenus, “Who says it’s more refreshing to walk along country roads than city streets,” to which Socrates replies, “He is quite right, too, my friend” (Plato 507). Without knowing the rest of the story, this line seems strange, as Socrates is seemingly supporting the idea that the city is not the only valuable place to be, but going back to it, we can see it as a valuable piece of foreshadowing. The journey outside the city has truly been refreshing for Socrates. It is doubtful that this will cause him to start spending all his time in nature and renounce the city, but the experience has given him a new perspective, one that will also help him appreciate the city more. We can see this at the end of the dialogue when Socrates has finished giving advice on proper speech making. He instructs Phaedrus to “go and tell Lysias that we came to the spring which is sacred to the Nymphs and heard words charging us to deliver a message to Lysias and anyone else who composes speeches” (Plato 554). Lysias was the man who made the original speech that drew Socrates out of the city, though the specific message Phaedrus is to deliver is unimportant here. Lysias stands in for the city because in their minds, he is a representative for all those in the city who give bad speeches. They have carried his speech into the meadow with him, and he is the only link to the city they have at that moment. Socrates only has a message for Lysias because he heard it from the Nymphs; he only realized this thing about Lysias, about the city, because he left it. Leaving allowed Socrates to step back and see something about the city he would not have otherwise seen. Being in the new space with a cleared head helps him evaluate the people in the city who routinely give bad speeches, but by whom he is always surrounded. It seems obvious enough, but it is worth saying: Socrates would not have had this conversation and these realizations if he had not left the city. It was precisely

because he left his path that he encountered the stimuli (the tree, Phaedrus, Lysias' speech) that enabled this conversation.

This may be the most valuable point we can take from "Phaedrus." Initially Socrates is quite similar to Nietzsche's promiser or Freud's normal sexual being. He has his path and is adamant about not straying from it. Just as the promiser sticks to his promise without bending and the normal sexual being exhibits only normal sexual desires, so, too, does Socrates restrict himself to staying in the city. And the cracks that we see in Freud's admission about perversions and how they are actually normal are split wide open in "Phaedrus." Socrates allows himself to be drawn out of the city and considers the possibility that there might be something of value outside of his own path. By the end of their journey, he is so far from his usual backdrop that it is almost a foreign locale. And yet while Nietzsche would describe this deviation as a sign of weakness, and Freud might describe the person as perverted and psychologically troubled, Socrates sees that there is actually great value in what he has done. He resists any inclination towards fear and allows himself to be swept up in the new experience. Once he does, he discovers new capabilities and possibilities he would not otherwise have found. Taking this even further, we can understand that the value and power of Socrates' action, in leaving his metaphorical path, is not just that he sees something new, but that it will allow him to better appreciate what he already knew. He will appreciate the city more, appreciate his original path more, because he has this new perspective, and be able to better define the path itself. He may go back to the old path, but at least he will know that there are good things to be found from deviating, and that should not be frightening.

CONCLUSION

We now have to wonder why Nietzsche, Freud, and Plato all seem to feel some animosity towards the idea of deviating from the path. They have hinted that deviating from the path is a sign of weakness because uncertainty and unpredictability are bad things, but we have seen how this is not true. Each of their subjects who force themselves to stick to their paths appear to actually be quite unhappy or repressed, and the subject who does deviate from the path sees that it is not a bad thing at all. So what motivates these claims about the danger of leaving the path?

Fear seems to play a significant role. It is much easier to say that “such and such” is the best way of doing things than it is to say that “such and such” is a good option but not necessarily the absolute. Making this sort of admission requires a “leap of faith” that brings with it a high level of uncertainty and the very-real risk of failure. A leap of faith implies a jump to some place new, and the big threat of jumping without really knowing where you are jumping to is that you might fall. Clearly deviating from a path means that you will not know where you are going; the path is the only thing that showed you a course, and you are leaving that. It is very likely that you might fall, or fail, or make a mistake, or whatever the equivalent consequence is for that situation, but this is certainly not the only possible outcome of a leap of faith. You could also land somewhere solid and safe that, while new and uncertain, could be really fulfilling.

This idea sounds very similar to the saying “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” Those who stick to their paths are akin to the person with a bird in their hand (presumably a good thing). They do already have something in their hand, and that is safe. They know what they have, they are comfortable with it, and there is little risk to it because it is known. The work required to procure that bird is already done, so it is easy to stick with it. Catching a bird is not an easy thing to do, so it could seem foolish to give that up. But the alternative is having two

birds, meaning something more than what they have now. It is important to note that the two birds are also not just in plain sight ready for the taking; they are in the bush. They may be hard to see clearly and to know exactly what they are, so the hunter might only know that something is there. In order for him to get the birds, he has to have faith; faith that he can catch the birds, and also faith that if he is unable to catch the birds this time, he will eventually find some birds and be all right. Pushing oneself to see what other options are out there involves accepting the possibility of failure, and this can be a scary thing to do, but the benefits are clear.

The arguments of each of these three authors all show some signs of fear or unwillingness to accept uncertainty. Nietzsche's promiser is all about control and certainty. He is not comfortable with the unknown or with chance because he has worked so hard to forge his memory so as to avoid uncertainty. He respects those who are like him because they, too, are predictable and consistent; there is no guessing with them. To accept uncertainty is to accept that he might not be the pinnacle of society, that he might not be who he thinks he is. For Freud, his work is founded on analyzing and categorizing people. To say that people are just really different and exhibit all sorts of desires is a failure of psychoanalysis. Hence he comes up with the "normal" path in an effort to remove that inconsistency. Socrates obviously shows the least fear of all because he allows himself to leave his path and experience uncertainty, but clearly before this he did not voluntarily confront the uncertainty outside the city walls. It may not have been fear that kept him inside, as he may never have had reason to leave, but he must have considered leaving in order to formulate his initial stance. When presented with the unknown, he heretofore chose to play it safe.

Regardless of why the authors make these claims, it is clear that the ideas do not stand up to themselves. They are undone by contradictions and ambiguities that they cannot overcome, or

in the case of Plato, actual proof to the contrary. Although Nietzsche wants to privilege the value of memory over forgetfulness and say that the man who can remember and act off that is stronger, he does not satisfactorily resolve the paradoxical relationship between the two. Memory is still a product of forgetfulness and could not exist without it. Freud undoes his own explanation of normative sexuality by plainly saying that what is normal is to deviate. The normal actually contains the not normal, and this calls into question whether the normal actually exists at all. Plato clearly has Socrates change his mind about the value of sticking to a path. Once Socrates does stray from his usual routine, he is rewarded with an experience that both alters his behavior and causes him to see his routine in a new light. While these ideas do face significant challenges, the point is not to claim that sticking to a path has no value, or that deviating from it is more valuable. Rather, the value of the path is not as clear-cut as the authors would like it to be, and that ambiguity is part of the territory.

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