

## Nietzschean Self-Overcoming

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this paper is to provide a novel reading of Nietzsche's concept of self-overcoming and in doing so draw out some distinctive features of Nietzsche's thinking about ethics and ethical ideals. However this reading will be different from those interpreters who read self-overcoming in terms of Nietzsche's will to power psychology. Rather it will attempt to frame self-overcoming as a distinctive kind of re-evaluative, ethical activity. Section 1 will explain what this reading of self-overcoming involves in terms of the idea of overcoming self-evaluative frameworks. Section 2 will argue that Nietzsche's idea of achieving a standpoint "Beyond Good and Evil" serves as a central example of self-overcoming read in this way. Finally the Section 3 will explore Nietzsche's remarks on continual self-overcoming and argue that this idea points towards what I will call the horizontal nature of the "future moralities".

**KEYWORDS:** self-overcoming, will to power psychology, self-evaluative frameworks, future moralities, horizontal ends.

### Introduction: Self-Overcoming and Will to Power Psychology

Nietzsche often writes in praise of self-overcoming (*Selbst-Überwindung*). He tells us that his humanity consists in "constant self-overcoming" (*EH* I.8)<sup>1</sup> and that if someone wanted to give a name to his life-long self-discipline against "Wagnerianism", Schopenhauer, and "the whole modern 'humaneness'" then one might call it self-overcoming (*CW* Preface). He says that his writings "speak only" of his overcoming's (*HH* II Preface 1), later claiming that "the development of states that are increasingly high, rare, distant, tautly drawn and comprehensive...are dependent on the constant 'self-overcoming of man'" (*BGE* 257),<sup>2</sup> and that "the most

spiritual people, being the strongest, find their happiness where other people would find their downfall...in harshness towards themselves and towards others, in trials: they take pleasure in self-overcoming' (*A* 57). With a different emphasis Nietzsche also links the notion to historical processes, for example claiming that "Europe's longest and most courageous self-overcoming" can be seen in the development of a "will to truth" in religious conscience, "sublimated into a scientific conscience", which comes to find belief in the Christian God untenable and which he thinks should, in a similar spirit of truthfulness, lead us to draw a further inference against Christian Morality (*GS* 357, cf. *GM* III.27). Finally, the two senses of the term, personal and historical, are drawn together when he speaks of Goethe as "a type of self-overcoming on the part of that century" (*TI* IX.49).

What role this concept is supposed to play in Nietzsche's philosophy is ambiguous. On the one hand it seems to underwrite some kind of significant personal achievement. On the other, it is given a more historical role, offered in an almost Hegelian idiom as accounting for the complex development and internal dialectics of socio-cultural phenomenon such as morality and religious belief. In this article I will focus on self-overcoming as a distinctive kind of first-personal, and ethical, re-evaluative activity.

However, my account will be different from recent commentators who have explained this concept, and its relation to Nietzsche's ethical commitments, through psychological versions of the will to power. On one prominent version, as put forward by Bernard Reginster, we are given an account of human desire in which the ends of our first-order desires are sought in conjunction with a second-order desire for the feeling of power; a hedonic experience occasioned by overcoming resistances.<sup>3</sup> Whilst this second-order desire, the will to power as the will to overcoming resistance,<sup>4</sup> is dependent on those first order desires, insofar as it can only get determinate content and occasion for expression through them, this psychological will to power has been put forward as fundamental to understanding Nietzsche's ethics and philosophy of value. According to these interpretations, the kinds of first-order activities and ends that Nietzsche thinks are most valuable, and wants to direct us towards, are those in which the will to power so construed is maximized.<sup>5</sup> In this way it is claimed that will to power psychology can provide us with a standard by which we can assess and rank human activities, underwriting an "ethics of power".<sup>6</sup>

For these commentators self-overcoming is framed in terms of this will to power

psychology,<sup>7</sup> such that a commitment to self-overcoming is a commitment to perpetually maintaining this power-dynamic of seeking out and overcoming resistance in the suitable first-order activities. Reginster, for example, tells us that Nietzsche's creators will power in this way, they are "perpetually in search of new challenges to meet, of new overcomings", and in doing so eventually overcome themselves.<sup>8</sup> However, Reginster does not say enough about what is involved in this process. Both his and Paul Katsafanas's official position seems to be that self-overcoming is another term for will to power, and as such is (like will to power is for them) a constituent feature of all human psychology. Yet, at other times they, like Nietzsche, describe self-overcoming as a distinctive achievement, and so we are left with a number of questions. One might wonder if it is the case that the achievement of self-overcoming is merely quantitative, such that in overcoming enough resistance one overcomes oneself, or whether there could be degrees of self-overcoming. Moreover in such instances when "creators" eventually overcome themselves we might ask whether this was an explicit aim of the activity or merely a by-product.

In fact, the way Nietzsche sometimes talks about self-overcoming implies that it is not sufficiently explained as resulting from the pursuit of overcoming maximum resistance. As highlighted by some of the quoted passages at the beginning of this article we might think that it also matters to Nietzsche what it is that stands to be overcome. As Peter Poellner notes, for Nietzsche "evaluative judgements are also possible and required about the worth of an overcoming in terms of what it is an overcoming of and what it is an overcoming towards; that is, what our first-order desires aim at".<sup>9</sup> That is to say we might think that Nietzsche's evaluative commitments, whilst often plausibly framed in terms of will to power psychology and its conception of self-overcoming, are *also* concerned with first-order evaluative practices in terms of their substantive content and normative ends.<sup>10</sup>

In this article I will argue that by interpreting self-overcoming as a distinctive kind of re-evaluative activity we can provide a different account of this concept and its role in Nietzsche's ethics than in those accounts that focus predominately on the will to power. However, it should be kept in mind that I am *not* claiming that the accounts which interpret self-overcoming in that way are wrong to do so or that my reading should replace those accounts. As both Reginster and Katsafanas argue there are textual and philosophical grounds for their reading. In this sense what follows of my own account of this concept is *not* intended to be a sufficient characterization, either

exegetically or philosophically, and in this sense I do not claim to capture everything, or even necessarily the most important thing, that Nietzsche intends with this concept. My claim is more limited. Namely that my reading of self-overcoming as a distinctive kind of re-evaluative ethical activity points towards something that the will to power accounts overlook and therefore warrants consideration. Moreover, and as will become clearer in Section 3 (which will explicate Nietzsche's problematic ideas on continual self-overcoming), my alternative interpretation of self-overcoming is also able to provide a distinctive reading of what Nietzsche thinks is involved in our striving towards ethical ideals, that is what self-overcoming is an overcoming towards. It will do so by highlighting the way in which such ethical striving is necessarily horizontal due to way in which we falsify what we were striving for in trying to conceptualize our ethical ideals in specific self-evaluative frameworks. It is in this sense, and others, that providing an alternative reading of self-overcoming will allow me to draw out some distinctive features of Nietzsche's thinking about ethics and ethical ideals.

In terms of structure, Section 1 will present an account of self-overcoming as a distinctive kind of re-evaluative, ethical activity. Section 2 will give an example of this kind of self-overcoming through Nietzsche's idea of achieving a perspective "Beyond Good and Evil", and suggest some further disclaimers on my account in light of this. Finally Section 3 will consider the idea that we should be committed to self-overcoming continually.

### 1. Self-Overcoming as a Re-evaluative Activity

So, we need an account of self-overcoming that says something about "the worth of an overcoming in terms of what it is an overcoming of and what it is an overcoming towards".<sup>11</sup> In other words, we need an account of the way self-overcoming relates to questions of value both in terms of (a) its substantive content (what it is an overcoming of) and (b) its ends (what it is an overcoming towards). In this section, I will provide the start of an account of (a). The central claim I want to argue for is that self-overcoming involves an overcoming of values in relation to what I will call self-evaluative frameworks. What I mean by this will require explanation. To begin with it will be helpful to have an idea of what constitutes an evaluative framework *simpliciter*.

First, evaluative frameworks should be thought to involve normative standards that allow for judgements of actions (or states of affairs) that fall under the purview of the activity. Games are good examples of when we adopt such evaluative frameworks, since by having certain pre-established normative standards about what the relevant ends are, and how we are to achieve them, they allow for contrasting, and often finely grained, judgements of performance. A second feature of evaluative frameworks is that insofar as we are sincerely engaged in activities governed by them, then their normative standards are *constitutive* standards, such that if I do not follow the norms then I cease to be performing that activity. For example, if when playing cricket I claim to have scored a run by jogging on the spot, this indicates that I am not really playing cricket at all.

With this characterization of evaluative frameworks in place, I will now specify what the relevant differences are in the case of *self*-evaluative frameworks. First, it should be noted that the distinction cannot just be that the activity in question involves self-evaluation, such that it is specifically my, or someone else's performance that is being assessed, rather than that of an object (e.g., a car engine's performance). Since evaluating people according to externally specified normative standards is typical of, and essential to, the vast majority of human activities.<sup>12</sup> Rather, the important distinction is to do with the content of what is being assessed and the kinds of questions this different focus generates, such that we might say that self-evaluative frameworks concern others and myself in an ethical sense. Charles Taylor's description of "strong evaluation" sets up some criteria for distinguishing self-evaluative from evaluative frameworks on such grounds: "There are questions about how I am going to live my life which touch on the issues of what kind of life is worth living, or what kind of life would fulfil the promise implicit in my particular talents, or the demands incumbent on someone with my endowment, or of what constitutes a rich, meaningful life – as against one concerned with secondary matters or trivia".<sup>13</sup>

So, we might argue that with self-evaluative frameworks we are under the jurisdiction of a set of normative standards according to which assessments are made not just of our performance in a particular activity, but of our conduct in ethical life. In this sense the normative standards that constitute self-evaluative frameworks will be more general, but are also more fundamental and important. For what self-evaluative frameworks are comprised of are the criteria according to which we make

assessments of our worth as persons, what we might call our fundamental evaluations, and therefore the normative standards through which we construct our practical identities (I will explain my use of this term and its importance for my account in what follows). As Nietzsche writes in a note, “morality is the doctrine of the order of men’s rank, and consequently also of the significance of their actions and works for this order of rank: thus, the doctrine of human valuations in respect of everything human” (*WLN* 35[5]).<sup>14</sup>

Another significant aspect of self-evaluative frameworks are normative ideals against which we compare ourselves, often as a means for improvement.<sup>15</sup> Consider, for example, the self-evaluative framework of the Christian. This individual’s assessments of ethical conduct are bound to an ideal Jesus was taken to exemplify, providing them with certain fundamental evaluations. I note this feature because we might think that a self-evaluative framework’s normative ideal typically provides at least some of the content of those, often contrastive, fundamental evaluations. We can see this in the case of Christian Morality through its evaluations of redeemed vs. condemned, good vs. evil. Yet, whilst such normative ideals for self-improvement are a central feature of self-evaluative frameworks it is what they concern that is important, namely, as stated above, assessments of ethical conduct in a way that is bound up with our practical identity. Indeed, it is this ethical dimension that is fundamental to understanding the distinctiveness of self-evaluative frameworks.

Pausing for a moment, we might wonder what to make of an individual who values his performance in a game so highly that it defines his practical identity. Such an individual would not be shallow in Taylor’s sense of failing to be attuned to issues of what it is worthwhile to do and what is worthwhile to be, since they would have answers to these questions.<sup>16</sup> However, we might think that one of the central intuitions which guides our sense that self-evaluative frameworks are more important is that they should be comprised of a more general set of fundamental evaluations that typically determine our attitudes towards a wide variety of more specific first-order projects or ends, so determining “the significance of their actions and works for this order of rank” (*WLN* 35[5]).<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it might seem problematically narrow if any one particular activity or end exclusively determined these fundamental evaluations. Therefore, there is an important issue of the scope of one’s fundamental evaluations, such that if an individual is *only* concerned with his performance in a particular game,

at the expense of all other concerns, then we might think that it is an open question whether or not he is really engaged in ethical life.<sup>18</sup>

Now that we have a working definition of a self-evaluative framework I can return to my initial claim. I want to argue that self-overcoming involves both questioning and ultimately abandoning a self-evaluative framework, that is overcoming some set of fundamental evaluations through which we make assessments of our ethical conduct, and therefore shifting the normative standards through which we define our practical identities. It seems that Nietzsche has this in mind when he has Zarathustra say that the “greatest thing that you can experience” is “the hour of your greatest contempt” (*Z* Prologue 3), suggesting the creative power of a certain kind of dissatisfaction-with-self.<sup>19</sup> So we might say, framed in terms of the first desideratum at the beginning of this section, that self-overcoming takes self-evaluative frameworks as its substantive content, that is what it is an overcoming of, and as such it is re-evaluative, ethical project.<sup>20</sup>

The exegetical case for attributing this view of self-overcoming to Nietzsche, while present in many of the passages quoted in the Introduction, will be provided in more detail in Section 2. However, before this I want to provide some further reflections on two aspects of my account so far. Firstly I want to discuss what kind of activities this interpretation rules out as counting as instances of Nietzschean self-overcoming, and secondly how the account can make sense of the “self” in self-overcoming.

It is important to note that interpreting self-overcoming in this way rules out many first-order activities, and their ends, as counting as instances of Nietzschean self-overcoming, even those that involve overcoming quantitatively significant resistances. For example, it should be clear that running a marathon or climbing a mountain would not count. Such activities undoubtedly involve evaluative frameworks in which normative standards govern self-assessment, and typically involve high degrees of sacrifice. But we would be hard pressed to argue that activities like these involve an overcoming of the fundamental evaluations that constitute our practical identity. This is of course not to deny that all kinds of activities, and achievements within them, are commonly said to have involved self-overcoming without such re-evaluation, for example running the marathon faster. My claim is rather that at least part of what Nietzsche means when he uses this term in something different, and in this sense the account of Nietzschean self-overcoming suggested so far is not the same as a common sense conception of self-overcoming,

whereby an individual has to overcome many obstacles and is willing to make certain sacrifices in order to achieve certain ends.

Furthermore, we can see how this implies that the meaning of Nietzschean self-overcoming might not be sufficiently captured by the perpetual pursuit of overcoming resistance, that is in terms of those will to power psychology readings considered in the Introduction.<sup>21</sup> If self-overcoming involves, at least in part, re-evaluative, ethical activity then it requires something more of those engaged in it than can be cashed out solely in terms of overcoming resistances. This more specific emphasis is captured by Nietzsche having Zarathustra say that “change of values – that is the change of creators. Whoever must be a creator always annihilates” (Z “On Thousand and One Goals”), later reminding us that “not around the inventors of new noise does the world revolve, but around the inventors of new values” (Z “On Great Events”).

Moreover, we should not confuse self-overcoming, in the way I have interpreted it, with coming to value something differently, where this merely amounts to becoming aware of some aspect of the object of evaluation of which I was previously not aware. For example, say an individual has a positive evaluation of certain institutions and believes that they are noble in their pursuit of knowledge, yet after years spent in them comes to realize that the pursuit of material wealth is in fact more important to them. On this basis their evaluation might change to a negative one. However, the normative standards for making evaluations have not changed. In fact a precondition of this new negative assessment is their holding onto the evaluative framework in which the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is praiseworthy and the pursuit of material wealth is objectionable. These are the fundamental evaluations that are not under question in such instances.

More positively, the reading of self-overcoming presented so far also allows us to specify more clearly the “self” that is involved in self-overcoming. Remember, it was suggested that the role of the self in self-overcoming is something that the will to power psychology readings do not say enough about, as evidenced by the kinds of questions it was suggested their accounts leave open (see Introduction). As has been argued it is our practical identity, as constructed through certain fundamental evaluations, that is revalued in Nietzschean self-overcoming. Such a reading therefore resists any overly literalist interpretation that might confuse practical identity, as primarily a matter of one’s self-conception, with something like personal identity,

which is a matter of psychological continuity for temporally extended subjects. If self-overcoming referred to the latter rather than former, putatively involving a literal death of the self, then the notion would become problematic. Since understanding self-overcoming as something that can be reasonably attributed to me after the re-evaluation, presupposes a psychological continuity that could not be overcome on pain of the self in question after self-overcoming referring to a literally different person. David Velleman stresses the need to keep this distinction in mind, telling us “when someone suffers an identity crisis, as we call it, what is threatened is not his identity as a person but his conception of himself as a person, which might also be called his sense of identity or his sense of who he is”.<sup>22</sup> So, with Nietzschean self-overcoming, interpreted in my way, it is our fundamental evaluations, those that are constitutive of our frameworks for self-evaluation, and are essential to our practical identities (as self-conceptions), which are re-evaluated.

A good example is the Christian-turned-atheist who achieves self-overcoming in this way by abandoning her faith. Not only would such an individual reject the religious-moral norms that allow for ethical assessments such as “good Christian” or “sinner”, but by abandoning her faith the self-evaluative framework in which she made these kinds of assessments is rendered obsolete. Therefore, the overcoming of this self-evaluative framework renders her practical identity as she previously conceived of it destabilized. She can no longer rely on that familiar set of fundamental evaluations and norms to assess her, and others, worth and the former ethical significance of her actions, thoughts, desires and projects (i.e., her self-conception), is re-valued.<sup>23</sup>

Through this example I think we can see that for something to count as an instance of Nietzschean self-overcoming it cannot merely question a self-evaluative framework, but it must also involve a shift away from it. The question of a shift towards what then becomes important, and this is precisely the second desideratum set out in the Introduction, of needing an account of the ends of self-overcoming (or what it is an overcoming towards). Although I will hold off on considering this till Section 3 since I will be able to engage with it more adequately at that stage.

## 2. Beyond Good and Evil

Taking up the exegetical case more directly, I now want to argue that Nietzsche's idea of achieving a standpoint "Beyond Good and Evil" is an instance of self-overcoming as described above, that is an overcoming of a self-evaluative framework.<sup>24</sup> This section's role is therefore partly exegetical, showing how a project at the centre of Nietzsche's ethical thought admits of a natural interpretation in the terms set out above. However, in doing so I will also be able to draw out some further significant aspects of self-overcoming as I am interpreting it.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche describes the project I have in mind; 'But today, thanks to a renewed self-contemplation and deepening of humanity, shouldn't we be facing a renewed necessity to effect a reversal and fundamental displacement of values? Shouldn't we be standing on the threshold of a period that would be designated, negatively at first, as extra-moral...The overcoming of morality – even the self-overcoming of morality' (*BGE* 32).<sup>25</sup> In order to understand what Nietzsche means in this passage it is helpful to look to *On the Genealogy of Morality* where he provides a more detailed setting for this specific achievement. There we find out that the overcoming of morality involves the rejection of a self-evaluative framework that was born of the most world-historical reversal of values, what Nietzsche calls the "slave revolt in morality" (*GM* I.7). Whilst this text paints a complex picture of this phenomenon in terms of its psychological motivations and historical conditions, for our purposes we can focus on the evaluative dimension of this original reversal.

One of the least interpretatively contested claims about Nietzsche's account of the development of what he calls "European morality" (*GS* 343, 380) is that he thinks it begins with the triumph of slave morality which represented an overturning of the self-evaluative framework of noble morality. He tells us it was a "revaluation of all former values", the triumph "over all others ideals, all noble ideals" (*GM* I.8, cf. *GM* I.16; Nietzsche identifies noble morality with the dominant self-evaluative framework of Greco-Roman culture). Whereas, we are told, noble morality expressed itself by fundamental evaluations whereby "good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy" (*GM* I.7) - what Nietzsche calls the aristocratic value equation – slave morality overturned this framework in favour of new normative standards according to which "Only those who suffer are good, only the poor, the powerless, the lowly are good; the suffering, the deprived, the sick, the ugly...whereas you rich, the noble and powerful, you are eternally wicked, cruel, lustful, insatiate, godless, you will also be eternally wretched, cursed and damned"! (*GM* I.7)

With this re-evaluation in mind we can make sense of Nietzsche's description of what the overcoming of morality amounts to when he says "it has been sufficiently clear for some time what I want...with that dangerous slogan which is written on the spine of my last book, *Beyond Good and Evil*... at least this does not mean 'Beyond Good and Bad'" (*GM* I.17). Nietzsche is clearly guarding against the misleading idea that in overcoming the particular morality he is opposed to we abandon all self-evaluative frameworks. In this sense it is correct to say that the overcoming of morality, and self-overcoming generally, does not seek to abandon self-evaluative frameworks in favour of evaluative nihilism (i.e. a world without any self-evaluative frameworks).<sup>26</sup> This could not be Nietzsche's position since that *would* mean going "Beyond Good and Bad" (*GM* I.17) and as he has Zarathustra say, "only through esteeming is there value and without esteeming the nut of existence would be hollow" (*Z* "On a Thousand and One Goals"). Rather, Nietzsche is suggesting that we overcome the specific self-evaluative framework associated with the morality that he takes to dominate Modernity, "our entire European morality" (*GS* 343), which he sees as a development of slave morality's original reversal of the self-evaluative framework of noble morality.

Nietzsche's justification for making this association is complex and contentious, since it is dependent on the alleged continuation in modern European morality of the psychology of *ressentiment* and the normative agenda of harming the highest exemplars of humanity in favour of the "herd", largely through Christianity or sublimated Christian values.<sup>27</sup> However, with regard to achieving a standpoint "Beyond Good and Evil" it is clear enough what the critical object of this project would be insofar as Nietzsche describes it as the achievement of a "point beyond our good and evil...by which I mean the sum of commanding value judgements that have become part of our flesh and blood" (*GS* 380). So, it makes sense to find Nietzsche concluding that European morality is "only one type of human morality beside which, before which, and after which many other (and especially *higher*) moralities are or should be possible" (*BGE* 202), i.e. new and higher self-evaluative frameworks.

So, we can now see how Nietzsche's account of the overcoming of morality can be given a natural interpretation in terms of the account of self-overcoming set out in Section 1. Yet, in light of this example we can make two further stipulations. The first is that self-overcoming involves a movement from one self-evaluative framework to another, *not* the abandoning of all ethical frameworks, a point captured by

Zarathustra's claim that "whoever must be a creator in good and evil...must first be an annihilators and break values' (Z "On Self-Overcoming"; although as we shall see below this point rather a number of further complications). The second is that self-overcoming should be thought of as historically situated. As Robert Pippin states, "the conditions described as necessary for...self-overcoming are clearly here historical (dependent on one's time) and social (dependent, in some way, on the state of a shared social world)".<sup>28</sup>

In fact there are two ways of taking Pippin's point. The first would be that self-overcoming is historically situated to the extent that the critical object of such a project could only ever be an established self-evaluative framework of the culture we are a part of. The second, and suggested by some of Nietzsche's remarks, is that certain "powerful creators" (in Nietzsche's idiom) might also overcome self-evaluative frameworks that are in some sense of their own making, although this project will have to stand in *some* relation to the self-evaluative frameworks of the culture they are a part of. I shall discuss this suggestion in terms of the idea of continual self-overcoming in Section 3.

However, by considering self-overcoming through the example of the overcoming of morality two problems with my account come into focus. As we shall see, they both highlight the worry that the kind of activity I described in Section 1 was too general, such that we might ask if it is just *any* self-evaluative framework that we are being encouraged to overcome. I will call these the *formal objections* since they both involve specifying ways in which my account of self-overcoming seems problematically non-specific.

The first objection is that there are certain self-evaluative frameworks that we could make a reasonable, perhaps even Nietzschean, case for preserving. For example, we could point to the self-evaluative framework of Nietzsche's nobles, who are praised for possessing an ethical outlook built around self-affirmations, their fundamental valuations being primarily self-expressions, exhibiting a certainty about their elevated status and showing reverence for everything of a 'high rank' (*BGE* 262, cf. *BGE* 287, *GM* I.10-12).<sup>29</sup> The second objection is that we can envisage situations in which an individual is a committed Nietzschean (whatever exactly that involves) and then decides that Buddhist or Schopenhauerean resignation is in fact the right answer to what she now perceives to life's greatest problem, namely that of suffering. Likewise we might think of an individual who was previously a libertine and then

coverts to being a born-again Christian. The problem is that we seem to have instances of what could be plausibly described as re-evaluations of those fundamental evaluations which structure the practical identities in question, and yet it seems that both cases would, and do, fall foul of Nietzsche's criticisms. In other words, they seem to involve Nietzschean self-overcoming as I am interpreting it so far, and yet surely fall short of Nietzsche's ideal.

In fact these *formal objections* to my account can be met. However, to see how will require a detailed consideration of the second aspect of my account, namely the ends of Nietzschean self-overcoming (what it is an "overcoming towards"). Given this, I will provide my preferred responses at the end of Section 3. Before moving onto Section 3 I want to consider two different solutions to the *formal objections* that are unsatisfactory.

One response to the first *formal objection* would be to argue that the self-evaluative framework we assent to in overcoming European morality, in shifting away from *those* norms of self-assessment is actually noble morality. Such that the critical object of self-overcoming would be European morality, in order to bring about a re-assent to noble morality. Yet, it should be stressed that any return to the specific self-evaluative framework of the Greco-Roman world is not a possibility Nietzsche seriously entertains (at least in his works of the 1880's); "we children of the future...we 'conserve' nothing; neither do we want to return to any past" (*GS* 337, cf. *GS* 40). This is not to undermine the significance Nietzsche attaches to his reading of noble morality and its Homeric values (courage, heroism, beauty etc.), since this serves an important contrastive function insofar as he believes its fundamental evaluations were not based on *ressentiment* or normative ends deleterious to the highest forms of human excellence. Rather, it is just to stress that Nietzsche's emphasis on "future moralities" (*BGE* 202) and "undiscovered land the boundaries of which no one has yet surveyed" (*GS* 382), suggests that these new self-evaluative frameworks are not simply those of the Greco-Roman world.

Addressing the second *formal objection*, one might argue that it is not just that the overcoming of morality is an important instance of self-overcoming, but more strongly that it is only this particular self-evaluative framework, European morality, that Nietzsche wants to overcome. In other words, overcoming the self-evaluative framework of European morality would be the *only* instance of self-overcoming that Nietzsche is interested in. Further, since Nietzsche takes European morality to be

defined through its history in the “slave revolt” and its continued dependence of the psychology of *ressentiment*, in fact the critical object of self-overcoming could be *ressentiment*-based moralities, including (for Nietzsche) socialism, anarchism, nationalism, feminism, and utilitarianism (*GM* I.11, cf. *GM* I.5, *BGE* 145, 226). Self-overcoming could then be framed as involving a shift away from self-evaluative frameworks in which ethical assessment of oneself and others are “re-touched, re-interpreted, and reviewed through the poisonous eye of *ressentiment*” (*GM* I.11). Clearly Nietzsche thinks this psychology, a kind of self-deception which distorts certain evaluative features of the world (primarily qualities of persons) in order to enact an “imaginary revenge” (making up for a kind of powerlessness), plays a crucial role in constructing and maintaining the fundamental evaluations that govern the self-evaluative framework of European morality, establishing its norms of ethical assessment.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, such a position faces exegetical difficulties as a satisfactory account of Nietzschean self-overcoming. Since what then are we to make of Nietzsche’s praise of *constant* self-overcoming in *BGE* 257 and *EH* I.8? Moreover, we might wonder what it means when “life speaks” to Zarathustra and says, “good and evil that would be everlasting – there is no such thing! They must overcome themselves out of themselves again and again” (*Z* “On Self-Overcoming”). Elsewhere in the same text, Nietzsche has Zarathustra say that “good and evil, and rich and poor, and high and trifling, and all the names of values: they shall be weapons and clanging signs that life must overcome itself *again and again*... (*Z* “On the Tarantulas”, my emphasis). In other passages Nietzsche expresses similar thoughts, saying “life, to us, that means constantly transforming all that we are into light and flame” (*GS* PII 3), and describes the way in which “again and again we experience our golden hour of victory, - and there we stand, the way we were born, unbreakable, tense, ready for new, more difficult and distant things’ (*GM* I.12). Nietzsche even describes Beethoven, a figure he has uniform praise for, as “somewhere between a brittle old soul that is constantly coming apart and an overly young, future-orientated soul that it constantly on its way (*BGE* 245, cf. *GS* 282, *TI* VII.10). Moreover, when Nietzsche discusses the notion of some kind of continual self-overcoming he seems to offer it as central to his ethical thought, as representing some kind of commitment, achievement, or attitude we can take towards our ethical lives and practical identities. So I think the above response, claiming that self-overcoming only relates to European morality will not work.

Nevertheless, what this commitment to continual self-overcoming amounts to remains unclear, and I will now provide a reading of why this concept is sometimes given this form.

### 3. Self-Overcoming as a Continual Activity

This section will give an account of what self-overcoming is an overcoming towards, the second desideratum from the beginning of the Section 1. We can provide an answer to this question by considering Nietzsche's idea that we should be committed to self-overcoming continually, and the relation between this idea and the evaluative malaise he sees humanity confronted with in a post-moral age, that is a future in which European morality is no longer subscribed to.

However, *prima facie* the idea of continual self-overcoming seems worryingly arbitrary and perhaps even psychologically implausible, at least in the way I am reading Nietzschean self-overcoming, since can we really think that Nietzsche is suggesting not just the overcoming of a particular self-evaluative framework (say that of European morality), but a commitment to doing so again and again? As Jaspers notes, we could see such a demand as one of "constant self-crucifixion terminating in nothingness".<sup>31</sup> In contrast to first impressions a plausible reading of this idea can be given. Moreover understanding what Nietzsche intends by his emphasis on continual self-overcoming will allow me to (a) discuss an aspect of Nietzsche's thinking about our striving towards ethics ideals that is both distinctive, and not sufficiently discussed by will to power psychology readings, and (b) respond to the *formal objections* proposed at the end of Section 2.

The suggestion that we should pursue self-overcoming continually could be framed as a commitment to the Enlightenment ideal of never-ending re-evaluating and re-assessing. Although, according to my account of self-overcoming, what would always be under question are the fundamental evaluations and normative standards through which we construct our practical identities.<sup>32</sup> Yet, we might wonder how plausible this is. Insofar as it we take it literally, as if in every moment and with every thought we re-assess our fundamental evaluations then it seems far-fetched, raising concerns about whether a subject with such an attitude could think or act at all. For even the most critical self-understanding cannot entertain the suspension of all such values at once. However, we need not take it this way. Rather, continual self-overcoming could

make more sense as a stance of *openness*, similar to how we might characterize an ideal scientist's attitude as always being open to revision, improvement, and in some instances wholesale overhaul of paradigms. We would be mistaken to think that the ideal scientific practitioner is constantly, or at one specific moment, overhauling everything, rather what is important is the continual commitment to the possibility of wholesale shift in terms of on-going attention to evidential or theoretical limitations. Analogously, the attitude of ethical openness would never allow us to be done with ourselves, and it would therefore serve the function of always holding open, as a possibility, those "future moralities" (*BGE* 202, i.e., new self-evaluative frameworks).

Nevertheless, what more precisely are these new and future moralities that self-overcoming, continual or otherwise, is directed towards? How, that is, can we make more sense of the ends of Nietzschean self-overcoming? By providing an answer to this question we will be able to see the limitations of the reading of continual self-overcoming just presented (the 'ethical openness' reading) and suggest an alternative.

So, if self-overcoming involves a change in a self-evaluative framework as directed towards "future moralities" then we might reasonably want to know more about the latter's nature and origins. Such supposed new self-evaluative frameworks, despite Nietzsche's talk about creating values, should not be thought to come into existence *ex nihilo*. Rather, I think Taylor describes something that seems close to the ends of Nietzschean self-overcoming when he says "with these seekers...we are taken beyond the gamut of traditionally available frameworks. Not only do they embrace these traditions tentatively, but they also often develop their own versions of them, or idiosyncratic combinations of or borrowing from or semi inventions within them".<sup>33</sup> This perhaps captures, whilst remaining non-specific, what we might expect to find in such future moralities.

Yet, what should be remembered is that one of the main reasons Nietzsche seems to be drawn to self-overcoming as some kind of ethical ideal is that the ends to which such "semi-inventive" projects are directed cannot be exhaustively articulated in advance, or put another way they are what I will call horizontal. Self-overcoming then might be thought to express, as Poellner puts it, "the desire for self-transformation through an orientation towards what Nietzsche calls 'ideals', the contents of which cannot be determinately specified by us as we are".<sup>34</sup> I want to argue that this idea points towards a more distinctive understanding of continual self-overcoming than the stance of ethical openness captures. In order to see how though we first need to make

a distinction between two ways in which we might think of the ends of self-overcoming as horizontal.

For all that has been said so far we could think that whilst these future moralities remain to be specified at the initial point of engagement in re-evaluative projects, or in other words that they cannot be articulated in advance by us as we are at present, that over the course of such self-overcoming we would, in the end, come to a fully articulated, no longer inchoate, self-evaluative framework. Like the ideal scientist who overcomes the theoretical or evidential limitations of a certain hypothesis in favour of a new one that is a better fit, we might think that there are no limitations, in theory, on achieving and conceptually formulating this new self-evaluative standpoint. It is in this sense that Taylor remarks how when engaging in such re-evaluations we appeal to some deep “unstructured sense of what is important, which is as yet inchoate”, but that in the end this is brought to articulation.<sup>35</sup> The commitment to constant ethical openness dictates that we could not be complacent, but read in this way it seems that achieving the ends of Nietzschean self-overcoming is theoretically attainable, even if in practice we might find it very difficult to maintain this commitment continually.

Yet, there is a more distinctive way of taking Nietzsche’s point about the horizontality of future moralities. We could say, *pace* Taylor, that it is not merely at the beginning of our ethical re-evaluations that the higher standpoint which we strive for is inchoate, but rather that in trying to bring to definition our ethical ideals, by in some sense making them “objective” and conceptually articulated, we somehow betray them. Such that when we try to move closer towards definitely achieving and articulating this new self-evaluative framework Nietzsche thinks we in fact somehow always falsify or fall short of what was more authentic in our original, adumbrated, commitment to something higher.

In this sense we might highlight a kind of anti-conceptualist aspect to Nietzsche’s thinking about ethical ideals. For example consider these two particularly revealing passages: “I caught this insight on the wing and quickly took the nearest shoddy words to fasten it lest it fly away from me. And now it has died of these barren words and hangs and flags in them – and I hardly know any more, when I look at it, how I could have felt so happy when I caught this bird” (GS 298); “We stop valuing ourselves enough when we communicate. Our true experiences are completely taciturn. They could not be communicated even if they wanted to be. This is because

the right words for them do not exist. The things we have words for are also the things we have already left behind” (*TI* VIII.26, cf. *BGE* 97, 160).<sup>36</sup> This theme is problematic and when Nietzsche engages with it his prose often becomes more poetic. Yet given the difficulty of trying to conceptualize a point about the problematic nature of conceptualizing our ethical ideals it is not surprising that he often reaches for a more metaphorical style. For instance in the final aphorism of *Beyond Good and Evil* when he asks “What are the only things we can paint...only ever things that are about to wilt and lose their smell. Only ever storms that have exhausted themselves and are moving off, and feelings that are yellowed and late...but nobody will guess from this how you looked in your morning, you sudden sparks and wonders of my solitude” (*BGE* 296).

Drawing on these passages we might say that for Nietzsche there is a “wilting” that takes place in the activity of striving to conceptualize, and so realize, our highest ideals. Put another way, Nietzsche seems to think that there is a fundamentally self-defeating character to our projects of ethical self-transformation.<sup>37</sup> Interpreting the ends of self-overcoming in this distinctive way, as suggesting something more theoretically, rather than just practically, difficult about articulating (and achieving) the ends of such re-evaluative activities, might allow us to see how continual self-overcoming might make sense as something we could be committed to and how it can combat what Nietzsche sees as the post-moral evaluative malaise. To see how we need to specify more clearly what this malaise is, and then examine how the first reading of continual self-overcoming, the stance of ethical openness, fares on this score.

Nietzsche is concerned, as we saw in our discussion in Section 2, by the idea that in overcoming European morality we might sleepwalk into a kind of evaluative nihilism, more specifically into a post-moral future in which we give up on striving for higher ethical ideals, ignoring his call for higher moralities after European morality (*BGE* 202). He thinks we might all too easily fall into the trap of favouring that “pitiful contentment” (*Z* Prologue 3) represented in Zarathustra’s depiction of the last human being who derisively asks, “What is creation? What is longing?” (*Z* Prologue 5)

So, if we return to our example of the ideal scientist as exemplary of the stance of openness, we might note that whilst he must be open to revision given new evidence or theoretical limitations, if at a given time all such considerations speak in favour of

a particular hypothesis then he would reasonably have to accept it. In this way a commitment to openness should not amount to arbitrary skepticism. Rather, the stance of openness is openness to revision given that relevant reason-based evidence presents itself. Applying this to the ethical context, we might wonder whether we can really make sense of a situation in which, having achieved some proto-noble standpoint, that is to say if our fundamental evaluations are no longer those of European morality, we would then be committed to overcoming *this* new self-evaluative framework as well (whatever precise content the latter has).<sup>38</sup> Since it might seem that if we arrive at this standpoint and find no good reason, *pace* a kind of arbitrary self-skepticism, to again revise these new fundamental evaluations, then the demand for continual self-overcoming would be unreasonable and psychologically implausible. In this sense a commitment to ethical openness should not dictate revision regardless, since it is the reasons and intuitions about the limitations of a particular standpoint that provide a good deal, if not necessarily all, of the motivation for engaging in any particular self-overcoming in the first place. Ethical openness should only commit us to openness to such reasons as they are presented, and it does not itself supply those reasons.

Consequently, if even some proto-noble self-evaluative standpoint must eventually be overcome, as implied by the idea of continual self-overcoming, then we would have to have a reason why. Note that we cannot appeal to the idea that this commitment might sustain our interest in ethical life in a post-moral world, since it should not be the case that our end is to “affirm life”, to find a way of striving towards new self-evaluative frameworks, and that continual self-overcoming best serves this aim. Not only might this betray Nietzsche’s remarks on continual self-overcoming which implicitly resist this commitment becoming a means to an end, but it gives rise to two objections. (1) There might be all kinds of different or preferable means for achieving this end (“affirming life”) in a post-moral context and (2) we would have to have an independent argument, *pace* nihilism, that “affirming life” in a post-moral context is actually realizable. So, the problem with reading continual self-overcoming as the stance of ethical openness is that it does not, by itself, give us a plausible explanation of the motivation to overcome some proto-noble ethical standpoint or explain why we should keep striving towards new ethical ideals in a post-moral context.

The more distinctive reading of continual self-overcoming, as growing out of Nietzsche’s anti-conceptualism and the horizontal nature of our ethical ideals, suggests

a more plausible response to these problems (and the first *formal objection* from Section 2). The motivation for re-engaging in re-evaluative projects makes more sense if we understand, on some level, that we have fallen short and are therefore dissatisfied with what we have ended up with as the result of a particular self-transformative project. In this way my constant striving to overcome myself would not be arbitrary, but might be explained in terms of the necessarily always limited attempt of trying to get closer to an ethical ideal, underwriting what might be required to possess “the power [and also the reasons] to create for ourselves our own new eyes and ever again new eyes that are even more our own” (*GS* 143).

However, such continual attempts at ethical self-transformation would not represent the myth of Sisyphus, of attempting to articulate, failing, then starting again from the beginning. Rather we might think, as Nietzsche suggests in *GS* 143, that attempts at articulation could come closer to expressing our ethical ideals. Consequently, each attempt at articulation could overcome, or at least confront, some of the limitations of previous articulations, and therefore come closer to a more genuine expression. And this is the case even if exhaustive, final realization of our highest ethical ideal is never achieved, and if in continually striving towards such “future moralities” we are aware of the limitations and sense of inadequacy that pervades all efforts at articulation in specific, conceptualized self-evaluative frameworks. In this sense the “future” in “future moralities” (*BGE* 202) does not merely designate its temporal status, i.e., being in the future, but rather more significantly points towards the horizontal character of our highest ideals.

Interpreted in this way we can also see how the more distinctive reading of continual self-overcoming might combat the post-evaluative malaise more successfully. Since if what I end up with always falls short of what I was striving towards, then this should provide the necessary reasons to take up the project of self-overcoming again. By seeing the ends of Nietzschean self-overcoming as inexhaustible in this way, there will always be the opportunity for re-engaging in such projects, an understanding Nietzsche describes as the realization that “the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is - to live dangerously...Send your ships into uncharted seas” (*GS* 282, cf. *GS* 124), those “ships” directed towards “distant futures not yet glimpsed in dreams” (*Z* “On Old and New Law Tables”). Read in this way continual self-overcoming could provide a more successful way of maintaining ethical interest in ourselves in a post-moral future in

which the traditional frameworks of European morality are no longer subscribed to and self-evaluative frameworks take on a more protean and individually-indexed character, representing a key aspect of Nietzsche's project of staving off the potential slip of humanity into an ethical malaise (*GM* III.14).

I think this more distinctive reading of the ends of Nietzschean self-overcoming also provides a response to the second *formal objection* from the end of Section 2. There it was questioned how my account of self-overcoming could make sense of those cases of the converted Buddhist and born-again Christian, where we seem to have examples of what could plausibly be described as an overcoming of a self-evaluative framework that structures a practical identity, and yet it seems that both instances would, and do, fall foul of Nietzsche's criticisms. In other words, they seemed to involve Nietzschean self-overcoming as I had presented it up to that point and yet surely we have to say they fall short of Nietzsche's ideal.

One response to this objection would be to concede that such cases are indeed instances of Nietzschean self-overcoming as defined but argue that there is some *other* Nietzschean standard that could be applied, external to his ideal of self-overcoming, which could rule them out. A second response might be to deny that they are in fact instances of Nietzschean self-overcoming because the reading I have given was never attempting to be sufficient characterization of this concept. So perhaps we could appeal to the will to power psychology readings of self-overcoming to try to deal with such counter-examples. However, I think both of these responses would undermine the significance of the reading of self-overcoming presented in this article. In fact I think we can do better by drawing on the discussion of the horizontal ends of Nietzschean self-overcoming presented in this section.

As we have seen, at least one aspect of what is involved in the commitment to Nietzschean self-overcoming as a continual activity is a recognition of the way in which some final realization of our highest ethical ideal can never be achieved; as was noted above the "future" in "future moralities" (*BGE* 202) does not merely designate its temporal status but rather more significantly points towards the horizontal character of our highest ideals. However, whatever else the Christian or Buddhist self-evaluative frameworks involve, they are both aiming towards some finished or final state of rest (at least in their most traditional and typical formulations). For example, in the Christian case we have the *contemplatio Dei*, or the ultimate end of man, which Aquinas describes as "the complete good which satisfies his desire altogether",<sup>39</sup> and

in the Buddhist case the state of Nirvana, that “perfect oneness”, which Nietzsche describes as “that finally achieved state of total hypnosis and silence...as an escape from every aim, every wish, every action” (*GM* I.17). Moreover, such ends are aimed at by following fully codified and conceptually articulated self-evaluative frameworks in terms of truths and normative standards expressed in canonical texts like the Bible, which prescribe the various Religious practices that have to be followed if one is to achieve such states of “eternal beatitude”. As Nietzsche says about Christianity, “the value, meaning, horizons of value were fixed, unconditional, eternal, one with God” (*WLN* 11 [226]).

So even if the converted Buddhist or born-again Christian, by virtue of their “conversions”, could be said to have achieved a re-evaluation of a self-evaluative framework which structured their practical identities, they could not be said to be engaged in Nietzschean self-overcoming *proper* on my reading because of what it is that their projects of transformation are directed towards. In other words, what these instances of self-overcoming are aiming at is a once and for all satisfaction in some final state, aiming for what Nietzsche describes as a “deep sleep” (*GM* I.17). So, in this sense we can see that whilst ethical re-evaluation might be a necessary condition for something to count as an instance of Nietzschean self-overcoming on my reading, it is not sufficient, and therefore the second *formal objection* has been met.

Whilst more could be said about this continual dimension to self-overcoming, specifically in terms of its reliance on Nietzsche’s anti-conceptualism, my aims in this final section have been more limited. I have given an account of the ends of self-overcoming (what it is an overcoming towards), showing that continual self-overcoming does not collapse into arbitrariness or psychological implausibility but rather represents a novel dimension to Nietzsche’s thinking about ethical ideals, a feature which also allows us to answer some of the objections to the interpretation argued for in this article.

## Conclusion

My central aim in this paper was to provide a novel reading of Nietzschean self-overcoming. By focusing on the first-personal dimension to this idea I have been able to highlight at least one class of evaluative activities that he values highly, namely those in which we stand to achieve ethical self-transformation by overcoming the

fundamental evaluations that structure our practical identities. I then argued that achieving a standpoint “Beyond Good and Evil” was an example of self-overcoming read in this way and drew out some further stipulations on my interpretation. Finally, through explicating Nietzsche’s idea of continual self-overcoming, I provided an account of what self-overcoming is an “overcoming towards” in terms of horizontal ethical ends expressed in the idea of “future moralities”, drawing links between this idea and the potential for maintaining ethical interest in a post-moral context.

Whilst more could be said about a number of the claims argued for in this article I think the account of self-overcoming offered here points towards a more general point about the different approaches we might take in trying to understand Nietzsche’s thought, and specifically with regard to ethics. Perhaps most importantly, it has shown that it is often possible to frame distinctive ideas in Nietzsche’s ethics, such as importance of self-evaluative frameworks (Section 1), and the horizontal nature of ethical striving (Section 3), without explicit reference to, or dependence on, will to power psychology (and it is possible to do so even where the will to power psychology readings might seem like the most natural interpretative routes to take). Moreover, when we do so novel aspects of Nietzsche’s thought emerge, such as the strong link between an anti-conceptualist ethics and the notion of continual self-overcoming. In this sense it is worth exploring whether or not there might be other significant areas of Nietzsche’s ethical thought which could admit of a similar attempts to cleave away what is distinctive and of value in his texts from will to power psychology.

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<sup>1</sup>. Translations used are Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); *The Case of Wagner*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, trans. Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>. Some notion of self-overcoming is also present in Zarathustra's concept of the overman and the idea that the "human being is something that must be overcome" (Z Prologue 3, cf. A 57).

<sup>3</sup>. Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 118-147.

<sup>4</sup>. Reginster, *Affirmation of Life*, 130-132.

<sup>5</sup>. Aside from Reginster, Paul Katsafanas also provides a similar account, although with more "constitutive" themes in mind (see Katsafanas "Deriving Ethics from Action", 650-651, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 83 (2011): 620-60 and Katsafanas, *Agency and the Foundation of Ethics: Nietzschean Constitutivism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 145-183). John Richardson, with a slightly different emphasis, states that, for Nietzsche, "I am to see that the point to life is growth, growth by overcoming previous states of myself...Nietzsche's view again looks like a kind of consequentialism, with power – the individuals own power – as the good to be maximized" (Richardson "Nietzsche on Life's Ends", in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. J. Richardson and K. Gemes [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 777).

<sup>6</sup>. Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 176. It should be noted that for Katsafanas will to power only gives us a standard according to which we assess other values, and with which our other values need be consistent. So, rather than the "foundational principle from which we derive all other normative claims...will to power generates a standard in terms of which we are to assess all other values" (Katsafanas, *Agency and Foundation of Ethics*, 189).

<sup>7</sup>. Katsafanas, *Agency and Foundation of Ethics*, 158; Reginster, *Affirmation of Life*, 250-251. This reading of self-overcoming was originally proposed by Walter Kaufmann, who writes that "the will to power is conceived of as the will to overcome oneself", and that "'Power' means something specific for Nietzsche: self-overcoming" (Kaufmann, *Nietzsche – Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974], 200, 261).

<sup>8</sup>. Reginster, *Affirmation of Life*, 250-251.

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<sup>9</sup>. Peter Poellner, “Aestheticist Ethics”, in *Nietzsche, Naturalism and Normativity*, ed. C. Janaway and S. Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 52-80, 55.

<sup>10</sup>. As Brian Leiter comments, one of the central charges that Nietzsche makes against the kinds of morality he rejects are their “normative agenda[s] which benefits the ‘lowest’ human beings while harming the ‘highest’” (Leiter, “Nietzsche and the Morality Critics”. *Ethics* 107 no. 2, (1997): 250-285, 26; see also Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* [London: Routledge, 2015], 15-25). For a contrasting approach that makes impotent will to power central to Nietzsche’s critique of morality see Reginster “The Psychology of Christian Morality”, In *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. J. Richardson and K. Gemes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 701-727.

<sup>11</sup>. Poellner, “Aestheticist Ethics”, 55.

<sup>12</sup>. Leiter could be read as making this mistake when defining what constitutes moralities for Nietzsche. He appeals to the idea of “Anthropocentric Evaluative Practice”, the practice of evaluating oneself and others, claiming that “both slave and master moralities are examples of *morality*” because they are evaluative practices that are “concerned not with things or texts or foods, but with *human beings*” (Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 138). Yet, this does not tell us what is distinctive about moralities. So whilst he rightly adds that “*not every AEP is a morality*”, it cannot therefore follow that slave and master moralities are examples of moralities *because* they involve AEP. Rather AEP would be a necessary condition, but is not sufficient. As such Leiter’s definition does not tell us what distinguishes self-evaluative frameworks from non-ethical activities that are AEP’s, such as games. Ken Gemes and Christopher Janaway also highlight this problem in their ““Naturalism and Value in Nietzsche”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71.3 (2005): 729-740, 737.

<sup>13</sup>. Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 14 (cf. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 92).

<sup>14</sup> For an extensive overview of the topic of normativity in Nietzsche see C. Janaway and S. Robertson (ed.) *Nietzsche, Naturalism and Normativity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Of particular note in this collection for questions relating to first-order ethical commitments, and their status, are Poellner “Aestheticist Ethics”, 52-80; Peter Railton “Nietzsche’s Normative Theory? The Art and Skill of Living Well”, 20-51; Simon Robertson “The Scope Problem-Nietzsche, the Moral, Ethical and Quasi-Aesthetic”, 80-110. It is an important question, raised in the latter two articles, as to whether or not Nietzsche can consistently retain the usage of properly deontic concepts (e.g., duty, ought) in the light of his “critique of morality”, or whether his usage of them (cf. *BGE* 206, 212, 272) is in some sense “demoralized”. Moreover, with regard to the issue of ethical ideals and the kind of

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requirements Nietzsche might be imposing on his readers by suggesting self-overcoming as central to ethical life, I am inclined to agree with Edward Harcourt who writes that ‘there seems to be plenty of room to hold an ideal – a conception of how to live such that one can say what’s good about it – without any implication that other people are required to live according to it. Indeed one might think this is what an ideal *is*: a conception of how to live well that goes beyond what is required of one’ (Harcourt, “Nietzsche and the “aesthetics of character”” in Simon May (ed.) *Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011], 272). For my own attempt to answer questions regarding the normative authority of Nietzsche’s own evaluative standpoint see Jonathan Mitchell “Nietzsche on Taste: Epistemic Privilege and Anti-Realism” forthcoming in *Inquiry*.

<sup>15</sup>. This feature is present in some evaluative frameworks but not in others. For example, think of evaluative frameworks for assessing literature. Since whilst we might have some ideal of what the highest type of literature should attain to, in assessing a particular work we are not always doing so as a means to improving it.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, “What is Human Agency”, in *Human Agency and Language* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 26.

<sup>17</sup>. See also Taylor, “What is Human Agency”, 39.

<sup>18</sup>. Perhaps this will seem like a question begging response, or a merely stipulative definition (i.e., defining this individual out of ethical life), especially to someone who is willing to claim that concerns relating to his performance in the game do in fact provide him with a wide range of evaluative attitudes towards other first-order projects and ends. For example, he might be willing to entirely disregard certain other-directed concerns in favour of focusing exclusively on training to improve his performance. In the end if such an individual does not strike us as something of a sociopath I expect that we cannot do much more than appeal to our intuitions about the necessary scope of ethical life.

<sup>19</sup>. Robert Pippin makes a similar point about the importance of self-dissatisfaction to self-overcoming. Although his more positive statement that self-overcoming is a “self-negating and yet self-identifying and self-affirming state” that involves “tension of the spirit” seems unclear to me. See Pippin, “How to Overcome Oneself: Nietzsche on Freedom”. In *Nietzsche on Autonomy and Freedom*, ed. K. Gemes and S. May [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 69-88, 82.

<sup>20</sup>. Note that ethics is used here, and in the preceding discussion, to suggest something broader than “morality” in the sense Nietzsche is opposed to (see Section 2).

<sup>21</sup>. Nietzsche in fact tells us how the pursuit of endless “becoming”, that is, overcoming resistance *tout court* is problematic in *GS* 370.

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<sup>22</sup>. David Velleman, *Self to Self: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 356. Velleman's target is an idea of "motivational essences" he finds in Frankfurt, *The Importance of What we Care About*, and Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) according to which if one was to change or abandon particularly important (essential) motives (i.e., those that are constitutive of one's personality), then something akin to literal death of the self would be the result. Whilst I do not have the space to develop this point fully my sense is that Nietzsche, like Velleman, would want to resist the idea that we have "motivational essences" and also Frankfurt's claim that we have an obligation to self-preservation in these terms (see Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, 138, 139). In fact the commitment to self-overcoming might be opposed to what Nietzsche would perhaps see as a kind of ethical conservatism in Frankfurt's view (see *BGE* 198).

<sup>23</sup>. Velleman makes the sound point that whilst, due to the radical nature of the shift involved in such a revision of one's self-conception, a certain resistance to such self-overcoming would seem justified, that we would nonetheless not expect as much resistance as for "sake of literal self-preservation" (Velleman, *Self to Self*, 356.)

<sup>24</sup>. Another example can be found in Nietzsche's overcoming of Romanticism. For a detailed account of this topic see David Mitchell, "How the Free Spirit became Free: Sickness and Romanticism in Nietzsche's 1886 Prefaces". *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21:5 (2013): 946-966.

<sup>25</sup>. Whilst the interpretation of the overcoming of morality set out in this section captures something central to the notion, there is also a different sense to idea, namely that Judeo-Christian morality contains within itself the resources for its own overcoming (see *GS* 357, cf. *GM* III.27).

<sup>26</sup>. Nietzsche explains what his immoralism amounts to in *EH* IV.4.

<sup>27</sup>. For development of these themes see Poellner, "Ressentiment and Morality" in *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality a critical guide*, ed. S. May (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 120-141, and Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 165-179.

<sup>28</sup>. Pippin, "How to Overcome Oneself", 83.

<sup>29</sup>. Due to limitations of space I have not been able to consider the tension between self-overcoming and Nietzsche's praise of Goethean serenity as a kind of harmony of the soul. For discussion of this theme see Leiter, "The Paradox of Fatalism and Self-Creation in Nietzsche", in *Nietzsche*, ed. J. Richardson and B. Leiter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 227-261.

<sup>30</sup>. See Poellner, "Ressentiment and *Morality*", 122.

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<sup>31</sup>. Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche – An Introduction to the University of His Philosophical Activity*, trans C.F. Wallraff and F.J. Schmitz (London: John Hopkins University Press 1974), 393-394. This objection is similar to that which Hegel directed against the Romantics ideal of endless change (specifically as found in Novalis and Schlegel’s “Irony”), claiming that they were expressive of a “bad infinity” (see Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans T. M. Knox [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975], 64-69). Yet, the Romantics ideal of endless change, as a kind of endless striving due to any finite end once attained being experienced as unsatisfactory, whilst similar in certain regards is not the same as Nietzschean self-overcoming, which on my reading requires something more specific than this (i.e., ethical re-evaluation).

<sup>32</sup>. A commitment to continual self-overcoming might therefore seem close to an aspect of Sartre’s ethics: ‘authenticity must precisely lay claim to live this very situation: this will be love as *tension*...this lived calling into question of self by self...the shifting ensemble of perpetually calling things into question and or perpetually surpassing them’ (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans D. Pellauer [London: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 477-478).

<sup>33</sup>. Taylor, “What is Human Agency”, 17.

<sup>34</sup>. Poellner, “Aestheticist Ethics”, 77.

<sup>35</sup>. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 41- 42. Aaron Ridley explores a different way of framing similar ideas in relation to Nietzsche’s ethical ideal as a kind of particularism modelled after artistic creativity. Drawing on Nietzsche’s description of the way in which artists follow ‘laws that defy conceptual formulation precisely because of their hardness and determinateness’ (*BGE* 188), Ridley argues, following Kant’s reflections on artistic genius, that Nietzsche’s ethical agent does not have a formula for practice or action in advance which he then might apply. Rather, in a similar way to how an artist “sees what he should do” as it reveals itself precisely by being involved in the practice of completing a musical phrase or completing a painting, as a subtle kind of seeing-doing-and-responding dynamic in the artistic performance itself, Ridley claims that the “good man ‘perceives’ what a situation requires of him, even though there is no storable rule that allows him to do this” (Ridley, “Nietzsche on Art and Freedom”, *European Journal of Philosophy* 15: 2 [2007]: 204-224, 214).

<sup>36</sup>. Katsafanas argues that for Nietzsche there is a distinction between conceptual and non-conceptually articulated mental states that is co-extensive with the distinction between conscious and unconscious mental states. More specifically he claims that Nietzsche thinks that “concepts are not primarily designed to portray their objects accurately; rather, they are designed to facilitate human interaction” (Katsafanas, “Nietzsche’s Theory of Mind”, *European Journal of Philosophy* 13 [2005]: 1-33, 17). I expect that the way in which, for

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Nietzsche, we “falsify” our ethical ideals by conceptualizing them is a particular example of the way in which he thinks conceptually articulated mental states fall short of some non-conceptually articulated content.

<sup>37</sup>. This realization might seem melancholic, and Nietzsche claims that our insatiable “thirst to possess” our ethical ideals, our constant striving for what is “beautiful, strange questionable, terrible and divine”, has made it such that “nothing will sate us anymore” (*GS* 382, *GM* III.13).

<sup>38</sup>. This is really just a way of rephrasing the first *formal objection* from Section 2. As will become clear in the text I do not think that continual self-overcoming read as the stance of “ethical openness” can meet this objection.

<sup>39</sup>. Aquinas, *The Treatise on Divine Nature: Summa Theologiae I 1-13*, translated by B. Shanley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), Ia, IIae, 2.8.