

Nietzsche's Impossible Ethics: Comments on Bennett-Owen

Previn Karian
Keele University

Abstract. This article develops themes in Matt Bennett's reservations about David Owen's endorsement of Nietzschean ethics derived from Bernard Williams. The Continental reception of Nietzsche after Heidegger is used to justify Owen's ethical hermeneutics, whilst the difficulties of Bennett's search for a moral psychology in Nietzsche's 'immoralist' are highlighted. Late Nietzsche texts are representative of a bi-conditional logic: I am strong *if and only if* you are weak. Kant's moral frame and *Anthropology* critique Nietzsche's claims to immorality, the unique law, and the sovereign individual incapable of egotistic pluralism.

Keywords: Heidegger, ethics, moral psychology, immoralist, bi-conditional logic, Kant, agonistic.

As a respondent to Matt Bennett's paper, my primary difficulty is an almost comprehensive agreement with his statements about Nietzsche. Subsequently, I merely hope to highlight some aspects that *could* (rather than *should*) have been featured in his paper.

Bennett's central concern with David Owen's writings on Nietzsche, which he otherwise highly admires, lies in the area of ethics. Bennett alleges that Owen makes use of a distinction from Bernard Williams regarding the terms "moral" and "ethical". The "moral" is viewed in characteristically derogatory terms through Nietzsche as a mindless herd or "slave" morality of compliant normativity.¹ The "ethical" is presented by Owen as a separate realm that allows for a different form of conduct, residing not in social norms but in individual choice. This relies on a set of terms around self-overcoming, self-love and "unique law" that is set free from "responsibility, duty, and guilt" located in Kantian ethics. Whilst Bennett implies a presupposition of benevolence in Owen, he finds something that he describes as "objectionable, offensive, and unacceptable" to modern moral sensibilities in Nietzsche, that lurk as a latent potential in Owen. The perceived conflict is that Owen has extracted ethical principles from Nietzsche in a manner that occludes a "danger" in the latter's "immoralist" texts. Bennett extends this conflict across themes of self-love, individuality, self-esteem, inequality and competition. He does not engage with Owen's paper published here on the "vindication-justification" distinction as an ethical base, but relies instead on a range of his other writings on Nietzsche.

It is a dominant feature of Nietzschean philosophers to make something different of his philosophy from what is found in his texts. The most striking example of this inventiveness is of course Martin Heidegger's four volume "confrontation" with Nietzsche in his lectures from 1936-40 (Heidegger 1991, 1984). Against the backdrop agenda of "rescuing Nietzsche from the Nazis", Heidegger employs his well-known

[1] This is a gross caricature of both Kant and Christianity that Nietzsche necessarily misrepresents to find his own thought and voice. The misrepresentations are deferred for elaboration elsewhere.

hermeneutic method of “destructive retrieval” to find something in a philosopher which they would not have understood or seen in their work. This appears to have set a trend of “how to read Nietzsche” that is prevalent in the majority of Continental philosophers who have engaged with Nietzschean texts.² Heidegger’s hermeneutic approach and the Continental tradition considerably mitigate Bennett’s concern that Owen’s Nietzsche may not be seen in the way that Bennett does. Despite his attention to textual detail,³ Owen has no obligation to simply follow Nietzsche’s thought and is at liberty to develop elements that captivate him. At its most extreme, this freedom can be found in Derrida or Bataille. Such freedom will necessarily exclude many aspects that others will find a priority in Nietzsche’s texts. Bennett struggles with this freedom when applied to the ethical sphere, but this reflects his own priorities rather than Owen’s.

In proposing the terms “moral psychology” and “ethical psychology”, Bennett makes an adventurous move. Whilst he delineates a clear distinction that is present in Williams, his provocative contribution is to amplify the word “psychology”. This shifts the ground of discussion from “values” in morals or ethics to psychological conditions in the work of value-making. The move is as perilous as it is daring, since there is a vast realm of “drive psychology” in the construction of morals and ethics that Bennett does not bring in.⁴ Whilst the evident preference is to discuss Nietzsche’s ethics only in terms of philosophical concepts and methodology, as Williams does, the use of the word “psychology” brings in an entirely new dimension that neither Bennett nor Owen substantively engage with. Thus, they both evade the problematic of how either “morality” or “ethics” can in any way constitute a “psychology”, or whether both of those terms are purely philosophical constructs and concepts.

Bennett’s further concern lies in the self-declared epithet of “immoralist” that Nietzsche ascribes to himself. He senses that “Nietzsche offers a study of ethics that is by design a rival to moral ethics.” However, further clarification is required to explain why Nietzsche has any “ethics” at all rather than just another “morality”. The word “immoralist” semantically refers to its opposite “moralist”. Despite Nietzsche’s many voluble claims of going “beyond” the moral, it is not clear that he reaches any form of construct that can be described as an “ethics”, remaining stuck in an obsession with morality and its defects. This might explain the impulse in Owen and Williams to find an ethics in Nietzsche where there is none. Instead, Nietzschean texts give us the excited ravings, ecstasies and acidic nihilism of someone trapped in a hatred of morality from which he is never free, and returns to with a vengeance in his late texts. Described by Bennett as “a distinctive obsession with obligation, duty, and law...[that] operates with a concept of guilt”, Nietzsche provides no alternative construct of an ethics as

2] Sample representatives of Continental philosophers who follow Heidegger’s approach would be Bataille (1992), Deleuze (2006), Derrida (1978) and (1988), Klosowski (2008), and Sloterdijk (1989).

3] See, for example, Owen 1994.

4] See Gardner 2015, Katsafanas 2016 or Meechan 2020 as a sample of current debates.

Williams does. Nietzsche's much-vaunted claim of a "revaluation of all values" results in the shattered debris of "how to philosophize with a hammer" (Nietzsche 2003c). These "reflexive negative judgments" that Bennett identifies leave us with nothing more than a negation, begging the question as to why a mere reflexivity makes something ethical. These are the ruins from which Owen extracts an optimistic ethics regarding Nietzschean self-overcoming, framed positively as self-affirmation and self-love in the content of "vindication", that finds an additional "justification" through the validation of others (Owen 1994 and 2023). The result is that Owen provides content and meaning in "worth" and "value" that reaches the edge of psychology, though not engaging with or dependent on it. In doing so, we have a much more substantive alternative to normative morality than mere Nietzschean nihilism. Ethics are visible in Owen, but deliberately and consciously unstated in Nietzsche. I defer the strong Kantian riposte to Nietzsche-Owen available in the three types of egoism classified in the *Anthropology*, particularly the conflict between "the moral egoist" and its opposite "pluralism",⁵ due to space.

Likewise, it is striking that Bennett's discussion of how Owen represents "self-love" as the affirmation of a "self-care" does not engage with the compulsive need for superiority in Nietzsche.⁶ The comparative conceptual setting is between Nietzsche's "self-love" and Kant's prioritisation of "duty". For the latter, reasoned maxims and the categorical imperative of an unconditioned noumenal ground⁷ provide the stability and consistency of ethical possibility. This is presented as a de-prioritisation, and possible negation, of a "self-love". However, the "sovereign individual" in Nietzsche who espouses the self-appointed titles of "noble" and "free spirit" in eponymous chapters from *Beyond Good and Evil* asserts a self-valuing that is predicated on a superiority over others who must necessarily remain weak (Nietzsche 2003a). The content of this relationship is a biconditional logic whose proposition states: I am strong *if and only if* you are weak. This logic does not enter into Owen's positive optimism, and is neglected as a potential undermining of "ethics" in Bennett. However, we are left with "immorality" in Nietzsche – a conscious, calculated reaction against "herd" morality:

The weak and ill-constituted shall perish: first principle of *our* philanthropy. And one shall help them to do so. (Nietzsche 2003c, 128)

5] Kant (2007: 240-2; § 2. 7: 128-7: 130. Owen senses the vulnerability of his ethics when he notes the conflict that can occur when vindication opposes justification; however, there is no Kantian "pluralism" available in Owen's frame which collapses in a biconditional logic discussed below.

6] This has relevance to contemporary debates on toxic masculinity in social media cult followings of figures such as Andrew Tate and his influence on male youth.

7] The Kantian unconditioned of practical reason is misrepresented in Nietzsche's *Gay Science* (335). It is a conceptualising that eludes him, originating in CPR's noumena-phenomena distinction, resulting in the metaphysical demand of reason to "find the unconditioned for the conditioned cognitions of the understanding" (A307; A587/B615). Finding the "unconditioned" is the basis of "practical reason".

If this necessary determination of strong-weak in a bi-conditional logic is an ethical or psychological basis for Nietzschean value-making, Bennett needs to explain how the demand for superiority is a condition of self-love, which the positive reframing of Owen occludes, if not rejects surreptitiously. This biconditional logic remains unidentified and unexplored in Bennett's discussion in his sections entitled "Individuality", "Self-esteem and inequality" and "Competition". A specific focus can be brought to the terms "pathos of distance" and "Greek agonistic culture" that are textually not possible in Nietzsche without a strong-weak relationship and its biconditional logic.

Linked to self-love is Bennett's tentative formulation of a potential ethics based on the capacity for the "unique" that arrives through "self-observation". Referencing Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, Bennett states that such self-observation "would lead me to understand that my actions are unique and, on this basis... I resist the temptation to find a code of ethics that has general scope, and instead to create an ethics for myself that is unique to me, that applies to me and me alone." Rather than the "negative reflexivity" that he mentions above, the attempted reflexivity here is positive.

Firstly, the term "unique" in middle and late Nietzsche is an empty idealisation that merely hopes for something substantive. In these later texts, the content of hope is an *aporia* that Nietzsche's "unique" requires – the empty space each individual has to fill in for themselves. The move from void to ethics – viz, how the ethical filling in process occurs – requires explanation. Secondly, a Kantian perspective on "self-observation" from the *Anthropology* would effortlessly critique the Nietzschean notion of "self-observation", providing several possible outcomes rather than the contestable assumption of a singular "unique" (Kant 2007, 245; § 4. 7: 132-4.). Thirdly, there is no guarantee that any amount of self-observation will lead to either a unique ethics or a unique law for oneself. Psychologically, dysfunctional self-observation can lead to high states of anxiety, depression or obsessive-compulsive mental health and personality disorders. Whilst the Nietzschean position may be that dysfunctional states and their morbidity are merely the law of the weak, it is not clear that the strong escape these disorders. Once again, ethics and laws need to be clarified as either philosophical concepts or psychological products that can come from disordered or unstable minds – especially in those perceived or claiming to be strong. These three considerations problematize the terms "unique" and "self-observation" extracted from Nietzsche.

Linked to the theme of "agonistic culture" is the underdiscussed excess of verbal and ritual violence that Nietzsche licences in his "anti-egalitarian" stance. This is, of course, taken to an extreme in the work of Bataille who makes this aspect of Nietzsche brutally explicit (Bataille 2008). Bennett intuitively senses its presence when he speaks of Nietzsche's "contempt for those unworthy of opposition", and rightly challenges, if not rebuts attempts at "democratising a form of self-love" in what is an anti-egalitarian morality (not "ethics"!). It is textually clear that this feature of contempt grew into an excessively turgid stylistic feature of his prose from *Zarathustra* onwards. Nietzsche is not merely "anti-egalitarian" – he is contemptuously and malignantly so. This provides

fertile ground for research into why this occurred and what its impact would be on a purported ethics or self-love that constitutes figures such as Superman/Overman of *Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 2003 b), or the “Free Spirit” and “What is Noble?” in eponymous chapters of *Beyond Good and Evil* (Nietzsche 2003 a).

We can now see that whilst the distinction between “morality” and “ethics” might be clear in Williams and Owen, Bennett struggles to reach the latter because of his introduction of the word “psychology”. Psychology has much to offer in understanding Nietzsche’s fixation with “morality”, but would struggle to find any “ethics” that necessarily rest on psychological conditions. Bringing psychology into ethics is fraught with epistemic danger. Both Williams and Owen discuss those terms as philosophical concepts rather than psychological modelling and terminology, which gives them an epistemic tradition and frame of reference to draw on, that Bennett does not have. This results in a lack of consistency in his use of the terms “morality” and “ethics” where it is not clear which one he is referring to in his language.

A final point to make is the danger of using the term “Nietzsche” as a global reference to all texts representing the thought of a philosopher. Given the widespread understanding of “the death of the author” proposed by Roland Barthes (Barthes 1978), it is crucial to make clear that there are dramatic semantic shifts of thought and meaning in the chronological development of a philosopher. This denies the possibility of any singularity of thought or thinking that represents “Nietzsche”. Bennett’s presentation of agonistic conflict as the societal conditions that produce “genius”, “art” or “excellence” belong to an early Nietzsche that disappear through his middle and late works. This qualification of the cited works, *The Greek State* and *Homer’s Contest*, would severely limit, if not disqualify, an attempt to claim a creative outcome, an ethics or a psychology in what evolved as the “immoralist” of late Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*, a tragic slave to his hatred and opposition to morality.

Bennett has valiantly addressed the stalking nihilism that Owen necessarily ignores in his constructions of an ethics that frees itself from morality, initially set out by Williams. There are key points that are identified in Bennett’s presentation regarding the morality-ethics distinction that he brings towards a “psychology”. However, the full ravaging impact of Nietzsche’s “values” that aimed to go “beyond” morality and ethics demand a more direct engagement with his psychology, and how it constructs a failed enterprise stuck intractably in the very morality it seeks to escape.

prevink@opus-psycheia.com

REFERENCES

- Barthes, Roland. 1978. *Image-Music-Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang.
 Bataille, Georges. 2008. *On Nietzsche*. Translated by Bruce Boone. London: Continuum.
 Deleuze, Gilles. 2006. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. London: Continuum.

- Derrida, Jacques. 1979. *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*. Translated by Barbara Harlow. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1988. *The Ear of the Other*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Gardner, Sebastian. 2015. Nietzsche and Freud: The 'I' and Its Drives. In *Nietzsche and the Problem of Subjectivity*, edited by Bartholomew Ryan, Maria Joao Mayer Branco, and João Constancio, 367-93. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1984. *Nietzsche, Volume 2*. Translated by David Farrell Krell. Harper.
- . 1991. *Nietzsche, Volume 1*. Translated by David Farrell Krell. Harper.
- Janaway, Christopher. 2012. Nietzsche on Morality, Drives and Human Greatness. In *Nietzsche, Naturalism, and Normativity*, 183-201. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2007. Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View. In *Anthropology, History, and Education*, translated by Robert Louden. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Katsafanas, Paul. 2016. Value, Affect, and Drive. In *Nietzsche on Mind and Nature*, edited by Peter Kail and Manuel Dries. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Klossowski, Pierre. 2008. *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. London: Continuum.
- Meehan, John. 2020. Rhythms and Drives. *Process Studies* 49(1): 79-114.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2003a. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Reginald John Hollingdale. London: Penguin.
- . 2003b. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Reginald John Hollingdale. London: Penguin.
- . 2003c. *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*. Translated by Reginald John Hollingdale. London: Penguin.
- Owen, David. 2023. "On Vindication in Ethical Life" *Public Reason*.
- . 1994. *Maturity and Modernity: Nietzsche, Weber, Foucault and the Ambivalence of Reason*. London: Routledge.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. 1989. *Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism*. Translated by Jamie Owen Daniel. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.