

Nietzsche and the Hope of Normative Convergence

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“Those who can breathe the air of my writings know that it is an air of the heights, a *strong* air. One must be made for it. Otherwise there is no small danger one may catch cold in it. The ice is near, the solitude tremendous...Philosophy, as I have so far understood and lived it, means living voluntarily among ice and high mountains—seeking out everything strange and questionable in existence, everything so far placed under a ban by morality.”

-Nietzsche, “Preface” to *Ecce Homo*, 3

I. Introduction

Near the end of *On What Matters*, Derek Parfit offers a defense of what he calls the “convergence claim.” According to this claim of Parfit’s, we would all reach the same normative beliefs under certain idealized conditions (*OWM*, II, 570). Envisaging what would happen in such rarefied circumstances is not easy. Yet, insofar as we can get some clear sense of what would happen were the idealization conditions to obtain, Nietzsche, more than any other figure in the philosophical tradition, would seem to pose a serious challenge to any hope for this convergence. This is not just because Nietzsche disagrees with Parfit on the philosophical question of whether this convergence is likely, though surely he does. It is rather because Nietzsche scoffs at the moral values that to many of us can seem self-evident. In their stead, he proposes ideals imbued with a blend of aestheticism, elitism, and Homeric heroism, assigning these perfectionist values a priority that is deeply alien to conventional moral sensibilities. The “most influential and admired moral philosopher of the last two centuries” (*OWM*, II, 570) would thus, at first glance, seem to be out of step with some of our deepest normative commitments. Parfit accordingly seeks to disarm this challenge that he takes Nietzsche to present. Nietzsche’s normative pronouncements, he thinks, are either the product of psychological distortion, are contradicted by other things Nietzsche says, or else, on closer textual examination, are more moderate and considerably closer to Parfit’s own view than one might at first expect from the strident and polemical tone that Nietzsche adopts.

In devoting several of the culminating chapters of his monumental book to Nietzsche, Parfit joins the gradually widening circle of anglophone moral philosophers who in the past few decades have taken Nietzsche's difficult and often shocking ideas as worthy of contemporary engagement and discussion. While Parfit is of course not a Nietzsche scholar, nor is he aiming to produce a piece of Nietzsche scholarship, his interpretation admirably avoids many of the crude caricatures of Nietzsche's ideas that surface even in serious academic works, and it presents a nuanced reading, drawing on a wide range of textual evidence. Nonetheless, I will be arguing here that Parfit's interpretation is wrong on several key points. My interest is not primarily that of a philosophical historian, setting the record about Nietzsche straight for its own sake. Even less is my aim to defend Nietzsche's views as the correct alternative to Parfit's. But I *do* want to suggest that the Nietzsche that Parfit does outline, both because of the views that Parfit attributes to him and because of some difficult views that Parfit does not adequately grapple with, proves an easier challenge than Nietzsche should pose when it comes to the convergence claim.

I'll begin with two preliminary sections to set the stage: In the first of these, I spell out why the convergence claim matters to Parfit and why he takes Nietzsche in particular as someone whose views need to be dealt with. In the second of these, I'll briefly draw attention to a salient exegetical matter regarding Parfit's abundant use of Nietzsche's notebooks as textual evidence. After these two preliminary sections, I turn to a discussion of the two points on which I think Nietzsche's disagreement with Parfit is most serious and intractable—first, Nietzsche's denial that suffering is in itself bad and second, Nietzsche's deep-seated anti-egalitarianism. On both fronts, Nietzsche has radical normative views that simply cannot be expected to converge with Parfit's. I then turn to a discussion of Parfit's account of Nietzsche's critique of morality and then, in the section to follow, to his consideration of Nietzsche's meta-ethics. Parfit's questionable interpretations, in attributing

to Nietzsche a drastic rejection of ethical normativity, coupled with a similarly drastic rejection of any sort of remotely plausible realist grounding for values, makes Nietzsche far easier to dismiss than he might be.

II. The Rules of the Game

Parfit's argument would seem to presuppose the following conditional claim: If it turns out that there are deep and intractable normative disagreements between him and Nietzsche—disagreements that cannot plausibly be dismissed as the result of distorting factors or patent confusion—this would cast grave doubt on the convergence claim. It would take me too far afield, and it would probably require another whole paper, to deal with the philosophical underpinnings of the argument from disagreement in sufficient detail. So my strategy in this paper will be the more limited one of accepting the terms that Parfit has himself implicitly set and seeing whether he is successful in convincing us that Nietzsche is not a threat to the convergence claim after all.

It is worth briefly rehearsing, though, why Parfit cares about convergence in the first place: It is a protective measure on his part to buttress the sort of moral intuitionism he advocates. Parfit is especially worried about the challenge of an argument from disagreement. If normative truths, like the basic truths of mathematics, are out there to be intuited, then we should expect suitably well-informed people not to give incompatible accounts of what these truths are. Unless we can somehow explain away these conflicting reports, our confidence in our intuiting capacities should be shaken. If there is disagreement about normative matters in suitably idealized conditions and yet we stick to our guns about what we take to be the normative facts, “[w]e would have to believe that, when we disagree with others, it is only we who can recognize such truths. But if many other people, even in ideal conditions, could not recognize such truths, we could not rationally believe that we

have this ability” (*OWM*, II, 546). Unless the convergence claim is true, the argument from disagreement, Parfit concedes, would have “great force” against his moral epistemology (*OWM*, II, 546).

Yet why does Parfit take *Nietzsche in particular* as a challenge? (As opposed to, say, any random crank who writes him a rambling email purporting to outline a normative alternative to his own?) Why, indeed, does Parfit focus on the position someone *actually held* as opposed to a hypothetical position someone could coherently hold? There would appear to be some idea of epistemic peer-hood in the background that leads Parfit to focus on salient cases of disagreement with past luminaries: “Nietzsche,” Parfit writes, “was a brilliant thinker, who made many claims that are original, important, and true. We should ask whether our disagreements with Nietzsche give us reasons to doubt our own views” (*OWM*, II, 579). Parfit worries that philosophical giants, such as Nietzsche or Kant, seem to disagree with him on important normative issues, because, I take it, he thinks that they (unlike the random crank) are as epistemically well-placed as he is to intuit the normative reasons. In fact, their brilliance and historical stature amounts to a kind of meta-evidence, giving us further reason to take seriously views they in particular held, as opposed simply to coherent views that someone could potentially hold. Truly ideal conditions are no doubt beyond our ken, and we thus can’t say with certainty whether there would be agreement or disagreement in these conditions (*OWM*, II, 570). But disagreement among those we take to be epistemic peers (maybe even epistemic superiors) in very good, but less-than-ideal conditions should at the very least shake our confidence not only about whether there would be agreement in ideal conditions, but also about what particular normative claims this agreement would encompass.

In order to dispel the challenge that he takes Nietzsche to pose, Parfit hopes to show either that Nietzsche i) has beliefs that do not really diverge significantly from Parfit’s; ii) is

subject to distorting influences in the normative beliefs he does purport to have, so that these beliefs can be discounted as likely running afoul of the ideal conditions; or that, like the person insisting that in order for a given shape to be a triangle, it is not enough to be a closed three-sided figure, but it must also be sanctioned as a triangle by God, he iii) is subject to such serious conceptual confusion regarding the concept under discussion (there, triangularity—here, morality) that his disagreement can be written off as the result of confusion-provoked blindness to an important region of logical space. Parfit tries a combination of all three strategies. Before we turn to a discussion of some likely points of substantive philosophical disagreement between Nietzsche and Parfit, and to Parfit's interpretations and arguments, I want briefly to register a concern about the textual evidence that Parfit often cites.

III. The Question of the *Nachlaß*

The philosophical historian in me would be remiss in not mentioning an important philological issue that arises with Parfit's interpretation. Parfit draws very freely on the so-called *Nachlaß*, the collection of Nietzsche's notebooks that were published after his death. To the reader who does not consult the list of references at the end of *On What Matters*, and indeed to one who does and yet does not realize that Nietzsche never actually published a book called *The Will to Power*, it can seem that all these Nietzschean quotations cited by Parfit are on a par as positions behind which Nietzsche stood enough to publish them. This is not the case. In fact, more than a third of the quotations that Parfit cites—and many of the most important ones for his reading of Nietzsche—are drawn from these notebooks.

To be sure, Parfit is not alone in extensively citing the notebooks in this way. Following a model set by Heidegger, some of the best scholars of Nietzsche make considerable use of the notebooks in their interpretations, sometimes as the sole evidence

that Nietzsche held a particular view.¹ I myself am quite reluctant to draw on the notebooks except where they augment or clarify a position also clearly found in the works Nietzsche himself published or prepared for publication before his mental collapse in 1889, but I recognize that sensible arguments can be given for using the notebooks in a more permissive way.² In any event, the contemporary interpreters who use Nietzsche's notebooks typically have the positive aim of showing that there are coherent and interesting philosophical positions to be found when we look to this notebook material.³ These contemporary interpreters think it would be a shame to neglect what in their philosophical opinion are important claims and insights that Nietzsche didn't ever publish.

Yet Parfit, by contrast, most often draws on the notebooks with the negative aim of *casting doubt* on Nietzsche and his positions. To this end, he cites passages from the notebooks as evidence that Nietzsche is saddled with implausible commitments and moreover as evidence that Nietzsche contradicts himself. But it seems to me quite unfair to establish either point, and especially the latter, by drawing on material that Nietzsche never chose to publish. After all, Nietzsche may not have published this material precisely because ultimately he did not agree with it. Many of the ideas from the notebooks are ill-considered or overreaching; they are, after all, *notebooks* where Nietzsche was trying out ideas, not setting them down for perpetuity. We don't moreover know his purposes in writing down a given idea: it could well be an idea he endorses, either fully or tentatively. Or it could be a view he

¹ Schacht, R., *Nietzsche*, (Routledge, 1983); Nehamas, A., *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, (Harvard, 1985); Richardson, J., *Nietzsche's System*, (Oxford, 1996); Reginster, B., *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Harvard, 2006).

² Cf., Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*: 16-20.

³ Heidegger and his interesting, but self-serving interpretation of Nietzsche is a rather more complicated matter.

doesn't agree with *at all* and wants to subject to further scrutiny. But putting aside the fairness to the historical Nietzsche of this interpretive practice, Parfit, in drawing on this often dubious material from the notebooks in the way he does, ends up making Nietzsche out to be a less threatening philosophical opponent than he might otherwise be. The Nietzsche that we should care about here is not the man scribbling half-baked ideas, some inspired and some ridiculous, in his notebooks, but the more formidable philosopher who comes into view when we interpret his polished—and published—corpus of work with an eye to a charitable reconstruction. The most serious challenge comes from the opinions of the latter. Although this “Nietzsche” is in *some* sense a hermeneutical construct, even when faced with this figure, we are still much closer to an issue of actual as opposed to merely hypothetical disagreement. We are not inventing these philosophical positions afresh, but are extracting them from an existing body of canonical texts that Nietzsche himself carefully crafted. Our interpretation, accordingly, must be constrained by the requirement of textual fidelity, not by the limits of anything we can coherently imagine as a normative position. I'll wait to go into specific positions attributed to Nietzsche and their textual support in the *Nachlaß* until the sections to follow, but I want to flag this issue before moving on.

IV. Nietzsche on the Value of Suffering

In the chapter leading up to his discussion of Nietzsche, Parfit has argued for what he calls the “double badness of suffering” (*OWM*, II, 565), by way of the dual claims that (a) it is in itself bad to suffer and that (b) it is bad when people suffer in ways that they do not

deserve. Just let us focus our attention on Nietzsche's position with respect to a).⁴ Does Nietzsche agree that it is *in itself* bad to suffer? Nietzsche, as Parfit notes, does laud suffering time and again (e.g., BGE, 225; GS, 338).⁵ Yet Parfit wants to establish that appearances to the contrary, Nietzsche proves no serious challenge to convergence on this score.

But first of all, what, we should ask, would it take to deny that suffering is in itself bad? Parfit elucidates this badness-in-itself claim by noting that “[a]ll suffering is, in this sense, bad *for the sufferer*” (*OWM*, II, 565). No doubt, there is *some* sense in which suffering is just *by definition* something bad for the sufferer in that it is that which, among other things, is

⁴ As for b), Nietzsche, along with Parfit, is skeptical of the whole notion of people deserving to suffer. Nietzsche, though, is less interested in approaching this sort of question head-on than he is interested in various anthropological and psychological questions surrounding punishment and desert, namely (a) why people have come to hold others accountable for the actions they are alleged “freely” to do, and (b) why people (Christians, in particular) concoct perversely elaborate stories explaining why it is that they deserve the suffering that is their lot.

⁵ Works by Nietzsche are cited by section number (with one exception noted below) using the following abbreviations and translations, which I have modified where I have thought appropriate. A= *The Antichrist*, trans. Walter Kaufmann; BGE= *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann; BT= *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Speirs; D= *Daybreak*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale; EH= *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann; GM= *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann; GS= *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann; HH= *Human, All too Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale; LNB= *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, trans. Kate Sturge, ed. Rüdiger Bittner [n.b.: this volume is cited by page number]; TI= *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufmann; UM= *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. In works that comprise several individual essays, after the abbreviation is the essay number (as a Roman numeral) and section number (as an arabic numeral). For example, GM, I:2 is *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay I, Section 2. In works that include titled main sections, I include a key word for that section, followed by sub-section numbers, if applicable. For example, TI, "Socrates," 1 is the *Twilight of the Idols* section "The Problem of Socrates," sub-section 1.

characterized by feeling bad to the one who undergoes it. If this is all Parfit is claiming in noting that suffering is in itself bad, his claim could in principle brook no disagreement from Nietzsche or anyone else. In attempting to deny that suffering has an unpleasant phenomenal character, and therefore is *to some disagree* bad for the sufferer, one would, it seems, just be denying that the state in question was even suffering at all. Parfit, I take it, shouldn't want the claim that suffering is bad in itself to be this trivial. And what Parfit goes on to write suggests that he really has a deeper, more substantive point in mind. "Instrumental" seems to be the key point of contrast with "in itself" when Parfit notes the following: "Though suffering is always *in itself* bad, some suffering has good effects which may make it on the whole good, as when the pain that is caused by some injury prevents us from acting in ways that would increase this injury" (*OWM*, II, 565).⁶ The suffering would appear to be worthwhile *only* in virtue of its downstream beneficial effects, not on its own account. Thus Parfit's view is best read, I think, in the following way: Instances of suffering never have anything more than this sort of instrumental value for the sufferer and thus, considered "in itself"—that is, apart from this instrumental value—suffering is not ever good for the sufferer.

Parfit rightly observes that often what Nietzsche is actually celebrating in praising suffering is simply this instrumental value of suffering (*BGE*, 225; Cf. *HH*, I: 235). This

⁶ Parfit could in principle be pressing the view that suffering is "in itself" bad where "in itself" means intrinsically (where that is meant as the opposite of extrinsically). But given that the point of contrast he sets up is with suffering being instrumentally good, this does not appear to be the right interpretation. Even if Parfit did intend the "in itself" claim to be a point about intrinsicality/ extrinsicality, Nietzsche would still not be in agreement. Given the holistic tenor of Nietzsche's axiology (presupposed, e.g., in *TI*, "Errors," 8), we cannot correctly assess the value of things in isolation from the relations they bear to a larger whole; intrinsically, an instance of suffering is neither good nor bad.

would not be in tension with Parfit's own view, because one could still think of suffering as the regrettable cost of other important things—for example, the great symphony achieved through tremendous labor and psychological turmoil.

Yet Parfit observes, also rightly, that Nietzsche often appears to go beyond this instrumental point to deny that suffering is always in itself bad. What could Nietzsche mean in claiming this? His idea, I think, would need to be that instances of suffering are themselves *constitutive elements* of the good life. Even holding fixed all the other goods (exceptional achievement, for example) that suffering instrumentally makes possible, removing suffering from a life would render that life less good. Put differently: If one made a list of the features of a life that render it good—climbing a mountain peak, producing a masterpiece—instances of suffering would also be on that list of good-making features.

Parfit attributes to Nietzsche two claims that might be thought to lend support to this rather surprising view, and he then tries to show that once we see the dubious claims that are allegedly underwriting it, Nietzsche's position on suffering is not going to be a challenge to the convergence claim. On Parfit's interpretation, Nietzsche is doubtful that suffering is in itself bad because he accepts "the wider view that *everything* is good" (*OWM*, II, 571), a claim Parfit takes Nietzsche to hold in tandem with the response-dependence style claim that "we can make any event good by *affirming* or welcoming this event" (*OWM*, II, 571). The latter claim would just be a concession on Nietzsche's part that suffering is bad, because it stands in need of being made good in this way. And the Panglossian delusion that "*everything* is good" can be understood, and dismissed, Parfit thinks, as the product of psychological distortion, the response of someone who suffered in the prolonged and intense way that Nietzsche did (*OWM*, II, 572). Recall the rules of the game I set out earlier. Parfit here is trying to establish that i) Nietzsche agrees with him in important respects, and

insofar as Nietzsche disagrees, his beliefs ii) can be written off as the product of psychological distortion.

Let us not linger on the exegetical issue of whether Nietzsche should be interpreted as accepting either extreme view that Parfit attributes to him as the scaffolding for the claim that suffering is in itself good. The best evidence Parfit cites is from the notebooks, and even here, it is difficult to tell where Nietzsche stands *vis-à-vis* the viewpoints he is toying with.⁷ The important question for us should instead be this: Are these extreme positions, which it is not even clear that Nietzsche should be read as accepting, the only anchors in Nietzsche's work for the claim that suffering might constitutively render a life better? Or is there a more modest and philosophically-attractive Nietzschean position to support the

⁷ Parfit's interpretation relies on two notebook passages, where Nietzsche can appear to press this sort of cosmicody (LNB, 207; LNB, 135-6). Putting aside all issues about the textual status of the notebooks, the support that even these notebook passages lend is questionable. Parfit condenses one notebook entry to read "Everything actually happens *as it should happen*...every kind of "imperfection" and the suffering that result are also part of the *highest desirability*" (OWM, II, 571). But this misleadingly makes it seem as though Nietzsche is *asserting* this in his notebook, when, judging by the context, that is far from clear. Nietzsche, quoted in full, writes: "To attain a height and bird's eye view where one understands how everything actually runs *as it should run*: how every kind of 'imperfection' and the suffering that results are also part of the *highest desirability*..." Nietzsche's ellipses leave unclear what his own stance toward this evaluative perspective is. He might well reject it as the tendentious position of those deluded Christians seeking to give a theodicy. This is the danger of drawing so freely on the notebooks. In the work he chose to publish, which Parfit cites as the third and final piece of evidence for his interpretation (OWM, II, 572, citing EH), Nietzsche opts for the more modest view that it a worthwhile and admirable trait of strong, life-affirming, and self-reverential human beings that they will have such an attitude toward their lives and toward the world. But we should not assume that because Nietzsche thinks this attitude is valuable, he thinks such an attitude is *correct*, since he thinks many of the most worthwhile beliefs for people to hold are false (BGE, 4).

claim that suffering is not always in itself bad? More, it seems to me, can be said in Nietzsche's favor.

According to one important recent interpretation suggested by Bernard Reginster, Nietzsche's main objection to the moral tradition (including Christianity) is that its ideal of life is of one that is free from suffering.⁸ Whereas, on Nietzsche's view, Christians, Schopenhauerians, utilitarians and others think that suffering with no instrumental payoff is thereby always objectionable, Nietzsche, by contrast, thinks that suffering is *itself* part of what makes this life and world good, in addition to the further goods that suffering instrumentally secures. Notice that this claim is far more modest than the radical one Parfit has attributed to Nietzsche. It is not saying that all instances of suffering are good, or even more absurdly that everything whatsoever is good. It is simply saying that suffering itself, apart from what it makes possible, is *sometimes* a good-making feature of a life. Now what grounds could Nietzsche possibly have for thinking this, other than the ones mentioned by Parfit?⁹

It seems to me that the best Nietzschean argument in support of this point is one that draws on his rich analogy between lives and works of art (BT, 5; GS, 290). Part of what makes one's life a better life, judged by this distinctively aesthetic metric, may be *precisely* the

⁸ Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*: 176.

⁹ On Reginster's interpretation, Nietzsche holds that the process of reaching a goal is constitutively valuable, in addition to just the goal itself. One vital element in making this process valuable is that it is *not* easy. It involves overcoming resistance—and, according to a certain Schopenhauerian backdrop Nietzsche is working with, that will thereby involve suffering as an essential ingredient. See *The Affirmation of Life*: 194. Although I agree with Reginster that Nietzsche regards suffering as also valuable in this way just sketched, I'm not sure this particular Nietzschean argument will go far enough in questioning Parfit's contention that suffering is only ever instrumentally valuable. The alternative line of argument from Nietzsche that I develop in what follows is one that I think will more directly address this point of Parfit's.

suffering it contains, especially when the suffering is an aspect of a compelling narrative of adversity and achievement. Other philosophical perspectives, Nietzsche thinks, fail to notice the fact that suffering can be valuable in this way, because they assume that once isolated from that which it instrumentally makes possible, suffering can be judged, and a negative verdict on it rendered, on account of its unpleasant *phenomenal* character alone. But this is an assumption that Nietzsche rejects: “Whether it is hedonism or pessimism, utilitarianism or eudaemonism—all these ways of thinking that measure the value of things in accordance with *pleasure* and *pain*, which are mere epiphenomena and wholly secondary are ways of thinking that stay in the foreground and naïvetés on which everyone conscious of *creative* powers and an artistic conscience will look down not without derision, nor without pity” (BGE, 225). The person living the heroic life will of course experience great suffering, but he may also be living the best sort of life *for him*, not despite, but partly in virtue of his suffering, because that suffering itself contributes to a better life *qua* Nietzschean life-as-a-work-of-art. If we just subtracted the suffering from the life of Odysseus in those long years of journeying, imagining him a person alike in all other respects, but who couldn’t feel the suffering as suffering, that would not render his life better *even for him*. It is better to be a suffering hero than an anesthetized one.

Notice that the suffering is not here instrumental to making the life-qua-artwork good, as typically would be, say, drinking enough water to be able to do the interesting and important things that would make one’s life good as a work of art. The suffering is instead partly constitutive of the life’s goodness, being itself a good-making element of the life considered in this aesthetic way. These features come as part of a holistic package, and accordingly, they cannot be adequately judged in isolation from other elements of the life. But just because some element (a beautiful patch of color in a painting or an instance of suffering in a life) is *extrinsically* valuable in this way, it doesn’t follow that its value is merely

instrumental. Nor is the suffering valuable simply on account of affording *others* aesthetic pleasure. It may well do that. But the aesthetic value inheres in one's life itself, insofar as it has the aesthetically commendable features it does—the features which would warrant the aesthetic response others might have to it.

I think, in short, that there is an intelligible Nietzschean position here on which one denies that suffering is only ever instrumentally valuable. And I would hasten to add that it would be ill-advised to dismiss Nietzsche's position as the product of psychological distortion, at the risk of throwing stones from one's glass house. For Nietzsche might just as well claim, perhaps with even more justice, that the people who denounce suffering as always in itself bad are equally beset by a serious form of psychological distortion. Their weakness and "softening," (TI, "Skirmishes," 37) make them fetishize the phenomenal character of suffering and lead them to focus on *that alone* as what makes it always a part of a life that is of negative value. This is the understandable result of a desperate desire to avoid all pain. But it leads them to prefer what might not be the truly preferable life for them, judged in aesthetic terms.

This Nietzschean ideal of life is of course borne of a sort of arch Romantic aestheticism, but it is important to recognize that despite its extremity, it is vastly more plausible than the view that Parfit has attributed to Nietzsche. It preserves the possibility that many things are bad (including a great many instances of suffering.) And it doesn't reduce the value of suffering to simply an instrumental vehicle for securing other things. It is not my aim to establish that Nietzsche is right or that his view is free from problems, only that he has an interesting position that will push back against Parfit's claim that suffering is always in itself bad. The threat of disagreement still looms.

V. Nietzsche on Egalitarianism

Few writers in the history of philosophy are as (apparently) elitist and anti-egalitarian as Nietzsche.¹⁰ Parfit acknowledges this seeming anti-egalitarianism, writing:

Since Nietzsche gives supreme weight to the greatest creative achievements in art, science, and philosophy, he also gives supreme value to the existence and well-being of the few people who are capable of these achievements. Nietzsche believes that these few people, whom we can call the *creative elite*, should be given special rights. When he makes such claims, Nietzsche may seem to be denying that everyone's well-being matters equally. That would be a deep disagreement with what most of us now believe (*OWM*, II, 590).

There are three separate anti-egalitarian positions on Nietzsche's part that should be distinguished. Nietzsche would appear to be:

- (1) doubting that all humans have equal worth and dignity;
- (2) counting the well-being of some more than that of others in the reckoning of what matters;
- and (3) believing that the elite should be given special rights.

Parfit seeks to dispel the appearance of deep disagreement with Nietzsche on these matters. While Parfit admits that Nietzsche makes some anti-egalitarian-sounding remarks, he argues that Nietzsche also holds some "strongly egalitarian beliefs" nonetheless (*OWM*, II, 591). Yet Parfit's interpretation, it seems to me, does nothing to dislodge (1)-(3) as the

¹⁰ Brian Leiter has noted that the "egalitarian premise of all contemporary moral and political theory – the premise, in one form or another, of the equal worth and dignity of each person – is simply absent in Nietzsche's work." Leiter, B., *Nietzsche on Morality*, (Routledge, 2002): 290. (Cf., A, 43; A, 57)

right interpretations of Nietzsche, nor does he establish that Nietzsche held countervailing egalitarian beliefs in any significant sense of the word “egalitarian.”

Parfit seeks to soften the blow of Nietzsche’s anti-egalitarianism by noting that although Nietzsche makes some “rude and dismissive remarks about the mediocre” (*OWM*, II, 591), Nietzsche nonetheless thinks the elite are obligated not to mistreat them. He cites a passage in *The Antichrist* where Nietzsche writes that “when the exceptional human being treats the mediocre more tenderly than himself and his peers, this is not mere courtesy of the heart—it is simply his duty” (*OWM*, II, 591, citing A, 57). Since Nietzsche opts for the word “duty” [*Pflicht*], the Kantian overtones might be taken to suggest that Nietzsche thinks these claims of duty are grounded in the equal moral status of the “mediocre” human beings that are thus to be treated tenderly. That would cast doubt on whether he accepts (1).

Yet this remark of Nietzsche’s from *The Antichrist*—the highly condescending tone of which should itself give us pause about Parfit’s tack—is taken from a section in which Nietzsche has been noting with approval the intense stratification present in the caste-based Laws of Manu. Far from thinking these are rooted in an arbitrary social convention that contravenes the fact that all people are of equal worth and dignity, Nietzsche calls this stratification a “sanction of a *natural order*” (A, 57). Some people, he appears to think, *really are* of higher worth than others, and it is these people who have, as he says, the privilege of “represent[ing] happiness, beauty, and graciousness on earth” (A, 57). In fact, in the paragraph prior to the one from which Parfit has drawn this quotation about treating the mediocre tenderly, Nietzsche echoes Aristotle’s infamous and disturbing remarks about natural slavery from the *Politics* (1254a18-23), noting, “To be a public utility, a wheel, a function, for that one must be destined by nature: it is *not* society, it is the only kind of *happiness* of which the great majority are capable that makes intelligent machines of them” (A, 57). From the fact that Nietzsche thinks the elite are duty-bound to treat these

“intelligent machines” tenderly, it does not follow that he thinks they are of equal moral status as the elite to whom this requirement is directed.

Nor does it follow that the elite and the peons should have equal social and political rights either. For Nietzsche goes on to write later in the same passage: “Whom do I hate most among the rabble of today? The socialist rabble, the chandala apostles, who undermine the instinct, the pleasure, the worker’s sense of satisfaction with his small existence—who make him envious, who teach him revenge. The wrong [*Unrecht*] lies not in unequal rights but the claim of ‘equal rights’” (A, 57). Parfit notes that with these unequal rights come unequal responsibilities, with more being expected of the elite (*OWM*, II, 590-1). But this lends no succor to reading Nietzsche as more of an egalitarian with respect to (3); it just shows that, on the subject of rights, he is an anti-egalitarian with a correlative commitment to *noblesse oblige*.

Parfit seeks to question (2) by claiming that Nietzsche is an “egalitarian” about the badness of suffering, because he “does not seem to believe that suffering is in itself less bad when it is endured by mediocre human beings” (*OWM*, II, 591-2). The idea of this suffering being “less bad” admits of a few different readings, and I suspect that Parfit may here be equivocating among them. Suffering to degree x , he could be claiming, feels bad to degree x regardless of who the sufferer is. That claim is in itself bordering on the trivial. Unless it is supplemented with ancillary theses about what *follows from this* with respect to what is impersonally good, it has no bearing on issues of egalitarianism. Parfit could also be claiming that suffering is an equally “bad-making” feature of a life regardless of who the particular sufferer is. Now Nietzsche *would* allow that suffering in this respect is no less bad for the mediocre—and indeed may be worse for them, especially if, like the lower animals, they are unable to incorporate it into some heroic narrative of their lives. But the thesis that Parfit really needs is something far more ambitious, so as to put pressure on (2). What (2)

attributes to Nietzsche is the view that it is more important, from the impersonal axiological standpoint, that a few select beings flourish than that the mass of mankind do so. Noting that suffering is no less bad (and maybe even worse) in *personal terms*, when endured by the “mediocre” does not undermine this claim. The argument equivocates on the respect in which it is worse—for the sufferer in particular or from the standpoint of the whole. And the standpoint of the whole may of course regard with callous indifference the fact that many people’s individual lives will go worse.¹¹

Parfit’s best argument is to question (2) by noting that the exceptional achievements of the few are of benefit not just to that select few, but to humanity as a whole. This is an important point, and it has not been stressed enough in interpretations of Nietzsche’s ethics and social philosophy. The exegetical strategy for Parfit would thus be to say that (2) is rightly attributed to Nietzsche, *only because* Nietzsche thinks this focus on the creative elite is in everyone’s interest and that ultimately no one person’s interest is more important than another’s. But I don’t think this follows: Just because Nietzsche thinks that everyone gets some benefits from the perfectionistic achievements of the few, it doesn’t follow that he holds that everyone’s well-being matters *equally*, as would be needed for the egalitarian claim to be significant. Mice may benefit from the crumbs that fall from exalted tables, but this

¹¹ On Nietzsche’s own reckoning of what matters, the existence of a few great types is of vastly greater importance than the “well-being” of the rest of mankind. Nietzsche notes how much “one would like to apply to society and its goals something that can be learned from observation of any species of the animal or plant world: that its only concern is the individual higher exemplar, the more uncommon, more powerful, more complex, more fruitful” (UM, III:6). The goal of a species’ evolution lies “not in the mass of its exemplars and their wellbeing...but rather in those apparently scattered and chance existences which favourable conditions have here and there produced” (UM, III:6).

doesn't have any bearing on the question of whether the well-being of the diners and the mice is on an axiological par.

Parfit's arguments, in short, are unconvincing in dislodging Nietzsche from the ranks of the entrenched anti-egalitarians. Parfit himself suggests that claims (2) and (3), if Nietzsche is indeed making them, are in deep disagreement with Parfit's own view (*OWM*, II, 590). And surely Parfit must think (1) is as well. But Parfit has not given us good reason for thinking that Nietzsche's apparent acceptance of these claims is an exegetical illusion or that it is contradicted by other things Nietzsche says. As with the issue about the badness of suffering in itself, Nietzsche, it seems to me, will continue to disagree with Parfit on these issues of egalitarianism.

One could, I suppose, accuse Nietzsche of being subject to a distorting influence because he has beliefs that favor a creative aristocracy in which he would place himself. (As one example of a distorting influence, Parfit cites the "knowledge that, if other people accepted and acted on some normative belief, that would give special benefits to us" (*OWM*, II, 547)). But Nietzsche might just as well accuse egalitarians as subject to a "distorting influence" in their endorsement of egalitarian ideas. Consider things, Nietzsche might ask, from the perspective of the most lowly and powerless: If others (particularly the strong) acted on the belief that everyone is of equal worth, and that all are deserving of equal rights and of equal respect, that would be a tremendous boon for the lowly and powerless.

Would these benefits they thus gain be relevantly "special"? (*OWM*, II, 547). We must be careful here. For there is a way of reading "special" so as just to beg the question in favor of egalitarianism in the statement of the ideal conditions; any *unequal* distribution of rights and benefits is "special" and any normative beliefs favoring the unequal distribution thereby count as "distorted." But if we want to resist smuggling our normative commitments into the ideal conditions themselves, we should opt for a neutral way of

reading this term “special”: Any distribution of rights and benefits counts as “special” when it diverges from what one actually merits or deserves. This formulation is compatible with everyone deserving the same moral status, rights, and benefits. But this is *also* compatible with their *not* deserving the same moral status, rights, and benefits. Yet if we take *this* reading of “special” that I am proposing—the reading that doesn’t beg the question—then if we think, as Nietzsche does, that the lowly and powerless are *not* deserving of the same status, rights, and benefits as the noble and the well-constituted, then the lowly and powerless are indeed in favor of normative beliefs that confer “special” benefits on them.

We should not forget how central this egalitarianism is to Parfit’s own project. Take the sort of “Triple Theory” that Parfit has argued for, in which Kantianism, rule consequentialism and Scanlonian contractualism are supposed to converge. The true moral theory, he thinks, is made up of the optimific principles that, in conditions of full information, *everyone* could rationally choose and that *no one* could reasonably reject (*OWM*, II, 245). And yet why, Nietzsche might ask, is it being assumed that everyone has rights that are absolute side constraints, so that they get a say and get veto power in this highly democratic fashion? This whole approach, like much of modern moral philosophy, begs the question from the start about the equal moral status of all people, by making it seem as if it is a neutral deliverance of the moral theory, when in fact it is an entrenched and self-ratifying presupposition of it.

Parfit believes that “there has been slow but accelerating progress towards the beliefs that everyone’s well-being matters equally, and that everyone has equal moral claims” (*OWM*, II, 563). Like Parfit, I also believe that, and the readers of this paper probably believe that too. But we do a disservice to the truth if we project our views onto Nietzsche. Nietzsche harbors doubts about whether this greater inclusiveness *does* mark normative or epistemic progress. Nietzsche relishes playing the provocateur, drawing our attention to the extraneous

ideological factors that might account for this radical change toward egalitarianism, so as to undermine our confidence that our beliefs arose as the result of a cool apprehension of the moral facts. However confident we may feel in writing off his views as the product of distortion, he wants to insinuate that *our* views are just as likely to be the products of distortion.

In doubting some of our deepest normative convictions, Nietzsche may make us uncomfortable. We may even despise him as a reactionary monster. But we should not make his views out to be more egalitarian than they really are. When it comes to (1)-(3), it is doubtful that we would arrive at normative convergence with Nietzsche. Once again, the threat of disagreement looms.

VI. Nietzsche's Critique of Morality

Now that we have considered two important points of disagreement between Nietzsche and Parfit when it comes to certain egalitarian ideals and to the value of suffering, I'd like to turn to Parfit's account of Nietzsche's criticism of morality. Nietzsche, Parfit's interpretation claims, does not have anything approaching our non-theological concept of what we ought morally to do. Nietzsche neglects this possibility, Parfit thinks, because he is subject to a form of conceptual confusion that ties morality inextricably together with God. This confusion results in a blindness on Nietzsche's part to a whole realm of logical space that his distorted concept of morality will not allow him to bring into view. He is, to use my earlier example from section II, supposedly like the person who insists that in order to be a triangle a closed figure must not just have three sides, but must also be *sanctioned by God* as a triangle. This extraneous requirement is one that fastens on to something that is just irrelevant to the concept of triangularity. If a person is skeptical about the existence of

triangles on this perverse basis, his opinions can simply be discounted. It is a similar situation, Parfit thinks, with Nietzsche's concept of morality and his critique thereof.

On Parfit's reconstruction of his view, Nietzsche's doubts about morality are rooted in conceiving of it as a system of commands issued by God. It is something having normative authority only if there is a God to issue these commands (*OWM*, II, 584-9). Nietzsche's objection, on this construal, is that the norms of morality are bankrupt with no God to stand behind these commandments. Nietzsche, if this reading is correct, thus overlooks the possibility of a non-theological, non-imperative morality. After all, the claim "person x ought to ϕ " needn't take an imperative form, let alone be the imperative of God, in order to be a true norm of morality. Because Nietzsche's critique allegedly depends on this simplistic misunderstanding, Parfit thinks that we needn't put any stock in Nietzsche's vociferous criticisms of morality. "Nietzsche's claims cannot straightforwardly conflict with our beliefs about what we ought morally to do," so long as our conception of morality is not tied to these dubious theological and imperative underpinnings (*OWM*, II, 589). Yet in interpreting Nietzsche in this way, Parfit makes Nietzsche into too easy a target; whatever the ultimate merits of Nietzsche's criticisms of morality, they cannot be so easily brushed aside as this elementary confusion.

The first thing to note is that in "deny[ing]" morality (D, 103), or purporting to be an immoralist (EH, "Destiny," 4), Nietzsche is not rejecting the very idea of ethical normativity. His target is a more specific family of worldviews, offering themselves as the correct account of what matters and of what actions and ways of living are appropriate or inappropriate.¹² In the seminal passage from *Daybreak* that Parfit cites as evidence for Nietzsche's thorough opposition to morality, Nietzsche indeed writes: "I deny morality as I deny alchemy, that is I

¹² This point has been noted by a number of scholars: See Schacht, *Nietzsche*: 466-9; Geuss, R., "Nietzsche and Morality," in his *Morality, Culture, and History* (Cambridge, 1999): 170; Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*: 74.

deny their premises” (D, 103). Just as alchemy presupposes that one can turn baser metals into gold, morality—Parfit takes Nietzsche to think—presupposes that certain things are genuinely right and wrong only in virtue of being commanded by God.¹³ Yet *just after* the bit of text from *Daybreak* that Parfit cites as evidence that Nietzsche gainsays morality, Nietzsche continues: “It goes without saying that I do not deny—unless I am a fool—that many actions called immoral are to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral are to be done and encouraged—but I think the one is to be encouraged and the other avoided *on different grounds than hitherto* (103).¹⁴ Since he thinks that there really are things to be done and avoided and since he thinks that there is no God (Cf., GS, 108; 125), clearly he cannot think this ethical normativity depends on the commands *of God*. What Nietzsche is doubting is a

¹³ It is doubtful that Nietzsche thinks this. He seems on the contrary to think it is a false belief held by certain proponents of morality (TI, “Skirmishes,” 5). For helpful discussion of this issue, see Shaw, T., *Nietzsche’s Political Skepticism*, (Princeton, 2007): 83-88.

¹⁴ The German reads: “*Ich leugne nicht, wie sich von selber versteht — vorausgesetzt, dass ich kein Narr bin —, dass viele Handlungen, welche unsittlich heissen, zu vermeiden und zu bekämpfen sind; ebenfalls, dass viele, die sittlich heissen, zu thun und zu fördern sind, — aber ich meine: das Eine wie das Andere aus anderen Gründen, als bisher.*”

certain family of normative claims—and in particular, the *grounds* supporting these claims—not the very idea of things that are to be done and avoided.¹⁵

Parfit's interpretation taps into the widespread misunderstanding that because Nietzsche is critical of "morality," he thinks everything is permitted. Yet Nietzsche's criticisms of morality are in fact motivated by his own profound normative commitments. Indeed, he at times even suggests that these criticisms of his are founded upon a different and "*higher*" sort of morality (BGE, 202), by the lights of which he finds the "herd animal

¹⁵ This supposed misunderstanding on Nietzsche's part stems from a feature of the German word "sollen," Parfit thinks. Unlike the English "ought," "sollen" can both "express commands" and "state normative claims" (*OWM*, II, 584). Parfit further uses this passage to imply, though not directly to argue, that Nietzsche thinks there are no *moral* truths, because morality, being a set of commands, cannot in principle be true or false (*OWM*, II, 585). "Don't kill," *qua* command, is not of course the sort of thing that can be true or false. Nietzsche, according to Parfit, overlooks the possibility that morality might state normative propositions that can be true or false.

This is a questionable line of interpretation on a number of levels. First, Nietzsche apparently thinks in the very passage that Parfit himself cites (D, 103) that there are things "to be done" and "to be avoided," and he conveys this *without ever* using a form of the word "sollen." Second, even about "sollen" and its forms in particular, Nietzsche has no thoroughgoing doubts to the effect that it is moot without theological backing. Earlier in *Daybreak*, he notes that the "du sollst" [you ought/ thou shalt] speaks to Godless Nietzschean immoralists too (D, "Preface," 4). Third, it would be odd if he thought there were things to be done and avoided, but no truths about these matters, at least from his own evaluative perspective.

morality” holding sway in Europe deeply problematic. (Cp., D, 4).¹⁶ He thus would seem to believe that there is such a thing as morality, in some very broad sense of the term, but the systems *purporting* to be morality—the “harm no one” (*laede-neminem*), BGE 186) moralities championing equal rights for all, pity for the destitute, self-deprecating humility, disdain for the powerful, bovine contentment, contempt for the body and for this earthly world, and the elimination of suffering are all pretenders to the claim of being the true morality (Cf., EH, “Daybreak,” 1). Rather than rejecting anything that could go under the name “morality,” Nietzsche is rejecting *various versions* of morality—and he is rejecting them as normatively wanting by the lights of his own morality or ethics.¹⁷ But what does Nietzsche make of the standing of these values of his own? Does he think they are borne simply of his own idiosyncratic taste? Or might they be grounded in some more secure claim to meta-ethical authority? To this difficult exegetical issue, I want now to turn.

¹⁶ Unfortunately for his more philosophically-minded readers, Nietzsche does not use the term “morality” consistently. (*Moral*, *Moralität*, and *Sittlichkeit* are all words he uses, and there is this same lack of consistency in the German too). Sometimes he speaks as if morality is something to be rejected wholesale as mistaken or dubious (II, “Improvers,” 1). But when he says this, he is clearly talking about a narrower system than ethical normativity *tout court*.

¹⁷ Nietzsche realizes the danger of misunderstanding brought in tow by his “dangerous slogan” that is the title of his famous book *Beyond Good and Evil* (GM, I:17). He takes pains to note in this section of the *Genealogy* that at least this phrase does not mean “beyond good and bad.” “Good” and “evil,” Nietzsche thinks, are creatures of a certain normative framework that he sees as having replaced a Greco-Roman ethics of “good” (in a different sense of the word “good”) and “bad.” At one time, the “good” (in the Greco-Roman sense) were the strong, the proud, the noble, the healthy and the beautiful, and the “bad” were the weak, the humble, the base, the sick, and the ugly. With the “slave revolt,” (GM, I:10) the worth of these qualities gets inverted and those who were previously the “bad” get the title of the “good”; those who were previously “good” now get villainized as the “evil.” The poor and meek were not always due to inherit the earth.

VII. Meta-ethics and Meta-axiology

Parfit attributes to Nietzsche several meta-ethical or meta-axiological suggestions. (Given that Nietzsche concerns himself with “values” broadly—where that includes ethical values along with aesthetic values—“meta-axiology” may be the most appropriate term instead of meta-ethics, so that is the one I shall use.) I take it that Parfit’s strategy here is to show that Nietzsche has incompatible meta-axiological views—and thus that he contradicts himself. Nietzsche, on Parfit’s interpretation, holds one of three views. He is either a misguided realist, who thinks that “life” or the “will to power” provide the ultimate grounding of value, or he is a sort of constructivist or subjectivist who thinks that value derives from us in some meta-axiologically ambitious way, or he is a projectivist, who holds that judgments of value are simply the expressions of evaluative attitudes. These readings are all anchored in less-than-decisive textual evidence.

The realist interpretation builds on Nietzsche’s remarks about the will-to-power being the ultimate basis of value (*OWM*, II, 597-8, citing *LNB*, 215 and 119). First of all, it is difficult to tell whether Nietzsche means to offer this as a reductive theory of the property of being valuable or instead as a theory of what things have the property of being

valuable.¹⁸ Yet even if this is intended as a meta-axiological claim, Nietzsche *never published* this silly idea, and the most reasonable inference to draw from the fact that he did not is that he was dissatisfied with it.¹⁹

The second position attributed to Nietzsche is that he thinks values are created (*OWM*, II, 600-01, citing, e.g., *GS*, 301, *BGE*, 211). The trouble here is that Nietzsche uses “value” and “values” in two quite different senses.²⁰ One sense is more social and anthropological. The other sense is more axiologically loaded. Nietzsche takes the “value of these values”(GM, “Preface,” 6) as a serious question to be considered, and not as a pleonasm, precisely because these two different senses of “value” are at work. It is an open question for Nietzsche whether certain “values” (in the social/anthropological sense) are really valuable (in the axiologically loaded sense). We should then ask: In the places where he talks about values being created, what sense of values does he have in mind? As social or

¹⁸ The closest we get in Nietzsche’s published work is A, 2. Here Nietzsche writes, “What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself.” What is bad? Everything that is borne of weakness.” Here Nietzsche is not giving a *definition* of all that is good, let alone a meta-ethical claim about its grounding, but describing a certain broad class of things that are good. And when it comes to his description of them as good, he leaves it unclear whether they are unconditionally good, conditionally good, *prima facie* good, *pro tanto* good and so on. It is highly unlikely that his position in *The Antichrist* or elsewhere is that the will-to-power is unconditionally good, since he devotes a considerable portion of the book to abusing St. Paul and the priestly inventors of Christianity for the particular exercise of their will to power. (e.g., A, 26, 37, 55)

¹⁹ We should not, however, prejudge the issue of whether he was dissatisfied with *all* potential forms of value realism.

²⁰ Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick are sensitive to a similar distinction. See their “Nietzsche and Moral Objectivity: The Development of Nietzsche’s Meta-ethics” in *Nietzsche and Morality*, Brian Leiter and Neil Sinhababu (eds.) (Oxford, 2007). See also Schacht, *Nietzsche*: 348.

anthropological entities, values do indeed get created when people, normative systems, and societies *take* or *proclaim* things to be valuable. Such “values” needn’t have any meta-ethical or meta-axiological import; Christianity and slave morality are systems of values in just such a sense. While Nietzsche could *also* have in mind something very axiologically ambitious in his talk of the creation of values, we needn’t extract this dramatic meta-axiological theory from the text. For it is far from clear that Nietzsche thinks *the value* of these values (that is, the fact of their really being valuable) is *itself* something that gets created. Similarly, when he raises doubts about whether values are part of the mind-independent fabric of reality (e.g., GS, 301), what sense of values does he have in mind? As social or anthropological entities, values surely cannot be wholly independent of the activities and practices of human beings, any more than the institution of money can. But what of the fact of certain values *really being* valuable? Can *that* be independent of human practices of valuing? Again, it is difficult to know what he thinks. Yet we should be careful not simply to assume that he is making meta-axiological claims, when it is not clear from the texts whether he is.

There is related conflation of these two different senses of “value” in the attributions of blanket value projectivism to Nietzsche (*OWM*, II, 601). When Nietzsche sees values as expressive of people’s preferences or attitudes, is he making a claim about values in the social or anthropological sense (that is, a claim about what people and societies *regard* as valuable?) Or is he making a deflationary claim that this is *all there is* to values in the other apparently more axiologically loaded sense? Once again, it is difficult to know.

These cursory remarks of mine are just meant to show that none of these three interpretations is decisive in pointing to a meta-axiological view that Nietzsche clearly held. There are indeed many passages in Nietzsche’s work that can be read as suggestive of meta-axiological views. But in the recent anglophone secondary literature, Nietzsche has been attributed the gamut of views by various interpreters, sometimes by taking passages that are

not obviously addressing these issues and finding evidence for some fairly complex meta-axiological position in them. The texts, it seems to me, leave issues of meta-ethics and meta-axiology seriously underdetermined. That is a more sweeping and ambitious claim than I can substantiate here, but my point is simply that we needn't read Nietzsche as *contradicting* himself in putting forward a set of three apparently incompatible meta-axiological views. We can instead read him as just not particularly focused on what we would now classify as distinctively meta-ethical or meta-axiological questions and making remarks that are addressing different sorts of questions entirely.

When it comes to Parfit's own interpretation, it is difficult to know exactly what bearing these meta-axiological issues are supposed to have on the convergence claim. Even assuming for the sake of argument that Nietzsche's views about meta-axiology are self-contradictory, does this give us reason for discounting his *first-order* views about the value of suffering or about egalitarianism? That is far from clear.

Another way of understanding Parfit's strategy of argument would be along the following lines: He thinks that *whatever* meta-axiology of these three Nietzsche holds (assuming, charitably, that he holds just one), he has no recourse to a "reason-implying" concept of what matters (*OWM*, II, 600).²¹ Thus, even if he did have first-order claims diverging from Parfit's, these would founder for want of real meta-axiological support. Perhaps so. But of what relevance is this? Nietzsche's meta-axiological views, assuming any can be pinned on him, would have little bearing for the purposes of the convergence claim, where it is his first-order normative views that matter. And, as we have seen in the foregoing sections, when it comes to the important points where Nietzsche and Parfit disagree, in no

²¹ I take it that Parfit considers the brand of realism he attributes to Nietzsche (making "life" or the "will to power" the ultimate basis of value) to be a form of reductive naturalism. Accordingly, by Parfit's lights, it would be meta-axiologically wanting (*OWM*, II, Ch. 24-7).

case would Nietzsche's first-order normative views seem to be driven by his (supposed) meta-axiological commitments.

Let us imagine, though, a Nietzsche who thinks that there are "reason-implying" (*OWM*, I, 38) senses of good and bad. Such a Nietzsche would be an even more formidable opponent for Parfit. He would think, in Parfit's terms, that there genuinely are good and bad things, better and worse lives. And it is not that the desires or attitudes of person *x* are the decisive factor in making this the case for *x*. It is not that there is the *ex nihilo* creation of these values either. Nor is it that there is some reductive naturalistic basis for these values in "life" or "the will to power." Such a Nietzsche would share a Parfitian meta-axiology. But there would be a brute clash of intuitions about what matters. Now it is not clear that Nietzsche either accepts *or* rejects this robust sort of realism. But it is, I think, a position that his texts do not foreclose either.

VIII. Conclusion

Parfit hopes to show that, despite appearances very much to the contrary, Nietzsche was not—if I may draw on Parfit's image at the heart of *On What Matters—climbing a different mountain*. I have tried to argue here that Parfit's case is not successful. On two important normative issues, Nietzsche and Parfit cannot be expected to agree. Nor should we draw hasty conclusions about Nietzsche's critique of morality or his meta-ethics and dismiss his views accordingly. For even if Nietzsche were subject to the confusion that normative claims only have force if they are the commands of God, and even if he were beholden to a meta-ethical view that undermines the normative standing of his own pronouncements, the fact remains that his value assessments radically diverge from Parfit's—and from nearly all of modern moral philosophy. The point is not to prove that Nietzsche is right. It is instead to question whether we can expect Nietzsche and Parfit to converge in their normative

judgments in ideal conditions. Such convergence is unlikely. As we see in the epigraph I used at the beginning of this paper, Nietzsche, like Parfit, casts himself as a metaphorical climber of mountains (EH, "Preface," 3; *OWM*, I, 419). But at the top of *his* mountain Nietzsche expects to find icy solitude, not the company of many others who have been climbing on the other side. And whatever else Nietzsche is wrong about, about that I suspect he is right.²²

²² My thanks to Sarah McGrath, Peter Singer, and Jack Spencer for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.