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How One Becomes What One Is

Abstract: Throughout his work Nietzsche uses Pindar’s injunction “Become who you are!” to spur his readers on to what appears to be an agonal process of self-cultivation and self-overcoming. However, whereas in his earlier work Nietzsche often uses various active metaphors to describe such a process of becoming who one is, in *Ecce Homo* he stresses the absence of any struggle, and describes “becoming what one is” as a physiological and subconscious process. The metaphors of self-cultivation and self-overcoming give way to a metaphor of forgetting oneself, even misunderstanding oneself. For Nietzsche, it seems, any conscious effort at becoming what one is, is ultimately counterproductive. This essay elucidates Nietzsche’s metaphor of forgetting the self, rather than cultivating or overcoming it, and reconstructs a non-intentional perspective on “becoming what one is” that supplements Nietzsche’s more active metaphors in his earlier work.

1 Introduction

Throughout his work Nietzsche uses Pindar’s injunction “Become who you are!” to spur his readers on to what appears to be an agonal process of self-cultivation and self-overcoming.¹ However, whereas Nietzsche in his earlier work often uses various active metaphors to describe such a process of becoming who one is, later on they increasingly give way to more passive metaphors. In Nietzsche’s later work, a naturalistic perspective can be found, which renders such active metaphors somewhat problematic. For, seen from the perspective of will to power, the notions of ‘I’ and ‘will’ are both recognized to be illusory. “Become who you are!” changes to “becoming what one is”. There can no longer be any voluntaristic master agent that can drive such a process. Consciousness is not an independent causal agent, but a by-product of subconscious bodily drives. Conscious thought is nothing but the expression of the many drives that make up the individual as will to power.

¹ Translations of quotations from Nietzsche’s works are by R.J. Hollingdale (D, TI, WS), Walter Kaufmann (AC, BGE), Duncan Large (EH) and Graham Parkes (Z). Translations of quotations from the *Nachlass* and correspondence are by the author.

In *Ecce Homo*, this perspective can be found in its most radical form. Nietzsche stresses the absence of any struggle, and describes “becoming what one is” as a physiological and subconscious process, something that grows within us, underneath the surface of consciousness. Nietzsche describes “know thyself” as a recipe for ruin: in order to become what one is, one has to have no idea of who one is, and keep a distance from all the great imperatives. The metaphors of self-cultivation and self-overcoming – which suggest a conscious pursuit of emancipation and authenticity, leading up to a sovereign individual – give way in *Ecce Homo* to a metaphor of forgetting oneself, misunderstanding oneself, in order not to interfere with the “regulating idea” that grows below the surface of consciousness. For Nietzsche, it seems, any conscious effort at becoming what one is, is ultimately in vain.²

This essay will further elucidate Nietzsche’s metaphor of forgetting the self, rather than cultivating or overcoming it, and will reconstruct, on the basis of *Ecce Homo* and *Nachlass* excerpts from the same period, a non-intentional perspective on “becoming what one is” that supplements Nietzsche’s more active metaphors in his earlier work.³

2 *Ecce Homo* as Self-Help Book or Preparation for *The Antichrist*?

In the introduction to his excellent English translation of *Ecce Homo*, Duncan Large suggests that it can be read as an instruction manual for “how to become what you are” (Large 2007, p. xvii). Such an instruction would have to be compatible with Nietzsche’s conception of human individuality as the particular configuration of a person’s drives. “Becoming what one is” would refer to an individual process of educating the drives, in which what is optimal for one person is not necessarily optimal for another. Nietzsche’s own life is not a recipe to be followed, but serves as a model or example (*Vorbild*). In a modern way of speaking, we could view *Ecce Homo* then as a kind of self-help book that promotes the process of self-becoming as an ethical ideal, with Nietzsche himself as “an inspirational example of successfully achieved selfhood” (Large 2007, p. xvii).

Large describes self-becoming as connected to self-overcoming: “overcoming the parts of yourself that are not, ultimately, of yourself or do not, as Nietzsche

² I have written more about this in my Dutch dissertation (van der Braak 2004).

³ For a more extensive discussion of this matter, see van der Braak 2011.

puts it, belong to your task, your destiny” (Large 2007, p. xvii). This means that “you incorporate what was alien into your task by affirming it and deeming it retrospectively to have been a necessary stage in your personal development” (Large 2007, p. xvii). But can *Ecce Homo* really be seen as a self-help book?

In my interpretation *Ecce Homo* serves as an explanation of how Nietzsche has become a person that is capable of perceiving what is true, and of sniffing out lies. In other words, one who is capable of performing a reevaluation of values. Nietzsche wrote *Ecce Homo* in order to pave the way for a successful reception of *The Antichrist*, and its objective is to legitimize the author of that work. As Daniel Conway puts it, “*Ecce Homo* functions, in large part, to document Nietzsche’s legislative credentials” (Conway 1997, p. 115). With *Ecce Homo*, he wanted to prevent the confiscation of *The Antichrist*.

3 “The Truth is in My Nostrils”: Truth as Courage, Error as Cowardice

“Do not mistake me for someone else!”, Nietzsche warns the reader of *Ecce Homo* (EH Preface 1). Perhaps Nietzsche researchers should also take this to heart. One of the remarkable and even shocking things in *Ecce Homo*, for the Nietzsche researcher anyway, is Nietzsche’s insistence, already in the Foreword, that such a thing as “truth” *does* exist (EH Preface 3). This cannot be explained away as merely rhetoric, or a sign of impending madness, for Nietzsche holds the same perspective on truth – what Daniel Conway has called his “emergent realism” (Conway 1999) – in *The Antichrist* and *Twilight of the Idols*.

For Nietzsche, all speaking about consciousness, thought and convictions is merely a way of speaking about the ‘great reason’ of the body. From Nietzsche’s perspective of will to power, all philosophical judgments are symptoms of an underlying physiological condition. Philosophical allegiances either to “truth” or appearance” in a metaphysical sense are equally symptomatic of decadence. When Nietzsche speaks again, in 1888, about “reality”, he leaves its ontological status vague. We could interpret it, for now, as the Dionysian flux of life that the healthy are able to stand, and the decadent need to be protected from. In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche speaks about the priest’s “instinctive hatred of reality” that goes with such decadence, a pathological recoil from it (AC 30). The opposite of that would be a healthy, receptive attunement to reality.

In the preface to *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche’s emphasis on truth and error seems to be not in an extra-moral sense, but in a moral sense. Being able to perceive truthfully seems a moral issue for Nietzsche: it has to do with who one is,

how tough one dares to be with oneself, how sincere one dares to be with oneself. “How much truth can a spirit *stand*, how much truth does it *dare?* – for me that became more and more the real measure of value. Error (– belief in the ideal –) is not blindness, error is *cowardice* ...” (EH Preface 3). But, on the other hand, how much reality one can stand simply depends on one’s health. The idealist cannot help recoiling from it, whereas the healthy person naturally embraces reality as it is. Later in *Ecce Homo*, as he discusses *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche says:

[O]ne comes only so close to truth as one’s strength *allows* one’s courage to dare advance. Knowledge, saying “yes” to reality, is just as much a necessity for the strong as are, for the weak (inspired by weakness), cowardice and *flight* from reality – the “ideal” ... They are not free to know: *décadents* need the lie, it is one of the conditions of their preservation. (EH III BT 2)

Because the healthy do not need to flee from reality, they not only have a wider range of perspectives at their disposal but are also capable of certain higher experiences that decadent people are not, Nietzsche claims. Because of this, they are more attuned to reality as it is and can gain subjectively valid knowledge of it.

4 How Those with a Great Destiny Become What They Are

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche describes how he, Nietzsche, became the healthy person with strong drives, strong enough to bear truth and expose the lies of, for example, decadent Christian priests. *Ecce Homo* is meant as an attack on idealism, consequently all conscious effort needs to be excised from his account of how he has become what he is. Therefore, the metaphors of self-cultivation and self-overcoming, of Nietzsche’s earlier work, are absent here.

The answers that Nietzsche gives are in terms of nutrition (in the widest sense of the word): “how do *you* personally have to nourish yourself in order to attain your maximum of strength, of *virtù* in the Renaissance style, of moraline-free virtue?” (EH II 1). This is followed by a discussion of German and English cooking. But we shouldn’t forget that in *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche says that the mind resembles most of all – a stomach (BGE 230). Nietzsche continues to take on the subjects of place, climate and relaxation.

In section 9 of ‘Why I am So Clever’ in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes that he can no longer avoid answering the question of how to become what you are,

which is connected with the art of, not self-creation or self-becoming, but surprisingly enough the art of self-preservation. Such a self-preservation seems only important for a very small minority, those that assume they have an unusually great task:

[I]f you assume that your task, your destiny, the *fate* of your task lies considerably beyond the average measure, then no danger would be greater than facing up to yourself *with* this task. (EH II 9)

Ecce Homo is not a self-help book for a general audience; it is at most a self-help book for free spirits. But more likely, the format of a self-help book is a thinly veiled way for Nietzsche to speak about his own development:

Becoming what you are presupposes that you have not the slightest inkling *what* you are. From this point of view even life's *mistakes* have their own sense and value, the temporary byways and detours, the delays, the "modesties", the seriousness wasted on tasks which lie beyond *the* task. (EH II 9)

Nietzsche's affirmation of his own "byways and detours" could therefore be seen as not only an artistic form of self-creation, involving, as Large points out, a retrospective reinterpretation which inevitably involves bending the historical truth a little bit (Large 2007, p. xviii), but also as part of a more general theory of illness and health, which explains why Nietzsche's health is a form of "the great health", which makes him uniquely suited for performing a revaluation of values. Again, in my view, the single overriding purpose of *Ecce Homo*, which should be kept in mind with the interpretation of all its passages, is to show why Nietzsche is fit to perform a revaluation of values. Nietzsche continues: "[W]here *nosce te ipsum* would be the recipe for decline, then forgetting yourself, *misunderstanding* yourself, belittling, constricting, mediocritizing yourself becomes good sense itself" (EH II 9). In order to interpret this, let us turn to Nietzsche's use of the old notion, already popular in antiquity, of first and second nature.

5 First and Second Nature

In the second of the *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche speaks about second nature in a negative way: attempting to overcome the errors of the past leads at best to the construction of new instincts, of a second nature, that causes our inherited, inborn first nature to scorch and shrivel up (UM II 3). Usually this second nature

is weaker than the first nature. But eventually this second nature will become a new first nature.

In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche writes more positively that any education provides us with a second nature, a protective snake skin that allows our first nature to develop unhindered and to ripen underneath (D 455). He adds, however, that most people are unable to shed this skin when their first nature has ripened. The active *development* of one's second nature should be distinguished from the more passive *ripening*, and eventual revelation, of one's first nature. In his *Nachlass*, Nietzsche writes:

My being *reveals itself* – whether it *develops*?

From childhood on overloaded with foreign character and foreign knowledge. I am discovering myself. (NF 1878, 28[16]: KSA 8/506)

In *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, Nietzsche says:

One day, when one has long since been educated as the world understands it, one *discovers oneself*: here begins the task of the thinker; now the time has come to call on him for assistance – not as an educator, but as one who has educated himself and who thus knows how it is done. (HAH II WS 267)

But the relationship between first and second nature is more complex. In two letters from December 1882, Nietzsche uses the distinction between first and second nature to answer some critical remarks from his friend Erwin Rohde, presumably about *The Joyous Science* that appeared that year. Apparently, Rohde was not all that impressed by Nietzsche's newfound life-affirming demeanor. In a letter to Hans von Bülow, Nietzsche writes:

What do I care when my friends say that my current “free-spirited” demeanor [*Freigeisterei*] is an eccentric, teeth-gritting *decision*, that is forced upon my own inclination? It may indeed be a “second nature”: but I will prove that only with this second nature I have come into the actual *possession* of my first nature. (KSB 6/290)

According to this interpretation, Nietzsche thinks Rohde has failed to differentiate between Nietzsche's *historical* first nature and his *actual* first nature (which now is able to manifest itself through an acquired second nature). In Nietzsche's letter to Rohde himself, he expresses himself slightly differently:

Yes, I do have a “second nature”, but not in order to destroy the first but to *stand* it. I would have long ago perished from my “first nature” – I almost did perish from it.

What you say about an “eccentric decision” is by the way completely *true*. I could name you place and time. But – *who* was it that *made the decision*? – For sure, my dearest friend, it was the *first* nature: **it wanted** “to live”. – (KSB 6/291)

Nietzsche suggests here that it was his first nature that decided to adopt the second nature, in order to protect the organism “Nietzsche” from itself. Reviewing *Human, All too Human* in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes about the re-emergence of his first nature:

That nethermost self, as if buried alive, as if made mute beneath the constant *need* to pay heed to other selves (– which is what reading is!) awoke slowly, shyly, hesitantly – but finally *it spoke again*. (EH III HAH 4)

Nietzsche also writes about *The Wanderer and his Shadow* and *Daybreak* as a return to himself.

Let us return to the interpretation of section 9 of ‘Why I am so Clever’. A second nature can function in service of a first nature. Therefore, Nietzsche writes, even a selfless Christian morality can be useful and effective in this way:

Brotherly love, living for other people and things *can* be a preventative measure for maintaining the harshest selfishness. This is the exception, when – against my habit and conviction – I side with the “selfless” drives: in this case they labor in the service of *egoism*, *self-discipline* [Selbstsucht, Selbstzucht]. (EH II 9)

Such a healthy egoism is only for strong natures. As Nietzsche notes in *Twilight of the Idols*: “The value of egoism depends on the physiological value of him who possesses it” (TI IX 33). The question in all this is, however: who decides to employ those selfless drives in the service of self-discipline? Who or what is behind the steering wheel? Nietzsche makes it very clear that it is not consciousness itself:

You need to keep the whole surface of consciousness – consciousness *is* a surface – untainted by any of the great imperatives. Beware even every great phrase, every great pose! With all of them the instinct risks “understanding itself” too soon – – Meanwhile, in the depths, the organizing “idea” with a calling to be master grows and grows – it begins to command, it slowly leads you *back* out of byways and detours, it prepares *individual* qualities and skills which will one day prove indispensable as means to the whole – it trains one by one the *ancillary* capacities before it breathes a word about the dominant task, about “goal”, “purpose”, “sense”. – (EH II 9)

This is an utterly perplexing passage. It seems unabashedly teleological. What is this organizing “idea” with a calling to be master? Is it one of the drives, some kind of master drive? Is it the unchangeable “granite of spiritual *fatum*” deep

within each person, that Nietzsche refers to elsewhere (BGE 231)? Furthermore, this passage also suggests that Nietzsche was destined to become the revaluator of all values, and that he had the courage and the good sense to let this guiding instinct unfold itself, while keeping his conscious mind in the dark. Nietzsche even continues with a remarkable, if patently false, rhetorical flourish:

I lack any memory of ever having exerted myself – there is no trace of a *struggle* evident in my life, I am the opposite of a heroic nature. “Wanting” something, “striving” for something, having in view a “purpose”, a “wish” – I know nothing of this from experience. [...] I have not the slightest wish for anything to be other than it is; I myself do not want to be different. But this is how I have always lived. I have never wished for anything. (EH II 9)

6 Teleology, Pregnancy, Procreation

How can all this be squared with Nietzsche’s perspective of will to power, of the world as a non-teleological plurality of conflicting wills to power, aimed at increasing their power, each at every moment drawing its ultimate consequence?

Wolfgang Müller-Lauter has called attention to a lingering ambiguity in Nietzsche’s thought on teleology. In describing Nietzsche’s views on the body as a command structure, Müller-Lauter points to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where the body is described as “a plurality with one meaning, a war and a peace, a herd and a shepherd” and “a great reason” (Z I 4). Plurality and unity, purposelessness and purpose seem to go hand in hand here. In a long note in 1884, Nietzsche assumes “that a *purposefulness* rules events on the smallest scale”, and speculates that this could be due to “*immensely higher* and more comprehensive *intellects* than the one we are conscious of” (NF 1883–1884, 24[16]: KSA 10/654).

Nietzsche’s thoughts on teleology can perhaps be clarified with the help of two metaphors: that of pregnancy, and that of procreation. In *Ecce Homo*, he speaks about how,

in that state of profound tension to which pregnancy condemns the spirit and basically the whole organism, a chance occurrence, any kind of external stimulation has too violent an effect, “sinks in” too deep. [...] A kind of self-immurement is one of the foremost instinctual ruses of spiritual pregnancy. Shall I allow an *alien* thought to climb secretly over the wall? – (EH II 3)

Therefore, Nietzsche advises, for example, against reading. When pregnant with a great task, self-defense is important: “Not seeing many things, not hearing them, not allowing them to approach you – first ruse, first proof that you are

no accident but a necessity” (EH II 8). In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche writes more about “the holy condition of pregnancy”:

Ideal selfishness – Is there a more holy condition than that of pregnancy? To do all we do in the unspoken belief that it has somehow to benefit that which is coming to be within us! – has to *enhance* its mysterious worth, the thought of which fills us with delight! In this condition we avoid many things without having to force ourself very hard! We suppress our anger, we offer the hand of conciliation: our child shall grow out of all that is gentlest and best. We are horrified if we are sharp or abrupt: suppose it should pour a drop of evil into the dear unknown’s cup of life! Everything is veiled, ominous, we know nothing of what is taking place, we wait and try to be *ready*. At the same time, a pure and purifying feeling of profound irresponsibility reigns in us almost like that of an auditor before the curtain has gone up – *it is growing, it is coming to light: we have no right to determine either its value or the hour of its coming.* All the influence we can exert lies in keeping it safe. “What is growing here is something greater than we are” is our most secret hope: we prepare everything for it so that it may come happily into the world: not only everything that may prove useful to it but also the joyfulness and laurel-wreaths of our soul. – It is in this *state of consecration* that one should live! It is a state one can live in! [...] This is *ideal selfishness*: continually to watch over and care for and to keep our soul still, so that our fruitfulness shall *come to a happy fulfillment!* Thus, as intermediaries, we watch over and care for to the *benefit of all*; and the mood in which we live, this mood of pride and gentleness, is a balm which spreads far around us and on to restless souls too. – (D 552)

Nietzsche’s remarks on pregnancy should be read with Diotima’s views from the *Symposium* (Nietzsche’s *Liebingsdichtung*)⁴ in mind:

“All of us are pregnant, Socrates, both in body and in soul, and, as soon as we come to a certain age, we naturally desire to give birth. [...] [W]hen pregnant animals or persons draw near to beauty, they become gentle and joyfully disposed and give birth and reproduce; but near ugliness they are foulfaced and draw back in pain; they turn away and shrink back and do not reproduce.” (*Symposium* 206cd)⁵

Müller-Lauter points out that Nietzsche explains the body’s expansion of power by alluding to the phenomenon of procreation. Nietzsche calls procreating the real achievement of the individual and hence his “highest interest”; he understands procreation as the “*highest expression of power*” from “the center of the whole individuation” (NF 1886–1887, 7[9]: KSA 12/295). On the other hand, Müller-Lauter notes, procreation is the ultimate surrender of power: the entire body surrenders power in favor of the origination of a new body (Müller-Lauter 1999a,

⁴ See Kaufmann 1974, p. 23.

⁵ Trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Plato 1997, p. 489). Incidentally – and this is not insignificant when speaking about *Ecce Homo* – according to Diotima, the goddess who presides at childbirth is *Moirai* (Fate).

p. 182). As Müller-Lauter points out, this blatantly contradicts Nietzsche's fundamental understanding of the conflicting wills to power.

Diotima does not distinguish between the male begetting and the female giving birth aspects of procreation. She describes procreation as a process of opening up, so that what one carries within oneself can manifest itself. The perspective on "becoming what one is" in *Ecce Homo* is about such an opening up and giving birth to what is inside. Such a process is only possible after having allowed one's first nature to grow uninterrupted by protecting it with a solid second nature. This giving birth has to do with Nietzsche's writings. For Nietzsche, becoming who he is has been connected with his task, his *Aufgabe*:

Become more and more who you are – the teacher and educator [*Bildner*] of yourself! You are not an author, you write only for yourself! Thus you cultivate the remembrance of your good moments and find their coherence, the golden chain of your self! In this way you prepare for the time when you have to speak! (NF 1881, 11[297]; KSA 9/555)

Ecce Homo is Nietzsche's presentation of the golden chain of his self, as the completion of his preparation for the time when he has to speak. It serves as a prelude to the publication of *The Antichrist*, "the greatest philosophical event of all time, with which the history of humankind will be broken into two opposing halves" (KSB 8/447).⁶ Who would have the time or the inclination to write a self-help book when such a momentous event is under way?

⁶ Letter to Malwida von Meysenbug, 4 October 1888.