

**Presentation on Gemes, “Nietzsche on Free Will, Autonomy and the Sovereign Individual”**  
PHIL 449, Spring 2014

Nietzsche has conflicting statements about free will in his writings

- criticizes it as a symptom of slave morality
- praises it as something possessed by superior people, such as sovereign individual
- also seems to hold to determinism and rejects free will in a metaphysical sense

Gemes addresses these seemingly conflicting views of FW by saying that N is talking about two different forms of free will: “deserts free will” and “agency free will”

- sidesteps issue of determinism as not relevant to the issue of agency that N is focused on

deserts free will

- tied to the idea of responsibility for actions and whether or not one deserves punishment. For this kind of FW need to ask whether one was too strongly influenced by outside forces or whether consciously responsible
- Nietzsche rejects this way of thinking about free will: see GM I.13: there is no doer behind the deed

agency free will

- Focused on the question: What does it mean to be a self capable of acting?

*Deserts free will as focused more on how we should react to the actions of others; agency free will more on what it means for me to act.*

Sovereign individual

- has agency free will: performs deeds out of an internal, ordered, hierarchy of drives
- takes responsibility for actions as opposed to deflecting responsibility onto a god, society, fate, etc.
- this is what it means to have a genuine character, to have an authentic self capable of acting

**Question:** How can we be sure that someone (even oneself) is a sovereign individual?

N suggests we rely on reason and experience rather than feelings

Quote from *Daybreak* 35 (in Owen, p. 49): trusting your feelings means giving more credence to the past, to one's grandparents and what has been inherited from them than to “the gods which are in us: our reason and our experience.”

- so if we just rely on our feelings we'll be accepting what we've learned without question; need to rely on reason and experience instead

Problems with experience

Video on the “McGurk effect”, on YouTube (hear the same sound but it sounds different if paired with a visual that suggests a different sound)

- structural features of this illusion: (1) even if we're aware it's an illusion the effect still occurs; (2) we only become aware of the illusion when we have evidence of incongruity; (3) we don't have access to the processes by which we have experiences, so it's hard to find out that it is going wrong

Problems with reason

Wikipedia page on cognitive biases—we are subject to many biases in our reasoning

- reason can also be untrustworthy: if it seems good enough to us we take it as good enough

-- similar structural issues as above with experience

**so again the question:** How can we know if someone or oneself is a sovereign individual when we might just think they are but believe this falsely?

**Another question:** Does it really matter whether a person possesses agency or not so long as good deeds are performed over bad? What does it matter whether this is caused by a unified agent or not?

**Discussion** (sorry, I couldn't get everyone's ideas down while also paying attention to the discussion!)

- Problems with reason and experience suggest that we can't get to objective truth, but this doesn't mean get rid of reason and experience; rather, let's get rid of the idea of being able to attain an objective truth beyond perspectives.
- this includes asking whether we can really be sure if someone is an SI or not. All we have is our experience of that, so we have to rely on it.
- In Treatise III.12 Nietzsche seems to be closing the door on metaphysics altogether with his discussion of perspectivism. But can we really close this door altogether?
- A bigger question about the SI: your "authentic self" in the way discussed here is still a product of your environment, your context; it's not just purely "you." So in what way is it authentic?
- N, as a naturalist, agrees that we have some drives we don't get to choose, that we are affected by situations and other people beyond our control. But we can still be creative in the sense of interpreting these experiences. When we talk about authenticity we are talking about where these interpretations come from. Are they just taken over from what has gone before, or have we ourselves engaged in this interpretation?
- Might N be committing similar errors to those he criticizes in speaking of the SI in very individualistic ways, seemingly promoting the conditions for capitalism? [Christina: curious how this commits the same errors he accuses others of committing]