# Nietzsche's Aristocratism Revisited

Thomas Fossen
Department of Philosophy, Utrecht University

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## Introduction

While Fascist or Nazi readings of Nietzsche have been thoroughly repudiated in Nietzsche-scholarship, Nietzsche is usually conceived to espouse some kind of political aristocratism (Appel 1999; Conway 1996; Ansell-Pearson 1994).[1] And given his affirmation of the designation 'aristocratic radicalism', this appears hard to deny (Hayman 1980 314). Even those favorably disposed to the viability of Nietzsche's thought for contemporary political theory acknowledge that Nietzsche occasionally slips into or leans toward political aristocratism (Owen 2002). Many commentators therefore pursue a strategy of detachment or ostracism, trying to salvage (some of) Nietzsche's ethical and political ideas, especially his perfectionism, from his unpalatable digressions into political elitism. Yet despite appearances, the textual basis for attributing a commitment to an aristocratic political theory to Nietzsche is very thin. Indeed, based on a reexamination of the texts which are most often cited to support this reading (primarily the final chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil*), I will argue that it is mistaken. If we attend to the historical dimension of these passages, political aristocracy appears as an archaic form of social organization. I will argue, first, that the relation Nietzsche affirms between his perfectionism and a political and social hierarchy is less direct than usually interpreted. Second, I propose that Nietzsche's call for a new kind of slavery is not to be taken as an argument for political domination and exclusion, but as a desire to cultivate an instrumental attitude toward others and parts of oneself, regarding them as mere means. In this sense, slavery represents a correlative to an unconditional commitment to oneself. Nietzsche's thought is radically aristocratic, not because it proposes an alternative political theory but because it seeks to promote an ethic that is hostile to democratic civility.

## 1. Perfection and social hierarchy

It is generally acknowledged that the central impulse of Nietzsche's political and ethical thought is a kind of perfectionism which aims at the elevation or enhancement of mankind, the extension of human capabilities, through the cultivation of exemplary individuals, without however prescribing an ideal to which these individuals are to conform. In this sense Nietzsche's perfectionism is open-ended. It expresses the continual struggle to overcome oneself. It has been suggested on the basis of various passages in his work that Nietzsche advocates a politics of domination in which the majority serves the interests of an elite engaged in self-experimentation and -overcoming. Some of these accounts rely on uncharitable and inaccurate readings of Nietzsche, as James Conant has shown in an analysis of Nietzsche's essay *Schopenhauer as Educator* (Conant 2001). Conant argues that Nietzsche's perfectionist ethical ideal does not in principle exclude anyone (Conant 2001 196-198). For Nietzsche, greatness does not reflect a gift or particular talent, a natural attribute unattainable for common people (Conant 2001 210-216). The fact that Nietzsche believes that only a few can achieve greatness does not imply that most are excluded from striving for self-

overcoming from the start.

However, while Nietzsche's ethical ideal is not in principle elitist in the sense that it incorporates a principle of exclusion, there are passages that suggest that striving for perfection cannot proceed without the sacrifice or exploitation of other people. The initial aphorisms (257-260) of the chapter 'What is Noble?' in *Beyond Good and Evil* are usually cited as the strongest expression of Nietzsche's political aristocratism. Nietzsche states that an aristocratic society is and always will be a precondition for the 'elevation of the type "man"' (BGE 257). This suggests to many that Nietzsche argues for the institution of a social hierarchy as a precondition for fulfilling his perfectionist ideal and that consequently his political theory is fundamentally elitist (Appel 1999; Ansell-Pearson 1994). Conway argues that Nietzsche yearns for an aristocratic political regime (although it might prove unrealizable in current times) for instrumental reasons, in the service of his perfectionism (Conway 1996 41). Owen maintains that such a reading can be avoided by pointing to inconsistencies with other parts of Nietzsche's work (Owen 2002 121-125). According to Owen, while Nietzsche was committed to political aristocratism at some time, he implicitly repudiates this position elsewhere. So while these commentators disagree on the implications and significance of Nietzsche's political aristocratism, they agree that there is a textual basis for attributing an aristocratic political theory to Nietzsche. My aim is to show that this attribution is mistaken.

The issue of contention is the necessary connection that Nietzsche posits between his open-ended perfectionist ethical ideal of self-overcoming (the enhancement of man) and a social hierarchy or caste-system, or in Conway's words, a 'rigid stratification and hierarchical organization of society and its resources' (Conway 1996 54). Nietzsche begins his chapter 'What is noble?' thus:

> Every elevation of the type "man" has hitherto been the work of an aristocratic society – and so it will always be: a society which believes in a long scale of orders of rank and differences of worth between man and man and needs slavery in some sense or other. Without the pathos of distance such as develops from the incarnate differences of classes, from the ruling caste's constant looking out and looking down on subjects and instruments and from its equally constant exercise of obedience and command, its holding down and holding at a distance, that other, more mysterious pathos could not have developed either, that longing for an ever-increasing widening of distance within the soul itself, the formation of ever higher, rarer, more remote, tenser, more comprehensive states, in short precisely the elevation of the type "man", the continual "self-overcoming of man", to take a moral formula in a supra-moral sense. (BGE 257)

Nietzsche's perfectionist ideal is presented here as an increase of 'distance within the soul itself', attainment of 'ever higher, rarer, more remote, tenser, more comprehensive states'. Its condition is and will always be a society which believes in differences of value between individuals and depends upon some sense of slavery.

Yet the exact nature of the relation is unclear, and Nietzsche does not give us much to go on in this passage. What does Nietzsche mean when he says that every enhancement of man is the work of an aristocratic society? How is it, exactly, that social stratification is a prerequisite for differentiation 'within the soul'? Contemporary commentators who explicitly address this passage infer from BGE 257 a direct link between self-overcoming and the existence of a social hierarchy: the hierarchy gives rise to the pathos of distance of the aristocratic class, which is turned into the more mysterious inner pathos that enables striving for self-overcoming. Owen, for instance, interprets the pathos of inner distance as an internalization or translation of the social pathos of distance (Owen 1995 68, 124; cf. Ansell-Pearson 1994

50f.). What is significant about this interpretation is that it confines the activity of self-overcoming to the aristocratic elite, to the exclusion of others. It would therefore count against Conant's argument that Nietzsche's perfectionism is an ideal for everyone[2]. This is the gist of both Owen's and Ansell-Pearson's interpretation of this passage. The discussion then turns on the question whether this claim expresses a crucial aspect of Nietzsche's political ideas, namely that the perfectionist striving for self-overcoming is conditional on an aristocratic political order (Conway 1996; Ansell-Pearson 1994), or whether Nietzsche implicitly disavows the claims he makes in his subsequent writing (specifically, in GM), rendering Nietzsche's remarks in BGE 257 innocuous (Owen 2002).

Yet this interpretation immediately raises a difficulty within the passage itself. Nietzsche says it is an aristocratic *society*, not an aristocratic *class*, which gives rise to the elevation of the type 'man'. While 'that other, more mysterious pathos' could not have arisen *without* the aristocratic pathos of distance, it is not at all clear that it arises *from* the pathos of distance. If we read Nietzsche this way, he appears to be committing the fallacy of inferring a necessary connection from a statement of origin. But this interpretation not only jars with the wording of the passage itself. As I will argue, Nietzsche makes clear in subsequent passages that the widening of distance within the soul, and consequently the enhancement of man, arises not from the activity of the elite within a stratified social order, but from the dissolution of this order. The connection Nietzsche posits is less direct. In associating the elevation of the type 'man' with the pathos of distance belonging to a social hierarchy, Nietzsche foreshadows a connection that only becomes clear in the course of his narrative of the origins of moralities in social relations of power.

This point requires some elaboration. The key to assessing the connection between social hierarchy and self-overcoming is Nietzsche's account of morality as rooted in power. The first step is to recognize that a social hierarchy is characterized by relations of power which take the form of a relation of command and obedience between castes of rulers and slaves. This hierarchy represents not the result but the continuation of struggle between rulers and slaves: rulers continually keep the slaves at bay ('holding down and holding at a distance') and slaves resist suppression (Aydin 2007; BGE 257; cf. 26[276] 11.222; van Tongeren 1989 152f.). These relations of power affect rulers and slaves in a particular way: human beings for Nietzsche are fundamentally attuned to, or as Owen puts it, have an 'architectonic interest in' the *feeling of power* (Owen 2007 34; cf. BGE 13; BGE 230; GM III 7; Patton 2001 108f.). That is to say, the social power-struggle feeds into human beings' affective experience. The pathos of distance of the ruling caste is precisely the feeling of power which the rulers derive from the experience of command and superiority over other classes (BGE 257; cf. GM I 2).

Nietzsche connects this affective experience of power with the origin of morality. In this sense morality is the 'sign-language of the affects' (BGE 187)[3]. From the experience of command over and his distance from the weak, and from the pleasure, the 'feeling of plenitude', which the ruler derives from it, a moment of valuation arises. The ruling class determines an order of rank, it creates values that affirm this feeling of superiority (and thus affirm the ruler himself) as 'good' and condemn everything else as 'bad' (BGE 260)[4]. This is the origin of master morality. The slave's affective experience of power is different from that of the noble in that he experiences not a plenitude but a *lack* of power, a feeling of suffering and oppression which gives rise to a pathos of resentment (the slave counterpart to the noble pathos of distance) (GM I 10). As a means for 'enduring the burden of existence', the slave gives birth to the values reactively opposed to those of the nobles, calling the rulers 'evil' and

themselves ‘good’ (BGE 260). So, like that of the master, the slave's moment of valuation is rooted in his affective experience of power. The specific kind of relations of power that constitute a social hierarchy between classes are thus the condition for the rise of both noble and slave modes of valuation. So for Nietzsche a social hierarchy (the ‘incarnate differences of classes’) gives rise to a mode of valuation which attends these relations of power, constituting a ‘long scale of orders of rank and differences of worth between man and man’ (BGE 257)[5].

While Nietzsche argues that the moments of valuation of both the rulers and the slaves arise from their experience of power, the resulting modes of valuation are not epiphenomenal to the underlying social hierarchy. On the contrary, the establishment of a mode of valuation is a means in the power-struggle. The noble morality reinforces the hierarchical relation of master and slave by casting the master as the end and the slave as mere means. This enables the institution of law, justice and rights (that is, privileges), which can be seen as mechanisms for enforcing the social hierarchy by forging an affirmation of the relation of equality and justice among the ruling caste (BGE 265), while at the same time keeping the lower classes at bay (GM II 11)[6]. Concomitantly, the act of valuation of the slaves reversing the order of rank – ‘the slave revolt in morality’ (GM I 10) – serves their resistance and manages eventually to undermine and collapse the hierarchy which brought it forth and hence to subvert and transform the hierarchical relations of power.

It seems, then, that this account gives us an explanation (by connecting valuation to the feeling of power) of the origin and function of the belief in an order of rank and differences of worth between individuals in a social hierarchy. However, *pace* Owen[7], this account of social hierarchy as the origin of the aristocratic order of rank does not give us an explanation of the connection Nietzsche posits between the pathos of distance and the striving for self-overcoming. For while ‘political superiority’ does give rise to a mode of valuation that distinguishes the noble from the slave by ‘superiority of soul’ (GM I 6), it does not yet establish a striving for distance *within* the soul. It remains unclear in what sense a ruling class which derives a pathos of distance from domination over others would thereby strive for *self*-overcoming. Accordingly, the pathos of inner distance is not expressed in the noble morality of the rulers (an expression of the pathos of social distance) and is yet to be explained. We need to follow Nietzsche's analysis one step further.

This next step is the internalization of the struggle for power between perspectives of valuation. As we have seen, on Nietzsche's account moralities are rooted in and part of a power-struggle. We have also seen that Nietzsche conceives the enhancement of man as the achievement of ‘ever higher, rarer, more remote, tenser, more comprehensive states’ (BGE 257), as entertaining an ever-wider range of perspectives. Where does ‘that other, more mysterious pathos’, ‘that longing for an ever-increasing widening of distance within the soul itself’ originate? As van Tongeren (1989) shows, Nietzsche traces the question ‘What is Noble?’ in the chapter bearing that title (of which BGE 257 is the opening passage) through different historical periods, culminating in the question ‘What does the word ‘noble’ mean to us today?’(BGE 287). The conception of nobility changes along with a shift in focus; whereas Nietzsche begins by speaking of classes or castes (BGE 257-260), he shifts his attention to individuals (at first within classes (BGE 259-268), later on without reference to class (BGE 270-288)), and finally to the figure of the philosopher (BGE 289ff.; van Tongeren 1989 139). Along with this shift in focus, van Tongeren identifies a displacement of the locus of struggle from different castes, to different individuals, to within the individual. As van Tongeren

maintains, the intensification of tension within the individual is Nietzsche's ethical ideal of nobility in *Beyond Good and Evil* (van Tongeren 1989 165-171). As such, the struggle within the individual, as represented by the philosopher (BGE 292), constitutes Nietzsche's answer to the question: 'What does the word "noble" mean to us today?'(BGE 287)[8]. '[T]oday there is perhaps no more decisive mark of a "higher nature", a more spiritual nature, than that of being divided in this sense and a genuine battleground of these opposed values'(GM I 16; van Tongeren 1989 213-228)[9].

To see the implications of this, we need to trace this narrative in a bit more detail. As both the noble and slave modes of valuation are rooted in the 'incarnate differences of classes', in a struggle which takes a particular shape according to the 'power-complexes' (GM II 11) engaged in it, getting beyond the mere opposition of these moralities by opposing castes and attaining higher, more comprehensive states of human consciousness requires a transformation of the struggle. A transformation of the struggle means a transformation of the battleground and of the actors and their relations. This is exactly what Nietzsche describes in BGE 262. During the heyday of aristocratic discipline, 'continual struggle against *unfavourable* conditions', against internal and external enemies (lower castes within the same society and competing aristocratic castes outside it), 'fixes' and 'hardens' the caste and its members. Yet its success is also a cause of its demise; due to a lack of further obstacles to overcome, it becomes 'spent' or 'outlived'. The tension built up through the caste's outward struggle now turns inward.

> With one stroke the bond and constraint of the ancient discipline [of the aristocratic caste - TF] is broken: it is no longer felt to be a necessity, a condition of existence – if it were to persist it could be only as a form of luxury, as an archaizing taste. Variation, whether as deviation (into the higher, rarer, more refined) or as degeneration and monstrosity, is suddenly on the scene in the greatest splendour and abundance, the individual dares to be individual and stand out [...] The dangerous and uncanny point is reached where the grander, more manifold, more comprehensive life lives beyond the old morality; the "individual" stands there, reduced to his own law-giving, to his own arts and stratagems for self-preservation, self-enhancement, self-redemption. (BGE 262)

What is striking about this passage is that precisely the displacement of the struggle is what constitutes enhancement of mankind: the emergence of the individual after the demise of the aristocratic caste constitutes a 'grander', 'more comprehensive' form of life. This enhancement is made possible when the discipline (and presumably the political dominance) of the aristocratic class breaks down.

Still, while the emergence of the individual constitutes an enhancement, it falls short of self-overcoming characterized as a widening of distance *within* the soul, the internal tension which seems to characterize the figure of the philosopher (or nobility in our time). The dissolution of the aristocratic class and the emergence of the individual result in a mixing of different modes of valuation (BGE 260; BGE 262). No longer is either morality tied to a specific social class. Individuals are faced by a mixed legacy of contrary ideals (BGE 200). However, Nietzsche makes clear that this by no means entails that the individual himself becomes the locus of the tension and struggle between moralities, thus encompassing a broader range of affective experiences and entertaining a greater range of perspectives. While individuals who 'wage war upon themselves' in this sense become possible, these mixed cultures at the same time present an imminent threat of a cessation of struggle (BGE 200; BGE 262). This stifling is precisely what Nietzsche thinks Christianity and the democratic movement have come to represent in our time. This presents him with his fundamental predicament: How to revive the opportunity for individuality and self-overcoming, for the enhancement of life through the

cultivation of higher natures?

We are now in a position to make sense of the relation Nietzsche posits between social hierarchy and self-overcoming. Rather than associating the elevation of mankind simply with the activity of the aristocratic class, Nietzsche sees the disarray of the aristocrats as the dominant social class as a condition for self-overcoming. The enhancement of man is here the product of the tension that is released as an aristocracy loses its grip. It is not clear from BGE 262 whether Nietzsche thinks individuals are remnants of the dissolving aristocracy or arise from other castes as well. But what is important is that the dissolution of the discipline that maintains the social hierarchy is a condition for their emergence, and thereby, it seems, for the subsequent phase of internalization of tension within the soul. This is not to negate but to complicate the connection between social hierarchy and self-overcoming that Nietzsche affirms in BGE 257. Both the noble and slave modes of valuation originate from a society characterized by a social hierarchy of classes. It is the origin of the belief in differences of worth between individuals. The crux is that for Nietzsche's ideal of self-overcoming, *both* the noble and the slave mode of valuation are essential, or more precisely, the struggle between them within the individual. The intensification of this struggle within the individual is conditional on the dissolution of the stable marker of the social hierarchy, when discipline of caste gives way to individual discipline.

**2. Slavery as mere means**

This account of the pathos of distance goes some way to rebut attributions of political aristocratism to Nietzsche. Those readings rely on the assumption that self-overcoming is conditional on a social hierarchy because the striving for perfection of the elite requires the subordination of other classes, while my reading challenges the equation of self-overcoming with the activity of the aristocratic elite. But this narrative of origination does not explain in what sense according to Nietzsche any future enhancement of man requires slavery in some sense or other. Nietzsche does not merely say that the elevation of man is tied to an aristocratic society in that it originates there; he affirms a necessary connection between his perfectionism and slavery in some sense or other. Does this not repudiate my claim that there is no basis for attributing an aristocratic political theory to Nietzsche? I maintain that it does not. This is because slavery, as Nietzsche conceives it, is not merely a socio-political institution (although it has historically taken that form), but also, and more fundamentally, expresses an ethical attitude towards the slave. As I aim to show, slavery for Nietzsche is not characterized essentially by exclusion, as it is generally interpreted, but by exploitation. Furthermore, exploitation expresses a perspective in which others are regarded as mere means.

The first thing to note is that just as Nietzsche's perfectionist ideal is non-teleological and open-ended – Nietzsche does not propose an end-state to which self-overcoming strives – so his conception of aristocracy and slavery are underdetermined. Where Nietzsche alludes to slavery as a precondition for self-overcoming, he leaves its sense open: the elevation of 'the type "man"' requires slavery '*in some sense or other*' (BGE 257, emphasis added), and 'involves a *new kind* of enslavement' (GS 377, emphasis added). This implies that the sense of slavery on which self-overcoming is conditional is tied to what self-overcoming means in a particular context. As self-overcoming is an open-ended and dynamic historical process, so the sense of an aristocratic society and of slavery that is its precondition is historically contingent. This is apparent in the historical narrative that runs through the last chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil* (as discussed above and by van Tongeren). In this respect it is

significant that Nietzsche presents his requirement of slavery and aristocracy not as a culmination but as the starting point in pursuing the question 'what is noble?' Nietzsche affirms slavery in BGE 257 as a necessity for self-overcoming, and illustrates it with reference to the original aristocratic societies, but what it means *for our time* is by no means obvious, and becomes clearer only in the course of the chapter.

Throughout *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche deploys the notions of aristocracy and slavery both in a socio-political sense (a society characterized by a social hierarchy in which one class dominates others) and in a more abstract sense. As we have seen, Nietzsche takes an aristocratic society in the socio-political sense to be the origin of the striving for self-overcoming. The question is what slavery in the more abstract sense means and why it is a precondition for self-overcoming. Although the exact sense of slavery as a condition for self-overcoming remains open, it seems that we can find an abstract characterization of what it means in different historical situations. For Nietzsche, slavery, whether it is directed at other classes, individuals, or oneself, expresses an instrumental attitude toward other human beings or part of oneself: to regard them not as ends in themselves but as *mere means*. This perspective takes the form of a basic or fundamental belief on the part of the one who adopts it. A healthy aristocratic class, for example, must have as its 'fundamental faith' that it is an end in itself (cf. 26[282] 11.224),

> that it does not feel itself to be a function (of the monarchy or of the commonwealth), but as their meaning and supreme justification – that it therefore accepts with a good conscience the sacrifice of innumerable men who for its sake have to be suppressed and reduced to incomplete men, to slaves and instruments. (BGE 258)

A noble soul is characterized by the 'immovable faith that to a being such as 'we are' other beings have to be subordinate by their nature, and sacrifice themselves to us' (BGE 265). And finally: 'A human being who strives for something great regards everybody he meets on his way either as a means or as a delay and hindrance – or as a temporary resting place' (BGE 273). It appears that this fundamental faith in a reduction of others to mere means is the flip-side of the coin that the noble feels himself an *end* – slavery is the correlative of egoism (BGE 265).

> It is not the works, it is the faith which is decisive here, which determines the order of rank here, to employ an old religious formula in a new and deeper sense: some fundamental certainty which a noble soul possesses in regard to itself, something which may not be sought or found and perhaps may not be lost either. – The noble soul has reverence for itself. – (BGE 287)

Three things are important to note here. First, in each of these cases, Nietzsche is attributing a belief to a noble class or individual. In other words, slavery here refers to a *perspective* adopted by certain individuals. By contrast, the enhancement of the 'type "man"' appears to be a third-person judgment. So when an aristocratic class believes itself to be a higher form of existence that is the purpose of its society (BGE 258), that fact in itself does not necessarily amount to an elevation of mankind as articulated by Nietzsche. Nonetheless, for individuals to adopt this perspective is crucial for the self-overcoming of mankind. The reason, it seems, is that Nietzsche believes self-overcoming requires an unconditional commitment to oneself as an end (as is expressed in the 'fundamental' or 'immovable' faith (BGE 258; BGE 265)). Second, the subject of this perspective changes historically. There is a shift in the subject to which Nietzsche attributes the fundamental belief in oneself as an end and in others as mere means which maps onto the shift in focus throughout his chapter from the aristocratic class (BGE 258) to the individual as a member of a class (BGE 265), to the solitary individual

striving for greatness (BGE 273). Third, this account raises the possibility that the object of the perspective of slavery can be part of the self. Recall that in the final phase of Nietzsche's narrative, the struggle between modes of valuation or perspectives has been internalized; the philosopher is divided within himself. This implies that the attitude one takes in adopting oneself as an end seems to involve also treating (part of) oneself as a means[10]. This is expressed, for example, in Nietzsche's claim that great men conduct war against themselves (BGE 200) and his assertions of hardship and suffering as preconditions for self-overcoming (BGE 225; BGE 270)[11]. It is not clear, then, that the philosophers of the future need the 'sacrifice of others' in the same way that the aristocratic class needed the slave class for its economic sustenance. If it is conceived as an intensification of struggle within the soul, then why would self-overcoming necessarily rely on the actual exploitation of other human beings?

At this point one could object that I have understated the extent to which slavery, for Nietzsche, consists in the *actual practice* of exploitation of others, beyond the adoption of an instrumentalizing perspective as part of an unconditional commitment to oneself. Isn't there an obvious sense in which the individual who strives for self-overcoming needs the actual exploitation of others, in the same way that an aristocratic class needed a slave class, namely to provide for the necessities of life and the leisure to strive for greatness? The first thing to note is that this argument is conspicuously absent in *Beyond Good and Evil*, despite its forceful assertion that slavery in some sense or other is required for self-overcoming[12]. On the other hand, there are some notes in the *Nachlass* which suggest an economic reason why slavery is required in contemporary conditions, notably 10[17] 12.463. In this note, Nietzsche conceives contemporary democratized and economized society as the 'maximum in the exploitation of the human' which constitutes the life-condition for a kind of higher man who 'stands upon' and 'lives off' it[13]. Nietzsche describes modern man as exceptionally fit to be regarded and used as an instrument. What is needed now are new aristocrats capable of making use of him and giving him direction (cf. BGE 242; 2[179] 12.155). Since, then, democratic society already represents a form of exploitation, an economic arrangement highly fit to support an aristocratic endeavour, it seems that the pertinent point with respect to the need for a new kind of slavery does not reside in the need to repress and exploit a class of persons (contemporary man is already slavish and productive). Even if, from the perspective of new aristocrats, some form of exploitation is required as a life-condition, with a view to the enhancement of man the need for a new kind of slavery seems to express the need to cultivate an unconditional commitment and instrumentalizing attitude[14].

**3. Life-negation and exploitation**

An important challenge remains. Doesn't this account underestimate how literal Nietzsche's claims about slavery and hierarchy are (although I maintain that they *are* literal, just in a more abstract sense)? How, if at all, can it be squared with Nietzsche's sometimes biologistic accounts of social phenomena? After all, in *Beyond Good and Evil* 259, Nietzsche claims that every healthy social body practices exploitation because 'life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and, at the least and mildest, exploitation', and as such it wants 'to grow, expand, draw to itself, gain ascendancy'. Nietzsche ridicules the 'common European consciousness' with its desire for democracy and equal human rights. The society-wide application of the measure and restraint that these ideals express constitutes a denial of life as will to power:

> As soon as there is a desire to take this principle [to mutually refrain from injury, violence, exploitation, to equate one's own will with that of another - TF] further, however, and if possible even as the fundamental principle of society, it at once reveals itself for what it is: as the will to the denial of life, as the principle of dissolution and decay.

Insofar as such sentiments (of restraint toward equals) are normal, appropriate, healthy, 'good manners'– that is, within an aristocratic body – they are so only when they are coupled with exploitation of other bodies. Nietzsche concludes:

> "Exploitation" does not pertain to a corrupt or imperfect or primitive society: it pertains to the essence of the living thing as a fundamental organic function, it is a consequence of the intrinsic will to power which is precisely the will of life. – Granted this is a novelty as a theory – as a reality it is the primordial fact of all history: let us be at least that honest with ourselves! –

The passage easily lends itself to be read as a socio-ontological thesis about social bodies. Exploitation as essential to life, as Nietzsche describes it here, attains a physical quality, as something bodies do against other bodies, which seems hard to reconcile with the notion that 'spiritual' exploitation is just as much exploitation, and with the idea that it may be practiced against oneself. Doesn't this passage entail that treating others as a means must necessarily take the form of physical violence and exploitation of other human beings? Nietzsche's insistence that we 'resist all sentimental weakness' suggests that we are to take him quite literally.

The passage raises complicated issues which would merit a separate study. There appears to be a tension between the one-sided portrayal of will to power in organismic terms in this passage, and the more differentiated ways Nietzsche tends to deploy it elsewhere, for example, when he identifies philosophy as 'the most spiritual will to power' (BGE 9; BGE 211), and when he uses will to power to account for biology (BGE 13), psychology (BGE 23; BGE 51), and ontology (BGE 22). I want to make it at least plausible that a *prima facie* socio-ontological reading, which stresses actual exploitation rather than its perspectival aspect and which seems to rule out the internalization of exploitation, can be avoided. Without denying the centrality of the conception of life as will to power in Nietzsche's thought, the passage also seems to lend itself to an alternative interpretation, in which the rather narrow and one-dimensional organismic metaphor for will to power that Nietzsche deploys here for social analysis is read as a polemic and performative attempt to unmask democratic ideals rather than as an ontological thesis regarding social organizations. To argue that passages that do not easily fit one's account are polemically motivated is potentially problematic, but in this case I think a strong case can be made for such a reading.

A polemical reading places the rhetorical deployment of this passage in line with the in-your-face approach Nietzsche deploys throughout his work of trying to loosen the hold of the dominant sentiments of his contemporaries. In *On the Geneology of Morals*, for example, Nietzsche unmasks Christian morality as rooted in cruelty, thus undermining and inverting the Christian's self-conception[15]. Similarly, I would suggest, in BGE 259 Nietzsche criticizes the 'common European consciousness' for its (to put it mildly) naïve view of life and for its profound misunderstanding of *itself*. He emphasizes the exceptional nature of the self-conception as humane of those who advocate equal freedom for all, and tries to *unmask* this common consciousness by recasting it as life-negating, exhorting us to be at least honest with ourselves about this. When Nietzsche asserts that '"[e]xploitation" does not pertain to an imperfect or primitive society', he exhorts us to realize that a democratic society, too, practices exploitation in some sense or other (as argued above).

A tension remains between Nietzsche's aim of unmasking dominant Christian and democratic ideals as themselves expressions of cruelty and exploitation, and hence as forms of life, and his aim of casting them as signs of decay and degeneration, as adverse to life. The critical moment in this passage (BGE 259) is the characterization of the will to take the principle of equality and restraint as the 'fundamental principle of society', and to imagine a future state of society free from exploitation, as *life-negation*. Life-negation involves a form of dishonesty. The essence of life as will to power is only recognized if one dares to 'think this matter thoroughly through to the bottom and resist all sentimental weakness'. Yet by themselves, falsehood and dishonesty are not necessarily hostile to life in Nietzsche's view: falsehood can be a condition for life (BGE 4). Indeed, Nietzsche conceives morality as falsehood that is of use to life. On the other hand, Nietzsche suggests that life-negation amounts to more than a form of dishonesty; it is actually adverse to life. What renders life-negation problematic is that it becomes also a 'principle of dissolution and decay'. Note that this qualification implies a shift in perspective: while life-negation is a qualification of someone's perspective, the qualification of adversity to life takes a third-person standpoint from the perspective of 'life'. The difficulty lies in explaining how, in this case, a form of dishonesty amounts to adversity to life. This points to a more general problem of Nietzsche's account of will to power to explain decadence or decay (cf. Aydin 2007). I cannot fully address these issues here.

**4. An aristocratic political theory?**

Let me sum up the main points so far. First, the relation between Nietzsche's perfectionism and a social hierarchy of classes is less direct than Ansell-Pearson and Owen suggest. While a striving for self-overcoming cannot originate without the pathos of distance that arises in an aristocratic class, the striving for self-overcoming itself (and the enhancement of man) cannot be equated with the activity of the aristocratic elite. Social hierarchy is the origin of modes of valuation the struggle between which is a condition for self-overcoming. Second, slavery for Nietzsche is needed for the enhancement of man because it represents a perspective that attributes the highest significance to the achievement of one's greatness (and hence to the achievement of self-overcoming) and makes other individuals or concerns subject to this, reducing them to mere means. The cultivation of new philosophers able to lift humanity out of its paralysis seems to require precisely this faith, but is prevented by the dominance of slave morality (BGE 203). The lack of reverence for oneself and for the overruling importance of one's task stifles struggle and thereby precludes the enhancement of man. What is required in contemporary conditions is not so much the economic conditions for greatness by means of the sacrifice of others, but individuals who adopt an aristocratic perspective; a commitment to oneself that implies a willingness to treat others or parts of oneself as mere means.

An important implication of my analysis is that the interpretation of *Beyond Good and Evil* as espousing an aristocratic political theory based on the institution of social stratification misses the historical dimension of Nietzsche's thought on this point. Modern conditions call for a re-assessment of the question what is noble, and concomitantly, of what slavery is. What such an account misses is any idea of *why* subjugation of others by means of a political regime is needed as a precondition for greatness in contemporary conditions. It is clear that Nietzsche sees a need for differences of valuation among individuals, and for individuals to have an unconditional commitment to themselves as ends, but it is unclear why this should take the form of a socio-political hierarchy between classes. In fact, in the light of Nietzsche's account of the modern condition, political aristocratism appears as an archaic form of organization

suited to a time when the conditions for self-overcoming were different. Whereas Nietzsche's conception of self-overcoming is historically dynamic, the idea that it can be produced through aristocratic institutions as the 'supreme form of political regime' casts it as static (Conway 1996 34). To attribute an aristocratic political theory to Nietzsche is to beg the question: What makes self-overcoming possible *in contemporary conditions*?

Why, then, do commentators insist on attributing an aristocratic political theory to Nietzsche? My suggestion is that at the root of this interpretation lies an equation of slavery with exclusion. On my interpretation, exploitation is the essence of Nietzsche's conception of slavery. The difference may appear trivial but it has significant consequences for the political theory one can attribute to Nietzsche. As I argued above, exploitation as Nietzsche conceives it refers essentially to the adoption of a perspective in which others or parts of oneself are regarded as mere means. Exclusion is an institutionalized social status; it draws fixed boundaries between castes, instituted by law. Although these may be permeable to some extent (cf. HH 439), such exchange is institutionally mediated according to certain criteria. Conceived in this way, political exclusion appears as one way (but not necessarily *the* way) in which aristocratic subjectivity (the attitude of exploitation) can constitute an objective social reality.

Conway acknowledges that slavery has historically taken different forms, and also that Nietzsche deploys the term in different senses (Conway 1996 36, 147, n. 11). But despite this, he attributes primacy to the kind of slavery associated with a hierarchical caste system:

> Although it turns out that [Nietzsche] is more interested in the sort of "slavery" that one imposes on oneself in the cultivation of one's soul, his peculiar, metaphorical use of the term "slavery" is itself a concession to the besetting decadence of his epoch. If *real* slavery were possible in late modernity – that is, if the establishment of an aristocratic political regime were a viable option in the twilight of the idols – then he would surely, and unabashedly, endorse it as a precondition of the perfectionism he advocates. (Conway 1996 36f.; emphasis in original)

Conway concludes that Nietzsche 'views the practice of exclusion as an inescapable element – a 'necessary evil,' as it were – of political legislation in any regime'(Conway 1996 37). Conway's analysis is problematic for two reasons. First, his attribution of primacy to the socio-political sense of slavery turns on a distinction between metaphorical slavery and real slavery. Yet this presupposes a dualism to which Nietzsche would not subscribe. For Nietzsche, as we have seen, moralities are both rooted in a power-struggle and are means in it. This implies that forms of subjection through internalization of beliefs or modes of valuation are just as much an expression of power as subjection by means of physical force. Nietzsche's point is that spiritual slavery *is* real slavery, just as spiritual cruelty *is* real cruelty[16]. Second, Conway considers Nietzsche's turn to a more 'spiritual' conception of slavery a concession to the decadence of his time. But this is to turn the matter around. Nietzsche does not start out with a universal theory of the enhancement of the species, as if advocating an eternal truth – he starts out from a concern with and diagnosis of his time. As argued above, he posits internal differentiation and struggle within the soul as an ideal for this time, countering the homogeneity he sees as decadence. Nietzsche fails to endorse political aristocracy as a solution to his contemporary predicament not simply because he realizes that what Conway calls 'real' slavery – an institutional hierarchy of classes – is no longer feasible, but because nobility has come to mean something different, something to do with individuality. In other words, it is not at all clear that even if modern institutions were not too corrupt, as Conway argues (Conway 1996 39), the institution of a political hierarchy would provide the conditions

for self-overcoming requisite to our age.

If my interpretation is sound, and Nietzsche does not (implicitly or explicitly) endorse an aristocratic political regime, if only nostalgically, then the question arises how we can explain his frequent favorable reference to and evident admiration for aristocratic regimes. Here we should note that aristocratic regimes are almost always presented in contrast to contemporary society (or to the slave morality which characterizes it according to Nietzsche), not as an alternative option that we can adopt, but rather to reveal something important about our own time, to subvert the dominance of contemporary prejudices, and to open up new perspectives (HC; BGE 259; TI Improvers 2-3; AC 57; GM)[17].

**Conclusion**

In the texts usually adduced to support an aristocratic political interpretation, Nietzsche nowhere advocates the institution of a *political* aristocracy – which is not to say that he does not express admiration for aristocracies. Nietzsche's perfectionism is inherently aristocratic in the sense that it involves an unconditional commitment to oneself and an instrumentalization of others and aspects of oneself, but what this means with respect to politics is left open. If one understands the political as the governing institutions of society, Nietzsche's aristocratism is not primarily political but ethical. Nietzsche is not nostalgic for aristocratic political regimes, desiring to roll back the slave-revolt in morality as if it was a mistake. What is needed now is something higher, more 'spiritual'. But for that at least some individuals must lose their democratic scruples and prejudice – an effect Nietzsche hopes to achieve performatively, through his writings. The vagueness of his notion of 'great politics' indicates that it cannot be understood in the conventional terms of political thought – and perhaps, Nietzsche might say, cannot yet be understood at all[18].

Nietzsche's aristocratism is not thereby rendered harmless or benign. It involves the cultivation of an attitude that allows in principle the use of others for one's ends and that is difficult to reconcile with democratic civility. As such it expresses a fundamental rejection of the principle that one's freedom is limited by the freedom of everybody else. Yet it is not at all clear that it amounts to implementation of a rigid social hierarchy and a rejection of democratic institutions. According to Nietzsche, modern man has rendered himself a small and useful tool. Conceived in this way, contemporary society already represents an elaborate form of exploitation. What seems needed, then, is not institutions capable of pressing people into service for an elite, but rather a new kind of aristocrat who conceives himself as its purpose.

> And would it not be a kind of goal, redemption, and justification for the democratic movement itself if someone arrived who made use of it –, by finally producing beside its new and sublime development of slavery – that is what European democracy will become ultimately, – that higher kind of dominating and Caesarean spirits who would now – have need of this new slavery? For new, hitherto impossible prospects, for their prospects? For their tasks? (2[13] 12.73f.)

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2 One could, of course, attribute this to a change in Nietzsche's views after *Schopenhauer as Educator*, which forms the basis of Conant's account.

3 'A human being's evaluations betray something of the structure of its soul and where it sees its conditions of life, its real needs' (BGE 268).

4 'The pathos of nobility and distance, as aforesaid, the protracted and domineering fundamental total feeling on the part of a higher ruling order in relation to a lower order, to a "below" – that is the origin of the antithesis "good" and "bad"'(GM I 2).

5 As Patton and Owen argue, an implication of Nietzsche's conceptualization of the feeling of power is that it is disconnected to some extent from the actual social relations of power (Patton 2001 108-109, Owen 2007 34-35). This is to say that the affective experience of power is not fully determined by the social relations of power. The reason is that for Nietzsche the human affective experience of power is perspectival in nature; it involves a moment of interpretation. As Owen neatly sums up: 'Nietzsche's point is this: because human beings are self-conscious creatures, the feeling of power to which their doings give rise is necessarily mediated by the perspective in terms of which they understand (or misunderstand) themselves as agents and the moral evaluation and ranking of types of action expressed within that perspective. Consequently, an expansion (or diminution) of the feeling of power can be an effect of a change of perspective rather than of an actual increase (or decrease) of power expressed'(Owen 2007 34). However, since this does not imply that there is no relation between actual power and the feeling of power, it does not count against an interpretation of the origins of modes of valuation in the affective experience of a social hierarchy.

6 '[L]aw represents on earth [...] the struggle against the reactive feelings, the war conducted against them on the part of the active and aggressive powers who employed some of their strength to impose measure and bounds upon the excesses of the reactive pathos and to compel it to come to terms'(GM II 11).

7 '[T]his good/bad form of moral reasoning emerges from the pathos of social distance in which the feeling of political superiority which stems from the power of command over slaves is translated into the feeling of superiority of soul (the pathos of inner distance) which Nietzsche ascribes to the noble'(Owen 1995 68).

8 Cf. van Tongeren (1989 213-256) for a discussion of the practicability of this perfectionist ideal.

9 See also BGE Preface, where the free spirits are characterized by internal tension.

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11 This raises a problem which I cannot fully address here. How can one adopt oneself as an end while at the same time instrumentalizing aspects of oneself? Perhaps the problem is analogous to that of how to reconcile different formulations of Nietzsche's perfecionist ideal as 'becoming what one is' (SE) and 'self-overcoming' (BGE).

12 This suggests again that the elevation of man, for Nietzsche, is not the work of the aristocratic *class*. Recall that the noble mode of valuation has its origin not in suffering, but in the aristocrats' pleasurable feeling of abundance (BGE 260).

13 And despite Nietzsche's deployment of this argument with respect to ancient Greek aristocracy in his early essay 'The Greek State' (GSt).

14 'He needs just as much the antagonism of the crowd, of the "levelled ones", the feeling of distance in comparison with them; he stands on them, he lives from them. This higher form of aristocratism is that of the future. – In moral terms, that total machinery, the solidarity of all cogs, represents a maximum in the exploitation of humans: but it presupposes those for the sake of whom this exploitation has meaning'(10[17] 12.463).

15 The *Nachlass* passages with respect to the new aristocracy are highly contentious. See especially 2[76] 12.96f.; 9[174] 12.439; 35[47] 11.533; 26[173] 11.195; 7[21] 10.244; 9[153] 12.424; 37[8] 11.580; 25[134] 11.49; 2[57] 12.87; 2[13] 12.71. Cf. 'Aristokratie' in van Tongeren et al. (2004 120-129); also the paper by Herman Siemens in this volume.

16 On the performative aspects of GM, see Owen (2007), and David Owen's paper in this volume.

17 Cf. BGE 188: '[I]t seems that slavery, in the cruder and in the more refined sense, is the indispensable means also for spiritual discipline and breeding'. What does Nietzsche mean by slavery here? Even the Christians practise it!

18 In AC 57 and TI Improvers, Nietzsche explicitly contrasts Christianity with aristocracy in a way which suggests that these passages are meant to reveal something about Christianity, rather than propose aristocracy as an alternative. This renders problematic attempts to identify an aristocratic political theory in these passages.

The issue of 'great politics' is highly contentious. BGE 208 provides a challenging account, in which Nietzsche desires a unification of European nations into a single will 'by means of a new caste dominating all of Europe'. 'The time for petty politics is past: the very next century will bring with it the struggle for mastery over the whole earth – the compulsion to great politics'. Still, what Nietzsche has in mind is subject to interpretation, and Nietzsche tends to defer the question to the future: 'Enough, the time comes, in which one must relearn about politics' 2[57] 12.87f. Cf. note 14 above.