

Please cite the published version in *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, available at <http://hpq.press.illinois.edu/34/1/glazer.html>

## Nietzsche on Mirth and Morality

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*Laughter I have pronounced holy; you higher men, learn to laugh!* (Z IV.13:20)

Beginning in *The Gay Science* (1882), but continuing through *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), and *The Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Nietzsche time and again exhorts his readers to laugh. But why? I argue that Nietzsche wants us to laugh because the emotion that laughter expresses, mirth, plays an important psychological-cum-epistemological role in his attack on traditional morality. I contend that mirth, unlike other attitudes, is uniquely suited to loosening morality's grip on us, not only as an abstract proposition, but as a lived form of life, and that Nietzsche champions it for this very reason. It is no coincidence, then, that Nietzsche chooses to call his philosophy a 'gay science' rather than a 'skeptical' or a 'sad science.'

The basic story runs as follows: Nietzsche criticizes traditional moralities both for painting false portraits of human nature and for advocating ideals that are inhibitive of true human flourishing. Mirth<sup>1</sup>, the pleasurable emotion that one experiences upon consuming humor and expresses through laughter, is essentially directed toward a proposition or proclamation that one ceases to take seriously, in the sense that one had but no longer takes it to be true or binding. Thus, the experience of mirth in the face of traditional morality can free one from its harmful dictates, which is why Nietzsche views laughter as a portent of strength and vitality.

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche's term, '*Fröhlichkeit*,' is often translated as 'gaiety' or 'joyousness.' I translate it as 'mirth' throughout.

But why *mirth*? Why should an emotion, much less an odd one like mirth, be the focus of Nietzsche's exhortations? That is, why does Nietzsche call for us to be amused by morality when it would surely be enough simply to believe it false and unhealthy? I argue that Nietzsche champions mirth because it is uniquely suited to rooting out beliefs that have covertly infiltrated our psychologies. Given that Nietzsche considers morality to be insidious, or to maintain its hold over us even after we think that we have freed ourselves from it, we need mirth to expose its nefarious workings. Thus, while mirth is not the only attitude that Nietzsche recommends that we adopt toward the dictates of traditional morality – indeed, he suggests that we adopt many others as well – mirth nevertheless enjoys a privileged status within Nietzsche's spirited polemics.

I am by no means the first to argue that humor plays a central role in Nietzsche's philosophical project. Indeed, there is already a growing body of literature on precisely this topic. A number of scholars have compellingly highlighted the importance of Nietzsche's humorous *style*, arguing that it has either a *pedagogical*, a *therapeutic*, or a *destructive* aim. Kathleen Higgins' *Comic Relief* (2002) pursues a pedagogical reading, arguing that Nietzsche employs 'humorous strategies to dislodge readers from their typical somber philosophical habits and to incite their own imaginative thinking' (2002, ix). Lawrence J. Hatab (2008) advances a therapeutic reading, arguing that Nietzsche's humor 'abandons certainty and embraces limits in knowledge and life – and enjoys such delimitation' (2008, 82). Finally, a number of so-called 'postmodern' readers of Nietzsche have defended a destructive reading, according to which Nietzsche uses humor to undermine 'serious' philosophical system-building. Gilles Deleuze argues that Nietzsche pushes a radical agenda in which every attempt to 'codify' our experiences must be rejected, and that 'one cannot help but laugh when the codes are confounded' (1999, 147). Similarly, George McFadden (1981) avers that Nietzsche presents humor as a 'Dionysian joy that is only to be found in the destruction of forms that are noble and good rather than ugly' (1981, 350).

My approach differs from the aforementioned in that my focus is on Nietzsche's *philosophy of humor* rather than on his *humorous philosophy*. That is, I shall analyze the claims that Nietzsche makes about humor, setting aside the humorous effects that his writings may have on his readers.

Again, I am by no means embarking on virgin territory here. John Lippitt (1992) has paved the path for me, claiming that Nietzsche views laughter as an appropriate expression of our liberation from restrictive social norms. In his words, laughter is a ‘relief from the constraints of decency, politeness, and so on’ (1992, 43). As we shall see, I am in general agreement with Lippitt’s line of interpretation, although I hope to make the implications of it for Nietzsche’s critique of traditional morality more explicit.

A competing account of Nietzsche’s philosophy of humor has been defended by Hatab (1988; 2005), who argues – in line with his therapeutic reading of Nietzsche’s humorous style – that Nietzsche conceptualizes laughter as, ‘a most positive, vibrant form of tragic affirmation, a healthy incorporation of the negative limits of being’ (2005, 162). Our accounts differ in that whereas Hatab views Nietzschean laughter as being properly directed toward oneself and one’s own existence, I view laughter as being properly trained toward pernicious moral doctrines, and only secondarily toward oneself. Moreover, whereas Hatab’s account is centered on laughter itself, my account is centered on the emotion that laughter expresses, namely mirth. I claim that it is the emotional attitude that does all the heavy lifting in Nietzsche’s theory, and not its outward expression, which serves merely as a signal for that attitude.

The paper is structured as follows. I begin by reviewing Nietzsche’s infamous critique of traditional morality (§ 1). I then argue that Nietzsche holds mirth to be incompatible with serious doxastic commitment (§ 2), and that, because of this, he recommends mirth as an attitude to take toward traditional morality (§ 3). Afterward, I contend that Nietzsche accords a privileged status to mirth insofar as it is uniquely suited to uprooting subconscious moral commitments (§ 4), but that it can only play this role when partnered with skepticism (§ 5). Finally, I conclude with a detailed interpretation of GS 1, which best encapsulates Nietzsche’s arguments (§ 6).

## **1. Nietzsche’s Critique of Traditional Morality**

Nietzsche’s critical stance toward morality has earned him a variety of notorious epithets: Nietzsche the Immoralist, Nietzsche the Nihilist, and

most dramatically, Nietzsche the Antichrist. The details of Nietzsche's critique continue to be the subject of scholarly dispute, but there is at least a general consensus concerning his overarching line of attack. In short, Nietzsche criticizes traditional moralities for misrepresenting human nature and for prescribing behavior that impedes human flourishing (Leiter, 1995; 2002; 2010).

On the first point, Nietzsche argues that traditional moralities rest upon a number of false assumptions about human nature: most importantly, (1) that humans have free will, making them appropriately responsible for their actions, and (2) that their motives can be transparently ascertained from their behavior or conscious thoughts (Leiter, 2010). Nietzsche develops arguments against these assumptions throughout the 1880s (e.g., D 116, 119; GS 333; BGE 21; GM I.13), but we find a succinct summary of them in *Twilight of the Idols* (1888):

The 'inner world' is full of phantoms...: the will is one of them. The will no longer moves anything, hence does not explain anything either – it merely accompanies events; it can also be absent. The so-called *motive*: another error. Merely a surface phenomenon of consciousness – something alongside the deed that is more likely to cover up the antecedents of the deeds than to represent them. (TI VI:3; quoted in Leiter 2010).

In short, our conscious intentions do not play the causal/explanatory role we think they do: rather than causing our behavior, they obscure the inner workings of the mind.

Traditional moralities are not merely false, according to Nietzsche; they are also harmful. His central argument for this conclusion, found most prominently in *The Gay Science* and *The Genealogy of Morality*, is that traditional moralities advocate values that inhibit human flourishing, based on a correct understanding of human nature. Human beings, in Nietzsche's view, are living, breathing, fleshy animals, whose flourishing necessarily involves a degree of physical (including psychological) health. Yet traditional moralities present our embodiment as a sickness, and seek at every turn to overcome or erase it. Nietzsche despises this disgust of the body, writing: 'I find those people unpleasant in whom every natural

inclination immediately becomes a sickness, something disfiguring or even contemptible' (GS 294). Against Socrates' claim that the body is the metaphorical sickness of the soul, Nietzsche claims that the soul is the literal sickness of the body. He notes that our spiritual existence 'becomes even more self-assured and triumphant to the extent that its own presupposition, physiological viability, *decreases*' (GM III.11; see also GM I.6, GS 305, 340). In short, morality make us sick, and this sickness is a direct impediment to human flourishing.

In response to traditional morality's denial of the body, Nietzsche declares the need to 'translate man back into nature' (BGE 230, cf. 33). He rejects the poisonous shame that morality indoctrinates, even listing the overcoming of shame as a sign of greatness: 'And as long as you are in any way *ashamed* of yourselves, you do not yet belong among us!' (GS 107) And: '*What is the seal of having become free?* – No longer to be ashamed before oneself' (GS 275).<sup>2</sup> Thus, Nietzsche's own normative stance may be characterized as one that champions and defends the importance of biological and psychological well-being.<sup>3</sup> In *Ecce Homo* (1888), subtitled *How One Becomes What One Is*, he builds on this idea by arguing that we ought to act in accordance with our nature (EH II:9).

Having summarized Nietzsche's overarching critique of traditional morality, I will now switch gears and discuss Nietzsche's remarks about mirth and laughter. § 3 will then bring us back to Nietzsche's critique of morality, allowing my central claim about mirth to figure prominently therein.

## **2. The Psychological Structure of Mirth, Part I**

Although Nietzsche writes often about mirth, comedy, and laughter, he never formulates an explicit theory of humor as such. This is hardly surprising, given his opposition to systematic theorizing, but we are still left to wonder what general understanding of humor may have propelled his particular thoughts on the subject. Thankfully, for the arguments that I am

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<sup>2</sup> Meyer (2012, 39) likewise argues that comedy and laughter play an important role in the overcoming of shame.

<sup>3</sup> But see EH I:2 for Nietzsche's account of 'health.'

pursuing here, we must attribute to Nietzsche only two general claims about the nature of mirth. I shall discuss the first here, and the second in § 4.

The first claim, which I call the *Incompatibility Thesis*, states that experiencing mirth toward a particular proposition or proclamation is incompatible with taking it seriously, in the following sense: if we find a particular demand or claim amusing, then we cannot at the same time take ourselves to be legitimately bound by it (in the case of a demand) or committed to it as a truth (in the case of a claim). Three clarifications are in order. First, the incompatibility arises only when we are amused by the *content* of a claim. We may find a particular *formulation* or *presentation* of a claim amusing, while still taking the content seriously. Second, there are other ways of taking claims seriously, which are not incompatible with mirth. We may be amused by the content of a claim, yet still take it ‘seriously’ in the sense that we engage with it philosophically, or appreciate its cultural significance, or follow it from fear of earthly punishment. Finally, the incompatibility is alethic rather than deontic. The claim is not simply that it would be *irrational* to be amused by something and to consider it true or binding at the same time; the claim is that, under normal conditions, it is *psychologically impossible*. There’s something about the structure of mirth that prevents a person from committing herself to a proposition or proclamation that she finds amusing.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche conceives the mind as a battleground of conflicting affects, or drives:

*What knowing means. – [Not to laugh, not to lament, not to curse, but to understand!] says Spinoza as simply and sublimely as is his wont. Yet in the final analysis, what is this intelligere other than the way we become sensible of the other three? A result of the different and conflicting drives to laugh, lament, and curse? Before knowledge is possible, each of these impulses must first have presented its one-sided view of the thing or event; then comes the fight between these one-sided views, and occasionally out of it a mean, an appeasement, a concession to all three sides, a kind of justice and contract [...]. Since only the ultimate reconciliation scenes and final accounts of this long process rise to consciousness, we suppose that intelligere must be something conciliatory, just,*

and good, something essentially opposed to the instincts, when in fact *it is only a certain behaviour of the drives towards one another.* (GS 333)

As Katsafanas (2005) and Riccardi (2015) interpret this passage, the mind is for Nietzsche divided into a subconscious realm of continuously conflicting drives and a sometimes conscious, sometimes subconscious realm of stable, linguistically-structured propositional attitudes (including beliefs, desires, and emotions). Whereas Spinoza held that the attitudes are independent of the drives, Nietzsche holds that the attitudes are in fact constituted by the relations between the drives. And whereas folk-psychology attempts to explain human behavior in terms of our attitudes, Nietzschean psychology attempts to explain human behavior in terms of the underlying drives.

The reason why a person cannot feel mirth toward a proposition and consider it true or binding at the same time, for Nietzsche, is that the orderings of drives that constitute the first attitude are distinct from the orderings of drives that constitute the second. For a person to take a proposition seriously, certain drives (including the drive to laugh at it) must be dominated, or least kept in check, by other drives. For a person to experience mirth toward a proposition, on the other hand, those first drives must instead dominate.

### **3. Mirth vs. Morality**

Let us now bring the central points from the first two sections of the paper together. Nietzsche, we have seen, is critical of traditional morality for misrepresenting human nature as well as for prescribing harmful ideals. And Nietzsche believes mirth to be an attitude that is incompatible with taking certain claims or commandments seriously. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find that Nietzsche often describes the rejection of morality in terms of finding it ridiculous or laughable, and that Nietzsche both applauds and recommends this emotional reaction to it.

In the first aphorism of the first book of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche claims that every great moral teacher ‘was vanquished by laughter,’ and that in liberating ourselves from their teachings, ‘laughter will have formed an

alliance with wisdom' and 'only "gay science" will remain' (GS 1). We learn in the preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science*, written several years later, that 'gay science' signifies an 'amusement' that triumphs over the seriousness of morality (GS Pr. 1). Nietzsche even adds a short text to the title page, which includes the exhortation to "laugh at each master, who at himself has not poked fun.' The masters referenced here are probably the moral teachers of that first aphorism, who decree that 'There is something one is absolutely forbidden henceforth to laugh at' (GS 1).

We also find a number of suggestive passages from *Beyond Good and Evil*, written between the first and second editions of *The Gay Science*, in which Nietzsche points out that mirth embodies a rejection of moral prescriptions (BGE 5, 11, 62, 186). The most telling is found at the end of the book, where Nietzsche describes his gay science as an 'amulet' that can protect one from the influence of traditional morality (BGE 293). Immediately afterward, he extols the virtue of laughter: 'I would even allow myself to rank philosophers according to the quality of their laughing... I have no doubt that [the Gods] also know how to laugh...at the expense of all serious things! Gods are fond of ridicule: it seems that they cannot refrain from laughter even in holy matters' (BGE 294). Recalling Hobbes' view that mirth is the experience of 'sudden glory' over another (Hobbes 1991, 43), which Nietzsche appears to endorse (BGE 294), the idea is that in being amused by something 'holy,' we elevate ourselves above it, dismissing its purported authority over us (Gunter, 1968).

I have suggested that mirth and laughter figure prominently into Nietzsche's attack on morality insofar as he views mirth as an attitude that is incompatible with doxastic commitment. If you find something funny, then you cannot believe it to be true or to make a legitimate demand on you. Two important questions remain. First, mirth is not the only attitude that it is incompatible with doxastic commitment; skepticism is too. Why, then, does Nietzsche want us to laugh at morality, rather than simply to believe it false and harmful? Second, although mirth is incompatible with doxastic commitment, it's still an open question as to which comes first: the experience of mirth or the rejection of morality. If we can laugh at morality only once we have ceased to take it seriously, then mirth would be a *symptom* of a change in attitude, not its *cause*. Why, then, should we think that mirth is a cause of the rejection of morality?

To answer these questions, I shall advance a ‘two-step’ account of the overcoming of morality. The first step is skepticism. Assuming that we are convinced by the arguments that Nietzsche presents against the descriptive and normative claims of traditional morality, we will disavow them as false and harmful. However, Nietzsche suggests that morality is *insidious*, and that we may continue to follow its dictates subconsciously, despite having consciously disavowed them. The second step in the overcoming of morality is mirth. For reasons I shall present shortly, mirth is uniquely suited to identifying and rooting out beliefs that have infiltrated the subconscious. Skepticism initiates the exorcism of traditional morality from our minds by targeting our conscious commitments to morality. Mirth completes it by targeting our subconscious commitments to morality. In the end, both attitudes are needed.

#### **4. The Psychological Structure of Mirth, Part II**

In § 2, I attributed to Nietzsche the Incompatibility Thesis, or the claim that it is impossible to be amused by a proposition or proclamation and to take it seriously at the same time. In this section, I shall attribute to Nietzsche another thesis, which I call the *Exposure Thesis*. According to this thesis, we are amused when we recognize that a disavowed belief has covertly infiltrated our minds, usually as a result of this belief coming into conflict with another belief (Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 2011). Mirth shines a light on a perfidious belief and exorcises it.

Mirth, like its cousin surprise, results from the unexpected. We don’t find jokes that we’ve already heard funny, precisely because we expect the punchline before it’s told. We do find jokes funny, however, when they unexpectedly cause us to realize that we have made a false assumption somewhere along the way. Consider how the following joke functions: *Two fish are in their tank. One says to the other, ‘I’ll man the guns; you drive’* (Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 2011, 42). The joke’s set-up tricks the hearer into thinking that ‘tank’ means ‘fish tank,’ leading her to imagine two fish swimming inconspicuously in their aquarium. The joke’s punch-line then reveals to her that her interpretation of the set-up was in error, since ‘tank’ in fact meant ‘armored car.’ Mirth is the experience of the incongruity

between the thought that the fish are in an aquarium and the thought that the fish want to man the guns and drive, coupled with the resolution of the incongruity by revising one's understanding of the meaning of 'tank' (Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 2011, 110-1). Crucially, the joke only works if the listener is unaware of having made the assumption that 'tank' means 'fish tank.' If the listener hears the setup and consciously deliberates, 'Well, 'tank' could mean 'fish tank' or 'armored car,' but here it probably means 'fish tank,' then she won't experience the sudden resolution of the incongruity, and so won't be amused by it.

On this understanding of humor – which is often called the 'incongruity theory' (Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 2011; Morreall, 2013) – mirth occurs when an implicit assumption is suddenly exposed through its inconsistency with another belief. Some have argued that the pleasurable exposure of an implicit belief is both necessary and sufficient for mirth (e.g., Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, 2011), but here I shall attribute to Nietzsche the weaker and far less controversial thesis that this exposure is merely sufficient.<sup>4</sup>

Why should we think that Nietzsche would have endorsed this thesis? One reason is that Kant endorsed this thesis and Nietzsche adopted, nearly word for word, Kant's formulation of it. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant writes that 'Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing' (1987, 203). In other words, mirth occurs whenever an implicit assumption is unexpectedly (but happily) revealed to be false, and hence we cannot simultaneously laugh at an assumption and believe it to be true at the same time. Now compare Kant's formulation with Nietzsche's in *Human, All Too Human*: 'we play and laugh when the expected (which usually makes us fearful and tense) discharges itself harmlessly' (HH 213). Nietzsche, like Kant, describes humor as the resolution of a 'tense expectation,' a wording that is unique enough to discount coincidence. Another potential reason is that Schopenhauer endorsed the incongruity theory (1907, I.13; quoted in Morreall, 2013), and since Nietzsche was greatly influenced by Schopenhauer, he may have adopted it from him. However, I have not found any passages in Nietzsche that directly attest to Schopenhauer's influence on this point.

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<sup>4</sup> Working out the precise sufficiency conditions is difficult, however. See Clark (1987), Martin (1987), and Morreall (1987).

Let us grant that Nietzsche endorsed the Exposure Thesis. It follows from this thesis that a person will find morality amusing if morality has covertly infiltrated her mind but is then exposed through its incongruity with other beliefs. To be clear, a person does not discover that a belief has infiltrated her psychology *and then* experience mirth as a result; rather, the discovery partially *constitutes* the experience of mirth. Mirth is, in this view, a ‘hot cognition,’ an intentional mental state that feels a certain way, rather than an unintentional feeling that follows an intentional mental state.<sup>5</sup> What makes mirth an especially perspicuous attitude, for Nietzsche, is that it can identify beliefs that we consciously disavow yet subconsciously accept. Borrowing a metaphor from Hurley, Dennett, and Adams (2011), mirth functions to ‘debug’ our minds. It scans for incompatibilities among our conscious and subconscious commitments, and rewards the discovery of one with a burst of pleasure. Thus, in the same way that *ressentiment* essentially functions to turn one’s ‘evaluating glance’ outward (GM I.10), mirth essentially functions to turn one’s scrutiny inward, toward one’s implicit assumptions and cognitive habits.

The need to ‘debug’ our minds is important, for Nietzsche, insofar he views morality as *insidious*, or as continuing to influence our behavior even once we have consciously disavowed it. Indeed, Nietzsche often claims that moral values are so deeply rooted in our shared forms of life that they cannot be easily uprooted and eradicated. He writes in *The Gay Science*, for instance, that ‘There are no experiences other than moral ones, not even in the realm of sense perception’ (GS 114). In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche argues that philosophers unknowingly mistake dubious moral claims for logical or metaphysical truths (BGE 11, 21, cf. 24). He even writes that ‘All psychology so far has got stuck in moral prejudices and fears’ (BGE 23). Finally, the third treatise of the *Genealogy of Morality* is dedicated to showing that many diverse endeavors are secretly governed by ascetic moral ideals. In sum, Nietzsche asserts, throughout this period, that morality is pervasive; that it rears its ugly head everywhere, even where least expected. The problem with skepticism and other attitudes that are

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<sup>5</sup> Leiter (2013) argues that Nietzsche adopts a non-cognitivist view of subconscious drives, according to which these drives are mere feelings, or inclinations, without cognitive content, but a cognitivist view of emotions, according to which emotions do have cognitive content. Riccardi (2015), drawing on Katsafanas (2005), argues that emotions are propositional attitudes.

incompatible with doxastic commitment, then, is that they are too naïve, on Nietzsche's view. When we abstractly consider the truth or falsity of a proposition, we may fail to appreciate the extent to which our beliefs are effects of our lived and embodied forms of life. Mirth avoids this naïveté by *presupposing* the influence of morality on our lives as part of its intrinsic psychological structure. We are amused by morality precisely because it has covertly infiltrated our minds.

Crucially, mirth does more than simply detect the infiltration of pernicious moral ideals; it also exorcises them. The experience of mirth is tumultuous – and typically accompanied by a sudden and grotesque outburst of laughter – precisely because it is the experience of a mutiny among subconscious drives. With the discovery of a subconscious commitment to morality, certain drives, including the drive to laugh, are released from their subjugation by other drives and rise to dominance. The reordering of drives – like the discovery of cognitive infiltration – is not simply a *cause* of mirth; rather, it *is* mirth.

Here I am drawing on so-called 'release theories' of humor, according to which mirth is the experience of liberation from self-imposed inhibitions on certain socially-unacceptable drives (Spencer 1860; Freud 1960). On Freud's version of the theory, we experience mirth when we gratify those urges that we normally repress, especially urges toward sex and aggression. Nietzsche is asserting something similar: we experience mirth when certain drives that are normally held in check suddenly gain dominance. We find an articulation of this thesis in the preface to *The Gay Science*: "'Gay Science": this signifies the saturnalia of a mind that has patiently resisted a terrible, long pressure – patiently, severely, coldly, without yielding, but also without hope – and is now all of a sudden attacked by hope, by hope for health, by the *intoxication* of recovery' (GS Pr 1). The inhibiting norms of traditional morality have created a 'terrible, long pressure' within us.<sup>6</sup> Even if we consciously disavow traditional morality, self-effacing drives may continue to dominate the subconscious. The experience of a mirth is a 'saturnalia of [the] mind,' a revolution of the subconscious in which drives that were once dominated – drives to laugh, to hope, to gratify – suddenly rise to dominance.

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<sup>6</sup> In the *Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche offers an extensive analysis of this repression of drives, which results in 'bad conscience' (GM II.17).

My account of mirth has important implications for our understanding of Nietzsche's theory of mind. Katsafanas (2005) and Riccardi (2015) argue that mental attitudes (including beliefs, desires, and emotions) are constituted by relations among subconscious drives. It is easiest to visualize these relations as *static* relations – as a hierarchy of drives in a single time slice. However, I'm suggesting that some mental states are constituted by *dynamic* relations among drives – as shifts in a hierarchy across multiple time slices. Felt emotions, in particular, would be the conscious experience of upheavals among drives, of some rising to dominance and others being subordinated.

To review, we laugh at morality when we discover that it has covertly infiltrated our subconscious, despite us having consciously disavowed it, and when certain drives, previously held in check, rise to dominance. This account of the psychological structure of mirth answers both of the questions that I posed at the end of § 3. Nietzsche accords a special status to mirth insofar as it is capable of 'debugging' our minds, or of identifying the subconscious influence of beliefs that we have consciously disavowed. And mirth is more than a symptom of the overcoming of morality insofar as mirth is the experience of a mutiny among drives, in which those drives that are inconsistent with a continued adherence to traditional morality take charge.

## **5. Gay Science**

By now it should be clear that while mirth has an important role to play in the overcoming of morality, it cannot play this role alone. On my interpretation, mirth complements skepticism by picking up where skepticism leaves off. Through philosophical arguments and rational considerations we can draw the conclusion that traditional moralities are false and harmful. However, the contemplation of this conclusion may fail to constitute a true rejection of traditional morality, since morality may continue to influence our psychologies on a deeper level. Mirth enters the picture as a strategy for 'debugging' our minds. Mirth can expose the subconscious influence of traditional morality, and root it out. Thus, at the end of the day, my claim is not that mirth can overcome traditional morality

all by itself; rather, my claim is that mirth has a central and pivotal role to play in the overcoming of traditional morality, but must work alongside skepticism in order to play it effectively.

We see this idea reflected in the chronology of Nietzsche's works. In *Human, All Too Human* (1878) and *Daybreak* (1881), Nietzsche offers sober, reasoned arguments against traditional morality. Then, in *The Gay Science* (1882), which completes the so-called 'free spirit' trilogy, Nietzsche begins exhorting his readers to laugh at morality. These exhortations continue throughout the 1880s. On my interpretation, this progression parallels an individual's overcoming of morality: first we must disavow morality as false and harmful; then we must root out its subconscious influence through mirth. In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche claims that 'we have to *learn to think differently*—in order...to *feel differently*' (D 103). Before we can be amused by morality, we must first disavow it. After all, mirth requires the discovery of an assumption that we do not endorse. Were we to endorse morality, then the discovery that it has covertly infiltrated our minds would not be experienced as mirth. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche suggests that changes in taste – especially changes in what one finds 'ridiculous' – rather than changes in opinion, are what predict changes in behavior (GS 39, 132). To prevent ourselves from subconsciously acting on the basis of a morality we reject, we must do more than judge it false, we must judge it 'ridiculous,' which is to say, we must experience mirth toward it.

We also see this idea reflected in the name that Nietzsche chooses for his philosophy: 'gay science.' To overcome morality, we need science (i.e. skepticism). But science is not enough. We also need gaiety (i.e. mirth). Nietzsche writes in the preface to *The Gay Science* that in doing gay science, 'much that is unreasonable and foolish comes to light' (GS Pr 1), where what is unreasonable gives rise to skepticism and what is foolish gives rise to mirth. In the end, both attitudes are needed to overcome morality. Skepticism without mirth is ineffectual, but mirth without skepticism is blind.

As we shall see in the next section, however, mirth will often serve as only a temporary reprieve from morality. Once the amusement and laughter subside, a person may go back to taking morality seriously. She may do so because morality fills a need that humans have acquired, namely the need to

find meaning and purpose in their lives. Nietzsche holds that mirth will provide a permanent reprieve from morality if and only if a person can learn to turn her ridicule from morality onto herself. Once she has laughed away the harmful dictates of morality, she must learn to laugh away her own need for a replacement. That is why Nietzsche advocates that we laugh at ourselves. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra instructs his students in the ability to laugh at oneself – ‘Learn to laugh at yourselves as one must laugh!’ (Z IV 13:15). (It is telling that parts I-III of *Zarathustra* encourage the reader to take Zarathustra seriously, and then part IV stages an ass festival, which prompts the reader to laugh at Zarathustra and at his or her own desire to find something to take seriously.) In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he states that one exhibits ‘good taste’ and ‘courage’ by mocking oneself (BGE 5). And in the *Genealogy of Morality*, he writes that ‘a great tragedian...only arrives at the final pinnacle of his greatness when he is able to see himself and his art *beneath* him,—when he is able to *laugh* at himself. (GM III.3). For Nietzsche, wisdom – more specifically, *gay* wisdom – consists in the ability to laugh at morality as well as one’s own need for morality. Only then will a person be able to free herself from it entirely.

My ‘two-step’ account of the overcoming of morality helps to explain why Nietzsche’s own normative outlook will not be susceptible to mirth in the same way that traditional moralities are. To the extent that Nietzsche’s view is grounded in true claims about who we are, where self-loathing and self-deception have no place, we will not be amused by it. If we are amused by anything, at this point, it will be a sneaking return of the self-effacing desire for meaning and purpose beyond those that make us who we are (see More, 2014). To conclude this paper, I shall offer an interpretation of GS 1, which best encapsulates the arguments that I have attributed to Nietzsche.

## 6. Gay Wisdom

The first aphorism of the first book of *The Gay Science* is entitled, ‘The teachers of the purpose of existence,’ and in it, Nietzsche provides an analysis of the rise and fall of a traditional morality. He describes how such moralities originate, how they function, and how they eventually die.

Important for our purposes here is the fact that Nietzsche views mirth and laughter, once again, as responsible for the demise of pernicious moral worldviews. Let us begin by considering Nietzsche's account of the origins of a morality.

Human beings, Nietzsche tells us, are animals through and through. We live and die within the natural order, which is governed by various physical and biological laws, and our actions, like those of any animal, are the products of instinct. Nietzsche writes:

Whether I regard human beings with a good or with an evil eye, I always find them engaged in a single task, each and every one of them: to do what benefits the preservation of the human race. Not from a feeling of love for the race, but simply because within them nothing is older, stronger, more inexorable and invincible than this instinct – because this instinct constitutes *the essence* of our species and herd. (GS 1)

We want to believe that we are different from the beasts, however, and so we seek out alternative explanations for our behavior. The teachers of the purpose of existence – or the 'ethical teachers,' as Nietzsche also calls them – appear with the answer we prefer: there is more to us than our natural instincts. In addition to having fleshy bodies, we also have immaterial *souls*, which transcend the natural order, and which make us the free authors of our actions. We act as we do on the basis of *reasons*, and not simply as a result of brute biological processes. We are *dignified* creatures, after all.

But if our souls are not born of the natural order, then where do they come from? The teachers have an answer to this question, too: reality is not limited to the natural order that we see before us, they say. There is also a *supernatural* order – the 'other-worldly beyond' (Jenseits) – which transcends the natural world and which is the native home to our souls. Our purpose in life, the ethical teachers advise us, is to gain entry into this other-worldly beyond after our bodily demise here in this world, which we can do only if we adhere to a strict moral code. Nietzsche summarizes the basic idea as follows:

The ethical teacher makes his appearance as the teacher of the purpose in order that what happens necessarily and always, by itself and without a purpose, shall henceforth seem to be done for a purpose and strike man as reason and an ultimate commandment; to this end he invents a second, different existence and takes by means of his old mechanics the old, ordinary existence off its old, ordinary hinges. (GS 1)

Every traditional morality, then, is animated by the belief that we must live *for* something, above and beyond our natural, earthy, fleshy existences. Traditional morality fills a psychological void that many human animals experience, namely the need to feel superior to the beasts and to have a higher calling in life.

The logic of a traditional morality is by now clear: since the natural world is one without purposes or reasons, we must appeal to some *other* world, beyond the one we see, which supplies these purposes and reasons. While the teacher's proclamations are appealing (especially to the downtrodden), they are both false and harmful. They are false because they describe human nature and the world falsely, and they are harmful because they turn our focus from our own flourishing in this life and toward the hope of flourishing in another, non-existent life. Of course, the teacher does not want his adherents to believe that his morality is false and harmful, and so he introduces a clever defensive tactic. He calls the dictates of his morality 'holy,' and he asserts that doubting or questioning them – or what's even worse, *laughing* at them – is blasphemy, a damnable moral offense. Nietzsche writes:

To be sure, in no way does he want us to *laugh* at existence, or at ourselves – or at him... Foolish and fanciful as his inventions and valuations may be, badly as he may misjudge the course of nature and deny its conditions – and all ethical systems hitherto have been so foolish and contrary to nature that humanity would have perished from everyone had it gained power over humanity – all the same! Every time 'the hero' [that is, an ethical teacher] appeared on stage, something new was attained: the gruesome counterpart of laughter,

that profound shock that many individuals feel at the thought: ‘Yes, living is worth it! Yes, I am worthy of living!’ (GS 1).

Because traditional moralities have little by way of evidence on their side, they maintain their own believability by forbidding anyone from even demanding justification for their central claims in the first place.

Nietzsche claims that, for a time, a morality will command the faith of a people. But it will eventually lose its grip, and its adherents will abandon their faith in it, viewing it thereafter as both quaint and antiquated. Nietzsche writes, ‘There is no denying that in the long run each of these great teachers of a purpose was vanquished by *laughter, reason* and nature’ (GS 1, emphasis added; cf. GS 382). Reason and laughter can vanquish these teachers and their teachings, we have seen, because skepticism leads us to disavow certain beliefs about morality and since mirth is uniquely suited to ‘debugging’ our minds – to exposing disavowed beliefs that have infiltrated our worldviews. The teachers of the purpose of existence wish to delay the inevitable by forbidding their adherents from laughing at them.

Nietzsche is careful to point out, however, that mirth does not fill the psychological void that traditional moralities have been specifically crafted to plug. Although we can destroy a traditional morality by laughing at it, we are left pining for another answer to the question of the meaning of life. Nietzsche speculates that human beings have a acquired ‘faith in the *reason in life*’ (GS 1) over the course of history, however, and thus as soon as one morality loses its hold, the sheep will seek out a new shepherd. Laughter, then, can vanquish one specific reason in life, but if it does not challenge the need for reasons, then it will not undermine the future search for a new reason, and hence a new morality. Nietzsche calls the historical period in which one traditional morality follows after the next ‘the age of tragedy’ (GS 1).

To escape the vicious cycle of the age of tragedy, Nietzsche holds that a person must learn to laugh not only at morality, but also at *herself*. More specifically, she must learn to laugh at her need to find a purpose – beyond instinct, beyond nature – for her existence. If she takes this need for granted, then upon rejecting one morality she will seek out another, and then another. She will be trapped within the age of tragedy. To escape this

cycle, she needs humor, since mirth can expose and reject this profound need that she has been unknowingly taught. Nietzsche writes:

[Y]ou will never find someone who could completely mock you, the individual, even in your best qualities, someone who could bring home to you as far as truth allows your boundless, fly- and frog-like wretchedness! *To laugh at oneself as one would have to laugh in order to laugh from the whole truth* – for that, not even the best have had enough sense of truth, and the most gifted have had far too little genius! Perhaps even laughter still has a future – when the proposition ‘The species is everything, and individual is always nothing’ has become part of humanity and this ultimate liberation [from traditional morality] and irresponsibility is accessible to everyone at all times. *Perhaps laughter will then have formed an alliance with wisdom; perhaps only ‘gay science’ will remain.* (GS 1, emphasis added)

This passage is exceptionally rich, but the basic idea is clear: we will free ourselves from the tenacious grips of morality only once, through skepticism and mirth, we have exposed and rejected the idea that we need a purpose beyond that which nature gave us: biological flourishing. To be amused by this need is to exhibit a type of wisdom that neither the best nor the most gifted have so far exhibited, namely ‘gay wisdom.’

At the beginning of this paper I claimed that my approach to Nietzsche’s philosophy of humor differs from Hatab’s insofar as I focus on the ridiculousness of morality while Hatab focuses on the ridiculousness of oneself. I have just argued that Nietzsche wants us to laugh also at ourselves – and indeed that the ability to do so constitutes ‘gay wisdom’ – but I maintain that the wisdom of laughing at ourselves can be understood only against the backdrop of the wisdom of laughing at morality. We shouldn’t laugh at just any aspects of ourselves; instead, we should laugh very specifically at our felt need to find a purpose for our existence, a need that only traditional morality can fill. Furthermore, we should laugh at this aspect of ourselves only after we have laughed at morality, since only then are we in a position to expose the need that attracted us to that morality in the first place.

I have argued that mirth and its expression in laughter play an important psychological-cum-epistemological role in Nietzsche's famous critique of traditional morality. Mirth is, in virtue of its intrinsic psychological structure, capable of freeing us from the pernicious demands of traditional morality, especially those that have infiltrated our habits and worldview, despite the fact that we have consciously disavowed them. It is thus no surprise that Nietzsche dubs his philosophy a 'gay science' and that he persistently exhorts his readers to learn how to laugh.

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