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## ***Was ist also Loben? Nietzsche on the Ethics of Praise***

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ethics of praise as discussed in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's occasional remarks on praise are shown to be mainly critical and as falling onto three broad categories, namely: i) metaphysical; ii) psychological and iii) ethical. During the course of the paper, Nietzsche's approach is located in wider theoretical context of contemporary work on the ethics of praise and moral philosophy more generally.

*Der steigt empor – ihn soll man loben!*

*Doch jener kommt allzeit von oben!*

*Der lebt dem Lobe selbst enthoben,*

*Der ist von droben!<sup>1</sup>*

### I INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In theorising about the reactive attitudes, modern moral philosophy has tended to be more interested in the 'punitive' concept of blame than in the 'complimentary' concept of praise.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, F., 1887/1974, *The Gay Science*, Tr. W. Kaufmann, New York: Random House, Section 60, 'Höhere Menschen'.

<sup>2</sup> This point is widely recognized. The following statement from Meir Dan-Cohen is typical: '... since deprivations are more morally charged than rewards, it is no surprise that moral philosophers should have given more attention to punishment than to payment.' (Dan-Cohen, M. 2016, *Normative Subjects: Self and Collectivity in Morality and Law*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 32)

Furthermore, when that tradition has turned its attention to praise, it has often been more interested in expounding on when praise is *not* appropriate than when it *is*. Is this a contingent or superficial feature of the history of philosophy, or does it give expression to some deep or essential fact about our ethical sensibility? This is one of the main questions I pursue in this paper. I do so by giving a threefold analysis of the ethics of praise as found in the works of one of the most influential philosophers writing in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, namely Friedrich Nietzsche. My tentative conclusion is that the basic explanation of why Nietzsche approaches the ethics of praise primarily through a lens of suspicion is his attraction to the idea that praise is often a symptom of imperfection and would therefore not play a significant part in a truly excellent life. To give and receive praise may well be human. Yet it is also in important respects ‘*too human*’, and therefore not truly excellent, or great.<sup>3</sup>

## II FOUR MODELS OF PRAISE

Praise, as I shall understand it in what follows, is the expression of approval or admiration for someone or something, and to praise is to express such approval or admiration. Moral praise, thus understood, is the expression of moral approval or admiration for someone or something, and to offer moral praise is to express such approval or admiration in a way that is distinctively moral by way of its explicit, implicit or otherwise communicated content.<sup>4</sup> As I understand it

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<sup>3</sup> The presence of this, or some very similar, thought in Nietzsche’s work is briefly noted in Rüdiger Bittner’s Introduction to *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv. Hans Ruin’s ‘Saying *Amen* to the Light of Dawn: Nietzsche on Praise, Prayer, and Affirmation’ *Nietzsche Studien* 48 (2019), 99-116 makes a number of observations about praise in the context of a study of Nietzsche’s use of religious language. Ruin’s topic is orthogonal to the one I address in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> The question of what, by way of its content or psychological basis, makes praise narrowly speaking *moral* is a question that obviously cannot be ignored in the context of a discussion

here, therefore, to praise (whether morally or otherwise) is a communicative and public act, and so to be distinguished from a *judgment of praiseworthiness* which could, at least in principle, be made in private; for example as manifested in a stable attitude of admiration).

To interrogate the philosophical literature on the ethics of praise I make use of the following heuristic, according to which praise is interpreted and evaluated along the following four dimensions. To clarify: these dimensions are not intended to be mutually exclusive. Nor are they intended to be mutually exhaustive. They are, however intended to capture most instances of praise that have been the focus of systematic philosophical attention.<sup>5</sup>

Along the first dimension, praise is interpreted and evaluated in accordance with what I shall refer to as (following the standard terminology for negative moral appraisals) a ‘retributive’ model. The retributive model represents apt praise as responding to paradigmatic markers of individual responsibility, such as control, intention or quality of will. According to this model, a beneficial act, such as preventing someone from falling over on a train, is praiseworthy to the extent that it was beneficently intended by the agent and within their control, as opposed to being automatic, forced or a matter of luck. On the retributive model of praise, the language of praise substantially overlaps with the language of desert or (inner) worth.

Along a second dimension, praise is interpreted and evaluated in accordance with what I shall refer to as a ‘performance’ model. The performance model represents apt praise as responding to paradigmatic markers of objective individual achievement, such as the meeting of

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of Nietzsche’s remarks on the ethics of praise. I shall return to this issue in passing when I address Nietzsche’s remarks on the topic in the following sections.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Anderson, R. A, Crockett, M.J, & Pizarrop, D.A., ‘A Theory of Moral Praise’, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 24 (9) 2020, 694-703. Anderson et. al. base their results on a study of over twenty published research papers. They come down in favour of an analysis of *moral* praise along broadly expressive/relational lines, as described below. Their study does not include a survey of work in theology or religious studies, and their conclusions must therefore be interpreted with this caveat in mind.

operational requirements, the satisfaction of criteria, or the completion of tasks. According to this model, a beneficial act, such as preventing someone from falling over on a train, is praiseworthy to the extent that it was actually performed as described, independently of the precise quality of the will that produced it, or the precise extent to which the action was within the agent's control. On the performative model of praise, the language of praise substantially overlaps with the language of merit or rank.

Along a third dimension, praise is interpreted and evaluated in accordance with what I shall refer to as an 'instrumental' model. The instrumental model represents apt praise as responding to paradigmatic markers of desirable consequences, such as achieving intended benefits, promoting long term goals, or promoting the good overall. According to this model, a beneficial act, such as preventing someone from falling over on a train, is praiseworthy to the extent that it either/or: a) prevents harm to its recipient, has no negative downstream consequences for either party, or is an instance of behaviour that is generally beneficial overall; or b) *its being positively appraised* is such as to prevent harm to its recipient, have no negative downstream consequences for either party, or be an instance of behaviour that is generally beneficial overall.<sup>6</sup> On the instrumental model of praise, the language of praise substantially overlaps with the language of accomplishment and beneficence.

Along a fourth dimension, praise is interpreted and evaluated in accordance with what I shall refer to as an 'expressive/relational' model. Although the expressive/relational model is consistent with expressions of praise that have little or no functional or otherwise causally productive elements, paradigmatic applications of this model represents apt praise as

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, London: Macmillan, 428.

responding positively to paradigmatic markers of socially productive interaction, such as co-ordination, co-operation and the maintenance of social relationships. According to this model, a beneficial act, such as preventing someone from falling over on a train, is praiseworthy to the extent that it displays a form of behaviour the positive appraisal of which presents an opportunity for inviting or affirming its targeted as a member of some in-group. On the expressive/relational model of praise, the language of praise substantially overlaps with the language of community, encouragement, and inclusion.

### III NIETZSCHE'S THREEFOLD CRITIQUE OF PRAISE

#### A. Nietzsche the Metaphysician

Nietzsche's remarks on the ethics of praise can be divided into three discernible strands.<sup>7</sup> The first strand locates a distinctively moral form of praise alongside moral blame as a target of suspicion in their role as the expression of reactive attitudes that presuppose a false, or

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<sup>7</sup> The textual evidence provided below derives from a brief survey of most of Nietzsche's works, published or unpublished; primarily - but not only - in English translation. In some cases, the difference is relevant, as witnessed by some non-equivalent translations of individual passages (e.g. GS 166). But as I detail below, Nietzsche's word for praise in the German is almost invariably '*Loben*'. I have ignored all mentions of praise that I have judged to be incidental to my main topic. I have also held back from giving any systematic attention to Nietzsche's own 'first order' expressions of praise where these occur (which they do); although Nietzsche's own willingness to praise some people and not others is not irrelevant to my main topic. Finally, I have focused almost exclusively on textual fragments where praise occurs as an explicit *object* of concern in Nietzsche's work; although I have inevitably been influenced by textual materials that provide contextual information about that concern as well.

‘fictional’ metaphysics of individual freedom, autonomy and responsibility, and therefore candidates for debunking or rejection. Nietzsche writes:

... how fantastic are our feelings of “freedom of will”, “cause and effect”; how thoughts and images are, like words, only signs of thoughts; the inexplicability of every action; the superficiality of all praise and blame [*die Oberflächlichkeit alles Lobens und Tadelns*’]; how essential fiction and conceits are in which we dwell consciously; how all our words refer to fictions (our affects too), and how the bond between man and man depends on the transmission and elaboration of these fictions: while fundamentally the real bond (through procreation) goes its unknown way’<sup>8</sup>

The target of these negative remarks is, if not the retributive model of praise as such, then the retributivist conception of moral responsibility that Nietzsche rejects on the basis of its erroneous (or ‘fictional’) metaphysics of the autonomous individual subject.<sup>9</sup> Thus, earlier, in *Human All too Human*, Nietzsche had written:

... he who is rewarded does not deserve his reward: for he could not have acted otherwise than he did. Thus the reward possesses only the sense of an encouragement, to him and others, and the provision of a motive for subsequent actions; commendation is called out to the runner who is still on the track, not to him who has reached the finishing line... they are given to him for reasons of utility without his being able to lay

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<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1901/1968, *The Will to Power*, Tr. W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage. Section 676, ‘On the Origin of Our Evaluations’..

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Leiter, B. *Nietzsche on Morality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. London: Routledge, 2014.

any just claim to them... mankind's utility requires their continuance; and insofar as... reward... and praise [*Lob'*], operate most effectively upon vanity, this same utility also requires the continuance of vanity.'<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, Nietzsche seems to evaluate praise both in accordance with the instrumental and expressive/relational model described above.<sup>11</sup> Seeing as this evaluation is driven by his general skepticism about the metaphysics of moral responsibility these remarks may not reveal anything especially illuminating about the distinctive features of *praise* in particular. Nevertheless, the metaphysics of moral responsibility can obviously play a part in the study of praise insofar as it is put to work as part of a diagnosis of how the endorsement of a false metaphysics of responsibility can play a crucial role in the invention and retention of a moral sensibility of praise and blame that in the absence of its endorsement would be groundless or unacceptable.<sup>12</sup> Most of Nietzsche's explicit remarks about praise do not, however, take this

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<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1878/1986, *Human, All Too Human*, Tr. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Section 105. See also Section 39.

<sup>11</sup> Another example of Nietzsche's application of the instrumental (and, at a stretch, the expressive/relational model) model is visible in the following passage from *The Gay Science*, in which he purports to diagnose the social function of ethical praise: 'Thus what is really praised when virtues are praised is, first, their instrumental nature and, secondly, the instinct in every virtue that refuses to be held in check by the over-all advantage for the individual himself – in sum, the unreason in virtue that leads the individual to allow himself to be transformed into a mere function of the whole. The praise of virtue is the praise of something that is privately harmful – the praise of instincts that deprive a human being of his noblest selfishness and the strength for the highest autonomy.' Nietzsche, F. 1882-1974, *The Gay Science*, Tr. W. Kaufmann, New York: Random House. Book 1. Section 21.

<sup>12</sup> An example of this diagnostic work is arguably found in the following passage from *The Genealogy of Morals*, which although not explicitly addressing the topic of praise, is directly relevant to its ethical evaluation. Nietzsche writes: 'This type of man *needs* to believe in a neutral independent 'subject', prompted by an instinct for self-preservation and self-affirmation in which every lie is sanctified. The subject... has perhaps been believed in hitherto more firmly than anything else on earth because it makes possible to the majority of mortals, the weak and the oppressed of every kind, the sublime self-deception that interprets weakness as a freedom, and their being thus-and-thus as a *merit*.' (Nietzsche, F., 1876/1967,



form. This is therefore an aspect of Nietzsche's thinking about praise that I shall mainly set aside in what follows.<sup>13</sup>

## B Nietzsche the Psychologist

A more revealing aspect of Nietzsche's thinking about praise relates to questions about what contemporary philosophers call our 'standing' to praise or be praised. Thus, In *Daybreak/Dawn*, Nietzsche writes:

'Revenge in praise [*Rache in Lobe*]'– Here is a page written all over with praise [*Lob*'], and you call it shallow: but when you divine that revenge lies concealed within this praise you will find it almost too subtle and take great pleasure in the abundance of little bold strokes and figures. It is not man but his revenge that is so subtle, rich and inventive he himself is hardly aware of it'<sup>14</sup>

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*The Genealogy of Morals & Ecce Homo*, Tr. W. Kaufmann, New York: Vintage, Essay 1, Section 13.

<sup>13</sup> Some of Nietzsche's general remarks in favour of the rejection of praise and blame and other judgments 'conceptually downstream' of attributions of moral responsibility are not easily located on either side of the now common distinction between moral metaphysics and moral psychology. To divide Nietzsche's remarks on the ethics of praise into either the 'metaphysical' or the 'psychological' may therefore involve an ineliminable element of anachronism. Nevertheless, I shall retain this distinction in what follows as a taxonomical heuristic.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1881/1982, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the prejudices of morality*, Tr. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Section 228. Elsewhere in the same work, Nietzsche writes: '*Praise* – Here is one who, you can plainly see, is going to *praise* you: you bite your lip, your heart contracts: ah, that *this* cup might pass from me! But it does not pass, it approaches! Let us therefore drink down the sweet impudence of the panegyrist, let us overcome our nausea and profound disgust at the essence of his praise, let us twist our face into an expression of joyful gratitude! – for, after all, he meant to do us a favour! And now, after it is all over, we realize that he feels very exalted, he has achieved a victory over

That this is more than a passing thought is suggested by the fact that the same kind of suspicion finds expression in several of Nietzsche's other works. Thus, in *The Gay Science* we get:

'Against those who praise [*Gegen die Lobenden*]' – A: 'One is praised [*gelobt*]' only by one's peers'. B: 'Yes, whoever praises [*lobt*]' you says: I am your peer.'<sup>15</sup>

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

'And I have learned this, too among them: he who praises [*der Lobende*]' appears to be giving back, in truth however he wants to be given more'<sup>16</sup>

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us – yes! and over himself too, the dog! – for he did not find it easy to wring this praise from himself.' (Section 273). The reference to panegyric in this passage points to a connection between Nietzsche's generally critical remarks about praise and public speeches given in honour of emperors and others in Ancient Greece and Rome. I make no attempt to pursue this connection here.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1882-1974, *The Gay Science*, Tr. W. Kaufmann, New York: Random House. Section 190. Elsewhere in the same book, Nietzsche writes: '... When a friend praises him, it seems to him as if his friend praised himself. When an enemy praises him, it seems to him as if his enemy expected praise for being so generous. And when he is praised by one of the rest... he feels hurt that some people consider him neither a friend nor an enemy, and he says: What are those to me who make a show of their justice towards me?' (Section 168). A number of Nietzsche's psychological observations on the social dynamics of praise show a high degree of similarity with a series of earlier observations on the same topic by Francois de la Rochefoucauld. See e.g. la Rochefoucauld 1678/2008, *Collected Maxims and Other Reflections*, Tr. A. H. Blackmore & F. Giguere, Oxford: Oxford University Press. I shall make no attempt to pursue this issue further here.

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1887/1961, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Tr. R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, Part 3, 'Of the Virtue that Makes Small'.

And from beyond the grave, in *The Will to Power*:

What, then, is praise [*Was ist also Loben?*]? A sort of restoration of the balance in respect of benefits received, giving a return, a demonstration of *our* power – for those who praise affirm, judge, evaluate, pass sentence: they claim the right of being *able* to affirm, of being *able* to dispense honors. A heightened feeling of happiness and life is also a heightened feeling of power: it is from this that man praises (- from this that he invents and seeks a doer, a “subject”-). Gratitude as virtuous revenge: most strenuously demanded and practiced where equality and pride must both be upheld, where revenge is practiced best.<sup>17</sup>

What Nietzsche seems to suggest in these passages is that praise is an essentially aggressive or hostile act, by means of which the person issuing praise not only claims a status for themselves as being in the position of Judge, but also thereby comes to share in the achievements of the praisee; thereby somehow taking some of the achievement away from the praisee; hence in some sense parasitically appropriating it. In this way, Nietzsche’s thought that praise (for example as expressed through gratitude) can function as a kind of revenge provides a distinctively conspiratorial example of the subtle ways of the ‘will to power’.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1901/1968, *The Will to Power*, Tr. W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage. Section 775. [Note dated ‘Spring-Fall 1887’]. See also WLN 9 [79].

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it also gives an original twist to the idea that no good deed will go unpunished.

Although it is possible to see what Nietzsche is getting at in these passages, it is difficult to accept that his characterisation of praise actually captures what praise essentially consists in, or how it universally functions in practice; never mind that this is the most important thing that is ethically problematic with it when it is. If it did, it would be difficult to understand the undeniable fact that praise is often welcomed, invited, or even demanded by its targets (and arguably sometimes expected or demanded without engaging in any form of conspiracy or self-deception). An implicit recognition of this fact is arguably visible in Nietzsche's remark in HAH (105) about how the utility of praise can operate 'most effectively upon vanity,' now attributing disreputable motives not to the praiser but to the praisee. This thought is strongly suggestive another source of suspicion about praise, but once more a source of suspicion that cannot be assumed to be universally justified unless we accept the (implausible) hypothesis that all human beings are equally and irredeemably vain or selfish. One place where Nietzsche seems to recognize this very fact is BGE (122), where he writes that 'To enjoy praise is with some people only politeness of the heart – and precisely the opposite of vanity of the spirit'.<sup>19</sup> In which case, not all human beings are equally and irredeemably vain or selfish in the way the a conspiratorial hypothesis would predict. Even so, the multiple vices involved in vainly and dishonestly giving or receiving praise are ones that many readers will be able to recognize as a feature of some at least some human interactions. Charitably interpreted, it is partly the contingent, variable but undeniably actual presence of these vices that motivates Nietzsche's hostility and suspicion about praise; at least on the part of 'great men', for whom, he says that 'in praise there is more importunity than in blame'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, F., 1886/1973, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Tr. R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, Section 122.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, F., 1886/1973, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Tr. R. J. Hollongdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, Section 170.

## C Nietzsche the Ethicist

A third Nietzschean source of suspicion about praise, and one which also depends on a prior judgment of ‘standing’, consists in thinking that, for at least some individuals, praise either is (or should be) considered as beneath them. Given his generally critical diagnosis of the psychology of praise, it would be natural to expect Nietzsche’s ‘non-affirmative’ attitude towards praise to be firmly and explicitly rooted in this diagnosis. On closer inspection, however, this is not exactly what we find.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes:

We know well how science strikes those who merely glance at it in passing... Above all they are terrified to see how the most difficult is demanded and the best is done without praise [*Lob*] and decorations... But those who are used to it would never wish to live anywhere else than in this bright, transparent, vigorous, electrified air – in this *virile* air.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Nietzsche, F. 1882-1974, *The Gay Science*, Tr. W.Kaufmann, New York: Random House. Section 293. Elsewhere in the same book, Nietzsche writes: ‘... praise and profit and respectability may suffice for those who merely wish to have a good conscience – but not you who try the heart and reins and make even conscience an object of science!’ (Section 308). And again: ‘Second principle: to ‘improve’ one’s fellow man, by praise, for example, so that he begins to sweat out his delight in himself, or to grab a corner of his good or ‘interesting’ qualities and to pull at it until the whole virtue comes out and one can hide one’s fellow man in its folds.’ (Section 364). Once more, Nietzsche seems here to be interpreting praise partly along the lines of an instrumental model.

This is in sharp contrast to ‘those who want merely a good conscience’, for whom ‘praise and benefit and respectability may be enough’ (GS 308) in order for them to live a ‘fossilized Stoic way of life’ (GS 326); but not for those who (presumably like the author himself) ‘scrupulously examine the inside of things and *know about conscience*.’<sup>22</sup>

The same theme appears repeatedly in remarks posthumously published *The Will to Power*:

‘To disavow merit: but to do that which is above all praise [*über allem Loben*], indeed beyond all understanding’<sup>23</sup>

‘To desire no praise [*Kein Lob haben wollen*]: one does what profits one, or what gives one pleasure, or what one *must*’<sup>25</sup>

‘A great man...What is he?... [H]e is colder, harder, less hesitating and without fear of ‘opinion.’[H]e wants no ‘sympathetic heart’ There is a solitude within him that is inaccessible to praise or blame [*etwas Unerreichbares ist für Lob und Tadel*], his own justice is beyond appeal.’<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1882-1974, *The Gay Science*, Tr. W. Kaufmann, New York: Random House. Section 308.

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1901/1968, *The Will to Power*, Tr. W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage. Section 913. See also GS 289, where Nietzsche writes of the individual who is ‘independent of praise and blame. . . In *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, Nietzsche writes (in the first person singular) of someone who wishes to ‘place myself outside all praise and blame in order to run after my own good in my own way.’ Nietzsche, F, 2003, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Tr. Rüdiger Bittner, 35 [17].

<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1901/1968, *The Will to Power*, Tr. W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage. Section 946.

<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1901/1968, *The Will to Power*, Tr. W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage. Section 962.

So great men consider themselves above or beyond praise. But why? A germ of an answer can arguably be found in GM, where Nietzsche writes:

“He praises me [*‘Er lobt mich’*]: hence he thinks I am right.” – this asinine inference spoils half our life for us hermits, for it leads asses to seek our neighborhood and friendship.<sup>27</sup>

But, once again, why? Perhaps the answer is that the great or noble person does not regard themselves as someone who can be judged because they regard themselves as being the *source* or *determiner* of values, and thus *value creating*?<sup>28</sup> Quite exactly what the insight is supposed to be here (or if there is one) is hard to pin down. After all, even if the order of values by which I am judged is in some sense an order of my own creation, it does not follow that it is inappropriate for anyone else to commend me for having lived up to those values. Nietzsche would seem to disagree, possibly because – as we have already seen - he associates those who welcome praise with those who ‘need praise.’<sup>29</sup> Perhaps he thinks that this need for praise is

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<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1886/1973, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Tr. R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, Section 283. Compare: ‘Avoidance of petty honors and mistrust of all who praise readily: for whoever praises believes he understands what he praises: but to understand – Balzac, that typical man of ambition, has revealed it – *comprendre c’est égal*.’ Nietzsche, F. 1901/1968, *The Will to Power*, Tr. W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage, Section 943.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. Nietzsche, F. 1886/1973, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Tr. R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, Section 260.

<sup>29</sup> Nietzsche, F. 2003, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, Tr. Rudiger Bittner, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 35 [17].

therefore a symptom of some kind of weakness from which truly great individuals do not suffer.

He writes

‘For this is what distinguishes the hard school as a good school from all others: that much is demanded; and sternly demanded; that the good, even the exceptional, is demanded as the norm; that praise is rare [*‘das Lob selten ist’*]; that indulgence is non-existent; that blame is apportioned sharply, objectively, without regard for talent or antecedents... The same discipline makes both the good soldier and the good scholar; and looked at more closely, there is no good scholar who does not have the instincts of a good soldier in his makeup... What does one *learn* in a hard school? Obeying and commanding.’<sup>30</sup>

This ‘martial’ theme is not an isolated occurrence in Nietzsche’s writings. In fact, it is something of a recurring trope, as when Nietzsche writes – with obvious approval - of ‘how the hardest is demanded and the best done despite the absence of praise and rewards; rather, as among soldiers, what one mostly hears is almost exclusively reproach and reprimands.’<sup>31</sup> To this extent, Nietzsche seem to be understanding the virtues of good scholarship as a close relative of martial virtue.

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<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1901/1968, *The Will to Power*, Tr. W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage. Section 912

<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1882-1974, *The Gay Science*, Tr. W. Kaufmann, New York: Random House. Section 293. See also WLN 9 [79], where Nietzsche writes of ‘military severity in demanding, and dealing with ‘what one is expected to do’ (no more praising...)’ Here, as elsewhere, being open to praise is associated with ‘moral virtue’ in Nietzsche’s distinctive and pejorative sense. And in this sense, ‘[i]t is a thoroughly small type of person who is *only* virtuous.’ (WLN 10 [83] Note made 1887.).



In most of the passages just cited, Nietzsche refrains from putting forward any conspiratorial psychological hypotheses like the ones discussed in the previous section. What we get instead is the explicit endorsement of an ethos of excellence that considers itself above praise (although not, it would seem, above blame). Nietzsche's main focus at this juncture is the recipient of praise; the key thought being that to crave, demand, invite, or even accept praise is a symptom of imperfection, weakness, or being of inferior rank. A truly excellent individual (perhaps Nietzsche's 'Übermensch'; perhaps the author's projected image of his ideal self) is someone who achieves and sustains true excellence without praise, or who disdains it. The most natural model to interpret these thoughts of Nietzsche's is neither the instrumental nor the retributive model, but arguably a performative model, according to which praise is evaluated primarily according to standing or rank

For anyone familiar with the experience of serious intellectual pursuits in the absence of social acceptance or recognition, be it fictional (as in Nietzsche's case) or actual, it is difficult not to sympathise with at least some of Nietzsche's thoughts here. His description of at least one kind of outstanding individual who labours either independently or contrary to the conventional values around them is both insightful and food for serious thought. At the same time, there is arguably something forced about Nietzsche's insistence on comparing the scholar to the soldier, while passing over some of the less martial alternatives that ought to be available to him, such as the model of Aristotle's virtuous person (variously described in *Nicomachean Ethics*) who is not only worthy of great things, but who knows that he is, and would at least be open for this fact to be duly recognized in the judgments of others.<sup>32</sup> With the benefit of

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<sup>32</sup> Aristotle's discussion (in NE IV, 3) of pride (the 'crown of the virtues') in NE as a virtue concerned with honour is relevant here, and not a million miles away from what Nietzsche might be on about in the passages I have cited in this section. Consider, for example, Aristotle's claim that 'proud men are thought to be disdainful' and how the proud man is 'the sort of man to confer benefits, but... is ashamed of receiving them; for the one is the mark of a superior, the other of an inferior.' (Aristotle, Unknown/1925, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Tr. D. Ross, Rev. J. L. Ackrill & J. O. Urmson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 89-95. To unpack

hindsight, it is tempting to suggest that Nietzsche would have welcomed if a few more voices had publicly resonated with his own achievements (such as they were), given that he was – after all - prepared to describe himself as being ‘so wise’, ‘so clever’, and able to ‘write such good books’<sup>33</sup>. In any case, the idea that a life of excellence above and beyond all praise is one that is either accessible to, or a realistic aspiration for, more than a very selective minority of individuals is not one that is very plausible. Nor, quite evidently, is it one to which Nietzsche was remotely sympathetic.

### D Loose Ends

It would clearly be a gross mistake to attribute to Nietzsche a universally negative attitude towards all instances of praise . Not only are many of his most critical remarks about praise focused on *moral* praise in particular, and hence on his critique of ‘morality’. Nietzsche’s writings also contain a significant amount of apparently sincere praise.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Nietzsche is hardly blind to the possibility that some ‘Great Men’ might benefit from the cultivation of ‘every means of discipline’, including insincere or ‘exaggerated’ praise. Yet ass

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the similarities and differences between Nietzsche and Aristotle’s views on praise would take me too far afield .

<sup>33</sup> At least some of Nietzsche’s remarks about praise arguably have just a touch of the autobiographical about them; or at least are naturally read as being prompted by some real event or person of the author’s acquaintance. Among the examples of this, one might consider GS (168), where we read about someone who is ‘suffering from the desire to be praised and finds no nourishment for it’ in spite of the fact that ‘the whole world is celebrating him’, and who ‘has a bad ear for praise’.

<sup>34</sup> For example, in Z, Nietzsche praises (with varying degrees of fictional licence): ‘the great leek of conscience’, Zarathustra’ (Part 4, ‘Retired from Service’); ‘this spirit of all free spirits’ (Part 4, ‘Of the Higher Man’); ‘the world he created’, and ‘intoxicated cruelty’ (Part 4, The Intoxicated Song’). In TI, Nietzsche writes (with apparent approval) of the ‘heroic man’, who ‘praises his existence through tragedy’ (Section 24). In various places, Nietzsche also praises a selected group of historical individuals, most prominently great artists (although not the same artists throughout his works).

he puts it, ‘such an education is beyond good and evil; but no one must know it.’<sup>35</sup> Finally, not everything Nietzsche says about the ethics of praise is equally easy to make sense of.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, it is safe to conclude that Nietzsche takes a generally non-affirmative view of narrowly moral praise; is generally suspicious of the motive behind a great deal of praise (moral or otherwise); and puts forward an ideal of human excellence according to which genuinely excellent individuals would mostly consider themselves beyond praise (moral or otherwise).

#### IV PRAISE AND EXCELLENCE

Nietzsche’s scattered remarks about the ethics of praise commits him to the following two claims. First, among ethically excellent individuals there would not be much praise. Second, a truly excellent person would generally not want praise (nor would they, sincerely, or non-instrumentally) offer a lot of it to other

Perhaps we can make sense of the combination of these two claims if we assume that personal excellence is (at least in great part) an essentially ‘positional good’, the possession of which (in significant amounts) by some people implies the non-possession of which (in significant amounts) by others. To be excellent on this view is to be , along some suitable dimension, *outstanding*, and thereby to truly ‘stand out from the crowd’.

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<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, F. 1901/1968, *The Will to Power*, Tr. W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage. Section 980.

<sup>36</sup> For example, I struggle to make sense of the following passage: ‘Falsity. – Every sovereign instinct has the others for its tools, retainers, flatterers: it never lets itself be called by its *ugly* name and it countenances no praise in which it is not also praised indirectly. All praise and blame in general crystallizes around every sovereign instinct to form a rigorous order and etiquette. This is *one* of the sources of falsity.’ Nietzsche, F. 1901/1968, *The Will to Power*, Tr. W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage. Section 377.

Whether a given form of excellence is a positional good depends on what it involves. Suppose, as Nietzsche and others have suggested, that human excellence involves great power, in particular great social power. It is not implausible to think that the possession of great social power by some implies the non-possession of great social power by others. The same arguably applies to other features of people which lend themselves to description in terms of the prefix 'great' (great intelligence, great kindness, great originality, or just 'greatness'). If so, human excellence is (at least in significant part) a positional good and equality of excellence is not only unrealistic but actually misguided even as an aspiration. The idea of universal human excellence is basically incoherent. There can be no excellent world where everyone (or even almost everyone) is excellent. Human excellence presupposes an actual hierarchy of ability or performance which honestly respects the fact that exploitation of one group of people by another 'pertains to the *essence* of the living thing as a fundamental organic function'<sup>37</sup>

This 'positionality' hypothesis is one potential explanation of why, according to writers like Nietzsche, excellent persons might be (at least) reluctant to either give or receive praise. The explanation is (at least in part) that (most of) the people surrounding the excellent person will be neither appropriate objects nor appropriate subjects of praise; essentially because they fall short of the standing required to merit either receiving praise or credibly offer it (at least to a truly excellent person). To this extent, Nietzsche's ethics of praise is another aspect of the sharply anti-egalitarian view he holds about the nature and ethics of human relations.

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<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, F., 1886/1973, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Tr. R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, Section 259.

What the ‘positionality’ hypothesis fails to explain, however, is why excellent persons would not endorse or encourage praise among themselves; however small the set of excellent persons might be. The possibility of some kind of mutual affirmation or reinforcement among excellent people is therefore not ruled out by the ‘positionality’ hypothesis alone. It is also a possibility that is arguably accommodated by the expressive/relational model of praise, according to which praise is a paradigmatically dynamic and mutually reinforcing expression of admiration that does not necessarily make any of the allegedly problematic metaphysical or psychological assumptions about its object that Nietzsche rejects in his critique of distinctively moral praise .

Why does Nietzsche not appear to seriously consider this possibility? Going by the textual evidence presented above, the most obvious hypothesis is that the ‘greatness’ Nietzsche had in mind was of a kind that does not encourage the kind of friendly sociality involved in affirmative and reinforcing practices of praise. Moreover, Nietzsche’s ‘great’ individual tends to be a somewhat solitary creature (somewhat like himself), and when he talks about praise in the context of groups one of his primary examples is the ‘martial’ values of soldiers who allegedly rarely praise each other’s achievements, but who punish each other’s failures freely.<sup>38</sup>

But why don’t they? If ‘greatness’ were a purely positional good, the answer would be simple. Yet it is not. *Scarcity* is not the same as pure *positionality*. We can bring out the distinction between the two by considering the following ambiguity in uses of the term ‘power’.

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<sup>38</sup> A comprehensive discussion of this issue would have to consider Nietzsche’s remarks on friendship and race. I regret not to have been able to incorporate a discussion of these topics here. For discussion of the latter topic, see e.g. GM 1.5...

On the one hand, there is the power that some agents have over others. This is a kind of power that someone can have only on the condition someone else (in the limiting case, everyone else) does not have it. (It is also arguably the kind of power that is naturally suggested by Nietzsche's use of the German word '*macht*', as in '*Wille zur Macht*'). Yet even here we are well advised to proceed with caution. If you gain power over me by winning more votes than me in a democratic election, this leaves open the possibility that I can subsequently gain power over you by winning more votes than you in the next one. Moreover, 'power', in the sense of having power over others, is relatively unspecific with respect to the personal capacities and social conditions that allow one to possess it. Hence, it is consistent with the possibility of power being distributed widely, if not synchronically, then diachronically (See e.g. BGE 259.)

On the other hand, there is the power that some agents have to effectively exercise their agency in some way or other. This is a kind of power that someone can have even if someone else (in the limiting case, everyone else) also has it. (This kind of power may be more naturally suggested by German words such as '*kraft*', '*stärke*' or '*potenz*'). Thus, I may be said to have the powers of reason; the powers to feed myself and my dependents; the powers to pursue meaningful social relations; or the powers to pursue the perfection of my human nature. 'Power', in the broad sense of having the ability or strength to act effectively in the world, is something that can be widely distributed among people, and in the limiting case something that could in principle be distributed equally.

It would clearly be overly simplistic and philosophically naïve to accuse Nietzsche of being confused about the distinction between the positionality and scarcity of goods. On the contrary, part of the interest of Nietzsche ethics of praise derives from the way he challenges the reader to think about the fact that *some* aspects of human excellence (moral or otherwise) arguably do

have purely positional aspects. This interest remains even if we also insist that *not all* aspects of human excellence (moral or otherwise) are necessarily positional, as opposed to contingently scarce.

Yet the interest of Nietzsche's ethics of praise extends beyond the question of positionality to the question of scarcity itself, at least for the following two reasons. The first, and less controversial, reason is that Nietzsche is committed to the view that not only is human excellence *actually* scarce; there are also significant differences among human beings with respect to their *potential* for excellence. Thus, he is committed to deny that all human beings ever *could* achieve excellence, greatness, or virtue. In this respect, his ethics of praise stands in sharp contrast to the strongly egalitarian view associated with Kant and other 'Enlightenment' proponents of the Christian idea of universal equality (before God). To this extent, the key to understanding Nietzsche's generally hostile view of praise is to see it as a function of his general rejection of equality as a moral-metaphysical hypothesis. Not only is excellence, greatness or virtue among human persons *actually* distributed unevenly. It *must* be (c.f. BGE 259).

The second, and more controversial, reason is that, according to Nietzsche, the limited actual or potential excellence of most human beings is not some regrettable obstacle to the realization of a utopian ideal in which all relevant persons have achieved a state of excellence. If anything, it is the other way round. The very idea of a state of affairs in which all relevant persons have achieved a state of excellence is, if not a contradiction in terms, then a regrettable obstacle to the primary form of excellence that Nietzsche is interested in, namely a kind of excellence which involves a sense of 'greatness' or 'power' that is, at least in part, essentially positional. To be truly excellent or great, in this sense, necessarily involves being *better than* others (for

example by way of making *outstanding* personal achievements) and having the power to rule over others and tell them what to do (which is an obvious connotation of ‘*Wille zur Macht*’.) Although there is no unambiguous suggestion in Nietzsche that this is a status that can only be achieved by a single agent (in spite of his repeatedly associating genuine excellence with isolated individuals), it is a clear implication of his writings on praise that genuine excellence is a status that could only be achieved by a very small number of individuals.

Situating Nietzsche’s remarks on the ethics of praise in the context of his anti-egalitarian critique has two significant upshots; two interpretive and two ethical. The first interpretive pay-off is that locating Nietzsche’s remarks on praise within his strongly anti-egalitarian ethical outlook serves to make sense of a cluster of generally hostile remarks about praise and excellence that would otherwise look somewhat puzzling. The second interpretive pay-off is that reading these hostile remarks against the background of Nietzsche’s anti-egalitarian commitments serves to demonstrate the relevance of those remarks to contemporary debates about equality in ethics and politics that show no signs of reaching a state of consensus.<sup>39</sup>

The first ethical pay-off is that Nietzsche’s critical remarks about the ethics of praise presents a challenge to articulate a conception of human excellence that clearly separates the extent to which different aspects of excellence - as found among actual or potential persons - is either positional or scarce. The second ethical pay-off is that digging beneath the surface of Nietzsche’s general hostility to praise can help to gain further clarity about what at least some of us consider one of the more problematic aspects of his critique of ‘morality’; namely his

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<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Anne Phillips, *Unconditional Equals*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021; Paul Sagar, *Basic Equality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024.



non-disguised temptation to think of rigid inequalities in human powers and capacities as not just a fact of life, but as a welcome source of aspiration and development.<sup>40</sup>

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