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Chapter 12

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Nietzsche and the "aesthetics of character"

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On the Genealogy of Morality calls for a "critique of moral values" (*GM*, Preface, 6), a critique which has no ambition to be value-neutral: "the value of these values should itself … be examined." At least if the object of the critique is morality as a whole, the values invoked cannot themselves be moral, on pain of making the critique self-defeating. So the question arises what these values – in particular, what Nietzsche's ideals of and for humanity – might be. It has been proposed, citing evidence as much from the *Genealogy* as elsewhere, that the values in question are "aesthetic" (Foot 2002a: 147).[1] Indeed Nietzsche's ethical thought seems to act as a kind of flypaper to the word "aesthetic," which sticks to it in a variety of more and less appropriate meanings. However, given the availability of the distinction between the moral and the ethical, which marks out morality – in ways

indebted of course to Nietzsche himself – as a "particular development of the ethical" (Williams 1985[BIB-172]: 6),[2] we do not need the term "aesthetic" in order to label a set of ideals simply insofar as they do not belong to morality: if the "aesthetic" label is to justify itself, it needs to do more work than that. And to understand what work it is capable of doing, we need to understand better what it is for an ideal – an ideal of character or of human living, that is, rather than an ideal of the appearance of art objects – to be aesthetic. The aim of this chapter is to do that, with a view to establishing that, tempting as it is to reach for the phrase "aesthetic" in connection with Nietzsche, it is poorly motivated as a description of what is distinctive about his ideals of character.

The direction I shall take is as follows. First I suggest that "(merely) aesthetic" is the way *any* non-moral ideal of character might be expected to look from within the perspective of morality, narrowly understood (section 1). But since we can't understand anything about Nietzsche's ideals of character without including his critique of morality in the story, if we want to describe how Nietzsche saw his own ideals of character, we will have every reason *not* to describe them as aesthetic in this sense. And, to the extent that we are ourselves impressed by Nietzsche's critique of morality, we will also have reason not to describe ideals of character as aesthetic in this sense *in propria voce*.

Next (section 2) I distinguish another use of "aesthetic" in connection with ideals of character, in which it labels either a kind of conception of character Nietzsche did not have, or is simply synonymous with "ideals" of no distinctively aesthetic variety. Then in section 3, I outline a phenomenon – though not the only one – that's quite properly labelled by the phrase "having an aesthetic ideal of character." Roughly, it's the phenomenon of a person's life being dominated, in a certain way, by a model of how to live that is derived from narrative art. (It could thus be derived from cinema or opera or epic poetry, but in this chapter I keep to fiction.) However, whether one subscribes to a narrow conception of morality or not, for a person's life to be dominated in this way is a character defect. It doesn't of course follow from this fact that Nietzsche didn't have an aesthetic ideal of character in this sense, but it ought to make us think twice before interpreting him this way.

With these various understandings before our minds, it should be easier to ask (as I do in sections 4–5) if there's any real work left for the notion of an aesthetics of character to do: that is, whether there are ideals of character which remain discernible from outside the narrow perspective of morality, which are genuine ideals (i.e. not defects), and which there is some point in picking out as distinctively aesthetic. My conclusion is that there are not.

1. It's always hard to keep Aristotle out of the discussion when human excellences and defects are at issue, and a brief mention here too will be helpful to focus ideas. For the "aesthetic" label has been attached to Aristotle's conceptions of human excellence as well as to Nietzsche's, and with the perspective of (narrow) morality behind it. Indeed it was noticing that this (as it strikes me) mistake is made about Aristotle that suggested to me the possibility that the same mistake may in part account for the temptation to flourish the term "aesthetic" in connection with Nietzsche.

Distinguishing between the way the noble (*to kalon*) functions as an end of action in the *Rhetoric* (*R*) and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), Roger Crisp comments that in the former work, beneficial actions are said to be noble and thereby worth doing, whereas in *NE*, "virtuous action is solely for the sake of the noble" (Crisp 2003[BIB-028]). So, Crisp says, in the *NE* Aristotle gives as the ground-level reason for acting virtuously not the possibly non-eudaimonistic reason of the interests of others – possibly non-eudaimonistic because one's own eudaimonia and the interests of others might conflict – but the eudaimonistic reason of the good to oneself of acting nobly. Whereas in *R*, acts are worth doing because they're noble and noble because they're beneficial to others, in the *NE* acts are worth doing because they're noble and their nobility makes them worth doing because nobility is, fundamentally, good *for the agent*.

Whether this is correct as an interpretation of Aristotle is not of interest here – all I'm interested in is the contrast between the two conceptions of nobility.[3] For Crisp then immediately goes on:

> The "aesthetic" aspect of nobility [in *NE*] of course makes this charge all the easier. The agent [in *NE*] is being encouraged to attend to the beauty of his character, rather than the interests of others. … Aristotle converts nobility [in *R*] from a morally loaded notion capable of providing its own reasons resting on the interests of others to an aesthetic feature of the agent's own character, the significance of which rests not so much on the interests of others but on the contribution a beautiful character can make to the agent's own happiness.
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> (2003: 78)

However, would anything have been lost, in the expression of his view, had Crisp said simply "encouraged to attend *to his own character*," rather than specifically to its beauty? I think not. In a slightly later passage, Crisp goes on to say that Aristotle's portraits of virtuous people in Books II–V of *NE* "can be seen as a further development of an aesthetics of character consisting in descriptions of the attractions of the noble life, and the unattractiveness of the shameful" (2003: 78) – no explicit mention of beauty here. What's driving the application of the label "aesthetic" to nobility as an

ideal, then, seems not to be specifically the *beauty* of a noble character (as might be the case if nobility were then explained as involving some formal feature of character such as harmony among the faculties or among one's ends) but the more non-specific notion of nobility's *attractiveness to its possessor*. That is to say, where the goodness of virtue is fundamentally explained by reference to the good of its intended beneficiaries, we have a *moral* ideal; by contrast it's enough in Crisp's parlance to label an ideal of character "aesthetic" that the goodness of virtue is fundamentally explained by reference to the good of its possessor.

With this understanding of Crisp's use of the "aesthetic" tag in mind – which, by the way, was not developed with the intention of offering any reflection on Nietzsche – now consider the following remarks of Christopher Janaway's. Nietzsche's targets in the *Genealogy* are Rée and Schopenhauer, Janaway says, who assume that the essence of morality is *das Unegoistische*; Nietzsche's is "a critique of value conceived as selflessness" (Janaway 2007[BIB-067]: 9). His revaluation, meanwhile, consists in "assigning positive value to characteristics of human behaviour that have been decried as 'egoistic', and negative value to those that have been lauded as 'unegoistic' or 'selfless'" (2007[BIB-067]: 13). The dividing line between Rée and Schopenhauer on the one hand and Nietzsche on the other would seem to fall, then, exactly at the point which divides the "moral" Aristotle of the

Rhetoric (on Crisp's interpretation) from the "aesthetic" Aristotle of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Nonetheless, is there yet a good reason for describing Nietzsche's ideals of character as aesthetic? I would say not. For one thing, the "aesthetic" label is rather wasted if what attracts it is only the non-specific feature of goodness to the possessor, since there seem to be non-moral ideals that are *not* illuminatingly described as aesthetic – being a good husband or a good friend, for example. More importantly, to apply the label to Nietzsche's ideals of character for the reason Crisp applies it to Aristotle's in the *NE* would be precisely to affirm, though as it were from the other side, the centrality of the distinction between "egoistic" and "selfless" that Crisp insists on. But it's evident that once "this whole antithesis between 'egoistic' and 'unegoistic' [had] forced itself more and more on man's conscience" (*GM*, I, 2), something had gone wrong, so I take it that though Nietzsche indeed wants to bring some characteristics "[formerly] decried as 'egoistic'" into the fold of human excellences, he wants to do so not by affirming the distinction and as it were reversing the signs but by moving beyond the distinction altogether. From a point of view "beyond good and evil," it will be easy to recognize some characteristics formerly decried as egoistic *and* some not so decried as human excellences, because the good to oneself/good to others distinction will have become unimportant. But with that distinction, out too goes the justification for

describing excellences of character as "aesthetic" simply on the grounds that they are attractive to their possessor.

Crisp's mention of "beauty" of character recalls an even weaker justification for the "aesthetic" label as applied to ideals of character, namely that an excellence of character is an aesthetic excellence if its possessor takes pleasure in the thought of having it. This is distinct from Crisp's Sidgwickian justification just dismissed, since the thought of having a given excellence may be pleasing to its possessor even if what fundamentally *explains* its status as an excellence – and what earns it the "aesthetic" label on the Sidgwickian justification – is something other than its goodness to its possessor (its goodness to others, for example). This weaker justification could be passed over altogether were it not that one trips over the thought that excellences of character are "beauties" of character in all sorts of places, perhaps as a residue of a more fully fleshed out eighteenth-century conception of a "beautiful soul"[4] (scoffed at, incidentally, by Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*[5]). Consider for example the following passages from the early nineteenth-century theologian J. F. Fries:[6]

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> It is only by reference to the ideals of sublimity and beauty that man can be truly pleasing or displeasing to himself. The only thing which duty commands … is the beauty of the life of man.

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(Fries 1982[BIB-040]: 15)

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> I wish and will, in the depths of my heart, one thing alone – that my life should correspond to … moral ideals, that I should raise myself, in accordance with those ideals, to nobility and beauty of soul.

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(Fries 1982[BIB-040]: 31)

The passages show just how empty aesthetic vocabulary can be in connection with character. For when one looks at how "duty" is explained, it turns out that its "primary requirements" are "honour and justice"; the "moral ideals" in the second passage are "the requirements of virtue." Now the inference from "pleasing to its possessor" to "aesthetic" is weak enough, since the class of pleasing things – Greek vases, rest, hot toast – seems to include many things which are not aesthetically pleasing. But just suppose we agree to use the word "aesthetic" in connection with traits of character so that any excellence which pleases its possessor (or perhaps anyone else) counts as an aesthetic excellence. The trouble is that *any* excellence will count as aesthetic, since it's possible to enjoy the thought of one's possessing any trait of character that one regards as good. In particular, narrowly moral ideals – including, presumably, meeting the "requirements of virtue" as Fries conceives them, though the point does not seem worth pursuing in detail – will count as aesthetic ideals. Hence "aesthetic" as so defined will be hopeless as a way of capturing the contrast between Nietzsche's own ideals, whatever they were, and those he rejected.

2. Just the same problem besets a second possible kind of understanding of the notion of an aesthetics of character, which I'll introduce gradually. "The most crucial flaw that [Nietzsche] finds in the interpretation that produces moral values," Nehamas writes, is the presupposition that "everyone should live according to a single code of conduct" (Nehamas 1985[BIB-106]: 209), though "the avowed aim to be … universal and to apply equally to all human beings on the basis of reasons provided by some features in which we all essentially share" may, he argues, also be shared by "codes of conduct that [are not] moral in the specific sense discussed in the *Genealogy*" (1985: 224). But if this flaw may be common both to moral and to non-moral codes of conduct, how is Nietzsche to respond? According to Nehamas, his escape route was "to create an artwork out of himself," since this effort "is … also his effort to offer a positive view [of how to live] without falling back into the dogmatic tradition he so distrusted" (1985: 8). The ideal character instantiated but not described by Nietzsche's work "constitutes an implicit commendation of that character, and at the same time constitutes an obstacle to its being a general model … that could be followed by others" (1985: 230). Once again I'm not going to comment on Nehamas's very demanding conception of Nietzsche's "aestheticism" (1985: 7; 1998: 10), except to say that if Nietzsche really does not describe his ideal character, how can we make sense of the idea that

he "produces a perfect instance of it" (1985: 230)? The concept of an instance is the concept of a relation between a particular and a type, and "no description" sounds as if it implies "no type." But surely Nietzsche does describe, partially at least, his ideal character – so we have a type, and thus something others can seek to exemplify (or not).

Does that mean Nietzsche himself is, self-defeatingly, a dogmatist, maintaining that "everyone should live according to a single code of conduct"? No. There's a gap, first of all, between a "universalizing" theory and the very strong claim that "everyone should live according to a single code of conduct": the latter is a case of the former, but not the only case. Thus a theory that says that the way one should live is determined by one's status is a universalizing theory, because it prescribes a way of life to anyone with a given status, but – at least if there is such a thing as difference of status – not a theory that prescribes the same code of conduct to everyone. So if all Nietzsche wanted to reject was the very strong claim, there would be plenty of room for him to prescribe ways of life to others: "fashioning himself into a literary character" is not the only way out of claiming that "a single mode of life … [is] best for all" (1998: 13).

But besides universalizing but status-adjusted prescriptions, there is another gradation on the scale of answers to "how should one live?" in between the very strong claim and literary self-fashioning. This is the

thought that, even for people of equal status, there is a plurality of good ways of living. It's this thought that Philippa Foot seems to have partly in mind when she says that Nietzsche "affirm[s] a special kind of aestheticism":

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> For an artist, rules would indeed be beside the point: the goodness of what he or she makes cannot be the same as the goodness of another artist's work, as if there could be a manual for producing what's good [in art].

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(Foot 2002a: 147)

What justifies the "aesthetic" label here is that, since Nietzsche sets out to describe what's good about a particular character or way of living in such a way as not to make any claim on others to live that way, the goodness in question must be aesthetic, or else such a claim *would* be being made. This justification, however, falls apart under scrutiny. Here it's instructive to compare Irwin on Kierkegaard's "aesthetic" agent (Irwin 2009[BIB-066]: 292), who pursues certain ends "without any conviction that they matter, but simply because they appeal" to him. Of course the aesthetic agent's long-term ends must matter more than various short-term ends that may jostle with them at this or that point of decision, otherwise it's hard to conceive of the "aesthetic" agent as a rational agent at all. The point is that it doesn't matter to him that he has the long-term ends he has, rather than some others.

The description of the "aesthetic agent" certainly gives us an interpretation of a non-prescriptive conception of how to live. But it's too weak: if it really doesn't matter to one that one has this or that set of long-term ends, it's doubtful that there is room for one to think of these ends as good, since to think of them as good in some way would surely be for them to start mattering. And it doesn't fit Nietzsche at all: it seems to matter to him deeply how one lives – or, perhaps in order not to prejudge questions about his "universalism," at least how *he* lives.[7] On the other hand there seems to be plenty of room to hold an ideal – a conception of how to live such that one can say what's good about it – without any implication that other people are required to live according to it. Indeed one might think this is what an ideal *is*: a conception of how to live well that goes beyond what is required of one. So if the point is that Nietzsche thinks there's "no manual" for living well, we do not need to claim his ideals of life are distinctively aesthetic in order to make it. This is not to say that any ideal would be acceptable to Nietzsche, just on the grounds that it doesn't specify ways in which one *has* to act. But if the term "aesthetic ideal" is just code for "ideal," once again the concept won't help us to identify what's distinctive about the ideals he did *not* reject.[8]

3. I turn now to the third principal meaning of "aesthetic" I want to distinguish in relation to ideals of character, a sense in which it labels a

character defect. The novel has been picking over the remains of its own victims almost since the genre began, and one of its abiding themes has been the various ways in which a person’s life can be taken over, and for the worse, by literary models: again and again we find characters in novels who want their own lives to be novel-like, and who are thus constantly on the lookout for representative moments, emblems, turning points, resolutions, as evidences that the unscripted muddle of real living is after all unfolding like a book. A well-known and light-hearted example is Austen’s treatment of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey.* Since her expectations of Northanger are molded by fiction, the real abbey with its windows “so large, so clear, so light,” can hardly fail to disappoint: “To an imagination which had hoped for the smallest divisions [*sc*. windowpanes], and the heaviest stone-work, for painted glass, dirt, and cobwebs, the difference was very distressing” (Austen 1980[BIB-007]: 128). Any number of other novels share this general theme: *Emma*, *Madame Bovary*, *Don Quixote*.

I’m going to focus, however, on a portrait of a defect closely analogous to Catherine’s but painted in more sombre tones, namely the character of Lord Jim in Conrad’s novel of that title. Jim’s career at sea begins when “after a course of light holiday literature his vocation … had declared itself” (Conrad 1900[BIB-025]: 4). Aboard his training ship, he would

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> live in his mind the sea-life of light literature. He saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane, swimming through a surf with a line; or as a lonely castaway, barefooted and half naked, walking on uncovered reefs in search of shellfish to stave off starvation. He confronted savages on tropical shores, quelled mutinies on the high seas, and in a small boat upon the ocean kept up the hearts of despairing men – always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book.

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(1900: 5)

As first mate on the *Patna* carrying eight hundred sleeping pilgrims, his thoughts once again were

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> full of valorous deeds: he loved these dreams and the success of his imaginary achievements.

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(1900: 13)

But when a few moments later the *Patna* strikes a reef, Jim like all the other crew members jumps ship while the pilgrims are still asleep, leaving them (for all he knows) to drown. He spends the rest of his life hiding from others' knowledge of the episode in more and more remote corners of the world, eventually establishing a satisfactory life for himself as the unofficial governor of an island. However, raiders arrive and though Jim guarantees

the safety of the local head man's son, the son is killed. So, despite his mistress's pleading, Jim gives himself up to the head man, and is shot by him: as the narrator says,

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> Not in the wildest days of his boyish visions could he have seen the alluring shape of such an extraordinary success! … But we can see him, an obscure conqueror of fame, tearing himself out of the arms of a jealous love at the sign, at the call of his exalted egoism. He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct.

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(1900: 253)

The book has received an edifying reading (Weston 1975[BIB-169]), according to which Jim feels *shame* for his early *cowardice*, but *redeems* himself in his own eyes in the end by acting with *integrity* – he does after all *say* he stakes his life on the safety of the head man's son – in just the way he had failed to do before. But this reading overlooks Conrad's insistence on the role of fiction in Jim's thinking. This is not to say that people can't be straightforwardly inspired to exemplary moral conduct by reading fiction – no doubt they can. Nor is it to say that Jim doesn't feel shame for his conduct on the *Patna*, and indeed feels it because his conduct was cowardly. Nonetheless – at least if to have an ideal isn't per se a character defect, for all that the content of the ideal might make it into one – the fictional models

that dominate Jim's thought are not properly thought of as his ideals, because to be dominated in that way by a fictional model, no matter what its content, *is* a defect of character. So what is the difference? The question deserves a systematic treatment but here I can only provide a sketch of an answer. For one thing, there's a difference with respect to truth: possessors both of ideals and of fictional models want to believe that they are true of them, but with fictional models – until reality presses itself so insistently that it's no longer effective – wishful thinking is a typical mechanism for satisfying this want, whereas this is not so with ideals. This connects with a second point, about self-criticism: ideals give rise to self-criticism of a kind that can be both continuous and realistic, whereas fictional models on the whole militate against realistic self-assessment, only to allow it in as a last resort in a form that is both total and damning. Thirdly and relatedly, Jim's cowardice bears an oddly oblique relation to his shame: his shame does not, for example, express itself in thoughts about his potential victims. Indeed Jim is barely capable of acknowledging that he *did* jump ship, so reluctant is he to acknowledge the gap between himself and the flattering picture of himself borrowed from fiction. The primary object of his shame is not his cowardice in jumping ship, but the mismatch between the flattering picture and reality. As to "redeeming himself," by the end of the novel the *Patna* episode is years behind him and only the fact that he is "romantic" –

Conrad's word for subjection to models of conduct derived from fiction – freezes his attention on that episode and obscures the fact that the most important issue he now faces is quite a different one. A less "romantic" character – and one therefore whose thoughts were better at tracking the contours of his own changing reality – would not have needed to parade his integrity to himself, because he would have had a greater sense of the solidity of his life as it then was (the "living woman" whom he trades for a "shadowy ideal of conduct"), of his then life as a going concern.

Before we go on, we need a term for the defect of character I have been trying to outline. Conrad's "romantic" of course suggests one, but it is already fully booked so I opt for a well-established alternative – though it has to stay in italics – in memory of one of the defect's most famous exemplars: *bovarysme*.[9] To head off the suggestion that *bovarysme* is a defect that only besets fictional characters, I want to look at one more case of it, admittedly a case evidenced in a piece of written work and a work of some considerable literary merit at that, but not a piece of fiction – a piece of autobiography. Peter Fuller's memoir *Marches Past* (Fuller 1986[BIB-042]) is partly a self-conscious record of the author's struggle with his *bovarysme*, and therefore partly resembles *Lord Jim* insofar as it is a literary representation of someone with that affliction (though in Fuller's case a really existing someone). But insofar as Fuller's struggle is unsuccessful –

Fuller displays his self-fictionalizing tendency in his very effort to describe how he "breaks out" of it to "real human relations" – the book is also simply evidence of his *bovarysme*, not a representation of it. Fuller, that is, appears to have suffered from what Conrad in *Lord Jim* only represented.

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> Fuller had for many years, he tells us, a pet axolotl, which as he explains is the embryonic state of the Mexican salamander … [It] need never metamorphose and may even breed in its larval form.

That is to say, he had in a tank in his room a symbol of emotional stuntedness (forever the embryo) and cut-offness from other people (the tank's glass sides). In the course of the memoir Fuller comes to hate the axolotl ("it infuriated me because it refused to grow up"; 1986: 60) and is glad when it dies because, he says, "I have reached the other side of the window-pane … My assassination of it was an act of self-realization" (1986: 63). One senses, however, that his "assassination" – an overstatement in any case: the creature in fact seems to die either of illness or of an accidental overdose of axolotl medicine – isn't an act of self-realization, but only the symbol of one. Self-realization occurs in the narrative of his life that Fuller constructs with the animal as a prop, but whether real life catches up is less clear. And he knows it: when at the end of the book Fuller describes the birth of his daughter, he tells us "This was real: not a watery, wordy or painted birth" (1986: 181). (The "watery" birth is the symbolic birth into a

salamander which the axolotl would have undergone if Fuller had smashed its tank.) But even this real birth, though of course it really happened, is ready to hand for Fuller as a symbol of "breaking out" to "real relations with others" – after all there is no necessity to end the book's narrative when his daughter is born. Indeed nothing could be more conveniently symbolic than a real rather than a symbolic birth, and even as Fuller weaves real events into the narrative web he compulsively casts over his own life as it unfolds, as if hoping thereby to stabilize them, events get the better of him: a postscript to the book owns up that

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> Just as I was beginning to break out of the citadel of the past and myself, and beginning to be able to enjoy my relationship with [his wife] … she left.

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(1986: 181)

Despite the instability of his own narrative construction, his imprisonment in it is guaranteed by his incapacity – of which he's painfully aware – not to convert [["his tendency … to convert"? I prefer the negative formulation as it better conveys the idea that it's something Fuller is struggling against]] everything he comes across into a literary symbol. "Damn! Damn!," he says. "As I read back what I have written, I realize how living itself becomes all 'set up'" (1986: 136); seemingly overwhelmed by the symbolic possibilities

of a plate of oysters, he longs for "an oyster which is an oyster which is an oyster."

I have dwelt at length on *bovarysme* partly because of the intrinsic interest of differentiating the bad from the (presumably possible) good ways in which one can be inspired or guided in one's life by fiction. But there's also of course a connection with Nietzsche. Because of their debt to an art form, a perfectly good word for the relation to fictional models characteristic of *bovarysme* could be "having aesthetic ideals."[10] And though the thought is not to the fore in the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche famously claimed that the "great and rare art" of "'giv[ing] style' to one's character" "is practised by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses that their nature has to offer and then fit them into an artistic plan" (*GS*, 290); we "want to be poets of our lives" (*GS*, 299). Setting on one side the highly specialized claim that Nietzsche's literary output itself constitutes the practice of this "art" (Nehamas 1985[BIB-106], 1998[BIB-107]), it's at least not a foolish interpretation of Nietzsche to read him as holding an "aesthetics of character" precisely insofar as he urges us self-consciously to shape our lives in such a way that they have a plot.[11] But that is *bovarysme*: aesthetic ideals in this sense are false ideals. It does not of course follow from this that Nietzsche didn't have them, and I return to the question in section 5 below. For the time being it is

enough to have fixed a sense of "aesthetic ideals" in which they are something to be avoided.

4. So far I have set up three models of what an aesthetics of character might be. The first was any ideal of character which comes out on the wrong side of the self-regarding/other-regarding divide which is central to morality's taxonomy of character traits: this clearly picks out ideals as aesthetic on account of their content. The second and third, by contrast, were content-neutral: any conception of how to live that is presented as worthwhile but not mandatory – that is, any ideal; and *bovarysme* (which is a way of relating to an ideal that makes it a false ideal, whatever its content). If these three exhaust the possibilities for the "aesthetics of character," perhaps there's good reason to give up using the term in connection with Nietzsche – and indeed altogether. But do they? Janaway maintains that one aspect of Nietzsche's positive ideal of individuality or self-love is

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> aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic self-satisfaction, the shaping of one's character so that every part of it contributes to a meaningful whole in the manner of a work of art.

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(Janaway 2007[BIB-067]: 254)

The idea here differs from the empty idea of a "beautiful soul" I dismissed in section 1<<Cross-ref.>>, in that a reason is offered for calling the self-satisfaction in question distinctively aesthetic, namely that its object is not

just any feature of one's character that one regards as good, but (to put it vaguely) its shape. So if the notion of a character's shape can be given a sense that's sufficiently close to (say) the shape of a vase – a property which is uncontroversially apt to elicit aesthetic appreciation – the reason offered will be a good one.[12] Meanwhile Aaron Ridley notes that "art," in certain crucial passages in the *Genealogy*, "refers to the imposition of form on raw material" (1998b[BIB-128]: 136).[13] Since the characteristic that draws Nietzsche's admiration above all in the *Genealogy* is, Ridley argues, the capacity to impose form, his "admiration for the master-interpreters he describes, and for their master-interpretations" constitutes an "aesthetic" (1998b[BIB-128]: 137). Ridley's point is clearly related to Janaway's, because among the things on which Nietzsche says humanity's form-giving is practised is humanity itself, and this includes (though it's not restricted to) the form-giver's own character. If the giver and the receiver of form are one and the same, then, crediting Nietzsche with an aesthetics of character apparently has a double justification.[14]

To take the components of the double justification in turn, let's begin with the notion of a character's "shape." The notion needs to be handled with care. According to Nehamas, Nietzsche holds that

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> an admirable self consists in a large number of powerful and conflicting tendencies that are controlled and harmonized. … Style … involves controlled multiplicity and resolved conflict.

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(1985: 7)

But this doesn't seem quite right. Nietzsche writes:

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> In an age of disintegration … a person will have the legacy of multiple lineages in his body, which means conflicting (and often not merely conflicting) drives and value standards that fight each other and rarely leave each other alone. … [I]f conflict and war affect such a nature as one *more* stimulus and goad to life – , and if genuine proficiency and finesse in waging war with himself (which is to say: the ability to control and outwit himself) are inherited and cultivated along with his most powerful and irreconcilable drives, then what emerge are those amazing, incomprehensible, and unthinkable ones, those human riddles destined for victory and seduction; Alcibiades and Caesar are the most exquisite expressions of this type.

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(*BGE*, 200)[15]

Evidently Alcibiades and Caesar are cited as paragons. So Nehamas is right that Nietzsche prized "self-control" (Nehamas: "controlled multiplicity"), but wrong to identify it with harmony (Nehamas: "controlled *and*

harmonized"). The kind of control in question is, on the contrary, that which consists in tolerating *dis*harmony ("conflict and war") – being such that conflicting tendencies can coexist in oneself *without* one's succumbing to the temptation either to disown one or more of them, or to harmonize them. The point is confirmed by a passage in *Ecce Homo* in which Nietzsche credits himself with this quality:

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> The task of *revaluing all values* might have required more abilities than have ever been combined in any one individual, and in particular contradictory abilities that could not be allowed to disturb or destroy one another. … not mixing anything, not "reconciling" anything; an incredible multiplicity that is nonetheless the converse of chaos.

ES

(*EH*, "Why I Am So Clever," 9)

However, as long as we take to heart the injunction "to 'reconcile' nothing," and so remember that "the opposite of chaos" isn't "harmony," but simply "form,"[16] the point that the shape of a character – the way its parts relate to one another – is an ideal for Nietzsche is in order.

However, to get from this to the conclusion that Nietzsche's ideal of shape constitutes an *aesthetics* of character, it's not enough that the shape of a vase is an aesthetic property and that there's *some* sense of "shape" on which Nietzsche values character for its shape: the question is whether *that*

sense of "shape" is sufficiently close to the unarguably aesthetic one. Nor is it enough to show that a character could be admirable on account of its shape but bad in some other way. This is not to ask whether Nietzsche would admire someone on account of their character's shape despite their being consistently and thoroughgoingly wicked: the question seems irrelevant since "shape" in the sense Nietzsche admires [["in the sense in which Nietzsche admires it"/ "in the sense Nietzsche admires" The first: "in the sense in which Nietzsche admires it"]] has little or nothing to do with consistency. But it does seem possible that he could admire someone for the shape of their character who had both (and unreconciled) good and bad character traits, and I don't think we have to confine this thought experiment to the case where the bad traits are just bad from the perspective of morality narrowly conceived – they can be bad on any sane evaluative outlook. Now picking out the shape of a character as an independently admirable trait leaves room for judgments of the form "(some) bad parts, good whole," and indeed it should: we *can* surely admire somebody, independently of the value of their individual traits, for the fact that they live with them without self-deceiving attempts to tidy themselves up. But it doesn't follow that "shape" is an aesthetic notion. For since "shape" doesn't mean "harmony," what it means is well enough captured by the thought that conflicting drives or experiences or parts of oneself should not be *disowned* or *denied* or

repressed. And this ideal sounds at least as much like an ideal of psychic (or personal) *health* as it does like a distinctively aesthetic one. Did Nietzsche himself think "shape" was an aesthetic ideal? Of course there is evidence that he did: the famous "giving style" passage already quoted from *The Gay Science* goes on that those who practise this art go on "until … even weaknesses delight the eye" (*GS*, 290). However, there is also some evidence that he thought of it as an ideal of health:

EXT

> A strong and well-formed man digests his experiences (including deeds and misdeeds) as he digests his meals, even when he has hard lumps to swallow.

ES

(*GM*, III, 16)[17]

If I am right, the latter way of classifying the shape ideal is better motivated than the former, and the case for crediting Nietzsche with an aesthetics of character has not yet been made out.

5. I turn now to the second component of the double justification, the fact that Nietzsche admires not only characters which *have* shape or form, in the sense explained, but also the capacity for *form-giving* itself. I don't mean to suggest that this is Nietzsche's *only* ideal of character, but since it has been said to be specially closely related to the aesthetic, it is worth focusing on. The term *virtù* will do as a shorthand for it, and indeed Nietzsche uses it himself:

EXT

> What is happiness? – The feeling that power is *growing*, that some resistance has been overcome. … *Not* virtue, but prowess (virtue in the style of the Renaissance style, *virtù*).
>
> (*A* 2; cf. *EH*, "Why I Am So Clever," 1)

ES

Read back into Nietzsche's remarks about the fashioning of one's own character, it fits his idea that we constitute a "difficult, resisting … matter" (*GM*, II, 18): self-fashioning would then exemplify *virtù*, because the "difficulty" of the material is a measure of the *virtù* of the artist.[18] But though *virtù* is evidently a Nietzschean ideal, is it an aesthetic ideal?

Well, isn't it just obviously an aesthetic ideal, because in Nietzsche's view it's the quality quintessentially required in artists? But that would be too quick, since one might argue on just the same basis that in its core manifestations at least – i.e. as displayed in the production of works of art – *virtù* isn't an ideal of character at all, but a skill. The two concepts are distinct (Foot 2002b[BIB-034]: 8), because one can show off one's skill as a sculptor all the better by deliberately getting the proportions of the statue wrong, but one cannot display one's courage by deliberate acts of cowardice. Why does this difference make a difference? Because virtues of character "engage the will" (Foot, ibid.), including one's choice of ends, in a way skills don't. In reply, however, there are virtues of character – notably courage – which are not directly to do with one's choice of ends. Thus it's

my honesty that's displayed in my decision to tell the truth in a room full of people who don't want to hear it, but this can *also* display courage. So *virtù* could after all be a virtue of character, but an "executive" virtue. Moreover it's not just lack of practice that interferes with *virtù* – so do lack of spontaneity, timidity, excessive deference to others, as well as more complex psychological blockages, and these seem to "engage the will," as is evident from what's involved in trying to overcome them. But if they are traits of character, so is *virtù*.

A more worrying objection to the claim that *virtù* is an aesthetic ideal parallels the worry about shape. The thought that *virtù* is an aesthetic ideal draws its strength from the claim that it's the form-giver's virtue, and things that are thus given form are objects of aesthetic appraisal. But if in connection with one's own character, "shape" is better understood as an ideal of health than as an aesthetic ideal, this justification for treating *virtù* as an aesthetic ideal falls by the wayside.[19]

On the back of this objection comes another. Even if "shape" as an ideal of character were enough like an aesthetic property to justify the claim that in giving form to one's character one would be displaying *virtù*, is shape really something one *gives* one's character? The thought seems highly doubtful: the part played by the voluntary in the formation or re-formation of one's character, including any process by which one's conflicting traits

together achieve "shape" or "form," seem to be – as Nietzsche himself has in part taught us to see – both oblique and patchy. So if Nietzsche thought of his ideals as an aesthetics of character because of the opportunities for displaying *virtù* in relation to oneself, that would have been a bad reason. But in any case, it has been argued (Leiter 1998[BIB-083]; see also May 1999[BIB-093]: 189) that notwithstanding the "giving style" passage and others, it's problematic to ascribe to Nietzsche the thought that one stands to one's own character as an artist to his material: certainly the last thing he thinks is that "becoming what one is" involves making one's life conform to a preconceived plan. ("Becoming what you are presupposes that you do not have the slightest idea *what* you are"; *EH*, "Why I Am So Clever," 9.) This, indeed, is why it would be wrong to say Nietzsche advocated the twisted relation to narrative models characteristic of *bovarysme* under the guise of a genuine ideal.

Before we write off *virtù* as an ideal of character in Nietzsche, however, let's not forget that there are many things *besides* oneself that Nietzsche thinks admirable people give form to – including, most notably, other people. Indeed in the *Genealogy*, the theme of giving form to others (as e.g. *GM*, II, 17, "the shaping of a population, which had up to now been unrestrained and shapeless, into a fixed form"; cf. also *GM*, II, 12) is at least as prominent as that of forming oneself. In this context, the previous

objections to *virtù* as an ideal of character in Nietzsche do not apply. But now the question arises whether Nietzsche's prizing of *virtù* serves to mark Nietzsche's own ideals off from those he rejects, and in particular from the ideals of character that belong to morality. It might appear that the answer has to be "no," for two reasons. First, the form-givers in the *Genealogy* include the priests (both the "priestly caste" of the nobles [*GM*, I, 7] and the Jews and Christians); "the 'unegoistic' as a *moral* value" too was the product of "artist's cruelty" (*GM*, II, 18). Second, as May has argued (1999: 81ff.), asceticism according to Nietzsche is not life-denying per se but only when it "wants to be master, not over something in life but over life itself" (*GM*, III, 11). Indeed asceticism plays a leading part in Nietzsche's specification of his own ideals, as for example in the description of any anti-moralist ("for whom conquest, adventure, danger, and even pain have actually become a necessity; … acclimatized to thinner air higher up, to winter treks, ice and mountains in every sense") who might dare to "intertwin[e] … bad conscience with … all the ideals which up to now have been hostile to life" (*GM*, II, 24). So there's no form-giving/ascetic polarity which we might appeal to in order to divide *virtù* from the ideals Nietzsche rejects. However, it doesn't follow from this that *virtù* is not a distinctively Nietzschean ideal. For it doesn't follow from the fact that the creators of morality *exemplified virtù* that it is an ideal *of theirs*, and indeed I take it to

be one of the peculiarities of morality's asceticism (as distinct from the broader ascetic "conceptual form"; May 1999[BIB-093]: 81) that it cannot find room in its own catalogue of virtues for this virtue, and thus cannot recognize one of its own driving forces: "'life *against* life' is … simply nonsense. It can only be *apparent*; it has to be a sort of provisional expression, … a psychological misunderstanding of something, the real nature of which was far from being understood" (*GM*, III, 13). But something can hardly function as an ideal for someone if it is not even acknowledged: the task of distinguishing Nietzsche's ideals from those he opposes is precisely a matter of specifying rival *catalogues* of excellences of character, so there can be a sharp contrast at this level even if adherents to the rival catalogues may have fundamental psychological features in common. The fact that "priests" too are form-givers is no reason, then, not to treat *virtù* as a distinctively Nietzschean ideal.

So, finally, is treating *virtù* as an ideal of character to have an *aesthetics* of character? If modesty is a (narrowly) moral virtue, I take it that its contrary and that which it is designed to guard against – boastfulness – is a narrowly moral vice. So a good way to try to place *virtù* in relation to other human excellences is to think again of the things that militate against it – for example timidity, lack of self-discipline, self-deception, all of which Nietzsche reviles. Though these are not the exclusive preserve of morality in

the narrow sense, and indeed even if (improbably) none of them belong to it at all, they are very familiar defects of character, and no purpose is served by classifying them as distinctively aesthetic. Consequently, central as *virtù* may be to Nietzsche's ideals, I cannot see that it is illuminating to classify an ideal of human living that makes room for it as an "aesthetics of character."

On all the interpretations of "aesthetic" as applied to ideals of character that I have examined, then, the term turns out either to be well motivated but not to mark out a genuine ideal; or else poorly motivated, either as a way of marking out an ideal of a distinctive type or as a way of marking out what is special about Nietzsche's own ideals, or both. If we are to capture what, if anything, is special about Nietzsche's ideals of character, therefore, we are unlikely to help ourselves if we continue to reach for the "aesthetic" label.

6. The sense remains nonetheless that I have barely begun to describe the entanglement of the ethical with the aesthetic in Nietzsche's work, so let me say in conclusion a little about the direction in which further investigation might go. In his *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Bernard Williams points out the dangers for the would-be amoralist of "thinking of himself as being in character really rather splendid" (1976[BIB-171]: 20). Though Williams's imagined figure also compares himself with the "craven

multitude," there's no evidence Williams had Nietzschean models in mind. But the thought Williams's amoralist needs not to have is very like a thought Foot ascribes to Nietzsche: his ideal for humanity, she says in discussing his "shift from moral to aesthetic valuation," is "a splendid human being" (Foot 2002a[BIB-033]: 148). And "splendor" is, I take it, a term of aesthetic appraisal.

Now the thought the amoralist needs not to have is not a thought Nietzsche's nobles were in danger of having about themselves, for all their consciousness of social superiority, for aesthetic notions are notably absent from their evaluative repertoire. Their "good"–"bad" contrast expresses class difference and the traits that supposedly went with that, and even where the trait is a character trait (truthfulness rather than, say, wealth), Nietzsche emphasizes that this was originally *merely* a way of marking class difference and not a value judgment of any kind, and so a fortiori not an aesthetic judgment (*GM*, I, 4; I, 5). Nietzsche also mentions "reverence for age and origins" as the basis for justice (*BGE*, 260): plausible in a tribal society, but it expresses no aesthetic valuation. Other defining features of noble morality flow from the "good"–"bad" distinction: they have duties of "extended gratitude and vengefulness" to members of their own group, while it doesn't really matter how they behave towards the "bad" ("to creatures of a lower rank … people may act as they see fit"; *BGE*, 260).

Again no trace of aesthetic norms: towards the in-group it's traditional duty, towards the out-group it's whatever they feel like doing.

However, "splendor" *is* a word in Nietzsche's own evaluative vocabulary ("[man's] highest potential power and splendour"; *GM*, Preface, 6), and all I've said so far is consistent with the claim that Nietzsche himself *did* think the nobles were "really rather splendid." Perhaps that is part of what Foot had in mind. However, it seems wrong to describe this Nietzschean judgment on the nobles as evidence of an aesthetic *ideal* of character on Nietzsche's part. For one thing, the psychology of Nietzsche's "higher nature" of today (*GM*, I, 16) is vastly more complex than the psychology Nietzsche ascribes to the nobles, thanks to the whole (speculative) history of morality that lies between them and us. So however splendid Nietzsche thought the nobles (together with their non-aesthetic ideals), their way of life and their ideals cannot be ideals *for us*, or for Nietzsche, or for anyone starting off from where he was, or we are.

The judgment does, however, amount to what we might call aesthetic*ism*, a sensibility which includes the capacity to suppress moral evaluation in favor of the appreciation of properties such as splendor, magnificence, excitement, massiveness of scale – not to mention thoughtlessness and violence. It is tempting to say it is an attitude to life that is akin to typical attitudes to the representation of life in art. But it's not

clear that the suspension of moral evaluation is invited by artistic representation as such. Nor is it clear that this attitude only makes an appearance in relation to ways of living which are – like that of Nietzsche’s nobles – too remote to serve as models for us, though it may be more appropriate here than elsewhere: after all, if one can paint a stirring scene in which the eye is drawn away from morally problematic features, one can paint oneself into it too. This brings me back to *bovarysme*: not, admittedly, the “strategic” *bovarysme* of trying to live one’s whole life according to a narrative plan, but the more “tactical” *bovarysme* of Eliot’s “dramatizing oneself against one’s environment” (1934[BIB-032]: 40). But if Nietzsche does exemplify this sensibility – and I have hardly argued for that here – he is surely only one of a great many to have done so. Accordingly the proper investigation of this sensibility and its relevance to moral philosophy I leave to another occasion.

Chapter

CN

Notes

[1] See also Ridley 1998b[BIB-128], Janaway 2007[BIB-067] and, in a rather special sense, Nehamas 1985 and 1998.

[2] Cf. Mackie's distinction between "morality in the narrow sense" and "morality in the broad sense" (Mackie 1977[BIB-090]: 106).

[3] On the interpretative issue, I follow Irwin (2009[BIB-066]: 607–9), who traces to Sidgwick the erroneous thought that Aristotle "does not distinguish moral from aesthetic judgments" *because* Aristotelian virtuous agents, in acting for the sake of the *kalon*, act egoistically.

[4] For the career of the "beautiful soul" idea in the eighteenth century, see Norton 1995. The afterlife of the conception is prolonged still further in Colin McGinn's "aesthetic theory of virtue" (McGinn 1997[BIB-095]). (I am indebted to McGinn for the reference to Norton.) Unless much more is said, McGinn's view seems simply to expand the category of the beautiful to include both aesthetic beauty and the "particular *kind* of beauty proper to the soul that virtue consists in" (1997[BIB-095]: 95). In old money, therefore, excellences of character are precisely *not* aesthetic. For a little more on the more fully fleshed out conception, see below, section 4.

[5] "[T]o demand that everyone should become 'good', herd animals, blue-eyed, benevolent 'beautiful souls' … would mean robbing existence of its *great* character" (*EH*, "Why I Am a Destiny," 4).

[6] The work in question originally appeared under the title *Julius und Evagoras*.

[7] But surely Nietzsche did not only care about how *he* lived: otherwise it would be hard to make sense of the pervasive presence, in the *Genealogy* and elsewhere, of

type expressions, most notably "man" and its cognates. For example: "man, as species" (*GM*, Preface, 6); "faith in mankind" (*GM*, I, 12); "the animal 'man' is finally taught to be ashamed of all his instincts" (*GM*, II, 7); "one single *stronger* species of man" (*GM*, II, 12); "this man of the future" (*GM*, II, 24); and cf. "how far the judgment promotes and preserves life, how well it preserves, and perhaps even cultivates, the type" (*BGE*, 4); "a higher type of man" (*BGE*, 30); "keeping the type 'man' on a lower level" (*BGE*, 62). What Nietzsche wanted was for the greatest possibilities *of human nature* to be realized, though this is far from saying that everyone is required or can even aspire to live in the same way.

[8] We find the same apparently groundless use of "aesthetic" in connection with ideals of life in a remark of Foucault's: "In Greek ethics … ethics was not related to any social – or at least to any legal – institutional system. … What they were worried about, their theme, was to constitute a kind of ethics which was an aesthetics of existence. … I wonder if our problem nowadays is not, in a way, similar to this one, since most of us no longer believe that ethics is founded in religion, nor do we want a legal system to intervene in our moral, personal, private life" (Foucault 1991[BIB-035]: 343). The thought seems to be that since "private life" is not regulated by religion or by law, it is an area in which the way we live is not *required* of us – so the norms that govern it are aesthetic. But why equate the whole of the ethical with the required, in such a way that any norms that fall short of requiring us to follow them default to the category of the aesthetic? One might diagnose the subterranean working of the "morality system," were it not that even the "morality system" doesn't make that equation, since (on some constructions at least) it leaves room,

for example, for self-sacrifice, that is, something both "unegoistic" and supererogatory.

[9] *Le Petit Robert* records a philosopher's (Jules de Gaultier's) definition, "le pouvoir départi à l'homme de se concevoir autre qu'il n'est" – useless, because it fits more or less any imaginative exercise involving oneself. The word is found in English in, for example, Eliot 1934[BIB-032]: 40. Though Eliot defers partially to Gaultier's definition (but only partially: "the human *will* to see things as they are not"), he also describes Othello – whose *bovarysme* is in question – as taking "an *aesthetic* rather than a moral attitude [to himself], dramatizing himself against his environment."

[10] As Eliot saw: see previous footnote.

[11] If Nietzsche *were* in some sense his own literary creation ("a character whose 'biography' [his work] turns out to be"; Nehamas 1985[BIB-106]: 199), would it follow that Nietzsche himself was a victim of *bovarysme*? As Nehamas says, whether or not Nietzsche succeeded in applying "the image of life contained in his writings" to himself is a biographical matter, not a philosophical one, so examining the work won't tell us (Nehamas 1998[BIB-107]: 8). The most we can say is that, in the light of Fuller's experience, if he *did* apply that model to himself, it's not clear how much of a "success" that would be.

[12] Cf. Nehamas 1985[BIB-106]: 192: "Nietzsche believes that the evaluation of people and lives must appeal to a *formal* factor in addition to the content of our actions."

[13] E.g. *GM*, II, 12; II, 17; cf. *BGE*, 213.

[14] Aesthetic vocabulary for the appraisal of character and its double justification are anticipated to a remarkable extent, it would seem, by Shaftesbury: "The Beautiful, the Fair, the Comely, were never in the Matter, but in the Art and Design; never in

Body itself, but in the Form or Forming Power. … [Hence] the only instance of 'true' beauty … [is] a mind that has trained its formative powers *on itself*, that has made *itself* the object of its power to impose order and harmony on external matter. … [T]hat which fashions even minds themselves, contains in itself all the Beauties fashioned by those Minds," from Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* 2:407–8, cited by Norton 1995[BIB-108]: 35–36. As Norton points out, it is unclear whether "that which fashions minds themselves" is a reference to human self-fashioning, which would make the presumptive Nietzschean parallel very close indeed, or to God.

[15] cf. *GM*, I, 16: "there is, today, perhaps no more distinguishing feature of the '*higher nature*', the intellectual nature, than to be divided in this sense [i.e. between the "*opposing* values 'good and bad', 'good and evil'"] and really and truly a battleground for these opposites"; "Where the plant 'man' shows himself strongest one finds instincts that conflict powerfully … but are controlled" (*KGW* VII-2: 289), and Nietzsche's idealization of Goethe who "bore all the conflicting tendencies of his century within him" (*KGW* VI-3: 145).

[16] Cf. "compelling one's chaos to become form" (*WP*, 842).

[17] Cf. *BGE*, 257. In *GM*, I, 10, the "forming" and "health" vocabularies are mixed: "to be unable to take his enemies, his misfortunes, and even his *misdeeds* seriously for long – that is the sign of strong, rounded natures with a superabundance of a power which is flexible, formative, healing and can make one forget." The vocabulary of sickness and health of course features prominently in Nietzsche's vocabulary of appraisal generally, as at e.g. *GM*, I, 7; III, 15.

[18] For *virtù* and *difficultà* (difficulty), see Shearman 1967[BIB-139]: 21: "Lorenzo de'Medici, in a Commentary upon his own sonnets, argued that this verse-form is

the equal of any other because of its *difficultà* – because *virtù*, according to the philosophers, consists in (the conquest of) difficulty. … Painters and sculptors each argued the superiority of their art over the other because it was more difficult."

[19] I don't see why "shape" couldn't be an aesthetic property of character even if it were merely an instance of natural beauty. Thus, if I understand him correctly, I differ from Ridley who holds that shape is an aesthetic property of character *just* because it's a property it receives as a result of form-giving activity by the person whose character it is: "Beauty is a state of the soul: it is the result of going to work on oneself, of interpreting oneself, of exercising upon oneself that artist's violence to which Nietzsche is so attached" (Ridley 1998b[BIB-128]: 140).