Nietzschean Individualism and Liberal Theory

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Abstract

Lester Hunt argues convincingly that Nietzsche should be taken seriously as a proponent of an ethics of character, and he attempts to show that a thorough explication of this ethics yields a distinctive justification for liberalism that avoids a major weakness of conventional justifications. After a detailed review of Hunt's insightful and often compelling arguments, this paper concludes that his Nietzschean justification may give rise to problems as formidable as those it solves. Moreover, Hunt's thesis is shown to depend on a questionable reading of Nietzsche's conception of human flourishing that obliterates the connection the latter makes between his critique of liberal freedom and his affirmation of life as will to power.

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Lester Hunt's *Nietzsche and the Origin of Virtue* (New York: Routledge, 1991) is a bold and original attempt to develop a new rationale for liberal theory based on an analysis of the ethics of Nietzschean individualism. In Hunt's view Nietzsche's advocacy of a higher human type is inseparable from his commitment to an ethics of character that is based on his own revalued conception of virtue. Hunt argues that the conditions most conducive to Nietzschean virtue would be those of a free society characterized by a competitive ethos based on a commitment to excellence.

Especially with its advocacy of "Nietzschean liberalism," this book is bound to provoke, but even readers like myself, who are uncomfortable with its conclusions will appreciate both the seriousness of its purpose and the thoughtfulness of its foray into regions that have known little scholarly traffic. Hunt's argument is of interest for two quite different reasons, suggesting two distinct lines of inquiry. There is, first, the question of Hunt's contribution to our understanding of Nietzsche and, second - irrespective of whether he gets Nietzsche right - the question of his contribution to liberal theory. I will address the second question first, summarizing and evaluating his explication of Nietzschean ethics as a basis for a kind of Nietzschean liberalism. Then I will go on to consider the merits of his analysis as a contribution to our understanding of Nietzsche.

A Nietzschean Ethics of Character

Given the illiberal tenor of most of Nietzsche's political commentary and the once popular association of his name with fascism, Hunt's repeated reference to "Nietzschean liberalism," requires immediate comment. There are no extravagant claims here. Hunt is not arguing that Nietzsche himself was a liberal but rather that liberalism can benefit from Nietzschean ideas. According to Hunt, Nietzsche was both apolitical and profoundly

antipolitical; politics were largely irrelevant to him, and the State in all of its forms was anathema. Nor is there any suggestion that if Nietzsche had been political he would have been a liberal, for Hunt also recognizes the authoritarian tendency of various Nietzschean views. Indeed, even Nietzsche's ethics of character, according to Hunt, require modification before they can serve as an acceptable basis for a new liberalism.

Hunt's "Nietzschean liberalism" is derived from Nietzschean ideas, in other words, but the phrase is something of an oxymoron in that it refers to a theory of politics that Nietzsche himself would have repudiated. This in no way vitiates Hunt's argument, however, and there is nothing wrong with using an oxymoron as long as its ironic implications are acknowledged. We must keep in mind that Hunt's avowed purpose is write for those "who want to use Nietzsche as a source of insight into ethical and political matters" (xviii). It is understandable, therefore, if his analysis results in a theory that reflects not only Nietzschean ideas but his own alternatives to Nietzschean ideas that cannot withstand critical scrutiny.

Some will also question the appropriateness of ascribing to Nietzsche any positive ethical doctrine, while others will want to limit the positive ethics to the imperative of intellectual integrity inherent in what they take to be an essentially deconstructive enterprise. Certainly, when Nietzsche turns to morality the emphasis is usually on undermining, repudiating, and negating. By his own account he is an "immoralist" who is engaged in a "campaign against morality."[1]

Nevertheless, Hunt is correct that Nietzsche at times draws a sharp distinction between those moralities he likes and those he despises. In passages like the following Nietzsche does indeed seem to be affirming an ethics as well as negating one:

> I am well disposed toward those moralities which goad me to do something and do it again . . . as well as I alone can do it . . . But...I do not like negative virtues - virtues whose very essence is to negate and deny oneself.[2]

Hunt argues convincingly that Nietzsche's campaign against morality is really an assault on "what moral philosophers today generally mean when they discuss 'morality'" (10). In particular, it is an assault on the Kantian ideal. Nietzsche denies that moral acts can ever be "disinterested" in the Kantian sense, just as he denies that the will is ever free or that individuals are ever morally responsible for their actions. Moreover, because he denies that judgments determining the moral worth of an action can ever be applicable to everyone, he denies the validity of universal moralities and opposes every universal code of conduct. A number of modern philosophers have challenged aspects of the Kantian moral ideal, but in Hunt's view Nietzsche is unique in that he appears to repudiate every prominent feature of that ideal without exception.

In Nietzsche's view neither the consequences of our actions nor the conscious intentions behind them are what is ethically most important. Rather, what matters ethically about an action is its unintentional substratum, the deep character out of which it arises. According to Nietzsche a virtuous character becomes possible not through surpressing one's passions in the name of some disinterested, universal ought, but through adopting

the kind of highest goal that enables one's passions to become virtues because they are capable of supporting this goal and promoting its realization. Virtues originate, then, when passions are reinterpreted in a manner that redirects their energies toward the attainment of the organism's highest hope, and a virtuous character originates out of a vital relationship between one's deepest passions and one's highest aspirations.

Because everyone is unique and because no two people have identical passions, Nietzsche cannot prescribe a highest goal or a hierarchy of values appropriate for all, nor can he prescribe a complete set of virtuous character traits for all. That is why Zarathustra says, "if you have a virtue and she is your virtue, then you have her in common with nobody."[3] According to Hunt Nietzsche's ethics of character combined with his conviction that everyone is unique commits him to a kind of ethical relativism, for he believes "that what counts as right or good varies from one individual to the next" (130).

There remains, however, an important sense in which Hunt's Nietzsche is not an ethical relativist. Hunt ascribes to his subject a commitment to "vitalism," which is the belief that "life is the only thing that is good in itself, and is the standard by which the value of everything else is to be measured" (112). Indeed, as Hunt acknowledges, life as an ultimate standard begins to look "suspiciously like the *summum bonum* of traditional philosophers," but there is in Hunt's view one important difference (153). Unlike the "traditional philosophers" Hunt's Nietzsche does not believe that life or anything else has *objective* value in itself. The objective evaluation of life in particular is impossible because there is no position outside of life from which to judge it. Things (including life) have value only to the extent that we attribute value to them, and our evaluations are never disinterested.

Life is the ultimate good for all of us only because it is the one thing all of us are ultimately interested in. Even those moralities that Nietzsche describes as "life denying" are at bottom vitalistic, according to Hunt, because their secret purpose is to make life endurable for the afflicated. As Nietzsche puts it, they are at bottom nothing less than "an artifice for the *preservation* of life."[4]

Of course the conclusion that life is the highest good only acquires ethical significance to the extent that we can ascertain what it means to engender or promote life. As Hunt notes, the promotion of the most extensive human survival possible is not necessarily coextensive with the promotion of the highest level of human flourishing or well being, and Nietzsche's own formulations of the implications of his vitalism "are all disappointingly sketchy" (112). Nevertheless, Hunt thinks it is possible to ascertain what Nietzsche must have had in mind by extrapolating from his many discussions of life as will to power. Nietzsche repeatedly suggests that life as will to power is not a mere will to survival but a will to "the consummate attainment of power," which Hunt argues is in Nietzsche's mind synonymous with human flourishing and well being (128). Self-preservation is merely one of the most common consequences of the fact that life is at bottom will to power.

What, then, is meant by "the consummate attainment of power," which is apparently the ultimate objective of all life? To achieve power, according to Hunt, is "to appropriate parts of the environment and incorporate them, along with other parts of the organism,

into a single hierarchical system" (129). An obvious instance of incorporating parts of the environment would be the physiological process of nutrition. An instance of incorporating "other parts of the organism" would be the process of turning a passion into a virtue by redirecting its energies toward the attainment of the organism's highest goal.

The virtue of the organism as a whole, according to Hunt,

> is a sort of integration of the parts of the self. It arises when one part of the self imposes order on other, potentially chaotic parts by successfully orienting the subordinate parts toward its own purposes. (128)

Putting it slightly differently, "virtue is a certain complete integration of the psyche in which one's passsions are directed toward one's highest goals" (141, 142). In the end virtue, flourishing, the attainment of power, and the enhancement of life are all indissoluably connected, for the integration of the self is power enhancing and therefore life enhancing and inseparable from human flourishing.

At the deepest level we are all interested in these things, which is why Nietzsche, according to Hunt, believes we are not only all interested in life but we are all interested in life in the same way. This is also presumably why, according to Hunt, Nietzsche evaluates the worth of persons according to a single standard - the degree to which they have attained power.

In a fundamental sense, then, Hunt's Nietzsche is not an ethical relativist. One ought to do whatever promotes one's own empowerment, which means whatever engenders one's survival, growth, and ultimate flourishing. In a more immediate sense, however, Nietzsche is indeed relativist or relational about what specifically one ought to do, because the values and goals that lead to empowerment will vary from person to person.

Unfortunately, most of us do not know ourselves well, which means the values and goals that would best promote our own empowerment are not self-evident. What is best for us "rests on deep facts about ourselves that may at present be unknown"(134). Herein lies the importance of Nietzschean experimentalism in Hunt's view. As Hunt explains it, one discovers what constitutes one's virtue only gradually "by *trying out* ideals on an individual basis . . . If we find that the experiment vivifies us, we grow into the next experiment; if we note the all-too-familiar symptoms of decline, we retreat from it and try something else" (135). We use vitalism, in other words, to evaluate our experiments until slowly and by degrees our virtues come into view, and the integration of the self is achieved.

Nietzschean Illiberalism and Hunt's Critique

The attainment of Nietzschean virtue, therefore, depends on both the inclination and the opportunity to engage in an experimental process and then to define one's life according to the dictates of that process. Hunt suggests that a society of people seeking excellence of character would resemble a "community of scientists," formulating hypotheses, conducting experiments and learning from the results (135, 178). Since the conditions most

conducive to this sort of experimentalism are those of individual freedom in Hunt's view, Nietzsche's ethics of character could provide the basis for a powerful argument for a liberal social order.

As we have seen, however, Nietzsche never makes that argument, despite a tendency to evaluate societies (as Hunt puts it) entirely according to whether they promote "the formation of virtue in those who are capable of it" (164). This is because there are a number of illiberal and even heroic authoritarian strands in Nietzsche's thought that work at cross purposes to the liberal implications of his ethics of character as described above.

First, there is Nietzsche's abiding preoccupation with the establishment and maintenance of order. To be sure, there is also an "anti-state animus" in Nietzsche's writings, but countering this is what Hunt describes as a "deeply ingrained notion that someone - or some group of people - really ought to be in control, somehow, of human life in general" (43). Nietzsche looks forward to a hegemony of "new philosophers" who would rule through the development of "law-giving moralities" as a means of shaping a higher type of human being. He also advocates social institutions dependent on "a kind of will, instinct, or imperative, which is anti-liberal to the point of malice: the will to tradition, to authority, to responsibility for centuries to come . . . "[5] Nietzsche clearly has little confidence in the beneficial effects of spontaneous social processes left to themselves, and this is especially true where the lower orders are concerned.

Indeed, Nietzsche displays an extraordinary low estimation of the average type, even to the point of arguing that "the great majority of men have no right to existence."[6] He opposes the kind freedom that is conducive to experimentalism for the majority because he does not believe the experiments of the majority typically lead to virtue. To the contrary he seems to believe that a loosening of constraints would only lead to a debilitating instinctual chaos in most people.

He does suggest, however, that in a rightly constituted society even mediocrities could play an important role. Although they would not achieve virtue themselves, they could nonetheless render conditions favorable for the emergence of virtue in the higher type of relieving it of the burden of earning a living. Nietzsche apparently believes that the highest enhancement of life occurs in aristocratic societies where exceptional human beings can give the creation of culture and the pursuit of virtue their undivided attention, freed from the distraction of having to provide for themselves. In Hunt's view that is why Nietzsche says in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "every enhancement of the type 'man'" depends on "slavery in some sense or other," and why he proclaims in *The Antichrist* that "A high culture is a pyramid: it can stand only on a broad base; its first presupposition is a strong and solidly consolidated mediocrity."[7] The relation of the elite to the majority, therefore, is essentially exploitative in Nietzsche's ideal order. As Hunt describes it, the elite lives off the labor of the many and gives them little of value in return. The virtuous do not work, and the workers do not pursue virtue (174).

Hunt briefly but effectively criticizes the views enumerated above from several directions. He argues, for example, that "the enhancement of the type 'man'" does not require the exploitative system Nietzsche envisions because there is no good reason to

believe that earning a living is incompatible with the pursuit of virtue, even in the Nietzschean sense. Indeed, because virtue "presupposes activities and interests other than virtue," he reasons, "it is arguable that productive work, or something relevantly like it, is actually necessary for the formation of virtue" (175). Nietzsche does suggest that his virtue seeking elite would be comprised of artists and philosophers, but as Hunt argues, "[t]here is no reason to think that philosophers and avant-garde artists can seek and achieve excellence while potters, farmers, singers, tycoons, scientists, and spotwelders cannot" (178).

Hunt also challenges Nietzsche's view that freedom is only appropriate for the few. Although Nietzsche suggests that the majority is incapable of pursuing virtue as a result of deep-seated physiological factors, Hunt observes correctly that Nietzsche offers no convincing reasons to believe these things, and therefore no convincing justification for denying the many the freedom he would accord to the few. Hunt notes, simply, that "most of us are probably liberal enough to think that there is some reason why everyone should be free" (54).

In keeping with the above, Hunt also rejects what he takes to be Nietzsche's fear of chaos and the essentially authoritarian overtones of his emphasis on order, institutional constraint and social control. Hunt especially rejects Nietzsche's advocacy of social control by a value-positing elite. According to Hunt, Nietzsche simply fails to appreciate the extent to which liberal social systems can generate salutory forms of spontaneous order that serve society's needs and that are quite independent of the conscious intentions of anyone.

These kinds of arguments, in Hunt's view, strongly indicate that a liberal order would best promote "the formation of virtue in those who are capable of it" (164) because "the quest for virtue as Nietzsche understands it would require an unlimited freedom to carry out vital experiments" (177). The social embodiments of the heroic authoritarian strands in Nietzsche's thought, therefore, could only frustrate the realization of the very ideal he propounds.

In a concluding section that he describes as "highly speculative," Hunt envisions a revisionist "Nietzschean utopia," based on a "social agreement" establishing a set of shared principles guaranteeing the freedom of the individual, recognizing the value of diversity, and making no judgments in advance as to who might pursue virtue and who might not. Because the quest for virtue requires not only freedom but "the will to use that freedom," (177) Hunt also envisions a social order self-consciously committed to the pursuit of virtue in much the way Nietzsche thought the ancient Greeks were as he describes them in his unpublished fragment, "Homer's Contest." In "Homer's Contest," Nietzsche accounts for the extraordinary excellence that seems to have characterized so many facets of life in ancient Greek culture by arguing that Greek society was characterized by a "contest ideal" which was attended by the popular belief that "every talent must unfold itself in fighting." This contest ideal permitted both a reinterpretation and a transfiguration of the most terrible passions, including cruelty and the "tigerish lust to annihilate," into the virtue of competitive striving, which in turn promoted excellence in all walks of life and the spontaneous creation of virtuous character (60, 61). In Hunt's view a free society whose

members perpetually "strive to equal and outdo one another in excellence" (178) would spontaneously generate character, quite independently of any value-positing elite. Because of its competitive ethos Hunt characterizes Nietzschean liberalism as a kind of "liberalism with teeth" (65, 179).

Hunt leaves us with two parallel images of his utopian ideal: one on the one hand, a competitive society inspired by the contest ideal and on the other a society which resembles "a community of scientists who formulate hypotheses, conduct experiments, and learn from one another's results" (135, 178). But unlike a community of scientists, the citizens of Hunt's utopia would not all arrive at similar conclusions because the diversity of their passions would promote a diversity of values and goals. It would be appropriate, therefore, if society were to split into subcultures, with each subculture "united by the values its members share" (135). Hunt's description of his ideal society is extremely brief, indeed, almost Nietzschean in its brevity, but in an important footnote he adds:

> The social agreement I have suggested as a basis for a Nietzschean utopia could be worked out in a way that strikingly resembles the "framework for utopia" with which Robert Nozick concludes his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* . . . There would be one notable difference, however: Nozick, in the manner that is typical of traditional liberalism conceives of utopia as a place where everyone is as happy as they can be; the corresponding neo-Nietzschean utopia would be one in which everyone is as *good* as they can be. (196)

There remains one serious incompatibility between Nietzschean ethics and Hunt's neo-Nietzschean utopia. Because Nietzschean virtue, which is a matter of individual self-integration and empowerment, does not necessarily require a commitment to justice, and because Nietzsche's ethics of character prescribe no code of interpersonal conduct, the pursuit of Nietzschean virtue could conceivably entail the forceable exploitation of others, or even their annihilation - and certainly the abrogation of the "social agreement" mentioned above - insofar as such actions contributed on the balance to the self-mastery and empowerment of a dominant group or individual. This means that the widespread adoption of Nietzschean ethics would not necessarily lead to the widespread emergence of Nietzschean virtue, because those who pursued the Nietzschean individually would not necessarily engender the kind of society that is most conducive to Nietzschean virtue generally.

Hunt responds to this problem by arguing that Nietzsche pays insufficient attention to the social prerequisites of virtue. Whether virtue is fostered from competing with others or through learning from them, the pursuit of virtue is never a purely solitary affair. It depends on a multiplicity of social interactions within a social process that is itself dependent upon the widespread observance of principles of justice. In the penultimate paragraph of his book, Hunt therefore proposes another significant modification:

> If the connection between one's virtue and one's involvement with other people is sufficiently strong and deep, there might be good reason for revising Nietzsche's conception of virtue, so that it is not merely a certain integration of

> the self but, in addition, a certain integration of the self into the community around one. More precisely, the trait by which one observes the rights of others - that is justice - would in that case be a virtue. (179)

This commitment to justice, he goes on to say, should be regarded as a kind of second-order virtue, good because it facilitates the emergence of a generally virtuous character. In this way he attempts to dissolve the last incompatibility between Nietzschean ethics and his neo-Nietzschean utopia.

Nietzschean Liberalism as Liberal Theory

This section will offer an evaluation of Hunt's brief but provocative account of Nietzschean liberalism as a contribution to the liberal tradition. For the moment "Nietzschean" will continue to mean "Nietzschean as Hunt understands it," except where the meaning is obvious.

Hunt suggests that Nietzschean liberalism makes a valuable contribution to the liberal tradition because it provides an effective argument for individual freedom that is "free from some of the shortcomings of more traditional liberal theories" (179). Hunt complains that traditional theories seem willing to tolerate and even promote ethically second rate human types for the sake of merely practical ends. Free institutions are thought to work with only a minimum of government interference because they harness the selfish pursuits of private individuals in a manner that promotes the public good. "[T]raditional liberal social theories," in other words, "rely in order to work, on human drives which their authors seem to admit are shabby or, at best, second rate." But as Hunt also notes, "To rely on motives in this way is to reward them, an to reward them is to encourage and foster them" (65). Traditional liberal theories would appear, then, to foster the ethically shabby, and this puts them at a disadvantage when compared with authoritarian political theories which claim to foster genuinely good human beings. In Hunt's view Nietzsche's ethical and political ideas, once suitably modified, can be used to "defend free institutions, without appearing to foster the second-rate for the sake of the merely practical" (65). Nietzsche's ethics of character vindicate and affirm selfish pursuits that are selfish in the right way.

Nietzschean ethics, however, are by no means the only solution to the problem Hunt describes, nor is it clear that the problem is endemic to the liberal tradition. Many utilitarians, for example, would bridle at the notion that liberalism promotes the second-rate for the sake of the merely practical, arguing instead that there need not be anything ethically second rate about self-interested behavior that promotes the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Moreover, various schools of liberalism would appear to reject the view that free institutions *merely* serve the practical. In this respect Hunt's Nietzschean liberalism, for all its originality, has points in common with existing theories. It is true, for example, that John Stuart Mill and Nietzsche are poles apart on ethical matters, which is probably why the latter calls the former a "blockhead."[8] Nevertheless, Mill does champion an ideal of individuality, which in his view is essential to well being and therefore inseparable from the good. Indeed, he champions an individuality of personal empowerment that in some ways anticipates the Nietzschean rationale for liberalism Hunt propounds. In *On Liberty*

in a passage that repeatedly draws from Willhelm von Humbolt with evident enthusiasm, Mill laments that few outside of Germany appreciate von Humbolt's doctrine that:

> "the end of man . . . is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole"; and that, therefore, the object "toward which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts . . . is the individuality of power and development"; that for this there are two requisites, "freedom, and variety of situations."[9]

In other words no new Nietzschean ethics is required to deliver liberalism from practical justifications with unethical consequences. The arguments of Mill, T.H. Green, and a number of others can be taken to mean that free institutions promote an individualism that is at the ethical core of the liberal ideal.

Nevertheless, a Nietzschean ethics would seem to avoid a number of problems commonly associated with Mill's modified utilitarianism and/or Green's Kantian ethics. Moreover, the Nietzschean ideal validates the untrammeled pursuit of self-empowering goals more assertively and with far fewer qualifications than the other approaches ever could. But coupling the Nietzschean ideal with liberalism may give rise as many problems as it solves.

Before he can use Nietzschean ethics to justify a liberal market society, for example, Hunt needs to show that working for a living can be generally conducive to the pursuit of Nietzschean virtue, and indeed more conducive than other alternatives. He does argue that virtue requires "something relevantly like" productive work, ostensibly because the formation of virtue involves working toward a highest goal. But as we have seen, the highest goal that leads to virtue must be specially tailored to the individual's unique array of passions. It is not clear that "becoming what one is" in the Nietzschean sense and toiling in the market place could ever really coincide for large numbers of people.

That many are challenged by their work and find meaning in it matters little if the challenge is not to become who one is but to conform to the dictates of economic institutions. And Nietzsche suggests that the pressures of the market place may be as subversive of genuine virtue as religion. That is why he inveighs against the tendency toward "blindly raging industriousness," which he calls the "typical virtue of an instrument." Indeed, at times he sounds almost Marxian in his depictions of the debilitating and pervasive effects on consciousness of the emerging economic order:

> Today one can see coming into existence the culture of a society of which *commerce* is as much the soul as personal contest was with the ancient Greeks and as war, victory, and justice were for the Romans. The man engaged in commerce understands how to appraise everything . . . *according to the needs of the consumer*, not according to his own needs . . . This type of appraisal he then applies . . . to everything, and thus also to the productions of the arts and sciences, of thinkers, scholars, artists, statesmen, peoples, and parties of the entire age: in

> regard to everything that is made he inquires after supply and demand *in order to determine the value of a thing in his own eyes.*[10]

As we have seen, Hunt proposes a return to the contest ideal alluded to above, because he apparently believes it would incite citizens to strive for an excellence consistent with genuine virtue. But he needs to respond to Nietzsche's arguments. To the extent market priorities define individual consciousness in the ways Nietzsche suggests - indeed, to the extent that "blindly raging industriousness" is mistaken for virtue - the contest ideal would only seem to exacerbate the conformist tendencies described above, thereby further distracting individuals from the discovery of their own uniquely appropriate goals.

This discussion highlights the fragility of the link Hunt forges between Nietzsche's ethics of character and justice conceived as a virtue. Hunt's argument suggests that justice is a virtue only because it facilitates the emergence of a generally virtuous character. If, however, self-integration were to require freedom, or partial freedom, from productive work and therefore the exploitation (or the expropriation and annihilation) of weaker individuals or groups by stronger ones, then a degree of rapaciousness might well qualify as a second-order virtue using the same kinds of arguments.

We might also ponder the meaning of Nietzschean ethics for other forms of moral obligation. Let us consider, for example, the situation of one who assumes responsibility for the care of ailing parents over a period of years and therefore must put to one side the various plans and projects most conducive to that individual's self-integration and empowerment. After an initial period, let us further assume that the self-sacrifice involved is motivated more by a sense of duty than by affection, spontaneous compassion, or any Nietzschean "gift-giving virtue." In this case Nietzschean ethics would seem to counsel one who wishes to become a better person to jettison the parents in the name of the pursuit of virtue. Adjusting the facts a little, one could readily develop parallel arguments for various forms of child neglect. Nietzsche's "campaign against morality," even as modified by Hunt, has disturbing implications for commonsense notions of moral obligation.

I am not suggesting that it is always wrong to neglect parents or children for essentially selfish reasons. Rather, I am suggesting there is something unsettling about an ethics that in case after case rebaptises selfishness as the pursuit of virtue by completely disassociating the ethical merit of an act from its impact on others.

Of course it is by no means a conclusive refutation of an ethical theory that it leads to counter-intuitive results, because our intuitions could be wrong. Nevertheless, we are warranted in demanding very good reasons for abandoning our deeply held intuitive judgments, and it is by no means clear that the reasons given by Nietzsche and/or Hunt are good enough.

Some final remarks are in order regarding the kind of liberalism Hunt deems best. As we have seen, Hunt's Nietzsche evaluates the goodness of a society entirely according to whether it promotes "the formation of virtue in those who are capable of it" (164). On this basis Hunt concludes that the best Nietzschean society would be a free one and, in a final footnote, adds that a "social agreement" forming "the basis for a Nietzschean utopia could be worked out in a way that strikingly resembles the 'framework for utopia' with

which Robert Nozick concludes his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*" (196). The political structure of a Nietzschean utopia, then, would apparently resemble that of Nozick's minimal state.

Regrettably, Hunt makes no attempt to justify his tilt toward Nozick, and it is not obvious that it flows from the ethical arguments described above. Hunt's premises have little in common with Nozick's, as is evident from the difference in rationales for freedom. Nozick's argument grows out of a strong theory of individual rights, whereas Hunt's is based entirely on a theory of virtue, which trumps all other considerations. The meaning of this difference in rationales is suggested by Nietzsche's Zarathustra: "Free *from* what? As if that mattered to Zarathustra! But your eyes should tell me brightly: free *for* what?"[11] Nozick's freedom is primarily a freedom *from* others, including the sovereign, whereas Nietzschean freedom is a freedom *to* engage in experiments and pursue goals that lead to individual self-perfection. But it is not clear that Nietzschean freedom is best promoted by Nozick's minimal state.

Two years before *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, T.H. Green made a similar distinction between negative and positive freedom, which he incorporated into his theory of politics. While tacitly acknowledging that the goal of making citizens free *from* others can justify a minimal state, he argued that the true goal of a liberal order should be the promotion of genuine individualsm.[12] Although Green's ethics are in some respects diametrically opposed to Nietzsche's, he, too, makes an ethical argument which defines individualism as a kind of self-perfection that has to do with self-empowerment. And he reasons that if the rationale for freedom is individualism, then the state may have a positive responsibility to promote freedom by promoting opportunities leading to individual empowerment. In this way he develops a string of well-known arguments for health and occupational safety regulations, state sponsored education, etc. Because Hunt, like Green, starts with the goal of self-perfection for all who are capable of it - and because Hunt, too, argues that "exemplary virtue would seem to require that one have opportunities to pursue a relatively rich variety of activities" - he needs to refute Green's arguments, or demonstrate their irrelevance in the Nietzschean context, if he is to associate Nietzschean liberalism with Nozick's minimal state (176). He needs to show that a minimal state makes the greatest net contribution to positive freedom, or that other arrangements are too destructive of incentives or whatever. As it stands, his analysis does not require such conclusions.

Hunt as an Interpreter of Nietzsche: The Implications of Method

In assessing Hunt's interpretation of Nietzsche it is important to keep in mind the limited nature of his inquiry. At the outset he says, "my focus is entirely on ethical and political matters. Other themes are brought in only when they really seem necessary for an understanding of my central concerns." Moreover, Hunt's treatment even if Nietzsche's ethics is by no means comprehensive, nor does it aspire to be. His book, "is mainly an attempt to take Nietzsche seriously as a contributor to the ethics of character" (xviii). Other facets of Nietzsche's ethical views and many of his politically relevant passages are therefore passed over in favor of an interpretation of Nietzsche's ethics of character and the political vision that arguably flows from it, a vision that, by Hunt's own account, Nietzsche would have rejected.

The portrait of Nietzsche that emerges, therefore, is inevitably idiosyncratic. For example many will be surprised at a book on Nietzsche's ethics that never once mentions the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same. This doctrine is central to Nietzsche's later writings, and most would agree that it is central to his ethical ideal. Similarly, most of what Nietzsche does say about politics is ignored in favor of what Hunt thinks he should have said.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with limiting one's focus and embracing Nietzsche selectively, especially if one's ultimate objective is not Nietzsche exegesis but the elucidation of some aspect of contemporary theory, as is the case with Hunt. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that such an approach can be used to justify a wide variety of incompatible ideals. If Hunt's account arguably legitimates a minimalist Nietzschean liberalism, Mark Warren's differing focus in *Nietzsche and Political Philosophy* equally legitimates a postmodern politics of the left, and my own analysis in *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* could with modifications be used to justify a Nietzschean fascism (although I would not go this route).[13] It all depends on what one emphasizes, what one explicitly rejects, and what one neglects.

Hunt acknowledges some of the ways in which his thought diverges from Nietzsche's, but he arguably overlooks others, and this too may be a consequence of method. Because of the ambiguities of Nietzsche's style and his penchant for at least appearing to contradict himself, one must take great care lest the themes one examines yield conclusions that are subtley undermined and even negated by themes one neglects. This is an occupational hazard for all Nietzsche scholarship, but it is a special hazard for any highly focused analysis that trys to incorporate Nietzschean themes into a non-Nietzschean theoretical framework.

Too often Hunt seems to neglect the implications of Nietzsche's critique of conventional philosophy. Those who have focused heavily on Nietzsche's epistemological ruminations (i.e. his perspectivism) have often interpreted him as saying that there are no universal truths, certainly none about ultimate questions, which means there are no reliable first principles and no firm foundations anywhere. Far from providing a ground for objective truths, the view that life is will to power is said to defeat objectivity, because it shows that the will to truth itself is will to power and as such irrevocably grounded in the subjectivity of the body. This means that the insistance on objective foundations is best understood in terms of the body and as a symptom of a certain type of life. Not surprisingly, Nietzsche views the quest for objective foundations and the will to system generally in much the same way he views the need for gods. They are all signs of a kind of weakness and/or sickness that requires the denial life as it is.[14]

Hunt deserves credit for recognizing what many who concentrate on Nietzsche's perspectivism ignore: that at some level Nietzsche does appear to believe in the truth, and even the objective truth, of a number of his own assertions. Moreover, Hunt correctly identifies Nietzsche's foremost concern as the enhancement of life and recognizes that this is fraught with moral and political implications. The particular focus Hunt has chosen, therefore, is of enormous importance, especially since it has long been neglected.

But too often Hunt's account makes Nietzsche look like a conventional philosopher despite the latter's critique of conventional philosophy. Instead of seeing life denial in the quest for firm foundations, Hunt finds what is, in effect, a firm foundation in Nietzsche's conception of life. It is, as we have seen, the Nietzschean equivalent of a "summum bonum," and a first principle of Nietzsche's ethical ideal. A universally dominant drive becomes the foundational principle that generates an ultimate good that grounds every argument.

Hunt acknowledges, as any reader must, that Nietzsche does not write like a conventional philosopher, but there is little appreciation of the relation between style and content. Rather, Nietzsche's style becomes an extraneous excrescence that the philosopher must work around to get at what is really being said. Since Nietzsche's books "contain rather few passages in which he appears to be offering arguments for the opinions he expresses in them," (1) Hunt suggests that it is incumbent on us to supply what Nietzsche omits. Moreover, he says, "I will be fairly free - some will no doubt say generous - in supplying Nietzsche with premises needed to make his arguments work," because this is "a necessary part of getting at what his ideas are and how they hang together" (5, 6).

Because Nietzsche is so cryptic, every interpreter must extrapolate freely from what is given, which helps to explain why there will always be wide latitude (although not endless latitude) for legitimate disagreement. This also helps to explain how I can hold Hunt's book in high esteem despite my various criticisms. But Hunt extrapolates from what is given more freely than most. He supplies not only the missing arguments and missing premises, but a missing analytical structure as well. There is indeed an intuitive coherence to Nietzsche's texts, which Hunt's formidable analytical powers often help to illuminate, but the tidiness of his account and the reductiveness of the analytical structure he supplies does Procrustean violence to the looseness of a body of writings which, after all, champions the body over abstract reason and illuminates with tropes more often than sustained analysis, and which generally seems to revel in the validity of disjointed intuition.

Can Life be Defined?

Let us now return to Hunt's handling of Nietzsche's view of life. The implications of Hunt's method are particularly important here because he argues that life is for Nietzsche the standard by which the value of everything else is to be measured. The specificity with which life can be defined ultimately determines the specificity with which Nietzsche's ethical ideal can be identified.

Others have concluded, in sharp contrast to Hunt, that Nietzsche's conception of life is simply devoid of specific content.[15] Hunt admits that Nietzsche's formulations of his vitalism "are all disappointingly sketchy," but he attempts "to determine what the principle must mean - or should mean" by teasing out the implications of Nietzsche's arguments in favor of it (112). As we have seen he concludes that for Nietzsche life is will to power, which is to say, a will to the "consummate attainment of power," a state reflecting the kind of self-integration Nietzsche calls the virtue of the organism as a whole. As we have also seen, Nietzsche can say that life is the ultimate standard only because he believes we are

all ultimately interested in life and interested in it in the same way. At bottom we are all interested in our own empowerment.

Hunt acknowledges troubling passages suggesting that the instinct of life may operate differently in different people. At times Nietzsche seems to say that the will to power of the strong is a will to the maximum enhancement of life, even if this requires living dangerously, whereas the will to power of the weak is a will to mere self-preservation. This suggests a problem. If the promotion of life can imply differing and incompatible goals, then life does not necessarily suggest a unitary good that all are interested in, and Nietzsche's vitalism fails.

Hunt argues, however, that he is operating under the assumption that Nietzsche is no fool. It would not make sense to predicate the Nietzschean arguments outlined above upon a chimerical conception of life. In Hunt's view there is no necessary antagonism between self-preservation and the will to acquire power, despite the misleading tendency of some of Nietzsche's remarks. At bottom, all are really interested in their own empowerment, and self-preservation is simply a frequent, though indirect result of this universal concern (129).

Hunt's position is by no means inevitable. The suggestion that Nietzsche would be a fool to predicate his vitalism on an indeterminate conception of life assumes, first, that Nietzsche really did have in mind the arguments for vitalism that Hunt attributes to him, and, second, that Nietzsche is not an ironist, and, third, that positing life as the ultimate standard is not simply a way of repudiating metaphysical alternatives.

For better or for worse, Nietzsche really does appear to say that the will to power generates different ways of being interested in life in different people. In some the will to power means a will to accumulate power in ways that could indeed promote self-preservation, but in great men will to power appears to mean a will to express power in ways that lead to its own dimunition and even extinction. As Nietzsche says in *Twilight of the Idols:*

> The great human being is a finale . . . The genius in work and deed is necessarily a squanderer: that he squanders himself, that is his greatness. The instinct of self-preservation is suspended . . . He flows out, he overflows, he uses himself up, he does not spare himself - and this is a calamitous, involuntary fatality, no less than a river's flooding the land.[16]

Nietzsche repeatedly praises this kind of recklessness.

The will to power as Nietzsche describes it is not simply one passion among many. It is the basic substratum of all life, including all of the passions, and Nietzsche was probably aware of the definitional problems monisms of this sort pose. Because the formulation of such a monism must be capable of embracing every conceivable manifestation of life, a formulation that reduces to a single clear principle is not likely to have the requisite comprehensiveness. The credibility of Nietzsche's view of life as will to power, in other words, depends in part on its irreducible ambiguity.

One of the most celebrated ambiguities concerning Nietzsche's will to power monism is its relation to the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same. Hunt propounds an ethic of individual empowerment, which is consistent with his interpretation of the will to power. But the doctrine of the eternal recurrence suggests a somewhat different ideal. As Nietzsche says in a note: "My teaching declares: the task is to live in such a way that you must wish to live again - you will anyway!"[17] Moreover, Nietzsche suggests that the goal is to will the eternal recurrence, not just of one's better moments or even of one's life taken as a whole, but of every moment of one's life, even those that have been devastating from the standpoint of personal empowerment. It is not at all clear how this ideal relates to the Hunt describes.

In a similar vein, Hunt declares that Nietzsche "evaluates the worth of persons on the basis of a single standard: the degree to which they have attained power" (131). But Nietzsche also clearly evaluates people according to a standard of health and sickness. Moreover, he repeatedly suggests that it is possible to be strong but sick,[18] thereby suggesting that the continuum of strength and power is not identical to the continuum of health and affirmation. In one area after another we find that, past a certain point, the more we try to pin Nietzsche down, the more elusive he becomes.

Nietzschean Freedom

Hunt attributes an inordinate degree of order not only to Nietzsche's thought as a whole but also to the psyche of the human ideal Nietzsche is trying to promote. According to Hunt Nietzsche believes "one's act will be virtuous to the extent that it indicates success in one's efforts to 'become master of the chaos that one is; to compel one's chaos to become form'" (170). Virtue, according to Hunt, "is a sort of integration of the parts of the self," whereas chaos is "a great evil" (128, 43). The more fully integrated the self becomes, the greater the enhancement of life (126).

Nietzsche repeatedly suggests, however, that human greatness is at least in part dependent on inner chaos and conflict. As Zarathustra says, "one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star." And as Nietzsche says in a note, "[I]t is precisely through the presence of opposites and the feelings they occasion that the great man, *the bow with the great tension*, develops." In *Beyond Good and Evil* he argues that "magical, incomprehensible, and unfathomable ones arise" when internal "opposition and war . . . have the effect of one more charm and incentive of life." And in *Twilight of the Idols* he says, "The price of fruitfulness is to be rich in internal opposition . . . One has renounced the *great* life when one renounces war." It should now be clear why Zarathustra says to his disciples, "You should love peace as a means to new wars - and the short peace more than the long. To you I do not recommend work but struggle." Hunt's account neglects Nietzsche's emphasis on struggle as something that is intrinsically good and not just a means to an end. As Nietzsche explains, "The will to power can manifest itself only against resistances. Therefore, it seeks that which resists it."[19]

It may be as Hunt suggests that Nietzsche associates individual perfection with a state of full self-integration, (126) but as Zarathustra says, "What has become perfect, all that is ripe - wants to die." Similarly, it may be that in Nietzsche's view one transforms one's

passions into virtues by planting one's goal among them, but it is also clear that the objects of the passions do not endure. As Zarathustra says elsewhere, "Whatever I create and however much I love it - soon I must oppose it and my love; thus my will wills it." And he adds a few lines later, "good and evil that are not transitory do not exist. Driven on by themselves they must overcome themselves again and again."[20] For Nietzsche life at its best is that which continuously overcomes itself and continually sacrifices itself for more power. Chaos, tension, and dissonance can never be absent from this process.

I do not mean to suggest that organizing the chaos is unimportant. In order to function in the world and flourish, the underlying chaos of warring instincts that nature endows one with must be forged into at least a semblance of unity. But once a degree of integration is achieved, insurrection and upheaval become important as well. It would appear that the ongoing growth of the Nietzschean spirit requires a continual ebb and flow of integration and partial disintegration.

Hunt is also correct to emphasize the formative power of social institutions in Nietzsche's view. Because there is no order inherent in the nature of things, culture in the broadest sense and the institutions that serve it can play a crucial role in shaping the individual. Nevertheless, institutional order, like internal spiritual order, is not an unmitigated blessing. Nietzsche explains in *The Gay Science* that because "all ordered society puts the passions to sleep," "[t]he strongest and most evil spirits have so far done the most to advance humanity." By "toppling boundary markers" and "violating pieties," whether "by force of arms" or "by means of new religions and moralities" they have "reawakened again and again the sense of comparison, of contradiction, of the pleasure in what is new, daring, untried." They have "compelled men to pit opinion against opinion, model against model," and in the process they have "relumed the passions that were going to sleep."[21]

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche explains that if the tendency toward lawful order, identified in that book as the Apollinian tendency, predominates for too long, it can "congeal the form to Egyptian rigidity and coldness,"[22] thereby stultifying life's creative powers. In Nietzsche's view the Greeks became great only because their apollinian energies were periodically checked by wave upon wave of dionysian destructiveness, which swept aside lawful order in favor of a relapse into chaos and insight. The highest flourishing of life, in other words, requires a continual overcoming and renewal of the forms of its own manifestation.

Hunt suggests that Nietzsche's authoritarian tendencies stem from a misguided fear of chaos and a distrust of spontaneous natural processes, but that is debatable. Contrary to Hunt's view, there is a principle of spontaneous order that appears repeatedly in Nietzsche's writings, and it is the process of struggle itself. As Nietzsche says cryptically in his early essay called, "The Greek State," "War is Apollo." It is war and the threat of war that first turns a people into a hierarchically ordered social whole. According to both "The Greek State" and *The Geneology of Morals*, it is armed struggle (and not some social contract) that gives rise to the first state, and that makes possible the emergence of genuine culture as well.[23]

Nietzsche argues that the continuous struggle against severe constraint is what fortifies the will and unifies the self, and this is not without illiberal political implications. In his view the social and political institutions of the warrior aristocracies of antiquity provided the optimal conditions for the breeding of a stronger, more unified human type. This type emerged as a result of being locked "in a constant fight with its neighbors or with the oppressed who are rebellious or threaten rebellion."[24]

As a political corollary he argues in *Twilight of the Idols:*

> The peoples who had some value, *attained* some value, never attained it under liberal institutions: it was great danger alone that made something of them that merits respect. Danger alone acquaints us with our resources, our virtues, our armor and weapons, our *spirit*, and forces us to be strong. *First* principle: one must need to be strong - otherwise one will never become strong.

Paradoxically, Nietzsche argues that the genuine freedom of a people or an individual can be measured not by the absence of compulsion but, "according to the resistance which must be overcome, according to the exertion required to remain on top." As we have seen, Nietzschean freedom is a positive freedom. It depends upon the power to act, to command oneself and hold oneself accountable, which means it can be fortified by danger, warfare, and the long fight against severe constraint. This is why Nietzsche declares:

> The highest type of free man should be sought where the highest resistance is constantly overcome: five steps from tyranny, close to the threshold of the danger of servitude. This is true psychologically if by "tyrants" are meant inexorable and fearful instincts that provoke the maximum of authority and discipline against themselves; the most beautiful type: Julius Caesar. This is true politically too; one need only go through history.[25]

As several of the passages above suggest, politics are not wholly irrelevant to Nietzsche's thoughts on the enhancement of man. Just as he argues that "[t]here are no worse and no more thorough injurers of freedom than liberal institutions," he repeatedly associated democracy with "the diminution of man." Conversely, he proclaims:

> Every enhancement of the type, "man" has so far been the work of an aristocratic society - and it will be so again and again - a society that believes in the long ladder of an order of rank and differences in value between man and man, and that needs slavery in some sense or other.[26]

A long discussion would show that Nietzsche was indeed anti-political but in a limited sense only. Just as he declared himself an enemy of reason, science and morality, but nonetheless had a reason, science and morality he preferred, so too with politics. His blasts at the state as a "new idol" (and he associates our modern "apotheosis of the state" with the "the Hegelian philosophy") are of a piece with his opposition to idolatry of every kind. In his view the modern world is prone to new forms of idolatry because of the vacuum

left by the old God's death, and he denies that "the problem of existence" can be "solved" by any political event, just as he denies that it can be fully comprehended by any philosophical system.[27] Nevertheless, he has a politics of sorts, just as he has a philosophy, and the former is integral with the latter. Moreover, it is the politics - and not the anti-politics - that reveals the profoundly oxymoronic character of the phrase "Nietzschean liberalism."

Notes

1. *Ecce Homo*, "Dawn: Thoughts about Morality as a Prejudice," sec. 1. Where available, I have used the Kaufmann and/or Hollingdale translations. Elsewhere, I have used my own.

2. *The Gay Science* (hereafter cited as *GS*), sec. 304 (quoted by Hunt at 80). When citing Nietzsche, I will refer to the title, part and/or section number whenever possible.

3. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (hereafter cited as *Z*), pt. 1, "On Enjoying and Suffering the Passions."

4. *The Genealogy of Morals* (hereafter cited as *GM*), pt. 3, sec. 13 (quoted by Hunt at 119).

5. *Twilight of the Idols* (hereafter cited as *TI*), "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," sec. 39 (quoted by Hunt at 45).

6. *The Will to Power* (hereafter cited as *WP*), sec. 872.

7. *Beyond Good and Evil* (hereafter cited as *BGE*), Sec. 257 (quoted by Hunt at 30); *The Antichrist* (hereafter cited as *A*), sec. 57 (quoted by Hunt at 103).

8. *WP*, sec. 30.

9. *On Liberty* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956) 69, 70.

10. *GS*, sec. 21; *Daybreak*, sec. 175. For more on Nietzsche's critique of capitalism, see *Marx, Nietzsche, and Modernity* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986), 169- 194.

11. *Z*, pt. 1, "On the Way of the Creator."

12. See generally "Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract," *The Political Theory of T.H. Green* (New York: Harlan Davidson, 1964), 43-74.

13. *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988; *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

14. Eg. see *A*, sec. 54; *TI*, "Maxims and Arrows," sec. 26.

15. Eg. Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 30; J.P. Stern, *A Study of Nietzsche* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 106.

16. "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," sec. 44.

17. *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (hereafter cited as *WKG*), eds. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967-) III/2, 403.

18. See *GM*, pt. 3, sec. 15; *TI*, "Skirmishes," sec. 45.

19. *Z*, "Prologue," sec. 5; *WP*, sec. 967; *BGE*, sec. 200; *TI*, "Morality as Anti-Nature," sec. 3; *Z*, pt. 1, "On War and Warriors"; *WP*, sec. 656.

20. Z, pt. 4, "The Drunken Song," sec. 9; pt. 2, "On Self- Overcoming."

21. *GS*, sec. 4.

22. *BT*, sec. 9.

23. *WKG*, III/2, 265, 266; *GM*, pt. 2, sec. 17.

24. *BGE*, sec. 262.

25. *TI*, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," sec. 38.

26. Ibid; *BG, sec. 203; Ibid, sec.*

27. *WKG*, III/2, 200.