

Nietzsche: his context and his views on the good life.

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The current study design for VCE Philosophy Unit 4 sends us off on an exploration of philosophical evocations of The Good Life for human beings. The design first directs us back to ancient Athens of the 4th & 5th Centuries BCE to encounter Plato's stark vision of a life spent restraining the desires and passions in order to systematically pursue justice and truth, then on to Aristotle's somewhat more urbane account of the harmoniously flourishing great-souled individual whose body is trained to habitual virtue through thoughtful participation in communal life, before sending us back up to the present to consider Peter Singer's contrastingly modern exhortation, in the context of the 21st Century democratic nation state, to moral action based on universal compassion.

In these pages here we follow the study design back to the 19th Century to take a dip in the bracingly contrary waters of the work of the German philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche**.

We shall begin by investigating the **historical, social and philosophical context** in which Nietzsche developed his views; the **key terms** he employed to present them; and some of the **assumptions** and **propositions** regarding **human nature** that are central to his position on what a good life for us might involve.

Then we shall pursue an **evaluative** investigation by **analysing** and **evaluating** the **arguments** that might be put forward in favour of Nietzsche's highly idiosyncratic views, before **comparing** the key **propositions** and **consequences** of Nietzsche's position to those of the positions of the other thinkers we have encountered.

Nietzsche's life

Nietzsche was born in the small village of Röcken near Leipzig in the Prussian province of Saxony in 1844 to the wife of the local Lutheran pastor. His mother's father had also been a protestant minister. Nietzsche did well in classical studies at school (not so well in maths and drawing) and went on to university, initially to study Christian theology and *classical philology* (the study of ancient texts, particularly those from ancient Greece and Rome). This was a course of study that would have prepared Nietzsche for becoming a Lutheran minister in the family tradition, however he seems quite early to have lost his Christian faith. Within a year of commencing university, Nietzsche had dropped theology in order to focus exclusively on philology.



Friedrich Nietzsche 1844-1900

As Nietzsche's philological studies progressed he became increasingly drawn to the study of the *philosophical* texts of ancient Greece. So promising a student was he that, by 1869, at the age of just 24, he was offered and accepted the position of Professor of Classical Philology at the University of Basel in Switzerland. He taught at Basel for ten years until chronic ill-health forced him to retire. For the ten years following his retirement (the remainder of his sane life) Nietzsche spun out his small pension and nursed his poor health by staying at tourist destinations in the off season: Swiss mountain resorts in the summer, Mediterranean coastal towns in the winter. Quite suddenly, in early 1889, whilst staying in the Italian town of Turin,

Nietzsche suffered a debilitating mental collapse. First Nietzsche's mother, then his sister took care of him over the last ten years of his life as he declined into increasingly severe mental paralysis, succumbing to death in 1900.

In 1872, whilst still a university professor, Nietzsche published his first book, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (later translated into English as *The Birth of Tragedy*). From then on until his collapse he managed to produce a sequence of philosophical works (roughly one per year) that were scarcely noticed during his sane lifetime, but which became increasingly widely read and admired after he himself was no longer able to acknowledge their success. By the time of his death, Nietzsche's fame had spread well beyond Germany. His ideas stimulated English language writers such as Yeats, Joyce, George Bernard Shaw, Eugene O'Neill and Australia's own Norman Lindsay. Nietzsche's works were also central inspirations for the psychoanalytical theorists Freud and Jung and for later philosophers such as Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida—to name but a few.

The excerpts from Nietzsche that are singled out by the Philosophy Unit 4 study design are all taken from a book of notes Nietzsche published in 1886, quite late in his career: *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (Beyond Good and Evil).

Germany in the 19th Century.

The forgoing material is not essential for your studies in VCE Philosophy Unit 4 but, as Nietzsche is a particularly *personal* writer, it provides important background information that will help you to make sense of his often quite difficult texts. Similarly, it will help us to give meaning to the key terms Nietzsche employs and to discern the central assumptions Nietzsche relies on to support his position if we also know something about the social, cultural and philosophical influences he encountered as a young man growing up in a German speaking region of Europe in the mid-19th Century.

Although, compared to the ancient philosophers indicated in the study design, Nietzsche's times are not so very far-flung from our own, a great deal changed as a result of the periods of catastrophic warfare that erupted during the first half of the 20th Century; these changes indelibly mark off our times from his. As a result the common presuppositions of Nietzsche's time can sometimes seem as alien to us as those of ancient Athens!

History

19th Century Europe saw the rise of the so-called **nation state** as the chief political unit. The motley of principalities, duchies and kingdoms—sometimes loosely affiliated into diffuse Empires—which had provided the structure within which the European aristocratic classes had ruled hitherto, were steadily being replaced by larger regions of more centralised political organisation. The peoples of these larger regions were urged to consider themselves a part of the one **nation** (literally: a people of common birth; people who are related in some way) through



The many small German states in the 1840's

participation in a common **language** and **culture** who had united politically into one **state** for reasons of reciprocal benefit: the better to organise for cooperative physical and economic protection.

The regions that compose modern **Germany** came rather late to this process. Where the British, the Spanish, the Russian and the French nation states were well established by the beginning of the 19th Century, until mid-century German-speaking peoples remained dispersed across a wide area of central Europe, ruled by more than fifty different political formations ranging from the small sovereign principalities and duchies of central and southern Germany, to the larger kingdom of Prussia to the north and the various German-speaking parts of the Austrian Empire to the south-east.

For many of the areas where German was the predominant language, political **unification** came about as a consequence of the need for the various small polities to combine in order to fight back against the expansion of the French Empire under Napoleon in the first two decades of the century. This process of unification reached its peak under the Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in the wake of the final victory of the Germanic forces over the French in the Franco-Prussian war of 1871. At that point, polities over a region including but much larger than present day Germany (but not including Austria) united to form the German Empire (*Das Deutsches Kaiserreich*).

This background is important for understanding Nietzsche because much of his writing can best be understood first and foremost as his contribution to the heated debates that absorbed the German speaking world at the time regarding whether and, if so *how* to create a sense of unified nationhood amongst the disparate peoples of the new German Reich.

Throughout his writing career Nietzsche remained a staunch **opponent** of the idea that all cultural and moral questions should be addressed within the context of the modern **liberal-democratic nation state**. To understand *why* he objected so strongly to a **culture** conceived in support of **nationalism** and to the ascendance of a **moral code** based on **liberal egalitarian or democratic ideals**, we need to understand something of the cultural and philosophical milieu Nietzsche himself grew out of.

Romanticism

Nietzsche's high-school, *Schulpforta*, had, a few generations prior to his arrival, been charged with the education of Fichte, Novalis and the brothers Schlegel. These individuals were key figures in an international cultural phenomenon known as **Romanticism**, which began in Germany in the mid-18th Century. By Nietzsche's youth the glory days of Romanticism as a guiding productive force in Germany were over, but many of the central precepts lived on, incorporated to greater or lesser degrees into the cultural mainstream.

The **Romantic** outlook on life is probably best understood as a **reaction** to the confidence of the enlightenment thinking of the preceding two centuries. The **Enlightenment** was a period characterised by highly **optimistic** assessments of the power of human reason to know the world and thereby to guide and support humankind in steady progress towards perfection.

Underpinning the **Romantic** approach was the conviction that the world of experience radically **exceeds** the power of human comprehension: for the Romantics existence is **irrational** and so ultimately unfathomable by logical means. Romantic poets and artists tended to present Nature as mysterious and wild; treacherously unreliable and ungovernable—foggy nights and stormy seas abound.

Philosophers of the period found support for the Romantic's low assessment of the power of reason by reflecting on the obscurity of the **Self**. We *talk* of a self, but can find in experience no *object* we might *describe* as a self. Yet how can we expect to know the world clearly when we can't even find a secure basis for giving an account of who we ourselves are?

Romantic philosophers also pointed to the phenomenon of our existence in **time** as an indicator of the limitations of reason. All experience takes place in time but, as St Augustine had famously reflected much earlier:

What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know.

—we certainly have a strong *sense* of our *being* in time, but the more we investigate what exactly *being in time* amounts to, the more our thought seems to become caught up in contradictions: We say we exist in time, but does the past exist? —not any longer. Does the future?—not yet. So *when* exactly is it that we exist? In the present?—but *what is* the present? It seems no more than a kind of mirage, an ever-fleeing instant, a frail border *between* past and future: is *that* firm enough ground on which to build a coherent understanding of Being?

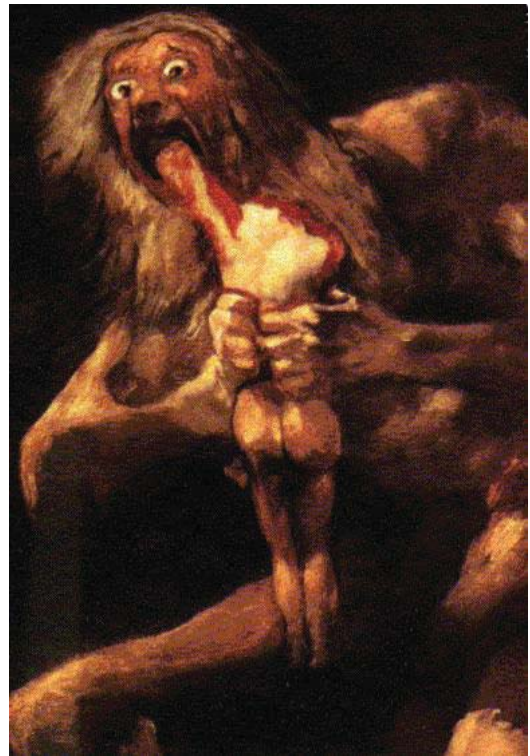
Such reflections led the Romantics to place **greater value** on our **sensory and emotional** dealings with existence: if reason seems to lack a sufficiently coherent basis to enable it to be an authoritative guide to Being, perhaps we should put more trust in our intuitive and passionate interactions with the world? We may never be able to *know* the world entirely satisfyingly as an *object* for rational or scientific investigation but perhaps we can never-the-less develop a wholly authentic *felt* response to it (hence the choice of 'Romantic' as a title). The position is nicely summed up by Novalis in his commentary on the philosophy of Fichte:

The borders of feeling are the borders of philosophy.

—rational thought then is no more than an island as it were, cast adrift in a great sea of 'feeling'.

As the Romantics kicked these ideas of the excessive nature of existence and the corresponding importance of our felt responses to the world around, a number of consequences seemed to follow.

In relation to **art** appreciation, the Romantics tended to mistrust the experience of **beauty** and the sense of pure delight that usually accompanies it, as insufficiently complex to be the sole inspiration for an authentic response to the excessive nature of the world. Far more in accord with the Romantic approach were experiences which evoked **mixtures** of pleasant and unpleasant emotions, such as one might feel whilst listening to a piece of music that is both uplifting and yet also terrifying—a Beethoven crescendo perhaps—or upon gazing at a painting that is both very finely executed and yet disgusting—some of Goya's works for instance. The 18th Century German philosopher Emmanuel Kant had suggested that mixed experiences of this



Francisco Goya, *Saturn Devouring His Son*
c. 1819–1823.

kind are evoked not by the Beautiful, but by the **Sublime**.

Because by their lights Art in its evocation of the Sublime held the potential to provide authentic experiences that are somehow equal to the excessive nature of the world in a way that reason can never achieve, the Romantics tended to place a much **higher significance** on the **less structured modes of thoughtful activity** appropriate to artistic creation over the more methodical approaches typical of work in philosophy, maths and the sciences.

In any realm of endeavour, the Romantic view tended to suggest that **truth** is the result of **flashes of insight**—moments of revelation or epiphany—rather than the result of following some method of careful definition and deduction. This lack of method in turn led to the notion that insight into truth is not something that just anyone can achieve by following a particular process of thought; rather there are certain people who are constitutionally more ‘in tune’ with Being and hence far more able to achieve insight than the rest of us. The Romantics reserved the word **Genius** for such individuals. Since the Genius was thus in some sense especially close to existence, it was more-or-less expected that they, in their own lives, would tend to reflect the irrational, emotionally complex and impulsive nature of the world. There is much talk of *the madness of Genius* in Romantic thought.

We see then that Romantic thought tended to a certain **elitism** in that the human world divided into two fairly distinct groups. There are the people of Genius who achieve wondrous insights into Being and translate them into their art—such individuals are *sui generis*, their lives should not be judged by the pedestrian standards appropriate for the rest of us. And there is the rest of us, those who are not capable of the insights of Genius, but who must rather live our lives *within* the structures of feeling and thought that are elaborated on the basis of the revelations handed down to us though their Art by Genius.

This aspect of Romantic thought brings with it a certain **pessimism** concerning human history. In place of the Enlightenment vision of steady progress in rational understanding, technology and social organisation, Romantic thinkers tended to see history as **cyclic**, with the moments in which persons of Genius hand down their insights to the rest of us as the highpoints of the cycles, followed by periods in which common humanity strives to find itself within the consequences of the revelations of Genius: the latter periods being in a certain sense periods of decline, in which the insights of Genius become tarnished and weakened by being handled and transmitted by more ordinary folk. For examples of this process the Romantics pointed to the life of Christ (a moral Genius) and the subsequent dispersal and weakening of the Gospel doctrine in the spread of Christ’s insights amongst the various churches of Christendom. Similarly, one might point to the spread of the Jacobin ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity by the conquests of Napoleon and the subsequent weakening of those ideals in the bureaucratic nation states that sprung up in his wake.

The preceding ideas were all presented with memorable immediacy and rhetorical flair in the work of Arthur Schopenhauer, a German-language philosopher of the generation prior to Nietzsche’s. Schopenhauer was a thinker Nietzsche was greatly taken by in his early years. The final turn in the development of this line of Romantic thought was made by Nietzsche himself in his first published book *The Birth of Tragedy*. In that work Nietzsche suggested that within the cyclic vision of history described above, the **Genius** is best seen as a **Tragic Hero** along the lines of the tragic protagonists of ancient Greek drama, such as Oedipus in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and Prometheus in the *Prometheus Bound* attributed to Aeschylus. Nietzsche’s key thought here being that **the very best life** for a human being involves **striving to achieve an authentic relationship with Being through insight into truth** in full awareness that such striving can only lead in the long term (thanks to the irrational and unforgiving nature of existence) to ultimate failure, suffering and defeat.

The foregoing ideas fit together well in the Romantic sense of artistically structured thought—involving the more-or-less free association of ideas—it is far less clear that they can be connected by the more rational ties of logical necessity. The question arises of just *how* strongly these ideas follow one from the other: even if we are convinced of the notion of the ultimate incomprehensibility of existence, how much of the Romantic scheme are we thereby obliged to accept as a consequence?

Reflection activity

Take a moment now to consider *your own* position on the Romantic/Enlightenment divide as I have presented it above.

Where do your initial feelings lie: are you inclined to the optimistic view that, through patient reasonableness, humankind can make steady progress in rational understanding, technology and social organisation towards a point of perfection, or near-perfection where most of the really excruciating problems of life have been solved and most of the mysteries of the Universe dispelled?

Or are you more inclined towards the Romantic view that existence is ultimately refractory to human reason, so that systematic thinking alone cannot lead us to ever greater feats of life-enhancement and social organisation? Must human existence be forever fraught with pain, heartache and confusion? If so, do the other aspects of the Romantic scheme as I have given it here then seem to follow on for you? Does the task of negotiating our felt responses to the world become more significant? Are there certain individuals who are especially gifted when it comes to elaborating — through their ideas and their Art— the most authentic ways to feel and act? ('Art' here including all forms of creative activity: music, literature, film, you name it) If so, should we then allow that such creative people are 'special' in some way, and not to be tied down by the same rules we employ to judge our own lives?

In your journal, brainstorm your ideas under a title '**Which seems more plausible: the Enlightenment or the Romantic view of human existence?**'

Once you have settled, with some degree of circumspection, on your own inclinations with regards to this choice, see if you can probe out some **good reasons** you might have for taking the view you do. Can you come up with reasons that are more than just *personal* (*I feel this way because of the way I was brought up*, for instance)? See if you can come up with two or three reasons for your choice that might actually convince **someone else** that your way of looking at things here is correct. Once you have your arguments thought out, jot them down in a few paragraphs.

In your journal, write out your arguments in fair copy under the title '**My reasons for preferring the [Enlightenment/Romantic] view of human existence over the [Romantic/Enlightenment] view**' (choose the version that suits your own response).

Digging Out Nietzsche's Fundamental Assumption

Nietzsche, in much of his later work, can helpfully be seen as a thinker who is carefully sorting through the key themes from his Romantic (and Enlightenment) inheritance, trying to select out what is worth keeping from what needs to be cast aside. The aspect of Romantic thought he was most eager to be rid of was the somewhat dour, pessimistic view of existence the view seemed to entail. Nietzsche in his later work was at great pains to discover and promote a joyous, **affirmative** approach to existence, one more akin to the optimism of the Enlightenment view. The key aspect of Romanticism Nietzsche retained was a version of the Romantic conception of the Genius as the source of Artistic insight.

From the Romantic view of the Genius, Nietzsche derived the view that the good life for a human being, the very best life, is one spent striving to be, or at least to contribute to the becoming of Genius. (Although, as we shall see, Nietzsche seldom used the word Genius itself, freighted as it was for him with the dour Romantic view of existence he came to despise.) Becoming or supporting the occurrence of individuals of great Artistic insight was no easy task on Nietzsche's view—there is much use of the metaphor of childbirth in his work, both as a trope for the pangs of engendering insight in oneself and in supporting others to achieve it. From these reflections we might therefore sum-up Nietzsche's position on the good life as follows:

The greatest life for a human being is one spent in creative achievement born of striving to overcome resistances and setbacks.

This vision of the best life for a human being is everywhere present in Nietzsche but, because it is such a fundamental presupposition with him, he seldom if ever states it explicitly. The closest I could find to a clear statement of the view comes from note 19 of a work from Nietzsche's middle period entitled *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (often translated as 'The Gay Science'):

Examine the lives of the best and most fruitful people and peoples and ask yourself whether a tree that is supposed to grow to a proud height can dispense with bad weather and storms; whether misfortune and external resistance [...] do not belong among the favourable conditions without which any great growth even of virtue is scarcely possible. The poison of which weaker natures perish strengthens the strong—nor do they call it poison.

We are going to take a look now at a couple of the prescribed readings for Philosophy Unit 4 to see if we can catch a glimpse in them of this key proposition at work.

As mentioned above, all the Philosophy Unit 4 prescribed texts from Nietzsche this year are taken from a late work, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche typically chose to present his thought not in the form of a closely argued treatise—the form common to modern philosophers—but in collections of short, often quite shocking and abrupt notes. We see here the influence of the anti-rationalism of the Romantic view mentioned above: Nietzsche's notes are not designed to lead us gently and methodically to some well-grounded position, rather they are intended to buffet us with spurs to thought, perhaps leading us thereby to moments of insight. This stylistic aspect of Nietzsche's writing makes him both very exciting but rather challenging to read! The notes from *Beyond Good and Evil* prescribed for study in VCE Philosophy Unit 4 in 2015 are (were) notes: **199, 201, 203, 225, 228, 260 and 284.**

Let's now have a quick look at two notes: # 225 and # 199. As you read the notes try and see which of the general themes discussed above you can discern operating within them.

Above all as we read these notes we are looking for an answer to the question: *What does Nietzsche seem to think is the most valuable or important aspect of human being?*

Firstly let's look at note 225 from the middle of the selection of notes. Note 225 is typical Nietzsche; a diatribe against the idea that suffering is always a *bad thing*. As Nietzsche points out at the beginning of the note the idea that suffering is pretty much the essence of what is bad is central to many modern attempts to ground our moral judgements in a systematic code. What is it that we must pursue in all our actions? *We must try to reduce human (and, perhaps, animal) suffering and to promote general happiness*. We might combine these two goals by saying that the goal of all right action is promoting 'general wellbeing'. The view is certainly implicit to much of the rhetoric employed by our politicians, and you will recall that a proposition of the kind informs the Utilitarian moral outlook presented by Peter Singer.

In the present note, Nietzsche criticises the proposition that suffering is always bad. But notice, superficially at least, he does not so much argue against the claim as lampoon it. (Notice the preponderance of exclamation marks!) Our difficult task is to try and work out what background reasons Nietzsche could possibly have for considering suffering to be sometimes (often?) a *good thing*. What other aspect of human being can Nietzsche consider to be so important that misery and pain become relatively unimportant for him, *even useful*? We see a little further on in the note that Nietzsche applauds suffering because he says the 'discipline [...] of *great* suffering [...] has created every elevation of mankind hitherto'. So it would seem that **human elevation** is an overriding goal for Nietzsche.

When we look about in the note for hints as to what this human elevation might involve, we are struck by the frequent references to **artistic** pursuits. At the beginning of the note Nietzsche suggests that those who are 'conscious of *creative* powers and an artist's conscience' are more likely to see things as he does, then, further down, Nietzsche talks of man as both '*creature* and *creator*' where the creature part is spoken of rather dismissively as the part which must suffer, but the creator is 'sculptor, the hardness of the hammer, the divine spectator and the seventh day'.

From this note we can see strong hints of the key assumption mentioned above—that for Nietzsche the paramount goal of human existence is not avoiding suffering but rather meeting suffering and misfortune ('resistance' we might say) and creatively overcoming it in artistic achievement.

For further hints as to what kinds of 'artistic achievement' Nietzsche has in mind, let's look quickly now at note 199 from the beginning of the selection of notes. Note 199 takes the dichotomy of creature and creator from note 225 and redescribes it as a difference between the herd-men and the unconditional commander. We might rephrase this distinction as the distinction between those who need to be told what to do by others (those who are only obedient) and those who can be stern with themselves, can command themselves, are, on their own initiative, able to apply themselves to difficult tasks. The level at which Nietzsche is pitching his point here is illuminated by the example he uses to finish the note. The note ends with an enthusiastic description of Napoleon's effect on Europe in the 19th Century. According to what Nietzsche says in the note, Napoleon was the source of all the **Higher Happiness** achieved through the Century's 'most valuable men and moments.'

As mentioned above, the conquests of the French under Napoleon brought huge changes across Europe. The resultant upheavals set in train the processes by which the feudal political arrangements under which most Europeans had been ruled since the fall of the Roman Empire were replaced by the rise of the modern nation-state. Because of his military successes and popularity Napoleon was able to remove many of the last remnants of aristocratic privilege in France by introducing centralised legal and taxation systems designed to apply equally to all. He also created a central bank, made the state more responsible for infrastructure such as roads and sewerage, made higher education more attainable for the less privileged, completed the separation of church and state thereby introducing greater religious freedoms and promoted the unification of the sciences through the introduction of the metric system of measurement. These French reforms became a model for many other developing states.



Bonaparte Crossing the Alps, Jacques-Louis David

In view of all this, it might not be too extreme to say that Napoleon by his actions created the circumstances under which the very way European people understood themselves changed, so that the life expectations, goals and challenges of many of the more socially active members of society became quite different after Napoleon from what they had been before him. It seems that when Nietzsche talks of great artists, creators and commanders, it is people like Napoleon whom he has particularly in mind: people who, through their activity contribute to the creation, not of art objects, but of new kinds of people!

Nietzsche's point here is that Napoleon by his actions opened up a whole new world of challenges which in turn provoked other less insightful and/or self-propelled individuals into putting their shoulders to the wheel of creatively reinterpreting what it is to be human. But Nietzsche's further point is that Napoleon also brought great suffering to many through his military adventures and the political upheavals they caused. Napoleon could not have done what he did, and so could not have provoked many others to achieve what they did, if he had not been rather uncaring about suffering; his own that that of others.

(Intriguingly, although Nietzsche here uses Napoleon as the model for the *kind* of individual he particularly admires, Nietzsche elsewhere makes it clear that, in the particular case of Napoleon, he personally abhorred many of the social changes Napoleon by his actions help to spread!)

Reflection activity

What do *you* think of Nietzsche's key assumption regarding human being?

We might put Nietzsche's key assumption regarding the good life as something like:

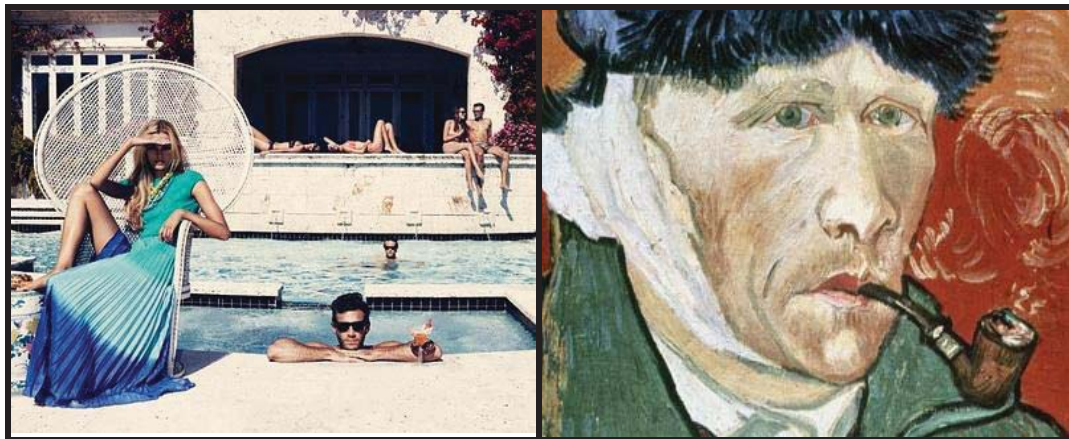
The Good Life (henceforth 'TGL') involves creative striving to overcome resistances and setbacks ('Higher Happiness').

In this activity you will probe out your own attitude to this proposition.

Firstly, have a think about the times in your life that you feel have been real high points; your life's most valuable moments. What did these moments involve? How would you describe the way you felt at these times—is the term 'happy' sufficient? Were they times when you were cheerful, comfortable and pain free? Or was there more to it than that? Would these times fit Nietzsche's evocation of moments in which you required great strength and creative insight to overcome seemingly impossible hurdles to achieve something? (If you have not experienced moments like this in your life so far, perhaps you can imagine a moment like this and compare it to the points in your life you would describe as your best).

Which would you be inclined to think was the more desirable or complete life: a life of comfort and indulgence or a life of creative achievement despite considerable obstacles and discomfort? Why? What is the basis of your reasoning here? Can you think of interesting examples of each kind of life and compare them?

In your journal, write down your ideas and reasons under the title: **'Is comfort and self-indulgence or creative striving to overcome difficulties the best indicator of a good life?'**



Which of these most closely resembles *your* notion of the good life?

Once you have put some thought into this matter, firmed up your views and your reasons for them, document your position by writing 4-5 paragraphs on the results of your deliberations. The title for your piece should read **'Why I [do/do not] agree with Nietzsche's contention that a life of creative achievement born of striving to overcome resistances and setbacks is the best life.'**

Morality and Genealogy

In the set text notes for Philosophy Unit 4 Nietzsche is not so much arguing for the fundamental view of human nature we have attributed to him in the foregoing. As we said, this view is a very deep assumption with Nietzsche, something he barely even feels the need to state. Rather, in these notes Nietzsche is out to combat the chief *dangers* he sees to his conception of the good life. As we saw in reading note 225, Nietzsche there attacks the view (and the supporters of the view) that suffering is always a bad thing. He does this because on his view the good life **requires** suffering as a spur to creative achievement. The thought that suffering is a bad thing lies very deep in our modern culture. Before we move on to explore Nietzsche's positive view of suffering in greater detail, we pause now to consider a key strategy Nietzsche employs to cast suspicion on our attachment to the view that, whatever else a good life might involve, it is of paramount importance to avoid causing suffering.

In 1859 a momentous event occurred for human self-understanding. That year Charles Darwin published his *Origin of the Species*, the work that would gradually convince the world that all biological diversity is the result of slow processes of mutation and selection operating amongst the individual members of each species over very long periods of time. Darwin's work arose from and gave further encouragement to a growing tendency amongst thinkers to view present circumstances as the result of long-extended historical processes.

Nietzsche, in what he called his **genealogies**, applied this style of thinking to our **moral evaluations**. Consider, for instance, the tendency to put a high value on motives to action that show concern for the feelings of others: we tend to congratulate people who take great care to consider the consequences their actions will have for the other people around them—we say that being considerate, considering the feelings of others in this way, is *a good thing*, or even *the right thing* to do.

We might call motives for action based on immediate consideration for others **compassionate motives**. The very high value we put on compassionate motives had hitherto been seen as either an inherent part of the universal human character or, perhaps, as a valuable moral truth that humanity had been taught at some point by an historical figure (by Christ or the Buddha for instance). By contrast, Nietzsche wrote pieces in which he attempted to show how the tendency to put a very high value on compassionate motives might have come about as the result of a long drawn-out **power struggle**, over many generations, in which two quite different **types** of human individual battled for social precedence.

We need to take care to distinguish Nietzsche's genealogical investigations in this vein from the work of social Darwinist thinkers. Social Darwinists are also concerned to show that present social norms and behaviours have come about as a result of extended past processes. But, where Social Darwinists look at human behaviour from the long perspective in order to show how certain behaviours (such as aggression perhaps) are genetically hard-wired in us as a result of the history of the human species and so are in a sense unavoidable, Nietzsche's genealogies are presented in order to show that various of our habitual (moral) evaluations—that particular types of thought or behaviour are necessarily good and others are necessarily bad, for instance—are not nearly as necessary or as obviously true as we might have thought. Nietzsche's genealogies are intended to show that many of our current moral evaluations are no more than the rather random outcome of past social struggles. That is, Nietzsche presents his genealogical investigations, not in order to show the *limits* on human behaviour, but in order to open up the range of moral possibilities: to show that our options for how we might evaluate our actions are *more numerous* than we might previously have imagined.

Reflection activity

Time now to have a think about the sources of *your own* moral evaluations!

Spend some time now reflecting on your own evaluations of people's actions. Suppose you see someone knock someone else over in the street. When you come to make an evaluation of the action (as good or bad; right or wrong), does it make any difference to you whether or not the first person actually *meant* to knock the other person over? Or, if it is a genuine accident, whether they feel *regretful* for doing it afterwards?

Why? Is there a general rule you are applying here? Can you state it?

How did *you* acquire this general rule? Where did it come from originally do you think?

How convinced are you that this general rule is one all other people should employ too?

Why?

For a bit of stimulus on the topic, you might like to have a watch of the film clip for The Verve's (rather Romantic!) 1997 *Bitter Sweet Symphony* available through the following link:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lyu1KKwC74>

If you saw someone behaving as the protagonist in the clip does, what would be your evaluation of their actions? Why? Where does your tendency to think this way come from?

Write down your thoughts on the topic in your journal under the title: '**Why do we admire people who take special care not to cause discomfort to others?**'

Firstly, write a few paragraphs (4-5) stating your thesis on *how* our common tendency to admire people who take care not to cause discomfort to others came about; then, secondly, state whether you think this origin for the tendency supplies us with any strong reasons for thinking that the high evaluation we tend to give to this sort of behaviour is at all warranted. That is, does the ultimate historical **source** of the evaluative tendency give us any sound **reasons** for thinking the evaluations are **correct** or **incorrect**?

The Genealogy of Morals: Nietzsche's attempt to discredit the high value we put on compassionate motives.

The fundamental assumption we attributed to Nietzsche above hints towards the likely reasons he had for disapproving of the modern tendency to elevate egalitarian, compassionate motives above all others. We shall be looking into the explicit arguments by which he might derive his antipathy here from his fundamental assumption later on. (It is probably worth pointing out that Nietzsche is *not* saying that compassion in all its forms is wrong, he is just saying that it is given a dangerously high, universal value in modern moral schemes.) Nietzsche was well aware that the inclination to try and treat everyone equally (to be 'fair' as we say these days), and to strongly approve of motives that are based on a commitment to minimise the sufferings of others, runs very deep with modern humanity. He realised that it would take much more than mere logical deductions to get people to change their evaluations in this regard! One of the more famous moves in his campaign against this modern tendency is presented in some detail in Book One of his *Zur Genealogie der Moral (On the Genealogy of Morals)*.

In note 260 from the course readings Nietzsche gives a brief summary of the line of thought he had presented in this previous book. At note 260 Nietzsche attempts to unhook our attachment to universal compassion by asserting that it is nothing more than the historical product of a victory in which a group of people Nietzsche presents as contemptible (the 'slaves') came to dominate the common culture they shared with another group of people he presents as more admirable (the 'masters').

Read through note 260 now

Reflection activity

Let's look closely at what Nietzsche is saying here about the **evaluative stances** of each of these two types of person, the Master type and the Slave type.

Read over note 260 from *Beyond Good and Evil* again now, this time keeping a close eye out for the opposing pairs of values and evaluative stances that Nietzsche attributes to the Master types and the Slave types of history. The table below has two columns, one for the values and evaluative stances of the Master types and one for the corresponding values and evaluative stances of the Slave types. Make a copy of the table and, as a result of your reading of note 260, try to complete each row by filling in the blank spaces with values or evaluative stances that seem to be the opposite of or to be a reaction to the stance already filled in for the other type of person. (The first two rows have been completed as examples and there are a couple of empty rows at the end for you to put in any *other* interesting pairs of opposed values you come across in the reading).

Aristocratic (Master) Values	Resentful (Slave) Values
Good (= us) / despicable = them	Evil (= them) / good = us
Conscious creator of values	Cringing adopter of values
Based on feelings of power and plenitude	
	The evil are the fearsome
Delight in challenging (being 'severe' with) oneself	
	Morals based on negating those of the masters
We are the honest ones	
	Sense of duty to all sufferers
'Be true to yourself'	
	'Take care the consequences of your actions do not cause suffering'

If we attempt to summarise the upshot of note 260, we might say that in this note Nietzsche is arguing that we should not trust moral systems based on unconditional compassion because such systems have a disreputable past—they arose amongst a miserably degraded group of people. Put like this, the argument is not valid but we can make it so by adding an extra premise which Nietzsche might plausibly be taken to be assuming. The required premise runs something like: *Any moral tendency that has its source amongst a degraded group of people is not to be trusted*. If we write out the argument in standard form now, augmented with this enthymematic premise, we get something like the argument below:

The tendency to base moral evaluations on the imperative to minimise suffering originally arose among a degraded group of people.

[Any moral tendency that has its source among a degraded group of people is not to be trusted.]

∴ The tendency to base moral evaluations on the imperative to minimise suffering is not to be trusted.

When we put it like this we can see clearly how the ideas Nietzsche presents here raise two important questions, relating to the likely truth (or *plausibility*) of each premise above:

- 1) How plausible is Nietzsche's genealogy?
- 2) Even if Nietzsche's historical account is true, to what extent does that discredit the modern tendency to put a high value on compassion?

Reflection activity

Write a short evaluative piece (200-300 words) based on the analysis of the argument from note 260 given above in standard form. Your piece should be based on your reflections on the extent to which Nietzsche's genealogy here has managed to discredit moralities of universal compassion in your eyes.

Has Nietzsche's genealogy managed to convince you that our modern tendency to universal compassion is indeed questionable? Are you now any less certain of the unconditional importance of reducing suffering? Why? Or why not?

Your *reasons* for finding, or not finding, Nietzsche's argument here to be convincing will need to refer to your evaluation of the plausibility of each of the premises to the argument as given above.

Are you inclined to believe Nietzsche's historical account of the rise of compassionate moral schemes?

However you feel about the plausibility of his historical account, do you feel in any case that an historical account such as this has any bearing on the moral stance we should take today?

Consider the following thought experiment: suppose someone managed to show convincingly that our strong moral preference for honesty was the result of an extremely unattractive and disreputable group of people (who happened to admire honesty) getting the cultural upper hand at some point in the last millennium. Would the news tend to make you any less convinced of the present value of honest behaviour?

What are the consequences of Nietzsche's view of The Good Life?

So far, after a brief introduction to the life and times of the 19th Century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche we have looked into two of the texts by him that are prescribed reading for Unit 4 Philosophy this year: notes 225 and 199 from *Beyond Good and Evil*. Our chief goal in reading the notes was to see if we could spot Nietzsche's fundamental assumption concerning the good life for human beings. We argued that Nietzsche throughout his writings assumed, though seldom if ever explicitly stated, that **the best life** for a human being is **one spent in creative achievement born of striving to overcome resistances and setbacks**.

We then turned to consider note 260 in order to analyse and evaluate a key argument implicit to it. On the interpretation given here, that argument is given by Nietzsche in order to undermine the dominant contemporary conviction that egalitarian, compassionate motives must play a central role in any plausible moral scheme.

Nietzsche's fundamental assumption regarding the good life for a human being is just visible, lurking in the background as it were, in the set texts we shall consider now. However it does not take centre stage in any because in these texts, as with note 260, Nietzsche is generally not so much concerned to present and argue for his fundamental assumption, rather he is out to show that certain modern tendencies in moral and political thought—namely, an emphasis on compassion as the ultimate basis of morality and the movement towards egalitarian or democratic values in the political sphere—cannot supply the cultural and moral preconditions required for people to lead the good life as he understands it to be. As you read through these texts, keep an eye out for Nietzsche's frequent use of words like 'degeneration', 'decay' and 'diminishment.' These occur regularly because Nietzsche's key theme here is the likely failure of the human project—the loss of the possibility of leading the good life of creative striving—if moralities of universal compassion and egalitarian or democratic political values become universally accepted.

Let's begin our reading by looking again at notes 225 and 199, this time to see if, in amongst the rhetorical flourishes and pungent imagery, we can spot the implicit **arguments** Nietzsche is giving for his repeated claims that moralities of universal compassion and political systems based on egalitarian or democratic values are antithetical to our leading the good life.

We shall read through note 199 again now

It is extraordinarily hard to pull arguments out of Nietzsche's texts! As we noted above, a further Romantic aspect of Nietzsche's work can be seen in his repudiation of systematic argumentation in favour of expressive flourishes that are (artistically) designed to promote moments of insight. However I think we can find, just beneath the surface of this text as it were, an argument along the following lines.

The argument is a chain argument in two parts. The first sub argument takes Nietzsche's fundamental assumption that the good life involves creative achievement born of striving to overcome resistances and setbacks as its first premise and combines this with a second premise, which Nietzsche derives from a kind of speculative survey of human history, to the effect that most people (the 'herd-men') are followers, not commanders, so incapable of putting themselves to great creative tasks. From these two Nietzsche concludes that the good life for most of humanity requires that they be challenged by *someone else*, a great individual or 'unconditional commander'.

The following sub argument takes the conclusion of the argument above as its first premise and combines this with a new premise based on the reflection that egalitarian or democratic

political systems by their nature tend to level-out humanity and so to dissuade exceptional people from making themselves too obvious, indeed egalitarian or democratic values tend to operate so as to make truly exceptional people feel *guilty* about their extraordinary nature (Nietzsche's version of the *tall poppy syndrome*). From this reflection Nietzsche derives a second premise that egalitarian or democratic values act to prevent exceptional people from realising their potential as unconditional (cultural) commanders. From the two premises together Nietzsche concludes that egalitarian or democratic values are thus antithetical to the good life: they work to prevent the great from realising their potential and so deprive the rest of us of the challenges we require in order to realise the best life we could lead. Egalitarian or democratic values on Nietzsche's account, threaten to lead humankind into a degenerative spiral.

Perhaps our evaluation of the argument will be facilitated by putting it into standard form as follows:

Note 199: an argument against modern egalitarian or democratic values

- (1) *The good life for humanity (henceforth TGL) involves creative achievement born of striving to overcome resistances and setbacks ('Higher Happiness').*
- (2) *The majority of humanity require someone else—a great individual (an 'unconditional commander')—to challenge them by creating new sources of resistance and setbacks.*

∴ TGL for the majority of humanity requires the challenges posed by great individuals.

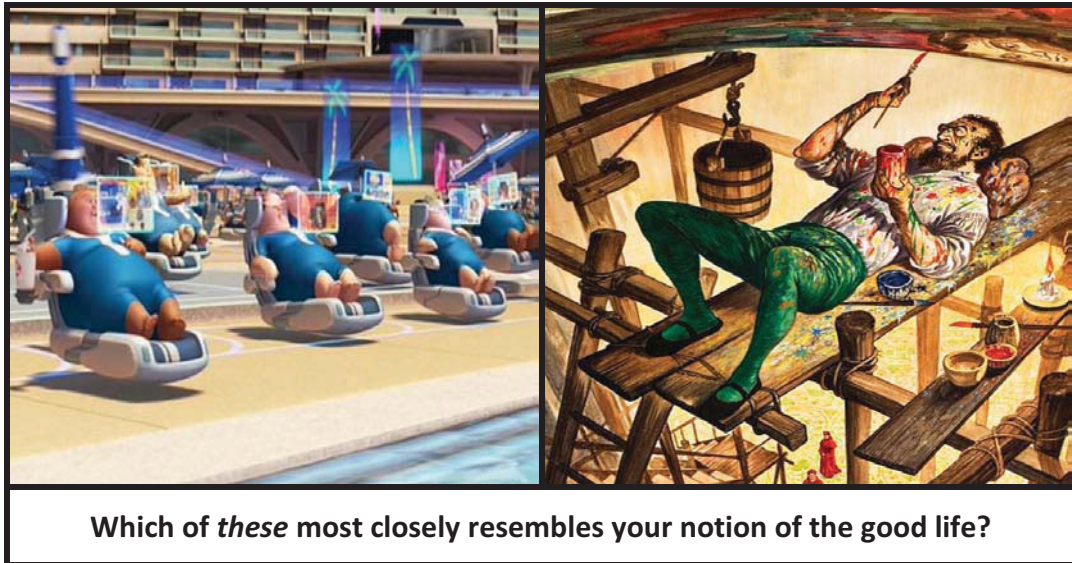
- TGL for the majority of humanity requires the challenges posed by great individuals.*
- (3) *Egalitarian or democratic values tend to prevent the appearance and limit the effect of great individuals (because they tend to level out humanity and to support the Status Quo—i.e. to promote avoidance of profound change.)*

∴ Egalitarian or democratic values are antithetical to our living TGL.

Let's look closely at this argument. Both sub arguments appear valid: if the premises are true then the conclusions would seem to follow of necessity. So the evaluative question becomes one of assessing the *plausibility* of the premises.

Premise (1) is Nietzsche's fundamental assumption regarding the good life. In the second journal writing activity above you tested this premise against your own experience of the world. What did you decide there? Of course, if we do not buy Nietzsche's fundamental assumption regarding the good life, the whole argument is sunk. But the thought of a humanity of sybaritic blobs (think of the humans in the movie *Wall-E*) is pretty disgusting isn't it? So maybe we might allow that at least *some* degree of challenge and striving to overcome hindrances is a desirable part of the good life for a human being.

As mentioned above, in note 199 Nietzsche purports to derive premise (2) from a (somewhat social Darwinist) survey of human history, but we can also see it as a kind of shadow of the Romantic view of the role of the Genius in human affairs. It is a premise that makes a very broad claim about the world which would be rather hard to definitively test. Does it seem plausible to you?



Which of *these* most closely resembles your notion of the good life?

The third premise, (3), is an intriguing claim isn't it? What do you think about the 'tall poppy syndrome'? Is it true? In an egalitarian or democratic society are the (threateningly) exceptional forced to hide or muffle their abilities do you think? Why is so much of our modern day talk of excellence restricted to areas of achievement that are relatively safe and unproblematical for the rest of us, such as excellence in sporting achievement, cookery or some species of secular sainthood—selflessly helping others in some way? (Think of the usual winners of the Australian of the Year award.) Are we scared of people of exceptional talent? Do we hobble them by forcing them to submit to the expectations and social mores appropriate to the rest of us? Are the truly exceptional (or eccentric) restricted and to an extent neutralized by modern social arrangements and values? These are some of the intriguing questions Nietzsche puts to us here.

Reflection activity

For each of the premises—(1), (2) & (3)—of the argument in standard form above:

- a) Give one **objection** to the premise. (The strongest objection to it you can think of!) Don't forget to clearly state your **reasons** for objecting that the premise is false.
- b) Give a possible **reply** a Nietzschean might make to the objection. That is, give a response someone who supported the premise might make in an attempt to show that your objection in (a) does **not** succeed in showing the premise to be false.
- c) Make a decision on the likely **truth** or **falsity** of each premise on the basis of your reflections *contra* and *pro*.

Once you have reviewed the plausibility of each of the three free premises to the chain argument above make a *summary evaluation* of Nietzsche's argument here regarding egalitarian or democratic values. Do you find it convincing or unconvincing? Why?

Write your ideas here into a journal entry titled 'Nietzsche's implicit argument against egalitarian or democratic values.'

We shall read through note 225 again now

Once again the outward form of this note seems to be more of a flamboyant diatribe than a reasoned discussion. But here too, if we look just below the surface of the note as it were, I think we can discern the rough outline of an argument. As is announced in the first lines, the target of the argument here is not modern egalitarian or democratic values but rather modern moral systems that base themselves on an unconditional concern to prevent or diminish suffering. *Hedonism* covers any view that sees the goal of life as the maximisation of pleasure (and minimisation of pain); *pessimism* refers to Schopenhauer's twist on hedonism that, since in this world the pursuit of pleasure can only increase suffering, the repudiation of all desire should be the goal of humanity; as we saw in weeks 6 & 7 *utilitarianism* covers any view which holds that the right thing to do in any situation is the action which leads to the greatest happiness (and least pain) for the greatest number; while from weeks 3 & 4 we know that *eudaemonism* refers to Aristotle's view that the purpose of human life is 'well-being' in the sense of personal fulfilment and flourishing achieved through meaningful, communal, self-affirming activity.

Again Nietzsche's argument against all these views can be analysed as a chain argument involving a pair of sub arguments. I give these in standard form below. See if you can spot each move of the argument as you read through the text!

Note 225: an argument against basing morality on an unconditional concern to prevent or diminish suffering (*contra* modern morality)

- (1) TGL involves creative achievement born of striving to overcome resistances and setbacks.
- (4) Overcoming resistances and setbacks requires cultivating a certain indifference to suffering (our own and that of others).

∴ TGL involves cultivating a certain indifference to suffering.

- (5) Modern moralities based on unconditional compassion (e.g. Utilitarianism) put great emphasis on avoiding and palliating suffering.
- TGL involves cultivating a certain indifference to suffering.

∴ Modern moralities of compassion are antithetical to our living TGL.

Again here, both sub arguments appear valid—if the premises are true it is hard to imagine situations in which the conclusions will not be true too. So, again, our evaluation of the soundness of the argument as a whole will turn on our assessment of the plausibility of the premises.

Premise (4) is an intriguing one isn't it? To what extent do you think that all striving to achieve something involves a certain willingness to undergo (and, perhaps also, to cause) suffering? The philosophical commentator Alain de Botton produced an episode of his TV series *Philosophy: A Guide to Happiness*, 'Nietzsche on Hardship,' in which he explored the truth of the claim that all great achievements require a willingness to undergo suffering. The episode is available on YouTube at the following address

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=280Ev9h_C3c.

I strongly urge you to watch the video if you can find the time.

Premise (5) seems hard to deny; consider the approach to suffering promoted by Singer in the readings for weeks 6 & 7. From premises most of us would be inclined to accept, Singer reached the conclusion that ‘we ought to be preventing as much suffering as we can without sacrificing something else of comparable moral importance’ where he suggested that this conclusion might even lead us to feel the obligation that ‘everyone [in comfortable] circumstances ought to give as much as possible [to charity], that is, at least up to the point at which by giving more one would begin to cause serious suffering for oneself and one’s dependents’. Singer’s moral focus on suffering and his investigation concerning how it might be reduced seem quite natural and unsurprising to us. This certainly suggests that an extreme sensitivity to suffering, and a strong urge to prevent it if at all possible, are very much part of the modern Western mindset.

Notice that in note 225, Nietzsche does *not* deny that a certain amount of compassion is desirable, he is merely against *unconditional* compassion—the urge to prevent and palliate suffering wherever it may be, at (almost) any cost. Note that in place of such universal compassion, Nietzsche urges compassion (*‘pity’*) not for everyone, but for the extraordinary people whose potential may be squandered if a morality of unconditional compassion comes to prevail. (This is the meaning of Nietzsche’s exhortation to employ ‘pity against pity’ towards the end of the note).

Nor does Nietzsche deny that the legitimacy of universal compassion is very hard for us moderns to deny. As mentioned above and as we shall explore in greater detail in the following section, Nietzsche worked up his genealogies of morality in an attempt to undermine the strength of our attachment to compassionate motives.

Reflection activity

For each of premises (4) & (5) in the argument in standard form above:

- a)** Give one **objection** to the premise. (The strongest objection to it you can think of!) Don’t forget to clearly state your **reasons** for objecting that the premise is false.
- b)** Give a possible **reply** a Nietzschean might make to the objection. That is, give a response someone who supported the premise might make in an attempt to show that your objection in (a) does **not** succeed in showing the premise to be false.
- c)** Make a decision on the likely **truth** or **falsity** of each premise on the basis of your reflections *contra* and *pro*.

Once you have reviewed the plausibility of the free premises to the argument (including of course your review of premise (1) from your evaluation of the previous argument above), make a *summary evaluation* of Nietzsche’s argument here against moralities based on unconditional compassion. Does it convince you? Why/why not?

Write your ideas here into a journal entry titled ‘**Nietzsche’s implicit argument against moralities of universal compassion.**’

Nietzsche's positive agenda: *the revaluation of all values*

It is time now to look at the remaining notes from *Beyond Good and Evil* specified in the Unit 4 study design: notes 201, 203, 228, and 284. In these pieces we see Nietzsche making a shift from the predominantly critical stance of the notes we have considered so far, to a more future-directed stance in which he begins to gesture towards his own recommendations for how we might come to inhabit a suitably invigorating, artistically based mode of human being.

In note 201 Nietzsche embroiders on themes we have come across already: older, masterly, warrior-aristocrat moralities were based on an approach to life in which one behaved in a way that was true to oneself and expressed one's individual character and nobility; by contrast more recent, slavish moralities urge us to take great care to consider the consequences of our actions for others, not out of nobility, but out of a sense of pitying dismay: '*there but for the grace of God go I*'. Moralities of compassion are based on an ignoble desire to allay the **fear** that someday you too may come to share the fate that has befallen those less fortunate than you.

In note 203 Nietzsche introduces his own vision with an exhortation to himself and his readers ('you free spirits') to begin preparing the way for an entirely different kind of person ('*new philosophers*', 'men of the future'), who will have a quite different understanding of themselves and their moral responsibilities. (Note that Nietzsche is not suggesting we should just go back to the Master morality of old—he is exhorting his readers begin preparing the way for some entirely *new*, and at this point very uncertain, way of being human.) Nietzsche gives the task of preparation the title '**the revaluation of all values**' and suggests that the road to revaluation might also be based on a fear, but in this case the fear is not of sharing the fate of your neighbour, but fear of the possible future degeneration of human kind ('man').



Nietzsche's sister, Elizabeth, welcomes Adolf Hitler to the Nietzsche Archives in the early 1930's

would be to constrain rather than to free-up the 'unconditional commanders' he hopes to empower. Nevertheless we might wonder what the consequences of Nietzsche's ideas here might be: how might someone who took his views to heart behave?

The renowned British philosopher Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy*, stated at the end of his chapter on Nietzsche (page 800):

I dislike Nietzsche because he likes the contemplation of pain, because he erects conceit into a duty, because the men whom he most admires are conquerors, whose glory is cleverness in causing men to die. But I think the ultimate argument against his

This is quite a frightening note isn't it? Especially when we read the zealous world-altering style against the anti-democratic, pro-suffering stance Nietzsche establishes in the other notes. There is something decidedly worrying about his rhetoric—the high-spirited exhortations to bring about comprehensive change, without any rational analysis of the details and the consequences of such change, can strike us as unfocused and overblown. It is worth noting however that in this lack of detail and analysis Nietzsche remains entirely consistent with his other views: to worry over-much about consequences would be to fall prey to the (broadly) utilitarian moralities he detests; to give detailed rational analyses

philosophy, as against any unpleasant but internally self-consistent ethic, lies not in an appeal to facts, but in an appeal to the emotions. Nietzsche despises universal love [compassion]; I feel it the motive power to all that I desire as regards the world. His followers have had their innings, but we may hope that it is coming rapidly to an end.

Russell's reference to Nietzsche's 'followers' here is to the Nazis and Fascists in Germany and Italy respectively who were finally being defeated as Russell was writing his *History* and who had indeed interpreted Nietzsche as a chief prophet of their calamitous visions.

While it is widely acknowledged that the Nazi and Fascist interpretations of Nietzsche ignore the subtleties of his writings and so do him grave injustice, we can see in notes such as 203, the aspects of Nietzsche's thought and the sometimes extravagant style of his presentation, which made it possible for thinkers from the far right to claim him as one of their own.

A more generous reading of Nietzsche than that of Russell (or of the far right) might begin by highlighting the extent to which, for all his belligerent posturing, Nietzsche is not really a political thinker at all: his aims are far more personal and cultural. In this vein we might take Nietzsche's railings against compassion and egalitarian or democratic values not as intended to rouse humanity to overthrow democratic institutions and to pursue social policies that ignore, or even heighten, the sufferings of the masses, but rather as strategic warnings directed to only a very *select* group of individuals. Nietzsche is warning *some* of us (not all) that we should not allow the increasing democratisation of society to lull us into a state of complaisant ease, and that we must not to let concern to alleviate the current sufferings of others distract us from the importance of striving to improve ourselves and our way of thinking of the world for the benefit not so much of present, but of future generations. Nietzsche is urging us to think of ourselves as extra-ordinary and to push ourselves to achieve, not by anyone else's standards, but in accord with standards that are authentically our own.



The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog
Caspar David Friedrich, 1818

This more personal, and I suggest, more acceptable reading of Nietzsche is borne out in the remaining two notes from the prescribed list: **228** and **284**. Note **228** begins with Nietzsche writing in his amusingly scurrilous mode: poking fun again at the English utilitarian moral philosophers, this time not for their relatively indiscriminate imperative to minimise suffering but rather for the pettiness of their obverse goal of maximising pleasure. The note becomes deeper towards the end, when Nietzsche moves on to hounding the Utilitarians, not for their goals *per se*, but for the *universality* they claimed for them. Nietzsche puts forward the new idea here that the demand for 'one morality for all' is misguided. With this he introduces the possibility that Utilitarianism could *really be* the most satisfactory morality for the herd, those with a slave mentality—for whom he says it is best not to think too much about morality in any case—since these people seek no more than comfort and respite from their struggles.

But Nietzsche makes it clear here from the confidential way he addresses the reader that he is *not* writing for such people, he writes only for those who might be, or might at least be willing to try and be, ‘higher’ types. As we have seen, Nietzsche argues that for such people a sterner more demanding morality is required. (We can get an idea of the kind of character Nietzsche envisions such individuals as having by taking the *opposite* qualities and values to those he attributes to the Utilitarians in the final, mocking poem: if Nietzsche is *not* speaking to plodding, tedious, pedantic, humourless, commonplace, spiritless, non-geniuses, then presumably he addresses the light footed, engaging, reckless, laughing, extraordinary, spirited geniuses amongst his readership—hardly a set of descriptors anyone, even his mother, would ever have been inclined to apply to Hitler!)

Where in note **228** Nietzsche introduces his notion that his vision of the good life may include a *plurality* of moralities, corresponding to different types of human individual, in note **284** the very *private*, individualised nature of the vision of the good life Nietzsche has been promoting in the notes thus far is made clear. Far from urging his readers to go out into the world and pursue a political career aimed at removing compassionate morality from the face of the Earth and instituting a new era of aristocratic rule, in this note Nietzsche admonishes his readers to pursue solitude and a degree of alienation from public life. (Compare with Aristotle!) Note that Nietzsche here also, seemingly paradoxically, includes ‘sympathy’ as one of his four cardinal virtues. But, having read note 225, this should not surprise us; we see here a first move in the *revaluation of values*. ‘Sympathy’ now no longer means the undiscerning compassion the impotently suffering extend to all those worse off than themselves, it means the new sympathy (the ‘pity against pity’) that the self-defining individual has for those, particularly those of the future, who are also capable of defining themselves and of giving themselves great and difficult tasks, but whose potential may be wasted if they do not somehow find a way to keep themselves aloof from the petty fears and the idle pleasures of the many.

If we cleave to this sense that in his writings Nietzsche is *not* promoting a grand plan for the wholesale rejuvenation of the world political order, but is rather making a very personal appeal to the individual reader, and so take it that what Nietzsche is suggesting is that the good life for *human beings such as himself* requires first and foremost a certain way of thinking about oneself—as extraordinary and as a work-in-progress, who may need to suffer and to cause suffering in order to achieve—then I suggest that many of the seemingly tasteless and affronting aspects of his thought become more palatable. Perhaps Nietzsche is not urging us to put pity to one side as we impose our will upon whomever we cross, he is simply urging us not to rest content with a life of comfort and self-satisfaction. We must strive, and in striving risk doing injury to ourselves and to others, in order to live not a pleasant or a happy life, but a truly noble and magnificent one.

Reflection activity

Nietzsche’s exhortation to solitude and wariness of others, which we encountered in the last note, note 284, seems quite opposed to Aristotle’s view of the good life as requiring friends and community. And, where Aristotle based his reasoning on the assumption that humans had a fixed purpose or *telos*, Nietzsche’s view of the human good, as continual striving to create in the face of adversity, seems less about striving to achieve any one particular, predetermined goal, more about striving for its own sake (a way of being Nietzsche, in his last works, came, somewhat ill-advisedly, to refer to as *Will to Power*). Note too that, where Aristotle urges us to lead lives of moderation and balance, Nietzsche envisages a life of creative excess, congruent

with his vision of the world itself as excessive and endlessly creative; a view, as we saw, he inherited from the Romantics.

Perhaps though, when all is said and done, Nietzsche's view of human existence is not so very different from the view put forward by Socrates, with which we began! Nietzsche too is urging us to be severe with ourselves and to dedicate our lives to the pursuit of an ideal. The big difference being that, where Socrates purports to *discover* his ideal through reason, Nietzsche says the very best pursue (and knowingly pursue) an ideal that is entirely of their own making—avowedly their own creation.

An important new philosophical skill you are expected to acquire over the course of Unit 4 is the ability to *compare* positions on a topic. Why not take time now to formulate your ideas concerning the relative strengths and weaknesses of Nietzsche's view of the good life, compared to those of Socrates, Aristotle and Singer?

When you have developed some well-considered opinions on the matter, together with some reflectively evaluated reasons for them, write your thoughts in your journal under the title **'Comparing Nietzsche's Position on the good life.'**