Our Virtues

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I

This paper offers a reading of the seventh chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil*, and in particular, a solution to its puzzle. Nietzsche titled that chapter “Our Virtues,” and this immediately generates a puzzle because the opening words of the chapter comprise the question, “Our virtues?” The puzzle, then, is that there might not be any subject matter for this chapter—unlike, say, “On the Prejudices of Philosophers,” but possibly more like “What Is Noble”—leaving us to wonder what to do with all those words if they are not about anything.

There is a familiar way of handling Nietzsche’s questions, however: to take the answer as obvious. This approach offers a straightforward assignment of content to the text: we have virtues, Nietzsche can tell us what they are, and the reason for bothering to ask about them was to spic things up by drawing the reader in, or to draw the reader in by spicing things up. And there are other rhetorical strategies to which we could assimilate Nietzsche’s question, while still giving an easy affirmative answer. Posing a question could be a way for an epistemically privileged narrator to call the reader’s unnoticed ignorance to her attention. Or posing a question could be a small temporal inconsistency, in which one goes back to before a now-completed inquiry has begun, so that one can retrace one’s steps.

On occasion, however, we should take Nietzsche’s questions seriously as such. Nietzsche poses questions not only to indicate that the answer is obvious, or to call
attention to his superior knowledge, or to introduce a new topic in an engaging manner, but, at least with certain issues, because questionableness cannot be driven away. Nietzsche and his surrogates ask these questions, for example, not because answers lie just over the horizon, but rather because attention should be fixed on the horizon: “To what extent does truth endure incorporation?” (GS 110); “How are we to comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?” (GS 125); “What would your happiness be if you did not have those for whom you shine?” (Z prologue); “Why not rather untruth?” (BGE 1); “Today—is greatness possible?” (BGE 212); “What do ascetic ideals mean?” (GM III:2); “Why humanity at all?” (GM III:28). In a similar manner, the asking of the question of whether we, in fact, have virtues marks off the intractability of the issues involved. Nietzsche suggests that our characters are unstable in a way that leaves our virtuousness irredeemably ambiguous. A lack of stable features could, of course, be the basis for denying that we have virtues. The instability in ourselves is not merely erratic, however, but stems from a commitment that is fundamental to what we are. We unsettle our own qualities in a way that challenges any particular standard of virtue.

The procedure that I shall adopt here is to review the particular characterization of “us” in the discussion of “our virtues,” indexed as it is to speaker and historical moment. There Nietzsche identifies a number of our distinguishing features, which seem to be unified around the integrity that we sustain in our antipathy to perfection. In light of this account of what we now are, I offer a consideration of the ways in which Nietzsche treats our characteristics as qualifying or disqualifying us for virtue, and why this remains ambiguous. What I shall argue is that, in Nietzsche’s view, the subjectivity that we can be said to share is comprised by particular meanings. These meanings are inextricable from our commitments and accordingly structure our ethical possibilities but are impossible to vindicate. Nietzsche ultimately affirms our virtues, I think, but does so in a way that depends on sustaining the authority of our self-image which, in a moment of dislocation with respect to the past and trepidation with respect to the future, is hopelessly unstable.

II

“Our virtues?” (BGE 214), the question that begins the seventh chapter of Beyond Good and Evil, lacks a verb. A commonplace of grammar books is that a sentence without a verb cannot express a thought, but in this case it seems easy to assimilate the question into a context that fleshes out its meaning. One can imagine a dialogue in which Nietzsche’s interlocutor asks him something like, “What do you think about our virtues?” or “Are our virtues any good?” Then comes the moment of puzzlement, in which the question fragment reestablishes the discourse’s footing. The question suggests that it is premature to inquire into the specific character
of our virtues while the reference of “our virtues” in still in play; first we need to establish whether we indeed have any. Nietzsche quickly concedes, “It is probable that we, too, still have our virtues . . . ” (BGE 214). This probability quickly shifts to a hypothetical: “. . . if we should have virtues” (BGE 214). Whether this uncertainty about our virtues is probabilistic or hypothetical, what remains odd is that the uncertainty does not stem from lack of knowledge about ourselves. This chapter—indeed, this aphorism—is filled with specifications of just what, exactly, we are like, so a lack of information is not what generates the gap between what we are entitled to claim and a self-ascription of virtue. One can even doubt that there is such a gap, given that Nietzsche is later ready to say, “we have our virtues, it cannot be disputed” (BGE 224). So the puzzle of this chapter seems to be identifying what is problematic about “our virtues,” where neither epistemic nor personal shortcomings seem to be involved.

A resolution of this main puzzle depends, in turn, on resolving a subsidiary one. The scope of the first-person plural in “our virtues” needs specification. One might even be so surprised at Nietzsche apparently accepting community membership that one takes this as the main puzzle. Fortunately, however, Nietzsche does clarify the first-person plural, at least by contrast. There are five historical groups implicitly distinguished in chapter 7, and the virtues in question belong to the members of the fourth. BGE 214 orients itself around “our grandfathers,” whose virtues were “ingenuous and big-boned,” and this suggests that “we” are to be understood generationally, in relation to those who came before and those who come after. Our grandfathers were, no doubt, preceded by ancestors who, whether due to audacity or debility, seem to fall outside the history of our virtues. Our proximate forbears are our Enlightenment fathers, whose taste was offended by “religion as a pose” (BGE 216). We are “Europeans of the day after tomorrow” (BGE 214), typified not only by our tortured family relationships but also by our “historical sense” (BGE 224). And, Nietzsche suggests, we are on the verge of being replaced, or possibly replacing ourselves, in some unspecified but fearsome way. “Our virtues” anticipate some impending doom, and the ultimate significance of this chapter might indeed be the historical argument that leads beyond its proper subject matter. The contemporaneous moment and the identity of the would-be bearers of virtue are nevertheless relatively unproblematic. The first-person plural is both personal and cultural, and thus the puzzle is over how we are to assess what is distinctive, albeit precarious, about the historical moment in which Nietzsche places himself.

We can identify what is problematic about our virtues by examining what Nietzsche puts forward as our characteristics; the discord between us and virtue suggests a solution to the puzzle. In the preliminary account of who we are, our distinguishing features are “our dangerous curiosity,” “our multiplicity and art of disguise,” and “our tender and as it were sweetened cruelty in spirit and senses” (BGE 214). These features differ greatly from one another, but they are united in manifesting an inverted relation to boundaries. Wherever there should be a firm separation, our traits break this down; wherever, by contrast, there should be inner harmony,
we manage to incite an antagonism. “Curiosity” [Neugierde] suggests something that should not be: the overlap of desire and cognition, such that cognition itself becomes playful and insatiable, always provoking a tension between what one knows and what one wants to know. “Multiplicity and the art of disguise” suggests a form of transgression both compound and complex. To be multiple is for oneself to be separated from oneself, and having a disguise suggests that the surface mis-represents the depth. But having a specific “art of disguise” suggests that the mis-representation of oneself in appearance is in fact a form of self-expression; and what is more, Nietzsche, by grouping this art with multiplicity as a single trait, suggests that multiplicity requires disguise as its only available form of self-representation, even as these representations are inevitably inadequate, even as no one in particular is misrepresented. The final trait in this preliminary set involves the coincidence of opposites: cruelty is tender and sweetened, and sensuality and spirituality are intermixed. And these two sets are themselves combined, so that cruelty enters even into the receptivity of the senses, where it can only be a bit of self-harm inserting itself into one’s passive being. The cruelty is not merely sweet, but sweetened, like a toxin to which one adds sugar and then consumes. Our defining characteristics render us volatile, transgressive, and self-menacing, then: our firmest feature is our own instability.

Given this characterization, one can understand why Nietzsche hesitates to discuss “our virtues.” Typically, not every good quality can count as a human virtue, at least not as an ethical virtue; a picture of the virtues depends on a picture of human psychology according to which we have certain stable features that can be decisive with respect to action and can engage with reasons. A process of cultivation, if appropriately conducted, can lead to the development of a good character. Such development of one’s own person not only serves a practical function, by enabling distinctly ethical responsiveness, but also represents one’s perfection. In this process, despite its dependence on the availability of external goods, one can become good and thereby insulate oneself from contingency as much as is possible in a human life. No human life, of course, is immune from harm altogether, but a life of active virtue represents a form of goodness that is at least exceptionally solid. With courage, for example, one remains vulnerable in familiar ways but possesses a goodness that is not qualified by non-moral harms and even manifests itself in one’s affective responses to difficulties and losses. Virtues are accordingly something finished. In possessing the virtues, one has concluded the achievement of a stability in oneself that stands over against the world of action.

However one assesses the deeply ambiguous characteristics that are distinctively ours, then, one can see why Nietzsche would hesitate to identify them as our virtues. These characteristics are deeply incompatible with the old picture of the soul on which the prominence accorded to virtues rested: there is no way to reconcile what we are with virtue, at least not in what Nietzsche calls the “ingenuous and big-boned” (BGE 214) sense. Here, I think, Nietzsche does not have a particular philosophical target in mind, but envisions our grandfathers’ virtues as an unfortu-
nate synthesis of the pagan emphasis on stability of soul and the modern emphasis on social stability. The resulting virtues are perhaps unreflective and uncomplicated, and more conducive to conformity than to individual merit, but in any case antithetical to us. In order for us to meet the demands of an ethics in which so much importance is placed on our states of soul, we need to be the sorts of beings who could at least potentially satisfy a model of ethical perfection. But we lack stable features, let alone valuable or practical ones.

Instead, Nietzsche suggests, self-distancing activity is fundamental to what we are. Cruelty operates within our most basic faculties, and as “Europeans of the day after tomorrow” (BGE 214), we even live at a temporal distance from ourselves. As a result, our psychology comprises ongoing processes rather than the potential for stability; we perform so much labor of construction on ourselves that, instead of erecting an edifice of character, we are never sure whether we are building or demolishing. Part of this, Nietzsche claims, is that our personal accomplishments fit within more comprehensive processes. We lack both the zero points and the final goals in terms of which we could treat achievements as conclusive, so “every virtue inclines toward stupidity, every stupidity toward virtue” (BGE 227). More basically, however, we manifest an ambiguity between self-confidence and self-discovery, and one between self-discovery and self-invention. In us, causation, observation, and hope blur: “And is there anything more beautiful than looking for one’s virtue? Doesn’t this almost mean: believing in our virtues?” (BGE 214). For us to have unqualified virtues, we need first to have character. But here Nietzsche depicts us otherwise, as always caught between pathos and sovereignty, with our confidence both imperious and unstable.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche also refuses to give an unqualified negative answer to the question of our virtues. Nietzsche consistently depicts our separation from virtue as a self-enforced process. We are active in our de-cultivation of character, so if we lack virtues, it is not because we are too chaotic to be capable of living up to their standards, but because we have, in a sense, transcended them. In the standard picture of the virtues, one does not arrive at the correct action mechanically, as impelled by virtue, but with the attunement to reasons that comes with the proper cultivation. One can imagine the reflective process that this entails being further and further refined until it turns back on itself, resulting in beings who set themselves apart from the virtues. As distinguished by curiosity, multiplicity, and cruelty, then, we embody reasons not to cultivate stable character: for the sake of a greater attunement to reasons and a more fine-grained responsiveness to situations. In thus complicating ourselves, we still recognize virtue as a potential for what we could be that, as such a permanent potential, we can ipso facto never fully realize. Having this internal complexity could thus count as a shortcoming. But this complexity also represents an achievement in itself. Our powers are at least in one way greater than those contained in the psychology of virtue. Responsiveness to and productivity of subtleties forms our psychological constitution; or, to use the term that Nietzsche offers, we have “labyrinths” (BGE 214).
Virtues in the ingenuous and big-boned sense fit at best awkwardly in our psychology, then, and it remains ambiguous what to make of this. Nietzsche does, however, offer at least one further specification of our questionable virtuousness. Nietzsche poses a question which is indeed rhetorical, and which receives an affirmative answer in the subsequent sentences: “But this ‘believing in one’s virtues’—is that not fundamentally the same as what used to be called ‘the good conscience,’ that venerable long-tailed pigtail-concept [Zopf-Begriff] that our grandfathers hung behind their heads, and often enough behind their understandings?” (BGE 214). This, it seems, is the thin tether that connects us to the virtue tradition. Despite other changes, we still maintain this one continuity with the past and our grandfathers’ ethical outlook. This Zopf-Begriff, as appended to our heads and our understanding, is a hindrance; here langschwänzig, “long-tailed,” seems to imply schwanzlastig, “tail-heavy.” The anticipated demise of this burdensome good conscience is nevertheless met with an “alas” [Ach], however mild. Nietzsche’s response to this, and to the present wearing of the pigtail, seems to be conditioned by the pigtail’s conceptual nature. What is at stake in wearing or severing this pigtail, in linking back to our grandfathers or losing touch with our past, is not something about us in our immediate, underlying condition, but about us in our self-representation or self-conception. Having or losing this connection thus does not seem grievous because it only affects us in a way mediated by a higher-order relation that we might take to ourselves or our own underlying states of soul. It is a very strange pigtail that attaches to us, and is somehow about our virtues, but losing a pigtail does not itself involve cutting into bone.

This additional specification offers a closer approximation to the problematic status of our virtues. Nietzsche continues to address the ethical question of our virtues through a consideration of the complex features of our subjectivity; in the pigtail-concept that both constitutes our relationship to virtue and hangs behind our understanding, ethics and subjectivity indeed overlap. Nietzsche’s claim here is that our relationship to virtue consists in a conceptually mediated good conscience about underlying states of soul, and that a further disruption of this good conscience will bring about a redetermination of the underlying states. We can perhaps take this as an amplification of the previous features, namely curiosity, multiplicity, and cruelty. The claim is in any case a paradoxical one, however: the state of our souls—whether virtuous or vicious, or something else entirely—depends on the relationship of our souls to something else, such that, when the relationship alters, the souls themselves are transformed. The best way to understand both the soul’s complex relationship to its own pigtail and the problematic status of the virtues, I now want to suggest, is to see that, for Nietzsche, the soul is not built out of stable features, but out of particular meanings.

Elsewhere I have argued that, although Nietzsche criticizes a certain picture of the soul, he does so in order to preserve the category of the soul with a superior picture rather than to abolish it. In the picture that Nietzsche views as historically dominant, the soul is a unity that reflects on and exerts causal influence on the
world but is not influenced by anything outside itself. The scorn with which Nietzsche treats this view and its supernatural concomitants is familiar. In the course of amplifying his scorn, however, Nietzsche offers a view of causal explanation that not only rehabilitates the soul, but makes it indispensably important. Nietzsche’s view is that the fundamental form of explanation is telic in character, that is, it functions by appeal to final causes. And Nietzsche deems the availability of telic explanation to be sufficient for imputing subjectivity. Nietzsche’s position, then, is that the identification of purposiveness both betrays a soul and constitutes what explanation, at bottom, is.

This identification of subjectivity with purposiveness in general forestalls the possibility of setting out an ultimate list of basic mechanisms or dynamic features that comprise the human psyche. Since Nietzsche does not privilege any telic account over all others, he places no restraint on which explanations can contribute to an understanding of the soul. This might seem to suggest a highly abstract structural account, in which all that one can offer is the identification of subjectivity in general with purposiveness; it might also seem to suggest that only telic directedness contributes to the constitution of subjectivity. But in Nietzsche’s treatment of subjectivity, the point of offering a generalized account, like that of refusing to assert a single, privileged psychodynamics, is not to rest with the general, but just the opposite. Nietzsche’s aim, in advancing a telic account, is to vindicate, in very general terms, the very specific ways in which one is a subject: not as an instantiation of features common to all subjects, but as complex networks of engagements, entanglements, and dependencies.

Thus, in the account of subjectivity into which a picture of the virtues may or may not fit, the soul is consubstantial with its meanings. Nietzsche proceeds in “Our Virtues” by offering the specifics of historical self-understanding because there are not psychic structures that contain, or contemplate, or exude bits of mental content; the content is what comprises the soul. This content is inherently unstable: it can be systematically transformed through changes in context, through new moments of responsiveness, through our “inter-animating” activity, and even through the ways that it relates to itself. Indeed, this is the question of virtue: whether that pigtailed conceptual self-relation can constitute its own character, where this would require both integrating—or “immentalizing”—the appended meaning and the appended meaning being transformative of the rest of oneself. The question of the virtues thus not only carries its own intrinsic importance, but also provides a point of access to the nature of our souls.

One way of considering what this picture of subjectivity amounts to is to contrast it with a familiar one. Descartes, in the Seventh Set of Replies appended to the back of Meditations on First Philosophy, offers a suggestive metaphor in defense of his skeptical method:

Suppose [someone] had a basket full of apples and, being worried that some of the apples were rotten, wanted to take out the rotten ones to prevent the rot spreading. How would he proceed? Would he not begin
by tipping the whole lot out of the basket? And would not the next step be to cast his eye over each apple in turn, and pick up and put back in the basket only those he saw to be sound, leaving the others? In just the same way, those who have never philosophized correctly have various opinions in their minds which they have begun to store up since childhood, and which they therefore have reason to believe may in many cases be false. They then attempt to separate the false beliefs from the others, so as to prevent their contaminating the rest and making the whole lot uncertain. Now the best way they can accomplish this is to reject all their beliefs together in one go, as if they were all uncertain and false. They can then go over each belief in turn and re-adopt only those which they recognize to be true and indubitable.\(^\text{15}\)

The mind, in this metaphor, is an apple basket. It is a special sort of apple basket: it is a self-transparent, immaterial basket with several distinct faculties and innate apples about essences. The metaphor makes clear, however, that the mind is a different sort of thing than idea-apples, and that it functions as a receptacle that is potentially empty, even if as a matter of fact it seldom or never is. One can and indeed should tip the basket and conduct one's thinking devoid of ideas, as that is the most secure procedure to adopt. By starting from an empty mind and admitting ideas one by one, the rotten ideas that subsequently infect other ideas can be avoided.

In “Our Virtues” Nietzsche offers a different metaphor, one in which the idea of the mind as receptacle is both preserved and destroyed:

Here [the spirit's] needs and capabilities are the same as those which physiologists set forward for everything that lives, grows, and multiplies. The spirit's power to appropriate the foreign reveals itself in a strong tendency to assimilate the new to the old, to simplify the manifold, and to overlook or shove aside whatever is entirely contradictory. . . . Its intent in this is to incorporate new “experiences,” to categorize new things in old categories—thus, growth. . . . All this is necessary in proportion to a spirit's degree of appropriating power, its “digestive power,” metaphorically speaking—and actually “the spirit” is most like a stomach. (BGE 230)\(^\text{16}\)

As “stomach,” the mind is potentially empty and functionally distinguishable from its contents. Thinking, however, or the operation of the “spirit” in general, is not holding the contents of a receptacle, but digesting them.\(^\text{17}\) Thinking thoughts consumes them, making them available for nourishment and, of course, also producing excrement. And the spirit is in turn altered by this process, assimilating into itself the nourishing elements of its consumption. These elements, once incorporated into the stomach-spirit, are in turn transformed and transformative, as they metabolize further experience. These processes, as processes of spirit, are normative rather than chemical: they count as activity that can be attributed to someone and that concerns the standings of meanings in their proper relation to one another. But even as such, this normative metabolism is continuously self-transforming. This is perhaps why some interpreters mistakenly attribute a Humean position to Nietzsche. On Hume’s inference, the continuous succession of content excludes the presence
of a self. For Nietzsche, however, this is just what a self is, as this passage suggests: “Learning transforms us, it does what all nourishment does which also does not merely ‘preserve’—as the physiologist knows” (BGE 231). Here Nietzsche provokes the obvious answer to the obvious question of “What would the physiologist whisper into Zarathustra’s ear?”18: du bist was du ißt. Ideas and meanings do not exclude the self; rather, they feed the self and thereby become the self.19

At the risk of some awkwardness, it might now nevertheless serve to reconcile the two metaphors of our subjectivity. We have labyrinths and we are stomachs. The spirit-stomach maintains a continuity with everything it has ever metabolized, but not in any straightforward way; its constitution thus bears a labyrinthine complexity. The labyrinths that we have are structured by meanings that have long since lost their original, as it were organic unity with their context of production by being assimilated into new, although enigmatic purposes; this leaves a diversity of competing explanatory resources available to account for anything and everything about us.20 Together these metaphors show that it is impossible to give an unequivocal answer to the question of our virtues. On one hand, what we are is always susceptible to the contingencies that are entangled with our meanings. We depend on social, historical, and corporeal contexts, among others, for the possibility of being what we are, and these can be both intractable to will and opaque to understanding.22 On the other hand, we are not merely complex, but our complexity, as deriving in part from an ongoing, transformative process, is unanalyzable; every attempt to determine an aspect of the complex would itself be a part of the transformative process and would thus founder as soon as it was begun.

This state is incurable; if anything, Nietzsche suggests that it is chronic and worsening. We can thus contrast this view of what we are with one that Volker Gerhardt finds in Thus Spoke Zarathustra according to which the self is the “meaning of the body” or, more precisely, a transposition of “the body into a possible sense.”23 This view is Nietzschean and an important corrective to the Cartesian one according to which “everyone, in order to perfect humanity, was advised to pull their senses inside themselves in a turtle-like manner and to cut off contact with earthly things” (A 14). But the view that relates the self to the body, even as a meaning or a possibility for meaning, is nevertheless inadequate for present purposes. The question of our virtues does not depend on a characterization of subjectivity or self in general, but on what Nietzsche tries to set forth in “Our Virtues”: our distinctive identity as the wayward heirs of our grandfathers. And to characterize us, the meanings of the body do not suffice. What is precisely so problematic about us is that the meanings that we produce and assimilate have had their connection to the body usurped. Perhaps the body could once serve as ground of our subjectivity, and then the meanings of the body could serve as ground, but we produce meanings of our meanings of our meanings, with their connection back to the body having been long ago metabolized into ether and excrement.

This is what Nietzsche praises perhaps ambivalently in the seventh chapter of Beyond Good and Evil as “high spirituality” (BGE 219). We are no longer bound by coarse connections to the features of our world or even of ourselves. Our experience
is instead “spiritualized,” mediated by the layers of complexity that are themselves the result of our mediated engagement with the world. This, as Nietzsche points out, is a distraction from our corporeality:

> We have gained more insight about this, too: the raising of consciousness, the “spirit,” counts for us precisely as the symptom of the organ’s relative lack of perfection, as an attempting, groping, mistaking, as a labor that uses up an unnecessarily great amount of nervous strength. (A 14)

The very qualities that separate us from our grandfathers and their ingenuous, big-boned virtues are the ones that, according to Nietzsche, enervate us and render us less well suited to perfect functioning. Achieving “high spirituality” only exacerbates this, as it removes us still farther from our organic conditions. So the question remains: how could this possibly count as virtue?

III

We can also examine the question of whether or not we have virtues from the other direction, as it were: we can consider the case on our behalf and the qualifications that must be made to that case. The first step to making the case on behalf of our virtues is figuring out what these virtues might be. Even within the seventh chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche is not entirely consistent on this, but this is the most extended list: “we have our virtues, it cannot be disputed—we are unpretentious, selfless, modest, brave, full of self-overcoming, full of devotion, very grateful, very patient, very accommodating” (*BGE* 224). This is a familiar and impressive list of virtues that Nietzsche assures us we possess, but a moment’s analysis reveals this list to be a strange composite. It contains pagan virtues, such as bravery, ascetic virtues, such as selflessness, and deeply ambiguous ones, such as fullness of self-overcoming. At the same time, the assembly of these virtues is not arbitrary, as if these were qualities that history had randomly winnowed out for us. The list represents a unity that can only be understood, strangely, by considering the way it falls short of unqualified virtuousness: each item presupposes some way in which our situation in the world falls short of what we might wish it to be. On this matter, Nietzsche writes, “what we find most difficult to grasp, to feel, to taste over again, to love over again, what finds us fundamentally prejudiced and hostile, is precisely the perfected and ripened in every culture and art” (*BGE* 224). As a first approximation of how to understand our relation to virtue, we might say, then: we are not perfect and we have virtues of persons who are not perfect and nevertheless face the vagaries of an imperfect world with a certain kind of integrity.

There are two difficulties with this reading of our relation to virtue, however. One is that virtue for those who fall short of perfection is typically a *contradictio in adjecto*: it would not be a different kind of virtue but at best a more instrumental,
less valuable form of coping. The other difficulty is that Nietzsche does not claim that we fail to attain to perfection. It is not merely that we fall short, but that we are so deeply incapable of appreciating perfection that even if perfection itself were in our hands or on our palates, we could only repel it from ourselves as quickly as possible.

We feel antipathy to perfection, and perfection is antithetical to us; somehow just this is the condition of our thriving. To see how this strange situation could count toward our virtue, we can further consider the nature of our opposition. Nietzsche offers a greater specification of what we are against: “Morality as pose—now goes against our taste. This is a bit of progress: as it was progress among our fathers when religion as a pose finally went against their taste” (BGE 216). Clearly part of what is objectionable here involves pretense: morality is susceptible to its appearance being far greater than its substance, whether due to insincerity, shallowness, or hypocrisy. Nietzsche's criticism here runs much deeper than that, however. The criticism is not merely that morality assumes a shape that misrepresents its true content. The criticism is that the true content is pretense. The “sublime” accomplishment that Nietzsche contrasts with morality as a pose, and ascribes to us, is that “we learn to despise when we love, and precisely when we love best” (BGE 216). This claim is somewhat obscure, except in that it would make a poor model for pillow talk. The sense, I think, is this, however: we do not need to over-idealize the objects of our cares and commitments. On the contrary, we sustain our devotions best in recognition of how things are and what they might mean to us, and not by taking a measurement against an imaginary perfection that we then must delude ourselves about. Our love is subtle enough to love in the individual and the particular, rather than attaching itself to paradigms or exemplars that we cannot humanly relate to. In the same way, we can no longer regard our moral commitments as approximations of absolute standards, as such standards, lying beyond all our possible Verachtung, could not take for us the form of commitments. And in the same way our antipathy to perfection could open us up to something that counts as virtue.

Since we now need to inquire into a kind of openness to which our antipathy brings us, we need one more detour through subjectivity. Thinking, we know from the Genealogy, is a kind of measuring:

Setting prices, measuring values, thinking out equivalents, exchanging—this preoccupied the oldest thoughts of humanity to such an extent that it constitutes, in a certain sense, what thinking is: here the oldest kind of astuteness was cultivated, and here, we may likewise surmise, are the first beginnings of human pride, humanity’s feeling of superiority with respect to other animals. (GM II:8)

This miniature genealogy has a self-fulfilling character: starting as creatures whose preoccupation was exchange and comparison, we turn this preoccupation into our fundamental activity until it takes the shape of thought, and as thought we use it to think up our own superiority as Menschen, that is to say, creatures who measure,
Thinking is our distinction and our pride, and consists in making distinctions of value, which itself turns out to be a way of valuing. This view of thinking informs what Nietzsche writes in “Our Virtues,” namely that “one must compel moralities to bow first before the order of rank” (BGE 221). I cannot pretend here to offer a full interpretation of that claim, but its critical impetus is clearly the suggestion of a reversal of priorities. Instead of thinking of morality as standing outside and above our particular evaluations, we should think of morality as subject to that which is prior: our setting up of distinctions and making comparative assessments, which Nietzsche insists extends not only to persons but also to things (BGE 219). The former view, morality as highest proviso on rank-ordering, would require a thinking outside of thought altogether; it must inevitably be senseless for us. (This is, incidentally, the way in which morality could be a “pose”: its sense would have to be entirely superficial.) The latter position, by contrast, submitting morality itself to rank-ordering, engages with the ways in which we go about making sense of things and where our identity rests. It offers a sense of value that embraces shades of difference without being conditioned by an absolute, just as our despising and our antipathy suits us better for love. So if we reconcile these thoughts, we come to a suggestion of how our antipathy to perfection opens us to virtue: it constitutes what better thinking and better valuing is.

Nietzsche construes what we are as manifesting a familiar form of goodness, and the value that we possess, as befits a preliminary to virtue, has both instrumental and intrinsic elements. One characterization that Nietzsche offers of our relation to virtue is expressed in terms of the “despair” in which “the spirit finds its advantage” (BGE 223, emphasis added; cf. BGE 224). Nietzsche’s claim, then, is that what we are, as chaos and contempt, is especially well suited to pursuing virtue. One way in which he explicates this advantage is as an almost epistemic privilege. Nietzsche writes, “through our semi-barbarism in body and desires, we have secret points of access everywhere” (BGE 223). This claim, of course, is not quite epistemic; otherwise, the advantage conveyed would be obscure. Nietzsche is not claiming that we are especially good at perceiving or making claims about all things, but that, as a result of our openness and desire, we metabolize and incorporate all things. We have, that is, the most comprehensive standpoint from which to think and to value; our sense of rank can encompass the greatest extent of historical and cultural wisdom. The spirit’s other form of advantage is related to this one. Our privileged access connects us to “the realm of our invention, that realm where even we can still be original” (BGE 223). What lies within this realm, strangely, seems to be us, and thus we can invent ourselves, in a sense, through a transformation of the way in which the spirit relates to itself. So if our antipathy to perfection does unsettle us, it also gives us the potency to come back to ourselves as something new.

This access brings us to the doorstep, then, of what virtue can be for us. According to Nietzsche, our antipathy to perfection leaves us always contemptuous and unfinished and at the same time constitutes our power to bring about a novel self-invention. There is, accordingly, a reciprocal dependence between our imper-
fection and our virtue: we are imperfect in our perfectability, to be sure, but also perfect in our imperfectability. No formulation of this coincidence can escape from irony altogether, so that even when Nietzsche writes, in “Our Virtues,” that “we want to never weary of ‘perfecting’ ourselves in our virtue” (*BGE* 227), he cannot help but put “perfecting” in scare quotes. This, however, is our way of being ourselves. Perfection is a project that we are always engaging in, but not something that we could settle on. We cannot settle on perfection because we recognize that any such stopping place would be deficient with respect to some potential still left unrealized, even if only some taste of or laughter about what has already been brought to completion. At the same time, of course, just this power to look beyond any resting place and possibly to despise it in order to love further is what the perfection that is ours—the only perfection that we could stand—consists in.

This is itself a kind of greatness. The instability and antipathy built into our character sustains a process that prepares us for every contingency, somewhat like Aristotelian virtues do. Nietzsche expresses this in terms of a “tension of the soul” that conveys gifts to the soul:

That tension of the soul in misfortune . . . cultivates its strength, its shudder in the face of great destruction, its inventiveness and bravery in bearing, enduring, interpreting, making use of misfortune, and whatever has been given [geschenkt] to it of profundity, secret, mask, spirit, cunning, greatness. (*BGE* 225)

Aristotelian virtues resist contingency by standing firm: by enduring as a source of value no matter what circumstances present themselves. By contrast, we resist contingency through our instability. Nietzsche’s suggestion is that, instead of possessing certain qualities that never lead us astray, we respond better to the complexity and range of situations that confront us by matching that complexity as it were internally. The instability of our character allows for a productive process in which we strengthen and shape ourselves in ways that answer the particularity of the challenges we face. Through our questionable virtues, then, we lead lives that are not only better than ones of ingenuous and big-boned virtue, but that are also more deeply our own. We receive our meanings, our prudence, and even our spare personae in the course of living according to our virtues.

Here then is Nietzsche’s later account of why our virtues, which are always incomplete, nevertheless can be final goods. Nietzsche expresses the particular greatness of being tentative and yet unstable, contemptuous where we esteem, and generally at odds with ourselves by means of a contrast with something very much like the ingenuous and big-boned virtues:

Where there is a question of value or valuelessness, persons of conviction do not even come into consideration. Convictions are prisons. Those persons do not see far enough, they do not see beneath themselves: but to have a say about value and valuelessness, one must see five hundred convictions beneath oneself—behind oneself . . . The freedom from every sort of conviction belongs to strength, the capacity to see
freely. . . . Conviction as a means: there is much that can be achieved only by way of a conviction. Great passion uses and uses up convictions; it does not subordinate itself to them—it knows itself to be sovereign. (A 54)

The question of our virtues is not whether they qualify as such by relative superiority to some alternative list. There is no alternative list. Once virtues have been called into question, nothing else could meaningfully count as such; giving ourselves up to the old virtues would entail losing our vision and our ends. Our virtues count as virtues, however: they reveal how imperfection is in fact part of our perfection. Only in this imperfection do we have multiplicity of belief, purposiveness that transcends its own perspective, power, and the sovereignty of passion. All this, Nietzsche suggests, is to be reevaluated as strength, as this is what strength now is for us. This is what empowers us to carry out our ends and maintain our unstable form of integrity.

Carrying out such a reevaluation is not a finite task, since it depends on sustaining ourselves, in passionate contempt, apart from all convictions. But as long as we advance in that task, however much that process might be restricted by the contingencies of the world, then our volatility and ambiguity, our contempt and our antipathy—even our self-endangerment—all contribute to inventive self-transformation. So we do indeed have our virtues, probably. Virtue requires that our subjectivity maintain its form of integrity; it depends on maintaining a good conscience about this process and ultimately about itself; and it relies on the perpetual rediscovery of the realm of our invention. If these conditions are met, however, then we have our virtues.

NOTES

I am grateful to an audience at the CUNY Graduate Center, organized by Christa Acampora, that amply demonstrated the gift-giving virtue in their criticism before, during, and after the session. I could not possibly account for all the improvements they suggested, so I hope that they will forgive me for my failures to incorporate each suggestion and to acknowledge each critic by name. I am also grateful to Randall Havas and Ed Minar. My interlocutors are never responsible for my papers' shortcomings, but they are especially not so.

1. I refer to the main divisions in BGE as “chapters” to avoid awkwardness in English; Nietzsche calls them simply “Hauptstücke.”
2. See Beyond Good and Evil, §214. Works by Nietzsche are hereafter cited in the text by section number; translations are mine and emphasis is original unless noted. Works are identified by the standard North American Nietzsche Society abbreviations, namely: A (Der Antichrist), BGE (Jenseits von Gut und Böse), GM (Zur Genealogie der Moral), GS (Die Frohliche Wissenschaft), HH (Menschliches, Allzumenschliches), WS (Der Wanderer und sein Schatten), and Z (Also Sprach Zarathustra). One can find a similar observation about the puzzle of “Our Virtues” in Paul van Tongeren, Reinterpreting Modern Culture: An Introduction to Friedrich Nietzsche’s Philosophy (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2000), 216.
originality, I claim only to extend the general point about questionableness to the specific matters of my discussion, and possibly thereby to offer a revised version of what, for Nietzsche, the “destabilization of thought concerning subjectivity” (1) amounts to.

4. Bryan Garner discusses the diversity of opinion on this type of sentence in *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 364f. He notes that Otto Jespersen, in *Essentials in English Grammar* (New York: Henry Holt, 1933), called them “amorphous sentences” and claimed that they are “more suitable for the emotional side of human nature” (105) and that it is impossible to say what is “left out” (106) of them. Garner also quotes R. M. Gorrell and C. G. Lain, *A Tractate in English Handbook*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1956), 202: “Most writers . . . use the incomplete sentence sparingly, except in reports of conversation. It is a special device, to be used for special effects. In the hands of anyone but an expert, it is usually unsuccessful because the basic patterns have not been established, and missing ideas cannot be supplied.” I am certain that parallel views could be found in German grammars.

5. The problematic identification of our virtues is expressed as a hypothetical again, with respect to honesty [Redlichkeit], in BGE 227. For a discussion of Redlichkeit, see note 27 infra.

6. Although, because of my focus on the contemporaneous, the reading that I offer here largely avoids competition with that of Laurence Lampert in *Nietzsche’s Task* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), there are nevertheless significant differences in how we view the historical classifications and their importance. For Lampert, the story is at once progressivist, triumphalist, and eschatological: it involves the singularly philosophical recovery of an unambiguously natural disposition. In my reading, by contrast, the historical categories that Nietzsche introduces are distinctively important, with a number of implications. Our activity and in particular what we collectively make of ourselves is more important than either the naturalness of the disposition that “grounds philosophy itself” (Lampert, 210) or any anticipated outcome. Moderns, in my picture, are much more continuous with pre-moderns, and philosophers are continuous with “normal moderns” (Lampert, 200). And Nietzsche is much more ambivalent about the whole historical process on my reading. His aims are far more diagnostic than partisan: to the limited extent in which this is possible, he wishes to arrive at an understanding of the structure of history and the available senses in which we might be said to embody something of value.

7. For a defense of the narrow historical focus of my inquiry, see HH I:2. In the rest of the paper I shall leave aside the question of whether we still belong to this same historical moment and employ the first-person plural and the present tense to refer to the historical moment of Nietzsche’s discussion.

8. The locus classicus for this view is of course the treatment of ethical virtue in Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, Book II. I must leave for another occasion the issue of whether or not this picture of the virtues is true to Aristotle.

9. One can find a parallel equivocation about the use of the term “virtue” in *The Antichrist*: there Nietzsche declares himself to be against virtue, but for “moraline-free virtue” (A 2) and that a virtue must be our invention . . . a virtue in any other sense is merely a danger” (A 11). I have commented on this latter passage in “Nietzsche on Freedom,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 3 (2002): 310.


11. For more illumination on this matter than I can provide, one might compare Jonathan Lear’s discussion of a “middle course” between a “bare Metaphysical Subject” and the content of a “particular form of life” in *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 276.


13. Laurence Lampert emphasizes this last element, in terms of our ability to “own as our own” our capacities, in *Nietzsche’s Task* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 216.


16. Cf. the treatment of this passage in Christa Davis Acampora, “Naturalism and Nietzsche’s Moral


18. Here my allusion, as anyone reading this probably knows, is to Z III “The Other Dancing Song,” or to any of Nietzsche’s many other uses of whispering.


21. For Nietzsche’s main illustration of this point, see GM II:13.

22. For a complete reading of chapter 7, I would have to explain how Nietzsche’s culminating discussion of “the woman in itself” (*das Weib an sich*) (*BGE* 231ff) fits within the framework that I am suggesting rather than being—as it might appear—an incongruous appendix of trite misogynist remarks. Although I cannot make this case here, I think that it can be done: one would have to show that Nietzsche was criticizing (or mocking) rather than (merely) engaging in contemporary discourse about gender, and in particular suggesting that attempts to isolate and govern practice by the nature of woman fundamentally misapprehends the ways in which the social and relational (rather than “*an sich*”) meanings of gender are at once intransigent and mutable. Nietzsche would then be borrowing his contemporary discourse for the purpose of criticizing everyone: progressives and conservatives for presuming that prevailing meanings are exhaustive of the possibilities of gender, men and women for failing to acknowledge that their self-definitions are contested and relational, and himself for lacking the efficacy to so much as clarify the discourse. On such a reading, Nietzsche’s discussion of “*das Weib an sich*” has somewhat more in common with Simone de Beauvoir’s discussion of the “eternal feminine” in the introduction of *The Second Sex* than with, say, Otto Weininger’s discussion of the “female substance” in *Sex and Character*. And such a reading, incidentally, avoids the challenge of explaining what those passages are doing in that chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil*. On Otto Weininger, see Carol Diethe, *Nietzsche’s Women: Beyond the Whip* (New York: de Gruyter, 1996), 43. On Nietzsche’s discussion of “*das Weib an sich*,” see Maudemarie Clark, “Nietzsche’s Misogyny,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. K. Oliver and M. Pearsall (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1998), 187–98. On the comparison with Simone de Beauvoir, see Lynne Tirrell, “Sexual Dualism and Women’s Self-Creation,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. K. Oliver and M. Pearsall (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1998), 199–224. For a more general treatment, see Frances Neshott Oppel, *Nietzsche on Gender* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005).


24. For a discussion of the many qualities that Nietzsche identified as virtues, see Robert C. Solomon, *Living with Nietzsche: What the Great “Immoralist” Has to Teach Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), chap. 6. I will not attempt to make such a case here because it would have to be underdetermined by the textual evidence, but one could, I think, reconcile the plurality of particular virtues that Nietzsche identifies with a unified account of our virtuousness in general. Nietzsche intimated such an account by referring to *Redlichkeit* as “the only [virtue] remaining to us” (*BGE* 227). *Redlichkeit* is no familiar, specialized virtue: Alan White argues convincingly in “The Youngest Virtue,” in *Nietzsche’s Postmoralism*, ed. R. Schacht (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 63–78, that it cannot simply be translated as “honesty,” since it concerns a matter of existential import, one’s orientation to life as a whole. Jean-Luc Nancy, in “Our Prohiby,” in *Looking after Nietzsche*, ed. L. Rickels (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), refers to two features of *Redlichkeit*, furthermore, that might enable it to stand in for our virtuousness in gen-
eral: it is a meta-virtue, as "conscience behind conscience" (79) and it is a "virtue-in-process-of-becoming" (72), making it both unstable and ineffable. Together these features of Redlichkeit suggest that it is a general, nonspecific capacity to bring to bear whatever particular powers are suited to the contours of our situation, where this is responsive both to "life" and to virtuousness in general. On the unity of virtue in a more general context, see John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 52f.

25. One could of course retain the term "virtue" in such qualified cases. The main difficulty in doing so is that it would open up a range of otherwise closed questions, most importantly, whether and to what extent it is desirable to possess such virtues. For a brief discussion of some of the general difficulties of such qualified virtues, see my review of Christine Swanton's *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 31 (2006): 75–78. For an example of a systematic approach to virtue in a qualified sense, see Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).