

Notes on the gregarious, the idiosyncratic and the ‘combat against culture’ following Klossowski’s ‘Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle’

In his book entitled ‘Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle’ philosopher Pierre Klossowski [1905 - 2001] offers a unique and inspired reading of the work and philosophical thought of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche [1844 - 1900].

Klossowski introduces the first chapter of ‘The Vicious Circle’ [*The Combat Against Culture*] with a long quote from Nietzsche that, over a few paragraphs, asks questions of the nature of philosophy and the philosophers that practice it. Nietzsche’s claim in these initial lines seems to be that philosophers are “a kind of occasion and chance through which *the impulse is finally able to speak*.” [NVC: p. 2] Previously Nietzsche has described the musician in like manner, the betrayer of impulses via the semiological language of affects, or, music. It is easier to relate to this notion of the musician giving expression to impulses as this kind of terminology is common currency with regards to music today. Nietzsche also distinguishes the *semiological language of music* from the written word. Why does Nietzsche distinguish between the written semiology and the musical one? We find the answer in the notion of *confession* and more specifically, with regards to the ‘impulsive systems of a musician’ [NVC: p. 1], the ‘innocence of this type of *confession*’ [ibid]. For Nietzsche, the musician accidentally *confesses* his impulses, whereas it is the very *intention* of the writer to make such a *confession*; the writer is “conscious that they are speaking of themselves” [NVC: p. 2].

Nietzsche compares the philosopher to the musician in the sense that the philosopher too is unaware that through their writing they are not talking of *questions of truth* but about *questions of themselves* [ibid]. According to Nietzsche, what a philosopher adamantly advocates as truth is nothing more than the dominant impulse

of the agent. The 'truth' is the expression of this primary impulse at the expense of all others. Nietzsche states that it is the practice of moralizers and religious fanatics to lie and cheat in order to perpetuate the dominant impulse, or rather, lie and cheat in order to *maintain the dominance* of the primary impulse.

Klossowski asks, does this amount to saying that the philosopher is "a mere spectator of events, at once lucid and impotent?" [ibid] Is there any way in which the philosopher can 'intervene directly?' And, of course, Klossowski is asking this question of Nietzsche.

According to Klossowski, one must "break with the classic rule of morality" [NVC: p. 3], for Klossowski suggests that this *classic morality* does not allow for questioning. *Classic morality* tells us that there are (or advocates the position of) unquestionable truths, and gives to its teaching a '*once and for all*' [ibid] quality. That is, we are told that our habits are set in stone, as it were, never changing, and this is based on, or stands in relation to, the notion that human existence has some sort of transcendent aim or goal or purpose.

Why should it be the case that *classic morality* articulates habits as *once and for all*? Furthermore, what happens in these cases? According to Klossowski "behaviour can never be regulated by its regular repetition, nor can it limit thinking itself," [ibid] in which case, any habitual repetition that restricts thinking or behaviour itself is a system of *security*. One loses the ability to question the arbitrary nature of those habitual behaviours and one falls into a kind of *automatism*, whereby nothing is ever swept away and renewed; there can be no birth due to the fact that these behaviours have been granted unquestionably essential status - they never die. Christian Morality being one of the worst offenders.

“In Christianity, neither morality nor religion comes in touch at all with reality
Nothing but... imaginary *psychology* (nothing but misunderstanding of self,
interpretations of pleasant or unpleasant general feelings; for instance of the
states of the *nervus sympathicus*, with the help of the sign language of religio-
moral idiosyncrasy, - repentance, pangs of conscience, the temptation of the
devil, the presence of God); an imaginary teleology (the kingdom of God, the
last judgement, everlasting life [not the *Eternal Return*].” [AC: p. 17-18]

What then does Nietzsche make of the philosophers that promote philosophies
of truth, and systems of morality? Accordingly, Klossowski tells us that Nietzsche will
accuse philosophers of creating systems that borrow from, or, *mime*, their own violent
dominant impulses to correspond to the habitual semiotics of *classical morality*. It is
these *mimes* that Klossowski will identify as *simulacrum* and the *simulacra* stands for
a whole system, or, ‘code of everyday signs.’

The dominant impulse of the philosopher is like a virus that spreads to every
area of a system; everything becomes dominated by this one principle impulse - ‘truth’
is a ploy made on behalf of the dominant impulse to persist in its dominance. But this
‘truth,’ that of which the philosopher will speak, is not a truth *now and forever*, but,
the very *concept of truth* simply gives a kind of self-perpetuating credence to the
impulse. (It should be noted that the concept of ‘truth’ bears no resemblance to the
impulse itself, which is incommunicable.) This is why Klossowski repeats what
Nietzsche has said before, “*the philosopher is only a kind of occasion and chance
through which the impulse is finally able to speak.*” [NVC: p. 3]

This idea of *communicability* is a key concern of Klossowski. The impulse is
incommunicable and therefore philosophers merely communicate that part of their

behaviour that is indeed *communicable*.

In which case, it would appear that Nietzsche is not concerned with teachable doctrines. Klossowski claims that Nietzsche sees no efficacious value in a philosophy that simply promotes the established values, such as one might find in Immanuel Kant's [1724 - 1804] '*Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*,' whereby, crudely speaking, Kant moves through morality in three stages, beginning with a 'transition from the ordinary rational knowledge of morality to the philosophical' [GMM: p. 7] with an end to reconciling philosophical morality with the ordinary everyday conception of morality and a 'transition from popular moral philosophy to a metaphysics of morals,' [GMM: p. 19] which, in turn, serves a strengthening (securing) function in his 'Critique of Practical Reason.' Is not Kant's 'Critique' the communicable part of a truly *overwhelming* and most violent impulse, an impulse that simply mimes along to the *code of everyday signs*?

Here we arrive at the crux of the distinction between the 'gregarious' and the 'singular.' The gregarious is that which attempts to communicate in order to stabilize and secure. Gregariousness is a social survival technique and is related to the *code of everyday signs* and the *simulacra* (and *simulacrum*). As we have seen from the comments above concerning philosophy and philosophers, the dominant impulse, which is fundamentally incoherent and related to the singular case or the idiosyncratic, is mimed in accordance to the *code of everyday signs*. The idiosyncratic (from the Greek *idiosugkrasia* literally meaning, 'personal mixing together'), the singular, is covered over by the gregarious due to the fact that the singular poses a threat to the gregarious, a threat to the species [humanity]. This *covering over*, in turn (and if allowed to maintain a certain consistency, or, consistency of development) "disturbs the sensitivity of individuals." [NVC: p. 4]

Early on in ‘Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle’ we find mention of the sick and healthy in relation to the gregarious and singular.

According to Klossowski the ‘moral question’ should not be posed in terms of, right/wrong, true/false, etc. but rather, in terms of the sick and the healthy. Nietzsche, as always, is not content with making the gregarious exclusively applicable to the sick or the healthy; or, determining the singular in like manner. Nietzsche tells us that initially the gregarious springs from that which “have the character of *sickness*” [ibid] due to the fact that the singular (which is the initial impulse) stands in direct opposition to the gregarious, the species, humanities survival. The singular disrupts the *code of everyday signs* that are systems of security, ensuring the survival of the species. Here we can see the tension between the singular and the gregarious. The singular wishes to assert its own will, its own power, and this will be at the expense of the community (if we narrow the global species down to communities). The singular stands out against the restrictions of the constraining power of the gregarious - is not the singular a dangerous glitch in the sanctuary of the gregarious, the social, the communicable, the *code of everyday signs*?

Yet, this *initial sickness* is only the beginning of the story. Klossowski says of the gregarious that it is “the *levelling* power” [NVC: p. 5]¹ and that the singular is an ‘erectile power.’ Furthermore, the gregarious amount to a mediocrity whereby singular cases, high intensities of moods, impulses, tonalities of the soul, etc. are suppressed by the generality of the gregarious. George Bernard Shaw [1856 - 1950] once said that, “the reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in

¹ *My italics.* (One will find this notion of ‘*levelling*’ throughout Nietzsche’s writing; for example, regarding ‘[false] free spirits’ Nietzsche writes, “*levellers*, loquacious scribbling slaves of the democratic taste and its ‘modern ideas’: ... What they are trying with all their strength to achieve is a common green pasture of happiness for the herd, with safety, security, comfort, ease of life for everyone...” [BGE: p. 40 - 41])

trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man,” and if one replace the ‘reasonable’ and the ‘unreasonable’ with the *gregarious* and the *idiosyncratic*, respectively, one begins to appreciate the delicate arrangement between the gregarious and the singular case; in this sense, the singular, or, idiosyncratic, may ultimately define its own restrictions and become gregarious. Nietzsche states that, “the first explosion of force and will to self-determination is a sickness that can destroy humanity; and even more sickly are the first, strange, wild attempts of the mind to adjust the world to itself, to its own authority” [ibid]. (It is important also to note that whereas Shaw’s emphasis is on progression, with the implication of *social progress*, Nietzsche will not speak in such terms - Nietzsche’s is a singular progress).

However, Nietzsche makes an important distinction between two cultures: 1) the conceptual culture that is founded on the gregarious, and 2) lived culture, that “can never have a gregarious foundation.” [NVC: p. 6] The lived culture is that of the impulses, the singular - a conceptual culture is a re-presenting, or, *simulacra*. Klossowski contends that the mere fact that we have a *concept* of culture shows a covering over of the *lived* culture.

It is with this distinction between conceptual culture and lived culture, between the gregarious and the idiosyncratic, that Nietzsche talks about the ‘combat against culture.’ But, what are we to make of this combat? Nietzsche states that we must take sides, see what is problematic in culture, what is beneficial to us as individuals, etc. Where does culture restrict, and what does it allow? How far can we go, and where are the routes blocked?

Now, we should note that this *culture* is just that culture that Nietzsche himself has inherited; it is this culture that has delivered us Nietzsche - and yet,

Nietzsche would see this culture burn as he once imagined how he would revel in the “*marvels of the Louvre in flames*” [NVC: p. 10]. On the one hand we have the combat of the lived culture by the conceptual [gregarious] culture, and on the other we have Nietzsche’s own combat of conceptual culture in favour of the lived culture.

According to Klossowski, culture cannot be a fixed entity (once and for all) because the very nature of culture is *becoming*; any appeal to simulacra stands in direct opposition to culture. It is this very fixing of a concept of culture that prompts Nietzsche to refer it to the *slave type*, for, it is the *slave type* that will accept the foundations of a conceptual culture without questioning the *masters* that had invented it. This discussion relates directly to the discussions of the valuations *good/bad and good/evil* in ‘*The Genealogy of Morals*.’

It is through the gregarious that conceptual culture (or, the conceptualization of culture) covers over the very arbitrariness of the values created. No one questions these values, these morals, right, wrong, truth, falsehood - in fact, these antitheses are the very product of a conceptually gregarious culture. This may be what Gilles Deleuze would refer to as an overcoding of values, whereby the values are coded to fit a particular system of articulation (maybe Ludwig Wittgenstein would refer to these systems as ‘Language Games’) and then overcoded in order to conceal the arbitrary nature of those systems; this, in turn, provides the security of the species by applying the code to other areas until one no longer *wills* oneself. Overcoding, put simply, ensures the survival of the species by ensuring the dominance of the code.

What is lacking in the *conceptual culture*, or, as Klossowski would have it, what is *covered over*, is the ‘the fact of experimentation.’ Can a culture, a lived culture, survive this lack? What does culture amount to if it only repeats, replicates, re-establishes, the status quo? And here we have the combat of culture. But, and

again, Nietzsche is on the offensive, waging his own war on the *conceptual culture* of the gregarious. In Nietzsche's combat there are to be no sacred cows. Language itself must be uprooted! Nietzsche's mission statement is, "to give men back the courage of their natural drives / to check their self-underestimation... / to remove antitheses from things after comprehending that we have projected them there... / to remove the idiosyncrasies of society from existence" [NVC: p. 10]. Yet, why courage? Nietzsche believes that inequality prevails, yet, this inequality is not reflected in the gregarious and thus man has lost his courage to *bear* this inequality. The idea of the Eternal Return will serve to bring this courage back to man and ultimately split humanity down the middle, into those that accept the Return and those that do not. In which case, the question of advocacy of Nietzsche's own combat against culture will depend on whether one is willing to accept the implications of the Eternal Return.

*In the midway of this our mortal life,
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray
Gone from the path direct: and e'en to tell,
It were no easy task, how savage wild
That forest, how robust and rough its growth...*
[DC: p. 1]

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