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Nietzsche's Genealogical Perfectionism

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ABSTRACT

I argue that Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality* can be productively read as perfectionist in Emerson's sense. After reconstructing the debate on Nietzsche's perfectionism, I problematize the literature's almost exclusive focus on *Schopenhauer as Educator* at the expense of the *Genealogy*, which has caused scholars to construe Nietzsche's perfectionism in merely individualistic terms. By contrast, I show that the *Genealogy* can be interpreted as a perfectionist endeavor, at the heart of which lies the first-person plural: the "we." I thereby emphasize the relevance of "we-making" for a novel reading of Nietzsche's perfectionism—what I call his *genealogical perfectionism*. I conclude that the analysis of the genealogical dimension of Nietzsche's perfectionism provides us with much-needed resources to construe it in nonindividualistic terms.

I

Genealogy, in its subversive or critical form, can be defined as a narrative that, by describing how a given target (a belief, a concept, a practice, or a set thereof) has come about, aims to undermine its current value. In his *Genealogy of Morality*, Friedrich Nietzsche famously offers a genealogical narrative accounting for the emergence and enduring hegemony of Christian moral values. He argues that they originated in something that Christian morality itself would find despicable, namely, the *ressentiment* of "slaves" directed against their "masters" (GM I 1–10), and that they have had such a lasting success because, for hundreds of years, they have constituted the will to power of the majority of people as "a trick for the *preservation* of life": the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche claims, "*springs from the protective and healing instincts of a degenerating life*, which uses every means to maintain itself and struggles for its existence" (GM III 13). In particular, by giving a meaning to the suffering of human beings, the ascetic ideal was "the ultimate *'faute de mieux' par excellence*"—since "any meaning at all is better than no meaning at all," and "suicidal nihilism" could thereby be avoided (GM III 28). Thus, Nietzsche's *Genealogy* aims to show that, far from being God-given, Christian morality is a historical, human creation, and one that he now considers to no longer be able to fulfill its function: not only can it not promote the flourishing of human beings (it never could), but with its own foundations starting to crumble in the context of nineteenth-century European society, it also risks becoming useless as a tool for the mere "preservation" of their life.

The goal of critical genealogies, as Nietzsche's *Genealogy* clearly illustrates, is therefore to undermine the confidence of their readers in the current value of the genealogy's target: to instill in them a sense of dissatisfaction and of contingency, not only in relation to their past history (things could have gone differently, because what happened in the past was in no way necessary), but also with regard to their present and future, since continuing to hold the same beliefs might no longer be reasonable, and might actually be harmful for them.

Thus, critical genealogies never operate exclusively—and sometimes do not operate at all—on an epistemic level. If they aim to undermine the current value of a given set of beliefs, it is by inducing in their readers not only doubts with regard to their truth value, but also, and more importantly, a sense of *practical dissatisfaction*, thus inciting them to reject the target belief-set in order to transform their way of life and the world in which they live (Prinz 2007, 234–43). Most of the time, however, and certainly when it comes to the two main figures in the critical genealogy tradition—Nietzsche and Foucault—no clear definition is provided of the desired alternative: critical genealogies do not precisely define the next steps to be taken or the next stage to be attained in the transformation of oneself and one's society. They do give some indications about what ultimately matters (human flourishing for Nietzsche, resistance to congealed and fixed power relations for Foucault), but they do not prescribe, nor even explicitly describe, any ideal endpoint. As David Couzens Hoy claims, genealogy "does not change the world, but it does prepare the world for change": it "frees us for social transformation, even if it does not tell us precisely what to do or where to go" (Hoy 2008, 282–83).[1]

Stanley Cavell defines perfectionism, specifically in its Emersonian variant, as the constant tension toward a further state—one not yet realized, or "unattained"—of oneself, society, and the world (Cavell 1990, 12, 52). Emersonian perfectionism, in his view, is characterized by a "pattern of disappointment and desire": *disappointment* with the self, society, and the world as they are, and *desire* to transform them into something other and better (Cavell 2004, 2). Yet, importantly, Emersonian perfectionism is a perfectionism without perfection: indeed, once the self, society, and the world have been transformed, the same pattern of disappointment and desire will inevitably be reactivated, because for Emerson there is always a further state to be attained—and no state of the self, society, and the world will ever be final or perfect. In this sense, Emersonian perfectionism, as Cavell construes it, is inherently self-critical, just as Nietzschean genealogy is (Saar 2002, 236). Neither of them defines a precise ideal endpoint to reach; instead, they both aim to incite us to engage in a work of potentially endless transformation, of self- and world-making, thereby also inviting us to accept our finitude and fallibility (Cavell 2004, 4; Sluga 2014, 47), as well as the necessary imperfection of our society and culture—which is nevertheless our task to constantly strive to make better.[2]

In this paper, I therefore argue that critical genealogies, and in particular Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*, can be productively read as perfectionist in Emerson's sense. However, I claim that the crucial tasks of self- and world-making that are often associated with critical genealogies (Saar 2002, 2008; Srinivasan 2019) become intelligible only in relation to a dimension of Nietzsche's genealogical endeavor that has gone unnoticed, probably due to the tendency to read his work in purely individualistic terms: the dimension of the "we," or the multiplicity of collective subjects that, I argue, are the real protagonists of his *Genealogy*.

I begin by reconstructing the debate on Nietzsche's perfectionism as it has unfolded in the past three decades or so (§II). I then express my dissatisfaction with the fact that the literature has tended to overly emphasize the relevance of *Schopenhauer as Educator* at the expense of the *Genealogy*, causing scholars, even those sympathetic with Nietzsche, to construe his perfectionism in merely individualistic terms. By contrast, I show that the *Genealogy* can be interpreted as a perfectionist endeavor, and that at the heart of such endeavor lies the first-person plural—the "we." I thereby emphasize the relevance of "we-making" for a novel reading of Nietzsche's

perfectionism, or for what I call his *genealogical perfectionism* (§III). I conclude that the analysis of the genealogical dimension of Nietzsche's perfectionism provides us with a much-needed way of construing the latter in nonindividualistic terms (§IV).[3]

II

Nietzsche's perfectionism is far from being an overlooked topic in the literature (see, e.g., Church [2015]; Conant [2000]; Hurka [2007]; Lemm [2007]; Rutherford [2018]), especially in the wake of John Rawls's criticism of it in *A Theory of Justice* (1999 [1971], 285–86), and of Cavell's response defending Nietzsche in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (1990, xxiii–xxiv, 3–4, 48–53, 116). This debate, however, precisely because it was initiated and largely shaped by Rawls's criticism, has thus far mostly revolved around the early text Rawls relies on—section 6 of Nietzsche's 1876 essay, *Schopenhauer as Educator*—and has thus tended to ignore other relevant sources for his perfectionism.[4] By contrast, I argue that it is helpful to shift our attention from *Schopenhauer as Educator* to the *Genealogy*, thus following Cavell's initial intuition,[5] in order to emphasize the nonindividualistic dimension of Nietzsche's perfectionism.

Two main positions dominate the literature on Nietzsche's perfectionism. On the one hand, Rawls offers a reading of Nietzsche's perfectionism in section 50 of *A Theory of Justice* that construes it as essentially individualistic, elitist, and antidemocratic:

> So far I have said very little about the principle of perfection. [...] There are two variants: in the first it is the sole principle of a teleological theory directing society to arrange institutions and to define the duties and obligations of individuals so as to maximize the achievement of human excellence in art, science, and culture. The principle obviously is more demanding the higher the relevant ideal is pitched. The absolute weight that Nietzsche sometimes gives the lives of great men such as Socrates and Goethe is unusual. At places he says that mankind must continually strive to produce great individuals. We give value to our lives by working for the good of the highest specimens. (Rawls 1999 [1971], 285–86)

In a footnote, Rawls refers to a specific passage drawn from section 6 of *Schopenhauer as Educator*:

> Particularly striking is Nietzsche's statement: "Mankind must work continually to produce individual great human beings—this and nothing else is the task [...] for the question is this: how can your life, the individual life, retain the highest value, the deepest significance? [...] Only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable specimens." (Rawls 1999 [1971], 286 n. 50)

Of course, Rawls vehemently rejects this view, which he construes as the claim that most people should subordinate the pursuit of their own good to the aim of maximizing the good of a few elected "specimens." Conceived in these terms, Nietzsche's perfectionism is both individualistic and deeply inegalitarian, whereas for Rawls claims of justice and equality should always come before claims of individual excellence. More recently, a similar reading has been defended by Thomas Hurka, who argues that Nietzsche is a perfectionist because he elaborates a principle of maximization of the good, which Hurka claims Nietzsche identifies with power (Hurka 2007, 17, 22). Hurka refers, more precisely, to a "maximax" principle: since, in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche claims that the value of a society depends on the value of its highest specimens, it follows that all agents must aim to maximize the resources for and the excellence of the best and most powerful individuals within a given society (Hurka 2007, 18).[6]

On the other hand, without denying that Nietzsche's views are often characterized by aristocratic and elitist aspects, Cavell and Conant defend a reading of Nietzsche's perfectionism in *Schopenhauer as Educator* inspired by Emerson's "democratic" perfectionism (Cavell 1990, 1 and *passim*; Conant 2000, 226–29). Benedetta Zavatta (2019 [2006]) has meticulously reconstructed the profound influence that Emerson's writings exerted on Nietzsche throughout his life. Nietzsche began reading Emerson at a very young age and admired him enormously, to the point of considering him a "brother soul" (KSB 6 463, n. 477; quoted in Zavatta 2019 [2006], 187). Referring to Emerson's *Essays*, Nietzsche famously writes that he has "never felt so much at home in a book, and in *my* home" (KSA 9 12[68], 588, emphasis added; quoted in Golden 2013, 402). In fact, as Cavell (1990, 40, 49) and Conant (2000, 232–33) convincingly argue, the "exemplar" Nietzsche is thinking of in *Schopenhauer as Educator* seems to be Emerson, whose presence and influence—especially of his essays "Self-Reliance" and "Circles" (Emerson 1996, 259–82, 403–14)—is pervasive throughout the text (see, e.g., SE 1, 8 [1997a, 129, 193]; see also Cavell 2022, 26). Thus, Cavell's response to Rawls's criticism of Nietzsche's perfectionism is not only a defense of Nietzsche, but in many ways a defense of Emerson.

According to Cavell and Conant, Nietzsche's perfectionism, like Emerson's, far from being radically incompatible with democracy, is essential to democratic life because it allows for and encourages an incessant, internal critique of it (Cavell 1990, 3).[7] Indeed, Cavell and Conant claim that, if there is anything that Nietzsche aims to maximize, it is "genius," which following Emerson he considers to be equally distributed in each and every individual. Genius is not the product of innate talents that only a few people possess; it is instead a capacity that everyone possesses and that consists in making the most of one's unique qualities (Conant 2000, 212). In this sense, *all* individuals are by nature capable of perfecting themselves (Church 2015), since everyone can attain their own higher self: as Nietzsche claims in *Human, All Too Human*, "everyone has his good days when he finds his higher self" (HH I 624; trans. mod.). In short, Cavell and Conant argue that Nietzsche is suggesting that society should strive to maximize, not the good of a few selected "geniuses," but instead—through "education" and "culture"—the genius in each and every individual.

The crux of the interpretive dispute here revolves, at least in part, around Rawls's reliance on a dubious translation of the relevant passage from *Schopenhauer as Educator*, and more precisely of the word *Exemplare*, which Cavell and Conant translate as "exemplars" instead of "specimens," thus de-emphasizing the antidemocratic tone of Nietzsche's claims:

> How can your life, the individual life, receive the highest value, the deepest significance? [...] Certainly only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable exemplars [*Exemplare*], and not for the good of the majority, that is to say those who, taken individually, are the least valuable exemplars [*Exemplare*]. (SE 6 [1997a, 162])

In *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche continues, echoing one of Emerson's favorite images, that of the circle (see Cavell 1990, 50):

> By coming to this resolve he places himself within the circle of *culture*; for culture is the child of each individual's self-knowledge and dissatisfaction with himself. Anyone who believes in culture is thereby saying: "I see above me something higher and more human than I am; let everyone help me to attain it, as I will help everyone who knows and suffers as I do: so that at last the man may appear who feels himself perfect and boundless in knowledge and love, perception and power, and who in his completeness is at one with nature, the judge and evaluator of things." It is hard to create in anyone this condition of intrepid self-knowledge because it is impossible to teach love; for it is love alone that can bestow on the soul, not only a clear,

discriminating and self-contemptuous view of itself, but also the desire to look beyond itself and to seek with all its might for a higher self as yet still concealed from it. (SE 6 [1997a, 162–63])

Relying on this passage, Cavell and Conant argue that the exemplar that Nietzsche is talking about here is not another person, but one's own "higher self." Indeed, if other people often do play a role in the movement of self-perfection, it is by inspiring us to go beyond the current state of our self and to attain a further (higher) state of it. The desire to place ourselves in what Nietzsche calls "the circle of culture" is triggered by the encounter with an exemplar who, in turn, triggers a process of self-knowledge and self-dissatisfaction—thus inciting us to overcome our self as it currently is and to move in the direction of our "further, next, unattained but attainable, self" (Cavell 1990, 115). In *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Cavell writes:

> When Nietzsche says, in the words of his passage last quoted, describing the young person as a failed work of nature and as a witness, "for culture is the child of each individual," and imagines one who seeks this child to pray that everyone will help him or her to attain it, could it be clearer that the "something higher and more human" in question is not—not necessarily and in a sense not ever—that of someone *else*, but a further or eventual position of the self now dissatisfied with itself? (Cavell 1990, 52)

In short, Cavell reads Nietzsche as claiming, not that "there is a genius such that every self is to live for it," but that "for each self there is a genius" (Cavell 1990, 52). Thus, to serve as an exemplar for someone merely means to be a person whose character and way of life place a demand on them to emulate one in a nonimitative fashion—or better, to discover within themselves further, still unattained but nevertheless attainable, possibilities. Since the self and its exemplar are qualitatively alike, because "for each self there is a genius," Cavell and Conant conclude that Nietzsche's perfectionism is ultimately egalitarian and democratic (Cavell 1990, 49–50; Conant 2000, 227). Indeed, according to them, Nietzsche's perfectionism, like Emerson's, is indispensable to democracy, or better, as Cavell puts it, it turns out to be necessary if one wants to deal with the inevitable, incessant disappointment one experiences with the actual state of our democracies (Cavell 1990, 56): How are we to keep the democratic hope alive in the face of this unavoidable disappointment? How are we to deal with democracy's failures while struggling to make democracy better, to push it closer and closer to its ideal?

In Cavell's view, we need a way of bridging the gap between ideal and real justice, or in other words, a way of inhabiting this gap while incessantly working toward the realization (one never *fully* attainable) of democracy itself. According to him, Emersonian and Nietzschean perfectionism expresses precisely this "democratic aspiration" (Cavell 1990, 1) by emphasizing the tension and struggle not only between my self as it is and my self as it may become, but also, through this, between society "as it stands" and society "as it may become" (Cavell 2004, 141). It is therefore an integral part of our "training for democracy," which is in a sense a training for self-criticism (Cavell 1990, 56). Indeed, in Cavell's reading of Emersonian perfectionism, self-reliance, understood as the aversion to conformity, does not consist in turning *away from*, but in turning *toward* society, in constant confrontation and conversation with it, expressing dissatisfaction with it but also the conviction that the gap that separates us—and will always separate us—from the actual realization of an ideal state of justice can nevertheless be made inhabitable.

Thus, following Henry David Thoreau, Cavell construes disobedience as the paradoxical *foundation* of democracy: the democratic aspiration expressed by Emersonian and Nietzschean perfectionism ultimately consists in a "counter way of life," that is, in the establishment of a

critical relation to one's own society as it is, and in "the power to demand the change of the world as a whole" (Cavell 1989, 115). And while Nietzsche is no doubt more pessimistic than Emerson in this regard, both thinkers, according to Cavell, share the same dissatisfaction with the present state of their society and formulate an analogous call for its transformation—one, however, that must always begin with and constantly rely on the "transformation of the self" (Cavell 1990, 46).

III

While I am broadly sympathetic with Cavell's and Conant's reading of Nietzsche's perfectionism, and in particular with their emphasis on the profound influence that Emerson exerted on Nietzsche in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, I also find it problematic in at least two important respects. On the one hand, construing Nietzsche's perfectionism in egalitarian and democratic terms seems to be a stretch, one probably due to the tendency of Cavell and Conant to nearly *identify* Nietzsche's views (at least in *Schopenhauer as Educator*) with Emerson's. Yet it is difficult to deny that Nietzsche's positions are characterized by an elitism that, while increasingly evident in his late-period works, is already present throughout his earlier texts (Guay 2007; Rowthorn 2017). On the other hand, I also find Cavell's and Conant's interpretation of Nietzsche's perfectionism problematic because they construe it in purely individualistic terms: according to them, both Emerson and Nietzsche think that the transformation of society and the world must begin with, and continuously rely on, the transformation of the individual self. By shifting attention from *Schopenhauer as Educator* to the *Genealogy*, however, it is possible to emphasize a crucial nonindividualistic aspect of Nietzsche's perfectionism that has so far been largely ignored, as well as a perfectionist dimension of his genealogical endeavor. While addressing the former issue with Cavell's and Conant's reading of Nietzsche is outside the scope of this paper, in what follows I focus on the second issue, which is common to all the main interpretations advanced so far of Nietzsche's perfectionism—namely, its supposed individualism.

Indeed, it is a commonplace in the literature to link perfectionism—in both its democratic and aristocratic variants—to the pursuit of individuality. The clearest example is perhaps David Mikics's book, *The Romance of Individualism in Emerson and Nietzsche* (2003), where he argues that Emerson's and Nietzsche's perfectionisms rely on the judgment that human beings have so far largely failed to achieve "individuality," such that pursuing it (that is, pursuing individual freedom, originality, and integrity) constitutes the highest possible aim in one's life. Mikics goes on to argue that, while this pursuit is fairly unproblematic for Emerson due to the perfect harmony he postulates between human beings and nature, it is by contrast trickier for Nietzsche, who does not believe in such harmony and is ultimately unable to reconcile two different interpretations of what "achieving individuality" actually consists in: an Apollonian one, according to which it entails obtaining a well-integrated and stable identity, and a Dionysian one, according to which it entails achieving freedom from the constraints of the past and society, allowing for spontaneity, creativity, and originality (Mikics 2003, 4–6). Notwithstanding these differences, however, Mikics and virtually all other commentators—Cavell and Conant included—construe the pursuit and realization of individuality as crucial for both Emerson and Nietzsche, as well as for their respective understandings of perfectionism.

By contrast, I argue that the first-person plural (the "we" [*Wir*]) is as—if not more—relevant to Nietzschean perfectionism as the first-person singular is. This becomes particularly evident once we turn our attention away from *Schopenhauer as Educator*, focusing instead on the *Genealogy of Morality*—a move which, as I already mentioned, is virtually absent in the literature on Nietzsche's perfectionism. The most relevant exception is a recent paper by Donald Rutherford (2018), who elaborates a reading of Nietzschean perfectionism based on

the *Genealogy*. There, according to Rutherford, Nietzsche does not argue for a return of the "master morality," but for the cultivation of a noble mode of valuation based on spontaneity and self-affirmation, on a feeling of superiority, and on normative independence in the creation of values. Nietzsche, Rutherford argues, advocates for this noble mode of valuation to be exercised once again by those who seek to do so in the wake of a new revolution of values, and one of the forms that this exercise can take is perfectionist—where the ideal one establishes for oneself corresponds to the perfecting of one's powers (Rutherford 2018, 12). However, this is an understanding of Nietzsche's perfectionism still essentially centered on the individual: the supreme and, in fact, exclusive value is still considered to lie in the exercise of individuality, or in the "noble type" aiming to find his own unique way of thinking, valuing, and living, which is necessarily at odds with the values defended and promoted by all the other people (Rutherford 2018, 18).

This reading, as most readings of the *Genealogy*, overlooks the role that the first-person plural plays in Nietzsche's text. Indeed, the *Genealogy* famously begins with the following sentences: "We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers: and with good reason. We have never looked for ourselves—so how are we ever supposed to *find* ourselves?" (GM P 1). The *Genealogy*, therefore, begins with "we," not with "I." In the Preface, Nietzsche continues: "'Who *are* we in fact?' [...] We remain strange to ourselves out of necessity, we do not understand ourselves, we *must* confusedly mistake who we are, the motto 'everyone is furthest from himself' applies to us for ever—we are not 'knowers' when it comes to ourselves . . ." (GM P 1; see also GS V 346: "Who are we anyway?"). Cavell (1989, 25) pertinently emphasizes the connection between the first paragraph of Nietzsche's *Genealogy* and the first section of *Schopenhauer as Educator*, where Nietzsche, drawing inspiration from Emerson's essay "Experience" (which begins with the question: "Where do we find ourselves?" [Emerson 1996, 471]), asks: "How can we find ourselves again?" (SE 1 [1997a, 129])—thus showing that a "we" is already there, even in the earlier text.

For both Emerson and Nietzsche, the process of finding ourselves (what they also call "education") begins with a negative moment of *aversion*, that is, with a rejection of the current state of our self and our life. Far from aiming to discover our "true self," it consists in perpetually circulating from a state of our self to another, further or higher state of it. As Cavell argues, the perfectionist standpoint postulates that the human self is "always becoming, as on a journey, always partially in a further state" (Cavell 2004, 26). As I mentioned above, both Emersonian and Nietzschean perfectionisms, in his view, are predicated on the idea that each one of us has a "further or higher self" to attain (Cavell 1990, 53), but no "final" self to realize—the problem being precisely that we tend to take our current self as fixed and final. From this perspective, "knowing ourselves," for Emerson as well as for Nietzsche, means first and foremost realizing that we are not what we take ourselves to be: most of the time we tend to evade our genius, that is, the task of attaining our further or higher selves, instead settling for conformity.

Knowing ourselves, therefore, does not require introspection, which is one of the main forms of Christian asceticism (GM III 27), nor does it entail transcendence: it is instead a task, or a "path," that takes place *on the surface* of ordinary human practices, one that involves self-transformation. "Be your self! All you are now doing, thinking, desiring, is not you yourself," Nietzsche writes in *Schopenhauer as Educator* (SE 1 [1997a, 127]), once again echoing Emerson, and more precisely the final lines of "Considerations by the Way" and the call to have the "courage to be what we are" (Emerson 1996, 922; see Cavell 1990, 16). Here, however, being what we are does not mean *discovering* who we truly are but *becoming* who we want to be: it is not a matter of realizing a specific, fixed self, but instead consists in opening up a space of unattained but attainable possibilities. Nietzsche's *Genealogy* is precisely a critique of what we do, think, value, and desire as moral creatures—that is, as creatures with a conscience that has

been shaped by almost two thousand years of Christianity. It is a way of showing us that our selves are historical, and that, if we want to "find ourselves," we must actually reject our (current) self and transform or recreate it.[8] It is in this sense that Nietzsche's *Genealogy* can be construed as a perfectionist endeavor.

But there is more. The question that Nietzsche asks at the beginning of the *Genealogy* is: "How are *we* supposed to find ourselves," given that "*we* are unknown to ourselves, *we knowers*"? This use of the "we," as Quentin Landenne (2022) convincingly argues, is far from trivial in the *Genealogy*, which is punctuated from start to finish by expressions such as "we knowers," "we moderns," "we philosophers," "we psychologists," "we godless anti-metaphysicians," and so on (see, e.g., GM P 3; II 24; III 8, 20, 24). The subject of the *Genealogy* as well as its addressee are therefore plural subjects, who however are not defined a priori: they are instead subjects that the *Genealogy* itself aims to build, at least in part, by showing its reader that she, like everyone else, is not (just) a unique individual who should concern herself solely with the realization of her own personal genius, but that she is also part of different communities, of multiple "we"s. Thus, finding oneself is not only a matter of attaining one's own higher self: it also requires realizing that one is never one in isolation, but always necessarily one of many, part of a multiplicity of (past, present, and future) "we"s. Indeed, the multiplication of "we"s in Nietzsche's *Genealogy* is a way of showing the reader that finding herself requires recognizing the historical processes that have shaped her self along with the self of countless other people, and that reshaping or recreating it can only be done together with others. The perfectionist tasks of self- and world-transformation, which constitute the main goals of Nietzsche's critical genealogy, are not primarily individual tasks, but are actually collective or social endeavors.

This idea is already captured in Nietzsche's claim in *Schopenhauer as Educator* according to which "anyone who believes in culture" is saying: "I see above me something higher and more human than I am; let *everyone* help me to attain it, as I will help *everyone* who knows and suffers as I do" (SE 6 [1997a, 162]; emphasis added). The perfectionist journey, in Nietzsche's view, cannot therefore be a merely individual or individualistic one, prompted by the encounter with or attraction toward an exemplar (be it one's own higher self, or someone else); instead, it is also, crucially, a collective journey, one that begins with the realization that I am always already part of many "we"s, and thus that the tasks of self- and world-transformation necessarily entail a process of "we-making"—since only together with others does it become possible to bridge the gap between society as it stands and society as it may become.

Granted, it is a delicate interpretive question whether, in Nietzsche's *Genealogy*, these "we"s refer to collectivities open to anyone, or instead to privileged groups or a superior elite.[9] In other words, is Nietzsche's use of the first-person plural inclusive or exclusive? Is it an invitation to the reader to join the "we" or a selective device to distinguish allies from enemies? In the *Genealogy*, both interpretations seem in principle possible when it comes to expressions such as "we knowers" (which might refer to a specific group of people who devote their lives to the pursuit of knowledge, or more generally to all human beings as epistemic creatures) or "we godless" (by which Nietzsche might refer to self-declared atheists, or more generally to everyone living in a culture that no longer revolves around God, such as nineteenth-century Europe's). By contrast, "we philosophers" or "we free spirits" (see also HH P 2 and 7; GS P 4: "we daredevils of the spirit") seem to clearly refer to restricted groups of people who *already* aspire to overcome their present condition in the direction of a further, higher one.

Without attempting to solve this interpretive question once and for all,[10] what interests me here is that, regardless of their inclusive or exclusive use, these different "we"s are integral to the perfectionist endeavors of self- and world-transformation in the *Genealogy*. That, in Nietzsche's view, the aspirational "we"s are elitist, and that in practice not everyone will be able to join them is hard to deny. However, the enormous legacy of his *Genealogy* in critical theory, broadly

construed, leaves little doubt that, even though Nietzsche might have thought that only a few, selected readers would be able to actually understand him, the inability to do so appears to be self-imposed rather than necessary (Conant 2000, 198). Thus, even the aspirational "we"s seem to be, at least *in principle*, open to everyone—regardless of the fact that, as Andrew Huddleston puts it, "most ignore [their] call" (Huddleston 2019, 118 n. 49).

In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche speaks of the "*oligarchs of the spirit*" who, despite "all spatial and political division, [...] constitute a close-knit society whose members *know* and *recognize* each other" (HH I 261). And he continues:

> The spiritual superiority which formerly divided and created hostility now tends to *unite:* how could the individual keep himself aloft and, against every current, swim along his own course through life if he did not see here and there others of his own kind living under the same conditions and take them by the hand, in struggle against both the ochlocratic character of the half-spirited and the half-educated and the attempts that occasionally occur to erect a tyranny with the aid of the masses? The oligarchs have need of one another, they have joy in one another, they understand the signs of one another—but each of them is nonetheless free, he fights and conquers in his *own* place, and would rather perish than submit. (HH I 261)

The "we" of the "we philosophers," the "we free spirits," the "we oligarchs of the spirit" is thus certainly elitist in Nietzsche's mind. Yet this aristocracy of culture need not be reserved from the outset to any specific individual on the basis of their class, ethnicity, or gender.[11] Hence, if Conant is right in arguing that Nietzsche writes *to* the self you are, but *for* the self you can or should become (Conant 2000, 203), I would add that he also writes *for* the "we"(s) we can or should build—those aspirational "we"s who will one day be able to create new values and thereby transform society and the world. As Nietzsche writes in the Preface to *Human, All Too Human*:

> That free spirits of this kind *could* one day exist [...] *I* should wish to be the last to doubt it. I see them already *coming*, slowly, slowly; and perhaps I shall do something to speed their coming if I describe in advance under what vicissitudes, upon what paths, I *see* them coming? (HH P 2)

Amia Srinivasan has recently argued that the world-making dimension of Nietzsche's *Genealogy* relies on its capacity to reveal what our values and concepts do for us, which practices they emerge from and sustain, what possibilities they open or foreclose, and more importantly the role that agential powers have played in the emergence and continued dominance of those concepts and values (Srinivasan 2019, 140–47). By showing how our values and representational practices can be (re)made, however, Nietzsche's *Genealogy* also reveals that no revolution of values is possible if conceived in merely individualistic terms: to (re)make society and the world, one always needs to work with others—the Nietzschean "revaluation of all values" (GM I 8) is necessarily a collective endeavor.

IV

On the one hand, the literature on Nietzsche's perfectionism has so far tended to exclusively focus on the aspect pertaining to what we could call self-making or the transformation of the self, either as the supreme value in Nietzsche's view, or as the initial and necessary condition for world-making. It has thereby construed Nietzschean perfectionism in essentially individualistic terms. On the other hand, the literature on critical genealogies, and more specifically on Nietzsche's *Genealogy*, has highlighted its self- and world-making goals, while systematically

ignoring its perfectionist dimension. In this paper, I have argued that self-making and world-making constitute the main goals of *both* Nietzsche's perfectionism and his genealogy of morality, and claimed that emphasizing the genealogical dimension of his perfectionism—centered on the importance of collective agency, or of the "we"—allows us to construe the latter in nonindividualistic terms. Indeed, foregrounding the "we-making" dimension of Nietzschean genealogy is crucial to show that the transformation of one's self and the transformation of society and the world are collective endeavors. Nietzsche's genealogy only works as a perfectionist undertaking on the condition of making its readers realize that their selves are historical, that they are necessarily part of a multiplicity of (past, present, and future) "we"s, and that the revaluation of all values can only be the result of a collective effort.

In my reading, perfectionism, or the dimension of our moral, social, and political life that incites us to work on the tension between one's self and society as they stand and one's self and society as they may become, is not and cannot be an individual or individualistic endeavor, just as the genealogical revaluation of values is not and cannot be. The path that leads to the transformation of the self and the transformation of the world is not a path walked alone. In *Daybreak*, elaborating on a passage from *Human, All Too Human* that I quoted above, Nietzsche criticizes a conception of philosophy as "a kind of supreme struggle to possess the tyrannical rule of the spirit": the idea that "some such very fortunate, subtle, inventive, bold and mighty man was in reserve—one only!—was doubted by none, and several, most recently Schopenhauer, fancied themselves to be that one" (D 547). To this individualistic conception of philosophy, and of culture more generally, Nietzsche opposes "a higher and *more magnanimous* basic feeling": "'What do I matter!'—stands over the door of the thinker of the future" (D 547).[12] Relatedly, Nietzsche's *Genealogy* shows that our self is inconceivable in isolation from the multiplicity of "we"s it is a part of, and that the perfectionist task consists in joining and (re)creating the (aspirational) collective subjects who will be the true agents of change.

This "we-making" dimension is an integral part of Nietzsche's perfectionism, or at least of the form it takes in the *Genealogy*, which I call *genealogical perfectionism*: it indicates the necessity to go beyond the individual self, to acknowledge the existence of a multiplicity of mutually overlapping communities of which each individual is part, and to understand that attaining one's further or higher self is only possible if one works, along with others, toward the realization of a higher, better way of living together—a higher "culture," as Nietzsche would say, which is valuable in its own right, rather than just as a means to promote the flourishing of a few great, isolated individuals (Lemm 2007; Huddleston 2019). In this sense, even if Nietzschean genealogy does not prescribe any specific endpoint, it is predicated on a perfectionist, collective dynamic guided by the call to constantly strive to make society and the world *better*.[13]

NOTES

1. This feature of critical genealogies has famously come under attack by critical theorists such as Nancy Fraser (1981; 1985) and Jürgen Habermas (1981; 1990), who have lamented genealogy's lack of normative grounding, which, they charge, leads to normative confusion and, ultimately, to moral relativism and political conservatism. Elsewhere, I have responded to this charge by analyzing the "possibilizing" dimension of Foucault's genealogy (Lorenzini 2020; 2023, 103–18).

    In this issue of *The Monist* on "Nietzsche and Ethics," Nietzsche's works are cited by section (and, where relevant, chapter/part) number, and follow the abbreviations established by the North American Nietzsche Society: A = *The Antichrist*; AOM = *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*; BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil*; BT = *The Birth of Tragedy*; CW = *The Case of Wagner*; D = *Daybreak*; EH = *Ecce Homo*; GM = *On the Genealogy of Morality*; GS = *The Gay Science*; HH = *Human, All Too Human*; SE = *Schopenhauer as Educator*; TI = *Twilight of the Idols*; UM = *Untimely Meditations*; WP = *The Will to Power*; WS = *The Wanderer and His Shadow*; Z = *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Additionally, KSA = *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische*

Studienausgabe and KSB = *Sämtliche Briefe: Kritische Studienausgabe*. When preceding a section number, P = preface.

2. For an account of Nietzsche's "theory of cultural change," according to which he does not endorse any fixed societal model that would eternally endure in the same form, but instead thinks of change as inevitable and beneficial, see Cristy (2023).

3. It is important to clarify that the aim of this paper is not to provide a general interpretation of Nietzsche's work, nor to defend Nietzsche's philosophical project *as a whole* from the charge of individualism. My aim is more limited: to show that Nietzsche's *Genealogy* can be interpreted as a perfectionist endeavor, and that such an endeavor cannot be construed in merely individualistic terms, but has a crucial collective or social dimension. Therefore, Nietzsche's perfectionism, at least in its genealogical variant, is not individualistic—even though it remains, in many respects, elitist.

4. However, in *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, Cavell does devote a couple pages to a discussion of Emersonian themes in the Preface of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality* (1989, 24–26). For a reading of Nietzsche's perfectionism that draws from the *Genealogy*, see also Rutherford (2018)—more on this below.

5. It was Jim Conant who suggested assigning *Schopenhauer as Educator* instead of the *Genealogy* to the students enrolled in Cavell's course on Moral Perfectionism at Harvard University (Cavell 1990, xiii); a few years later, Conant himself published a long essay on Nietzsche's perfectionism in *Schopenhauer as Educator* (Conant 2000).

6. For a recent criticism of this view, see Huddleston (2019, 71–72).

7. For another defense of Nietzsche's salience for democratic theory, see Owen (2002).

8. This is what I have called genealogy's "possibilizing" dimension (Lorenzini 2020), paradigmatically captured in Foucault's famous claim that genealogy aims, not only to expose the "contingency that has made us what we are," but also to open up "the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think" (Foucault 1984, 46).

9. I am grateful to Rachel Cristy and Marta Faustino for pressing me on this point.

10. On the question of Nietzsche's inclusive or exclusive use of the first-person plural, in particular in *The Gay Science*, see Wotling (2010) and Faustino (2013, 263–76), who defend a collective, inclusive use of "*Wir*," as well as Stegmaier (2012, 600), who on the contrary argues for a selective, exclusive use of it.

11. See, however, BGE 213: "You need to have been born for any higher world; to say it more clearly, you need to have been bred for it: only your descent, your ancestry can give you a right to philosophy—taking that word in its highest sense. Even here, 'bloodline' is decisive."

12. Here, the Nietzschean "What do I matter!" is strikingly different from the "*Whim*" that Emerson, in "Self-Reliance," claims he would write "on the lintels of the door-post" when his "genius" calls him (Emerson 1996, 262). However, a few years later, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes: "'My judgment is *my* judgment: other people don't have an obvious right to it too'—perhaps this is what such a philosopher of the future will say" (BGE 43), a claim which comes certainly closer to Emerson's "*Whim*." I am grateful to Rachel Cristy and Lorenzo Serini for pointing me to these passages in Nietzsche.

13. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the conference *Emerson and Perfectionism Today* (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne), the conference *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Foucault* (University of Lisbon), the conference *Nietzsche, Politics, History* (Université catholique de Louvain), the Penn Normative Philosophy Group (University of Pennsylvania), and the Philosophy as a Way of Life International Seminar (Nova Institute of Philosophy). I am indebted to the audience at those events, as well as to Rachel Cristy, Marta Faustino, David Owen, Lorenzo Serini, and Sabina Vaccarino Bremner for their insightful questions, comments, and criticisms on different versions of this paper.

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