

Nietzsche Midterm Exam - Notes on Answers

Directions: Respond to each of the following passages in separate short essays. In each case you should explain clearly the meaning of Nietzsche's statement and its philosophical implications, and discuss how it is related to other relevant ideas and passages in the works we have read. You should note places where Nietzsche expresses views within, and across, works that seem at odds with each other and suggest whether such tensions can be resolved.

Below I outline some points that should appear in your essay. Since you didn't have your books to work from, I won't expect you to cite passages by number, but to receive full marks you should cover most of the ideas presented here.

1. From *Ecce Homo*, Preface, sec. 2:

"The last thing I should promise would be to 'improve' mankind. No new idols are erected by me; let the old ones learn what feet of clay mean. *Overthrowing idols* (my word for 'ideals')—that comes closer to being part of my craft. One has deprived reality of its value, its meaning, its truthfulness, to precisely the extent to which one has mendaciously invented an ideal world."

Start by clarifying the contrast between "reality" and the "ideal": reality as *this* world (of life, nature, and history) vs. reality as a perfected world (unchanging, eternal, "pure") that lies beyond/above appearances or awaits us in another life. The latter is the "ideal world" that is the target of N's criticism.

Traditionally, the task of the philosopher has to been to prepare us to enter this ideal world, by perfecting our nature (intellectually and morally).

N's argues that the "ideal world" is not real at all, but a fiction "mendaciously invented" by human beings to serve other ends (accommodating their own weaknesses or furthering their power over others).

Thus, N criticizes the notion on both intellectual grounds and on moral grounds: the latter include the charge that an ideal world deprives this world of potential meaning or value (it is never "good enough" for us).

N. states that his task is not to "improve mankind," i.e. preparing them for the "ideal world," and that he erects no new idols/ideals. How can the latter be reconciled with his own emphasis on new ideals of various sorts (e.g. Zarathustra)? The latter are goals to be strived for, but they are not grounded in an ideal world. Put another way: they are forms of *becoming* but rather being. They are also explicitly described by Nietzsche as artistic creations, i.e. ideals we fashion for ourselves.

2. From *Schopenhauer as Educator*, pp. 147-8:

"Every philosophy which believes that the problem of existence is touched on, not to say solved, by a political event is a joke- and pseudo-philosophy. Many states have been founded since the world began;

that is an old story. How should a political innovation suffice to turn men once and for all into contented inhabitants of the earth?"

The passage contrasts the significance of philosophy and politics. N. is implicitly attacking the Hegelian doctrine that the form of state is the highest expression of the development of Spirit. Thus, political developments (e.g. the movement toward greater political freedom) would be evidence of an underlying metaphysical reality. Against this, N. suggests that politics is a perennial problem for human beings, rooted in relations of power ("Many states have been founded since the world began; that is an old story"), and that it does not touch on the true concern of philosophy: the meaning and value of existence.

N. advances the latter conception of the philosopher in highlighting the importance of Schopenhauer, and he contrasts this conception with "modern philosophers" in whom there is a "struggle... between the reformer of life and the philosopher, that is to say the judge of life." (p. 145)

N. himself defends the latter view of the philosopher, and he shuns political solutions to philosophical questions (in contrast, e.g., to J. S. Mill). The opening of SE stresses the individual task of finding a direction and meaning for oneself (pp. 129, 141-2), and this demand is repeated in a more developed form in GS.

Nevertheless, while stressing his skepticism about politics as such, in SE, N. embeds his account of the philosopher in an account of the development of nature through culture, leading to the conclusion that "in pursuing the great ideal of the Schopenhauerian man by means of practical activity," "One thing above all is certain: these new duties are not the duties of a solitary; on the contrary, they set one in the midst of a mighty community **held together, not by external forms and regulations, but by a fundamental idea**. It is the fundamental idea of *culture*, insofar as it sets for each one of us but one task: *to promote the production of the philosopher, the artist and the saint within us and without us and thereby to work at the perfecting of nature.*" (p. 160)

The bolded text highlights the crucial contrast for N. in SE: there is a larger community in terms of which we are to identify ourselves, but it is not the state "held together by external forms and regulations." Rather, it is the idea of culture, dedicated to the production of the exceptional individual, in which nature achieves a "metaphysical goal": "self-enlightenment" and perfection. These are ideas about which the later N. becomes quite skeptical (e.g. GS 109).

3. *The Gay Science*, sec. 290

This text introduces a host of ideas that are bound up with N's "affirmation of life."

Going back to SE, there is the idea of finding a "path" for oneself through life and discovering the "productive uniqueness" within one. Both of these are tied up with the imperative "to become what one is" (the subtitle of *Ecce Homo*).

Here it is expressed in terms of the idea of “giving style to one’s character.” There are aspects of one’s character that cannot be changed (“the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small”—cf. BGE 231), but N. also urges bringing an artist’s eye to the fashioning of a unified self. One will become the “poet” of one’s life (299), someone who has come to affirm his or her own life as valuable (301), in part by seeing ourselves and our acts from an “artistic distance” (107). This is an example of how we are able “transfigure” our bodily existence—representing it in a higher, heroic form that we can affirm as valuable in itself.

In the second and third paragraphs, N. describes two different sorts of characters. The first, “strong and domineering natures,” take pride in subduing nature (in themselves) to “a law of their own.” This tracks the view he develops more fully in GS 335, linking it to the imperative “to become those we are.” The second type of character is described as “weak” and “without power.” Such individuals lack the capacity to live according to a self-imposed law; they resent the imposition of any kind of order and want only to live as “free nature.”

Although N. sometimes seems to praise the second sort of life, he himself clearly adheres to the former model. Nevertheless, his final conclusion is that whichever type one exemplifies, the one thing needful is that “a human being should *attain* satisfaction with himself, whether it is by means of this or that poetry and art...” This relates back to GS 275: “What is the seal of liberation?—No longer being ashamed in front of oneself.” Life can be affirmed in either case; the important point is to know oneself well enough that one can identify which type one is.