

Existentialism

PHIL 375, UBC

Philosophy and Literature

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What the Self Is Not

Nehamas contrasts Nietzsche's view of the self with the following.

Descartes an immortal and indivisible subject existing separately from the body

Descartes (again) the source of thought

Freud the core whose appearance is consciousness

Parfit/Carruthers a Humean collection whose unity is secondary

Plato a tripartite organism of appetites, spirit, and mind, over whom the mind should rule

Aristotle a lifetime with narrative/moral coherence

Becoming What One Is

There are several interpretive problems with “becoming what one is.” How are they resolved?

- ① what does Nietzsche mean by “what one is,” when he considers the self by and large a malignant invention?
- ② what does it mean to call upon someone to “become what one is” when there is no such thing as free will?
- ③ what is the underlying unity of that which one is, if it is neither physiological nor psychological nor metaphysical?

According to Nehamas, Nietzsche has the following recommendations to become what one is.

- human beings with a strong will create their own laws (they are new, unique, incomparable)
- they allow for organization and coherence (they do not entertain tolerance towards themselves)
- they prefer brief habits to the development of character (contra Aristotle), knowing that the future threatens any unity found between the present and the past
- they affirm eternal recurrence (which is cause-driven rather than goal-driven: everything is as it should be not because it is reaching towards goal but because effects follow their causes; evolution does not tell us where to go, it tells us where we come from)

Reproaches Against Existentialism

- quietism (communists) intellectual contemplation leads to just another bourgeois worldview
- privileging the solitary over solidarity, forgetting the “smile of the infant” (Catholics)
- the seriousness of human affairs and moral responsibility (Christians)

JPS: They call us gloomy, when they say (dismal proverbs),
“charity begins at home”

In the 18th century, the idea of the artisan-designer for human beings was sidelined, but the quest for a human essence remained. The paper knife.

- “man surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards”
- man differs from a scientific object because he is nothing until he makes something of himself
- in choosing for himself he chooses for all men (Christian trade union, monogamy)
- man is condemned to be free

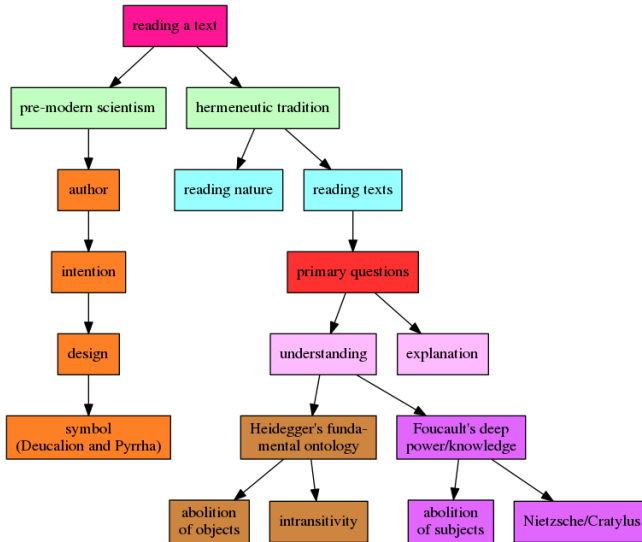
Open Questions

- How typical is the Free French example for a moral dilemma?
- Man fashions both the signs and their interpretation → the importance of hermeneutics for ethics (Jesuit priest)
- Sartre's reliance on Kant ("one ought always to ask oneself what would happen if everyone did as one is doing," 292) and Descartes ("the starting point for truth is one's immediate sense of self", 302)
- Contrast human nature with the human condition to understand what Sartre means by cowardice. "Those who hide from total freedom, in a guise of solemnity or with deterministic excuses, I shall call cowards" (308). The story of Carlos Flores and the subway accident.
- How appropriate is it to demand strict authenticity from humans? Don't we need an essence for authenticity, for "being who we are"? Michel Foucault's criticism.

Hermeneutic and Scientific Method

| | | |
|------------------|-----|-----------------|
| understanding | vs. | explaining |
| narrative | vs. | model |
| inter-textuality | vs. | experiment |
| coherence | vs. | falsifiability |
| hypostatic | vs. | hypothetical |
| texts | vs. | nature |
| integration | vs. | differentiation |
| dialectic | vs. | monism |

The Hermeneutic Tradition



Hermeneutics of Trust

For Gadamer, a hermeneutics of suspicion is always derivative of a hermeneutics of trust (the contrast between the two is due to Paul Ricoeur, who wrote about this after Gadamer published *Truth and Method*). Gadamer says, “only when this assumption proves mistaken [the assumption that the text has integrity]—i.e. the text is not intelligible—do we begin to suspect the text” (294).

Understanding is like speaking your native language: it is natural, constitutive of being. Misunderstanding is derivative and artificial, such as when someone speaks to you in a foreign language that you do not understand.

It is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to “understand” the text, psychologically or historically, as another’s opinion (294)

According to Ricoeur, the three purveyors of a hermeneutics of suspicion are:

- Friedrich Nietzsche
- Karl Marx
- Sigmund Freud

Their trust counterparts are Rudolf Bultmann and Hans-Georg Gadamer (and to some degree Ricoeur himself).

The hermeneutic circle is opposed to foundationalism. Examples are:

- the parts are determinative of the interpretation of the whole and vice versa
- the artist makes art; art defines and shapes the artist
- irreducibility does not imply independence
- interpretation presupposes understanding; understanding presupposes interpretation

Structuralism

| | Pre-Structuralism | Structuralism | Post-Structuralism |
|-------------------------|-------------------|---|---|
| unit of meaning | word | sentence | text/discourse |
| "it is raining outside" | stating the fact | stating the fact in contrast to other facts | starting point for a multiplicity of perhaps incoherent facts |
| meaning | content | form | self-reference |
| semiotics | design | difference | sign |
| truth | correspondence | coherence | multiplicity |
| hermeneutics | trust | comparison | suspicion |
| grammar | semantics | syntax | polysemy |
| explanation | construction | reduction | deconstruction |
| authorship | intent | system | death |
| location | centre | structure | decentring |

Charles Taylor's critique has the following flavours:

- Aristotelian
 - importance of upbringing and habits
 - importance of making the parts fit the whole
 - rational/emotional/social skills over rules
- Narrativist (the importance of story)
- Hermeneutical (the importance of language and interpretation)

The Expanding Circle

Here is the expanding circle of Taylor's opponents:

- Utilitarianism
- Existentialism
- Nietzsche's Drive Psychology

Frankfurt's Second-Order Desires

- first-order and second-order desires
- qualitative and quantitative evaluation of desires
- weak and strong evaluation (the defining feature for strong evaluation is to have a qualitative distinction of the worth of the motivations)

Utilitarianism fails on two counts:

- ① weak evaluation is not reducible to calculation
- ② moral evaluation is not reducible to weak evaluation

Criteria for Distinction

- contingency strong evaluation dilemmas cannot be resolved by appeal to contingencies
- contrast strong evaluation proceeds on the basis of contrasts (courage is meaningless without cowardice and vice versa)

The Problem with Second-Order Desires

- the practical vs the moral approach to raising children (Taylor: “deflated descriptions appear a wicked travesty, a shameless avoidance of moral reality,” page 37)
- consider a law that makes something morally repugnant (abortion, drug consumption, corruption, sex with children) more legal and less frequent → would you assent to it?
- are the moral notions at the basis of strong evaluation only a front to legitimize moral/social/economic pressure on others? (Mandeville)
- the drug that allows you to eat cake and be healthy as well (deflated descriptions vs moral reality)
- CT resolves this later by appealing to re-evaluation

Charles Taylor: “honour, dignity, integrity are *simply* other pleasurable states to which we give *high-sounding* names” (23). Why does reducibility in principle imply undue simplicity? Why is the “simple weigher” inferior to the “strong evaluator”? Monism can be maintained even in the face of certain kinds of emergence (dialectical materialism).

Charles Taylor

thus the strong evaluator has articulacy and depth which the simple weigher lacks

Really? Isn't it the monist who makes progress? Perhaps the monist does not succeed with the reduction, but many productive (rather than successful) scientific programs originate in a desire to perform a reduction (alchemy).

The Importance of Articulation

First-order choices are inarticulable. Second-order choices flow from the use of language and articulated coherence. Note the following analogy:

- Descartes' JE PENSE solves an epistemological problem (skepticism); as a consequence, we perceive ourselves primarily and dominantly as thinking beings
- Taylor's JE PARLE solves an ethical problem (what characterizes moral responsibility); as a consequence, we perceive ourselves primarily and dominantly as talking/interpreting/story-telling beings

The story of my great-grandparents.

Responsibility and Radical Choice

The problem with radical choice (Free French, Nepal) is that it solves the dilemma by rendering the force of the losing side inoperative (this is a problem that Bernard Williams has addressed with respect to utilitarianism and Kantian moral theory in articles such as “Consequentialism and Integrity” and “Ethical Consistency” – see his concept of “regret”).

This is the core claim: agents of radical choice are simple weighers. Taylor wasn't after the utilitarians, he was after the existentialists, undermining their position by putting them in the same boat as the utilitarians. The Meursault/Rieux incoherence problem and what is the object of moral evaluation (in Taylor's case: the way in which an agent successfully articulates coherence in their life; in the existentialist's case: the way in which an agent accepts the human condition).

Charles Taylor

This is what is impossible in the theory of radical choice. The agent of radical choice would at the moment of choice have *ex hypothesi* no horizon of evaluation. He would be utterly without identity. He would be a kind of extensionless point, a pure leap into the void. But such a thing is an impossibility, or rather could only be the description of the most terrible mental alienation. The subject of radical choice is another avatar of that recurrent figure which our civilization aspires to realize, the disembodied ego, the subject who can objectify all being, including his own, and choose in radical freedom. But this promised total self-possession would in fact be the most total self-loss. (35)

Where Does the Buck Stop?

Where does the buck stop? Not at radical choice (this would be a sort of foundationalism), but at articulations (hermeneutic circle). At the core are not calculations, but interpretations. There is a hermeneutic circle from self-interpretations that are constitutive of experience to evaluations of these self-interpretations. Radical re-evaluation: Quine's web of beliefs and Neurath's boat.

Human, All Too Human: Preface

The free spirit

- revalues all values
- is more suspicious than trusting
- lives experimentally
- emerges from convalescence
- is master over his/her virtues
- embraces perspective and its injustice

Human, All Too Human

Metaphysical philosophy vs historical philosophy (1, 1). Chemistry of concepts: how can something originate in its opposite? (Campari and cochineal beetles.) In 1,17 Nietzsche contrasts the metaphysical mode of explanation with physical and historical explanations.

Human All Too Human 1, 2

Philosophers involuntarily think of 'man' as an aeterna veritas, as something that remains constant in the midst of all flux, as a sure measure of things.

Human, All Too Human

Compare Kant and Nietzsche.

Two things fill the soul with awe and wonder: the starry heaven above, and the moral law within. (Kant)

For astrology believes that the firmament moves round the destiny of man; the moral man, however, takes it for granted that what he has essentially at heart must also be the essence and heart of things. (Nietzsche)

Human, All Too Human

Nietzsche's error theory of free will.

Human, All Too Human 2, 39

It is discovered that even this nature cannot be responsible, inasmuch as it is an absolutely necessary consequence concentered out of the elements and influences of past and present things, that man, therefore, cannot be made responsible for anything, neither for his nature, nor his motives, nor his actions, nor his effects. It has therewith come to be recognised that the history of moral valuations is at the same time the history of an error, the error of responsibility, which is based upon the error of the freedom of will.

Human, All Too Human

Nietzsche's error theory of free will.

Human, All Too Human 2, 39

Nobody is responsible for his actions, nobody for his nature; to judge is identical with being unjust.

Human, All Too Human

The evolution of good and evil. “Good and bad is for a long time the same thing as noble and base” (2, 45). Pity and benevolence. Pity is the power of the pitied to injure the pitier. The malice of pity and benevolence are medicine to assure a person of being able to dispense small amounts of power.

Human, All Too Human 2, 53

The heart of sensitive man ever enunciates against his head the axiom: between moral action and intellectual insight there must absolutely be a necessary connection. It is unfortunately otherwise; for there is no eternal justice.

Leiter's Opponents

- Derrida
- Nehamas
- Janaway

Nietzsche's Naturalistic Moral Psychology

What is naturalism?

- ① your inquiry is continuous with the methods of science
- ② you deny super-natural entities (because they play no explanatory role in science)
- ③ you are skeptical about free will

Nietzsche's Naturalistic Moral Psychology

The following offer a general theory of human nature, a (deterministic) Newtonian theory of psychology:

- David Hume (impressions and ideas)
- Karl Marx (dialectical materialism)
- Sigmund Freud (psychoanalysis)

Nietzsche's Naturalistic Moral Psychology

Nietzsche, in the tradition of Hume, offers a speculative psychology since science was not advanced enough.

Brian Leiter's *doctrine of types*

Each person has a more-or-less fixed psycho-physical constitution, which defines him as a particular *type* of person.

Nietzsche's Naturalistic Moral Psychology

Physiology/type → moral beliefs → theoretical beliefs.

Janaway: Nietzsche's style is inextricable from his theoretical beliefs (10). Leiter, in response: transference in psycho-analysis, theory and practice (11). Humean Nietzsche:

- Heritable type facts are central determinants of personality
- Consciousness is a surface (contra Kant)
- Moral judgments are post-hoc rationalizations
- Free will is an illusion

Nietzsche's Naturalistic Moral Psychology

Nietzsche's plausible views, according to Leiter:

- anti-realism about value
- sentimentalism (moral propositions are non-cognitive)
- skepticism about consciousness and rational agency
- skepticism about post-hoc rationalizations of moral philosophers
- the feeling of freely willing an action is epiphenomenal