Varieties of Virtue in the Modern European Tradition: Nietzsche's Potential Contribution

Matthew Dennis

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues
University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom
T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4865
E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk

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1. Introduction

Since the revival of interest in virtue ethics in the latter half of the twentieth-century, many have speculated whether the virtue tradition may shed light on Nietzsche's moral philosophy. It has even been thought that this could be a two-way process: not only might notions in virtue ethics shed light on Nietzsche, but his work might harbour the resources to strengthen the philosophy of virtue itself. Those involved in such an undertaking loosely fall into two camps: the first, comprising historically-minded Nietzsche scholars, are those who believe that virtue-based approaches explain the puzzling features of Nietzsche's own moral philosophy; the second, comprising virtue ethicists, are those who wonder whether Nietzsche might provide a viable alternative to Aristotelian-based approaches. Of course these projects are not mutually exclusive, and some interpret Nietzsche's moral philosophy in terms of the virtue tradition, while also reflecting on how his philosophy's arguably radical features may extend the scope of the tradition's viable positions. This dual approach will be the broad aim of this paper, although I will tend to focus on what Nietzsche is historically committed to in terms of virtue—not whether he is philosophically entitled to it. As we will see, even this undertaking will prove to be a demanding task, since Nietzsche purposely departs from the conventional philosophical lexicon on virtue, redefining its central terms, which makes his position difficult to elucidate without a fair amount of interpretive work. But furnishing Nietzsche with a comprehensible and historically-grounded position on virtue must be the first task before determining if such a position is philosophically coherent and seeing whether it has anything to offer contemporary debates in virtue ethics.

So how does the literature on Nietzsche and virtue currently stand? At the early stages of the debate, many scholars simply referred to the lists of so-called 'cardinal virtues' that he offers in D §556 and BGE §284,[1] and for a long time these were thought to be definitive. More recently, however, philosophers have tried to think more deeply about the question of which virtues Nietzsche advocates by trying to discern which character traits he consistently praises, although does not identify as virtues specifically. Clearly this approach is more sophisticated since the virtues Nietzsche calls 'cardinal' vary significantly between D §556 and BGE §284 and seem to have little to do with many of the other character traits he praises throughout his work. Nevertheless, even those scholars who think that Nietzsche's most important contribution to the virtue tradition is that he advocates new virtues, cannot agree what these virtues are, instead typically proposing that such virtues belong to one of three strikingly different categories. The first are what we could call the archaic-competitive character traits which Nietzsche discusses in GM. The second, are creative traits, which he praises from BT to his final (albeit devastating) remarks on Wagner in 1888. Third, are intellectual traits, those virtues of *redlichkeit*[2] and curiosity that relate to what Nietzsche terms the 'will to truth', which have recently received much interesting attention from Mark Alfano.

Despite the many interesting things scholars have said about Nietzsche's virtues—both his revisionary list of virtues and the revisionary content[3] he gives traditional virtues—as yet little attention has been paid to what he says about virtue itself. As we have seen, often scholars treat Nietzsche as if his most important contribution to the virtue

[1] See D §556: 'The good four. – *Honest* towards ourselves and whoever else is a friend to us; *brave* towards the enemy; *magnanimous* towards the defeated; *polite*—always: this is what the four cardinal virtues want us to be'; and BGE §284: 'And to keep control over your four virtues: courage, insight, sympathy, solitude.'

[2] Often translated as 'honesty' or 'integrity'.

[3] See, for example, Nietzsche's striking redefinition of the virtue of 'justice' in HL.

tradition is that he proposes new virtues, rather than that he is working with an different conception of virtue entirely.[4] While the virtues Nietzsche writes about are often refreshing and certainly provocative, in this paper I will argue that instead of promoting a set of cardinal virtues à la Plato or Aristotle, Nietzsche does not endorse any specific virtues at all. In fact I will propose, once we understand Nietzsche's conception of virtue correctly, we can see why the range of character traits that he can consider virtues is almost open-ended. This may of course help explain the mix of virtues that have been attributed to Nietzsche in the scholarly literature, but it may also enable us to understand his puzzling remarks on virtue, some of which I will examine below. Furthermore, approaching things in this way may show us what is philosophically distinctive about his position—I will suggest that it is not that he proposes strikingly-new virtues, it is his conception of virtue that distinguishes him from other thinkers in the virtue tradition.

In what follows I will seek to show that Nietzsche primarily conceives of virtue as empowering activity, specifically that which empowers (or contributes to empowering) the individual as a whole. On the Nietzschean view, whether a character trait is a virtue or a vice depends on whether it empowers the individual concerned: traits that empower it are virtues, whereas those that disempower it are vices. I will also argue that understanding virtue like this goes a significant way to explaining Nietzsche's insistence that individuals should aspire to different virtues, a claim that continues to baffle Nietzsche scholars and virtue ethicists alike. As we will see in the next section, Nietzsche remains relatively open about which character traits are empowering, as he sees this as dependant on the individual's constitution, what he calls the configuration of its 'drives', its specific psycho-physiological temperament. Apart from character traits that by their very nature are disempowering—certain ascetic or masochistic traits, say—or those traits that happen to be disempowering for an individual given its constitution, Nietzsche seems to regard any character trait as a virtue if it empowers the individual as a whole. Of course much more will need to be said about this, both in terms of precisely what kind of 'empowering activity' Nietzsche has in mind, and showing that there is textual evidence that commits him to this view. Finally, it will also be important to show that his understanding of empowering activity is philosophically distinctive, and to distinguish it from others at work in the virtue tradition, since both Aristotelian and some Hellenistic conceptions of virtue might all be said to fit—albeit loosely—with this definition. I will discuss this, and will suggest that the conception of virtue Nietzsche proposes has some precedent in Spinoza and Machiavelli, both of whom he cites in connection with this theme.

2. Four Puzzles

I will begin by showing how this approach helps make sense of the seemingly miscellaneous character traits that Nietzsche endorses as virtues, as well as suggesting how this approach can also shed much-needed light on his puzzling remarks on his conception of virtue that he makes throughout his work. Over and above the many times that he writes about specific virtues, Nietzsche's remarks on his conception of virtue are rarer and more cryptic, although they can be grouped into four relatively stable claims:[5] first, he tells us that virtue should be understood as a kind of talent or skill, sometimes even preferring to use the term 'proficiency' [*Tüchtigkeit*] instead of 'virtue' [*Tugend*], and telling us that we should understand this as '*virtù*' in the sense of the Italian Renaissance. Second, he tells us that, in contrast to the theological tradition, his conception of virtue is openly egoistic, a claim that although uncontentious to Aristotelians is perhaps best understood as targeted at the conception of virtue at work in the Christian and Thomist traditions. Third, he

[4] Within the Nietzsche scholarship the main exception to this is Lester Hunt's *Nietzsche and the Origin of Virtue*, who also pursues the question of Nietzsche's conception of virtue, rather than the specific virtues he happens to endorse.

[5] I am not suggesting these four claims are exhaustive. Over and above discussing specific virtues, Nietzsche makes other intriguing claims about his conception of virtue, including some of the features that Professor Annas mentions in her paper for this conference.

suggests that virtue is non-universalizable, instead applying with a high degree of specificity to individuals. Virtues are not only just expressed differently by different individuals, he tells us, but rather different character traits count as virtues for different individuals. This is the most difficult claim to defend, which is perhaps reflected by the penetrating analysis that Professor Annas subjects it to in her paper for this conference. Finally, he proposes—perhaps unsurprisingly given his self-styled 'immoralism'—that we should understand his conception of virtue as non-moral [*moralinfreie*]. As we shall see, this last claim depends on claim two and three, and possibly also on one.

Puzzle 1 (*Virtù* and *Tüchtigkeit*)

Nietzsche's first puzzling remarks about virtue concern his insistence that it should be conceived of as a talent or ability in a creative or practical sense. He tells us that we should strive for 'proficiency' [*Tüchtigkeit*], rather than 'virtue' [*Tugend*], adding in parenthesis that virtue is only worth seeking if we understand it as '*virtù*', that is, 'virtue in the Renaissance style' (AC §2).[6] Similarly, in *Ecce Homo*, he rhetorically asks:

> "what do you nourish [*ernähren*] *yourself* with in order to achieve the maximum of power [*Kraft*], of *virtú* in the style of the Renaissance, of moraline-free virtue?"[7]

From this we can see that when Nietzsche uses the term virtue he intends it to be understood as a loose synonym for either *virtù* or *Tüchtigkeit*.[8] It seems that we should, therefore, read *Tugend* as shorthand for *virtù* and *Tüchtigkeit*, and interpret it with all the etymological connotations of both these terms. So what are these connotations?

Nietzsche's use of *virtù* has typically been understood as a direct reference to Machiavelli, and this connection seems plausible as when using *virtù* he invariably attaches it to the phrase 'in the Renaissance-style'. Nietzsche would have known of the connotations of Machiavelli's use of the term from his early reading of *Il Principe*, especially the lack of connection it has with moral goodness in this text. Rather than relating to morality, Machiavelli uses *virtù* to mean '"drive", "determination", "courage", "skill", or "ability" in political or military affairs' (Price 1973: 324)—or, as the *Cambridge Italian Dictionary* succinctly puts it, 'ruthlessness and determination combined with exceptional ability to conceive and carry out a plan of action'.[9] *Virtù*, then, should be understood as the potential of one's talents or practical abilities to influence external events in some desirable way. As we will see, this shares some intriguing similarities to those of *Tüchtigkeit*, to which we now turn.

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[6] The full note reads: 'Not contentment, but more power; not peace at any price, but war; not virtue but excellence (*virtú* in the style of the Renaissance, moraline-free virtue)' [*Nicht Zufriedenheit, sondern mehr Macht; nicht Friede überhaupt, sondern Krieg; nicht Tugend, sondern Tüchtigkeit (Tugend im Renaissance-Stile, virtù, moralinfreie Tugend)*] (AC §2).

[7] EH, 'Clever' §1.

[8] Nietzsche also regularly stresses the interrelation between *Tugend*, *Tüchtigkeit*, and *virtù* in his later unpublished work. While the notes written concomitantly with his published work that deals with these terms often only reiterate that he understands them as synonyms (NF-1887 10[2] [WP 1021]; NF-1887 10[45] [WP 327]; NF-1887 10[109] [WP §317]; NF-1887,11[110]), some are more informative. One example of this is NF-1887 9 [87], where Nietzsche begins by bemoaning the 'suppressed and selective *heresy* in moral concepts' [*unterdrückte und ausgewischte* Häresie *in der Moral Begriffe*], before explicitly relating *virtù* to what he approvingly calls 'master-morality' [*Herren-Moral: virtù*], a term he often uses for his ethical ideal. Another example is in NF-1887 10[50] [WP §740], where Nietzsche notes that 'In the age of the Renaissance the criminal thrived and acquired for himself his own kind of virtue—virtue in the Renaissance style, to be sure, *virtù*, moraline-free virtue' [*in der Zeit der Renaissance gedieh der Verbrecher und erwarb sich seine eigne Art von Tugend—Tugend im Renaissance stile freilich, virtù, moralinfreie Tugend*].

[9] *Cambridge Italian Dictionary* (1962) (cited by Price 1973: 324). Neal Wood also gives another intriguing connection: 'Machiavelli often uses *virtù* as if it were the Latin *virtus*, energy of will, manliness, excellence' (Wood 1967: 11)

Nietzsche's translators often translate *Tüchtigkeit* as 'fitness' or 'efficiency',[10] although it could also be translated as 'proficiency', so long as we understand it as a talent or ability of some kind. As we have seen, *virtù* can also be understood as a similar kind of excellence, one relating to one's *Kraft* or *Talent*, rather than one's moral acumen, so translating *Tüchtigkeit* as 'proficiency' reinforces its connection with *virtù* which Nietzsche asks us to draw. Also, similarly to *virtù*, *Tüchtigkeit* has no connotation with moral goodness—it is simply excellence in terms of one's abilities, as Nietzsche makes plain when directly comparing it to *virtù* in an unpublished note from 1885:

> An proficient craftsman [*tüchtiger Handwerker*] or scholar cuts a fine figure when he takes pride in his art and looks on life content and satisfied. But nothing looks more wretched than when a shoemaker or schoolmaster gives us to understand with a suffering mien that he was really born for something better [*Besseres*]. There is nothing better [*Besseres*] than what is good [*Gute*]! And that is having some proficiency [*Tüchtigkeit*] and using that to create or *virtù* in the Italian Renaissance sense. NF-1885 34[161] [WP §75]

By reading *Tüchtigkeit* for *Tugend*, then, Nietzsche seems to be asking us to ignore the latter term's customary connection with moral goodness, encouraging us to understand it as involving an exceptional ability of some kind—one analogous to the skill of a *tüchtiger Handwerker*.

Puzzle 2 (egoism[11])

Nietzsche stresses that for a character trait to be a virtue in his sense, it must be *openly* egoistic, although he also makes the stronger claim that all character traits are necessarily motivated by underlying self-interest, whether they disclose it openly or not. His objection to the theological virtues, for example, is that they present themselves as carrying no egoistic agenda, whereas for Nietzsche such an agenda is always present. To illustrate this, in HH §57, he asks us to consider three cases of ostensibly unegoistic virtues:

> A girl in love wishes the faithfulness and devotion of her love could be tested by the faithlessness of the man she loves. A soldier wishes he could fall on the battlefield for his victorious fatherland; for his supreme desire is victor in the victory of his fatherland. A mother gives to her child that of which she deprives herself, sleep, the best food, if need be her health, her strength.

All these cases seem to be paradigmatic instances of unegoistic virtues—the virtues of faithfulness and devotion towards a loved one, or even the virtue of courageously perishing to thwart an aggressive enemy. But Nietzsche's point here is that there are underlying, and often undisclosed, egoistic motivations at work in all these examples. He pointedly asks:

> Is it not clear that in all these instances man loves *something of himself*, an idea, a desire, an offspring, more than *something else of himself*, that he thus *divides* his nature and sacrifices one part of it to the other? […] The *inclination for something* (wish, impulse, desire) is present in all the above-mentioned instances; to give in to it, with all the consequences, is in any event not 'unegoistic'.

[10] W. Kaufmann translates the term as 'fitness' in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1994): 570; whereas A. M. Ludovici translates it as 'efficiency' in *The Antichrist* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000): 5.

[11] Following Nietzsche, I will use the term egoism both to describe his position and those of the ancient world. As Professor Annas points out, however, in contemporary debate, 'egoism' is used to describe those theories 'whose content is self-centred or self-interested, as well as being formally agent-centred'. But, Annas continues, '[s]ince all ancient theories are formally agent-centred [this term] can be confusing' (Annas 1993: 225).

In these cases, Nietzsche argues, even the apparently unegoistic virtues of faithfulness, bravery, and solicitude have egoistic motivations, which may consist in a desire to be a faithful, brave, or solicitous person, or simply to be in the individual's direct interests when these are understood in an expanded sense. To grasp the egoism that motivates these so-called virtuous behaviours, then, we only need to understand egoism as capable of going beyond an individual's direct interests and immediate advantage.[12]

Nietzsche's complaint in these passages is not that egoism is the very thing that underlies virtue, but rather that it typically remains unacknowledged. The worry is not that, on close inspection, the individuals in the case studies above are actually self-interested, but that their understanding of what it means to be faithful, brave, and solicitous is not compatible with viewing these virtues as motivated by self-interest. For Nietzsche virtue is inherently egoistic, and for a character trait to be a virtue this self-interest should be openly acknowledged. He emphasises this when discussing Plato in WS §285:

> When Plato opines that with the abolition of property egoism too will be abolished the reply to him is that, in the case of man at any rate, the departure of egoism would also mean the departure of the four cardinal virtues—for it has to be said that the foulest pestilence could not do so much harm to mankind as would be done him if his vanity disappeared. Without vanity and egoism—what are the human virtues?

While this is a decidedly uncharitable reading of Plato's account of the benefits of a society operating without private property which we find in *The Republic*, the passage allows us to infer that Nietzsche is committed to two positions: first, he still thinks that it is appropriate to couch his moral philosophy in terms the virtues (losing them would be worse that the 'foulest pestilence'); second, that egoism (and vanity) are necessary constituents of virtue itself. We can say, then, that for Nietzsche all actions are necessarily egoistic, and for a character trait to be a virtue in his sense then this egoism must be openly acknowledged.

Puzzle 3 (individual-specific)

The idea that Nietzsche's moral philosophy is not generically prescriptive is a familiar theme throughout his writings. In HH §25, for example, he derides the Kantian requirement that the same moral actions are demanded 'of all men', telling us that it is 'absolutely not desirable that all men should act in the same way'. In this passage, the claim is restricted to the dictates of the categorical imperative, but elsewhere he makes similar claims about the virtues. For example, in AC Nietzsche tells us that:

> A virtue needs to be our own invention, our *own* most personal need and self-defence: in any other sense, a virtue is just dangerous. Whatever is not a condition for life *harms* it: a virtue that comes exclusively from a feeling of respect for the concept of 'virtue', as Kant would have it, is harmful.

As Professor Annas notes in her paper to this conference, claims like this can either suggest that Nietzsche thinks we should come to recognise which character traits are virtues ourselves (rather than taking another's word for it) or, the stronger thesis, that we should seek different ones from one another. Professor Annas suggests that the textual evidence

[12] In fact Nietzsche cautions in HH §46 that when he uses the term 'unegoistic', the 'word is never to be taken in a strict sense but only as a simplified form of expression'. Similarly in HH §455, he tells us that when he tells us that when an individual 'pursue objectives that transcend [its] individual lifespan […]', this fact 'makes him unegoistic, or, more correctly, it *broadens his egoism in respect of duration*' (emphasis added).

remains inconclusive on this point, but I would like to respectfully suggest that—at least on balance—Nietzsche may well be committed to the latter, stronger thesis. Take his position regarding chastity, for example, one of the so-called 'contrary virtues'.[13] In Z he asks:

Do I advise you to chastity? In some people chastity is a virtue, but in many it is almost a vice. They abstain, to be sure: but the bitch, sensuality, leers with envy out of everything they do. Even into the heights of their virtue and all the way into their cold spirit this beast follows them with its unrest.[14]

In this case at least, I would suggest it seems likely that Nietzsche thinks that, while some character traits are not virtues in some individuals, they can be virtues in others. Consequently, chastity is beneficial for some—by which I take him to mean that it empowers the individual in some way—but not for others. Of course Nietzsche may also believe that we need to discover this fact for ourselves, which I think is likely given the passage from AC that we cited above, but at least in this passage he seems to be saying that we should not all strive for the same virtues.

Before moving to look at where Nietzsche directly articulates this doctrine, it may be worth contextualising his position with two seemingly-similar views from the ancient world. For example, when discussing the question of the virtues of those who are not well-born, male, or Athenian, even Aristotle tells us that 'all classes [of persons] must be deemed to have their special attributes' (1260a28–29) and that 'the precise definition of each individual's virtue [*arete*] applies exclusively to him' (1276b25). The upshot of this is that he proposes that, when we are not addressing the select audience of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we should follow the sophist Gorgias by 'enumerat[ing] the virtues'. Unless Aristotle is quoting from a no longer extant source,[15] we can safely assume that he is basing his knowledge of Gorgias' thought on Plato's *Meno*, since his remarks closely map onto how Meno describes Gorgias's conception of virtue in this text. Asked by Socrates to define virtue, Meno replies—controversially in the extreme for modern readers—that virtue varies according to the individual concerned: 'the virtue of a woman is in manag[ing] the home, preserv[ing] its possessions, and be[ing] submissive to her husband', suggesting that distinct virtues apply to boys, girls, freemen, and slaves. In fact, he goes on to propose, there are different 'virtue[s] for every action and every age' with corresponding vices (71e–72a).

Nietzsche seems to share at least some common ground with the account that both Aristotle and Plato give of Gorgias' position. Both thinkers propose an individual-based conception of virtue, one in which individuals do not just express the same virtues in different ways but express different virtues entirely. Nietzsche's position seems to be more radical that Gorgias', however, as while the latter restricts differences in virtue to sortal types of individuals (boys, girls, etc), Nietzsche seems to suggest that specific virtues apply to specific individuals. Perhaps the clearest theoretical articulation of this view can be found in GS §120, which I quote in full:

The popular medical formulation of morality (the originator of which is Ariston of Chios), 'virtue is the health of the soul', would, in

[13] Vaticana, Libreria Editri, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: USCCB, 2000)

[14] AC §11. See also a concomitant note in WP §326: 'Virtues are as dangerous as vices in so far as one lets them rule Over one as authorities and laws from without and does not first produce them out of oneself, as one should do, as one's most personal self-defence and necessity, as conditions of precisely *our own* existence and growth, which we recognize and acknowledge independently of whether other men grow with us under similar or different conditions. This law of the dangerousness of impersonally understood, objective virtue applies also to modesty: many of the choicest spirits perish through it. The morality of modesty is the worst form of softening for those souls for which it makes sense that they should become hard in time.'

[15] Little survives of Gorgias' writings on virtue. We have no extant works except the full texts *Encomium of Helen* and *Defence of Palamedes* and fragments of his funeral speech written in honour of the casualties of the Peloponnesian War (Dillion and Gergel 2003: 45).

order to be useful, have to be changed at least to read, 'your virtue is the health of your soul'. For there is no health as such, and all attempts to define such a thing have failed miserably. Deciding what is health even for your body depends on your goal, your horizon, your powers, your impulses, your mistakes and above all on the ideals and phantasms of your soul. Thus there are innumerable heaths of the *body*; and the more one allows the particular and incomparable to rear its head again, the more one unlearns the dogma of the 'equality of men', the more the concept of a normal health, along with those of a normal diet and normal course of an illness, must be abandoned by our medical men. Only then would it be timely to reflect on the health and illness of the *soul* and to locate the virtue peculiar to each man in its health—which of course could look in one person like the opposite of health in another.

While the formulation, 'virtue is the health of the soul', and the analogy between the health of the body and the harmony of soul, could certainly be endorsed to some degree most ethicists in the ancient world, Nietzsche's subversion of the analogy merits close scrutiny. He tells us that since health depends on both the idiosyncratic nature of one's body and one's 'goal', 'horizon', 'powers', 'impulses', and 'ideals', then that which engenders it in one person will not engender it in another. This leads to his claim that there are 'innumerable healths of the *body*', the idea being that there are as many ways to be healthy as there are as bodies, and that for each body its health will be unique.

Nietzsche's idea is that, just as we cannot speak of health over and above a particular health that is enjoyed by a particular body, nor can we do this with virtue. Instead, Ariston's maxim must be changed to 'your virtue is the health of *your* soul' (emphasis added) to capture his claim that what is virtuous depends on the nature of the individual concerned. So how does Nietzsche think the nature of individual's differ? While a full account of this is beyond the remit of this paper, we can provisionally say that he thinks individuals differ on account of their 'drives', that is, their psycho-physiological characteristics. Just as somatic health is relative to the individual's bodily endowment—its metabolism, muscle density, height, and strength, etc—so too virtue is relative to the individual's configuration of drives.

Puzzle 4 (*moralinfreie*)

So far, then, we have seen that Nietzsche understands virtue to have three main characteristics: first, he tells us that we should consider it to be similar to a practical skill or creative talent, not connected with moral goodness; second, he specifies—in line with the ancient virtue tradition, although pointedly opposed to the theological one—that virtue is necessarily egoistic, and that for a character trait to be a virtue in his sense it must be openly so; third, he proposes, given that physio-psychological temperament of individuals differ, that the character traits that are considered virtues must be responsive to these differences. We now turn to Nietzsche's puzzling remarks on how his conception of virtue must be non-moral, remarks that must surely strike contemporary virtue ethicists as odd if not wilfully confusing. We first encountered this claim when we examined Nietzsche's insistence that his conception of virtue has more in common with proficiency [*Tüchtigkeit*] than moral virtue. Here we saw Nietzsche using *virtù* and *Tüchtigkeit* as synonyms because of the misleading connotations that he regards the term virtue [*Tugend*] as saddled with, on account of the apparent prominence this term has in the Christian tradition. Of course redefining virtue in this way may be outlandish enough to justify the claim that virtue is non-moral. After reviewing the evidence for this claim, however, I will argue that Nietzsche may also be justified in describing his conception of virtue as non-moral because of his specification that it must be egoistic and individualised.

When examining *virtù* above, we saw that Machiavelli uses the term to refer to a skill or talent that allows the individual to thrive in a creative or practical sense, which prompted us to tentatively conclude that virtue's domain may not be moral. Closer examination of Nietzsche's source-material on the Renaissance confirms that he may well have

understood things in this way. For example, as Émile Gebhart, one of his favourite authors on the Renaissance, writes in *La Renaissance Italienne et La Philosophie de L'Histoire*:

> [Renaissance] Italians called *virtù* this achievement of the personality. *Virtù* has, in truth, nothing in common with virtue[16]

In a similar vein, Jakob Burckhardt also strongly emphasises the difference between *virtù* and moral virtue. In *Die Culture der Renaissance in Italien*, which Nietzsche read upon its publication in 1869, Burckhardt tells us that a 'combination of power and skill [*Kraft und Talent*] is what Machiavelli calls *virtù* and is thought compatible with *scelleratezza* [villainy]'.[17] Many of Nietzsche's own notes on *virtù* also stress this connection. In NF-1887 10[50] [WP §740], for example, he tells us that:

> [T]he criminal is an ill-nourished and stunted plant, this is to the dishonour of our society; in the age of the Renaissance the criminal thrived and acquired for himself his own kind of *virtù*—virtue in the Renaissance style, to be sure, *virtù*, moraline-free virtue

The thought here seems to be that a society that can accommodate the drives of such individuals fares better as these individuals have much to contribute. Again, the Renaissance does better in this regard, as the criminal not only 'thrived' but was also admired and acquired *virtù*. From this we can see why Nietzsche understands *virtù* and *Tüchtigkeit* to be synonymous with his own sense of *Tugend*: all theses terms refer to some kind of proficiency or mastery—and while none specify the precise domain of such excellence, the connotations of *Tüchtigkeit* and *virtù* suggest that we should understand it as excellence in the practical or creative sphere as opposed to the moral one.

But, aside from relating to different domain that the moral, there may be another reason why Nietzsche tells us that his notion of virtue is non-moral, one that refers back to his conception of virtue itself. To do this we need to think of Nietzsche's precise definition of morality, so that we can grasp that which he is contrasting his non-moral conception of virtue with. This necessitates us understanding precisely what Nietzsche means by 'moral' in order to understand what he might mean by a 'non-moral' conception of virtue. While this is a tremendously wide question with a detailed literature, there are places where Nietzsche succinctly defines what he means by morality that allows us to conjecture about what a non-moral conception of virtue would have to look like. In NF-1886.7 [4] [WP 261], he tells us that:

> What is the criterion of a moral action? (l) its disinterestedness, (2) its universal validity.[18]

As we have seen, Nietzsche's conception of virtue explicitly has neither of these features, which gives us an extra reason why he feels entitled to call it non-moral as well as explaining what he means by this appellation. Nietzsche

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[16] *Italiens ont appellé virtù cet achèvement de la personnalité. La virtù n'a, il est vrai, rein de commun avec la vertue* (my translation). Nietzsche read and annotated this when it was published in 1887. Cited by Brobjer 1995: 81.

[17] Italian in the original. The full quote reads: 'Verein von Kraft und Talent ist es, was bei Macchiavell *virtù* heisst und auch mit scelleratezza verträglich gedacht wird'. Jakob Burckhardt in his *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* (Leipzig: Phaidon, 1860): 12. See Machiavelli's own account of the combination of '*virtù e scelleratezze*' in his description of Oliverotto's bloody rise to power in *Il principe* (Thomson 1992 [1513]: VIII 22–24).

[18] 'Was ist das Kriterium der moralischen Handlung? 1) ihre Uneigennützigkeit 2) ihre Allgemeingültigkeit usw.' A similar thought is related to virtues (instead of acts) in BGE §221. Here Nietzsche writes: 'In one made and destined for command, for example, self-abnegation and modest retirement would be not a virtue but the waste of a virtue: so it seems to me. Every unegoistic morality which takes itself as unconditional and addresses itself to everybody is not merely a sin against taste: it is an instigation to sins of omission, one seduction *more* under the mask of philanthropy—and a seduction and injury for precisely the higher, rarer, privileged.'

insists that his conception of virtue is non-moral because it does not have the two features of morality—it is *not* disinterested and it is *not* universal valid.

From this we can see that there are several reasons why Nietzsche may feel able to specify that his conception of virtue is non-moral: first, following what he tells us about replacing virtue [*Tugend*] with what he would regard as more appropriate terms, *virtù* or *Tüchtigkeit*, we have reason to think that his conception of virtue is non-moral simply because it is not in the moral domain. Second, we can also say that his conception of virtue is non-moral because it does not fulfil what Nietzsche regards as the two essential criteria for morality: disinterestedness and universal validity, both of which he explicitly specifies that his conception of virtue does not include.

3. Virtue as Empowering Activity

> It is power [*Macht*], this new virtue; it is a ruling thought and around it a clever soul: a golden sun and around it the snake of knowledge[19]

In the above quote, Zarathustra, the oracular mouthpiece for many of Nietzsche's more cogently-argued-for insights, equates power with virtue directly, announcing it as the 'new' virtue of his philosophy. But if we set aside the complex symbolism at work here—the references to the *Schlange der Erkenntniss* or *goldene Sonne*—we seem to have little else to go on, and so can only seek what Nietzsche means by empowering activity elsewhere. Where else is there evidence that he is committed to this view? And in precisely what sense are virtue and empowerment similar? In what follows I will suggest that we can find textual evidence for this position in Nietzsche's later work, as well as in an unpublished set of remarks that he makes around the time that he was most influenced by Spinoza. Furthermore, as I will seek to show in the next section, interpreting Nietzsche as conceiving of virtue in this way allows us to make sense of the four puzzling remarks which we have looked at above.

Nietzsche's remarks on Spinoza's conception of virtue are found in his unpublished notebooks from 1886–87, and suggest that he has a good working knowledge of the seventeenth-century philosopher's position.[20] As is well known, in his *Ethics* Spinoza directly equates virtue with power, similarly to how he controversially proposes that other philosophical terms are synonyms—most famously, *Deus sive natura*. Perhaps the best-known articulation of Spinoza's conception of virtue—which Nietzsche quotes verbatim—occurs in the eighth definition to Book IV where he tells us that 'By *virtue* [*virtutem*] and power [*potentiam*] I mean the same thing'. Of course much hinges on precisely what Spinoza means by power here, since the term has numerous senses, although we are given a clue by the fact that he uses the word *potentia* instead of *potestas*. Very briefly, whereas *potestas* specifically refers to strength or military power, *potentia* refers to the capacity of an individual to act or be acted upon in a way which conduces to their empowerment. Power in the sense of *potentia*, then, is much broader than *potestas*, which goes some way to making sense of Spinoza's connection of power with virtue in EIV P20. He writes:

> The more every man endeavours and is able to seek his own advantage, that is, to preserve his own being, the more he is endowed with virtue. On the other hand, insofar as he neglects to preserve what is to his advantage, that is, his own being, to that extent he is

[19] Z I 'On the Bestowing Virtue', §1. The German reads: 'Macht ist sie, diese neue Tugend; ein herrschender Gedanke ist sie und um ihn eine kluge Seele: eine goldene Sonne und um sie die Schlange der Erkenntniss.'

[20] The extent of Nietzsche's reading of Spinoza has become something of a contentious question in Nietzsche studies. Given his extensive and detailed remarks on Spinoza's conception of virtue, I think that it is plausible that he read Spinoza in the original, although there is disagreement about this. For example, Andreas Urs Sommer persuasively argues that Nietzsche derives all his knowledge of Spinoza from Kuno Fischer. See Andreas Urs Sommer, 'Nietzsche's Readings on Spinoza: A Contextualist Study, Particularly on the Reception of Kuno Fischer', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 43 (2012), 156–84.

weak.

Here we are presented with a picture in which individuals are virtuous in proportion how they use their capacity to empower themselves by seeking their own advantage. By empowering themselves, individuals 'preserve [their] own being', and therefore gain power in the sense of *potentia*.

As mentioned above, it is precisely this connection between virtue and power that Nietzsche focuses on when he summarises the seventeenth-century philosopher's position on virtue in his unpublished notes. In NF-1886.7 [4], for example, he adds his own comments to a string of direct citations, including the famous eighth definition to Book IV, which he quotes in long-hand ('"By virtue and power I mean the same thing."') and in abbreviated form (*Virtus = potentia*).[21] In the rest of the passage Nietzsche accurately summarises Spinoza's position on the connection between virtue and empowerment, so this is worth quoting in full:

> The *naturally* selfish [*egoistische*] viewpoint: virtue and power identical [*Tugend und Macht identisch*]. They do not give up, they sought, they do not fight against but for nature; it is not the destruction, but the *satisfaction* [*Befriedigung*] of the most *powerful* [*mächtigsten*] emotion. Good [*Gut*] is what promotes our power: evil [*böse*] the contrary. Virtue follows from the pursuit of self-preservation.

From this we can see that Nietzsche is familiar with, and seems to approve of, how Spinoza equates virtue and with empowering activity. After stating that virtue and power are identical (*Tugend und Macht identisch*), he succinctly recaps Spinoza's argumentation for treating virtue and power as synonyms, by directly quoting the reference to EIV D8, and then relating virtue to self-preservation [*Selbsterhaltung*]. Interestingly, he also seems aware of Spinoza's Latin terminology in this passage, since he uses *potentia* and not *potestas* in his short-hand formulation, '*Virtus = potentia*'. Moreover, when translating the term for power into German, he renders it as *Macht*, which fits with his own preferred term for power in the above quote from Z, as well as fitting with his definition of goodness in terms of power which we will examine below.

So far, then, we seem to have established that Nietzsche was familiar with the fact that Spinoza equates virtue with power, and that he was at least sympathetic to this idea. Of course this does not show that Nietzsche endorsed the position himself, just that he was aware of it and was interested enough to make notes on relevant passages. To show that he had more than a passing interest in Spinoza's conception of virtue, and that it was influential for his own view, we now move to look at a passage in AC where he appears to take on important aspects of Spinoza's position wholesale. In this passage, Nietzsche follows Spinoza's definition of the good, linking it to empowering activity, and telling us that we can determine the nature of good and bad on the basis of whether it empowers us or not. In AC §2 he writes:

> What is good [*gut*]? – Everything that enhances one's feeling of power [*Macht*], will to power, power itself.
> What is bad [*schlecht*]? – Everything stemming from weakness.
> What is happiness [*Glück*]? – The feeling that power is growing, that some resistance has been overcome.

We have cited part of this passage before in 'Puzzle 1', when we examined how Nietzsche links his conception of virtue with *virtù* and *Tüchtigkeit*.[22] While in this passage Nietzsche asks '*Was ist gut?*' not '*Was ist tugendhaft?* [virtuous]',

[21] Nietzsche changes Spinoza's Latin from the accusative to the nominative, rendering '*virtutem*' and '*potentiam*' *as* '*virtus*' and '*potentia*' respectively.

[22] To recall, the passage reads: '[N]ot peace, but war; not virtue, but proficiency (virtue in the style of the Renaissance, *virtù*,

his answer makes it clear that what interests him is not good or power *in abstracto*, but rather what is good for a specific individual. What is so striking about this passage, however, is how closely it resembles Spinoza's idea that the more individuals empower themselves by preserving their being and seeking their own advantage, the more virtuous they are (EIV P20; quoted above). In fact, Spinoza only gets to EIV P20 by invoking three earlier-established propositions (Definitions 1 and 2 of Book IV and EIII P7) in the proof to EIV P8, which even more closely resembles Nietzsche's remarks in AC §2. In the proof Spinoza writes:

> We call *good* or *bad* that which is advantageous, or an obstacle, to the preservation of our being; that is, that which increases or diminishes, helps or checks, our *power of activity*.[23]

From this we can see that, at least on this point, Nietzsche and Spinoza both understand what is good for the individual as what empowers it—that which increases its power of activity. Similarly they both understand what is bad as that which enervates the individual—that which decreases its power. By saying this we should of course not downplay the significant differences between both thinkers, or say that they are completely aligned even on this point. For a start, Spinoza has a particular view about what constitutes empowerment: he believes it is the exercise one's rational faculty, and that only by exercising this faculty does one empower oneself and become virtuous. Nietzsche clearly has no such commitment, and—perhaps due to his drive-based conception of the individual—remains much more open about what can empower and what can disempower.

4. Conclusion

We now turn to look at whether understanding virtue as empowering activity can help make sense of the four puzzles that we explicated in Section 2. Can we shed light on any of Nietzsche's puzzling remarks, if we understand him following Spinoza's power-based conception of virtue?

We began with Nietzsche's claim that his conception of virtue has more in common with *virtù*, understood in the Renaissance sense with all of this term's connotations. As we saw, at least in Machiavelli, although the connotations of *virtù* are largely martial, the term is also connected with practical activity in a general sense, especially the ability to conceive and carry out a 'plan of action'. This sense of *virtù* may go some way to explaining what Nietzsche means when he connects it to 'nourishment' [*Ernährung*] in EH 'Clever' §1. Here we saw him claiming that it is through a process of *Ernährung* that we achieve a 'maximum of power [*Kraft*]' and directly relating this to '*virtú* [or] virtue in the style of the Renaissance'. The connection between power and virtue was further reinforced by the second term that Nietzsche asks us to treat as synonymous with his conception of virtue. As we saw, this term was *Tüchtigkeit*, which means proficiency in a skilled domain, as is suggested by Nietzsche's characterisation of the '*tüchtiger Handwerker*', the proficient craftsman, who in NF-1885 34[161] we saw presented as virtuous on account of their *Tüchtigkeit*. We could say, therefore, that by manifesting either *virtù* and *Tüchtigkeit* an individual is displaying its power of acting in some way.

The next puzzling claim we looked at was Nietzsche's claim that his conception of virtue is egoistic. As we proposed in this section, although this claim alone does not distinguish Nietzsche from a figure such as Aristotle for whom virtuous action must be self-regarding, it does distinguish him from the conception of virtue at work in the theological tradition. In the virtues lauded by this tradition, we noted that lack of self-interest is often an implicit

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moraline-free virtue).'

[23] Emphasis added. EIV P8.

requirement. We also noted that Nietzsche invokes two arguments against this: first, virtues that aspire to complete disinterestedness are philosophically incoherent; second, virtues that proclaim such disinterestedness are disingenuous. Of course, if Nietzsche understands virtuous activity as that which empowers the individual, then it seems obvious that acting virtuously could not be disinterested, nor will it claim to be so. Furthermore, immediately prior to summarising Spinoza's conception of virtue, Nietzsche notes that this conception appeals to him because it adopts a '*naturally* selfish [*egoistische*] viewpoint' (NF-1886.7 [4]). If Nietzsche does conceive virtue as a kind of empowering activity, then, it seems to follow that he will also think of it as egoistic.

We then examined Nietzsche's insistence that his conception of virtue is individual-specific. Here we canvassed various interpretations on precisely what his view might be, and tentatively concluded that he seems to believe that what is virtuous for an individual depends on its configuration of drives. We also examined the analogy he makes—following the ancient virtue tradition—between virtue and health. Looking at GS §120, we saw that this presents us with an interpretative puzzle: although Nietzsche plainly states that there can be no such thing as health because this is relative to the individual's aims and goals, he also feels that the term 'health' has some currency. If we are to apply the same results to virtue, as Nietzsche ask that we do, then we are led to the more plausible claim that, while character traits can be virtues or vices depending on the psycho-physiological constitution of the individual, the term 'virtue' can be used to describe those traits that best allow the drives to thrive. While we have said relatively little about the nature of empowerment in this paper, we have briefly summarised Spinoza's account of this above, and have provisionally suggested that Nietzsche might be working with something like this account.

Finally we looked at Nietzsche's claim his conception of virtue is non-moral. First, we returned to his claim that his use of 'virtue' should be understood as synonymous with both *virtù* and *Tüchtigkeit*, suggesting that—due to the connotations that both these terms carry, especially their explicit disconnection to moral goodness—he may feel entitled to call his conception of virtue 'non-moral'. We saw that Nietzsche's source material on the Renaissance would have strongly supported this reading, and that he emphasises this point himself when he contends that *virtù* is compatible with 'criminality' and 'villainy'. In addition to the non-moral connotations of both *virtù* and *Tüchtigkeit*, we suggested that Nietzsche may also insist that his conception of virtue is non-moral because he specifies that morality comprises two characteristics: first, it professes to be unegoistic, that is, 'disinterested'; second, it aspires to have 'universal validity'. As we have seen in Nietzsche's second and third set of remarks which I have summarised above, he insists that his conception of virtue must be 'egoistic' and 'individual specific'. Of course, if his conception of virtue has either or both of these features, then on Nietzsche's own account he must regard it as non-moral, which gives us another reason why he specifies that it should be understood in this way.

I have argued that we need to differentiate the specific virtues that Nietzsche endorses from his conception of virtue as such. As noted in the introduction, identifying the virtues he endorses has received most attention in the literature, both by those who wish to understand his moral philosophy and those who hope his philosophical resources can be usefully employed in contemporary debates in virtue ethics. This has not been the approach of this paper, which has avoided examining the virtues that Nietzsche advocates, instead focusing on his conception of virtue as such. As we have seen, for a character trait to be a Nietzschean virtue it must fit with his conception of virtue, which following Spinoza I have sought to explain in terms of empowering activity. Understanding virtue as empowering activity, then, explains why Nietzsche insists that his virtues resemble skills or talents, must be egoistic, and must be responsive to the nature of the individual concerned.

Text Key:

BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*]

D = *Dawn* [*Morgenröthe*]

GM = *On the Genealogy of Morality* [*Zur Genealogie der Moral*]

GS = *The Gay Science* [*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*]

HH = *Human, All Too Human* [*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*]

HL = 'On the Use and Abuse of History for Life' [*Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*]

SE = *Schopenhauer as Educator* [*Schopenhauer als Erzieher*]

TI = Twilight of the Idols [*Götzen-Dämmerung*]

WS = *The Wanderer and His Shadow* [*Der Wanderer und sein Schatten*]

AC = *The Antichrist* [*Der Antichrist*]

EH = *Ecce Homo* [*Ecce Homo*]

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