

**“Nature is loved by what is best in us.” – Emerson (“Nature,” 2nd essay, p. 395.)**

**“We sail right over morality.....” (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 31.)**

While any comparison of Nietzsche and Emerson should not overemphasize their similarities and neglect to point out significant differences (e.g. Emerson’s optimistic belief in the divinity of human nature, as opposed to Nietzsche’s nihilistic atheism), it should come as no surprise that Emerson, author of the essay “Self-Reliance,” is mentioned admiringly by Nietzsche several times. An example is, “Emerson with his essays has been a good friend and cheered me up even in black periods..... Even as a boy I enjoyed listening to him” (*Ecce Homo*, 1989, p. 339). Another example, “Emerson – Much more enlightened, adventurous, multifarious, refined than Carlyle; above all happier..... Such a man instinctively feeds on pure ambrosia..... Emerson possesses that good-natured and quick-witted cheerfulness that discourages all earnestness..... His spirit is always finding reasons for being contented and even grateful” (*Twilight of the Idols*, 1990, p. 86).<sup>(1)</sup>

Although we cannot be sure which essays influenced Nietzsche with their “cheerfulness,” let us begin by looking at Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” which not only argues for non-conformity and solitude as Nietzsche does, but also contains sentences which sound as if they could have come from Nietzsche’s pen. Just three examples; first: re. fear, “We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other. Our age yields no great and perfect persons” (p. 145); second example, “We come to them who weep foolishly and sit down and cry for company, instead of imparting to them the truth and health in rough electric shocks, putting them once more in communication with their own reason” (p. 147); third, re. “civilized man,” “[I]t may be a question..... whether we have not lost by refinement some energy by a Christianity, entrenched in establishments and forms, some vigor of wild virtue” (p. 151). The resonance of these ideas with Nietzsche’s is, I think, clear, as are their implications for Nietzschean philosophy of life.

Emerson, the American Transcendentalist, is well-known as a naturist like his confrere Thoreau. It is not so widely recognized, however, that Nietzsche too makes many remarks about “Nature” and argues that we can learn from Nature, as Emerson does. However, for Nietzsche and Emerson how Nature can assist and guide us is

very different. Clarification of their differing notions of “Nature” will require some textual documentation. To begin with, Emerson wrote not only his famous long essay, *Nature*, but also a shorter essay also called “Nature,” as well as other essays setting forth his philosophy of Nature, such as “The Over-Soul.” That Emerson believes immersion in Nature can have a wholesome/therapeutic effect is clear: “In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows” (*Nature*, p. 6). Speaking in similar words of the charms of Nature, Emerson says: “These enchantments are medicinal, they sober and heal us. These are plain pleasures, kindly and native to us” (*Nature*, p. 391). In what way is Nature our benefactor? For both Nietzsche and Emerson it is because the key to morality lies in Nature. Nature can instruct us by its example how to live morally, (or “amorally”). In *Nature* Emerson explains what he means by saying that “Nature” is another name for “spirit” and is “the symbol of thought.” He says, “The moral law lies at the centre of nature and radiates to the circumference. It is the pith and marrow of every substance, every relation, and every process” (*Nature*, p. 23). In other words, “The laws of nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass..... The axioms of physics translate the laws of ethics” (*Nature*, p. 18). Emerson here has in mind the idea that laws of physics regarding gravity, motion, friction, etc. have a moral interpretation, or lesson, to teach us. For example, where there is action, there is equal and opposite reaction – an axiom that can be applied in life as well as in the laboratory. For Emerson, direct contact with, or intellectual contemplation of, Nature, restores and puts us back in touch with our own divine nature. Cannot the reflection of the moon in a mudpuddle be as moving and revelatory as a symphony by Beethoven? Nature resuscitates and rejuvenates by recalling to us our own deepest nature, which is identical to the nature of Nature.

### **Nietzsche on Nature**

It is perhaps surprising to find that Nietzsche, the moralist (or “Immoralist”), has something to say about “Nature” in virtually every one of his works, from the earliest unpublished notebooks to *The Will to Power*, compiled and published by his sister. In his remarks about Nature, Nietzsche is generally most concerned about the question as to

whether Nature is in any sense “moral.” Corollary questions are: In what way can Nature serve as a moral example to us? and, Is it possible to live in accordance with Nature or “return to Nature?” Discussion of this latter question is often framed in terms of the debate between Rousseau and Voltaire regarding the desirability of returning to a state of Nature, as opposed to one of “civilization.” Let us discuss these issues in reverse order, and compare them to Emerson’s optimistic view of Nature and human nature.

Regarding the question as to whether it is possible and/or desirable for man to “return to Nature” (in the manner, say, of Thoreau), Nietzsche has several different things to say, but his main point is always that although it would indeed be desirable for men to emulate Nature in her cruel, profligate, playful, immorality, the reality is that we lack the strength and courage to do so; we may hope to someday go beyond both Nature and morality in the sense that man will become (presumably by evolution) more than man (“better and more evil”). In *Beyond Good and Evil* (p. 15), speaking of the stoics, Nietzsche says, “‘According to nature’ you want to live?..... Imagine a being like nature, wasteful beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without purposes and consideration, without mercy and justice, fertile and desolate and uncertain at the same time..... Your pride wants to impose your morality, your ideal, on nature.....” Here we see already the crucial difference between Emerson’s bright vision of Nature as moral, meaningful, and purposeful, and Nietzsche’s darker view of Nature as chaotic and immoral. Nietzsche also here expresses his typical view that we inevitably “impose” or project a moral meaning onto a morally meaningless situation – just as we will later see that he argues that the “laws of Nature” are a fiction. In *The Will to Power* (p. 73), Nietzsche expresses his key idea that all morality is unnatural, or “anti-natural,” and his regret that we dare not “return to nature” (i.e. dare not be as immoral as Nature in fact is). “Not ‘return to nature’ – for there has never yet been a natural humanity. The scholasticism of un- and anti- natural values is the rule, is the beginning; man reaches nature only after a long struggle – he never ‘returns’ – Nature: i.e. daring to be immoral like nature.” In *The Will to Power* (p. 62), Nietzsche sketches the issue in terms of the debate between Rousseau and Voltaire: “Rousseau: the rule based on feeling; nature as the source of justice; man perfects himself to the extent to which he approaches nature (according to Voltaire, to the extent to which he moves away from nature). The very same epochs are for one ages of the progress of humanity, for the

other, times when injustice and inequality grow worse.” In *Twilight of the Idols* (p. 113), Nietzsche again berating Rousseau (and praising Napoleon), says in the spirit of Zarathustra: “*Progress in my sense*. – I too speak of a ‘return to nature’, although it is not really a going-back but a *going-up*. Up into a high, free, even frightful nature and naturalness, such as plays with great tasks, it is *permitted* to play with them.....” Once again we see Nietzsche’s fundamental idea that natural man is immoral, and since man is not now “immoral” (or, “beyond good and evil”), man is not now natural, although we may aspire to such a condition in the future as we re-define what it means to be human, or “more than human.” Nietzsche, the psychologist, makes a final insightful point regarding the desire to “return to Nature”: “Thus men also plunge into nature, not to find themselves but to lose and forget themselves in it. ‘To be outside oneself’ as the desire of all the weak and the self-discontented” (*The Will to Power*, p. 495).

Regarding the morality or immorality of Nature and Nature’s capacity to serve as our moral mentor, in *Twilight of the Idols* (p. 55), Nietzsche states: “—I formulate a principle. All naturalism in morality, that is all *healthy* morality, is dominated by an instinct of life – some commandment of life is fulfilled through a certain canon of ‘shall’ and ‘shall not’, some hindrance and hostile element on life’s road is thereby removed. *Anti-natural* morality, that is virtually every morality that has hitherto been taught, revered and preached, turns on the contrary precisely *against* the instincts of life – it is a now secret, now loud and impudent condemnation of these instincts.” By speaking of “healthy morality” Nietzsche somewhat erodes or undermines his usual opposition between Nature and Morality, as he does in the following two remarks, where it is conceded that Nature may be “cruel and playful” but is still “noble” and capable of showing the moral direction we should take. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (p. 101): “.....nature manifests herself as she is, in all her prodigal and magnificent indifference which is outrageous but noble.” In *The Will to Power* (p. 32): “Nature is not immoral, when it has no pity for the degenerate: on the contrary, the growth of physiological and moral ills among mankind is the consequence of a pathological and unnatural morality. The sensibility of the majority of men is pathological and unnatural.”

In one of his most extended, interesting, and cogent passages regarding Nature’s irrationality and inefficiency, Nietzsche compares the artist and the philosopher as two of the means Nature has chosen to produce and purvey culture, yet in a way that is cruelly

inefficient and wasteful, insofar as the artist himself enjoys his work in a way and degree that the public at large can never follow, likewise for the writings of the philosopher which are largely ignored or misunderstood. In Nietzsche's eyes, it is again a case of Nature squandering the rare and valuable, even if Nature has "the common good" in mind. In *Unpublished Writings* (pp. 278-81), we find the following statements: "We must reproach nature for its inexpedience..... It is stupid to create an avalanche only in order to remove a little snow, or to kill a human being in order to swat a fly on his nose. But that's how nature proceeds. The artist bears witness against teleology. The philosopher even more so. For whom does he philosophize? For himself? For others? But the first case would be senseless wastefulness on the part of nature, the second once again inexpedient. The philosopher always has utility only for the few, not for an entire people: his effect on these few is not as strong as on the author himself." Continuing, Nietzsche remarks: "Nature proceeds in an incomprehensible and clumsy way..... Nature does not take aim, and it misses the mark countless times. Artists and philosophers perish because their arrows do not hit the mark. Nature is just as wasteful in the realm of culture as it is in planting and sowing. It accomplishes its purposes in an inefficient and general manner. It expends too much energy for purposes which are out of proportion."<sup>(2)</sup>

Given that in Nietzsche's view Nature is irrational, inefficient, cruel, and "immoral," how could Nature ever serve as our moral compass (in life, or in a counseling/therapy situation)? In *Beyond Good and Evil* (p. 30), Nietzsche suggests that "nature's conformity to law" is only a matter of interpretation (of Nature, much as philologists interpret a text, and in doing so inevitably violate/distort the text by imposing or projecting alien meanings onto the text). We already know that Nietzsche would have us emulate the supposed "immorality" of Nature (an argument also proffered and practiced by de Sade).<sup>(3)</sup> Here we may speculate that insofar as Nature herself is "lawless" and indefinite/indeterminate/uncertain, one who seeks moral guidance from Nature should cultivate a similar "lawlessness," or lack of closure, finality, definiteness. I will argue below that, Nietzsche's vision is that only by remaining open and indefinite in one's identity and intentions can one live a fully creative and spontaneous life (as artist, philosopher, counselor, client, or "average person"), and deal with difficult situations involving loss in novel ways.

## **Loss: Love, Death, Culture Shock, Computer Addiction – Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Natural Morality Applied**

Significantly revised, Nietzsche’s life-formula would read: No moral failure, no fear, no hate. In terms of the above four categories of critical or chronic life-problems, this means that in each case what has been lost (or is otherwise lacking) is none-other than one’s good conscience. Feeling guilty, one feels vulnerable and afraid; afraid, one hates the unfamiliar.....in a vicious cycle. How, then, does one cope with apparently irreparable loss? Loss of purpose, meaning, truth, value, identity – or, more specifically, loss of life or loved one, loss (active or passive) of love or friendship, loss of ontological comfort during culture shock, loss of sensitivity to the *Mit-Sein* dimension of life (during “virtual schizophrenia”). Loss of employment and loss of a spouse through death, are considered to be perhaps the two most stressful experiences in life. How to deal with such loss?

Authentic Nietzschean therapy/counseling always begins by uprooting fear. In the case of lacking a loved one (one has not been found), or losing a loved one (either through a break-up, or death), or in maintaining a loving relationship, one should never act out of fear; fear causes need and one should desire the object of one’s love but not need it, and one should seek the same independent spirit for one’s loved ones. As in all four categories of “life-problem” under consideration, various strategies of Nietzschean therapy could be deployed. Other than overcome the failure, fear, hate cycle, one can keep in mind that attitude and interpretation, as well as action, are important. All “losses” are open to re-interpretation as a “gain,” or simply as a neutral fact (neither gain nor loss, or both gain and loss). People complain of not getting (i.e. lacking) something desired, as often as they complain of getting something unpleasant or harmful. In any case, during such periods of tribulation what is needed is strict encouragement and reinvigoration. Relationships are, like life in general, a struggle which one must learn to enjoy (“It hurts so good!”).

Nietzsche said a lot about both love and death, however here I will only try to sketch out in broad strokes the main outlines of how a Nietzschean therapist would attempt to aid someone dying or someone whose loved one is dying, or has died. The importance of real-time relationship wherein the counselor shows, as well as tells, what courage and love

are, cannot be overestimated; fear and courage are both contagious, as love and hate are. For all, courage is more important than intelligence.

The dying man, for example, may be informed that his decision to re-interpret his situation in positive terms, for example, as a challenge and an opportunity (to show courage, to help others by showing them the way, a chance to satisfy a morbid curiosity), rather than an unmitigated disaster, is free and authentic. Nothing should be assumed, but everything considered – including suicide/euthanasia as an option when the client (or counselor!) is over-ripe for it. Like everything, one can habituate oneself to saying “Yes!,” and joyfully embrace The End as the natural culmination of things. A sense of humor (and irony) is not always uncalled for. The grieving can best be consoled by agreeing that indeed quality of life is at least as important as quantity, and that the deceased had a quality life which has run its natural course. Quality of life is an equal function of external given circumstances into which one finds oneself “thrown,” as well as one’s freely chosen response; in other words, one is free to remember that under all circumstances the deceased had the chance to attempt to struggle and enjoy the “disasters” in life. Everything can not only be borne, but enjoyed. It all hangs on a clean conscience (I maintain, and believe Nietzsche advocates in the form of his hero/master morality, in which a “good conscience” is equivalent to a joyful nihilism). Just as Nature is productive and yet destructive, so too in human life are gain and loss interconnected. A forest fire need not be viewed as a disaster, nor are forms of loss which cause grievous suffering beyond reinterpretation as turns of events which open new doors.

One could easily argue that Nietzschean, existentialist, and Taoist philosophical counselors (in their emulation of an open-ended Nature) are in an advantageous position, being able perhaps to better adapt to alien cultural and conceptual territory, and thus make good cross-cultural counselors. From Nietzsche’s careful analysis of “culture” and “civilization,” and from his analysis of fear, being-together, etc., the informed Nietzschean philosophical counselor should be particularly sensitized to the distribution of power (à la Foucault), the moral culture, and patterns of communication, in the client’s culture as they are revealed in conversation. Culture shock could be “treated” by the counselor driving home the idea that aloneness, contingency, and some degree of paradox or absurdity, are all “normal.” Again, everything comes back to strength and

overcoming fear (and thus avoiding hate). In culture shock, fear is often not of overt, immanent danger, but is induced by uncertainty regarding what the other intends, and is thus unnecessary fear and worry if one comprehends the existential fact that everything is always contingent (again, as in Nature-at-large), and that we are always somewhat “alone” (even, or especially, when we are “at home”); one is thus inoculated with shock, and is enabled to be shocked by anything, and nothing (seeing the extraordinary as ordinary and vice versa). One should expect, hope for, change and difference (as is the rule in Nature).

Regarding the broad topic of “computer addiction,” one might begin by defining this onto-disorder as “unnatural” loss of sensitivity to the *Mit-Sein* dimension of life if the client is living a virtual life with virtual relationships at the cost of “real” ones. A Nietzschean or existentialist counselor/therapist might also remind the client that before him lie indefinitely many options, and it is never wise to trap oneself so that one’s options are unnecessarily limited (e.g. by falling into the habit of retreating to the computer screen instead of entering public space).<sup>(4)</sup>

## Conclusion

So, what are we to make of Nietzsche’s philosophy of natural morality as a theoretical groundwork for psychotherapy (or philosophical counseling/practice)? Nietzsche’s highly-opinionated tirades are often hot-headed and poorly argued, sadistic and sarcastic in tone, at times openly racist – it is no wonder that he has been accused of being a proto-Nazi. In the case of Nietzsche (as perhaps with all “existential” thinkers) it seems particularly apt to compare their lives and their writings for consonance or disparity. I would argue, however, that Nietzsche’s eventual “madness” is irrelevant to the truth or falsity of his views and propositions – any other position amounts to *argumentum ad hominem*. In my own experience, Nietzsche’s philosophy (a strong wine to be taken only occasionally, in small doses) is an invigorating and refreshing tonic – about as refreshing as a blast of wind off the bow of a ship – crisp, clear, and dangerous. In his call for strength, courage, and independence, Nietzsche provides keys for a vigorous life, truly in tune with Nature. Despite my radical revision of Nietzsche’s formula for a good life, so that “moral failure” often lies at the root of our lack of courage, I would still

maintain that in theory and practice Nietzsche has much to offer anyone seeking to develop a philosophy of life aligned with the main trends of Nature herself.<sup>(5)</sup>

## Notes:

- (1) Following the translation of Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ* (Tanner and Hollingdale, London and New York: Penguin, 1990), there is a Glossary of Names, with the following note on Emerson: "EMERSON, Ralph Waldo (1803-82) Aphorism 92 of *The Gay Science*, on the relation between poetry and prose, names only four 'masters of prose' of the nineteenth century (Goethe being considered a product of the eighteenth): Leopardi, Merimee, Emerson, and Landor. Whatever one may think of this judgement, and of its somewhat narrow conception of what constitutes good prose, it provides evidence of Nietzsche's extreme admiration for Emerson. The original edition of *The Gay Science* (1882) is prefaced by a quotation from Emerson, and he admired Emerson longer and with greater consistency than he did any other contemporary writer: his holiday programme for 1862 included making extracts from all Emerson's essays (no record of whether he actually did so) and his enthusiasm is just as great in 1888."
- (2) It is perhaps worth noting here Nietzsche's debt to Darwin, since Nietzsche himself does not do a very good job of doing so. First is the shared idea that man is an animal with natural animal appetites which are instinctive and include the "instinct to self-preservation." Nietzsche's doctrine (especially in *Zarathustra*) of the "going under" and "going up" of man to the more than human, has two readings: one an existential reading interpreting Nietzsche to mean that individuals may heroically challenge themselves to become "Yes!-saying" *Uebersmenschen*, living creative and independent lives of high achievement and nobility of spirit; the other reading however is flatly racist and evolutionary (in the strict sense of Darwin's "natural selection" or, survival of the fittest); this is especially clear when Nietzsche openly speaks of "breeding" and "mixing" of races, as well as when he singles out particular ethnic groups (including beer-guzzling Germans!) for his vitriol and denigration. However, as Nietzsche makes clear in the section under discussion regarding the extravagant waste by Nature of artists, philosophers, and other exceptional and valuable individuals, the key difference between Nietzsche and Darwin, is Nietzsche's insistence that it is precisely the most superior and valuable specimens (in the case of mankind) which are most likely not to survive, but rather to be over-run and destroyed by the mob/herd (which in its mediocrity fears the unfamiliar).

- (3) See for example, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*.
- (4) Perhaps I owe the reader an apology here for such sketchy and dilettantish remarks regarding how a Nietzschean might begin to address the four types of presenting problems which I use as examples of loss. My remarks are meant only to show how Nietzschean theory might come down to earth in application, and are not meant to be thorough in demonstrating in each case how life-problems can be addressed on Nietzschean terms.
- (5) Whereas Nietzsche's position seems clearly to be that "no problems are moral problems" (since "there are no moral facts," and "the bite of conscience is indecent"), my own view (the truth of which I am not entirely convinced) is that "all problems are moral problems" – i.e. the root of most of our troubles lies in self-betrayal, neglect of our own ideals and dreams, not being true to oneself, moral carelessness, etc. – a condition which induces fear, itself inducing hate, hostility and aggression towards others. It may be that Nietzsche has a vision of morality not unlike that of the Taoists, whereby one is enabled to accomplish much that may be viewed as morally laudable (but with no moral intentions or concern), whereas my own view is very Confucian, emphasizing moral self-examination as a method of recuperating from moral failure, and rectifying situations that are inevitably social and moral. By the way, a sequel to this paper to be called, "Nietzsche and Psychopathology" is under construction; it sets forth a taxonomy of philosophical disorders discussed by Nietzsche, including the following: "madness," fear, anxiety, neuroses, compulsion, hysteria, depression, nausea, ennui, melancholy, exhaustion, despair, decadence, degeneration, resentment, and nihilism. This work is seen as furthering the development of "philosophical counseling/practice," as opposed to psychotherapeutic (or even "existential") counseling, although many will balk at the "medical model" implied by such a taxonomy of philosophical "disorders."

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