

Nietzsche's Society

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Abstract: This essay asserts that Nietzsche proposes an important role for society within his ethics, and that this societal aspect has been greatly overlooked by Nietzsche scholars. By identifying a soul-state analogy and resemblance to virtue ethics, this essay contends that Nietzsche intends for societies and individuals to be seen as complementary parts of the will to power. Like Aristotle, Nietzsche prescribes an ideal society essential to greatness. By recognizing the importance of the role of society in Nietzsche's philosophy, Nietzsche scholarship is better positioned to consider new applications of his philosophical principles with his goals in mind.

A comprehensive approach to exploring Nietzsche's reoccurring consideration of society's value reveals that his ethics are meant to resemble a kind of virtue ethics and incorporate an Aristotelian soul-state analogy. The character and virtues Nietzsche identifies in individuals are inseparable and isomorphic to the societies' values, even though he often discusses the merits and faults of individuals and societies separately. A critical implication of this reading is that within Nietzsche's ethics, to strive for greatness, one must desire to create an ideal society. This supposition explains Nietzsche's preoccupation with evaluating societies and also suggests an aspiration of his philosophy: a better society. Thus, appreciating the full significance and role of society in Nietzsche's philosophy is necessary of Nietzsche scholarship if one is to correctly understand Nietzsche's values or carry on his philosophical tradition.

Throughout his works, Nietzsche is preoccupied with the question: what kinds of societies are valuable? Implicit in this question, Nietzsche makes two obvious claims. First, society has a role that is valuable. Second, there exists a method for determining value. In Nietzsche scholarship, explication of this second claim often overshadows the significance of the first.¹ Often, scholars approach the issue of society's value in Nietzsche's work by inferring from what they have already deconstructed; they first identify Nietzsche's ethics and then apply their own step-by-step methodology to determine the significance of the role of society. This approach results in shortsightedness. The persistence with which Nietzsche evaluates societies and the significance of this evaluation are lost unless the role of society is examined alongside his values.

The role of society has been overlooked due to several factors. The most overarching aspect is a failure to identify Nietzsche's soul-state analogy. Without realizing the connection between individuals' virtues and societies' virtues, Nietzsche's evaluation of society appears to be far less pervasive and one cannot see Nietzsche's objective change from assessing cultures to prescribing

¹ I have in mind here works by John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) and Brian Leiter in *Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2002).



an ideal society. However, the role of the state in Nietzsche's middle and later period writings is easily missed. A surface reading of these works without consideration of his other works as a whole might suggest that Nietzsche is solely concerned with individuals. In fact, some passages from his notebooks seem to support the misconception that Nietzsche values individuals over society.² Moreover, wading through any of Nietzsche's deliberately provocative aphorisms posits difficulty. There are times when Nietzsche seems at best cryptic and at worst to contradict himself. This confusion is compounded further by Nietzsche's attempts to deter his readers from deconstructing his philosophy; he suggests that it would denigrate its essence. He does not want his project systematized, which is why he does not explain the soul-state analogy outright. However, he is writing to be understood by those who are able to appreciate the entire corpus of his work.

In his late notebooks, Nietzsche clearly questions the shape future societies should take. In this context, his favored term for society is culture (*Kultur*). One such passage states that "the Germans . . . have no culture yet" but are "becoming," that this is "a wish on which one can live, a matter of will," and that he and Germany "desire something more" from the German culture.³ Writing either shortly before or after the first German unification, Nietzsche is here describing a Germany that is essentially a new revolutionary society.⁴ Nietzsche is excited to see a German culture that is growing, overcoming obstacles, and demanding more. Though much of Nietzsche's other published works express disappointment in German culture, his desire to prescribe a future ideal culture (in this case, for Germany) should not be dismissed as part of the mad ranting or fascist inlays that discredit the notebooks. It can also be found less explicitly stated in his earliest works. Beginning in his early writings, including *The Birth of Tragedy*, he aims to show how the culture of antiquity is superior to that of nineteenth-century Europe and summons Germany to embody the lost magnificence of Greek culture and thereby create a better society.⁵

Over time, Nietzsche's works convey his loss in confidence in modern society. However, he never loses admiration for antiquity, nor does he stop imagining a theoretical ideal society. Nietzsche's discussion of great societies evolves in his mature works from identifying examples of great societies to explaining the nature of great societies. He accomplishes this by imitating Greek culture, setting up his own soul-state analogy, which is

² Joe Ward, "Nietzsche's Value Conflict: Culture, Individual, Synthesis," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 41 (2011): endnote 3. Ward notes KSA 11:27[16], 12:5[108] on the value of the individual.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, (New York: Random House, 1968), 108.

⁴ This passage could have been written between 1870 and 1890. The German unification officially occurred January 1871.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

first established in Plato's *Republic*.⁶ In this analogy, Plato determines that a great society is a just society, and a state is just only if each of its parts—the money-making class, the helper, and the guardians—is engaged in that which corresponds to its nature, while working with others in mutual harmony.⁷ According to Plato, man is by nature a political animal, while the state is the natural order where man is to be political. This constitutes what is known as Aristotle's political naturalism.⁸ Unlike Plato, Nietzsche does not value the great society for political reasons. According to Nietzsche, "all great cultural epochs are epochs of political decline: that which is great in the cultural sense has been unpolitical, even anti-political."⁹ Nietzsche is not interested in the government of the societies he evaluates. Rather, he is interested in their values, traditions, and how their structure or government is a part of the larger culture.

Nietzsche's soul-state analogy is not Plato's, but rather the interpretation by Aristotle who claims that the happiness and virtue of the state are the same as the happiness and virtue of the soul.¹⁰ The difference between Plato's and Aristotle's analogies is that Aristotle's interpretation suggests the state and the soul share a nature that is not solely political but is the measure of every ethical decision. This seems to be true for Nietzsche, who considers some kinds of societies good because they reflect the highest state of being: "Society must not exist for society's sake but only as the foundation and scaffolding on which a choice type of being is able to raise itself to its higher task and to a higher state of *being*."¹¹ This quote suggests that societies are meant to benefit individuals, but the object of society is not only the individual but "being" itself, which includes more than the individual. Richard Schacht points out that Nietzsche also urges individuals to be "higher and freer," to "look beyond" all selfish considerations, and "pursue more distant purposes even under circumstances involving the suffering of others," as well as one's own suffering, for "through such sacrifice—meaning both ours and *our* neighbors'—we would strengthen and elevate the general sense of human power," even if we might "achieve nothing more."¹² According to Schacht, great individuals act truest to their nature when they contribute to their culture,

⁶ Nietzsche appears to both idolize Socrates and blame him for the fall of Greek culture. See Daw-Nay Evans, "A Solution to The Problem of Socrates in Nietzsche's Thought: An Explanation of Nietzsche's Ambivalence Toward Socrates." (MA diss., Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2004).

⁷ Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), IV.

⁸ In Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 2 (1253 18-29) the soul-state relationship is established in the opposite direction from the animal organism to the state.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

¹⁰ In Aristotle, *Politics* VII, I, Aristotle explicitly agrees with the soul-state analogy in the very same terms as Plato states it in *Republic* IV but considers it in terms of virtue.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), 258.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 146.



which is the reason Nietzsche often talks about the higher-types as artists.¹³ Therefore, individuals are agents whose highest state of being serves the creation of a high culture and vice versa.

The state and the individual have a shared nature (or purpose, depending on the metaphysical depth one reads into the will to power). One's thriving supports the other's thriving. They are isomorphic, which is the first premise of a soul-state analogy. Plato and Nietzsche also agree that those best suited to act as rulers are characterized by a similar internal structure.¹⁴ Nietzsche's ultimate individual, the *Übermensch*, is able to unify the opposing drives he bears just as the ideal society constructed in the soul-state analogy maintains stability amongst individuals of different classes.¹⁵ Nietzsche clearly incorporates the structure of the soul-state analogy. Since he is concerned with culture, like Aristotle, he describes the nature of good in the structure of a virtue ethics: that which is good is a matter of character rather than abiding by set rules. Nietzsche constructs a kind of virtue ethics inasmuch as he does not stipulate right actions to gain power; he only identifies power as virtuous.¹⁶ At the same time, Nietzsche is certainly not the same kind of virtue ethicist as Plato or Aristotle. Bernd Magnus correctly rejects Walter Kaufman's reading of Nietzsche as an Aristotelian virtue ethicist. Aristotle's two main concepts, *eudaimonia* (happiness) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) are completely unsuitable to Nietzsche.¹⁷ Nietzsche clearly denies that happiness is the primary motivation of what is good.¹⁸ He also reproves duty and logic.¹⁹ The principle similarities between Aristotle's and Nietzsche's ethics that are important here are that they both strive for human greatness and measure an agent's quality in relation to how well it exemplifies its nature or essence.

The critical difference between Nietzsche's and Aristotle's soul-state analogies and ethics is what each believes to be the essence of life. Aristotle determines the human essence to be reason, whereas Nietzsche claims that it is the will to power. Nietzsche says:

¹³ Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 469-73.

¹⁴ In the *Republic*, the "rational part" of man must rule (441e); the philosopher alone is fit to rule the *polis* (487e).

¹⁵ It is unclear if Nietzsche believes an *Übermensch* could ever exist. It is possible that all people sometimes act highly or lowly, but only a few people are strong enough to value power.

¹⁶ Michael Slote, "Nietzsche and Virtue Ethics," *International Studies in Philosophy* 30, no. 3 (1998): 23.

¹⁷ Bernd Magnus, "Aristotle and Nietzsche: 'Megalopsychia' and 'Übermensch'," in *The Greeks and the Good Life*, ed. David J. Depew (Fullerton: California State University, 1980), 262, and Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

¹⁸ Zarathustra asks, "What matters my happiness?" and recognizes that it is nothing which could "justify existence itself." Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. A. Del Caro and R. Pippin, trans. A. Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3. Also see *The Anti-Christ*, 2.

¹⁹ Christine Daigle, "Nietzsche: Virtue Ethics . . . Virtue Politics?" *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 32 (2006): 4.

[Anything which] is a living and not a dying body . . . will have to be an incarnate will to power, it will strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant—not from any morality or immorality but because it is living and because life simply is will to power . . . ‘Exploitation’ . . . belongs to the essence of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will to life.²⁰

The will to power is not only characteristic of individuals. It permeates every aspect of human life. Raymond Geuss believes its proper scope includes both smaller and larger entities that grow and become predominant through their own struggles and desires.²¹ According to Geuss’ argument, an individual is composed of many wills: He has a will, the company he works for has a will, his society has a will, etc. Societies are just as much a part of the will to power as individuals. Since accomplishments are relative to individuals’ strengths, ethical classifications of character can only be described by the flourishing of individuals. This is why Nietzsche’s late works define the will to power in relation to the individual. These individuals are only one dimension of the will to power. Their societies are another, and they affect the individuals’ wills. Thus, the role of society is implicit in Nietzsche’s discussions of individuals.

If the relationship between society’s and individuals’ will to power (Nietzsche’s soul-state analogy) goes unrecognized, the role of society could seem important to Nietzsche only as an environment of the higher type. Some scholars, such as Brian Leiter, misread Nietzsche in this way, believing him to have abandoned the role of society to focus on the next virtuosos.²² Leiter’s reading refers to passages from Nietzsche such as, “a single human being can under certain circumstances justify the existence of whole millennia.”²³ However, his conclusion is based on an incomplete analysis of this passage. Nietzsche certainly believes that some individuals are more valuable than their corrupt society, but this does not mean they are greater than the role of society. The same passage from *Twilight of the Idols* explains that great individuals, while often exceptions in their societies, are great because they act according to their nature and contribute to the creation of a high culture. In this same passage, Goethe is called a great individual because of his “grand attempt to overcome the eighteenth century through a return to nature, through a going-up to the naturalness of the Renaissance, a kind of self-overcoming on the part

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 259.

²¹ Raymond Geuss, “Nietzsche and Genealogy,” in *Morality, Culture, and History: Essays on German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12. Cf. Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, *Nietzsche: His Philosophy of Contradictions and the Contradictions of His Philosophy*, trans. David J. Parent (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 181.

²² Brian Leiter and Neil Sinhababu, *Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2002), 73–112.

²³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 49.



of the century."²⁴ Goethe, the great individual, overcame his society, but he did not secede from it. He inspired it to overcome itself through a return to nature.

Contra Leiter, Herman Siemens supports the position that society is equally as important to Nietzsche as great individuals. He points out that Nietzsche is most easily read as having concern for humanity as a whole.²⁵ Nietzsche claims that the corrupted morality of the lower-type is centered on individuals' well-being and happiness. He and other true philosophers ("we") reject this morality and value all life: "We . . . have opened our eyes and our conscience to the question where the plant 'man' has hitherto grown up most vigorously . . . everything evil, dreadful, tyrannical, beast of prey and serpent in man serves to enhance the species 'man.'"²⁶ According to this passage, the future of humanity depends partly on suffering and destruction, which the lower-type believe are bad. Nietzsche is willing to sacrifice great individuals for the expansion of power.²⁷ Overall, power may increase through destruction, which is why happiness is not a primary component of Nietzsche's good.

Perhaps Leiter is mistaken about Nietzsche's disinterest in societies because he misinterprets Nietzsche's criticism of morality to mean he is an immoralist.²⁸ If Leiter is correct in this regard and Nietzsche has no objective measure of values, he need not create a soul-state analogy to express the ideal state of living. However, Nietzsche's criticism of morality does not suggest he is an immoralist. Nietzsche says the following about morality:

In the main all those moral systems are distasteful to me which say: 'Do not do this! Renounce! Overcome thyself!' On the other hand I am favorable to those moral systems which stimulate me to do something, and to do it again from morning till evening, to dream of it at night, and think of nothing else but to do it *well*, as well as is possible for *me* alone! . . . I do not like any of the negative virtues whose very essence is negation and self-renunciation.²⁹

Nietzsche approves of moral systems that motivate individuals toward growth. Even though this growth is relative to individuals, it is also the process of life perpetuating. It is the nature of life, the will to power, and the standard for morality. If Nietzsche is primarily concerned with individuals' accomplishments, as Leiter believes, he could not be an effective ethicist.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Herman Siemens, "Nietzsche's Critique of Democracy [1870–1886]," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 38 (2009): 30.

²⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 44.

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 349. Cf. Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 688.

²⁸ Brian Leiter, "Nietzsche and the Morality Critics," *Ethics* 107, no. 22 (January 1997), 250–85.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 304.

An individual's greatness is relative to his or her ability and circumstances. For instance, Napoleon's victories elevated his power and revolutionized his culture, but his power is not the same as power in general. By today's standards, his military tactics would accomplish little. Nietzsche's primary concern is the will to power of which societies are a part. The virtue ethics Nietzsche seems to construct is for the benefit of humans, but his standard of good encompasses more than humanity.

There are several levels at which Nietzsche believes a great society increases power. One controversial and well-known strain in Nietzsche's *Nachlass* characterizes the will to power as constituents of matter in the realm of physics.³⁰ Beyond this unsubstantiated notebook conjecture, several passages from the published works describe the human individual not with one agency but as having multiple drives, each with its own will to power.³¹ Presumably, if there can be a synthesis of wills in the individual, there could also be further, more complex syntheses at the level of society.³² John Richardson offers the foremost analysis of will to power as a synthesis of drives working together in stable tension.³³ Richardson, however, suspects that Nietzsche consciously avoids describing society this way, choosing to focus instead only on the exceptional individual.³⁴ He claims that "any society must be held together by values it can't see beyond so none can be that open-ended synthesis, always pressing to overcome itself, which is the Dionysian overman."³⁵ However, his interpretation of the society is too static. Societies cannot be so confined by their values as their values are always evolving, as shown by Nietzsche's need to write a genealogy of morality.

Bernard Reginster offers an intriguing insight into how the will to power benefits life, claiming that "the will to power, in the last analysis, is the will to the very *activity of overcoming resistance*."³⁶ Nietzsche's unpublished manuscript unmistakably claims that "all expansion, incorporation, [and] growth is striving against something that resists."³⁷ His published works describe expansion, incorporation, and growth as the will to power.³⁸ Hence, Reginster establishes his initial correlation between the will to power and resistance, and finds that his proposed relationship corresponds succinctly with Nietzsche's overall characterization of the good.

What is good?—All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man. What is bad—All that proceeds from weakness. What is happiness—The feeling that power increases—that resistance is overcome. Not

³⁰ Ward, endnote 3. Ward notes *KSA* 11:36[31], 12:9[98], 13:14[79], 13:14[95].

³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³² This is similar to Siemens' conception of will to power.

³³ John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 44–52.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 51–2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁶ Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 127.

³⁷ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 704.

³⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 349 and Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 259.



contentment, but more power; not peace at all, but war; not virtue but proficiency/virtue in the Renaissance style, virtue, virtue free of moral acid.³⁹

In this passage, happiness is not only resistance, but resistance overcome. Additionally, will to power cannot only be the will to resistance against a perpetually frustrating obstacle. Otherwise, there could be no “expansion, incorporation, [or] growth.” Nietzsche’s conception of good is change and overcoming, which necessitates new and diverse resistance to overcome. The higher-type person is happy when she creates. That is her motivating desire, not hedonism or the feeling of happiness. The backbone of Nietzsche’s values, the will to power, requires conflict and advancement.⁴⁰

To understand Nietzsche’s great society, one needs to re-evaluate the conventional portrait of utopia. For Nietzsche, a society is not great because it is peaceful or without need. A great society is an arena for meeting and overcoming resistance. Unsurprisingly, Nietzsche’s outline of the great society resembles Plato’s ideal society. Plato believes that few people achieve the ordering of the soul that results in highest virtue; the vast majority of people have misshapen souls.⁴¹ Plato’s conception of an ideal society concerns the flourishing of society, not its individuals. In such a society, not all citizens are great. It is an aristocracy in which lower types take care of menial tasks so that greater individuals can be involved in higher tasks.⁴² Nietzsche claims that “caste-order . . . is necessary for the preservation of society, to make the higher and highest types possible,—unequal rights are the conditions for any rights at all.”⁴³ In this way, lower types are essential to the great society but are not valuable like the higher types. Great individuals, like great societies, are creative and maintain a balance of power.

Though Nietzsche does describe his perfect society as having a similar structure to Plato’s or Aristotle’s societies, Nietzsche’s society is not a product of temperance. According to Nietzsche’s idea of the will to power, living a full life is not always accompanied by a satisfaction or a feeling of happiness. Nietzsche’s ideal society is perfectly stable inasmuch as it maximizes growth. People in this society aim to be innovators; they compete without there being a finish line. Each citizen is allowed to grow in whatever way he can manage: psychologically, physically, or mentally. Nietzsche believes that people do not all have the same strength or ability, which is why some people need and want to have subservient roles in society. The structure of this society prohibits these lower types from gaining enough influence to be able to destroy the society. Living well in the *polis* does not require practical wisdom; it requires an artist’s imagination and the resolve to affirm the value of resistance.

While Nietzsche prescribes an ideal society, he only offers a theoretical structure of this society without committing himself to details. It is possible that

³⁹ Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ*, 2.

⁴⁰ Reginster, 126-47.

⁴¹ Plato, *Republic*, 428d-e.

⁴² Ward, 16.

⁴³ Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ*, 57.

the details of the perfect society are unrecognizable and unattainable, but in order to pursue greatness, we must strive for perfection nonetheless. To such an end, Nietzsche scholarship should be eager to acknowledge an exegetical analysis of the role of society as an attempt to do more with Nietzsche's philosophy. Granted, interpreting Nietzsche is a risky endeavor that has not always done him justice.⁴⁴ Still, we need to remember that Nietzsche does not want followers. He wants greatness.⁴⁵ Scholarship needs both an accurate understanding of Nietzsche's works and the ability to embrace the spirit of his work. To do either, one needs to acknowledge the unstated yet designated role of society in Nietzsche's ethics. ❖

⁴⁴ Walter A. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, IV.1.



