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Nietzsche on Human Greatness

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1 Introduction

As early as in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche writes that mankind "must work continually at the production of individual great men—that and nothing else is its task," and that mankind "ought to seek out and create the favourable conditions" under which "those great redemptive men can come into existence" (*UM*, III, §6).[1] In this paper, I take it to be uncontroversial that increasingly into his philosophical career, Nietzsche believed human greatness to be an appropriately valuable goal, at

[1] Works by Nietzsche are cited by section using the following abbreviations and translations (though modified where I have felt it appropriate to do so):

A = *The Antichrist*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (London: Penguin Books, 1968).
BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (London: Penguin Books, 1990).
D = *Daybreak*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
EH = *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (Aylesbury: Penguin Books, 1979).
GM = *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, (New York: Vintage Books, 1969).
GS = *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).
HH = *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
KSA = *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (New York: de Gruyter, 1967).
TI = *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (London: Penguin Books, 1968).
UM = *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
WP = *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

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least for certain types of people.[2] Where there is controversy however, regards (1) what type of value greatness has; (2) what the specific content of greatness is: what does the "highest splendour possible to the type man" (*GM*, preface: §6) consist in? In this paper, I solely consider the controversy regarding (2).

Nietzsche does not provide an explicit account of what "greatness" entails. This is likely because he did not have a precise *theory* of greatness, for its conditions, he claims, "are subtle, manifold and difficult to comprehend" (*BGE*, §62). Broadly, there are two relevant features of greatness to consider: what a great agent *is*, or their internal conditions (i.e. "character"); and what a great agent *does*, or their external conditions (i.e. achievements). Nietzsche's repeated paradigms of greatness include figures as seemingly diverse as Beethoven (e.g. *UM*, III, §3; *HH*, §155; *BGE*, §245), Cesare Borgia (e.g. *BGE*, §197; *TI*, "Skirmishes," §37), Julius Caesar (e.g. *BGE*, §200; *TI*, "Skirmishes," §38), and most frequently Goethe (e.g. *TI*, "Skirmishes," §49; *GS*, §103). But it is unclear whether Nietzsche takes these individuals to be great in virtue of their character traits, or in virtue of their particular achievements.

This ambiguity has consequently shaped the terrain of contemporary inquiry into this important concept in such a way that typically consists in either one of these refined features as sufficient to account for it. I discuss the arguments for such positions here, with my own view being that both achievements *and* traits of character are necessary for what Nietzsche understands greatness to consist in. I then consider whether these necessary conditions are together both *sufficient* for greatness, taking into account the relevance of a further distinction between *potential* and *actual* greatness.

It might be said that this position is uncontroversial, for perhaps it is implausible to suppose that one's character can be assessed independently of expression of it through one's actions or deeds.[3] However, my interest is in a *particular* kind of action or deed: those worthy of admiration, or that are appropriately designated as *achievements*. As I shall argue, many achievements Nietzsche values can be done by those he would likely *not* count as worthy characters, indicating that Nietzsche considers the two to be conceptually distinct. Consequently, the question regarding

Footnote 1 continued
For the German and *Nachlass* passages I rely on the KSA, and passages are cited by year, notebook number, note number. I use the English translation for the corresponding reference from *The Will to Power*.

[2] The relative importance of greatness appears to shift through Nietzsche's broader developmental trajectory between periods of his writing. He increasingly devoted attention to what the conditions of great individuals may be—most notably in *Beyond Good and Evil*, which I heavily draw upon here. As I suggest later, there may be some evidence of Nietzsche changing his mind about these conditions this from his early to mature period.

[3] This claim might be made by defenders of strong interpretations of Nietzsche as an 'expressivist' about agency, according to which (very generally), what an agent is simply *is* (or is revealed by) what he or she does. In other words, one's deeds are inexplicably linked to, or 'express', one's character. For defenders of this view, see Robert Pippin, "Lightning and Flash, Agent and Deed" in Christina Davis Acampora, ed., *Critical Essays on Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 131–146; David Owen, *Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morality*, (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen Press, 2007); Aaron Ridley, "Nietzsche's Intention: What the Sovereign Individual Promises" in Ken Gemes and Simon May, eds., *Nietzsche, Self and Agency*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

precisely what Nietzsche values in the relation between character and achievement remains worthy of investigation. Although the purpose of this paper is exegetical, in what follows I discuss the relation between the two with a hope of facilitating interest in an aspect of Nietzsche that is of philosophical value to ethicists more broadly. I shall firstly address traits of character.

2 Great Persons

Nietzsche offers several labels for the positive ideal under question, including "higher type" (e.g. *BGE*, §62; *A*, §4, §5), "free spirit" (e.g. *GS*, §347; *BGE*, §44), "hero" (e.g. *BT*, §24; *D*, §240; *GS*, §268), "noble" (e.g. *GS*, §55; *BGE*, §287; *KSA*, 1888, 15[115]), and perhaps "Übermensch," mentioned almost exclusively in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It is important to clarify that at least some of these terms are distinct from Nietzsche's use of "great" and "greatness" [*grosse*/*grossen*] (e.g. *UM*, III, §6; *BGE*, §212, §225; *EH*, II, §10; *KSA*, 1885, 37[8]) in so far as they are *technical* terms; they have a (relatively) consistent meaning in across his corpus. Greatness, on the other hand, is a broader term which does not have a stable usage in the texts. While a claim that, for example, "Beethoven is a free spirit," would tell us that Nietzsche believed Beethoven to at least in part *challenge prevailing social norms*, a claim that "Beethoven is the pinnacle of greatness" does not indicate precisely what it is about Beethoven that is being referred to, only that he is broadly *good* or *valuable*.

However, my focus is not upon how Nietzsche *uses* the *term* greatness, but what he thinks is *conceptually* distinctive about those persons he admires the most: "the greatness of man, the concept 'greatness'" (*BGE*, §212). Moreover, the issue at hand is further refined in that the concept I focus upon is *human* greatness. In doing so, I do not appeal to normatively relevant features intended to explicate what may distinguish humans from other species. Rather, I hone the parameters of this investigation so as to not undermine other forms of greatness Nietzsche *may* be interested in (e.g. *cultural* greatness). By paying attention to the relevant passages from the primary sources, and by assessing how human greatness has been approached in the secondary literature, I shall argue that the concept involves a synthesis of (at least some of) the technical terms mentioned above, and that therefore it is possible that one may qualify as, for example, noble, but not great.

Alexander Nehamas has argued that Nietzsche "refuses to offer any descriptions of what an ideal person or an ideal life would be like."[4] However, this claim is too strong. In a number of places, Nietzsche does describe at least some of the distinguishable features of these individuals. Typically, they centre on qualities of character which make up a "noble soul" (*BGE*, §287), rather than their specific achievements.

Before presenting what these qualities are, there is an ambiguity, both in Nietzsche's work and also in much of the secondary literature, that needs to be made explicit. This regards what is entailed by the term *character*. It is standard practice for commentators to interpret greatness of character to refer exclusively to a number

[4] Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 8.

of dispositions and executive virtues, by which I mean those traits that are manifested in controlling, deciding upon, guiding, and bringing about action. This appears to be how the term is understood by Brian Leiter,[5] Simon Robertson,[6] Andrew Huddleston,[7] and Bernard Reginster.[8] However, it is important to be aware of a potential distinction between two additional aspects of a person which may fall under the umbrella term of their character, all of which are relevant in some way to Nietzsche's understanding of greatness: (1) one's skill or ability; and (2) one's taste (which I shall take here to refer to which goals one chooses to pursue). As we shall see, these three properties—virtue, skill, and taste—may come apart in various ways. I shall return to this point later, but for the purposes of structure I shall hereafter follow Leiter and others in referring to character traits as just those dispositions and executive virtues Nietzsche venerates. I will now present a representative (but not necessarily exhaustive) list of these identifiable character traits.

Nietzsche often presents higher types as being solitary by nature. The higher man "…is always in his own company, whether he associates with books, human beings, or landscapes" (*EH*, II, 2). Moreover, this is something the great individual actually desires: he "strives instinctively for a citadel and a secrecy where he is saved from the crowd, the many, the great majority…" (*BGE*, §26; cf. *KSA*, 1885, 34[96]). Further still, he plainly writes that greatness entails "being noble, wanting to be by oneself, being able to be different, standing alone and having to live independently" and that "he shall be the greatest who can be the most solitary" (*BGE*, §212). A related quality regards *how* one is "able to be different" (*BGE*, §212). Truly great individuals, Nietzsche argues, are not just solitary, but they challenge the norms of their cultural environment: "the higher man courts opposition, and provokes it" (*GS*, §297; cf. *BGE*, §211; *KSA*, 1888, 15[115]).

Another quality of character that Nietzsche presents as a constitutive feature of greatness is a certain kind of "pride in oneself" (*BGE*, §260) or self-reverence. He writes that "the noble soul has reverence for itself" (*BGE*, §287), and that "perhaps the effect of selfishness is precisely at its greatest in the noblest persons" (*GS*, §55). In other places, Nietzsche appears to make an additional claim by endorsing great individuals' tendency towards practicing a form of ethical egoism—the view that one ought to do only what is in one's self interest—for higher types of people: "egoism pertains to the essence of the noble soul" (*BGE*, §265).

A fourth important condition of greatness is that individuals exercise their will to power to a significant degree. What belongs to "the noble type of man," Nietzsche

[5] Leiter uses the terms "characteristics" and "traits" to refer to what Nietzsche associates with greatness. See Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 116–122.

[6] Robertson uses the term 'character' to refer to what he calls "self-orientated qualities." See Simon Robertson, "Nietzsche's Ethical Revaluation," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 37, (2009), p. 78.

[7] Huddleston also refers to "character traits" or, the more Nietzschean, "quality of soul" to describe these executive virtues. See Andrew Huddleston, *Nietzsche on the Decadence and Flourishing of Culture*, (Princeton: Doctoral Thesis, 2012), pp. 37–44.

[8] Like Huddleston, Reginster retains Nietzsche's concept of the condition of the "soul" to describe these features. See Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 190–192.

tells us, is "…the feeling of plenitude, of power which seeks to overflow…" (*BGE*, §260). He "honours himself as one who is powerful" (*BGE*, §260). In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche writes that "the demeanour adopted by the nobility" is an expression of fact that "the consciousness of power is constantly playing its charming game in their limbs" (*D*, §201). There are, of course, varying interpretations of (a) what the will to power consists in, and (b) how important it is in Nietzsche's ethical project.

Nietzsche emphasises that since great individuals, in being driven to complete their various projects, must have a fifth quality: the psychological strength and discipline to endure suffering (*BGE*, §212, §225, §270). Increasingly into his mature period, Nietzsche suggests further that higher types not only have the ability to *endure* suffering, but they actively *desire* suffering in certain contexts so that they may overcome it and triumph over the challenge it provides: "[a strong nature] needs resistance; hence it *seeks* resistance." (*EH*, II, §7, cf. *GM*, I, §13; *KSA*, 1888, 14[174]).

Yet another important quality of character great individuals have on Nietzsche's view is a capacity for self-control or "self-mastery" in organising strong yet diverse drives. Broadly construed, Nietzsche understands a drive [*Trieb*] as a disposition that generates or provokes a tendency toward a certain pattern of activity.[9] Of our many drives, each constantly seeks expression: they aim to discharge themselves through a particular end, and as such are in competition with one another. For instance, Nietzsche talks of their "play and counterplay among one another" (*D*, §119), where every drive is "tyrannical" in so far as they want to be "the legitimate *master* of all the other drives" (*BGE*, §6).[10] In a number of places, Nietzsche praises great individuals in virtue of their ability to manage, control and organise these *strong* yet *varied* drives in a unified way. In the case of Caesar and da Vinci, he writes that:

> …in addition to powerful and irreconcilable drives, they have also inherited and cultivated into them a proper mastery and subtlety for conducting a war against oneself, that is to say, the faculty of self-control…(*BGE*, §200; cf. *KSA*, 1884, 27[59])

Similar views are expressed elsewhere: he recognises a "fundamental will of the spirit" in higher men that seeks "to be master internally and externally." Moreover, "out of multiplicity it has the will to simplicity, a will which binds together and tames, which is imperious, and domineering" (*BGE*, §230). The paradigm example of this capacity in Nietzsche's view is, unsurprisingly, Goethe, whom we are told "disciplined himself to a whole" (*TI*, "Skirmishes," §49).

[9] Nietzsche uses Drive [*Trieb*] seemingly interchangeably with Instinct [*Instinkt*]. I shall adopt this as a working assumption here.

[10] For more of an in-depth discussion of these issues than I can give here, see Paul Katsafanas, *The Nietzschean Self: Moral Psychology, Agency, and the Unconscious*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Ken Gemes, "Freud and Nietzsche on Sublimation," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 38, (2009), pp. 38–59; John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), especially pp. 44–48.

While Nietzsche acknowledges these qualities, there may be others I have not mentioned here. Furthermore, it is not obvious whether Nietzsche intends *all* of these qualities to be necessary for greatness, or just various combinations. The crucial point, however, is that all of them up are qualities of a person's *character*: they concern what an agent is like. It is these properties that Nietzsche frequently associates with the concept of nobility.

One view is that qualities of character are *all* that Nietzsche understands greatness to consist in: that being great is being a certain way—being noble—regardless of that person's particular achievements. This view is endorsed by Leiter, who claims that such traits are "plainly sufficient" for greatness.[11] Let us call this view (i.e. the view that human greatness resides in individuals solely in virtue of exercising certain qualities of character, irrespective of the content of the goals they pursue) the *Pure Character View*.

Supporters of the *Pure Character View* may point to Nietzsche's repeated emphasis on character traits, and relative silence regarding particular accomplishments, as sufficient to defend their view. But there are strong reasons to reject the *Pure Character View*, both as an interpretation of Nietzsche and as a position in and of itself. Here I invoke an argument given by Andrew Huddleston. Huddleston first responds to the fact that Nietzsche generally does not refer to great particular achievements, instead almost exclusively describing the great individual in terms of personal qualities. According to Huddleston, the reason for this is that it is "*so* obvious" that *to be great is to accomplish great things*, that "Nietzsche never sees fit to mention it explicitly."[12] In other words, that great achievements form a necessary part of the concept of greatness is a background assumption.

The motivation for this line of thought, Huddleston claims, is that the *Pure Character View* "risks admitting underachievers, however sedulous, into the pantheon of great individuals."[13] The point is that there may be cases where one retains all the traits of character Nietzsche values—self reverence, solitariness, endurance, and so forth—yet underachieves.

Building upon Huddleston's point, there are several reasons that could lead to these types of cases. Perhaps one reason is that a person simply has no goals. Alternatively this person may have goals but never attempts to achieve any of them. However, as Janaway has recently suggested, even possessing the traits mentioned above appears to be incompatible with either not having or never pursuing any goals.[14] Janaway proposes that Nietzsche may hold that no individual who satisfied the internal conditions of greatness could fail to have goals they seek to achieve. If,

[11] Leiter, (2002), p. 116.

[12] Huddleston, (2012), p. 30.

[13] Ibid., p. 29.

[14] Christopher Janaway, "Nietzsche on Morality, Drives and Human Greatness" in Christopher Janaway and Simon Robertson, eds., *Nietzsche, Naturalism and Normativity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 192. Janaway is strongly committed to the view that 'internal' traits of character are necessary for greatness, which I agree with. He is open to the view that greatness could also be a matter of 'external' achievements, but refrains from commitment to this view. Part of the motivation for this paper is to explore this suggestion.

for example, we accept the condition that all great individuals exercise their will to power to a high degree, then they are (on some accounts of the doctrine) by definition engaging in the pursuit of goals.[15] The point here is that if one fails to have and pursue goals, one fails to possess an internal condition necessary for greatness, and not because of a lack of achievement *per se*.

But this response does not undermine Huddleston's argument that the *Pure Character View* allows underachievers to exemplify greatness. This is because we might well imagine cases of a third variety: where (i) one retains the traits Nietzsche admires *and* (ii) one has many goals, *and* (iii) one pursues them all, yet constantly fails to achieve them due to a lack of talent.

It seems implausible that persons of this nature would qualify as great on Nietzsche's view. Failures may often be honourable and glorious: perhaps fighting a battle against a significantly stronger opponent, yet with the knowledge that it will inevitably end in defeat. Nevertheless, if no goals were *ever* achieved, no difficulties were ever overcome, it is unlikely Nietzsche would view them in a similar light to the great individuals he admires.

A related and perhaps more pressing problem with the *Pure Character View* is that it leaves open the possibility that these noble individuals can focus their efforts on and pursue trivial or worthless ends. Robertson points out precisely this worry:

> it seems that individuals may possess and exercise such qualities yet direct their activities toward goals we (or Nietzsche) would deny manifest excellence. If so, they may fail to count as genuinely excellent individuals.[16]

Take a typical example to demonstrate the force of this objection. Suppose a person, Andy, does not care for writing novels or plays, composing music or being politically active. Instead, Andy directs his activity at counting blades of grass in large fields. We can imagine him retaining all of the executive virtues mentioned above. We can also imagine Andy being extremely talented, having an extraordinary ability to remember which blades of grass he has counted and which he has not. But upon competition of his laborious task, there is a strong intuition that Andy is not worthy of admiration. Rather, perhaps, like Sisyphus, he is even deserving of pity for having wasted his time on such a trivial project. Regardless, it does not seem plausible that Andy would genuinely figure in Nietzsche's conception of great individuals.

A possible response to this objection might refer back to Janaway's point about the lack of one or more necessary internal traits. For instance in the example given, Andy appears to be an over-simplified individual without a multiplicity of diverse drives, and it is on *these* grounds that he fails to count as great. A similar line of argument is also taken by Ken Gemes, who in giving his own example of a person who solely directs their activities at collecting stamps, argues that this person is

[15] The strength of this point will vary given one's conception of the doctrine of the will to power. The point I make here is particularly driving if one accepts the (in my view) plausible thesis that the will to power is to be construed in terms of a will to overcome resistance in pursuit of some first-order desire, which is defended by Reginster (2006), and more recently in Paul Katsafanas, *Agency and The Foundations of Ethics: Nietzschean Constitutivism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[16] Robertson, (2009), p. 78.

unlikely to be *expressing* the full range of their drives, and so fails to satisfy at least one necessary aspect of the model of greatness Nietzsche (on the *Pure Character View*) propounds.[17]

But if we are persuaded by the claim that Andy's drives are not appropriately varied, strong, or unified in the case given, we could merely adapt the case in such a way that could satisfy any threshold deemed significant. Perhaps, for instance, Andy has many other diverse, yet equally ludicrous, projects which he unifies under one will.

This objection draws attention to the important question of whether Nietzsche holds that certain substantive goals have value independently of the process of achieving them, and others do not. Nietzsche's apparent silence on this matter has been taken by some to indicate that he has no explicit or implicit substantive account, but rather only associates value with formal properties which are compatible with a number of different goals. This view is well defended by Thomas Hurka, who writes that:

> In an early work he [Nietzsche] said the one thing "needful" is to 'give style to one's character," so its elements are unified by "a single taste," and that it matters less whether this taste is good or bad than whether it is a single taste.[18]

Hurka continues that "He [Nietzsche] deemed activities good if they involve organizing one's aims around a single goal whatever that goal is."[19] But this purely formal understanding of Nietzsche's conception of greatness is problematic. Defenders of this kind of view often point to a familiar passage where Nietzsche notes that "Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste" (*GS*, §290). The idea here being that, supposedly, there is no standard of correctness regarding substantive goals, but value is to be found in organising one's single taste to govern and bind one's variety of diverse goals. While it is certainly true that Nietzsche's higher men are driven towards the completion of a unifying project (what Hurka rightly identifies Nietzsche to mean by "style"), it is unlikely, and the above passage does not obviously demonstrate, that Nietzsche thinks that the goals one directs oneself towards do not matter *at all*.

In many places, Nietzsche indicates that tastes can be ranked in terms of their value. For example, he clearly thinks that many people have *bad* taste: "One must," as Nietzsche says, "shed the bad taste of wanting to agree with many" (*BGE*, §43). Nietzsche's continues:

> Books for all the world are always foul-smelling books: the smell of petty people clings to them. Where the people eats and drinks, even where they worship, there is usually a stink. One should not go to church if one wants to breathe *pure* air (*BGE*, §30).

[17] Gemes, (2009), p. 57. Janaway also makes this argument, though differs from Gemes in his characterisation of drives, which he takes to have the potential to dissipate completely. I discuss the implications of this for greatness shortly. See Janaway, (2012), p. 188.

[18] Thomas Hurka, "Games and the Good," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes, Vol. 80, (2006), p. 230.

[19] Ibid., pp. 230–231.

This use of the pejorative term "rabble" or "mob" [*Pöbel*] is repeated frequently to denote those of bad taste (*BGE*, §190, §224; *EH*, I, §4). In contrast, Nietzsche explicitly talks of those with "elevated taste" (*BGE*, §26).

For these reasons, we should be cautious of the claim that Nietzsche has no substantive standard of correctness with regard to the goals one pursues, and that therefore he would understand the tastes of higher men to be only *apparently* better than lower types. Because one can retain noble traits of character yet direct oneself towards worthless goals, this further indicates that the *Pure Character View* is insufficient to fully account for the concept of greatness.

Notice that this objection does not necessarily commit one to an interpretation of Nietzsche in which he holds a codifiable standard of taste (i.e. a strong account of precisely which substantive achievements are excellent). Rather, one might concede that Nietzsche has no codifiable standard of correctness in this respect, but in addition, one may nonetheless hold that there are some things which Nietzsche fairly obviously does *not* think exhibit good taste or excellence (e.g. grass-counter cases).

One possible response that defenders of the *Pure Character View* could make at this point is to draw attention to the ambiguity regarding the content of character that I flagged earlier. The two objections I raised against the *Pure Character View* in this section were that it allows for (i) cases where noble persons lacks the ability to achieve their goals; (ii) cases where noble persons pursue worthless goals. However, if one was to adopt a broader conception of character which includes not just executive virtues, but also skill and taste, then these objections may dissolve.

On this view, greatness would be a matter of satisfying three necessary traits of character: it requires a *virtuous*, highly *skilled* individual with *good taste*. Any combination of just two of these elements of character would yield insufficient results for greatness:

(a) A virtuous individual with good taste can constantly fail to meet his goals.
(b) A virtuous and highly skilled individual can direct his efforts towards valueless goals.

and, as I shall argue shortly:

(c) A highly skilled individual with good taste can lack virtue.

This is important because Robertson and Huddleston both suggest that having trivial goals or underachieving due to a lack of ability imply that Nietzsche must value not just character, but also particular *achievements*. However, by conceding an expansion of what properties "character" includes, this move is perhaps too quick. For one still might hold, as the *Pure Character View* does, that particular achievements are *results* of great character, but not what greatness *consists in*.

Nevertheless, I do not find this response convincing. A conception of character that included all of the above components would be highly stipulative, and would require hard work to establish its appropriate conceptual parameters. Such parameters are not discussed in detail by defenders of what I call the *Pure Character View*, leaving the concept of character open to *ad lib* expansiveness.

Moreover, although I disagree with Hurka's characterization of the way Nietzsche values achievements (i.e. in terms of *purely* formal properties), I agree that the content of greatness better explained by appealing at least partly the pursuit and achievement of goals. The objections raised against the *Pure Character View* involved demonstrating that it allowed for either the lack of achievement or the achievement of worthless goals. I take this to show a commitment to the view that greatness is a matter of, at least partly, *doing* rather than merely *being*. In what follows, I expand upon Nietzsche's emphasis on the importance of achieving worthy goals.

For the reasons so far discussed, I conclude that the *Pure Character View* is implausible. Being great is not simply a case of being a certain way. This conclusion implies the need for another terminological distinction: between nobility on the one hand and greatness on the other. If, as I suggested, nobility is used to refer to traits of character, and greatness is not just a matter of character, then the two concepts come apart. I now turn my attention to the question of just how important traits of character are to Nietzsche's understanding of greatness by considering a competing view.

3 Great Achievements

An alternative interpretation of Nietzsche's understanding of human greatness might be that it is best measured solely in terms of particular achievements. For example: writing great novels, constructing powerful empires, making scientific discoveries, and so forth. Let us call this view (i.e. the view that greatness resides purely in excellent achievements, regardless of an individual's nature) the *Pure Achievement View*.

The *Pure Achievement View* is, prima facie, attractive; while individuals like Shakespeare, Goethe and Beethoven may have certain character traits in common, what distinguishes them from the rest of humankind may be best explained by their creative output. But there are strong reasons to resist attributing the *Pure Achievement View* to Nietzsche. Perhaps the most effective ammunition for this resistance is to be found in §287 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, where Nietzsche asks "…what allows one to recognise the noble human being?," and continues that:

> It is not actions which reveal him—actions are always ambiguous, always unfathomable—; neither is it his "works." One finds today among artists and scholars sufficient who reveal by their works that they are driven on by a profound desire for the noble: but precisely this need *for* the noble is fundamentally different from the needs of the noble soul itself, and in fact an eloquent and dangerous sign of its lack. It is not the works, it is the *faith* which is decisive here, which determines the order of rank here, to employ an old religious formula in a new and deeper sense: some fundamental certainty which a noble soul possesses in regard to itself, something which cannot be sought or found and perhaps may not be lost either. (*BGE*, §287)

In this passage, Nietzsche appears to be explicitly denying that "actions" or "works," or what we might call achievements, are what constitute greatness. The reason being that valuable goals can sometimes be brought about skilfully, but for the wrong reasons: for example as a result of the *desire for* greatness, which stems from a lack, rather than producing works *as a result* of being great.

One of Nietzsche's own examples of valuable achievements brought about by individuals he does *not* consider to be great is certain religious literature—more specifically, particular Christian texts in Germany. Nietzsche considers the "preacher" to be "the only one in Germany who knew what a syllable, what a word weighs, how a sentence strikes, rises, falls, runs, runs to an end…" (*BGE*, §247). In other words, in purely aesthetic terms, certain Christian texts are great works. However, Nietzsche certainly does not consider the Christian preacher to be a "higher man" or paradigm of greatness.

It is significant that Nietzsche does not simply take these achievements to be attributively good; that is, merely good *as an instance of* a Christian text, in the same way that we could recognise someone to be good at being a serial killer. Rather, Nietzsche views these texts as valuable as achievements simpliciter. This can be seen in Nietzsche's praise of The Luther Bible, referring to it as "the best German book hitherto," and that compared to it "almost everything else is merely 'literature'…" (*BGE*, §247). In spite of this, Luther as a person is the target of repeated criticism from Nietzsche, who refers to him as a "peasant apostle" (*A*, §53), a "fanatic" (*A*, §54) who has "…all the vindictive instincts of a failed priest in him" (*A*, §61), and stands as an "antithetical type of the strong, emancipated spirit" (*A*, §54).

The suggestion is then, that human greatness cannot reside solely in actions or specific achievements for Nietzsche, because sometimes they can be brought about by people who, perhaps on account on their motives, have a bad character: they lack "nobility."

It might be thought that *BGE* §287, which was just used as evidence against the *Pure Achievement View*, might be used to support the *Pure Character View*. After all, it explicitly denounces "works" in favour of the "faith" of the "noble soul." However, it is in no way obvious that Nietzsche is suggesting that "works" do not matter *at all* in determining human greatness. In other words, *BGE* §287 at best claims that noble character traits are *necessary* for greatness, but it does not claim that they are *sufficient*. Nietzsche's intention here, it seems, is simply to urge us to use caution when judging a person to be great purely by their effects, because actions are "always open to interpretation": there is an epistemological constraint which prevents us from knowing how or why they were brought about.

In setting up the issue of what Nietzsche understands greatness to consist in, I have focused on two characters: the first, which I have just discussed in this section, achieves a variety of excellent things. The second has a number of virtues (e.g. self-reliance, endurance, pride, and so forth). The problem I raised with the first character was that some things can be achieved for reasons Nietzsche considers to be of disvalue (e.g. ressentiment). The problem I raised with the second character was that an individual could retain these virtues yet fail to achieve anything great, either because (i) they have no goals; (ii) they have noble goals but constantly fail to

reach them (i.e. Huddleston's objection); (iii) they pursue trivial or worthless goals (i.e. Robertson's objection).

However, there is a third character to consider which is significant here and that the commentators discussed so far have largely overlooked: those with "talents far beyond their genius" and "virtuosos through and through" (*BGE*, §256) who, for reasons beyond their control, are prevented from achieving. I shall now address this type of case with the hope of further improving the scope of the existing literature on Nietzsche's understanding of greatness.

Let us assume for the moment that Nietzsche holds that building an empire is a noble achievement. Now let's suppose that we have two figures: Alexander the Great and Alexander the Not-so-great. Both excel at their studies at the Macedonian military academy, each developing their capacity for intricate strategy and armed combat. Both Alexanders, let us imagine, are equally talented in the discipline of war and the politics of maintaining an empire. For the sake of argument, let us also assume they both have all the executive virtues Nietzsche regards the great individual to exercise. Now suppose that whilst Alexander the Not-so-great dies in 334 B.C., just before the campaign to conquer to the Persian Empire—a goal both Alexanders have a taste for—Alexander the Great sets out on the campaign and successfully achieves the of building his own empire. The relevant question is whether, on Nietzsche's view, both Alexanders are appropriate examples of human greatness due to their shared *capacity* for achievement, or whether only Alexander the Great qualifies on account of his *actually* carrying out his aim.

Examples of this nature call for a distinction between (a) a person having noble goals and the ability to achieve them, and (b) a person actually achieving these goals. It is, at least, not immediately obvious whether Nietzsche would accept (a)-type cases as genuine instances of greatness.

Nietzsche explicitly recognises the need to account for luck as a variable which can affect how a person turns out. For instance, in *Human All Too Human*, Nietzsche claims that to understand the nature of great individuals, one must "gain an insight into their power and its origin," taking into account "what *fortunate circumstances* played a part" (*HH*, §164: emphasis added). Similarly, he later describes the higher type is a "*lucky hit*" within a culture (*A*, §4). This theme is elucidated in §274 of *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> It requires luck and much that is incalculable if a higher human being in whom there slumbers the solution of a problem is to act—"break out" one might say—at the right time. Usually it does *not* happen, and in every corner of the earth there are people waiting who hardly know to what extent they are waiting but even less that they are waiting in vain. Sometimes the awakening call, that chance event which gives "permission" to act, comes but too late—when the best part of youth and the strength to act has already been used up in sitting still; and how many a man has discovered to his horror when he "rose up" that his limbs had gone to sleep and his spirit was already too heavy! "It is too late"—he has said to himself, having lost faith in himself and henceforth for ever useless (*BGE*, §274; cf. §62; *A*, §4).

There are a number of independent points being made in this passage, but the significant point that I want to draw attention to is that Nietzsche appears to credit luck with determining, at least some of the time, whether a person is merely *potentially* great or *actually* great. Although Nietzsche draws this distinction, indicating that the vast majority are "too late" to act on opportunities to achieve great things, there is nonetheless ambiguity regarding the status of potential achievers. The first line refers to them as "higher human beings," yet the tone of the passages seems to suggest regret that the "strength to act has already been used up."

However, Nietzsche continues:

> Could it be that, in the realm of genius, "Raphael without hands" is, taking the phrase in its widest sense, not the exception but the rule?—Perhaps genius is not so very rare: perhaps what is rare is the five hundred *hands* needed to tyrannize over the *kairos*, "the right time"—to take chance by the forelock! (*BGE*, §274)

The phrase "Raphael without hands" is used by a character in the 18th century play *Emilia Galotti* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and is intended to indicate the incompleteness of genius in a person: that one might lack the means by which one's genius would come to be realized. For example, if Raphael (understood to be a paradigm of human genius) were to have lost his hands—the very instruments needed for painting—his capacity for creativity would be severely limited. This passage might be taken as evidence that Nietzsche would endorse the potential to achieve worthy goals as a genuine instance of greatness, for the suggestion appears to be that "genius" or the capacity for achievement may be possessed by many, but luck sees to it that only few ever realize it.

But this strategy would fail to take into consideration the distinction between significant talent and nobility that I presented earlier. The above passage suggests that there is something admirable in the genius who lacks the means of achieving his goals, namely his *talent*, but it is not clear that Nietzsche associates him with *greatness*. Though great individuals all certainly exhibited an extraordinary talent and skill in their respective fields, Nietzsche does not value them purely in virtue of this property. As we saw above, one can be talented and lack good taste, or talented and lack noble character. Therefore, this passage does not necessarily support the thesis that Nietzsche endorses (a)-type cases (e.g. Alexander the Not-so-great) as great individuals.

There may in fact be reason for defending the opposing thesis: that Nietzsche considers greatness to be manifested by individuals who exercise certain qualities of character *and* by their *actual* worthy achievements. Nietzsche repeatedly expresses approval of the power of lasting influence and the leaving of one's mark in history through one's achievements. He refers to the man who can "extend his will across great stretches of his life" (*KSA*, 1885, 34[96]; *WP*, §962) and who forms a part of a new "caste" who will rule Europe with "a protracted terrible will of its own which could set its objectives thousands of years ahead" (*BGE*, §208).

But does Nietzsche view the historical extent of one's achievements as at least part of what greatness *consists in*, or merely a *consequence* of greatness? Let us again consider Nietzsche's paradigms of greatness: Beethoven, Goethe, Julius

Caesar, and so forth. All of these individuals achieved various goals that resonated throughout history, initiated significant cultural shifts, and attracted disciples and imitators. Nietzsche at times appears to endorse the view that the value of individuals' achievements is at least partly in virtue of these effects. For instance, at the start of the fourth essay of the *Untimely Meditations* he writes: "For an event to possess greatness two things must come together: greatness of spirit in those who accomplish it and greatness of spirit in those who experience it" (*UM*, IV, §1). In other words, a virtuous person's acts must significantly influence others to at least *some* degree to count as truly great. This is perhaps most clearly stated when Nietzsche concludes that "the individual deed of a man great in himself lacks greatness if it is brief and without resonance or effect" (*UM*, IV, §1).

Nevertheless, there is an epistemological constraint regarding this qualification. It is often difficult to know whether one's achievements will at some point have far-reaching effects in the world. Many artists, philosophers, poets and playwrights were little appreciated in their time, yet turned out to be tremendously influential, sometimes hundreds of years down the line. Another question would be if this impact or recognition is required to persist, for it might be that one's achievements are celebrated in a particular time yet, for whatever reason, are forgotten entirely in years to come. Does one cease to be great in such cases? Moreover, presumably (and as *UM*, IV, §1 appears to suggest) Nietzsche must have in mind the recognition of great achievements by *suitable people*, and not merely "the rabble." That Beethoven's scores are enjoyed by those with a refined taste, and perhaps similar skill, is what counts, and not the recognition of those who lack "greatness of spirit" (*UM*, IV, §1; cf. *HH*, §170).

Huddleston is sympathetic to the view that greatness for Nietzsche is just as much a matter of this extrinsic feature as it is of the intrinsic features described so far. He recognises that one may retain noble traits of character that contribute to greatness, and that one may have accomplished a number of worthy goals that Nietzsche typically associates with greatness, but, he writes: "being great also requires being recognized by others as having these features or having done these things that redound to greatness."[20]

On the one hand, it is clear that Nietzsche draws some relation between the greatness of individuals and the impact they have in history. However, the textual evidence suggesting that Nietzsche considers it a *necessary* condition of greatness is thin. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that if Nietzsche did at one time hold this view, he may have abandoned it during his mature period. For instance, in 1886 he writes:

> The greatest events and thoughts—but the greatest thoughts are the greatest events—are comprehended last: the generations which are their contemporaries do not *experience* such events—they live past them. What happens here is similar to what happens in the realm of the stars. The light of the furthest stars comes to men last; and before it has arrived man *denies* that there are—stars there. "How many centuries does a spirit need to be comprehended?"—

[20] Huddleston, (2012), p. 42.

> that too is a standard, with that too there is created an order of rank and etiquette such as is needed: for spirit and star (*BGE*, §285)

This passage may be in tension with *UM*, IV, §1 that I drew upon earlier, for it appears to refer to great events *prior to* recognition. If events, or achievements, can be considered great prior to any appreciation of them, then it may be that Nietzsche considers their effects in history as consequences of greatness rather than conditions. On the other hand, strictly speaking the passage refers to great events which are "comprehended last." One might interpret this as intending to mean merely that recognition is not always immediate, but often *eventual*. This would be compatible with the view that recognition is an essential condition of greatness.

This particular interpretive issue does not have the textual resources to be settled definitively either way. The reason being it is unlikely that Nietzsche had a worked out *theory* of greatness to that extent. The passage is nonetheless worth flagging in so far as it (at the very least) *might* indicate a change in Nietzsche's mind on the issue at some point between 1876 and 1886. With this in mind, I refrain from endorsing (but remain open to) the status of this particular extrinsic property as a necessary condition of greatness.

Nevertheless, we can extract from Nietzsche's ambiguous approach to this issue that he certainly cannot be committed to the claim that the extent of one's achievements is a *sufficient* condition for greatness, only that it can be at best a *necessary* condition. The reason for this is that Nietzsche of course recognises that the slave revolt in values had widespread effects on human civilisation. Yet, while he acknowledges their cunning [*List*], he does not think its instigators great, nor the aims of the revolt anything to be celebrated. One particular example is Paul the Apostle, who, although he had a tremendous impact upon the world in Nietzsche's view, is referred to as a "hate-obsessed false coiner" and "dysangelist" (*A*, §42) that is characterized by "rabbinical insolence" (*A*, §41). On the other hand, compare this to Nietzsche's view of Napoleon. His achievements certainly had far reaching implications in history, but with him "the ideal of the ancients itself emerged in flesh and blood and with unheard-of splendour" (*GM*, I, §16). Nietzsche refers to him as the "incarnation" of "the noble ideal as such" (*GM*, I, §16).[21] Consequently, the value of the extent of an achievement is conditional, at least partly, upon the achiever having a noble character, and the content of the goal.

4 Compound View

We have so far seen that the *Pure Character View* and the *Pure Achievement View* are both insufficient for what Nietzsche understood greatness to consist in. The implication of our reasons for this is that a compound view, where both character

[21] It is worth noting that it could be said Nietzsche's view of Napoleon is at times ambiguous. For example, in the same passage, Nietzsche refers to him as a "synthesis of the *inhuman* and the *superhuman*…" (*GM*, I, §16). This may indicate an understanding of Napoleon as a noble individual whom nonetheless directs his activities towards goals which Nietzsche finds appalling, or, at the very least, unworthy of admiration. I am unsure as to whether this passage can support such a claim on its own.

traits *and* achievements must be necessary components of greatness, is appropriate. The five potential interpretations of Nietzsche's position on the table up to this point are:

(1) Human greatness solely resides in individuals; such individuals are great solely in virtue of exercising certain qualities of character, irrespective of the content of the goals they pursue (the *Pure Character View*).
(2) Human greatness solely resides in excellent achievements, irrespective of the achiever's character traits (the *Pure Achievement View)*.
(3) Human greatness resides in individuals who exercise certain qualities of character *and* have the *capacity* for worthy achievements.
(4) Human greatness is manifested by individuals who exercise certain qualities of character *and* by their *actual* worthy achievements.
(5) Human greatness is manifested by individuals who exercise certain qualities of character *and* by their *actual* worthy achievements, which must have a significant impact in the world.

I have argued that (1) and (2) are implausible as readings of Nietzsche. I have also argued that Nietzsche likely rejects (3) in favour of (4), which I accept as the most plausible reading. I reserve from commitment to (5) on the grounds of a lack of substantial textual support, but leave the possibility for a defence of the view open.

However, there are two important features of greatness that I have not mentioned so far. Firstly, I have assumed up to this point that greatness is a threshold notion: either one is great or one is not (with perhaps some borderline cases). On this view, there is a dividing line regarding the degree to which one satisfies the conditions of achievement and character, beyond which one counts as great and within one counts as not great. But even so, the properties of greatness that I have argued Nietzsche identifies admit of degree. For instance, some may have a greater degree of organic unity among their drives, or satisfy their will to power more than others who also count as great. Moreover, some may have further reaching achievements. As result, it seems some can in principle be greater than others, or as Janaway puts it, greatness "is not an all-or-nothing affair."[22]

A second point to consider is that it is plausible that individuals can potentially lose the property of greatness over time: that one could cease to count as great. Nietzsche suggests one possible route to this in his account of human drives, which, as we saw in section one, he understands to be necessary for greatness when diverse yet strong and unified. Nietzsche writes in *Daybreak* that drives can "wither away like a plant without rain" (*D*, §119) if they are not regularly nourished. For example, after a certain time without satisfying a creative drive to paint, that drive in an artist may well "grow faint" (*D*, §119; cf. *BGE*, §274).

Janaway suggests that this passage from *Daybreak* is evidence that Nietzsche believes a drive can disappear from the agent completely (though not necessarily wilfully).[23] An alternative view, suggested by Katsafanas, is that a drive "cannot be

[22] Janaway, (2012), p. 191.

[23] Ibid., p. 190.

eliminated," rather its strength can just be depleted to a degree in which it no longer influences an agent.[24] Whether Janaway's stronger claim or Katsafanas' weaker claim is more plausible is an interesting question, but it is not directly relevant for my purposes here. Either view can recognise that greatness requires strong, diverse and unified drives. The relevant point being that if Nietzsche holds both:

(A) Greatness necessarily requires drives be strong, diverse and unified.
(B) Drives can fade over time to the extent that they don't influence an agent.

Then in principle:

(C) One can have the property of greatness at one time t and not at another t^1.

One example that captures this line of thought is that of the character Robert Baratheon from the novel *A Song of Ice and Fire*. At one point, Robert was considered a renowned and fearsome warrior. He had diverse but strong tastes in feasting, romance, in matters of war, and took pleasure in challenges. However, after winning the crown and having no more enemies to battle, Robert became complacent and immersed himself in drink and excessive feasting. As a result, he gained a large amount of weight, and his appetite for contest and achievement diminished. In Nietzschean terms, at least some of Robert's drives diminished in strength while a small number of others began to dominate unchecked and disjointed.

Nietzsche makes another important claim which may lend support to this idea of one's having the property of greatness at one time and not another. In §273 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche explicitly distinguishes between the disposition towards others of a person *striving for* greatness, and one *already* great. Regarding the former, he writes that "a human being who strives for something great regards everybody he meets on his way either as a means or as a delay and hindrance—or as a temporary resting-place" (*BGE*, §273; cf. *UM*, III, §6). In contrast, he continues: "The lofty *goodness* towards his fellow men which is proper to him becomes possible only when he has reached his height and he rules" (*BGE*, §273). The idea here being that a great individual—one who has astounding control and an abundance of power to reach their ends—has no need for treating others instrumentally or perhaps callously. Rather, he is generous and courteous on account of his lack of dependence on anyone. As Nietzsche writes later in *The Antichrist*: "when an exceptional human being handles the mediocre more gently than he does himself or his equals, this is not mere politeness of the heart—it is simply his *duty*…" (*A*, §57).[25]

[24] Katsafanas, (2016), p. 100.

[25] In a note one year earlier, Nietzsche appears to suggest a different view. The *already* "great man," he writes, wants "no 'sympathetic' heart, but servants, tools; in his intercourse with men he is always intent on *making* something out of them" (*KSA*, 1885, 34[96]; *WP*, §962). Leiter quotes this passage (2002, p. 117), and from only the first half of *BGE*, §273, to support the view that treating others instrumentally is a necessary character trait of the great individual. As I discuss above, the second half of *BGE*, §273 importantly casts doubt on whether the isolated notebook entry can serve the purpose Leiter intends. Nonetheless it is of interest that Nietzsche may have altered his view.

In making this distinction between the need for cold determination in *striving* for greatness, and the kindness and graciousness of the *already* great individual, Nietzsche emphasises the developmental dimension of greatness. This dimension is additionally relevant to Nietzsche's drawing of attention to the importance of luck (discussed above) as a significant condition for the cultivation of great individuals. If "fortunate circumstances" (*HH*, §164) can lead to the emergence and development of a great individual in realizing their potential excellence, then it is perfectly plausible to allow for the opposite to occur: that a stroke of bad luck or misfortune could, in some cases at least, deprive a person of the property of greatness at a later point in their life. With these distinct types of cases in mind, we can perceive more sharply Nietzsche's understanding of the contingency of possessing greatness as a property.

5 Conclusion

I have not sought to discuss every controversy surrounding the concept of greatness here, but I have attempted to provide clarity on at least three ambiguities and assumptions regarding its criteria. Firstly, and most central to this paper, I distinguished talent, taste, achievement, and noble character traits, and considered their relevance to greatness. This results in a Nietzschean understanding of the concept as extremely exclusive. Secondly, I raised the question of whether greatness is a matter of actually instantiating these properties, or merely having the potential to achieve them. I concluded by suggesting that greatness is likely a matter of actually having these properties. One reason for thinking so was due to a third point: I discussed whether Nietzsche considers a particular extrinsic condition—the reception of works in history—as necessary for greatness. This question is significant, yet it has received relatively little direct attention in the secondary literature. I have suggested that this condition does, at least at one stage of Nietzsche's thought, seem to be necessary. Ultimately however, I remain open on this important issue given the lack of consistent and substantial textual support. These distinctions, and the various interrelations of the components that I have addressed in this paper, leave us with a Nietzschean conception of human greatness which is highly nuanced. While Nietzsche does not always provide a definitive answer to these issues, his sensitivity to their significance is substantial to warrant the attention of ethicists independently of exegesis.

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