1. Introduction

The renown of “order of rank” (*Rangordnung*), as a term of art, suffers in comparison to some of Nietzsche’s more famous locutions. Nietzsche nevertheless makes two intriguing claims about order of rank: that it is the key to the very task of philosophy, and that we inevitably misunderstand it.

There are at least three reasons why an inquiry into Nietzsche’s notion of “order of rank” should be fruitful and thus worth pursuing. One is that, although the term does not appear often, it appears more often than many more famous notions, and is very well represented in Nietzsche’s work. Nietzsche invokes “order of rank” from the early unpublished essays, such as “On the Future of Our Educational Institutions,”1 to the very end of his career. Indeed, Nietzsche’s usage of the term is most concentrated in what is arguably his decisive post-Zarathustra period: “order of rank” was even, along with “will to power” and “revaluation of

1 See KSA 1:699.
values,” among the titles that Nietzsche sketched out for his projected masterpiece. Another reason to inquire into “order of rank” is that it marks off where Nietzsche’s position is most untimely. Nietzsche means to advocate some form of hierarchy in opposition to what he sees as an unreflective modern consensus on egalitarianism. Attention to this distinctive aspect of Nietzsche’s thought thus affords us a rare opportunity to confront what is, at least in Nietzsche’s view, an otherwise unexamined set of commitments. A third reason to inquire into order of rank is that Nietzsche identifies doing so with his philosophy as a whole. In his notebooks, Nietzsche writes, “my philosophy is directed at order of rank” (KSA 12:280). And at about the same time in the published writings, Nietzsche characterizes himself, “free spirits,” and the future task of philosophers as concerned with order of rank. Understanding order of rank is essential to understanding Nietzsche’s philosophical enterprise.

In what follows, I shall attempt to clarify and explain Nietzsche’s notion of order of rank by presenting features of Nietzsche’s discussion and a series of rival interpretations of it. I shall present Nietzsche’s notion in terms of its “problematic” character, its sphere, its ground, and its social character. In doing so, I shall explicate Nietzsche’s position by drawing a number of contrasts with the interpretations that I refer to as Natural Aristocracy, Mythic Archaism, Natural Pluralism, and Naturalism.

---

2 On this see Janz 1978: II, 380 and II, 426. For some title sketches, see, for example, KSA 11:692 and KSA 13:196.

3 In general, I find the Nachlass more useful for showing Nietzsche’s interest in order of rank than for specifying the content of that interest. Accordingly, I shall focus on the published writings, and only cite the notebook entries when they confirm points established elsewhere. My opinion, which I will not argue for here, is that one loses nothing other than confusion by neglecting the notebook entries on this particular topic.
Political, and Anthropological. I shall have to present these interpretations somewhat schematically, in some abstraction from the positions of particular individuals. I nevertheless hope to show the superiority of my own favored interpretation, which I refer to as Transcendental. In any case I intend to illuminate the importance and centrality of order of rank in Nietzsche’s thought.

2. The Problem

One typical feature of Nietzsche’s discussions of order of rank is that Nietzsche identifies it as a problem. Nietzsche, that is, provides neither a specific ranking of things nor a principle of ordering, but rather uses “order of rank” to identify something indeterminate or unresolved. The “problem” that Nietzsche thus identifies could arguably be one that the order of rank has, such as with application, or it could be that order of rank is itself problematic. The most basic formulation of this is simply “the problem of order of rank”(HAH I: P6, P7), but Nietzsche alternately discusses “the problem of value, the determination of the order of rank among values”(GM I 17), which seems to be equivalent. Even where Nietzsche does not specifically discuss the general problem of order of rank, he alludes to its problematic character, either with such a phrase as “the question of rank”(BGE 265), or more indirectly, such as when he concludes a discussion of height and rank by posing the question, “Is greatness possible?”(BGE 212) Just as this question remains unanswered, so Nietzsche consigns the “solution” of the problem to “the

4 There is also an “order of rank of problems”(BGE 213), which might suggest that there is a problem of order of rank of problems, which would presumably itself have a ranking, but I will leave that aside.
future task of philosophers” (GM I 17). Nietzsche even treats recognizing the problem as an accomplishment unto itself:

Given that it is the problem of order of rank about which we may say that it is our problem, we free spirits: only now, in the midday of our life, do we understand what sorts of preparations, detours, tests, experimentations, disguises the problem needed before it was allowed to rise up before us … (HAH I:P7)

Here, since the depicted agency is enigmatic, it is perhaps unclear whose accomplishment the recognition of the problem is. But Nietzsche seems not only to identify “order of rank” as a problem, but also to identify with it.

I wish to suggest two initial interpretive possibilities for what the “problem of order of rank” is. The first can be called “Natural Aristocracy.” According to this interpretation, the problem is determining the correct or suitable classification. There are natural, categorical differences among persons, and thus philosophers must identify both these categories and their relative rankings. Once this identification is accomplished, there could then be tasks of implementation: for example, consolidating the type-groupings, supporting the higher-ranked

---

5 I associate this interpretation with writings by Brian Leiter and Thomas Hurka, although neither are specifically concerned with “the problem of order of rank” and each introduces significant complications into his interpretation. For example, for Leiter, the types are natural kinds, but the evaluations of them are neither true nor false (at least at Leiter 2002: 152). Hurka sees Nietzsche as not supporting any clear metaethical position, but asserts, “that he at least takes his claims to be factual” (Hurka 2007: 12). But I take these differences, and even whether these writers in particular advocate some form of the Natural Aristocracy interpretation, as unimportant for the present enterprise.
types, or making the rank distinctions socially meaningful or enforced. But the implementation problem presupposes, in any case, the prior identification of types. The second possibility for interpreting the problem of order of rank can be called the Normative. On this interpretation, the problem is not identifying the correct classifications, but explaining the very possibility of rank distinction. The problem that Nietzsche confronts, that is, is how there can be normative authority at all, such that some things are better (or “higher”) than others, at least. This interpretation accords a higher level of generality to the problem than the previous interpretation: whereas the Natural Aristocracy interpretation would locate Nietzsche’s aim in saying that $x$ is better than $y$ (after, of course, identifying the correct categories), the Normative interpretation would locate Nietzsche’s aim in explaining or possibly furnishing the conditions under which such authoritative comparative evaluations obtain or make sense. The Normative interpretation, incidentally, is a component of the interpretation that I shall later identify as “Transcendental.”

I now want to present five sets of considerations in support of the Normative interpretation over the Natural Aristocracy interpretation. My reason for devoting so much attention to this interpretive conflict is that the Natural Aristocracy interpretation is the most basic of those that differ from my own preferred interpretation: to a great extent, one can understand the other competing interpretations as variations on Natural Aristocracy. So my hope is that the considerations presented here will contribute to clarifying the full range of possibilities.

The first respect in which the Natural Aristocracy interpretation fails is by offering a version of order of rank that is incompatible with there being a genuine “problem” of the sort that Nietzsche suggested. According to Natural Aristocracy, the various ranks are natural kinds
and the values associated with them are either non-cognitive or also natural. The only possible problems, then, are epistemic ones, such as how to accurately discern the natural kinds, or are particular to particular ranks, such as harms sustained by the higher ranks in a rank-averse society. In Nietzsche’s account, however, the relevant problem is inherent in order of rank itself, not pursuant to an unproblematic order. For example, Nietzsche writes,

… a philosopher, in case there could be a philosopher today, would be compelled to posit the greatness of humanity, the concept “greatness,” precisely in its range and multiplicity, in its unity in diversity: he would even determine rank and worth according to how much and how many things someone takes upon himself and bears, how far someone could extend his responsibility. (BGE 212)

The issues here are not ones of discovering what the rankings are, or how to manage their reception, but whether philosophy, greatness, and the determination of both value and rank are possible at all. This is left an open question, even as Nietzsche specifies conditions for a partially successful resolution. Nietzsche does not present the problem of order of rank as epistemic, and further suggests that in the absence of epistemic limitations the problem would be seen all the more distinctly rather than resolved: “… finally we could say, we free spirits: here – a new problem! Here a long ladder whose rungs we have sat upon and climbed … an order of

---

6 This, of course, does not exhaust the meta-ethical possibilities, but I do not think there is another meta-ethical option that both fits with Natural Aristocracy and makes a difference for the present point.

7 Nietzsche here distinguishes between value and rank; perhaps this distinction is between the categorization and the value assigned to the categories (or their members). But even here they have the same status: neither value nor rank is more natural or less problematic than the other.
rank that we see: here – our problem!” (HAH I: P7) A clear, unobstructed view of order of rank reveals it as a problem.

Another aspect of this difficulty for the Natural Aristocracy interpretation is that this interpretation misplaces the role of science. Since, on this interpretation, rankings apply to unproblematic natural categories, science would presumably have a role in identifying the categories. This role, indeed, would be the whole research program: beyond that identification, there would be little else to accomplish in addressing order of rank. Nietzsche, by contrast, characterizes the role of science as a subsidiary or “preparatory” one:

From now on all sciences have to prepare for the future task of the philosophers: this task understood as the philosopher having to solve the problem of value, having to determine the order of rank of values. (GM I: 17)

Here Nietzsche does not even identify science as particularly important: his claim is not that science is significant, but that it should be subordinated to philosophy, from which it is clearly distinguished. Nietzsche additionally claims that the problem of order of rank is not even accessible from the standpoint of science: “‘Science’ as prejudice. – It follows from the law of order of rank that scholars … may never catch sight of the great problems and question marks …” (GS 373; cf. BGE 204). The Natural Aristocracy interpretation seems to call for precisely the sort of inquiry that according to Nietzsche misses the point.

The next four sets of considerations are related to the previous one, that the Natural Aristocracy interpretation is not compatible with the sense in which Nietzsche takes order of rank to be problematic: one could, that is, see these considerations as additional ways of filling out what Nietzsche means by “problem.” The second set of considerations, for example, is that order of rank is something indeterminate, unstable, and constructed. Whereas according to
Natural Aristocracy the categories are fixed and stable, for Nietzsche the very possibility of such
categorical distinctions seems perpetually unresolved. There is a particularly clear albeit
qualified statement of this in *Daybreak*: “The order of rank of greatness for all past humanity is
always not yet determined” (D 548; cf. WP 999). More generally, Nietzsche suggests that order
of rank is something that needs to be carried out rather than merely discovered. The most
primitive example of this is the most famous in Nietzsche’s work:

On the contrary it was “the good” themselves, that is, the noble, powerful, high-stationed,
and high-minded who felt and posited themselves and their activity as good, that is, of the
first rank, in contradistinction to all that is low, low-minded, common, and vulgar…. What
does utility have to do with them! The viewpoint of utility is, with regards to such a fiery
eruption of the highest rank-ordering, rank-distinguishing value judgments, precisely as
alien and inappropriate as possible. (GM I:2; cf. BGE 260)

Here the “rank-ordering value judgments” *enact* the relevant distinctions, and the way they do so
leaves the rankings open to revision. Additional outbreaks of rank-ordering and rank-
distinguishing would presumably transform the judgments of the past and establish new norms,
themselves subject to further revision. There can be no fixed standard by which to measure such
transformations, since the availability of standards is just what the rank-ordering is meant to
explain. The standards that Nietzsche invokes are accordingly variable and contingent: so, for
example, “there are countless healths of the body” (GS 120), “master morality” is merely “the
sign language of what has turned out well” (CW epilogue) and, lest anyone think that this is
predetermined, “success has always been the greatest liar” (BGE 209).

---

8 I discuss Nietzsche’s reason for insisting on indeterminacy in Guay 2007: 170.
The third consideration that speaks against the Natural Aristocracy interpretation is that Nietzsche characterizes the problem of order of rank as processual: that is, the problem takes shape only within a particular dynamic. The naturalness of Natural Aristocracy implies that its rank distinctions obtain prior to any manifestation of them: even though the ranks can of course be socially manifest, such manifestations would only represent distinctions that already obtain. In Nietzsche’s depictions of the relevant dynamic, by contrast, the distinctions only emerge out of the ongoing actualization of “the will to be oneself”:

… the cleavage between human being and human being, status and status, the plurality of types, the will to be oneself, to stand out – what I call the pathos of distance – is typical of every strong age. The force of tension, its breadth between extremes, today becomes every smaller … (TI 9:37)

Here even “being oneself,” or at least the will to be oneself, is dependent on status differentials, which in turn depend on “standing out,” which depends on the tension between extremes – all of this suggests that the basic categories are not extricable from the dynamic as a whole. Elsewhere Nietzsche characterizes the relevant process as even more broadly-encompassing:

You should above all see with your own eyes where injustice is always greatest: namely, where life has developed at its smallest, narrowest, neediest, most inchoate and nevertheless cannot help but take itself as the end and meaning of things, and out of self-preservation secretly, contemptibly, and incessantly crumbles away and puts into question the higher, greater, richer – you should see the problem of order of rank with your own eyes and how power and right and extensiveness of perspectives grow with one another into the heights.

(HAH I: P6)
Here Nietzsche does not specify what the problem is or how it relates to the other terms, but it is invoked in a process of preservation and growth that includes not only ethical distinction but “extensiveness of perspective,” among other things.

The fourth set of considerations that speak against the Natural Aristocracy interpretation relate to Nietzsche’s overriding concern with “the human type.” On the Natural Aristocracy interpretation, Nietzsche’s preliminary task would be to distinguish the range of human types: by identifying the basic, fixed psychological underpinnings of different sorts of persons, one could then both group them into categories and assess which ones are better. Nietzsche, however, expresses his interest in order of rank not primarily in terms of various fixed types being better or worse than others, but in terms of what order of rank means for the possibility of “the human type.” Nietzsche, that is, takes an interest in human diversity not primarily for what it indicates about the particular types of human identity and affiliation, but for what it means for humanity. These passages from *Beyond Good and Evil* demonstrate this interest:

> With one look he grasps everything that, given a favorable collection and augmentation of powers and tasks, could still be cultivated from the human being, he knows with all the knowledge of his conscience how the human being remains unexhausted for the greatest possibilities, and how already the type “human” has confronted mysterious decisions and new paths – he knows still better … what sort of wretched things have so far usually shattered someone of the highest rank who is still becoming … (BGE 203)

> Every heightening of the “human” type has so far been the work of an aristocratic society – and so will it always be: as a society that believes in a long ladder of order of rank and difference in worth between person and person … (BGE 257)
In these passages, Nietzsche shows no interest in either the diversity of types or the particularities of rank. Indeed, he cannot: the point that he wishes to make is a general one, which covers many “aristocratic” societies. Since these societies presumably have different rankings, Nietzsche can neither claim to have identified fixed categories nor endorse all their rankings. Instead, Nietzsche’s interest lies in claiming that the human type is mutable, that some potential changes in the human type represent improvements or heightenings, and that these changes depend in some way on observing or “believing in” order of rank. Nietzsche is not interested in arriving at a particular ranking so much as identifying the role that rankings play in the different ways that there could be of being human.\(^9\)

Another way of considering the distinctiveness of Nietzsche’s position on this matter is to contrast it with that of Herder, or at any rate the one that Herder ascribes to the natural scientist:

The natural scientist presumes \textit{no order of rank} among the creatures that he considers; to him all are equally dear and valuable. So, too, with the natural scientist of humankind. The negro has just as much right to take the caucasian for a deviant as does the caucasian to take him for a beast …. In that period when everything was taking shape, nature cultivated \textit{the human type} as variably as her workshop required and allowed.\(^10\)

\(^9\) Heidegger makes a similar observation when he remarks that “the question of ‘the order of ranks’” does not belong to “the question of ‘values’ in general in themselves” but rather to “the question of \textit{humanness}.” See Heidegger 1999: §114.

\(^10\) Herder 1971: II, 262 (10\(^{th}\) Collection, Letter 116). Nietzsche was of course familiar with this work: Colli and Montinari cite it as one of Nietzsche’s sources for the idea of a “\textit{gai saber}.” See KSA XI: 337.
In one respect Herder’s and Nietzsche’s concerns are close to one another. They are both concerned with discovering a common humanity within human diversity, and moreover with the advancement or heightening of this shared humanity. But in another respect they are polar opposites. For Herder, the starting condition for his inquiry is that there is no order of rank among the various human types: to see them as natural in the relevant sense is precisely to set inter-typical value judgments aside and instead see advancement in terms of something like breadth of diversity. For Nietzsche, by contrast, the very distinctiveness of “the human type” crucially depends on order of rank. Human beings set themselves apart from the rest of nature by establishing rank distinctions, and presumably raise the status of the human type by doing so in better ways. So now we can reassert the contrast with the Natural Aristocracy interpretation. Natural Aristocracy adopts Herder’s standpoint of the natural scientist and combines it with an insistence on order of rank. Herder of course takes those two elements to be incompatible. And Nietzsche insists on order of rank, but does not approach rank-ordering from the standpoint of the natural scientist. Indeed, he cannot, since what he wants to explain is human self-separation from merely natural status of the sort that the scientist could adequately explain.

The fifth and final consideration that speaks against the Natural Aristocracy interpretation is that it views rank atomistically, whereas Nietzsche views rank as inherently social. On the Natural Aristocracy interpretation, that is, any individual’s rank-status, as a natural fact, can be isolated from every other individual’s rank-status. And since it is accordingly a contingent natural fact that rank is distributed in the way that it is, it is possible, at least in principle, for it to be distributed in any other way. It is possible, for example, for everyone to belong to the same rank, if only many accidents of birth had been different: if the world were luckier, everyone could be high-ranking at the same time. On Nietzsche’s view, by contrast, this is not an unlikely
possibility, but something nonsensical. Rank, for Nietzsche, crucially depends on relations with others, such that one achieves differential status by attaining some kind of socially-derived authority. Here is one of Nietzsche’s typical examples:

*Giving rank to one’s people.* – To have many great inner experiences and to rest upon and beyond them with a spiritual eye – that makes up the persons of culture, who give rank to their people. In France and Italy the nobleman does this, whereas in Germany, where the nobleman has so far belonged to the poor in spirit (perhaps not for much longer), priests, teachers, and their descendents do this. (D 198)

Rank, here, is rooted in something arguably private: having and acknowledging “inner experiences” in a certain way. These private experiences only translate into rank, however, with at least three subsequent steps. The bearers of such experiences need to occupy socially-constituted roles: “nobleman” is a possibility, and so is priest or teacher, depending on circumstances. These roles, further, have to shape a culture, and this culture must represent the life of a people. The rank of a people, at least, could not exist outside of a complex structure of social relations. And this example illustrates another feature of the sociality of order of rank. In Nietzsche’s account, the establishment of order of rank raises some above others, but at the same time brings everyone up: culture, for example, introduces hierarchies that contribute to a shared unity.

To recapitulate, Nietzsche characterizes order of rank as in some way a problem, and there are five sets of considerations that speak against the Natural Aristocracy interpretation of

11 See KSA XI: 638, where in discussing the unity of the subject, Nietzsche refers to “the dependence of the ruler on the ruled and the conditions of order of rank and division of labor as making possible the individual and at the same time the whole.”
what this could mean. Nietzsche characterizes order of rank as intrinsically problematic, indeterminate, processual, especially relevant to “the human type” rather than to the diversity of human types, and social rather than atomistic; the Natural Aristocracy interpretation takes the opposing side in each of these matters. If we reject that interpretation, that the categories are naturally given and their relative rankings are unproblematic, then we might turn to the Normative interpretation. On this alternative, the very idea that human beings, who distinguish themselves in part by what they believe in and care about, fall into fixed types is problematic for Nietzsche, and this provokes a series of questions such as how natural beings could sustain any normative order at all, what sort of social dynamic this would entail, how plastic our normative commitments might be, and how these commitments might affect and potentially raise our status as human beings. Most generally, Nietzsche is inquiring into the possible authority of normative distinction. The considerations that speak against the Natural Aristocracy interpretation support such a reading: that order of rank is indeterminate and problematic, that it develops through a social process, and that the way in which order of rank is sustained contributes to what human beings make of themselves.

We can confirm some features of the Normative interpretation by looking at three more passages. The first is one of Nietzsche’s earliest and strangest uses of the notion of order of rank. He has not settled on his vocabulary yet, but the notion is clearly present despite the different terminology, which is all the more jarring in its context:

Whoever is breathed upon by this cool draft will hardly believe that even the concept …

remains only as the residue of a metaphor, and that the illusion in the artistic transference of a nerve stimulus into images is, if not the mother then the grandmother of every concept.

Within this dice game of concepts, “truth” means – using each die as indicated, counting its
pips exactly, setting up the right headings, and never violating the order of caste and the
sequence of rank-classes. (KSA I: 882)

Here, from the “Truth and Lies” essay, is an early account of concepts that ends with what I take
to be preliminary version of order of rank, “order of caste and the sequence of rank-classes.”
Order of rank seems incongruous in a theory of concepts, but Nietzsche makes a distinction that
gives it a place to fit in. Nietzsche divides his account into two parts, one concerning concept
formation and the other concerning concept usage. The account of concept formation is vaguely
neo-Kantian with some rhetorical flourishes: we receive information through the nervous system,
these stimuli are translated into images, and concepts are the metaphorical residue left by the
illusion that this process generates. The account of concept usage is very different, however.
Rather than a physiological account of mental representations, the account of concept usage is an
account of correctness according to standards. Such a split between formation and usage is
probably untenable, but Nietzsche brings order of rank into play in the latter, to characterize
linguistic practice as a rule-governed activity that is to be assessed by its own standard of
rightness.\footnote{Cf. Charles Taylor on Herder’s criticism of Condillac on the origin of language in Taylor 1995.}
Order of rank conveys categorization and hierarchy, and Nietzsche accordingly uses
the notion to characterize linguistic practice in terms of social authority and correctness rather
than causal dispositions to respond. To invoke order of rank as Nietzsche does in this early
passage, then, is to bring normative criteria to bear.

A similar passage about morality suggests another feature of the Normative
things, which depends on whether a low, higher, or highest egoism wants one thing or another,
decides, once accepted, what is moral and what is immoral” (HAH 42; cf. BGE 265). Here there are some similarities to the account of concepts. Nietzsche proposes a split between private psychology and social authority, and places morality under the regulation of the latter. The additional element here, however, is that Nietzsche also proposes a split between order of rank and substantive norms. This might indeed have been present in Nietzsche’s discussion of truth: there order of rank was likely a background condition rather than a direct prescription for what to count as true. With morality, in any case, Nietzsche makes explicit that order of rank is not a set of substantive values, but the normative background that makes moral distinction possible. This normative background is not unnatural: it has a psychological history, and requires a social process of acknowledgement. But it is prior to moral distinction, and problematic in that its acceptance and ability to guide action is a contingent social circumstance. Since order of rank is the sort of thing that has a history, it could fail altogether.

We can turn back to the 1886 writings to find a third and final passage that confirms the Normative interpretation. In the Preface to the second edition of *Human, All-too-human*, Nietzsche employs the unsurprising metaphor of the ladder and offers a couple of surprising claims about what it means to be human:

… we first had to experience the most multiple and contradictory conditions of crisis and happiness in soul and body, as adventurers and circumnavigators of that inner world called “human,” as ones who size up that “higher” and “over another” that is also called “human” – penetrating everywhere, almost without fear, spurning nothing, losing nothing, enjoying everything to the fullest, cleansing and as it were sifting everything from that which is accidental – until finally we could say, we free spirits: “here – a new problem! Here a long ladder whose rungs we have sat upon and climbed – that we ourselves have at some point
been. Here is a higher, a deeper, an under-us, a monstrously long order, an order of rank, that we see: here – *our* problem!”(HAH I:P7)

There are three observations that I wish to make about this passage. First, although Nietzsche recounts a need for a preliminary experience of “crisis and happiness in soul and body,” or more simply of “everything,” “everywhere,” the problem of order of rank cannot come into view until everything “accidental” has been cleansed away or sifted out. This would seem to exclude natural contingencies, chance events, and causal relations. So I take Nietzsche to be acknowledging that order of rank has physiological and historical conditions, but insisting that it concerns a normative order that is in some sense separable from actual circumstances or effects. Second, Nietzsche identifies a rich “inner world” and a “higher and over another” with the human as such. To be human, then, is not to occupy a specific rank in the great chain of being, but something that Nietzsche expresses primarily in terms of the height-relation. That is, what Nietzsche takes as significant is not the placement in a hierarchy of types, but the very concern with the recognition of difference. To be human, then is to be receptive to considerations about “height,” where this is also equivalent to having an “inner world.” This suggests that Nietzsche’s interest in order of rank does not involve laying out a sequence but human responsiveness to normative distinction. Third, Nietzsche writes of free spirits that they are both seated on and sometimes identical to the ladder. This I think reinforces the previous points. There are not stable types or rankings, because one is mobile on the ladder. In fact, the free spirits seem to be permanently mobile on the ladder, since the ladder extends “monstrously” far in either direction. And persons are not placed in types: they are identified not with the rungs, which they sit upon, but with the ladder as a whole. Nietzsche’s point once again is not that
persons fall into rankings but that one becomes who one is in relation to a normative order that supports ascent and that one can sometimes identify with.

What I have been trying to show in this section is that there are two main interpretive options with respect to “order of rank,” and that these options reflect not only the textual evidence with respect to the “problem” of order of rank, but also a fundamental choice about how to understand Nietzsche’s philosophical enterprise. On one alternative, Nietzsche is advocating a substantive picture of how life should be arranged for everyone. This picture is characterized by privileges or subordinations that some types of persons have in relation to others. The type differences are fully natural, where this entails being pre-social, unalterable, and amenable to discovery by the natural sciences. And the relative superiority of some types, along with their attendant privileges, would be beyond dispute for Nietzsche – not something that requires explanation or defense in any way. “Order of rank,” on this interpretation, is both the basic character of human nature and the desired form of social life; its “problem” is that this basic character is disguised by false ideals. On the other alternative, Nietzsche is not advocating a substantive way of life – he has no such picture in mind – but offering reflections on the possibility of normative authority in general, where this is problematic both because it is unclear what it would mean for such authority to obtain among natural beings such as ourselves, and because the status of the human being as such depends on a contingent social success. On the Normative interpretation that I have argued for, this second view of Nietzsche’s philosophical enterprise is the correct one. Nietzsche, in discussing order of rank, means to question the possibility of normative authority, and in doing so to connect this matter to the structure of social life and what it means to be human.
3. Its Sphere

My aim in this section is to clarify what Nietzsche takes to be the sphere of order of rank. A typical understanding of this is that Nietzsche is writing about differences in rank among persons and perhaps other things only indirectly or derivatively. I shall suggest, by contrast, that Nietzsche takes order of rank to apply to everything, but primarily to values, and thence to persons. This suggestion will of course require some explanation, and might even seem like a small difference. It will further illuminate Nietzsche’s conception of order of rank, however, and in doing so will help to eliminate two more rival interpretations, Mythic Archaism and the Political.

To clarify what I mean by the “sphere” of order of rank, it helps to start with an example. A widespread assumption, I think, is that persons are the primary sphere of order of rank. Natural Aristocracy, at least, adopts such a position: what is above all else subject to a ranking is either character types or the persons who instantiate them. Then one could presumably say that other things derivatively partake in rank status, according to their association with the relevant persons: so we might say that private jets or philosophy books or fancy uniforms are subject to ranking, depending on what the ranking is and how such things relate to it. These derivative things could be either incidentally or intrinsically related. According to Natural Aristocracy, for example, jets, books, and uniforms would presumably be only incidentally related to the relevant ranks, since a person belongs to a rank independent of anything else; someone might disagree, however, and believe that without jets, books, and uniforms, each rank-status simply would not obtain. In any case, the ranking of persons is fundamental.
One could, of course, rank anything: football teams, wines, vacuum cleaners, philosophy departments, and so on. So the sphere of order of rank could conceivably be any of those things. But none of those things would be philosophically interesting in the way that persons are, and Nietzsche does make reference to “higher persons” and “higher types.” This, by itself, shows little: superiority in (even metaphorical) height is not equivalent to superiority in rank, and even if it were, this would not establish that persons are specifically relevant to Nietzsche’s discussion of order of rank, or that there are not other things that are more importantly so. Presumably, however, a focus on persons as falling within the sphere of order of rank comes not only from the textual evidence, but also from a judgment about philosophical importance. Nietzsche’s project is fundamentally an ethical one, and his interest in human personality stems from this. And a significant feature of his project is his argument against what I earlier referred to as unreflective egalitarianism. The focus on persons as within the sphere of order of rank comes, then, from a consideration of Nietzsche’s criticisms of Christian, democratic, or Kantian versions of universal equality, and viewing order of rank as a counterproposal to these.

I do not doubt that Nietzsche takes persons as falling importantly within the sphere of order of rank. But this is only a part of Nietzsche’s position, and not one that can be understood in isolation. This passage, for example, suggests a picture in which a worldly process produces a more expansive sphere:

I would much rather flatter [the spiritually-challenged but vigorous opponents of atheism] with my proposition that a high spirituality itself only exists as the final offshoot of moral qualities; that it is a synthesis of those conditions that are attributed to “exclusively moral” persons after they have been acquired, one at a time, through long discipline and practice, perhaps in whole chains of generations; that the high spirituality is precisely the
spiritualization of justice and the kindly severity that knows itself to be charged with the
maintenance of the ordering of rank in the world, among things themselves – and not only
among persons. (BGE 219)

There are several interpretive challenges with respect to this passage, but the most obvious one is
what Nietzsche intends in locating such an extensive “ordering of rank” in the world. Any
response will need, perhaps surprisingly, to explain how morality and justice relate to order of
rank. But however one meets that challenge, Nietzsche clearly and indiscriminately places
“things themselves” within the sphere of order of rank. The Natural Aristocracy interpretation
cannot, I think, accommodate the processual nature of order of rank depicted here: its
maintenance is a task that one is charged with, following a multigenerational practice. But no
reading that focuses exclusively on persons can accommodate what Nietzsche suggests here
about its sphere.

The interpretive challenge remains: whether we can make sense of Nietzsche’s position if
it both accords great significance to order of rank and places everything within its sphere.
Without an explanation we could arguably dismiss such an expansive sphere as an aberration.
My suggestion is that this aspect of Nietzsche’s position makes the most sense as an account of
the relationship between values and ends on one hand and persons on the other. There are

13 I suspect that Nietzsche’s phrasing in calling for a rank-ordering of things themselves is in
some way an allusion to Plotinus, who liked to rank persons, parts of souls, and all things: see,
for example, Plotinus 1989:155 (iii.4). I cannot see what interpretive difference this would
make, however. Another possible source is perhaps Schopenhauer, for whom things exhibit
themselves as “grades of the will’s objectivity”(Schopenhauer 1969:131)

14 The following few paragraphs are a modified version of Guay 2007: 164–6.
three main elements of this account. The first is that a hierarchy of values is essential to what Nietzsche refers to as “Life”: “Living – is that not precisely a wanting-to-be-different from this nature? Is living not evaluating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different?” (BGE 9; cf. KSA XI: 167 and Richardson 2004: 30). Here Nietzsche invokes a biological notion and claims that what distinguishes the living being as such is having a priority of ends. Non-living nature, by contrast, is merely moved by external causes. Living beings at least want to be otherwise and thus have preferences, make value judgments, and set ends for themselves. To be alive, then, is to set oneself up in opposition to the rest of nature by taking a position on how things will turn out, and this requires a hierarchy of ends.

The second main element of this account is Nietzsche’s claim that what one is and what ends one sets are interdependent. This passage, for example, offers a characterization of their interrelationship:

Whichever groups of sensations inside a soul awaken the fastest … that decides as to the entire order of rank of its values, that ultimately determines its table of goods. The value-estimations of a person betray something of the construction of his soul, and wherein it sees its conditions of life, its very own need. (BGE 208; cf. D 326, D 552, GM P:1, GM I:13, A 13).

“Betray” here could mean something minimal: that value-estimations just provide evidence for what sort of a person one is. The relationship seems much closer, however: although Nietzsche distinguishes between psychological responses, order of rank, and table of goods, there does not seem to be much else to the soul besides having a hierarchical structure of preferences. Then the value-estimations would be of more than epistemic import; they would “construct” the soul by
providing the view of its “conditions of life.” In either case, to be a person depends crucially on an “order of rank of values” (cf. WP 886).

The third main element of this account is a derivation of order of rank of persons from the preceding considerations. These considerations already suffice to generate an intrapersonal order of rank: if a hierarchy of ends distinguishes the living as such, and one’s self is a function of the ends that one sets, then there are distinctions of rank among one’s actual or potential selves. Internal complexity and the conceivability of self-transformation make rank distinction internal to what one is. Thus Nietzsche writes in early works of addressing one’s “higher self” or later of “in which order of rank the innermost drives of one’s nature are aligned in relation to one another” (BGE 6).

This intrapersonal elitism involves a claim that Life demands that one adopt a hierarchy of ends and thus generates, from one’s own standpoint, a hierarchy of selves. It thus remains far from what would be expected from rank-distinction among persons. Nietzsche also seems to advocate what might be called personal indifference, however: that from one’s first-person standpoint, evaluative commitments hold independent of their association with any particular individuals, even oneself. This passage, for example, advocates personal indifference, and from there moves directly to interpersonal elitism:

… that what is appropriate for one absolutely cannot be for another, that the demand for one morality [Moral] for everyone is precisely the impairment of the higher persons, in short, that there is an order of rank between person and person and thus also between morality and morality. (BGE 228)

This passage might seem to advocate the opposite of what I am suggesting: that Nietzsche offers a kind of relativism about morality, and no more general standpoint obtains. But Nietzsche is
appealing to order of rank here in order to show that there is such a standpoint, even if it is not widely recognized. The designation of “higher men” and the rank differences between moralities indeed only make sense given such a general standpoint. Nietzsche is not claiming, against universal morality, that there is no suitably impersonal view of things; he is claiming that in the suitably impersonal view of things there is, against universal morality, an order of rank between persons.

My aim at present is not to give a full account of the dynamics of the various elements in the sphere of order of rank. Such an account would have to be hopelessly contentious, as Nietzsche leaves many matters irredeemably obscure and underdetermined. At present I only wish to show that, if one takes part of Nietzsche’s project as that of connecting values and ends with persons or selves, then one can understand why Nietzsche would attribute such an extensive sphere of order of rank. In the picture that I am suggesting, order of rank between separate persons requires order of rank among distinct intrapsychological elements, which in turn requires order of rank among various value commitments. For someone to be the person that she is, then, there needs to be order among all the potential objects of interest or concern. Things in the world must have their order of rank. Indeed, on this account, the order of rank among persons is the most derivative and tenuous. Whereas an interpretation such as Natural Aristocracy makes persons primary, on this account interpersonal order of rank can only be sustained in the context of worldly and intrapsychic relations.

I now wish to review two additional interpretations of order of rank, and suggest that they each presume a far too limited sphere. The first is Mythic Archaism. On this interpretation,
order of rank is part of an attempted “arousal of mythic pasts” (Habermas 1987: 87). That is, Nietzsche advocates a future that is characterized by pre-historical patterns of authority, a mythic consciousness, and practices that are insulated from any dynamic of change. Unquestioned authority of certain individuals over everyone else is part of such a mythic past, and thus represents what Nietzsche means by “order of rank.” This interpretation is structurally similar to that of Natural Aristocracy, in that it identifies basic distinctions between persons and claims that Nietzsche advocates reproducing these rank distinctions in social life. What is different with Mythic Archaism, of course, is that the rank distinctions are not natural in any obvious sense and indeed are not grounded in any way. The basis of distinction is not rooted in nature but in a mythic sensibility that avoids any question of grounds.

This interpretation finds its support in passages such as this one:

In the first case, when those ruling are the ones who determine the concept “good,” the lofty, proud conditions of the soul are experienced as conveying distinction and determining order of rank. The noble human being separates himself from those beings amongst whom the opposite of such elevated, proud conditions find expression: he despises them. One immediately notes that in this first kind of morality the opposition “good” and “bad” signifies just as much as “noble” and “wretched.” (BGE 260)

---

15 I do not claim that Habermas offers a Mythic Archaism reading; indeed, Habermas does not offer an interpretation of order of rank per se. As with Natural Aristocracy, in this case I am less interested in representing particular authors’ interpretations than in isolating a position that takes its cues from familiar lines of interpretation. See also, for example, the reference to the “persistently archaic character of [Nietzsche’s] politics” in Wolin 2005: 485.
This account has two distinguishing features. The first is *immediacy*: rank authority is established not by a process or a justification but by a particular kind of felt experience on the part of the superior, what Nietzsche elsewhere calls a “pathos of distance” (GM I:2). The second distinguishing feature is what might be called *value compression*. In archaic Greek thought, for example, “good,” “noble,” “powerful,” “rich,” “brave,” “truthful,” and a host of other positive qualities are almost conceptually connected: one cannot conceive of one in the absence of the others. And the “bad,” “poor,” “wretched,” “petty,” “cowardly,” on the other hand, are conceived of, at least by the ruling group, not as a set of groups with contingently overlapping membership, but as a single unfortunate lot.

Others have discussed the general interpretive shortcomings of Mythic Archaism. Here I wish to focus on the way in which it restricts the sphere of order of rank. What the Mythic Archaism interpretation does is generalize from Nietzsche’s imagined primal case to all rank distinction. The consequence of taking this initial step as paradigmatic is that both immediacy and value compression are adopted without qualification. This limits the sphere of order of rank to those who feel themselves to be noble and those who are subject to them: persons are accordingly fundamental, and there is a narrow range of ranks. Nietzsche, by contrast, insists that things fall within order of rank, as discussed above, but also that there is a complex and pluralistic order of persons. So, for example, the primal case cannot accommodate a distinction between “higher,” which Nietzsche is typically concerned with, and “better,” the concern of the archaic noble; but according to Nietzsche, “the higher the kind of type a person is, the greater the improbability that he turns out well” (BGE 62). More generally, Nietzsche suggests that the process of enhancement of the human type has produced a “diversity of persons” (BGE 194) and

---

16 On Habermas’s reading of Nietzsche see, for example, Wellbery 1988 and Geuss 1999.
a “plurality of types” (TI 9.37), so that all of these need to be accounted for within order of rank, not just a few types along a single dimension of better and worse. This is why Nietzsche promotes a wide range of elites: higher persons, geniuses, nobles, free spirits, attempters, legislators, the profound, the healthy, the manifold, the great, the strong, the virtuous, and so on. Order of rank is part of Nietzsche’s attempt to better understand, not to deny, the diversity of human possibility.  

The other interpretation that I wish to discuss in terms of order of rank is the one that I call the Political. On this interpretation, Nietzsche’s basic commitment is the superior worth of certain types of individuals, and this commitment generates the prescriptive project of organizing political life so that this superior worth is somehow respected or cultivated. This interpretation is thus similar to the previous ones in one respect: Nietzsche’s notion of order of rank is taken to apply primarily to persons. What distinguishes this interpretation is that the question of what grounds this view is relatively unimportant – or does not go beyond an appeal to the superiority of the superior – and the superiority is taken as specifically political in nature. “Political” here

17 I take one of Nietzsche’s criticisms of morality to be that it interferes with such an understanding, because it submits all human values to a single dimension of assessment. See, for example, KSA XII: 507: “Moral values were till now the highest values: does someone want to cast that into doubt? … As we distance these values from that position, we alter all values: the principle of its heretofore order of rank is thereby overturned.” Part of Nietzsche’s criticism here is that moral values in particular, by virtue of the way in which they subordinate all other values, interfere with a diversity of values that would be in some way superior.

18 Here again I do not have a specific commentator in mind, but elements of the interpretation that I describe can be found, for example, in Appel 1998 and Detwiler 1990.
could mean a number of things: having authority to rule, meriting institutional privileges, or serving as the organizing focus of social life. But however one understands the political, order of rank is taken as specifically appropriate to that.

Taking order of rank as specifically relevant to the sphere of the political presumably comes from a belief in the importance of political authority or in the pervasive importance of institutions in modern life, and an understanding of “ranks” as corresponding to something like public offices. Nietzsche, however, does not privilege the political with respect to order of rank; in fact, he does just the opposite, distinguishing the political as especially uninteresting because order of rank has little to do with it. The latter position is suggested, for example, at GS 358: “Finally let us not forget what a church is, precisely in contrast to every ‘state’: a church is above all a ruling-structure that secures the highest rank for the more spiritual persons and believes so much in the power of spirituality that it forbids itself all cruder means of force – by that alone the church is in all circumstances a nobler institution than the state.” (GS 358) Here Nietzsche treats non-state institutions as nobler precisely because they, unlike the state, make room for order of rank. Politics’ distinctive means, the potential use of coercive force, is too “crude” to be suitable for sustaining rank distinction. Nietzsche accordingly focuses not on the political but on “spiritual order of rank” (HH 362; GS 290), “order of rank among artists and philosophers” (BGE 59), “order of rank in the sphere of the intellect” (KSA I:699; cf. D 446), “societal order of rank” (WS 30), and so on.

There is another problem with the Political interpretation that is relevant to the sphere of order of rank. As a consequence of assigning order of rank such a narrow sphere, the Political interpretation generates a prescriptive project. If order of rank is taken specifically as an intervention in the political, then there is not much for it to be about other than a view about what
should be realized in the world. Nietzsche, by contrast, insists that order of rank is something that is present in any social formation and thus cannot be the basis of a distinctive prescriptive project, as each of these passages show: 19

… an order of rank of goods is continually present to every society, to every individual, according to which he determines his actions and judges those of others. (HH 107)

Wherever we encounter a morality, we find an estimation and order of rank of human drives and actions. (GS 116; cf. WP 988)

The historical sense (or the capacity quickly to assess the order of rank of evaluations according to which a people, a society, a person has lived) … (BGE 224)

… basic psychological inclination to set up orders of rank (GM II:20)

Nietzsche employs order of rank to characterize something much more general than a particular, desirable political formation: order of rank, for Nietzsche, explains how the human world always works.

In this section, I have tried to show that Nietzsche’s notion of order of rank has a much wider sphere than is typically recognized, and that this feature of Nietzsche’s account runs against some commonly held interpretations. Order of rank encompasses just about everything, and does not accord primacy of place to the differential status of persons. The Mythic Archaism and Political interpretations in particular thus misdirect their focus: by attending primarily to

19 Here one might compare order of rank with the dynamic, hierarchical, and transcendental account of power in Foucault 1990: 93: “Power’s condition of possibility … must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point … it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of the inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable.”
persons they are mistakenly narrow and thereby lose sight of the broader picture in which order of rank functions.

4. Its ground

In this section I shall discuss what Nietzsche takes to be the ground of his views on order of rank. In doing so, I shall introduce and criticize the Anthropological interpretation and present my own favored interpretation, which I call “Transcendental.” On my view, Nietzsche presents order of rank not as reflecting a natural or mythic order, but as a condition for the availability of normative authority. There are thus two main elements to the Transcendental interpretation. One element is the one that I previously discussed: that Nietzsche’s account of order of rank is meant to contribute to an explanation of normative authority rather than to offer substantive values. The second element is that Nietzsche provides this explanation by way of an argument concerning the constitutive conditions for the phenomenon of Life, and thus human self-overcoming, to be possible.

Order of rank is grounded in its contribution to human self-enhancement. That is to say, we have a reason to acknowledge order of rank, according to Nietzsche, because the process by which human beings transform human identity for the better involves order of rank. We have already seen this in Nietzsche’s discussion of the “human” type:

Every heightening of the “human” type has so far been the work of an aristocratic society – and so will it always be: as a society that believes in a long order of rank and difference in worth between person and person and needs, in some sense, slavery. Without that pathos of distance … that other, more mysterious pathos could not have arisen at all, that desire for
always-renewed widening of distance inside the soul itself, the development of always higher, rarer, more distant, greater in tension, more comprehensive states, in short, the very heightening of the “human” type, the constant “self-overcoming” of the human, to take a moral formula in a supramoral sense. (BGE 257; cf. GS 377)

Order of rank seems to be a necessary condition for this heightening and self-overcoming, since it is a “need” that will be present in every case. This heightening, Nietzsche explains, can only proceed by a kind of self-activity that depends on a prior, social order of rank. Social distance makes possible the desire for internal distinction, which motivates transformative activity on oneself. Once again, then, Nietzsche’s claim seems to involve the role of the evaluative in the phenomenon of Life. Life involves active transformation of the world, including oneself as a part of the world, and this activity depends on evaluative commitments underwritten by order of rank.

There are many ways in which we could thereby think of Life and the heightening of the human type as furnishing a ground. The most basic would be to consider order of rank instrumentally: as if heightening of the human type were an end that someone could have, and acknowledging order of rank were a necessary means to achieving that end. In that case, of course, the authority of order of rank is entirely contingent on having the relevant end. I would like to show that, in two respects, Nietzsche’s case here is not merely instrumental. Order of rank is not an instrumental condition but a constitutive one: order of rank constitutes possibilities that would not otherwise obtain, rather than merely providing an efficient means to an end that could be independently identified. Nietzsche’s case is also not instrumental by virtue of its generality. Order of rank, I take Nietzsche to be claiming, does not furnish one end among many, but something more like self-relating activity in general: in accordance with Nietzsche’s
characterization of Life, by taking on evaluative commitments one becomes the sort of being who sets ends and thereby actively generates self-transformation. Nietzsche offers a suggestion of how he makes this point in his discussion of the ascetic ideal:

it rejects, denies, affirms, confirms according only to the meaning of its interpretation (– and has there ever been a more thoroughly thought out system of interpretation?); it submits to no power, rather it believes in its privilege before every power, in its unconditional distance of rank in relation to every power – it believes that there is no power on earth that does not receive its meaning, its right to exist, its value from it alone, as a tool for its work, as way and means to its goals, to One Goal . . . (GM III: 23)

This is only a single example of “distance of rank,” but here Nietzsche identifies a content-dependency of all power and all goals. Order of rank is a precondition for the determinate “meaning” of power and goals as such, or, as in this passage, it is that from which meaning is “received.”

Before I develop this point, that Nietzsche sees the content of everything, and in particular power and goals, as dependent on order of rank, I wish to consider the final rival interpretation. This interpretation, the Anthropological, has to my knowledge only one exponent, John Richardson (see Richardson 2004), so I shall try to remain faithful to his account. In Richardson’s view, Nietzsche accepts a Darwinian explanation of some of our instincts. That is, he explains certain human drives and values in terms of natural selection. But Nietzsche departs from Darwin by claiming that natural selection is inadequate to explain all human drives and values. A second form of selection, social selection, is required to explain “drives and practices that serve the survival or expansion of the social group (and not the individual or species)” (Richardson 2004: 85). Nietzsche further proposes a third form of selection, self-
selection, which builds upon but overcomes the prior forms. Whereas the prior forms “design” tame, homogeneous individuals, self-selection aims at individuals who are defined by their degree of difference and distinction from others. Nietzsche’s “breeding” cultivates escape from dominant social instincts, and accordingly “crucially pursues a ‘rank order’ or hierarchy, which he thinks is indispensable to making the strong and free individuals he advocates” (Richardson 2004: 201).

In light of the considerations that I have previously advanced, there is much to be said for the Anthropological interpretation. Richardson characterizes order of rank as integral to a dynamic, social-historical process rather than merely reflecting a pre-given evaluative order. Order of rank is furthermore central to self-relating activity, or as Richardson writes, “freedom” (Richardson 2004: 201). In particular, on Richardson’s reading, self-transformative activity is involved: there is a “breeding” by which one makes oneself into the kind of being with one’s own values. I nevertheless have three main objections to the Anthropological interpretation, of which the third is directly related to the ground of order of rank. The first objection is historical: the Anthropological interpretation places order of rank as a late offshoot in historical development, whereas Nietzsche insists that it is present at the very beginning. At the least, the mythic-archaic sense of distance arrives early, and more recent history presents a suppression or obscuring of order of rank rather than a new opportunity for it. The second objection is structural: the Anthropological interpretation characterizes order of rank as a kind of self-separation from the social, whereby individuals make themselves distinctive from others. Nietzsche, by contrast, characterizes order of rank as deeply social. Richardson suggests that society could be “engineered” (Richardson 2004: 203) for order of rank, but this would entail organizing social life for non-social persons, rather than, say, changing the social meaning of the
“human” type. Third and most relevant to present purposes, the Anthropological interpretation understands Nietzsche as offering a causal-explanatory account of how various forms of selection bring about certain human drives and values; on the topic of why Nietzsche values the ideal ascribed to him, this interpretation is mostly silent.\textsuperscript{20} What I have been suggesting, by contrast, is that the main function of order of rank in Nietzsche’s enterprise is to contribute to an explanation of the availability of normative authority.

I have already discussed, in section 2, the reasons why one should adopt the Normative interpretation, and thus understand order of rank as contributing to an explanation of normative authority. If we adopt the Normative interpretation, then it is hard to see how a causal explanation of the development of human drives has much to contribute; but, on the other hand, it remains unclear what could serve as the ground of order of rank, if not the appeal to developmental anthropology. My suggestion here is the interpretation that I call “Transcendental”:\textsuperscript{21} one that supplements the Normative interpretation of Nietzsche’s aims with the claim that order of rank is grounded as a constitutive condition. This interpretation is “transcendental,” then, in that it responds to a question of right by offering the conditions for the phenomenon of Life to be possible; I take this to be the basis of Nietzsche’s claims such as “order of rank merely formulates the highest law of Life itself” (A 57). Order of rank makes

\textsuperscript{20} See Richardson 2004: 200: “It is hard to say, I think, whether Nietzsche values this kind for its intrinsic character, or because of that difference and distinction from others.”

\textsuperscript{21} I do not claim, of course, that this interpretation involves all or only things that could be called transcendental. Even with reference to Kant’s understanding of “transcendental,” there is much that is absent: a set of uniquely necessary conditions, priority to experience, and derivation from the logical form of judgments, for example.
possible the evaluative, self-relating activity distinctive of Life as such, not as a causal condition, but by contributing to the content by which persons distinguish themselves from the rest of nature.

We can find an example of this contribution of content in Nietzsche’s claim, “one must compel moralities to bow first before the order of rank”(BGE 221). Nietzsche is suggesting that we should think of morality as subject to that which is prior: our setting up of distinctions and making of comparative assessments. Without this prior order of rank, morality would be an empty “seduction under the mask of philanthropy”(BGE 221): it would have no content other than the attractive but deceptive surface of human kindness. Nietzsche’s preferred picture apparently does contain moralities, but only if they take on non-superficial sense though engagement with an order of relative importance and value.

Nietzsche makes this point about substantive content not just about morality as a whole, but in many more specific contexts, in particular love of neighbor (BGE 216, GM I:10), passion (D 27), and, as here, equality:

[The noble soul] concedes, under circumstances that make it hesitate at first, that there are those who are equally entitled; as soon as it has cleaned up this question of rank, it moves among these equals and equally-entitled with the same security in shame and tender awe that it has in its dealings with itself. (BGE 265)

Nietzsche’s critique of equality is familiar, but he is not opposed to equality per se. He objects to equality that does not amount to anything: for example, “that everyone as an ‘immortal soul’ has equal rank” is a kind of “nothingness”(A 43). In the above passage, however, equality is a desirable form of social relations: it allows for a combination of self-assurance and awe.

---

22 I discuss this passage, and the general issue of content, in Guay 2005.
Nietzsche’s general point seems to be that equality in any desirable form has to be equality in specifically meaningful ways; the problem with the democratic-socialist-Kantian-Christian form of equality is that it is granted independently of any particular quality at all. The provision of meaningful ways in which there can be (or fail to be) equality is the constitutive role of order of rank, and how it thereby makes ethical distinctions possible.

Nietzsche makes a series of parallel points about the values and conditions he associates most closely with order of rank: responsibility (BGE 252, BGE 272), reverence (GS 100, BGE 263, BGE 287), faith (BGE 287), and suffering (BGE 270). His complaint is typically that the prominent forms are empty of content, and interfere with the ways in which similar but more substantive values might be available. And what, for Nietzsche, makes the difference between the substantive and empty forms is order of rank; this is the point of the present section.

Nietzsche’s notion of order of rank is meant to contribute to an explanation of the possibility of normative authority, and does so as a constitutive condition for the phenomenon of Life. My preferred “Transcendental” interpretation is meant to capture these features of Nietzsche’s approach.

5. Sociality

One thing that I have tried to show in the preceding sections is that order of rank is not primarily a substantive notion: Nietzsche is interested in the availability of normative authority rather than prescribing a specific hierarchy. Even such a “transcendental” view must have some substantive implications, however, and in this section I wish to discuss some of them. Since it is difficult to identify any of Nietzsche’s substantive views, let alone trace them back to order of rank, I shall
focus on two matters that are most directly related: the role of order of rank in communities and the reasons why order of rank is not more widely acknowledged. Here I hope to indicate some of the reasons for thinking that there is a necessary public role for order of rank, and that we are doomed to misunderstand it.

Order of rank stands somewhat awkwardly between individual and group, as this passage shows:

“You shall obey, someone and for a long time: otherwise you perish and you lose your last respect for yourself” – this seems to me the moral imperative of nature which is surely neither “categorical” – nor addressed to the individual, but rather to peoples, races, ages, classes, but above all to the entire animal “human,” to human beings. (BGE 188)

This “moral imperative of nature,” which I take to be derivative of order of rank, is both personal and collective. On one hand it calls for the obedience of each to another as the condition for warding off the loss of personal integrity. On the other hand, it is addressed especially to humanity as a whole, or the human being as such. Together these two aspects suggest that there must be standards that are not based in anyone’s interest or allegiance, but nevertheless command authority. Without such standards, there is no basis for respect for individuals, even self-respect. And even less can there be any kind of community, let alone a “human” type, without such a common basis for social relations. Subjection to the authority of impersonal standards makes a shared form of living possible.

Nietzsche thus comes to think that order of rank is necessary for the integrity of communities and individuals. The resulting need for obedience, although not itself conducive to any public justification, is not arbitrary or irrational, however, and it is not imposed by force. The most extensive discussion of order of rank appears in the chapter of Beyond Good and Evil
called “We Scholars,” and there Nietzsche suggests that the source of obedience depends on the quality of ideas:

The greatest events are the greatest thoughts – but the greatest thoughts are the greatest events – are the last ones to be understood: the generations that are contemporary with them do not experience such events – they live right by them. It happens just as in the starry realm. The light of the farthest stars comes last to human beings … “How many centuries does a spirit need before being understood?” – that is also a standard, by which one also makes an order of rank and manners, as is needed: for spirit and star. (BGE 285)

Of course, it is not the best ideas that ultimately command obedience, but the “greatest” ones. And this greatness not only cannot be explained, it cannot even be recognized.

Nietzsche characterizes this failure in recognition as itself an inevitable and interesting feature of our social world. There are four explanations that Nietzsche offers for this failure, and each points to a different aspect of his analysis of modernity. The first is antipathy. We are antipathetic to order of rank because it undermines the modern sense of individuality in which every person is a unique, completely independent source of value: thus, “One no longer has class-rank! One is an ‘individual’!” (D 203). Order of rank is ignored in part, then, because it implies that everyone’s identity depends on others in a way that no one would like to acknowledge. Another explanation that Nietzsche offers is the one closest to the passage about spirits and stars: we are simply not good enough to see order of rank. Nietzsche writes that the “spiritual middle-class … may never catch sight of the great problems and question marks” (GS 373) and that there are “persons not noble enough to see the abysmally different order of rank and cleft in rank between person and person” (BGE 62). The third explanation is that our commitments in distinctive spheres are confused or conflated, most typically the political and the
existential. The failure to acknowledge order of rank is thus the “catastrophe that has crept out of Christianity to politics” (A 43), and diffused itself further from there.

The fourth explanation that Nietzsche offers for the failure to acknowledge order of rank is perhaps the most interesting. The explanation is that it stems from repression: a concealment from ourselves of what we are really doing. In the modern version of this, no form of order of rank is credible – all authority claims have come to seem implausible – even as we cannot live without order of rank. The result is that we sustain the patterns of authority that support our shared ways of life, but always represent ourselves as doing something much different. Nietzsche thus identifies the “moral hypocrisy of those commanding,” in which they “know no other way to protect themselves against the bad conscience than to pose as the executors of more or higher commands” (BGE 199). This repression has an older source, however: Christianity’s permanent institution of guilt about order of rank in general, so that it cannot be avoided or reduced, except by creating more guilt. This inheritance endures in the operation of order of rank in the modern world, whereby we misunderstand and thus make unavailable the conditions of our own flourishing.

6. Conclusion

I have not been able to present anything like a developed theory of order of rank because Nietzsche did not have one. Whether this absence is best explained by the inherently “problematic” character of order of rank, or by Nietzsche’s shortcomings as a philosophical writer, I leave aside. I hope nevertheless to have shown that, even in the absence of such a theory, order of rank has an important place in Nietzsche’s thought and that it includes a range of
concerns and applications that are not typically noticed. Order of rank connects the availability of normative authority to the structure of social life and thus, for Nietzsche, is central to the very enterprise of philosophy.

To be sure, order of rank has a natural basis, involves rank disparity between persons, contributes to an anthropological account of the development of certain drives, and has substantive social implications. But in Nietzsche’s thought these are small pieces of a much broader account of how the authority of rank distinctions sustains the phenomenon of Life. And here, perhaps, is where Nietzsche’s deepest philosophical interests lie.²³

Bibliography

Writings by Nietzsche

All quotations from Nietzsche are my own translation, with original emphasis. Works are cited by section number except for the KSA, which is cited by volume and page number.

Other works cited


²³ I wish to thank Anna Gebbie, Randall Havas, and my students for their help in thinking about this topic, and Christine Swanton for explaining “Tall Poppy Syndrome” to me.


