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# “Everyone is Furthest from Himself”: An Interpretation of Nietzsche’s Recovery and Inversion of Terence’s Formula “I Am the Closest to Myself”

**Abstract:** This essay examines Nietzsche’s inversion of Terence’s formula “I am the closest to myself” into “Everyone is furthest from himself [*Jeder ist sich selbst der Fernste*]” (GM, Preface 1). In a contextual reading, I am going to ask how Nietzsche relates this formula to the difficulty of acquiring self-knowledge, as emphasized at the beginning of *On the Genealogy of Morality*. First, I argue that Nietzsche does not prohibit self-knowledge, but instead invites us to think about it differently; and second, I will show that the formula according to which “everyone is furthest from himself” can also be understood as an injunction to keep the self always at a distance. I will link these two aspects by arguing that Nietzsche replaces self-knowledge in the classical sense by an interpretation of the self, and that this interpretation must never be thought of as an undertaking that seeks to reify their self. Nietzsche urges us to make ourselves into creative projects, even this will entail fiction and illusion.

**Keywords:** Becoming oneself, Self-knowledge, Pindar, Terence, *On the Genealogy of Morality*

Inherited from Pindar, the famous formula “become who you are” seems to focus on what we could term a Nietzschean “ethics,” even though Nietzsche does not use this concept.<sup>1</sup> Addressing the tyrant Hieron, who was victorious in a Pythian test, Pindar uses this phrase at Delphi to demand of Hieron to show himself as he had come to know himself by acting so gloriously (“*Genoi oios essi mathon*,” *Pythics*, II, 72). Following the Greek poet, and emphasizing the latter’s perspective, Nietzsche prefers the agency of becoming oneself to a knowledge that would jeopardize the very process of becoming. Indeed, Pindar’s formula was already a reformulation of the Delphic “*Gnothi seauton*” (Know thyself) albeit in a specific way: Pindar places agency at the heart of self-knowl-

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<sup>1</sup> This text is a fully revised and translated version of “Cada qual é o mais distante de si mesmo”, *Cadernos Nietzsche* 44/2 (2023), 67–92.

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edge, relegating reflection to the end of the process once action has been taken. By omitting the end of the Pythian formula, Nietzsche seems to be taking a further step by eliminating any concluding reflection that would bring the process of becoming itself to an end.

In an unpublished text devoted to this Nietzschean formula, Georges Canguilhem assumed there to be an opposition between the Delphic sentence and Pindar's formula as it was taken up by Nietzsche.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as I have noted elsewhere, Nietzsche's omission of the word "*mathon*" could mean that knowledge itself is even less important to Nietzsche than it was for Pindar,<sup>3</sup> which could be confirmed by *Ecce Homo's* (1888) assertion that you need to have the slightest suspicion of who you are in order to become who you are (EH, Wise 1).<sup>4</sup> On this matter, Nietzsche seemed to follow Goethe's distrust of knowledge and self-observation.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Nietzsche may also have reduced the formula to "*werde, der du bist*" in order to make it more striking. After all, he is always particularly sensitive to the aesthetic dimension and rhetorical significance of his maxims, and anyone familiar with ancient rhetoric knows that to say less is at the same time to say more, or to let more be heard, by allowing a form of silence to resonate. That Pindar's emphasis on reflexivity is absent in Nietzsche's version is sufficient to make us wonder about it.

At first sight, Nietzsche seems to deny the possibility of self-knowledge at the beginning of *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, in this essay I am going to

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2 See Marco Brusotti, "Werde, der du bist!": Selbsterkenntnis, Handeln und Selbstgestaltung bei Nietzsche in einem Ineditum von Georges Canguilhem," *Nietzsche-Studien* 50 (2021), 181–216, esp. 187–93. Brusotti also shows that Nietzsche played an essential role for Canguilhem, even in his definition of the normal and the pathological.

3 See Nicolas Quérini, *De la connaissance de soi au devenir soi, Platon, Pindare et Nietzsche*, Paris 2023, esp. 241–2.

4 In this way, Nietzsche breaks with any possibility of a self that already exists, but also with the idea that it would suffice to discover a self in order to become it. We can thus easily see why reflection is largely distanced from the self, much more so than in the case of Pindar's sentence. Contrary to Canguilhem's assertion, Pindar assumes the self to be given in advance. See Brusotti, "Werde, der du bist!," 213. Hieron's self, for example, resides first and foremost in his *genos* of belonging, his family and his blood, from which he must prove himself worthy. See Quérini, *De la connaissance de soi au devenir soi, Platon, Pindare et Nietzsche*, 149–50.

5 See Brusotti, "Werde, der du bist!," 217–8.

6 Nietzsche seems to discredit the very possibility of self-knowledge on several occasions and to present it as a dangerous ideal for life: "What lives ceases to live when we have finished dissecting it [*dass es aufhört zu leben, wenn es zu Ende secirt ist*]" (UM II, HL 7, KSA 1.297, my translation). Commenting on GS 335, Patrick Wotling turns the Delphic sentence not only into an impossibility, but also into a form of perverse torture. See Patrick Wotling, "Évite de te connaître toi-même," in Camille Dejjardin / Quentin Landenne / Nicolas Quérini / Emmanuel Salanskis (eds.), *Devenir soi, former son caractère: Nietzsche, Emerson, Mill* (forthcoming). We will return to GS 335 later in the article.

examine in more detail his inversion of Terence's formula "I am the closest to myself"<sup>7</sup> into: "Everyone is furthest from himself [*Jeder ist sich selbst der Fernste*]" (GM, Preface 1). In a contextual reading, I am going to show how Nietzsche relates this formula to the difficulty of acquiring self-knowledge that is central to the beginning of *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Does this sentence according to which "everyone is furthest from himself" mean that a knowledge of oneself by oneself would be a futile exercise and that others would necessarily know us better than we do, such that otherness would have to be seen as an obligatory detour into self-knowledge? Nietzsche, of course, tells us from the outset that this Delphic ideal has never been achieved, because such an exercise in real self-knowledge has never been really attempted in the first place. Can we then really assume the opening of *On the Genealogy of Morality* to deny the very possibility of any self-knowledge, at least on a first reading? There might be another, more interesting way to understand this formula according to which we are the most distant to ourselves.

It is against this background that I am going to make two claims: first of all, Nietzsche does not at all prohibit self-knowledge at the beginning of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, but he invites us to conceive of self-knowledge in a different way; second, the formula according to which "everyone is furthest from himself" can also be understood as a demand to separate ourselves from what we believe to be our self. These two aspects of Nietzsche's phrase are interlinked, however, since Nietzsche replaces self-knowledge in the classical sense with an interpretation of the self that seeks to avoid reifying the self, since any reification of the self will detach the latter from its becoming. Finally, I would like to pursue a third line of investigation by asking what is the purpose of the theme of self-knowledge in a text focused on the emergence and on the value of morality? This is not a surprising question, of course, since morality is generally understood on the basis of a knowledge of human nature. In Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), for instance, knowledge about human nature is the starting point for a theory of the political world that also considers questions of a moral kind:

But there is another saying not of late understood, by which they might learn truly to read one another; if they would take the pains; and this is, *nosce teipsum, read thyself*: which was not meant, as it is now used, to countenance, either the barbarous state of men in power, toward their inferiors; or to encourage men of low degree, to a saucy behaviour toward their passions of one man, to the thoughts, and passions of another, whosoever looketh into himself, and considereth what he doth, when he does *think, opine, reason, hope, fear*, &c, and upon what grounds; he shall thereby read and know, what are the thoughts, and passions of all other men, upon like occasions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Terence was a Latin comic poet, possibly of Berber origin. Terence's words (*proximus sum egomet mihi*) are spoken in the comedy *Andria* (IV, 1, 12). Nietzsche turns the common sense of Terence's formula on its head and turns self-knowledge into a veritable paradox.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. John C. A. Gaskin, Oxford 2008, 12.

Moral philosophers often seek to identify an invariant and universal moral core of human nature. As a consequence of such an essentializing approach, morality and human nature are seen as corresponding to each other. Nietzsche’s genealogical approach, on the other hand, is at odds with, and seeks to subvert, this traditional view. On this account, there cannot be any absolute and fixed moral standards of a universal kind, since there simply is no such thing as human nature. Moreover, the assumption of a universal and fixed kind of human nature would make it impossible to question morality, thus also rendering impossible Nietzsche’s own genealogical method. Assuming the permanence of human nature, thus, stands in opposition to Nietzsche’s insistence on a history of morality, since it is this history that first of all allows us to recognize the emergence of shifting and contingent moral distinctions, such as “good” and “evil.” Likewise, assuming the existence of unchanging and fixed moral norms prevents us from understanding the pluralism of human natures that have come into existence over time.

Against this background, we must ask whether Nietzsche really denies any possibility of self-knowledge or whether, on the contrary, he argues that a better knowledge of human types in history also enables us to gain a better understanding of morality itself. We are thus safe in assuming that Nietzsche’s project aims at something like a knowledge from below, a knowledge of oneself but not immediately by oneself, by recognizing the impulses and drives that work behind, for example, a given resentment that has produced a certain type of morality and a certain type of human being at a specific moment in history. The genealogical approach retraces a certain history and searches for what provoked or triggered changes over time. Genealogy traverses the territory of morality which “really existed, really was lived” and thus aims at “discovering this country for the first time” (GM, Preface 7, my translation). According to Nietzsche, morality has never been questioned in a sufficiently radical way, since philosophers have never truly delved into the roots of morality, always taking morality for a given fact, and above all because few philosophers have questioned the value of morality itself.

For Nietzsche, this means that there are several types of morality which correspond to specific types of human beings, each of which have different values. Although moral phenomena are always misinterpretations<sup>9</sup>, questioning the nature of morality has to start from a “reality,” that is to say, it has to start by focusing on the lived reality of moral values and norms in order to excavate the impulses and drives at work behind what we wrongly name “moral facts.”

The second *Untimely Meditation* (1874) can to some extent be seen as a precursor to Nietzsche’s history of morality as it emerges in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Most crucially, Nietzsche emphasizes in the second *Untimely Meditation* that it is our “*plastic strength [plastische Kraft]*” which determines the amount of history we are able to

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9 See TI, Improvers 1.

take in without being crushed by it (UM II, HL 1, KSA 1.251).<sup>10</sup> This motif is also found in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, when Nietzsche writes that “there is an excess of plastic, restorative and reconstituting force, which also forces one to forget” (GM I 10, KSA 5.273, my translation). The comparison of these two texts, which are very far apart in Nietzsche’s writing career, is relevant in the sense that the second *Untimely Meditation* outlines both the usefulness and the danger of our knowledge about human nature from a historical perspective, whereas *On the Genealogy of Morality* begins with a critique of self-knowledge, which can nevertheless be understood as the starting point of understanding both ourselves and the morality we give ourselves. This is not a knowledge about universal human nature in the singular, but it is concerned with specific types of human beings, such as those contemporary European types that Nietzsche seeks to overcome. As such, and this is our second line of investigation, Nietzsche’s formula – “Everyone is furthest from himself.” – does not deny self-knowledge.

Let us start again from the first paragraph of the Preface, devoted to self-knowledge. Why, then, do we have so much difficulty in knowing ourselves?

We are strangers to ourselves, we are in person to ourselves: there is a good reason for this. We have never gone in search of ourselves – how could it be that one day we *find* ourselves [*fänden*]? It is rightly said: “Where your treasure is, there is your heart”; our heart is where the hives of our knowledge are. We are always on our way to them, we who are born winged and collect honey from the spirit, we really have only one thing at heart – to bring something “home [*heimzubringen*]” (GM, Preface 1).

We could interpret this passage from a perspective quite similar to the one proposed by Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (1961), according to which Western classical metaphysics was mistaken about what knowledge was by always relating the other to the same. Beginning with Plato, according to Levinas, we know things by reducing them to the identical, to the ideas for instance (as far as Plato’s dialogues are concerned), whose knowledge is always already in itself (although in a latent way), and this means that the movement of knowledge must be understood as the return of Ulysses to Ithaca. Levinas thus tries to think, on the contrary, a type of knowledge that does not reduce the other to the same, that preserves the heterogeneity of points of view, a relation without relation that he calls “religion.”<sup>11</sup> We could read GM, Preface 1 first of all from this point of view: our fault consists in always wanting to bring something back and therefore in wanting to return home (a theme that is of course also present in Nietzsche’s work). Although this dimension might not be totally absent from *On the Genealogy of Morality*, I want to suggest that Nietzsche’s approach is more complicated and therefore more subtle.

<sup>10</sup> See UM II, HL 4 and 10.

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, 4th edn., Dordrecht 1980, Section I, A, § 2.

Let me begin by focusing on the critical dimension of Nietzsche's passage quoted above, which highlights that the perspectives of Nietzsche and Levinas can indeed be brought together: we want knowledge of ourselves to be profitable, research to be fruitful. We want to produce something. But this operation does not "yield anything," that is, even if it were successful, it merely would make us know something that is already there, apparently always within our reach. We have to understand, however, what is at stake here: the link between the question of self-knowledge and morality. This is the knowledge from which we have turned away, precisely because we thought we were dealing here with something fixed, with a given, as with a so-called moral fact. Now, if the self is a given, if there is a self that is eternally fixed, the man of knowledge, truly interested in research, naturally turns away from it, since he wants to bring something back.

Nietzsche, I would argue, does not reject the idea that we turn away from ourselves merely because we are seeking knowledge about ourselves. The philosopher always values experimentation in terms of knowledge. Rather, Nietzsche allows us to recognize a mistake: such a detour away from ourselves is precisely the consequence of a false conception of the self. In short, this is a waste of time and has little value to those who seek to know themselves. Since, for Nietzsche, the self conceived in an atomistic way is merely an illusion, seeking knowledge about the core of the self seems a vain undertaking.<sup>12</sup>

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, however, the knower does start from a given self, but from the experiences through which we make ourselves. Nietzsche admits true knowledge only on this condition: we do not understand anything about a thing until we have experienced the latter ourselves.<sup>13</sup> On this account, self-knowledge is the knowledge of life, and even of life as one lives it, as one experiences it. The opening paragraph of *On the Genealogy of Morality* continues:

As for life, for the rest, the so-called "lived experiences [*Erlebnisse*]," – who of us has even enough seriousness for that? Or enough time? As far as these subjects are concerned, I am afraid we have never really been "captivated by the subject": our heart is precisely not in it – not even our ear! On the contrary, like a being in the grip of a divine distraction and immersed in himself, to whose ear the bell has just rung its twelve strokes of noon in full flight, who wakes up with a start and asks himself: "What exactly has just rung?," we too sometimes rub our ears afterwards and ask ourselves, totally stunned, totally disconcerted: "What exactly have we experienced?" And we recount, afterwards, as we said, the whole of these twelve vibrating bells of our lived experience, of our life, of our being – alas! and we count wrongly (GM, Preface 1, my translation).

We count wrongly, Nietzsche suggests in this passage, because we always tend to start from the notion of a self to which we bring back all our experiences. This is particularly the case with regard to morality, since our knowledge of the latter always begins with the

<sup>12</sup> See TI, Reason 5.

<sup>13</sup> See HH II, Preface 1.

assumption of a unified self as a natural and necessary point of reference. Such a fixed conception of a core of human nature does not serve as the origin of morality, however, which in turn puts into question our notion of origin. Following Foucault, we can say that the origin is never stable and pure, like a Platonic idea, but it is always anchored and situated in a history, which is to say that what we call origin really is a beginning, so that genealogy demonstrates the diffuse nature of this beginning and its consequences.<sup>14</sup> In short, morality cannot be anchored in itself in the same way that experiences cannot be understood by relating them to ourselves since they always already are what constitutes us. The whole paradox of Nietzsche's approach consists in insisting on the importance of self-knowledge while showing that the latter, at least if understood in a limited way, cannot really be the starting point of a genealogical investigation into the nature of morality. While we might thus expect an inquiry into morality to begin with an inquiry into human nature, Nietzsche moves into the opposite direction, starting out from the lived experience of morality in order to arrive, if this is possible, at knowledge about the human types that represent a specific morality.

Finally, this knowledge of the self can and must be conceived as a knowledge of the historically embedded human being, not of the human being as such, and what is at stake from Nietzsche's perspective is essentially the type of the European Christian human being. To understand this historically contingent human individual from the vantage point of actually being this individual, Nietzsche's philosophical psychology will need to create some distance: "The psychologist must look away from *himself* to simply see" (TI, Arrows 35, my translation). Paradoxically, if we belong to such a type of human being, it is by looking at something other than ourselves, by distancing ourselves from ourselves, that we will be able to know ourselves.

Nietzsche concludes GM, Preface 1 on the near impossibility of knowing oneself:

We remain precisely strangers to ourselves [*Wir bleiben uns eben nothwendig fremd*], of necessity we do not understand ourselves [*wir verstehn uns nicht*], we *must* misunderstand ourselves [*wir müssen uns verwechseln*], the principle: "Everyone is furthest from himself" applies to us forever; – in our regard we are not "men of knowledge" [*für uns sind wir keine "Erkennenden"*] (GM, Preface 1).

Once again, we must not start from a given that would be there in an obvious way. In BGE 186, Nietzsche points out the cardinal mistake made by all those who wanted to create a science of morality: by assuming morality to be a given, and by assuming the existence of a unified and unchanging self as a kind of metaphysical essence, philosophy is not sufficiently radical to really understand the historically contingent nature of human beings. In a way, this is also what the second *Untimely Meditation* has criticized when it rejected the Hegelian temptation to give meaning to history from the

<sup>14</sup> See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire," in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite*, Paris 1971, 145–72: 150.



perspective of its presumed goal or end. Nietzsche precisely refused any such teleological approach to history. The expression "untimely" is crucial here, since it entails that understanding our own culture, and determining its value, requires that we take a step back and create distance. In the same way that Nietzsche suggested that contemporary observers can only understand nineteenth-century German culture once they distance themselves from the latter, he also contends that we can only understand ourselves by moving away from our self. Hence, "untimely" means to create a "pathos of the distance" with regard to ourselves, so that such knowledge is possible and one can appear to ourselves, as in the expression: "Everyone is furthest from himself."

In fact, there are two ways of understanding the quoted passage from *On the Genealogy of Morality*: first, from the point of view of the very possibility of self-knowledge that is called into question, at least for us, "men of knowledge" (that is to say at the same time that perhaps a knowledge of the self is possible by other means). Second, we can also read this passage as an invitation to hold this self to be something absolutely remote: "we must misunderstand ourselves." It is imperative here to misunderstand oneself in order to avoid fixating the self, which is reminiscent of BGE 281 when Nietzsche says that he has never really sought himself. From then on, we see something positive taking shape like the ideal self about which the *Untimely Meditations* already spoke to us, a self that one projects ahead of oneself, a self that only shows itself beyond oneself. From this point of view, we can now understand that knowledge of ourselves, based on an act of interpretation, can play a completely positive role.

The Preface of *On the Genealogy of Morality* is thus directed against the idea of an immediate knowledge of the self. Instead, leaving any immediate self behind we need to work to eventually become ourselves, following Pindar's invitation to become aware of what we have become. That "everyone is furthest to himself" is thus also a demand to move away from ourselves in order to know ourselves, turning away from any immediate knowledge. As Nietzsche notes in the *The Gay Science* (1882–87):

My grasp on others' minds is sure,  
But to myself I am obscure!  
My eye is far too close to me –  
I am not what I see.  
For introspection, it might help  
To get more distance from myself.  
Though not as distant as my foe,  
Or closest friend, for neither know  
Me. Something halfway would be best!  
Can you guess what I request? (GS, Joke, Cunning and Revenge 25)<sup>15</sup>

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15 *The Joyous Science*, ed. and trans. R. Kevin Hill, London 2018.



Nietzsche's paradox is that he is a great connoisseur of human types without knowing himself. The eye in question here symbolizes an objective and immediate knowledge, since it is attached to a self that one would have directly in front of one's eyes, whereas such a knowledge of oneself will only be interesting if one can get away from oneself. We find a similar perspective in GS 15, where Nietzsche tells us that proximity to the object of immediate knowledge, to the object that is seen too closely, leads to disappointment:

*From a distance [Aus der Ferne].* – This mountain makes the whole landscape it dominates pregnant with meaning and attractive in every way: after saying this to ourselves for the hundredth time, our appreciation becomes so extravagant and unwarranted that we imagine the source of this attraction to be the most attractive thing in the landscape – and so we climb the mountain and are disappointed. All of a sudden we become disenchanted both with it and with the landscape around and below us; we had forgotten that much greatness, like much goodness, wants to be seen only at a certain distance [*eine gewisse Distanz*], and by all means from below, not from above – only in this way it is *effective*. Perhaps you know some people around you who can only look at themselves from a certain distance [*Ferne*] to find themselves at all tolerable or pleasing to behold and thus fortify themselves; for them, self-knowledge is ill-advised [*die Selbsterkenntnis ist ihnen zu widerrathen*] (GS 15).

The mountain that seemed so beautiful, so majestic because it was almost inaccessible from below, finally seems quite modest from above (a question of perspective here). When we climb the mountain and arrive at the summit, when we climb the slope that leads to our self, we are disappointed.

Nietzsche, however, does not advise against self-knowledge in general. But are we dealing here with the ideal self of which Nietzsche spoke in the *Untimely Meditations*? Is this self ever really attainable?<sup>16</sup> If there is an attraction, a seductive and invigorating affect that can provoke the self, the desire to be oneself, it can only exist if the self remains at a distance, if the self is irremediably distant from itself, even if we can approximate it partially. Thus, one finds the following idea in *Human, All too Human* I (1878):

*Relationship with the higher self [höheren Selbst].* – Everyone has his good day, in which he finds his higher self [*sein höheres Selbst findet*]; and the true feeling of humanity demands that one should appreciate everyone solely on the basis of this state, and not on the basis of his working days of absence and freedom and bondage. A painter, for example, should be valued and honored according to the supreme vision he was able to have and represent. But the men themselves maintain very diverse relations with their higher self and are frequently actors [*Schauspieler*] of them-

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<sup>16</sup> Marco Brusotti reminds us that Canguilhem gives a skeptical twist to the metaphor of moulting in the *Untimely Meditations*, meaning that self-knowledge is forever disappointed (Brusotti, “Werde, der du bist!,” 192). In contrast, I would argue that the search for the self, as long as it is undertaken in an interpretive way, does have a point, as long as we do not try to grasp the self objectively. This is the stance I defend in the rest of this article.

selves in that they do not cease to imitate afterwards what they are during these moments. Many live in front of their ideal in apprehension and humility and would like to deny it: they fear their higher self [*sie fürchten ihr höheres Selbst*] because, when it speaks, it speaks in a demanding way. Moreover, he comes and stays there as he pleases, with the freedom of a ghost; for this reason he is frequently called a gift of the gods, whereas in reality everything else is a gift of the gods (of chance): he, on the other hand, is the man himself (HH I 624, my translation).

Nietzsche speaks of a “true feeling of humanity,” an expression that sounds a bit strange coming from him, but if one does not want to be overwhelmed by the disgust of what is “all too human,” one must be charitable toward others and appreciate them according to their own ideal self. At the same time, anyone who becomes the actor of his own ideal also leads a failed existence, at least with respect to what he could be. Nietzsche writes here that these actors “fear their higher self because, when it speaks, it speaks in a demanding way,” which is also reminiscent of the third of the *Untimely Meditations* (1874) in which he writes: “The man who does not want to belong to the mass has only to cease to be indulgent toward himself” (UM III, SE 1, KSA 1.338, my translation). The fear or dread that we experience in the face of this higher self derives from the gap between what it represents and what we are. But the object of disgust is never the ideal self, the self that we project in a positive logic of assertion of ourselves and that directs us to become ourselves. Rather, we fail to be ourselves when we act out the ideal we have of ourselves, while the self that we are always disappoints us. (Wagner, for instance, can be seen as the actor of his own ideal self, thus disappointing Nietzsche and making the rupture of their friendship necessary.) What Nietzsche despises in the third of his *Untimely Meditations* is our laziness, the laziness that prevents us from becoming what we are. The “immediate” self is always an object of contempt, despised when measured against an ideal superior self.

If knowledge about our real self leads to disgust, we can remedy such disgust and disappointment by recognizing that self-knowledge remains a dynamic and interpretive project that is never able to fixate the self. In the above quotation from the *The Gay Science*, the self is bearable only because it is not known; contempt about the self intervenes as soon as we see ourselves lucidly. Self-knowledge kills life. Nietzsche already wrote in BT 7: “Understanding kills action, action depends on a veil of illusion.”<sup>17</sup> GS 15 also ends by noting that self-knowledge should be discouraged. One will thus understand that GS 335 makes of the knowledge of oneself “almost a malice,” and this is also the passage where we encounter the phrase “Everyone is furthest from himself” for the first time:

How many people know how to observe [*beobachten*]? And of the few who do – how many observe themselves [*beobachten sich selber*]? “Everyone is furthest from himself [*jeder ist sich selber der Fernste*]” – all the triers of the reins know this, much to their chagrin; and the saying, “know thyself

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17 *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. Michael Tanner, trans. Shaun Whiteside, London 2003.

[*erkenne dich selbst*],” in the mouth of a god and spoken to man, is almost a malice [*beinahe eine Bosheit*] (GS 335, KSA 3.560, translation modified).

Certainly, to know oneself objectively, to understand one’s defects and shortcomings, provokes disgust. GS 335 also insists that the ideals according to which we understand ourselves are external to us and formed by others, which prevents us from becoming ourselves. But Nietzsche uses the word “almost [*beinahe*],” which suggests that we can have a glimpse of the self that we can become even in a state heteronomy that seems to preclude this possibility. In the same way that he writes of Leibniz’s words: “Let no one pass by and underestimate the almost!” (BGE 207, my translation), we believe that this Nietzschean aphorism should not be allowed to slip by either, and so we give it meaning.<sup>18</sup>

This knowledge must then retain a dimension of vagueness because it does not wish to become an objective knowledge, but a knowledge in which the actual self and the limits of the self are linked, to create the horizon of a self that one can become. Strictly speaking, interpreting ourselves, or interpreting our self, is more important than knowing ourselves. Real self-knowledge does not place limits on the process through which we understand ourselves; such limits are always a manifestation of poor self-knowledge. A certain ignorance of one’s limits is therefore necessary to be able to surpass oneself.

In a similar way, in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, a lucid insight into the emergence and into the beginnings of morality can easily disgust, leading to skepticism and nihilism, as soon as we realize that morality is not as moral as it seems, is not as pure, but contains something pathological lurking behind it. Depending on our strength, such a lucid insight into morality can also incite us to exceed it. Nevertheless, if we recognize that our own conception of justice is merely an impulsive effect of our resentment, such insight can still disgust us, albeit only if we fail to hold our self as something distant. Finally, it is necessary to remind ourselves that BGE 32 makes self-knowledge the motive that brought humanity into the era of morality. The latter implies that morality had a beginning, that there was a pre-moral humanity, more animal, which did not return on itself. Now, it is this return which, in the long run, produces the fiction of free will and which makes it possible for us to make morality into something other than an illusion. But if self-knowledge has produced morality, it can also spur us to go beyond this morality: understanding human nature allows us to go beyond human nature to let the superhuman come into being. Nietzsche thus thinks of surpassing morality through itself and, in a formulation that echoes Hegel, he speaks of the self-overcoming (*Selbstüberwindung*) of morality, but that does not mean that the era of morality is about to overcome itself, since this would be a self-contradiction. Rather, it is necessary to call for its overcoming and from this point of view to look at the superhuman, at a type of existence beyond good and evil.

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18 My reading differs from Wotling, “Évite de te connaître toi-même.”

It is against this background that we can now understand the aim of *On the Genealogy of Morality* in the following manner: to know the type of human being that the Christian morality of resentment has produced in order to be able to think and produce from there the overcoming of this type toward a superior type beyond good and evil. Seen from this point of view, *On the Genealogy of Morality* is more than merely a search for the beginnings of morality, since this search is only the starting point for a project that seeks to overcome a life-denying morality, thus calling for another type of morality. Contemporary moral norms might disgust us, but they can also allow us to reach beyond a historically contingent human nature to produce something like a morality, or an ethics, that does not rely on the economy of the self.

Morality is thus "something to be overcome," a paradoxical injunction since it is a duty to overcome morality. Nietzsche concludes BGE 32 by writing:

The overcoming of morality, in a certain sense even the self-overcoming of morality: this may well be the name of that long secret work which remains reserved for the finest and most probing, but also the meanest consciences of today, they who are the living touchstones of the soul – (BGE 32, my translation).

In this passage, Nietzsche adopts a specific point of view: we can know human beings as they are now, in the morality that determines them, and this knowledge will allow us to overcome this particular human type. This obviously means that humans beings do not have an essential nature, but a process of becoming is inscribed into human "nature," since "man is the *animal* that is *not yet fixed in a stable way*" (BGE 62, my translation). And, it is not at all obvious that this animal will one day become permanent.

The fact that human beings are in a process of becoming does not prevent us from psychological insight into human types at a specific time, and this also enables us to gain insight into our own existence as such an individual type, although this is particularly difficult according to GS 354. As Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886): "On the contrary, in the philosopher, there is absolutely nothing impersonal; and his morality especially indicates, by bearing a decided and decisive testimony, *who he is*" (BGE 6, my translation). It is again the morality of an individual that allows us to understand this individual, but precisely in what is personal. It is a question of understanding the values that an individual chooses for themselves. We can interpret these values in an affirmative way so that they do not contradict and diminish the self, but rather give it strength. The overcoming of morality – as orchestrated by Zarathustra, who wants to constitute an ethics of affirmation for the coming of superhumans – is thus morality's self-overcoming, all the more so because Zarathustra himself stands at its origin.

Finally, this self-overcoming, which is at the same time a negation of self-knowledge in the moral period of humanity, must also be thought of at the individual level. In BGE 80, Nietzsche thus writes that "a thing that is elucidated ceases to interest us" (my translation). Paradoxically enough, self-knowledge would invite us to lose interest in ourselves, to forget ourselves, and it would thus lead to an opposite imperative. If a god

invited us to see ourselves objectively, this would indeed mean that we have to understand who we really are (overcoming ignorance about ourselves), but it would also constitute ourselves as an object. One could only become objective by reifying oneself, by constituting oneself as a well-defined self, by stopping oneself. This perspective seems therefore contrary to the one that Nietzsche discovers (or wants us to hear) in Pindar's sentence "*Genoi oios essi mathon*" (*Pythics*, II, 72). As I already noted in the introduction, Nietzsche's appropriation of Pindar's phrase insists on the dimension of becoming and apparently drops the dimension of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> The self is always in movement. Also, we can compare the sentence above ("a thing that is elucidated ceases to interest us," BGE 80) with the Preface of *On the Genealogy of Morality*: if knowledge seeks to bring something back, we lose interest in knowledge as soon as it is acquired. The scholar always wants something new. Considering that the self is a well-defined object that can be known, this knowledge should indeed disinterest us.

The same is the case with regard to morality. Understanding that our current values are not permanent allows us to conceive of their overcoming, liberating human individuals from their belief in the permanence of the values to which they subscribe. We should not assume, however, that any new values that are the result of this overcoming are truer than the values have been overcome. The question, rather, is whether the human being that embodies these new values also values life, that is, whether these new values empower this individual to continuously question, in the most radical way, our prejudicial preference for "the good," asking whether whatever we describe as "evil" might not also be beneficial to this to us (GM, Preface 7). Nietzsche reminds us in *On the Genealogy of Morality* that the moral illusions and prejudices we rely on are the result of our drives, and the task of genealogy consists in highlighting that morality is thus not something given. In a sense, we could say that, until now, there has never been a true moral philosophy, a radical investigation of the deep sources of human types, their history and transformations.

On a first-order reading of GM, Preface 1, Nietzsche denies an immediate and objective knowledge of the self, but a second-order interpretation of this passage, and in particular of the sentence "Everyone is furthest to himself," allows us to recognize that we simply must hold the self distant from us. From this perspective, we can understand that the self-overcoming of morality is accompanied by the overcoming of the ideal of an objective knowledge of the self, an ideal that must be overcome by an interpretive approach to the self. This is what enables us to conceive of morality beyond morality, of a superior and undoubtedly more personal morality that allows the self to assert itself beyond the morality of self-sacrifice as it is lived in Europe during Nietzsche's time.

Knowledge of the self will moreover coincide with knowledge of morality. For the mediocre human being entirely determined by the moral values of the context within

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<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche also gives a strong meaning to the verb used by Pindar by drawing it toward the question of becoming, whereas in the context of Pindar's verse it could just as well mean "to manifest."

which he lives self-knowledge coincides with these values. He knows himself only as an average human individual, fully participating in the values of an era. In contrast, continuously becoming ourselves, becoming who we are, allows us to escape this external moral determination, but this also creates a human type that is more difficult to know since it does not share in the values of others, that is values that serve as criteria of knowledge. The philosopher is however knowable by the "morals" (or ethics) he chooses for himself. Therefore, if Nietzsche refuses an objective knowledge of oneself by oneself, he does not seem to renounce the possibility of knowing others. He seems to accept that one can know someone from their personal ethics, since the latter indicate "who he is." Such knowledge, however, can only be of an interpretive kind, since the morality of a philosopher only bears witness (certainly decisive) to what he is.

If other morals, higher morals, have yet to be invented beyond the morality inherited from Platonism and Christianity (BGE 202), but also from Kant,<sup>20</sup> a form of Nietzschean "morality" or "ethics" (though he does not call it that himself) does seem to take shape around becoming oneself. Elsewhere I have argued that Nietzsche's enterprise in *Ecce Homo* was aimed at producing a self through the *poiesis* of autobiographical practice.<sup>21</sup> In this way, Nietzsche's autobiographical practice not only recaptures a self,<sup>22</sup> but he also constructs a self (perhaps even as an illusion or fiction). While he constantly criticizes the metaphysical illusion of a reified, atomic self, he does not deny the possibility of playing with the images of a self that can lead us to become ourselves and even to overcome ourselves. Against this background, it is now possible to conclude that Nietzsche urges us to form creative projections of ourselves, even if they often are a fiction. There are ways of playing with interpretations of the self that lead us in a practical way to embrace a certain form of unity in order to momentarily express a diversity, without this unity ever having to be closed or definitive, but simply existing as a

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20 See Benedetta Zavatta, *Individuality and Beyond: Nietzsche Reads Emerson*, trans. Alexander Reynolds, Oxford 2019, 112–3: "To mature as an individual, or to become an individual in the true and full sense, means to achieve moral autonomy. Emerson and Nietzsche, however, in sharp contrast to Kant, understand 'moral autonomy' to consist not in a giving of commands to oneself – not, that is to say, as an act of obedience, be it even of the self to the self – but rather as an act of spontaneity or, in other words, an act of creativity."

21 See Nicolas Quérini, "La pratique nietzschéenne de l'autobiographie," in Alexis Anne-Braun / Édouard Mehl (eds.), *Cahiers philosophiques de Strasbourg: [Auto]biographies philosophiques*, Strasbourg 2023, 97–116.

22 I therefore agree with the questions asked by Brusotti, "'Werde, der du bist!'," 193–4, since there is a positive dimension to becoming oneself, so that becoming oneself must not simply "wait" to be realized in order to be grasped retrospectively. On this topic, see also Camille Dejardin / Nicolas Quérini, "Les pratiques autobiographiques de Friedrich Nietzsche et de John Stuart Mill: Une lecture comparée," in Dejardin / Landenne / Quérini / Salanskis (eds.), *Devenir soi, former son caractère*, and Nicolas Quérini, "La dissolution paradoxale du sujet dans la période nietzschéenne de la 'maturité,'" *Labyrinth* 26 (2024): *Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Les voies d'entrée et de sortie du labyrinthe / Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Ways In and Out of the Labyrinth* (forthcoming).

dynamic horizon. In the way that *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) already positively thought of dreaming as the most common way of relating to the world,<sup>23</sup> we can undoubtedly positively “dream” of a self in a paradoxically conscious way, an “ideal self,” which would constitute a form of projection toward the self we wish to become, as an aspiration and without such a self having a definitive form of unity. As such, I do not agree with Canguilhem’s suggestion that “amor fati” would be a more appropriate subtitle for *Ecce Homo* than “become what you are.”<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Canguilhem is correct in his assumption that this motto should be understood as an integral affirmation of the self,<sup>25</sup> but only if this ideal self is integrated into this affirmation as a genuine aspiration and a form of self-creation by the self: autobiographical practice is not only retrospective, but also projective. In this respect, it is now possible to recognize a correspondence or a shared aim, between the motto “become what you are” and the genealogical affirmation that “Everyone is furthest to himself.”

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<sup>23</sup> BT 15, KSA 1.26: “The beautiful illusion of the dream worlds, in the creation of which every man is a consummate artist.”

<sup>24</sup> See Brusotti, “‘Werde, der du bist!,’” 203.

<sup>25</sup> See Brusotti, “‘Werde, der du bist!,’” 204.