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Autopoiesis: Self-Creation in Nietzsche

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Am a Senior English and Linguistics major. I participated in the Gaines Fellowship and the Honors Program. I received the John Spalding Gatton Provost’s Scholarship in the Arts and Sciences and was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. Next year I will teach English as a Second Language in a small town in Austria via the Fulbright Program.

Abstract

A recurrent theme in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche is his imperative that we must create ourselves. Though this theme of self-creation runs throughout the entirety of his published works, Nietzsche neither fully articulates in one place the processes and guidelines by which such self-creation could occur, nor does he fully resolve the paradoxes inherent in this concept. This paper attempts to distill from these fragments a coherent interpretation of both how we can and why we should, despite (or, paradoxically, because of) our many external and internal constraints, fashion ourselves the way an artist shapes a work of art.

Introduction

Throughout his works, one of Friedrich Nietzsche’s most common and consistent calls was for his readers to create themselves — at least those capable of creating themselves. We hear the first notes of this call sounded in Nietzsche’s first published work, The Birth of Tragedy, when Nietzsche talks of our “status as art works” and how the “genius in the act of creation” becomes “at once subject, object, poet, actor and audience.” This idea of shaping oneself as an “aesthetic phenomena” (BT, 5) is finally announced explicitly by the middle period when Nietzsche asserts: “We, however, want to become those we are — human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves” (GS, 335). Here we see Nietzsche adding nuances to this idea, knotting together his maxim “become who you are” with the project of self-creation. As we shall see, self-creation is the means by which one becomes what one is. Even in Nietzsche’s last productive year we find him giving Goethe the highest praise when he announces that Goethe “disciplined himself to wholeness, he created himself” (TI, IX, 49). This essay will first examine Nietzsche’s conception of the self and then...
turn to how Nietzsche believes we can create ourselves and why he believes we should. In order to understand what Nietzsche means by ‘self-creation’ we will need to examine that self’s interaction with the external world and grapple with many seeming contradictions in Nietzsche’s philosophy that threaten to muddle this encomium into meaninglessness.

The Self
We face our first contradiction when looking at Nietzsche’s view of the self. At first blush he seems to give both an ‘essentialist’ and an ‘existentialist’ account of the self. An essentialist account is one in which each person has an essential core, a True Self, which lies at ‘the base’ of the personality and character, analogous to the Christian concept of ‘the soul.’ This essential core, because it is an extremely specific entity, is static, unchanging, and therefore it is often associated with the concept of ‘Being,’ that is, something eternal and otherworldly, the prime example of Being being God. The existentialist account of the self is contained in the phrase ‘existence precedes essence.’ Existentialists deny the existence of any essential self, typically because they deny the existence of any essential Being in the world, which is typically the source of the essential self. Without the boundaries of essence, the self dynamically changes over time.

Nietzsche seems to use the language of essentialism when he says that each person has “a productive uniqueness within him at the core of his being” (UM, 143) or urges people to “Be yourself! All that you are now doing, thinking, and desiring is not really yourself” (UM, 127). These both imply a ‘true’ self outside of current appearances. However, when we examine Nietzsche’s philosophy as a whole, we find that Nietzsche’s account of the self leans toward the existentialist conception and favors the dynamic model.

Thus, we see Nietzsche asserting that “the unalterable character,” a hallmark of the static conception of self, “is not in the strict sense true” (HH, 41). He believes it is only laziness and the shortness of life that lead us to delude ourselves into thinking of our character and ourselves as given, monolithic facts. As he says: “Man becomes that which he wills to become, his willing precedes his existence” (HH, 35). This statement not only shows the malleability of the self but allows that our will has a shaping power to direct our becoming. It is within this framework that Nietzsche can metaphorically cast us as both creators and created works of art — though, as we shall see, the actual agency and autonomy of this ‘creative will’ will come into question.

Nietzsche’s uses of essentialist tropes are the exceptions that prove the rule of his dynamic conception of self. He uses essentialist rhetoric as a skillful means of encouraging us, because it is reassuring to believe the fiction of having a ‘true’ self one only needs to find — for this frees us of the responsibility of creation by saying we need only uncover this self. However, at bottom, Nietzsche concurs with Zarathustra when he says: “Some souls one will never discover, unless one invents them first” (Z, 154). Thus the ‘to be’ in the mixed message maxim “become who you are,” can be understood as an ideal, unattainable shaping of our becoming in such a way that one “create[s] and carr[ies] together into One what is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident” (Z, 252) in order to approximate the perfection associated with the idea of ‘soul’ or ‘true self’.

Nietzsche’s view differs from the prototypical existentialist account of the self, embodied in Sartre’s philosophy. For Sartre, we choose what we become and are therefore responsible for every aspect of our becoming, of our self. Nietzsche does not take such a radical stand. Although I will argue that Nietzsche does believe we can choose aspects of what we become, there are undeniable determinants of our behavior that limit our ability to choose. These determinants include the totality of external events outside of our control, or ‘fate,’ or unchosen but fundamental internal aspects of ourselves, such as our genetics and drives. For Nietzsche, the autonomy necessary for self-creation will have to occur within the constraints of unchosen external and internal factors.

It is precisely regarding the issue of our autonomy that Brian Leiter raises a paradox that questions the possibility of self-creation. Nietzsche’s troubling and unclear position toward determinism and fatalism questions the autonomy considered necessary for a person to create him or herself. To use Leiter’s example: If I were brainwashed into becoming a criminal, though I would be causally responsible for the criminal activity, we would not intuitively say that I had ‘created’ myself as a criminal. Leiter claims that: “Nietzsche the fatalist views a person like a plant: just as… the essential natural facts about a tomato plant determine its development… so too the essential natural facts about a person determine its development” (Leiter, 223). These natural facts are ‘causally primary,’ that is: “they are necessary for [an] effect… though they may not be sufficient for it” (Leiter, 224). Thus one must necessarily have the natural fact of tallness to become an NBA center, although this is alone is not sufficient for becoming one. This brings us to the paradox: “If a person’s life trajectories are determined in advance by the natural facts about himself, then how
can a person really create himself, i.e., how can he make an autonomous causal contribution to the course of that life?” (Leiter, 226).

From this perspective we can’t really create ourselves, for the requirement of ‘autonomy’ would require a causa sui origin outside of the chain of all previous causes and effects — something so impossible that Nietzsche himself goes so far as to call the idea a “rape and perversion of logic” (BGE, I, 23). However from this perspective nothing is ever created, for even the doodling of a smiley face would, from this perspective, be said to be a non-autonomous and therefore non-creative act. Therefore, if Nietzsche subscribed to this view and yet still speaks about creation at all, we must accept that autonomy is not essential to his understanding of creation. This, I will argue, does not scuttle the whole project of self-creation in Nietzsche. This is why I believe ‘auto poiesis’ captures Nietzsche’s view of self-creation the best. Aside from being in the language of his beloved Greeks, the ‘poiesis’ not only denotes creation but connotes poetry, recalling the aesthetic aspect of such creation. The ‘auto’ not only means simply ‘self’, but also connotes a certain ‘automatic’ involuntary aspect of this self-creation, again highlighting Nietzsche’s lowlighting of agency and emphasis on fatedness.

Nietzsche’s main impetus for problematizing free will comes not from his ‘naturalism’ (a role in which Leiter the naturalist is eager to cast him) but from its association with Christianity, and therefore slave morality — those eternally recurrent bogeymen in Nietzsche’s writings. The idea of the absolute freedom of the individual to choose is derived from the Christian solution to the ‘Problem of Evil,’ namely: If God is both all-good and all-powerful, why does evil occur? If he is all good and ‘wants’ good for all, then he must not be powerful enough to bring this about. If he is all-powerful and could banish evil, then he must choose not to and is therefore not all-good. The Christian solution is to say that God is both all-good and all-powerful, but he gave humans the free will to choose to obey his laws. Evil exists because humans choose not to obey God. Nietzsche of course rejects this entire account. His problematizing of free will is an attempt to swing this pendulum of thought back to a Classical Greek view — the view of fate we find in Aeschylus in which the workings of the world are deeply mysterious and “in which Moira [fate], as eternal justice, is seen enthroned above men and gods alike” (BT, 9). Nietzsche holds that we currently overemphasize agency and do not recognize the extent to which unchosen events, both external and internal, play a decisive role in what we do, and thus, who we become.

Nietzsche has Zarathustra announce: “Body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body... The body is a great reason, a plurality with one sense” while our reason and consciousness is a subservient “little reason” which is a “toy of [our] great reason” (Z, 147). But though “our organism is an oligarchy” (GM, II, 1) with ‘mind’ subservient to ‘body,’ the fatedness of our big reason and by extension the fate of the universe, the little reason still has a limited freedom of will. Metaphorically it has the power to nudge in one direction, but not the ability to shove and certainly not the absolute power to steer. To use a nautical metaphor, the idea of absolute freewill is the illusory idea that we are like the captains of a nuclear-powered ship able to go at full impulse in any direction we like. Nietzsche’s view is that we are rather like captains of a sailboat, who cannot sail against the wind of fate but still have the responsibility of tackling a course within those winds.

As ever, the important consideration for Nietzsche is your response to ‘the way the universe is,’ whether you affirm the necessity of the existent or gnash your teeth at it. In what I consider Nietzsche’s definitive take on the paradox of free will and fate, he discusses ‘Mohammedan fatalism,’ which “embodies the fundamental error of setting man and fate over against one another as two separate things.” Against this error, Nietzsche proposes that man and his ‘free will’ are a part of fate itself and thus the seeming “struggle” and paradox of ‘free will’ versus ‘fate’ “is imaginary” (WS, 61). Both “free will” and the “unfree will” (BGE, I, 21) are, as we will briefly touch on later, simplifications and falsifications of the world, owing to the limited perspective from which we can experience, and therefore come to know something about, the universe. Consider the following:

You have to believe in fate... what then grows out of this belief in your case — cowardice, resignation or frankness and magnanimity — bears witness to the soil upon which the seedcorn has been scattered but not, however, to the seedcorn itself — for out of this anything and everything can grow (HH, 332).

This quote suggests that the important question is not whether or not we have autonomy, but how we psychologically respond to a world in which our answers to this dilemma are uncertain. The weak and slavish response is one of resignation while the strong and masterful response is one of boldness and a faith that we are ones who can become who we are, who are ‘turning out well,’ for “it is only a matter of strong and weak wills” (BGE, I, 21) and few possess the necessary strength of will for self-creation. “Everyone possesses inborn talent, but few possess the degree of inborn and acquired toughness, endurance and energy actually to become a talent, that is to say to become what he is: which means to discharge it in works and actions” (HH I, 263). Here we see Nietzsche denying the treasured
shibboleth that “all men are created equal” — it is only the “few” who possess the “inborn” and thus unchosen means of becoming who they are. But how do you know if you have this inborn talent? You find yourself in the same bind that Calvinist believers in predestination find themselves: you can’t know for certain. One has to have faith in being ‘chosen’ and one shows this faith by acting like a ‘chosen’ person would act. In the same way, a test for whether you have this inborn “toughness, endurance and energy” is whether, in response to this quote, you say “Yes” and go out and manifest these qualities or instead say “No” and do not engage in the activities of self-becoming. demonstrating a lack of said inborn faculties. There are either ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ responses to the question of inborn capacity. “He has no spirit who seeks spirit” (IH, 547). That is, if you don’t think you have that capacity, then you don’t.

Incidentally, I believe a great amount of Nietzsche’s appeal to readers stems from his conspiratorial ‘us versus them’ style of writing, which implies, though never states explicitly, that his reader must be one of the few — presumably by virtue of having the good taste to read Nietzsche! And because you have the good taste to be reading my words, we’ll assume that we’re both one of the few capable of creating ourselves…

How We Can Create Ourselves

To become a self-creator we must first analyze the material we have to work with: we do this by analyzing ourselves with an intellectual conscience to find what values, drives, and virtues constitute us. We have to find what makes us a “unique miracle” (UM, 127). First of all, Nietzsche does not believe this kind of introspection can ever be complete, for “nothing… can be more incomplete than” a person’s “image of the totality of drives that constitute his being” (D, 116). However this is a good thing. People who delude themselves into believing they know exactly who they are create a self-fulfilling prophecy causing them to actually become that. Because Nietzsche believes that life is a process of seeking to grow, expand, and increase one’s power, taking “know thyself” to the extreme of actually believing we do know ourselves fully can freeze the potentiality of our becoming by pouring it into one static mold. Growth demands leeway. As Zarathustra puts it: “One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star” (Z, Pr., 5).

After this introspection, we must move on to do as “[a]ctive, successful natures” do, who “act, not according to the dictum “know thyself” but…” will a self and thou shalt become a self” (HH, II, 366). Because we are what we do, or as Nehamas puts it, “the sum total of qualities that can be attributed to us,” willing a self, and therefore self-creation, will mean changing and control-

ling what we do in order to “give style” to our character by “survey[ing] the strengths and weaknesses of [our] nature and then fit[ting] them into an artistic plan” and according to a “single taste” (GS, 290).

One method of achieving this is to examine what has guided our actions heretofore, that is to say, our morality. The creators must examine what “tablets of values” they have lived by and, if necessary, destroy those tablets that impede our self-creation. The creators will then posit their own ‘Yes’ and ‘No’, their own ‘straight line’ and ‘goal’ (TI, I, 44), that is they will posit an ideal conception of who they want to become and create for themselves a morality that will allow them to achieve this conception. From thence forth, what is ‘good’ will be what moves them toward this goal, this will be their “own categorical imperative” (A, 11). At first this may sound extremely disturbing from a ‘moral’ standpoint, but as we will see later, this is not nearly as ghoulish as it sounds. This is merely a recognition that our morality and our self interpenetrate. Like Escher’s image of the two hands drawing each other, we both create our values and our values create us. This is what Zarathustra means when he says: “To value is to create” [schätzen ist schaffen] (Z, 177) and why Nietzsche calls self-creators those who “give themselves laws, who create themselves” (GS, 335).

“Every morality is… a bit of tyranny against “nature”” (BGE, 290). This tyranny channels our becoming toward our goal. Thus we should submit to our self-posed moralities the way a poet submits to writing a haiku, for it is within the restrictions of 17 syllables that innovations and beauty emerge. Nihilism, the utter freedom of constraints, would be like free verse, which Robert Frost disdainfully referred to as “playing tennis without the net.” Though these new values will place new restrictions upon us, they do not make us less free but rather more free. This result is because true freedom for Nietzsche is not ‘freedom from restrictions’ but the ‘freedom to become who we are’ (Z, 176) and this freedom will grow as we subtract out of our lives all resistances and frictions hampering us from becoming who we are. This freedom is a “harmony among all of a person’s preference schemes. It is a state in which desire follows thought, and action follows desires, without tension or struggle, and in which the distinction between choice and constraint may well be thought to disappear” (Nehamas, 187).

To attain this freedom, we must daily engage in what Nietzsche calls ‘self-overcoming.’ Self-overcoming is the process by which we progress toward a goal through determined and persistent application of energy and hard work. Say we want to become ‘brave.’ We must first determine what being ‘brave’ will mean for us — for “a virtue must be our own invention” (A, 11)
and then overcome our current ‘non-brave’ self to manifest our newly posited, idiosyncratic definition of bravery in actions.

Through the process of self-overcoming we will become a new self. However, this does not mean that our self-overcoming has achieved, or even can achieve, its goal, for Nietzsche does not believe this process does or should have any ultimate end or goal. Consider Nietzsche’s parable: “Not every end is a goal. The end of a melody is not its goal; but nonetheless, if the melody had not reached its end it would not have reached its goal either” (WS, 204). We are like this melody — keep this in mind when reading the quotation that ends this essay. Thus to return to our example of bravery, after we have become ‘brave’ according to our own definition, we will not sit on our laurels but instead posit a new, even more demanding definition of bravery to fight to attain. We will be like Faust who from desire rushes to satisfaction and from satisfaction leaps to new desires. It is through this self-overcoming that we will become “poets of our life — first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters” (GS, 299).

In a great poem, every word and syllable is integral to the whole. As Saint Exupery put it: “You know a work of art is finished not when there is nothing left to add, but nothing left to take away.” Living life like a work of art would, ideally, involve having every aspect of your existence contribute to the poetic effect of the whole, partake in your guiding taste, your “unity of artistic style” (UM, 5). However we have one hulking hindrance that seemingly blocks this endeavor: the past. Though we can guide our becoming in the present through self-overcoming, we seem to be powerless to impose our guiding taste upon those parts of our life that predate this taste. As Zarathustra initially laments: “The will cannot will backwards … that is the will’s loneliest melancholy” (Z, II, 20). However, he goes on to offer an avenue — a certain way of living — that would indeed allow the past to be brought into line with our current style.
One can use the psychological test of “the eternal recurrence” to ascertain whether one is living in such a manner. The test goes as such: What if a demon were to “steal after you into your loneliest of loneliness and say to you: ‘This life as you now live it and have lived, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more …’” (GS, 341). Would you be satisfied enough with how you have lived your life so far to say: “Yes! Once more!” Or would you be terrified at the thought? Would you plead with the demon to give you a ‘do-over?’ The eternal recurrence test should inspire the self-creator to live in a way that he or she would be willing to live it eternal times more. This view makes every action and event reverberate with eternal significance because we have only this life to shape the wet cement of our existence before it sets for eternity.

Essential to eternal recurrence is that no aspect of our lives is unnecessary. If we were to change one aspect or event of it, we would not be who we are, we would be someone else. Nehamas puts it best: “a life that was different in any way would simply not be our life; it would be the life of a different person. To want to be a different in any way is for Nietzsche to want to be different in every way; it is to want, impossible as that is, to be somebody else” (Nehamas, 156). The self-creator wants only to be himself or herself. She or he will “learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things” and acquire Amor fati, the love of fate, which will in turn allow him or her to “be one of those who make things beautiful” (GS, 276): that is, a creator.

**Why We Should Create Ourselves**

This idea allows us to segue from ‘how’ one might create oneself as a work of art to grounds for ‘why’ one might do so. Though Nietzsche never systematically spelled out the various grounds on which he exorted self-creation — or systematically spelled out any other topic, for that matter — we can construct an interpretation from his body of work to divine his whys and wherefores. Returning to our line of inquiry, consider Zarathustra’s statement:

Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you have said Yes too to all woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, ‘You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!’ then you wanted all back. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored (Z, IV, 19).

Self-creation is a method for affirming not only some aspects of our life but all aspects of our life, and indeed, of affirming all of life. “Creation... is the great redemption from suffering” for we can affirm our woes because “much bitter dying” is necessary so “that the creator may be” (Z, 199). Thus, self-creation opens the door to Nietzsche’s conception of redemption: “The deep instinct for how one must live, in order to feel oneself ‘in heaven,’ to feel ‘eternal,’ while in all other behavior one decidedly does not feel ‘in heaven’ — this alone is the psychological reality of ‘redemption.’ A new way of life, not a new faith” (A, 33).

When we attain a new way of life through the self-overcoming of our self-creation, we can feel ‘in heaven,’ which means the feeling that we have overcome ourselves, that we are ‘turning out well,’ that we have Nietzsche’s conception of happiness: “The feeling that power is growing, that resistance is overcome” (A, 2). When we feel that we are ‘becoming who we are,’ we redeem every aspect of our lives because all were necessary to bring us to this present. In this way we “will backwards” and shape the fragments of our past — our “it was” — into “thus I willed it” (Z, II, 20) by resetting them into this newly created narrative of our selfhood.

However the preponderances of ‘I’s and ‘self’s in this paper leads us to a criticism of Nietzsche’s concept of self-creation and his philosophy in general: isn’t it egoistic and narcissistic? What could be more conceited than walking around saying “my great project is to live my life as a great work of art?” Could society function if every member focused selfishly on his or her own life?

First of all, Nietzsche doesn’t believe anybody acts unselfishly. We see this stance reflected in the quote: “Magnanimity contains the same degree of egoism as does revenge, but egoism of a different quality” (GS, 49). Everybody ultimately does what she or he wants, thus every action is egoistic: an instrument used to fulfill a desire or drive. This is seen in Nietzsche’s critique of the ascetic ideal or a more quotidian example: If you are on a diet and you deny yourself food that you want to eat, it may appear that you are not doing what you want. However you are actually just choosing to satisfy the desire to lose weight rather than the desire to have sensual pleasure. Nietzsche interprets altruistic acts in the same way. Self-creators do not deceive themselves and compromise their intellectual conscience by costuming egoism in the garb of altruism.

Though all our actions are inherently egoistic, as the above quote shows, egoistic actions differ in terms of quality. After admitting that we always do what we think will achieve our wants, self-creation involves wanting the right things. These ‘right things’ will be specific to our own taste and ‘straight line and goal,’ but insofar as we will want to create ourselves as someone ‘noble and high’ and not ‘petty and low’ — admitting these values are defined according to individual taste — we will eschew the petty egoism of revenge that harms
both avenger and target in favor of the noble egoism of magnanimity. Honest egoism that avoids resentment is good for both the egoist and the world at large because Nietzsche believes resentment is harmful for both the resenter and the target of resentment.

The hallmark of narcissism is excessive self-reflection; this was literally what entombed Narcissus. Nietzsche attacked excessive self-reflection not only on the grounds delineated above, i.e., that it can freeze becoming into the stasis of being, but on the related grounds that narcissism, excessive self-love, halts our self-overcoming. If you ‘love yourself just the way you are’ you won’t seek to improve on what you are. Thus Nietzsche believes the self-creator will actually be concerned with people beside herself or himself. As he says: “Morally speaking, neighbor love, living for others, and other things can be a protective measure for preserving the hardest self-concern. This is the exception where, against my wont and conviction, I side with the ‘selfless’ drives: here they work in the service of self-love and self-discipline” (EH, II, 9). Insofar as these altruistic motives and deeds prevent us from falling into the infinite regress of full-blown narcissism, they actually turn out to be our own best interest, as well as others. The ‘hardest self concern’ involves not always being concerned with yourself. Because self-creation involves the avoidance of excessive self-reflection, it is not narcissistic.

The self-creator will actually manifest the ‘altruistic’ morals of the herd: “[Y]ou will always encounter [poverty, humility, and chastity] to a certain degree” in the lives of “great, fruitful, inventive spirits” (GM, III, 8). However the self-creator does not achieve this directly, but as the unintentional result of his or her project of self-creation. Because self-creation involves cultivating certain desires, virtues, and projects, it necessarily entails forgoing all other ‘non-essential’ desires, virtues and projects. The self-creator forgoes these selfish desires because he or she recognizes life as a zero-sum game. She or he simply has better things to do than strive for such transient self-gratification.

If we look at Nietzsche himself as representing the self-creator or overman, we see that the overman, is not some malevolent, egotistical wrecking ball smashing everything in its wake as it follows its own trajectory. Nietzsche, the ‘great immoralist,’ was a decent and polite man. Though he would have hated the terms, he was ‘nice’ and ‘kind,’ someone whose last sane act was to embrace a horse that was being cruelly beaten on the streets of Turin. Though he ‘selfishly’ gave himself a personal categorical imperative, this morality was actually stricter than those around him. Thus such an egoistic project does not mean you will automatically exploit and harm those around you.

Indeed, Nietzsche suggests this selfish project will help both oneself and others in two important ways. First of all, the process of self-creation, of ‘giving style to one’s character’ allows one to “attain satisfaction with oneself” (GS, 290). This satisfaction is desirable because, for Nietzsche, petty and negative behavior stems from dissatisfaction with oneself, from being ashamed of who one is. Ashamed persons seek ways of denying responsibility for having ‘turned out bad’ and thus they seek to denigrate the world around them, whether in general or particular people around them. When Nietzsche says: “Whom do you call bad? — Those who always want to put to shame” (GS, 73), he means these dissatisfied people who devalue those around them in order to bring others ‘down to their level.’ Conversely, the self-satisfied, self-creative individual does not ‘bring others down’ but instead not only spares others shame (GS, 74), but potentially ‘raises others up’ by providing them an example of a liberated individual, for Nietzsche considers “the seal of liberation” to be “no longer…ashamed in front of oneself” (GS, 75). As the maxim has it: You have to love yourself before you can love someone else. Self-creation is a means of becoming excellent and this in itself contributes to both society and individual, for Nietzsche holds that “civilized conditions” require “everyone [to be] superior in one thing” for this allows the individual to both “be helpful and...thus feel free to accept help without a sense of shame” (HH, 509).

Secondly, the self-creative individual’s path to self-creation is by no means entirely an ‘internal’ affair. The creator will necessarily seek ways of externally manifesting his or her virtues and talents, whether as a painting, a building project, a book or, as in Nietzsche’s case, a philosophy. Because this creation will manifest the creator’s individual and idiosyncratic talents, will be something that only she or he could have produced, he or she will give the world something unique and never before seen, thus pushing forward the possibilities of what human beings are capable of producing.

Why will the creator externally manifest his or her virtues? If we are what we do, the only way to be great is to do something great. The creator will be such a fruitful and generative force, she or he will ‘flow over’ with creativity and from this overflow will contribute to those around him or her out of what Nietzsche calls the “gift-giving virtue.” This gift-giving both benefits the giver and the receiver. Thus the fruits of self-creation blur the lines between altruism and egoism. The world is a better place because, say, Beethoven ‘selfishly’ chose to chase the limits of his talents as far they would take him.

This cultivated fruitfulness of the creator ultimately creates that creator and his or her creation. This brings us
to perhaps the most important reason for why one should create one’s self. Nietzsche denies all otherworlds. Without God, Heaven, and the soul, it seems we are denied the possibility of outliving our death, denied immortality. However self-creation and its fruit, the creation of some great work, offers us a path to a this-worldly immortality. In death, when the creator “himself is now nothing but the grey ashes” “the fire” kindled by his great works can continue to blaze, thus when one considers that “every action performed by a human being becomes in some way the cause of other actions, decisions, thoughts, that everything that happens is inextricably knotted to everything that will happen, one comes to recognize the existence of an actual immortality, that of motion” (HH, 208). We live on to the extent that our actions continue to produce effects in the world after our death. Those self-creators who have cultivated greatness and produced great works can achieve this secular immortality. By discussing and freshly interpreting Nietzsche’s creations here, I have in a small manner perpetuated and contributed to his “immortality of motion” set in motion over a century ago.

We can question the worth of self-creation from another perspective: Nietzsche’s perspectivism. This philosophical position poses problems for proselytizing: because he denies that humans have access to universal truths, he concludes that our conceptions of reality are always subjective by virtue of the limited perspective from which we observe them. Science, freewill and other treasured concepts are, ultimately, “necessary fictions” that simplify, and thus falsify, reality into a manageable shape. Nietzsche recognizes “untruth as a condition of life” (BGE, 4). If this is so, does that not mean that Nietzsche’s own philosophy is just another assemblage of untruth? If so, why would we pick this interpretation over another?

Nietzsche, to avoid being a self-deceptive hypocrite, must admit that his philosophy is only an interpretation. However this is not damning: according to this interpretation, interpretations are all we can have. To demand more is impossible. To believe you have ‘The Truth’ is to delude yourself out of a weakness of character that demands a degree of certainty humanity is not capable of attaining. The self-creating master merely desires certainty, while the slave demands certainty (GS, 288). Furthermore, some falsehoods are more false than others. All interpretations are not created equal. To interpret Nietzsche’s work as, say, a Christian apologetic is certainly a worse interpretation than the one this paper presents. Such an interpretation would be willfully misreading reality or reading into it things that are not there — which is what Nietzsche believes Christianity does when it ‘reads into’ the ‘text’ of reality the unreal realms of heaven and hell. Thus Nietzsche believes his untruths are less false than Christian untruths because he has undertaken the creation of his worldview with an ‘intellectual conscience’ that seeks the truth as much as possible, though ultimate attainment will always elude it.

Our worldview is intimately connected with our morality and ourselves. All three interpenetrate and influence the becoming of the others: thus the falsehoods we live by influence who we become, who we are. Nietzsche’s ultimate grounds for favoring his philosophy over others is that he believes it will produce a better you, a better humanity, usually expressed with the metaphor of ‘health.’ His philosophy will make you ‘healthy’ enough to achieve great things. But this just continues the shell game of justification. What makes something healthy? For Nietzsche, something is healthy to the extent that it is ‘life-promoting.’ Because “[l]ife itself is to my mind the instinct for growth, for durability, for an accumulation of forces, for power” (A, 6), life-promoting or healthy acts are those that make us grow in power and durability. But this definition of life, which is the basis of these valuations, is itself another interpretation, another untruth. Without recourse to a universal ground of morality, Nietzsche cannot ultimately justify why his values are better than others. To justify something means to judge it necessary or right according to criteria outside of the situation justified. Nietzsche’s denial of a humanly knowable absolute truth-lying outside of human understanding precludes the possibility of these outside criteria.

The impossibility of external justification for our project of self-creation brings us back to our theme of ‘living life like a work of art.’ Now we can see that this trope appealed to Nietzsche precisely because art creates its own justification. Great works of art justify themselves not by recourse to some outside source, say a literary theory, but from within, from the very appeal of their appearance. This is the meaning behind Nietzsche’s statement: “Only as an aesthetic product can the world be justified to all eternity” (BT, 5). When Nietzsche later ‘revises’ this statement to only “as an aesthetic phenomenon” its existence “still bearable for us” (GS, 107) he is simply taking his original thought to its logical conclusion: if we live our life artfully, we ourselves are our own justification for ourselves; as such, this project of living ever more artfully gives a meaning to our life, a why to life. This project makes life bearable by giving meaning to our suffering, for man will endure any how so long as he has a why.

Ultimately life is “full of sound and fury/signifying nothing” (Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act V, Scene V). But why should we use the words “ultimately meaningless” with a slanderous intent? The notion of “ultimate meaning” is nonsensical. We should not
condemn the world for not being as we would like it to be. We should take the world as it is. Like it or not, this world and this life are the only ones we have. The philosophy and the philosopher that Nietzsche created orbit around one goal: not just to ‘like’ the way things are, but to love them, to affirm life in such a world. This is the mindset of the noble free spirit, the self-overcoming self-creator: earnestly self-overcoming to create a greater and greater self, all the while recognizing this self and its worldview, its tablets of virtue are all ‘holy lies’ and thus not taking it all so seriously, reveling in the lightness of being: in this way we are paradoxically serious enough to work toward our goal while being able to laugh at ourselves, able to “laugh and be elevated at the same time” (Z, 153).

It is a testament to the unity of Nietzsche’s thought that we find this same idea in his first work: “The Dionysian man…realize[s] that no action of [his] can work any change in the eternal condition of things… [and thus] in order to act [he] require[s] the veil of illusion” (BT, 7). These illusions, which we recognize as illusions, still allow us to love our fate and our world enough to create: “For it is only in love, only when shaded by the illusion produced by love…that man creates” (UM, 95).

With this love of this world and our fate within it, hopefully we will have the bravery and passion to live dangerously under the aspect of eternity in order to become who we are, a corona of energy managing to manifest its flux into its most luminous of possible forms before ultimately returning to the surging, eternal maelstrom of energy that is life. We become the child who understands the meaning of Nietzsche’s most beautiful and powerful aphorism:

Seriousness in play — In Genoa at the time of evening twilight I heard coming from a tower a long peal of bells: it seemed it would never stop, resounding as though it could never have enough of itself, of the noise of the streets out into the evening sky and the sea breeze, so chilling and at the same time so childlike, so melancholy. Then I recalled the words of Plato and suddenly they spoke to my heart: Nothing human is worthy of being taken very seriously; nonetheless...(HH, 628).

Works Cited:

Abbreviations:
A — The Antichrist
BGE — Beyond Good and Evil
BT — The Birth of Tragedy
D — Daybreak
EH — Ecce Homo
GM — On the Genealogy of Morals
GS — The Gay Science
HH — Human, All Too Human
TI — Twilight of the Idols
UM — Untimely Meditations
WS — The Wanderer and His Shadow
Z — Thus Spake Zarathustra

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