

Overview of Nietzsche's Philosophy

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Introduction

Nietzsche is opposed to atomism, to holism, and to metaphysics. Although existentialist philosophers such as Nietzsche deny the existence of selves, they still believe in the existence of the person.¹ Notions such as the “self,” the “I,” the “ego,” and the “will” are terms that we use in our daily language to represent the agent responsible for our actions, thoughts, desires, and impulses. They are terms used to represent things that we presume to be the causes of the effects: “I did this,” “I have the will power to do whatever I want.” The action or the deed is predicated to the subject, which are thought to be things in themselves – the “I,” the “ego,” the “self,” the “will.” This paper is an examination of Nietzsche’s fundamental philosophy, including his notion on the “subject as being a multiplicity” – that the subject is the sum of its parts. The “self” or the subject has no state of “being.” The world and the subject are impermanent because they are in a constant state of change; a state of “becoming.”

Being and Becoming

How is it that we come into “being”? First of all, Nietzsche believes that the “self” is merely a subjective representation of the sum of our thoughts, desires, emotions, our actions, etc. The “self,” as a substance, is merely an illusion – one that seems very structured and congruent. We think of the “self” as being the agent of its actions. We believe that we have an independent, self-sufficient, “unified” self because we believe that it is the agent of our thoughts, desires, and actions. Secondly, Nietzsche believes that there is no final state of “being”; that we are always evolving, changing; that we are

¹ James O. Bennet, “Selves and Person Existence in the Existentialist Tradition,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 37 (1999): 154.

always in a state of “becoming.” If the world had a final state, he believes that the world would have reached that state already.²

One may argue that an individual within society wants to end up at some state or multiple states of “being,” e.g., to become a happy person, to become a wealthy person, to become an outgoing person, to become an important person, to become a teacher, or to become a student. Once the individual reaches this state of “being,” shouldn’t it be considered the end state of “being”? For instance, I want to become a teacher, and so I do all sorts of things to prepare myself on becoming a teacher, e.g., I go to school to get the necessary degrees and credentials and I build up my resume by gaining experience in tutoring or teaching other students. Once I officially become a teacher, isn’t that the end process of “becoming” a teacher? Nietzsche would probably say that there is no end in “becoming” a teacher even if there is a point in one’s career that the individual does officially become a teacher and teaches a class for the first time. Why might this be so? Well, for one, anybody can become a teacher; a teacher is a person who teaches something to another person, and we all do this at one point or another. Therefore, we are always, in this sense, both a teacher or an instructor and a student or a learner because we are constantly learning new things and we are constantly teaching others what we know. Even if an individual finally becomes a legitimate teacher, for example a teacher at a community college, it’s not the end state because that person will always develop and change as a person and becomes a more experienced teacher. The title of being the teacher is still the same but the essence of being that teacher changes over time because of the life experience that influences that person to change.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967) Section 708.

What did Nietzsche meant by the phrase “become who you are?” If there is no end state of “being,” what is it that we should strive for and why? Once again, Nietzsche believes that the subject is the result of a multiplicity of influences, such as social, cultural, and historical influences. The problem, according to him, is that we are not unique because we think and act the way our society taught us to. In essence, our conscience is like a part of a collective conscience. Anything else would be deviating from the norm. The individual who deviates from the norm and become an independent thinker and creator is the type Nietzsche would prefer. He describes these sorts of people as “human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.”³ This is the type of human being we should strive to be.

Impermanence

The world is in constant change; it is always in a state of “becoming,” and not in a state of “being.” If the world had a final state of “being,” it would have reached that state already.⁴ Nietzsche holds a similar view about the subject – that it is always changing and impermanent. How can we explain what seems to be permanent? We each have our own characteristics and traits that seems to be constant and never changes. For example: shyness, being introverted, being extraverted, or being sociable. These personality traits remain fairly permanent, do they not? I would presume that when I wake up tomorrow, I will still be the same person, having the same personality traits and the same beliefs, unless something drastic happens to me today (e.g. if I got shot in a crossfire and end up in the hospital).

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) Section 335.

⁴ *The Will to Power*, Section 708.

We grow and experience new things in life which contributes to Nietzsche's concept of "becoming." The person is constantly changing by having new experiences, but one can argue that there are certain aspects of the personality that are relatively stable. Nietzsche would say that these stable characteristics are merely *dominant* aspects of the "self" or of the person. We have the notion that the "self" and the "I" are holistic concepts to represent ourselves. The subject is actually made up of many different aspects, including feelings, experiences, beliefs, impulses, and desires. On the surface, the person appears the same; the person appears as being a holistic entity. According to Nietzsche, the subject is the sums of its parts.

Agent and Object; The Doer and the Deed; Cause and Effect

Nietzsche believes that perception, or the causal connections between our thoughts, are hidden and perhaps imaginary.⁵ This includes our feelings and the perception between subject and object. My perception or my thought is due to the belief that I have made a causal connection among my beliefs and thoughts. Nietzsche doesn't even believe that there is such a process called "thinking." What we consider to be "thinking" is merely a process of selection and elimination. We select one element over the other. Therefore, our "thought" is merely the element that has been selected.

Causality is elusive because the interactions between our thoughts occur quickly and they are too complex to sort out in a logical fashion in order to find the casual connection. This presents us with a problem because this is what we do every day with our inner perceptions (our thoughts, feelings, and desires) and with our perception of the outer world (the subject and object; the deed and doer; the agent and action). We make casual connections as we see fit, such as in the case of a billiard ball hitting against

⁵ Ibid. Section 477.

another billiard ball on a pool table after it has been struck. When we perceive this event happening, we perceive one hitting the other, and the other moving, and we immediately make a causal connection between the cause and the effect – that one ball *caused* the other to move, even though we do not actually perceive any causal activity when one ball hits the other. Nevertheless, this event does not occur out of necessity, but out of past experience. We conclude that every time one billiard ball hits another billiard, one will cause the other to move, not out of necessity, but out of observational experience from the past.

The “self” is traditionally viewed as the agent of all of its actions. We believe that the “self” is a single, congruent, conscious thing – a thing-in-itself. Nietzsche denies these ideas. Nehamas brings up a problematic issue regarding the deed and the doer:

...how can we determine which actions to group together as actions of one agent; who is it whose deed is supposed to be “everything”?⁶

The actions of the agent are many, but they are influenced by other factors also and not solely by the individual. It is difficult to tell where one event begins and where it ends.

To clarify this notion, let us examine the agents and the actions in a car accident. Let there be two persons: person A and person B. Person A got in a car accident with person B, and person A thinks it was person B’s fault. Person B was driving too fast and didn’t come to a stop in time to avoid rear ending person A at a traffic light. The cause or the agent in this case would be presumed to be person B, and the object being influenced upon is person A. But what about all the other factors that caused person A to get into an accident with person B? There are many factors which led person A and person B to be at

⁶ Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) 172.

the same place and at the same time. For example, both had to go through many traffic lights, both had to buy a car, both had to obtain a driver's license, and both had to be born first. There were many factors that led up to the traffic incident, but instead, person A held person B totally responsible, even though person A was as much a part of the whole thing as person B was.

Cause and effect are inferences made to make sense of the world. We also use the inference of subject and predicate in sentences and in arguments. Who does the thinking? The "I" does the thinking. We separate the agent from the action. It is not the case that the *person* is doing the thinking. The person *is* thought. The person *is* his or her philosophy. The person *is* his or her biography. How can these things be separated from the person when they are actually parts of the sum of the effects that constitutes the person? Every one of these effects is a part of the person; the person is the sum of the effects. Cause and effect are inferences that should be used for communication and not for explanation.⁷ Nietzsche states:

In the "in-itself" there is nothing of "causal connections," of "necessity," or of "psychological non-freedom"; there the effect does not follow the cause, there is no rule of "law."⁸

On Truth and the Self

Nietzsche's concept of "truth" and the "self" are similar, in that he believes "truth" and "self" are both *created* rather than *discovered*. The essence of "truth" is the valuation in the belief that *such and such* notion is "true".⁹

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) Section 21.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *The Will to Power*, Section 507.

The “self” is created, “values” are created, and “truths” are created. If we accept things to be as they are, we hold these notions to be absolute and unchangeable. With regards to the “self,” people hold the view that “I am this way” or “I am that way.” They tend to accept these aspects of themselves as being absolute, final, and unchanging. The individual who takes control of his or her life will take control of what life has to offer and what he or she can become, instead of accepting things for what they are, including the “self”. If I want to be a certain type of person, possessing certain desirable characteristics, I will take the necessary steps to *become* that person. In essence, I take control of my life and *create* the life I want instead of playing a passive role by accepting life for what it is and the “self” or the “subject” for what it is. For instance, a person who is shy and accepts his or her shyness will end up limiting his or her social life. Shyness is confining him or her to a non-sociable, introverted kind of life. If the individual wants to experience new things and meet new people, he or she will have to break free of this shyness and take the chance to go out and live life. If the individual wants to become somebody, the necessary steps must be taken to become that somebody.

We should first *discover* how notions such as “truth” and “self” are *created*, according to Nietzsche. Then we should destroy these notions of “truth,” of “value,” of the “I,” and of the “self” in order to create a new, a unique, a better, a more complete person. Nietzsche believes that those who “want to become those who they are” are people that are unique and those that *create* themselves, and not those who merely accept themselves.¹⁰ The process of “becoming” is a process of constant change; a process involving *creation*, *development*, and *destruction*. The world and the subject are impermanent.

¹⁰ *The Gay Science*, Section 335.

Subject as Multiplicity

Nietzsche presents us with the idea that “subject is multiplicity.”¹¹ The subject is the result of the interaction among the many aspects that makes up the person as a whole, including past experience, feelings, thoughts, actions, and physical desires. The subject could be thought of as “a kind of aristocracy” in which the most dominant parts are in control. Another way of representing it is like a commander in charge of a platoon. There is conflict between our thoughts, feelings, desires, and actions but the most dominant will act as the leader and will constitute what is considered to be the “I,” the “ego,” or the “self.” We feel like we are in charge and we believe that this is the “self,” but we don’t realize there are other aspects that make up the person – the less dominant aspects that influences who we are, especially the unconscious thoughts, feelings, and impulses.

The subject is like an organization. The unity of the different levels of the organization, with the executives being the leaders, makes up the entire organization, and the organization represents itself as a *thing*, similar to how the “self” is viewed as a *subject* or a *thing*. It is like our modern day corporations, which are referred to as an *entity*, and are given certain lawful rights and privileges just like any human within society. “All unity is unity only as organization and co-operation....”¹² The subject is not the result of union into a single thing. According to Nietzsche, unification of the subject is more like co-operation – working together towards a common goal or end. The subject is a multiplicity of factors working together as a unified whole towards a common goal or end.

¹¹ *The Will to Power*, Section 490.

¹² *Ibid.* Section 561.

If there is no “self,” what makes up our thought process? What part of us does all the thinking? Nietzsche believes that “thinking” is a fiction arrived at by a process of selection and elimination.¹³ One element, which becomes the perception of thought, is selected, and the other elements are eliminated or filtered out. When we are doing a lot of “thinking,” it is merely a long series of selection and elimination, from one element to another and then to another. If our thought process is nothing more than a process of selection and elimination, then we process information like computers. Eventually, computers will be able to “think” like we do, and they will do so even better than humans because computers can process a great deal of information faster and more efficient than the human brain could.

If there is no such thing as “thinking,” do we possess a moral “conscience”? We believe that we are able to make the right decisions and that we are able to act freely. Nietzsche argues that when we make moral decisions, we are listening to our “conscience.” We listen and have faith in the voice of our “conscience” because we believe that it is never wrong or immoral, and since we believe that our “conscience” is always right, we infer that what is right must be done.¹⁴ Like discipline and the process of habituation, we learn how to act accordingly and act out of duty for our “conscience.” Nietzsche makes the analogy of a soldier obeying orders from his officer. For this reason, we are really not acting freely and from our own independent beliefs. To “become who we are” is to question our own conscience and what it thinks is the right thing to do. We should know ourselves by gaining more knowledge and by self-observation to understand our perceptions and our behaviors because we often act out of ignorance.

¹³ Ibid. Section 477.

¹⁴ *The Gay Science*, Section 335.

The subject is a multiplicity of mental processes, actions, feelings, and desires. Nietzsche believes that everything we do – all of our thoughts and actions, now and in the past – are all intertwined and has resulted into who we are as a person today. What I had done twenty years ago has somehow affected who I am today, and what I do today will affect who I will become twenty years from now. We are starting to realize the complexity in the multitude of events, thoughts, actions, feelings, and desires that constitutes the subject and how they are all interrelated.

Education and Self-Knowledge

The goal is to obtain “mastery and power over oneself.”¹⁵ We should somehow get our habits and character traits to be harmonious with each other and work cooperatively towards a common goal. Nietzsche criticized the German education system of his time as creating people who were nothing because “they [were] all sorts of things.”¹⁶ In order to be something or somebody, they must stop being all sorts of things. Education should encourage people to develop into “true individuals” instead of encouraging people to “develop in all different directions.” This may involve selecting consistent beliefs and traits and eliminating contradictory and inconsistent ones.¹⁷

In modern-day psychoanalytic theory, the development of the individual self occurs by having a balance and acceptance of all the other personality traits. This development occurs later in life when the individual has a considerable amount of life experience and goes through a self psychoanalysis. The young person lacks experience, so he or she acts and thinks out of habituation, out of pleasure, and out of ignorance.

¹⁵ Nehamas, 183.

¹⁶ *The Will to Power*, Section 108.

¹⁷ Nehamas, 184.

Aristotle would say that the young pursue pleasure while the older pursues the good. With age comes experience and wisdom, which involves the establishment of a more coherent or consistent person.

Modern education fills the mind with a great deal of knowledge, most of which are theoretical, symbolic, and incoherent which makes the learning process dull. If the person is unable to relate what he or she is learning to his or her own life, then the student will find education uninteresting. Students often ask themselves questions such as: “What does this have to do with my life? Why am I studying this? Why am I here?” Education should become more of a ‘why’ curriculum that is inspirational and involves reflective thinking from the current ‘what’ curriculum which is mainly knowledge based.

With relation to the notion of the “self” and the person, accepting our beliefs, traits, and behaviors blindly is like accepting the knowledge that is taught to us in school. We must examine and criticize the notion of the “self” and what makes us who we are. By discovering and understanding the interrelationship among the multitude of factors that makes up the person, we will be able to mold and create a new, unique individual – someone who can act and think independently from the herd and someone who has character and taste. Nietzsche believes that “We must become the best learners and discoverers of everything that is lawful and necessary in the world...”¹⁸ In order to be creators, we must not be ignorant. We must possess the proper knowledge to create, like the analogy he makes of the person learning physics in order to become a physicist.

In summary, we must become aware of whom we are by understanding ourselves. This involves an examination into the origins of our beliefs, thoughts, desires, and actions. After knowing the factors that contributes to the development of the person, we

¹⁸ *The Gay Science*, Section 335.

can overcome the “self,” and we can become creators of a new, unique person. Education can help by leading us into the proper direction, or it can misguide us into the wrong direction.

Self-Deception

Nehamas raises a good problem regarding self-deception. We can give style to our character but only by selecting what is desirable and making these aspects dominant while denying everything else. This causes dissonance among our own beliefs and desires. If we prefer certain aspects of ourselves to be dominant, we are doing so because we think it is the best thing to do.

Compared to an ignorant person, a person possessing self-knowledge knows the underlying influences that make up who he or she is. Since ignorant people are often unable to make these connections, they are deceived and they do not know how to shape their own development. They lack internal locus of control because too many external forces are influencing their thoughts, beliefs, desires, and behaviors. Therefore, self-knowledge is desirable because it allows us to have more influence and control in our lives and what we want to become. We will be less deceived because self-knowledge helps us to understand the process behind self-deception.

A related problem deals with having self bias. We evaluate ourselves using our own standards.¹⁹ This is why we sometimes need other people to evaluate us in order to help us to better understand who we are. In Aristotle’s philosophy on needing virtuous

¹⁹ Nehamas, 186.

friends, he states “we can contemplate our neighbors better than ourselves and their actions better than our own.”²⁰

On the “Will”

Another problematic issue pertaining to the subject is the notion of the “will.” Do people possess a “will” and “will power?” Most of us think that there is such a thing as a “will” and that we use it to do the things that we want to do. People tend to blame their actions on something, and in this case it is the “will.” Therefore, the “will” is thought of as being the cause of action, similar to the notions of the “I,” the “ego” and the “self” as being the causes of action; as being the doer of the deed.

Nietzsche opposes the notion of a “free will” and also the notion of the “unfree will.” He denies the existence of a “will-thing, but not a will-process, or volition.”²¹ The “will” is a metaphor used to describe tendencies or impulses. Having a so called “weak will” is having incoherence among the multitude of our impulses – they are not pointing into a similar direction; they do not strive for a similar goal or end. Having a “strong will” involves having coordination among our impulses – they are striving for a similar goal or end.²² The most dominant of these impulses are the most apparent, and we call these impulses as being our “will.” Nietzsche states:

“Willing” is not “desiring,” striving, demanding: it is distinguished from these by the affect of commanding. There is no such thing as “willing,” but only a willing *something*....²³

²⁰ Aristotle, “Nicomachean Ethics” in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 1169^b33-34.

²¹ James O. Bennet, 153.

²² *The Will to Power*, Section 46.

²³ *Ibid.* Section 668.

This takes us back to our discussion on the “subject as multiplicity,” of agent and object, of the deed and the doer. The person is the result of a multitude of factors including our beliefs, knowledge, desires, behaviors, impulses and how they are influenced by the external environment such as our culture, our society, and the people around us. It would seem that the goal is for us to obtain a state of harmony – harmony among our impulses, our desires, our attitude, and our behavior. This harmony is fashioning the individual in a certain direction or goal to become “true individuals.” Having “will to power” will help us achieve harmony. “Will to power” is “the forming, shaping, organizing, [and] expansive drive of all life.”²⁴

Eternal Recurrence

The notion of eternal recurrence is that everything will happen over again; that time repeats itself and every event in this life will be exactly the same in the next life. This is not of cosmological importance, but of psychological importance towards the person and his or her acceptance of who he or she is. “Being is becoming” and all of the events that have happened in the past have influenced who we are. If we are willing to accept a repeat of life and all of its events unconditionally, then we accept who we are.

What if I do not accept some aspect of myself? Would it be justifiable to change certain events in the past in order to create a better person? And what about the process of “becoming who we are” – of becoming a unique person and becoming a creator? If we simply accept everything in life, we would accept who we are, but that would mean not wanting to change for the better. If I accept every aspect of myself including the negative

²⁴ Cristoph Cox, “The ‘Subject’ of Nietzsche’s Perspectivism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35 (1997): 288.

aspects, for example the uncreative and non-unique aspects, then I will be kept from becoming a “true individual.”

If I want to “become who I am,” I would live life a certain way and change my attitude, my beliefs, and aim at a certain direction. Only then will I be able to achieve my goal. Let us assume that I don’t do this, and twenty years from now, I am asked if I am willing to live my life exactly as it was over again. If I say yes, then I would accept the fact that I do not want to take the necessary steps twenty years prior to become a “true individual” – to “become who I am.” Nietzsche would argue that this wouldn’t be the case because if I were to accept my past, I accept who I am in the present, because who I am in the present is due to the affects of the past. Without all the interrelated events that have happened in the past, I would not be who I am today. “A thing is the sum of its effects.” Who I am is the sum of the effects of my life. By removing a factor that has contributed to one of the effect, this would result in a different person. Therefore, if I accept who I am, then I would have to accept everything in the past that has contributed to my current existence. Since my current state of existence is my only existence, how can I not accept who I am? Not accepting who I am is denying my own existence. Certainly there are things in the past that I regret and wish had happened differently, but if they did happened differently, I would not desire that that they had happened differently because I would be a different person in a different universe in which the events did not occur.

Summary and Conclusion

Nietzsche believes that there is no “self,” no “ego,” and no “will-thing.” These terms are used to represent the agent of our actions, and they are useful for

communication. There is no thing-in-itself because this would infer that the thing can exist independently from everything else. How can there be a “self-thing” existing independently from the other aspects of ourselves? The subject is the result of a multitude of factors including our thoughts, beliefs, desires, feelings, impulses, and especially external factors including the environment, our culture, and our society. Everything is in flux; the world and the subject are in a state of constant change. There is no state of “being,” but only a state of “becoming,” and that “becoming” is the state of “being.”

The problem is partly due to human cognition and epistemology. Humans tend to process information in a certain way, e.g., the brain tends to classify and group things together. For this reason, the individual believes that there is a “self” thing, and that it is responsible for its actions. It’s much easier this way because the world becomes more coherent; it becomes more absolute; things are black and white. For the same reason, we have a tendency to classify things as being the agent and object; as the deed and the doer: “He did this to him,” “She did that to her,” “I am responsible for my actions.” When a person gets into a car accident, the person immediately associates the agent as being responsible for the action: *either* it was himself or herself who was responsible for the accident or it was the other driver. Who else can it be? What else can it be? According to Nietzsche, and many others who hold similar views about interdependence, there are many determining factors that can lead up to a car accident, or to any other incident. For the same reason, there are many factors that influences who the person is. By understanding these factors; by understanding oneself, one can understand how he or she came to be, in order to take necessary steps and actions to become who he or she wants to be; to “become who you are.”