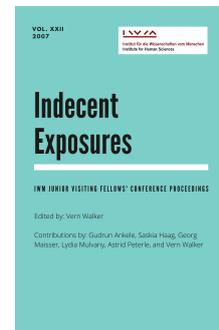


Madness in Nietzsche's Gay Science

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The larger problem of this project concerns appearances of madness and “untimeliness” in human characters throughout Nietzsche’s corpus. Before I can even proceed to that point, however, it first of all necessary to show what role madness plays for Nietzsche.

We can introduce the problem of madness, particularly in through his work in *The Gay Science*, by considering it above all a problem of valuation: Madness is a specific way of valuing or “bestowing” value on something, as we will see. As a kind of valuation, it is intricately bound up with Nietzsche’s rhetoric about “high” and “low,” and therefore with noble and common types as well—for according to the most popular version of Nietzsche, the different ways in which noble and common types value is a point of obsession for him. However, we will find his rhetoric in the *Gay Science* different from that which might be expected. In order to frame the popular Nietzsche’s views on noble and common, one typically reverts to his discussion in the *Genealogy of Morals*. Here Nietzsche announces the problem of noble and common most loudly and vehemently, and distinguishes them in terms of modes of valuation—madness is nowhere in the equation. He states namely that there are strong (noble, roughly) and weak (common, roughly) human types who give rise to master and slave moralities respectively. In his account of human history, in which humanity is reduced to these two types, he recounts with disgust of the “slaves” who wage an underhanded war on the “masters” using Christian morality as their chief weapon. In Nietzsche’s final accounting, the meek have at last inherited the earth in the mobbed-up, equality- and freedom-loving modernity we know so well.

Conversely, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche tells another story of noble and common, their history and interaction with one another. He dispenses with his distinctions of strong and weak and employs a subtler rhetoric and storytelling in scattered aphorisms, centering on the phenomenon of madness. Noble and common are renamed as the exception and the rule, the difference being that the exception—the noble type—is mad. Moreover, we can draw different political consequences from these two pictures: noble and common in the *Genealogy* is a problem of classes or groups at variance, while exception and rule concerns an individual and a community and their effects on one another. If this analysis

of noble and common is found to be substantially different from the more well-known picture in the *Genealogy*, we will have to determine why Nietzsche is presenting this divergent picture.

This history of noble and common types is interwoven with a few other related histories, which I will also take into account in the larger project, but not as much in this paper. These are: a story of the relationship between knowledge and what Nietzsche calls the “life-preserving instincts”; a history of the individual in relation to the majority; a history of modern knowledge; and a history of consciousness. These intermingling stories have different starting points, from speculations about the origins of man to medieval times, but all of them end in Nietzsche’s day.

The word ‘nobility’ insofar as it is associated with Nietzsche, as said above, has been explained using the concepts strong and weak, master and slave; we left out creativity. Nietzsche’s noble type shifts between warriors and artists—a borrowing from the classical notion of nobility as those who possess leisure and engage in war. In the *Gay Science* we are introduced to the “noble type” of human being once again, but he is a somewhat different character. The warrior and the creator in him are less visible, though both are present. The difference is that he is mad.

§2 Intellectual conscience.— *I keep having the same experience and keep resisting it every time. I do not want to believe it although it is palpable: the great majority of people lacks an intellectual conscience. [...] I mean: the great majority of people does not consider it contemptible to believe this or that and to live accordingly, without first having given themselves an account of the final and most certain reasons pro and con, and without even troubling themselves about such reasons afterward [...]*^[1]

Here Nietzsche separates himself from the “great majority of people,” thus becoming a kind of character in his own play. The reason he gives for his uniqueness is his possession of intellectual conscience, a thing he defines negatively through the indifference or resistance of the great majority in questioning their beliefs and judgments. We gather that Nietzsche considers it contemptible to live without thinking and questioning oneself, and that an intellectual conscience is defined by its “craving” for certainty. His repeated near-disbelief of the strange behavior of the great majority deliberately sets the scene for his contempt as an unavoidable by-product of his rare passion. Nietzsche doesn’t care about goodness or genius:

[...] when the person who has these virtues [...] does not account the desire for certainty as his inmost craving and distress—as that which separates the higher human beings from the lower. [...] But to stand in the midst of this rerum concordia discors and of this whole marvelous uncertainty and rich ambiguity of existence without questioning [...]—that is what I feel to be contemptible, and this is the feeling for which I look first in everybody. Some folly keeps persuading me that every human being has this feeling, simply because he is human. This is my type of injustice.^[2]

Nietzsche feels contempt for those without intellectual conscience: they feel no shame in “calling this good and that evil.” However, the great majority also feels contempt for Nietzsche, the higher human being: They “laugh” at his doubts, find him “amusing,” and don’t hate him. Only pious people have a real hatred of reason, and Nietzsche likes them for it. He puts it in moral terms, as a question of honesty: they “at least betray” their bad intellectual conscience, but it is also because they must take him seriously by virtue of their hatred.

In Nietzsche, contempt is an experience resulting from the spontaneous valuation of the strong that always “gave birth to” a high and a low. The difference between Nietzsche’s contempt for the majority and the majority’s contempt for Nietzsche is that the majority’s contempt is dismissive and does not create a high and low, whereas Nietzsche takes the liberty is led to declare a higher type of human being in his own image. Nietzsche’s experience of high and low is utterly instinctive, and also fierce. This is not a mistake or a weakness of this experience of high and low, although one might ask, well, why should anyone believe him? While the majority’s rejection of Nietzsche involves laughter, Nietzsche’s contempt is passionate, arising out of a passion for questioning, out of his view of existence as a *rerum concordia discors*, a “marvelous uncertainty” and a “rich ambiguity.” It is this sublime “rapture” that seems responsible for his different reaction. Nietzsche is a comic figure to the majority, even more so were he to tell them of higher and lower human beings, while to himself he is a tragic figure. He cannot dismiss the laughing majority, even though some “folly” haunts him, persuading him that an intellectual conscience is fundamental to all humans, and that the great majority is no different from him. This “folly” harbors an injustice.

In the next aphorism Nietzsche gives us another scenario that starts off with the point of view of the majority. It is a kind of generalization of the first person experience Nietzsche writes of in §2—he is modest, showing us that he is just one type of “higher type”:

§3 Noble and common.—*Common natures consider all noble, magnanimous feelings inexpedient and therefore first of all incredible. [...] They are suspicious of the noble person, as if he surreptitiously sought his advantage. When they are irresistibly persuaded of the absence of selfish intentions and gains, they see the noble person as a kind of fool; [...] “How can one enjoy being at a disadvantage? [...] Some disease of reason must be associated with the noble affection.” Thus they think and sneer, as they sneer at the pleasure that a madman derives from his fixed idea.* [3]

Our picture has shifted slightly. We can state the various confrontations as such: High vs. low, having vs. not having intellectual conscience, Nietzsche vs. the great majority who have turned into noble vs. common, magnanimous vs. advantage-seeking, the madman vs. his audience. Here Nietzsche first intimates that the noble type might be mad. He goes on to narrate the nature of the common type:

What distinguishes the common type is that it never loses sight of its advantage, and that this thought of purpose and advantage is even stronger than the strongest instincts; not to allow these instincts to lead one astray to perform inexpedient acts—that is their wisdom and pride.

Conversely, Nietzsche describes the noble type in opposition to this picture:

Compared to them, the higher type is more unreasonable, for those who are noble, magnanimous, and self-sacrificial do succumb to their instincts, and when they are at their best, their reason pauses. [...] The animal becomes more stupid than usual. [...] They have some feelings of pleasure and displeasure that are so strong that they reduce the intellect to silence or to servitude [...][4]

In other words, the definition of the higher type has changed. He is no longer the possessor of intellectual conscience, but rather an unreasonable, self-sacrificial, instinctive and stupid animal. Nietzsche also compares the higher type to an animal that “does not think of danger and death [...] because the pleasure in its young or in the female [...] dominate it totally.”[5]

The misunderstanding between noble and common has naturally shifted as well. This time, it is the common type who despises the noble type, for he has *acted*—Nietzsche does not act on his prejudices in §2:

The unreason or counterreason of passion is what the common type despises in the noble, especially when this passion is directed toward objects whose value seems quite fantastic and arbitrary. [...] But one cannot comprehend how anyone could risk his health and honor for the sake of a passion for knowledge.[6]

The common type despises the noble type for two reasons, first, for dispensing with basic common sense through the performance of dangerous yet magnanimous acts, and second, for directing his passion towards strange objects—what Nietzsche calls a “singular value standard.” Nietzsche uses this second reason to further outline the nature of the higher type, and the nature of his misunderstanding of the common type. He believes that his strange passion, or singular value standard, is actually present but concealed in the common type, and is led to treat them “unjustly”:

The taste of the higher type is for exceptions, for things that leave most people cold and seem to lack sweetness; the higher type has a singular value standard. Moreover, it usually believes that the idiosyncrasy of its taste is not a singular value standard; rather it posits its values and disvalues as generally valid and thus becomes incomprehensible and impractical. Very rarely does a higher nature retain sufficient reason for understanding and treating everyday people as such; for the most part, this type assumes that its own passion is present but kept concealed in all men, and this belief even becomes an ardent and eloquent faith. But when such exceptional people do not see themselves as the exception, how can they ever understand the common type and arrive at a fair evaluation of the rule? Thus they, too, speak of the folly, inexpediency, and fantasies of humanity, stunned that the course of the world should be so insane, and puzzled that it won't own up to what “is needful.”—This is the eternal injustice of those who are noble.[7]

We can observe that the noble type's ardent faith is similar to Nietzsche's pestering folly in §2, and that Nietzsche's intellectual conscience is a kind of singular value standard that the common type laughs at. If they were to see him seriously “risk his health and honor”

for such an “impractical” thing as that, they would probably stop laughing and despise him. Nietzsche therefore fits his own roster as a higher type, but he distances himself from the higher type since he recognizes his own tendency toward this “eternal injustice,” and has to resist continually the temptation to believe that an intellectual conscience is present in all men. The noble type recreates the great majority and projects his own passions onto them. One gathers that Nietzsche is recommending that magnanimous types should acquire a better understanding of common types, but why? Nietzsche himself is an exceptional exception with the possibility of justice, but what is this justice?

These two accounts present roughly the same material from altered perspectives, both nonetheless belonging to Nietzsche. Why show these two different accounts? First of all, it is obvious after reading through §2 and §3 that Nietzsche is not out to roast the majority yet again. Rather, he is now able to act as arbitrator, to narrate the more general scenario between noble and common, portray their mutual misunderstandings and evaluate the consequences—but he had to have been entangled in this very problem to begin with. What §2 presents to us is precisely—if we are to believe him—Nietzsche’s personal stake in the argument. He is an exception, positing himself as a higher type, who has somehow lifted himself out of and above this eternal failed dialogue between the one (or few) and the majority. In §3 Nietzsche presents the view from above, as a third party that has recognized its own injustice. Like Zarathustra, Nietzsche is coming down from his cave back to the people in the fashion of Platonic reversal, and many more of those are in store.

The next relevant aphorism, appearing at the end of Book 1, further complicates the problem between noble and common. It is here that the centrality of madness as the defining distinction between noble and common becomes evident:

§55 The ultimate noble-mindedness .— *What makes a person “noble”? [...] the passion that attacks those who are noble is peculiar, and they fail to realize this. It involves the use of a rare and singular standard and almost a madness: the feeling of heat in things that feel cold to everybody else; the discovery of values for which no scales have been invented yet [...] a self-sufficiency that overflows and gives to men and things.* [8]

In other words, nobility is difference. Although the noble type may also be known to have the qualities of being self-sacrificial, selflessness, and passionate, according to Nietzsche’s list, these cannot be used to identify a person as noble, since one virtue is blatantly false, in the case of selflessness, and there are contemptible versions of the other two virtues. The difference exists in terms of a way of valuing which resembles madness.

In the rest of the passage, Nietzsche repeats ideas from §2 and §3, namely the “injustice” of the noble type, but this time he states them more clearly and hints at a remedy:

Hitherto, it was rarity and a lack of awareness of this rarity that made a person noble. But we should note that this standard involved an unfair judgment concerning everything usual, near, and indispensable—in short, that which most preserves the species and was the rule among men hitherto: all this was slandered on the whole in favor of the exceptions. To become the advocate of the rule—that might be the ultimate form and refinement in which noble-mindedness reveals itself on earth.

The opposition between “noble” and “common” at times becomes that of the “exception” and the “rule”. This is an important difference. We are shifting from the language of high and low to the value-neutral language of analysis. Nietzsche portrays an exception or a one who didn’t know he was an exception, and judged the indispensable rule unfairly as a result. It is an almost mechanical explanation.

Before we go on to determine the real problem of the exception and what Nietzsche might mean by “becoming the advocate of the rule,” let us examine the subtext of Nietzsche’s location of reason and passion. To place reasonableness in the many and passion in the few is a Platonic reversal, where the reasonableness of the few controls the passion of the many in the just city of the Republic. Why relocate passion and the succumbing to passion in the few, and moreover, in the philosophical few with the drive to knowledge? One answer might be that if Nietzsche is going to claim later that the singular value standard is a creative force, then creativity has to originate from passions, and not from reasonableness. Also, the higher type’s passion must be an impractical passion, obscure to the common type—since common and even practical passions obviously exist, but are not necessarily creative if they are at the service of something else.

The picture of the higher type as the seat of passion marks out the higher type as self-destructive, in that the unlimited nature of passion, and when unbounded by reason or law leads to dangerous excess. Nietzsche called him “self-sacrificial,” but this was from the point of view of the common onlooker, who cannot perceive the selfish intentions of a noble act because he does not understand it. Conversely, in Plato it is the many who are not reasonable enough to control the destructive tendencies of passion, and hence require the few to rule them if they are to live a good life. However, “reasonableness,” insofar as it advocates self-preservation and security has lost its high ground in modernity. The latter are the debased ends of the modern state and have replaced virtue and the good life, and in practice, also rely heavily on the general reasonableness of a people. Reasonableness and reason were linked at one time, whereas there is little question after the enlightenment that an addiction to reason—as manifested in a passion for philosophy, for instance—can have as vicious and destructive effects as all other passions combined; it offers no alternatives to the programs it undermines, and has little to do with preservation and security. As the passionate one, the higher type is villain as much as hero in Nietzsche.

What exactly is the injustice of the noble exception? If Nietzsche is not only speaking of himself, as he indicates he is in §2, but some predecessor, then he is surely thinking of Socrates. First of all, for Socrates, philosophy is also a madness, albeit a divine one. The folly that haunts Nietzsche in §2 also resembles the reverse of Socrates’ *daimon*: they both have an irrational voice, the daemon preventing Socrates from committing an injustice, Nietzsche’s folly pulling him toward an injustice. Socrates also misjudged the rule, according to Nietzsche in §328:

To harm stupidity .—[...] The ancient philosophers taught that the main source of misfortune was something very different. Beginning with Socrates these thinkers never wearied of preaching: “Your thoughtlessness and stupidity, the way you live according to

the rule, your submission to your neighbor's opinion is the reason why you so rarely achieve happiness; we thinkers, as thinkers, are the happiest of all."

Let us not decide here whether this sermon against stupidity had better reasons on its side than did the sermon against selfishness. What is certain, however, is that it deprived stupidity of its good conscience; these philosophers harmed stupidity.[9]

We have two kinds of stupidity so far, then: the stupidity of the higher type when he risks his life for the sake of a strange passion, and the stupidity of the common type or the rule, who lives without thinking. Here we have the philosophers, with Socrates at their head, with their strange passions for knowledge, giving stupidity a bad conscience. In other words, they are judging the rule unfairly, conflating knowledge with necessity. It is also evident that Nietzsche is thinking of Socrates when we take into account that Socrates did risk his life and forfeited it for the sake of knowledge, and that he at least practiced philosophy on his interlocutors as if the capacity for truth was lying dormant within them, needing only a bit of encouragement from him.

We are also in a position to understand better the nature of the rule, and why an injustice against the rule could be harmful. We know that the rule is characterized by not losing sight of its advantage. We also know now that the usualness, nearness, and indispensability of the rule are what "most preserves the species." The rule not only preserves itself, it preserves humanity as keeper of the "life preserving instincts," common sense and the rest of what the ancient philosophers dubbed "stupidity"—as we will see.

Of course, Nietzsche comes too late with his justice. The consequences of madness becoming the rule is portrayed in §76 *The greatest danger*, where Nietzsche further characterizes both the exception, who is now a fully-fledged kind of madman, and the rule. He reiterates claim that the majority of men fulfill a necessary, preservative function: if the majority had not always seen themselves "as friends of 'healthy common sense,' humanity would have perished long ago." [10] "Common sense" is distinguished by the "the universality and the universal binding force of a faith; in sum, the non-arbitrary character of judgments," of which the rule is keeper. What will preserve the species is "man's greatest labor so far," which is "to reach agreement about very many things and to submit to a law of agreement—regardless of whether these things are true or false." In order to achieve this great labor, what is needed is "virtuous stupidity" or "virtuous intellects," "stolid metronomes for the slow spirit, to make sure that the faithful of the great shared faith stay together and continue their dance. It is a first-rate need that commands and demands this." [11] Earlier in this passage, Nietzsche calls this stabilized and consistent way of viewing the world "discipline of the mind."

On the other side of things, what threatens humanity is an undisciplined and inconsistent way of viewing the world, "the eruption of madness—which means the eruption of arbitrariness in feeling, seeing, and hearing, the enjoyment of the mind's lack of discipline, the joy in human unreason." [12] The universality in judgment is the opposite of madness, and not, as Nietzsche points out, truth and certainty. "The image of things still shifts and shuffles continually, and perhaps even more so and faster from now on than ever before. Continually, precisely the most select spirits bristle at this universal

binding force—the explorers of *truth* above all. Continually this faith, as *everybody's* faith, arouses nausea and a new lust in subtler minds..." We have identified the lovers of truth as the exceptions, who are now "impatient spirits" in whom "a veritable delight in madness erupts because madness has such a cheerful tempo."

Nietzsche concludes this section with the following dramatic sentences: "*We others are the exception and the danger*—and we need eternally to be defended. —Well, there actually are things to be said in favor of the exception, *provided that it never wants to become the rule.*" In order to come to an idea about what Nietzsche might mean here, let us first consider the exception conflating itself as a rule. We already mentioned Socrates, who promoted truth as a universal value and as universally good, in direct contradiction to all evidence—his interlocutors were often hostile to questioning, often had never questioned what was "obvious" in their lives, and in the end the city executed him as a danger—a threat to homeland security, if you will. What was Socrates promoting? Civil unrest? Nietzsche's answer is, well, yes. The search for truth is precisely that exercise in madness in the way Nietzsche defines it: it undermines the existing image of things, without providing the indisputable way of seeing that is needed—contrary to all of Socrates' promises. Socrates took his own madness to the marketplace, with a desire to become the rule.

What were the consequences? If we make the complaint that the drive to knowledge in the exception is corrupted when it becomes the property of the rule, we could also make the complaint that the nature of the rule has become corrupted by the madness of the exception. The rule has become infused with madness.

As for the first case, in which the drive to knowledge is corrupted, Nietzsche complains about the spiritual decadence and exhaustion of modern German culture, which was "aging" and weakening under the weight of an excess of knowledge. The love of knowledge hardens into a mere prejudice in favor of truth, a moral prejudice at that, and modern scholarship and scientific curiosity with their optimistic collecting of all kinds of knowledge without discrimination are the result. In other words, the nature of the exception changes when it becomes the rule; the singular value standard is bastardized. In the noble exception, the singular value standard, which is a singular, mad, and possibly "dangerous" way of perceiving things, is a creative force in itself. In the form that the rule takes on the madness for knowledge, it lacks the same vitality and becomes detrimental to culture. This specific critique of culture is elaborated on in the *Use and Abuse of History for Life*, in which scholars and scientists are the bearers of a tottering and weak culture.

However, if truth and knowledge have gained a more popular reputation in our modern day, through the Enlightenment and science and a flood of information technology, then by Nietzsche's analysis, so has the fragmentation of perceiving and hence valuing. The rule itself has been corrupted in the exception's madness for knowledge, which, even in its popular form, still constitutes a madness. If madness is a kind of freedom of perspective, which picks up speed from the very release from repressive "common sense," then democracy is the regime of madness *par excellence*. What exactly is the change in the rule?

Nietzsche describes it thus:

During the longest and most remote periods of the human past, the sting of conscience was not at all what it is now. Today one feels responsible only for one's will and actions, and one finds one's pride in oneself. All our teachers of law start from this sense of self and pleasure in the individual as if this had always been the found of law. But during the longest period of the human past nothing was more terrible than to feel that one stood by oneself. To be alone, to experience things by oneself, neither to obey nor to rule, to be an individual—that was not a pleasure but a punishment; one was sentenced “to individuality.” Freedom of thought was considered discomfort itself. [...] [I]t was egoism that was formerly experienced as something painful and as real misery. To be a self and to esteem oneself according to one's own weight and measure—that offended taste in those days. An inclination to do this would have been considered madness; for being alone was associated with every misery and fear.
[13]

The rule that used to be governed by the “discipline of the mind” and “rationality” is now governed by “freedom.” One values increasingly according to oneself. It is no wonder that the nature of politics has changed to accommodate this fact: unity of perspective is better promoted by tyrannies than by majority rule or democracy, which prefers individualism to unity of valuing—which is also a kind of madness. The “image of things” has been destroyed—because there exists no image in common. Because democracies unify people through ideals of freedom and tolerance, they deliberately do not prescribe a way to look at the world, but launch the young on the labyrinthine paths of the search for truth—at least, that is what I was told to do as a young American. In Plato's *Republic*, democracy is the most wild and colorful regime that gives birth to philosophy as well. It is the regime wherein the individual becomes in fact an individual, loses a unity of perspective with others and hence the full force of the perspective. Another result of this is that we become “convinced of the uncertainty and fantasies of our judgments,”[14] perhaps because they cannot be verified in the way that a rule in its unity previously authorized knowledge. Nietzsche describes this experiential difference in §46 *Our amazement*.

Formerly, nothing was known of this fickleness of everything human; the mores of morality sustained the faith that all of man's inner life was attached to iron necessity with eternal clamps. [...] The miraculous gave a great deal of pleasure to those who at times grew tired of the rule and of eternity. [...] To err! To be mad! That was part of the paradise and debauchery of bygone ages [...][15]

As Nietzsche concludes this aphorism, the rule that has tasted truth, on the other hand, experiences bliss “like that of a man who has suffered shipwreck, climbed ashore, and now stands with both feet on the firm old earth—amazed that it does not waver.” That bliss is, in this aphorism, from scientific discoveries in particular, which “stand up under examination and furnish the basis, again and again, for further discoveries.”

In conclusion, perhaps we can say that madness is productive or creative in the exception, as evidenced by Nietzsche's own creativity, but changes the nature of the many for the worse. Nietzsche gives us these conclusions using narration—he is giving us a vision of the past and a vision of modernity, and seeing history in terms of the interaction of the

exception with the rule. It is the reader's duty to accept or reject these as valid philosophical insights or poetic visions, or if they conflict with other insights and visions, to determine the meaning of those variances.

Notes:

1. Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1974. Pg. 76

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid, 77.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid, 78.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid, 116.

9. Ibid, 258.

10. Ibid, 130.

11. Ibid, 131.

12. Ibid, 130.

13. Ibid, 175.

14. Ibid, 111.

15. Ibid.

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