

How One Becomes What One Is Called

On the Relation between Traits and Trait-Terms in Nietzsche

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ABSTRACT: According to Nietzsche, drives are the ultimate constituents of virtues and vices. I argue that Nietzsche identifies two blueprints for character construction: a slavish, interpersonal blueprint, and a masterly, reflexive blueprint. When the interpersonal blueprint is implemented, a person becomes what he is called: his drives are shaped by the traits ascribed to him so that he becomes more like the sort of person he's taken to be. When the reflexive blueprint is implemented, a person becomes more like the sort of person she calls herself: her drives are shaped by the traits she ascribes to herself in a community of peers. The reflexive blueprint shares some surprising similarities with the interpersonal blueprint. I conclude with an account of *Nietzschean summoning*, which occurs when one person praises a generic type to an audience, implicitly inviting them to identify with that type and thereby to become more like it.

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When the devil sheds his skin, does not his name fall off too?
For it too is skin. Perhaps the devil himself is—skin.
(ZIV: “The Shadow”)

Despite the recent surge of interest in Nietzsche's moral psychology,¹ and his conceptions of character and virtue in particular,² little attention has been paid to his treatment of the relation between character traits and the terms that designate them. In this article, I argue for an interpretation of this relation: Nietzsche thinks there is a *looping effect* between the psychological disposition named by a character trait-term and the practice of using that term.³

While he affirms that people are differentially disposed to certain types of behavior (because of differences in the strength and configuration of their drives), Nietzsche conceives of these dispositions as fluid both in their objects and, to a lesser degree, in their strength. Someone disposed toward investigation will end up thinking, feeling, and acting very differently depending on whether he is labeled “curious” or “nosy.” Someone disposed toward aggression will end up thinking, feeling, and acting very differently depending on whether he is

considered a hero or a criminal (*TI* “Skirmishes” 45).⁴ The valence and content of the labels applied to a person, together with the power relation between the labeler and labeled, interact with his preexisting psychological dispositions to produce the kind of person he eventually becomes.

Moreover, as people’s dispositions shift under the pressure of labels, the meaning of the labels themselves evolves. If nobility is whatever noble people are disposed to think, feel, and do, then when noble people’s psychological dispositions change, so does the meaning of nobility.⁵ Preexisting psychological dispositions are shaped by the activity of labeling, which in turn modulates the meaning of the label, which further shapes the psychological disposition, and around and around we go.

Here is the plan for this article: in the first section, I explore the first of two Nietzschean styles of becoming what one is called: the interpersonal. Someone whose personality is built according to this plan becomes what others call him—good, bad, or mixed. Nietzsche associates this blueprint for the construction of character with slavishness. In the following section, I explore the second way of becoming what one is called: the reflexive. Someone whose personality is built according to this plan becomes what she considers herself. Nietzsche associates this method of personality construction with masterliness. It will turn out, however, that the masterly path is itself interpersonal, and in multiple ways. In lieu of a conclusion, the final section lays out a theory of what I call *Nietzschean summoning*. In existing discussions of the looping effect, only the reactions of those labeled are considered. Moreover, their reactions tend to be negative; they either deny the applicability of the label or modify their behavior in an attempt to squirm out of its extension. Nietzsche seems to have realized that when the extension of a term is unclear, people sometimes modify their behavior in order to squirm *into* it. Hence, by praising an ambiguously defined kind of person, one can induce kind-relevant behavior and dispositions in one’s audience: praising people of type *T* summons *T*s; *BGE* 42–44 offer prime examples of this phenomenon.

The Interpersonal Blueprint

At first blush, it’s probably most attractive to categorize a trait attribution as an assertion: to say that someone is *T* is to commit oneself to the truth of the proposition that the person has the disposition in question. Compare attributions of other dispositions, such as “This table is flammable” and “You conduct electricity.” The former commits the speaker to the truth of the proposition that the table would burn in appropriate conditions; the latter commits the speaker to the truth of the proposition that the hearer would conduct free electrons in appropriate conditions. Why should attributions of psychological dispositions be any different? What I want to argue in this section is that Nietzsche thinks that, despite the superficial similarity between attributing flammability to a

table and attributing honesty to a person, it may be more apt to interpret trait attributions as directives or declarations because they either cause the hearer to engage in a certain type of behavior or make it the case that they are true by being felicitously uttered.⁶

It is straightforward to see how a trait attribution might be used as a directive. If someone is asking for charitable donations and I say, “Jessica here is quite generous,” it is plausible to suppose that I am not too subtly goading Jessica into donating. Nietzsche thinks that trait attributions are sometimes used in this way, as he indicates in *GS* 21:

A man’s virtues are called *good* depending on their probable consequences not for him but for us and society: the praise of virtues has always been far from “selfless,” far from “unegoistic.” Otherwise one would have had to notice that virtues (like industriousness, obedience, chastity, filial piety, and justice) are usually harmful for those who possess them, being instincts that dominate them too violently and covetously and resist the efforts of reason to keep them in balance with their other instincts. [. . .] But your neighbor praises your virtue precisely on this account.

However, this is only one way of making trait attributions. It is less obvious that a trait attribution might function as a declaration, but this is what Nietzsche thinks. Standard examples of declarations are baptisms (“I hereby christen this ship the *Titanic*”) and institutional acts of labeling (“I pronounce you husband and wife”). One of the odd things about these speech acts is their direction of fit. The ship is called *Titanic* because it was thus christened; it is not christened *Titanic* because that is what it is called. The couple is married because they have been so pronounced; they were not so pronounced because they were married.

Nietzsche seems to think that many people have the character traits they do at least in part because they have been labeled with those traits; in other words, some trait attributions are declarations. This would be a special case of his insight that “what things *are called* is incomparably more important than what they are” because the “reputation, name, and appearance, the usual measure and weight of a thing, what it counts for [. . .] grows to be part of the thing and turns into its very body” (*GS* 58). He claims, for instance, that “since time immemorial, in all somehow dependent social strata the common man *was* only what he was *considered*: not at all used to positing values himself, he also attached no other value to himself than his masters attached to him” (*BGE* 261). This is a theme that runs throughout the writings of his mature writings, starting with *Daybreak*: the lowly, the ignoble, the slaves, the poor in spirit are shaped by society. And in this context society means the masters of society—the elite. If the aristocrats tell a member of *hoi polloi* that he is a farmer (or a blacksmith, or a sailor, or whatever), that is what he is.

Becoming what one is called is not just a matter of vocation, however. Nietzsche has in mind a process that runs much deeper. His idea is that those of

lower rank take on not only the tasks and jobs but also the character traits that are attributed to them. They become, quite literally, what they are called. If they are labeled “dishonest,” they become dishonest. If they are labeled “cowardly,” they become cowardly. If they are labeled “ambitious,” they become ambitious. In fact, I would venture to say that this way of reacting to attributions is what he means by slavishness. To be a slave in this psychological sense is to have a second-order disposition to acquire or simulate any (or at least most) first-order dispositions that are attributed to one.⁷

Here we begin to see a tension between the political and the psychological senses of slavishness. Politically, of course, to be a slave is to have one’s will subordinated, to be in another’s power; psychologically, to be a slave is to be disposed to think, feel, and act as expected. While it would not be incorrect to say that Nietzsche is more concerned with the psychological than the political, he is most interested in their interaction. He seems to think that almost everyone in modern culture has inherited some degree of psychological slavishness. Because so many of our ancestors were considered slaves (i.e., were politically enslaved), they acquired or developed psychological slavishness, which they then passed on to us. Through an “immense atavism,” even today “the ordinary man still always *waits* for an opinion about himself and then instinctively submits to that—but by no means only a ‘good’ opinion; also a bad and unfair one” (*BGE* 261).

Being treated as a person of a certain type has profound effects, especially when the treatment begins at birth and is presented as part of the natural order of things. So, for example, Nietzsche says that “at bottom the masses are willing to submit to slavery of any kind, if only the higher-ups constantly legitimize themselves as higher, as *born* to command—by having noble manners” (*GS* 40). This process need not be carried out at the level of consciousness. Indeed, it rarely is. Instead, even slavish people think that they are acting in their own interest and from their own character. But “what they do is done for the phantom of their ego which has formed itself in the heads of those around them and has been communicated to them [. . .] the one for ever in the head of someone else, and the head of this someone else again in the heads of others” (*D* 105). After implicitly taking a label to heart, they act in accordance with it. This leads others, as well as they themselves, to think the label was appropriately applied in the first place. It also reinforces their first-order disposition to behave in accordance with the label. After many cycles of such pretense, social confirmation, and habit formation, the trait becomes second nature. By pretending to be what one is designated, one becomes what one is designated. As Nietzsche puts it, “The hypocrite who always plays one and the same role finally ceases to be a hypocrite [. . .] If someone obstinately and for a long time wants to *appear* something it is in the end hard for him to *be* anything else” (*HH* 51).

Ordinary first-order dispositions like flammability do not depend on higher-order dispositions. Strange as it may seem, on Nietzsche’s view, first-order

psychological dispositions depend developmentally, if not conceptually, on higher-order psychological dispositions. And this developmental dependence has both ontogenetic and phylogenetic aspects. Most of our ancestors were politically enslaved to some extent, which led the majority of them to become psychologically slavish. We have inherited this second-order disposition, and we express and reinforce it whenever we become what we are called. Naturally, Nietzsche's Lamarckianism is dubious, but there might be other mechanisms that would result in the heritability of psychological slavishness.

The Reflexive Blueprint

The interpersonal blueprint for the construction of character relies on a kind of psychological receptivity. To become what one is called, one must be to some extent disposed to acquire or simulate whatever traits are attributed to one. To be evaluated, one must be evaluable. The other side of the coin is the disposition to assign value, to evaluate. This is what Nietzsche often seems to have in mind when he speaks not of political but of psychological masterliness or nobility.⁸

His most sustained treatment of the moral psychology of nobility is of course the first essay of *GM*. There, Nietzsche claims, against the "English psychologists" (and, one might think, himself in *GS* 21) that

the judgment "good" did *not* originate with those to whom "goodness" was shown! Rather it was "the good" themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed, and high-minded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good, that is, of the first rank, in contradistinction to all the low, low-minded, common, and plebian. It was out of this *pathos of distance* that they first seized the right to create values and to coin names for values. (*GM* I:2)

Unlike the slaves, these nobles are what they say they are. Their self-evaluations are declarations, not assertions or directives. Nietzsche even speculates that "the origin of language itself [is] an expression of power on the part of the rulers: they say 'this *is* this and this'" (*GM* I:2). Whereas the political underclass becomes psychologically slavish, and is thus molded from outside, the nobility practices reflexive evaluation.

It is important to note, though, that even with the nobles, there is a shift from the political to the psychological. They begin by celebrating their social dominance, but end in an affirmation of their own character traits. This is the "conceptual transformation" of which Nietzsche makes hay in *GM* I:4, saying that "everywhere 'noble,' 'aristocratic' in the social sense, is the basic concept from which 'good' in the sense of 'with aristocratic soul,' 'noble,' 'with a soul of high order,' 'with a privileged soul' necessarily developed." Their political

superiority engenders the confidence to affirm their own character, which they subsequently take to be responsible for that very superiority (*GM I:6*). But this shift presupposes that the nobles, too, lack robust first-order dispositions. For the most part, they are not already, but rather *become*, what they say they are. Their virtues are acquired through self-labeling. Like the slaves, they have a second-order receptivity: they are disposed to acquire whatever dispositions are attributed to them *by themselves*.

This is just one of the paradoxes of psychological masterliness. Another is the extent to which it, too, is grounded in interpersonal mechanisms. As I have presented it thus far, it might seem that the reflexive model of character development is extremely individualistic. A masterly person self-attributes some character traits, which she then goes on to acquire. But this is not how Nietzsche usually envisions the process. No individual has that much control. The content of most masterly self-attributions is social in multiple ways. First, the form of such an attribution tends to be not “*I am noble*” but “*We are noble*.” We—this group of people to which I belong—have this virtue. The self-attribution thus relies on there being a social group to which the individual belongs. Second, the content of the trait-term tends to be social as well. Nobility is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon. It implies a community of respect and honor, in which each member expects certain kinds of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors from the rest. “As one who is good, one belongs to the ‘good,’ a community that possesses a communal feeling because all individuals are knit together by the sense of repayment” (*HH 45*). A further way in which even masterly self-attributions are social depends on the fact that, though they are malleable, the meanings of trait-terms are not completely up to their speakers at the moment of utterance. Meaning depends on use, so the meaning of, for instance, “noble” is dynamic, but its evolution proceeds at a stately, even glacial, pace. Thus, when someone makes a masterly self-attribution, he can end up expressing content that he doesn’t consciously intend.⁹

The final way in which even the reflexive blueprint for the construction of character is grounded in interpersonal mechanisms is that, like many declarations, self-attributions require acceptance or uptake from the audience. The ship is called *Titanic* because someone christens it *Titanic*, but the christening is felicitous only because the audience accepts the declaration. The couple is married because they have been so pronounced, but the pronouncement succeeds only because the audience accepts it. Someone who declares “*We are noble*” is noble, but only because the declaration is accepted. To be noble, they need to be considered noble—by themselves, by other nobles, and even by the slaves.¹⁰ So “the aristocratic *culture* breathes power, and if its customs very often demand merely the semblance of the feeling of power, the impression this game produces on the non-aristocratic, and the spectacle of this impression, nonetheless constantly enhance the actual feeling of superiority” (*D 201*; see also *D 248*).

On this interpretation, psychological masterliness has much more in common with psychological slavishness than one might initially expect.

Nietzschean Summoning

I have argued for two Nietzschean models of character development. On the interpersonal model, one becomes what one is called by others. This presupposes a second-order psychological disposition (“slavishness”) to acquire or simulate whatever first-order psychological dispositions are attributed to one. On the reflexive model, one becomes what one calls oneself. This blueprint for character development turns out, however, to contain many interpersonal elements as well. If my interpretation is on the right track, Nietzsche thinks there is a looping effect between character traits and the terms we use to attribute them. People become what they are called, which helps to fix the meanings of the terms by which they are called, which again affects their personalities, and so on. This would mean that trait attributions often function as declarations rather than assertions.

And, as Nietzsche says, pointing out this phenomenon does not make it go away. “We can destroy only as creators.—But let us not forget this either: it is enough to create new names and estimations and probabilities in order to create in the long run new ‘things’” (*GS* 58). In this final section, I want to argue for a special case of this phenomenon, which I call *Nietzschean summoning*. So far, I have discussed only examples in which it is clear who the target of the trait attribution is. “You are *T*.” “I am *T*.” Sometimes, however, it is less clear who the target of the attribution is. When this happens and the trait is praised as a virtue, the audience is being invited to think of themselves as its bearers. When this kind of uptake occurs, the looping effect kicks in. Praising *Ts* summons *Ts*.

The clearest example of this phenomenon is in sections 42 through 44 of *BGE*.¹¹ There, Nietzsche says,

A new species of philosophers is coming up: I venture to baptize them with a name that is not free of danger. As I unriddle them, insofar as they allow themselves to be unriddled—for it belongs to their nature to *want* to remain riddles at some point—these philosophers of the future may have a right—it might also be a wrong—to be called *attempters* [*Versucher*]. This name itself is in the end a mere attempt [*Versuch*] and, if you will, a temptation [*Versuchung*]. (*BGE* 42)

Who are these new philosophers, these attempters (the German could also be translated as “experimenters”)? Nietzsche could, of course, just be making a prediction. I contend that, on the contrary, he is trying to summon the attempters from his readership. By praising them, he is (as he himself admits) attempting

to tempt us to think of ourselves as the new philosophers, and thus to *become* the new philosophers.

One reason to think that this is what's going on is his bewildering use of pronouns and other markers of person (first, second, and third) in *BGE* 44. Nietzsche transitions from talking about the new philosophers in the third person ("they [. . .] will be [auch sie . . . werden] free, *very* free spirits") to talking about them in the first person ("that is the type of man we are, we free spirits [wir freien Geister]!") to breathless apostrophic direct address ("you *new* philosophers [ihr *neuen* Philosophen]"). In this passage, Nietzsche seems to be trying to do exactly what he describes in *GS* 58. By creating a new name, he wants to create a new thing—the new philosopher. And he tries to do so by means of the looping effect, by inviting his audience to think of themselves as new philosophers. And, just as self-attributions need uptake from the audience to succeed, Nietzschean summoning works only when the audience accepts the invitation. Was Nietzsche right to predict the philosophers of the future? That depends on us.

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NOTES

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1. See, e.g., Mark Alfano, "The Tenacity of the Intentional Prior to the *Genealogy*," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 40 (2010): 29–46, "Nietzsche, Naturalism, and the Tenacity of the Intentional," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 44.3 (2013): 457–64, and *Nietzsche's Socio-Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); R. Lanier Anderson, "On the Nobility of Nietzsche's Priests," in *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide*, ed. Simon May (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 24–55; Paul Katsafanas, "The Relevance of History for Moral Philosophy: A Study in Nietzsche's *Genealogy*," in May, *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality*, 170–92, and "Nietzsche's Philosophical Psychology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. John Richardson and Ken Gemes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 727–55; Brian Leiter and Joshua Knobe, "The Case for Nietzschean Moral Psychology," in *Nietzsche and Morality*, ed. Brian Leiter and Neil Sinhababu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 83–109; Bernard Reginster, "What Is a Free Spirit? Nietzsche's Critique of Fanaticism," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 85.1 (2003): 51–85, *The Affirmation of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), and "The Will to Power and the Ethics of Creativity," in Leiter and Sinhababu, *Nietzsche and Morality*, 32–56; and John Richardson, "Nietzsche, Language, and Community," in *Individual and Community in Nietzsche's Philosophy*, ed. Julian Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 214–44.

2. See Mark Alfano, "An Enchanting Abundance of Types: Nietzsche's Modest Unity of Virtue Thesis," *Journal of Value Inquiry* (forthcoming), and "The Most Agreeable of All Vices: Nietzsche as Virtue Epistemologist," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21.4 (2013): 767–90; James Conant, "Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of *Schopenhauer as Educator*," in *Nietzsche's Post-Moralism*, ed. Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 181–256; Thomas Hurka, "Nietzsche: Perfectionist," in Leiter and Sinhababu, *Nietzsche and*

Morality, 9–31; Bernard Reginster, “Honesty and Curiosity in Nietzsche’s Free Spirit,” *Journal for the History of Philosophy* 51.3 (2013): 441–63; Michael Slote, “Nietzsche and Virtue Ethics,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 30.3 (1998): 23–27; Alan White, “The Youngest Virtue,” in Schacht, *Nietzsche’s Post-Moralism*, 63–78.

3. The phrase “looping effect” is due to Ian Hacking, “The Looping Effects of Human Kinds,” in *Causal Cognition*, ed. Dan Sperber et al. (New York: Clarendon, 1995), 351–83. Hacking also recognizes that Nietzsche may be its discoverer in his “Making Up People,” *London Review of Books* 28.16 (2006): 23–26. Mark Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), was the first to argue for a looping effect between virtues and virtue-terms.

4. In citing Nietzsche’s work, I have used the following translations: *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966); *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974); *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian del Caro, ed. Robert Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Judith Norman in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols And Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

5. The closest contemporary treatment of the meaning of virtue-terms is the “exemplarist” semantics developed by Linda Zagzebski, “Exemplarist Virtue Theory,” *Metaphilosophy* 41.1 (2010): 41–57.

6. I draw here on the taxonomy of speech acts developed by John Searle, “A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts,” in *Language, Mind, and Knowledge*, ed. Keith Gunderson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 344–69.

7. See Anderson, “On the Nobility of Nietzsche’s Priests,” 31, and Bernard Reginster, “Nietzsche on *Ressentiment* and Valuation,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1997): 281–305, esp. 285–87.

8. See Anderson, “On the Nobility of Nietzsche’s Priests,” 29.

9. Richardson argues that Nietzsche thinks “words get their meaning from the history of the social practice, and carry much of its depth and intricacy,” which implies that “Nietzsche thinks that words *do* mean a multiplicity, and that we mean a multiplicity through them, but aren’t aware of this, and are misled by the singleness and apparent simplicity of each word” (“Nietzsche, Language, and Community,” 225).

10. It has been argued by John Searle in *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995) that social facts always exhibit the feature “*seeming to be F* is logically prior to *being F*.”

11. Other examples are *BGE* 203, much of *Z*, *GM* III:28, *A* 1, *TI* “‘Reason’ in Philosophy” 5 and perhaps the whole of *EH*.