

Was Nietzsche as Mediocre as They Say?

Pepe Chang

UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

In the paper, “Philosophy as Self-Fashioning: Alexander Nehamas’s Art of Living,” R. Lanier Anderson and Joshua Landy explain Nehamas’s view of self-fashioning.¹ Nehamas arrived at his account of self-fashioning by generalizing the reading of Nietzsche he developed in the book of that name. However, I will argue that, according to Nietzsche, self-fashioning is a sign of mediocrity.

My argument will proceed as follows. First, I will give a brief description of self-fashioning, as presented by Anderson and Landy. Second, I will argue that pursuing the task of self-fashioning, on this account, indicates that the person devalues herself as she already is and that she is motivated by resentment, which, for Nietzsche, signifies mediocrity. I will also argue that according to Nietzsche, self-fashioning effects a person in a way which makes her mediocre (or anyway, more mediocre than otherwise). So one who decides to pursue self-fashioning is mediocre already because she is fueled by resentment, and due to the effects of self-fashioning, she ends up even more mediocre. Finally, I will show that as evidenced in *Ecce Homo*,

¹R. Lanier Anderson and Joshua Landy, “Philosophy as Self-Fashioning: Alexander Nehamas’s Art of Living”; hereafter abbreviated A&L.

Nietzsche presents this argument in his attempt to define *greatness* (as opposed to mediocrity). Because Nietzsche believed himself to have achieved greatness, he believed that he had done better than mediocrity, and there is by now a consensus that he was correct on that score. It is therefore uncharitable to regard him as a self-fashioner. If I am right, then current popular accounts, which treat Nietzsche as aiming to produce a narrative philosophical character are wrong, for these accounts require he be mediocre. And since there is by now a consensus that Nietzsche had surpassed mediocrity, a reconsideration of these accounts is needed.

Self-fashioning

According to Anderson and Landy, self-fashioning involves the creation of a character who is the voice of the writer. The writer funnels her characteristics, thoughts, and ideas through the character, allowing them to be unified and coherent. "Life presents each of us with a bewildering variety of factors attaching to our person...There is no guarantee that such components will fit together without serious tension. Achieving self-hood in the stronger sense is a matter of creating a harmonious order of these elements, thereby fashioning a coherent..way of life." (A&L, p. 2) On Anderson and Landy's account, self-fashioning is a means to becoming one's genuine self. "Who we are is not given to us but set for us as a problem, to which the philosophical art of living pursues solutions." (A&L, p.2)

According to Anderson and Landy, Nehamas describes the character created through self-fashioning as the ideal version of the philosopher who creates her. "Once the philosopher has made such a move of identification, then precisely by working at the construction of this

person, she can *fashion* herself, smoothing over accidents, making it more understandable and coherent.” (A&L, p.16) This means that the self-fashioner creates a character that represents her ideal self. She then strives to be like this ideal character and eventually she becomes that character, as if she had been that character all along. At this point, she has become her genuine self. “[T]he philosophical self-fashioner strives to regulate her actions and beliefs so that they live up to her ideal. Her fashioned authorial self becomes her genuine self.” (A&L, p.16).

Self-fashioning and Resentment

We can say that this interpretation of self-fashioning amounts to the conscious pursuit of one’s ideal self. But what motivates the act of self-fashioning? Why strive to become one’s ideal self at all? Self-fashioning allows an individual to control what she is to become. The ideal self is a unified and coherent character. This character does not need to explain any of her actions for they all make sense coming from *her*. However, the actions of her *real* self, the way she already is, are in need of defense. Her past choices appear to be inconsistent and incoherent. The task of becoming her ideal self is a means to avoid defending the inconsistent and incoherent tendencies of her real self. Instead of having to defend the actions of her real self, she has made them meaningful characteristics of a coherent ideal self. The struggle to give meaning to her actions therefore leads the individual to take on the task of self-fashioning in an attempt to become her ideal self.

But this implies that the actions coming from her real self are not considered meaningful *already*. She prefers or values her ideal self, in accord with which her actions are meaningful, to

her real self. The latter is devalued. Resentful of her devalued real self, she is motivated to take action. Self-fashioning, as a tool, is a *reaction* to her resentment. Becoming her ideal self is a method to defend herself against resentment. It seems, then, that self-fashioning is a defensive action that an individual take against resentment of her real self. A person who takes on the task of self-fashioning is, therefore, fueled by resentment.

In contrast, consider someone who already regards her actions as meaningful. She has no need to explain her actions for she finds nothing wrong with them. She values herself the way that she already is, regardless of the values of others, which could lead her to believe otherwise. For this person, there is no resentment motivating her to take on the task of self-fashioning.

Of course it seems possible that someone might decide to pursue self-fashioning as a self-improvement tool without feeling self resentment. Such a person would see that her real self needs some improvement and that self-fashioning will work as an effective tool. Perhaps such an individual values herself already but would like to fine tune herself through self-fashioning. In this case, it isn't that she is fueled by resentment. Rather she is fueled by being the best that she can be. She is motivated by self-improvement and it would seem uncharitable to consider her mediocre.

My response to such a proposal is this. Self-fashioning to become an ideal self should not be considered a simple, easy-to-achieve task. It is not on par with the task of picking up a self-help book or attending a "how to become a happier person" seminar. The process of self-fashioning takes much time, effort, and focus. It is a pursuit for coherence, harmony, and

unification of a created character, which the self-fashioner struggles to internalize and incorporate into herself. This pursuit becomes her way of life. “[O]ne must reflect constantly and on all the aspects of one’s life, in order to stay ‘in character’.” (A&L, p.12) To take on the task of self-fashioning, then, is to take on an immense task. It is an attempt to *actually* become a different character. It seems then that the desire for self-improvement doesn’t adequately represent what motivates a person to pursue self-fashioning. The self is not improved, but rather replaced by a new self. The desire to *transform* one’s real self does capture the motivation for self-fashioning. And this desire signifies resentment of the way that one already is.

I have shown that self-fashioning is fueled by resentment. Self-fashioning to become one’s ideal self is a reaction to one’s devalued real self. I have contrasted the person who takes on self-fashioning with someone who values herself as she already is; the latter individual finds self-fashioning a useless task. It wouldn’t be difficult to show that Nietzsche would consider the former more mediocre than the latter. For Nietzsche, those fueled by resentment can only react. Their only action is reaction.² And because their action is *commanded* by resentment, according to Nietzsche, they turn out to be mediocre. “The reason in this is that when defensive expenditures, be they ever so small, become the rule and a habit, they entail an extraordinary and entirely superfluous impoverishment.”³

It may, however, be impractical to say that reaction to resentment will *always* produce

² “[T]he essence of *ressentiment*...it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all--its action is...reaction.” (GM I,10) Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘Genealogy of Morals’ in *Basic Writing of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufmann. (The Modern Library, New York 1992).

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘Ecce Homo’ in *Basic Writing of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufmann. (The Modern

mediocrity. After all, it is conceivable that one fueled by resentment could produce something that we consider extraordinary. It has been suggested (in a popular made for television movie⁴) that in his early twenties, Steve Jobs of Apple Computers premiered, at a convention, his first personal computer. Many people went exclusively to view his computer. The positive response to his product was incredible. Bill Gates was allegedly in the audience. Overwhelmed by the response, Jobs supposedly snubbed Gates as he attempted to ask a question. Gates, being resentful of Jobs' attitude towards him and of Jobs' apparent success, set out to dominate the computer industry while leaving Jobs in the dust. Now suppose that this story is true and that Bill Gates was fueled by resentment to dominate the personal computer industry. It appears that he succeeded beyond his initial goal. Not only did he dominate the market, he became, at one time, the richest man in the world. Even if he were fueled by resentment, it seems impractical to say that Bill Gates would represent mediocrity. Most people, given that they were not resentful of him themselves, would say that Bill Gates is extraordinary.

In this case persisting with the original argument that resentment signifies mediocrity could lead one to embrace rather than reject mediocrity. After all, if Bill Gates represents mediocrity, then why not pursue it? However, this response conflates the great achievements of a person with the greatness of the person who achieves. Being fueled by resentment may not lead to a mediocre achievement, however, it will more than likely lead to a mediocre person. And given the option, most people will prefer not to become a mediocre person, even if their

Library, New York 1992) part II, section 8; hereafter abbreviated EH.

⁴*Pirates of Silicon Valley.*

accomplishments are considered great. To support this claim, I will now explain what it means to be a mediocre person and why self-fashioning, in particular, results in a mediocre person.

Self-fashioning and Mediocrity

Bill Gates, fueled by resentment, set a task for himself early in life. He consciously pursued his task of leaving Steve Jobs in the dust. This is similar to the person who takes on the task of self-fashioning. This person, who is also fueled by resentment, creates a coherent character and consciously pursues the task of becoming that character—of becoming her ideal self. As stated previously, self-fashioning is a task that requires much time, effort, and focus. And if an individual decides to consciously pursue this task, then she must have an extensive plan in order to succeed. It seems fair to say that if Bill Gates really did set out to pursue his task, and if he was serious about achieving his task, then he must have had an extensive plan.

But consciously pursuing this type of plan early in life will have effects on the person who pursues it. Most, if not all, of her efforts will be centered around her plan if she is intent on succeeding. This means that only those capacities that contribute to her success will be meaningful to her. Such capacities will be nurtured while other capacities, perceived as meaningless, will be neglected.

Practically speaking, we see this process occurring frequently. People who are exceptionally impressive in one area usually turn out to be quite deficient in another. This seems to be particularly true in cases where people consciously pursue and are committed to achieving a task early on. It wouldn't be difficult to find instances in which a person who is

intent on becoming a doctor early on in life establishes an extensive plan to achieve her task. Driven to succeed, most of her efforts will be directed toward achieving her task of becoming a doctor. Those capacities that contribute to her success will flourish while those capacities that have little impact on her success will be neglected. The person intent on becoming a doctor may cultivate her abilities to do well in school, memorize quickly, go without sleep, compete with others who have the same task, remain incredibly focused, etc. Cultivating these capacities she will, if everything goes according to plan, eventually become a doctor. When she finally achieves her task, many will congratulate her and believe that all her hard work and dedication has paid off. They will believe that she accomplished an impressive achievement. In addition, they will probably attribute this impressiveness to her *as a person*.

However, people will have overlooked the things that she had to give up in order to have achieved this task. Many of her capacities were neglected, specifically those that did not contribute to the task at hand. Intent on becoming a doctor, these capacities were unimportant. Such capacities might include experiencing and enjoying nature, being creative, enjoying free time, acquiring social skills, developing close personal relationships, etc.. At the end of the day, as a result of persistently and consciously pursuing her task, all that she has become is a person capable of being a doctor. She has intentionally limited her own capacities.

However, one could say that becoming a doctor was worth limiting her capacities. At least it was worth it to her. It was worth it because the capacities that she did nurture are now flourishing. She was successful. She got what she wanted, and surely calling her a mediocre person for getting what she wanted seems counterintuitive even if her other capacities were

wasted.⁵ However I think the claim to mediocrity is justified. Given the option, most people would prefer to have a fuller range of capacities. Most people would not think that a person who intentionally limited her own capacities was impressive--even if she did turn out an impressive product. I would even go so far as to say that most people would tend to feel sorry for her, claiming that she doesn't seem to have a fulfilling life. Although limiting her own capacities might have been worth it for her, it doesn't seem to be worth it for most people. This is because those with limited capacities are more mediocre *as people* than those with a full range of capacities. Being aware of and then consciously pursuing one's task intently results in limited capacities and this makes one a more mediocre person.

Furthermore, the effects of consciously pursuing one's task could *exceed* the detriment of limiting one's capacities. It could go so far as to *ruin* one's capacities. Suppose that things do not go as planned. Things go wrong in life all the time; there are simply too many uncontrollable variables to account for. The person in our example could end up failing to become a doctor, in which case, not only has she wasted the capacities that were not instrumental in becoming a doctor, the capacities that she has nurtured so intently are no longer of use to her. This leaves her only with capacities that are meaningless and, in a sense, ruined. She is left with the ability to do very little. "Merely through the constant need to ward off, one

⁵But again, this move seems to be fueled by defensiveness. If she did limit her own capacities, to defend her actions, she would *have* to believe that becoming a doctor was worth it. If her task ended up being meaningless, then she would have wasted all of her efforts. And most people don't want to believe that they have wasted their time or effort. They will take measures to ensure that their time not be considered wasted. In this case, she will adjust the worth of her limited capacities as exceeding the worth of having a full range of capacities. By doing so, she has made becoming a doctor worth having very little else. The point is that it will be hard to determine if she finds being a doctor worth it because she values being a doctor, or if it is worth it because it ensures that she didn't waste her time.

can become weak enough to be unable to defend oneself any longer.” (EH, II, 8) As a result of consciously pursuing her task *and* failing she has become even more mediocre.

It turns out, then, that the specific task of self-fashioning, because it entails consciously pursuing a task, produces a person who is mediocre. That is, it produces a person who either has limited or ruined capacities. Regardless of how impressive her achievement is, she, as a person, turns out to be mediocre.

Nietzsche, Mediocrity, and Greatness

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche describes *greatness*, the object of the task of becoming what one is. Greatness is the opposite of mediocrity--and Nietzsche describes the latter as getting in the way of greatness. “[T]he occasional side roads and wrong roads, the delays, “modesties”, seriousness wasted on tasks that are remote from *the* task.” (EH, II, 9) To avoid these obstructions one must not consciously pursue one’s task. “For let us assume that the task [of becoming what one is] transcends the average very significantly; in that case, nothing could be more dangerous than catching sight of oneself *with* this task. To become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion *what* one is.” (EH, II,9) This is because to achieve greatness, one must avoid ruining one’s capacities, which means that one must not consciously pursue one’s task. “For the task of a *revaluation of values* more capacities may have been needed than have ever dwelt together in a single individual—above all, even contrary capacities that had to be kept from disturbing, destroying one another. An order of rank among these capacities; distance; the art of separating without setting against one another; to mix nothing, to “reconcile” nothing; a

tremendous variety that is nevertheless the opposite of chaos—this was the precondition, the long, secret work and artistry of my instinct.” (EH, II, 9) For Nietzsche, the ruining of one’s own capacities ruins the possibility for greatness and this is to be avoided.. “When I measure myself against my *ability*...then I more than any other mortal have a claim to the epithet of greatness.” (EH, II, 10n)

According to Nietzsche, to become what one is is to achieve human greatness. Human greatness entails love of fate. “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary...but *love* it.” (EH, II, 10) One who loves fate is life-affirming, that is free from resentment. One who is free from resentment need not struggle to give meaning to one’s life. It is meaningful already. “Considered in this way, my life is simply wonderful...I cannot remember that I ever tried hard—no trace of *struggle* can be demonstrated in my life...” (EH, II, 9)

It seems, then, that Nietzsche, believing that he became who he was, would be opposed to the task of self-fashioning. As I have already shown, self-fashioning is to consciously pursue one’s ideal self which indicates resentment of one’s real self. Self fashioning is motivated by this resentment; struggling to give meaning to one’s life by creating and striving to become a coherent and unified character. And if one consciously pursues one’s task, one will set out a plan to become successful. However, diligently satisfying this type of plan is to intentionally limit one’s own capacities—and to possibly even destroy them. As one with limited or ruined capacities, one is a mediocre *person*, even if one achieves one’s task.

Both tasks of self-fashioning and becoming what one is aim at giving meaning to one's life. However, the former is being fueled by resentment while the latter is being free from resentment. It is questionable whether self-fashioning does, or even could actually succeed in giving meaning to one's life. A person who takes on the task of self-fashioning creates a significant burden for herself. She puts herself in a position where she needs to satisfy numerous expectations, in which case she is in a position to possibly fail. And given the tremendous task of self-fashioning in addition to all the uncontrollable variables in life, failing is a realistic possibility. With each failure comes disappointment and a deepened sense of resentment. "There are, to be sure, countless paths and bridges and demi-gods which would bear you through this stream [of life]; but only at the cost of yourself: you would put yourself in pawn and lose yourself."⁶ Rather than giving meaning to one's life, self-fashioning ends up creating resentment. Because, for Nietzsche, resentment is to be avoided, self-fashioning is also to be avoided. "The pathos of poses does *not* belong to greatness; whoever needs poses at all is *false*.— Beware of all picturesque men! (EH, II, 10) Self-fashioning, therefore, fails as a tool in give meaning to one's life. Self-fashioning can be characterized as "[t]he eye that ha[s] been spoiled by the tremendous need for seeing far..." (EH, B, 2) In this sense, self-fashioning end up *spoiling* the person who pursues it, in which case, she cannot achieve greatness.

Amor fati, however, promises meaning to one's life. "There exists in the world a single path along which no one can go except you: whither does it lead? Do not ask, go along it.

⁶Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (Cambridge University Press, 1997) chapter 3, section 1; hereafter abbreviated UM.

Who was it who said: ‘a man never rises higher than when he does not know whither his path can still lead him?’ (UM,3,1) As an individual who loves fate, she will not consciously plan her task in an attempt to control what she becomes. Rather she will realize what she has accomplished--what her capacities are. Free from the burden of satisfying expectations, this person expects nothing more from herself than what she has accomplished--she expects nothing more than what she is capable of. From this realization, she becomes who she is. She is free from resentment. According to Nietzsche, this is the great task which gives meaning to one’s life as one already is and as one will be, for “nothing in existence may be subtracted, nothing is dispensable...to comprehend this requires courage and, as a condition of that, an excess of strength.” (EH, BT,2) “Let the youthful soul look back on life with the question: what have you truly loved up to now, what has drawn your soul aloft, what has mastered it and at the same time blessed it? Set up these revered objects before you and perhaps their nature and their sequence will give you a law, the fundamental law of your own true self.” (UM, 3, 1)

Because Nietzsche believed himself to have become who he was, he believed that he achieved greatness. Nietzsche would not have been a self-fashioner for this means that he would have consciously pursued his ideal self. Treating him as such would require he be mediocre. It is therefore uncharitable to regard Nietzsche as a self-fashioner. However, it is currently a popular practice to treat Nietzsche as an instance of self-fashioning; philosophers such as Nehamas believe that Nietzsche’s works should be read as being delivered by an implicit

character intentionally created by Nietzsche.⁷ However, if I am right, this practice should be reconsidered.

⁷Alexander Nehamas, "Who are 'Philosophers of the Future'?: A Reading of *Beyond Good and Evil*" in *Reading Nietzsche*, ed. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Nehamas attempts to explain Nietzsche's non-traditional and seemingly unstructured writing style. According to Nehamas, a work such as *Beyond good and Evil* should be read as a monologue delivered by an implicit character. Nehamas believes Nietzsche created a character to make coherent his view of perspectivism.

One normally communicates a view by asserting it as the true view. "[D]escribing, supporting, and articulating [one's view]...will be to a great extent both necessary and inevitable." (N, p.63) If perspectivism is not asserted, then it is "just another perspective" rather than the true view, in which case, it carries no force. "To set a view out in detail and then to add 'But this is only an interpretation', disposes one's audience...to disregard the view..."(N, p.62)

However, perspectivism does not allow the assertion that it is the true view. It denies that there are any true views; there are only perspective. So if Nietzsche were simply to assert that perspectivism was the true view, he would be caught in a pragmatic contradiction.

According to Nehamas, the created character allows Nietzsche to communicate perspectivism while avoiding this contradiction by putting Nietzsche' view into the mouth of his character. The character asserts perspectivism, rather than Nietzsche himself. Because Nietzsche asserts nothing, he avoids a pragmatic contradiction. According to Nehamas, Nietzsche creates a character to assert the truth of perspectivism while avoiding a pragmatic contradiction.