Nearly without exception, philosophers have depicted the human as a bundle of drives, each vying to be satisfied. Left to their own devices, the bestial drives (i.e., rest, sex, and food) will win out, and the individual will lead a life full of regret or, if they are lucky, one ended by premature death. To avoid such lives, philosophers long advocated leading the Socratic examined life. Such a life, Socrates explains (Apology 38a), requires daily introspection and reflection on the ‘big things’ in life, most notably on the nature of virtue. Socrates’ goal, which has been pursued by most philosophers, is to install reason as the judge of one’s drives. Those that accord with the values determined by reason are allowed to flourish; those opposed are squelched, or at least tamed. Such, at any rate, was the consensus among philosophers until Nietzsche demoted the long standing truths of reason to the historical and biological exigencies of particular, often physically and psychologically unhealthy, individuals. For example, Nietzsche avers in On the Genealogy of Morals that the Christian exhortation to avoid sexual intercourse stems, not from a divinely rational appraisal of the Truth, but from a hoary band of priests who lauded celibacy rather than admitting their own impotence (GM I: 7 and 13).

As appealing as it may be to accept Nietzsche’s critique of values as historical vestiges that we might do well to shrug off, it is unclear where this would leave us. Sloughing off our inherited values sets us adrift without any means of orienting ourselves to the world (FW 124 & 125). Whatever their failings may be, Nietzsche’s predecessors at least school us in the art of living, whereas Nietzsche seems to forget that a life without the guidance of carefully selected values is doomed to shipwreck.

A common way out of this situation, both for Nietzsche scholars in particular and contemporary humans in general, is to claim that we must artistically create our own values around which we can fashion a robust life. While this heroic-romantic image of rugged individuals forging their own ideals has a certain appeal, Nietzsche warns against it. Specifically, he cautions that we are so thoroughly infected by the historical figures who forged our values that we can no longer accurately separate life-affirming values from life-denying ones.

Moreover, the Socratic project of knowing oneself can, in some cases, ‘be the recipe for ruin’ (EH Clever 9). To avoid such ruin, Nietzsche suggests, ‘[t]o become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion what one is’ (EH Clever 9). As will be developed below, Nietzsche’s psychology holds that the self (‘what one is’) ferments below the level of consciousness. Taking a Socratic peek at our subconscious machinations exposes the self to the deleterious contagions that western morality unwittingly carries with it. In this essay, I will explain in greater detail why Nietzsche warns against leading an examined life, and then outline his eminently practical but unsocratic programme for examining one’s life. My presentation will concentrate on the audaciously titled chapter ‘Why I am So Clever’ of Ecce Homo.

1. A Nietzschean Critique of Three Strategies of Philosophical Counselling

Perhaps the best way to understand Nietzsche’s intent in the chapter ‘Why I am so Clever’ is to examine how he might criticise some current techniques of philosophical practice. For illustrative purposes, I will use the condition of ennui. What I mean by ‘ennui’ is not far from the standard definition of ‘weariness and dissatisfaction with life’. I would add only that ennui is characterized by a lack of a definite object. It is the

3Nehamas (1985) gives arguably the best version of this interpretation.

Ennui is then much like ‘anxiety’ for Heidegger, which, unlike

Throughout I quote from Walter Kaufmann’s and R. J. Hollingdale’s translations with minor emendations. Citations refer to sections and not pages. The following key explains the abbreviations used: FW = The Gay Science; JGB = Beyond Good and Evil; GM = On the Genealogy of Morals; WA = The Case of Wagner; GD = Twilight of the Idols; EH = Ecce Homo; WM = The Will to Power.
vague feeling that something is wrong, that something is missing from one’s life, even though appearances suggest that one should be happy. I have chosen ennui as the illustrative case because it is a condition where philosophical counselling is clearly preferable to psychological or pharmacological therapy. Indeed, psychology in general seem unprepared to deal with ennui, at least not until it blossoms into some variety of depression. In this section, I will first describe three ways to treat ennui philosophically, and then present a Nietzschean critique of them. Although I will be focusing on ennui, it is only an illustration. I believe Nietzsche’s therapeutic technique is applicable to a wide range of concerns.

**Strategies for Treating Ennui Philosophically**

Philosophical counselling can offer at least three means of treatment for a person suffering from ennui, all of which involve examining one’s life to varying extents. First, following Socrates, the client can, guided by the counsellor, examine her life to find a purpose. After all, if the client suffers from a vague feeling that her life lacks something, that feeling might be symptomatic of the larger problem of leading a life bereft of purpose. Second, a philosophical counsellor might, following Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*, suggest to the client that assuming that life is the sort of thing that has a meaning or purpose is, to use Gilbert Ryle’s terminology, a category mistake. A category mistake occurs when one places an entity in the wrong category. Rudolf Carnap gives a good example of this: Caesar is a prime number. A subtler example frequently occurs between men and women in romantic relationships. Men who take the question ‘How much do you love me?’ literally are befuddled because love does not belong in the category of quantifiable entities. Freud locates a similar error throughout western philosophy. Ancient philosophers frequently placed life in the same category as tools, namely things having purpose. Later Christian philosophers and theologians often conceived of God’s activities as analogous, albeit superior, to those of humans. They often argued that just as humans make things for particular purposes, so God made humans with a particular purpose in mind. Freud claims that thinking of life this way is just as mistaken as trying to hit upon a quantitative answer to ‘how much do you love me?’ We might need to create a meaning or purpose for our lives, but this reflects something about human psychological needs, and not about reality. As Freud wants to say, life is not the kind of thing that has any meaning apart from the one we create. Third, a counsellor might suggest that, by shifting her perspective, the client could understand herself not to be in a crisis but at a point in her life where she is ready for change. Ennui, on this view, would be the intermediate stage between holding different sets of values.

**Decadence and Nietzsche’s Psychology of the Will to Power**

While one can find textual support in Nietzsche’s earlier writings for all three therapeutic strategies, in *Ecce Homo* he warns against all of them. Before presenting a Nietzschean critique of these counselling strategies, we will need to understand, if only in outline, what Nietzsche means by decadence and some of the psychological underpinnings of ‘Why I am So Clever.’

Nietzsche infamously holds the doctrine that everything is will to power and nothing besides (WM 1067). In 1888, the last year of his sanity, he refines this teaching using economic terms. Briefly, his position is as follows. All living organisms, from plants to humans, expend and acquire energy. In healthy organisms, acquisitions exceed expenditures. When the reverse occurs, the organism is sick. If its expenditures chronically exceed its acquisitions, the organism will die. All creatures have a mechanism, which Nietzsche calls a dynamometer (GD ‘Skirmishes’ 20 and WM 851), that reports whether it is gaining or losing energy. The activities of non-human organisms are linked directly to their dynamometers. Thus, for example, vines grow up trees because they acquire more energy in so doing than they expend (BGE 258, WM 704), while hedgehogs curl up in dangerous situations to avoid losing energy (EH Clever 8). All of this is done automatically.

The situation for humans is more complex. Like other animals, we have a variety of drives and abilities that can be organized in the pursuit of some goal, what Nietzsche calls our ‘tasks’ (EH Clever 9). Unlike other animals, not all humans have the same task. Moreover, we can, unlike other animals, become aware of our

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4The vocabulary of ‘change’ not ‘crisis’, as well as much of the idea for this third technique, comes from Lou Marinoff (Marinoff, 1999, 167-179). As his chapter title, ‘Midlife Without Crisis’, suggests, Marinoff is not discussing ennui per se, but I believe the strategies he presents for reinterpreting a midlife crisis into an opportunity for change are applicable for ennui, too.
tasks, and thereby subject them to rational scrutiny. As Socrates notes, leading an examined life is a twofold process. First we must ascertain what virtue is, and then steer our lives accordingly. Nietzsche makes explicit what is implicit in Socrates’, and in most philosophers’, account, namely that in leading such a life we feel ourselves to be flourishing. As suggested above, the problem Nietzsche locates in this strategy for flourishing is that what we believe constitutes virtue is not determined by divine reason transversing logically related connections among ideas, but by historical accident. The creators of many of our values, Nietzsche avers, were infected with decadence. The values such people lauded are actually rogue carriers of this ‘intellectual’ disease that threatens to scupper all our lives.

Although he claims that decadence has preoccupied him (WA Preface), Nietzsche never fully explains decadence. The gist of his position, however, is that a value promotes decadence if it both is ‘hostile to life’ (i.e., it causes one to lose more volitional resources than gain them), and it inverts our interpretation of our dynamometers so that we believe ourselves to be gaining volitional resources when we are actually losing them. To understand what Nietzsche has in mind here, I find it useful to think of a person as like a battery, an analogy frequently used in everyday life. We describe some activities as ‘recharging’ or ‘energizing’ us, while others ‘drain’ our energy. For Nietzsche, a truly flourishing individual has more charge than she can hold and thus must freely give this excess to others. According to Nietzsche’s diagnosis, unfortunately, most of us lead lives that are primarily draining, rarely are we recharged. Our values in general are thus ‘hostile to life.’

Decadent values are not only hostile to life, but also affect our ability to discern whether we are flourishing. To return to the battery analogy, notice that it, like our folk psychology, assumes that we accurately gauge our level of charge, what I call our volitional resources. Perhaps the most insidious feature of decadence is that it inverts our understanding of our charge level. We describe some activities as ‘recharging’ or ‘energizing’ us, while others ‘drain’ our energy. For Nietzsche, a truly flourishing individual has more charge than she can hold and thus must freely give this excess to others. According to Nietzsche’s diagnosis, unfortunately, most of us lead lives that are primarily draining, rarely are we recharged. Our values in general are thus ‘hostile to life.’

Nietzsche’s Critique of the Examined Life

To begin with, the problem for Nietzsche is not that we lack a purpose, what he calls ‘the task’ and an ‘organizing idea’ (EH Clever 9), but that we are so infected with decadence that any introspective glance may be counterproductive. More specifically, the psychology Nietzsche hints at in ‘Why I am So Clever’ posits an organizing ‘idea’ that ferments under the skin of consciousness. Left to itself, this ‘idea’ wields its power, gradually organizing the other ‘ideas’ and drives deep within the subconscious. Because decadence is a volitional disease lying on the surface of consciousness, one’s organizing ‘idea’ can go about its work nearly quarantined from the decadence of consciousness. Rather than risk infecting one’s task by rationally examining it, Nietzsche recommends being open to life, to ‘accidents’ (see EH Wise 2 & 4, Clever 3, 5 & 9; Dawn, and Zarathustra 8). Moreover, the traditional, if not only, means for determining when I’ve hit upon my purpose in life is a sense of flourishing. I ought to feel good about myself and my life if I have hit upon my true purpose. The possibility that I am infected with decadence means that the feeling of flourishing fails to be a sure sign of anything. I could believe myself to be flourishing because I really am (i.e., a dynamometer hooked up to me would show that I am consistently gaining volitional resources). Alternatively, this feeling could be, and Nietzsche thinks it is far more likely that it is, because I am decadent and so mistakenly think I am flourishing when I am becoming increasingly feeble. In sum, by examining my drives, desires, and abilities, I risk infecting them with decadence, I risk making my life substantially worse and this is why Nietzsche warns that attempting to lead an examined life à la Socrates can be the recipe for ruin.

The second philosophical technique for treating ennui, which I attributed to Freud, suffers from defects similar to those Nietzsche locates in the Socratic strategy. Moreover, the assertion that life might not be the sort of thing that has a purpose, the problem of living in the shadow of the death of God, is of course a problem that Nietzsche confronted his entire career. To live such a life requires ‘great health’ (EH Zarathustra 2), something he comes to realize that he and his contemporaries lack. This leaves only the third technique, namely changing one’s perspective.
Although Nietzsche is often heralded as the ‘inventor’ of perspectivism (the view that there is no Truth, only truths from various perspectives), it may seem surprising that in Ecce Homo he records his own decision not to look at things from a different, ‘happier’ perspective:

I displayed the ‘Russian fatalism’ I mentioned by tenaciously clinging for years to all but intolerable situations, places, apartments, and society, merely because they happened to be given by accident: it was better than changing them, than feeling that they could be changed – than rebelling against them. (EH Wise 6)

It is important to realize that by ‘intolerable situations’ Nietzsche does not mean being in an abusive relationship or any of the other despicable conditions that might come to mind when we read this phrase today. What Nietzsche means by ‘intolerable situations’ is best illustrated by a thought experiment he conducts in the next chapter:

Suppose I were to step out of my house and discover, instead of quiet, aristocratic Turin, a provincial German town: my instinct would have to cast up a barrier to push back everything that would assail it from this pinched and flattened, cowardly world. Or suppose I discovered a German metropolis – this built-up vice where nothing grows, where everything, good or bad, is dragged in. Wouldn’t this compel me to become a hedgehog? (EH Clever 8)

Although couched in autobiographical terms, an important general lesson can be gleaned from this account. Suppose that we’re in a situation that we believe could be changed. Aside from the risk of changing for the worse explained above, there is the problem of draining our scarce volitional resources even if we do not effect a change. Specifically, if we believe that our situation could be other than it is, we will expend volitional resources merely tolerating it. The daily expenditure might be very small, but Nietzsche warns, ‘our largest expenditures are our most frequent small ones’ (EH Clever 8). Worse, it is likely that we will begin to feel what Nietzsche calls ressentiment, the thirst for revenge coupled with the incapacity for it (EH Wise 6). ‘And nothing burns one up quicker than the effects of ressentiment’ (EH Wise 6). What Nietzsche advocates here is a kind of volitional hibernation. Rather than expend any volitional resources, one should detach oneself to avoid any expenditures at all. It is important to keep in mind that Nietzsche is not recommending Russian fatalism as a way of life, but only as a means of preserving what little volitional resources we have so that we may acquire more and become healthy. In any event, changing perspectives also fails to treat ennui.

At this point, one might object that Nietzsche has not found anything wrong with any of these three treatment strategies per se, but shown only that if the client and counsellor are decadent, then these strategies will only worsen the client. What evidence does Nietzsche have any particular client or counsellor is decadent? Apparently, the only way to determine whether a person is decadent is to have them diagnosed by someone who has been both decadent and healthy. Nietzsche claims that he is the only one in history with this quality – and even he lapses into decadence periodically (EH Wise 1). This puts Nietzsche in quite a predicament vis-à-vis the author-reader or counsellor-client relationship. He cannot be certain that any teaching he forwards is not a rogue carrier of his decadence. He also cannot be certain that his reader is decadent. Since Nietzsche worries that postmodernity is on the brink of collapse into decadence, he must act very carefully lest he accidentally worsen humanity’s condition. Yet because he is the only one who knows how to ameliorate the ravages of decadence, he must act. His ingenious solution is the very genre of Ecce Homo, particularly the two chapters on which we have been concentrating. These chapters are so autobiographical, so uniquely stamped with the life experiences of their author that no specific teaching can be discerned. Nonetheless, a general therapeutic strategy can be extracted from Nietzsche’s reports of his own actions, a strategy I call Nietzsche’s therapy of the little things.

2. Nietzsche’s Therapy of the Little Things

Although decadence is pernicious, it does not present an unsolvable problem. The key is that it is an epistemic disease, not a volitional one. That is, being decadent is not like harbouring a parasite that drains one’s volitional resources. Rather, it is a confusion about when one is engaged in activities that garner more volitional resources than one expends and when one is acting in a way that expends more than one acquires. That confusion is both created and reinforced by the decadent’s values. A direct assault on the decadent’s values will not work any more than Nancy Reagan’s ‘just say no’ to drugs was an effective way to combat addiction. Rehabilitation, then, requires examining the least cognitive aspects of one’s life, what Nietzsche calls the ‘little things’.
Nietzsche describes four spheres of ‘little things’, namely nutrition, place and climate, recreation, and selfishness (Domino, 2002). The strategy he suggests is to begin by experimenting with what we habitually eat and drink to see whether minor changes will increase our volitional resources. The reason for starting with our diets is twofold. First, because they are relatively unregulated by morality (Nietzsche has in mind primarily Christianity here), our decadent drives will not be marshalled against such changes (in contrast to what would happen if a devote Christian were to try to become selfish, the fourth sphere). Second, the effects of dietary changes will be primarily bodily. The body is less corruptible than the mind, and the more basic the drive, the less corruptible it is. This is important in recalibrating our dynamometers. We need to begin to ‘remember’ what flourishing feels like, and we need to do this at the most basic, somatic level. Once we begin to recover our vitality through dietary modification, we can use the recaptured volitional resources to begin to experiment with the other spheres, first with place and climate because they are still somatic, and then gradually to the more cognitive spheres of recreation and selfishness. Once we are healthy enough to realize that we used to be sick, we can engage in the three strategies discussed previously – but from a position of vitality, not from weakness or decadence that we are most likely in now.

To the person suffering from ennui, or arguably most other conditions that would prompt her to consult a philosophical counsellor, Nietzsche would recommend that she first experiment with the habitual parts of her diet, whether that be coffee first thing in the morning or midday tea. By making small changes, she might regain some energy otherwise wasted. For example, Nietzsche warns against snacks but recommends cocoa in place of coffee or tea (EH Clever 1). Indeed, the chapter ‘Why I am so Clever’ is littered with such picayune advice. While Nietzsche’s suggestions often accidentally accord with contemporary medical opinion, they are not the generic prescriptions doled out by the medical establishment. Rather, Nietzsche is making public the results of his own experiments with his life. Their value to us is not in their specific content but as a model of how one might go about examining the little things in one’s life. As he warns, ‘Everybody has his own measure, often between the narrowest and most delicate limits’ (EH Clever 1). In the end, Nietzsche makes a convincing case for practical philosophy even if he is wrong about decadence. If to lead a flourishing life requires that we know our own limits, and if only the individual herself can determine these limits, then it is only philosophy, which empowers the client, that can help. Moreover, Nietzsche’s therapy of the little things requires the distinctly philosophical ability to separate (or at least attempt to separate) how one feels somatically with how one’s culture says one ought to feel. This is a skill honed from the Stoics to the phenomenologists, and one that people swept away with the latest trends often need, and without which their lives will improve only by accident.

Let me conclude by addressing the question I have dodged throughout, namely: is Nietzsche right about decadence? Unfortunately, given his account of decadence, a negative answer seems only to confirm his correctness – since anyone who denies the existence of decadence is clearly deluded by the very thing he says doesn’t exist! To my mind, it is more helpful to acknowledge that even if Nietzsche is wrong about decadence, he is certainly right that western civilization has focused exclusively on the ‘big things’ and has done so to our detriment. Perhaps it is time to begin with the little things and work up to the big ones. We might discover that the so-called big things are not really so important.

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References


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