

‘The Doing is Everything’: A Middle-voiced Reading of Agency in Nietzsche.

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ABSTRACT:

Nietzsche’s famous claim, ‘das Thun ist Alles’, is usually translated as ‘the deed is everything’. I argue that it is better rendered as ‘the doing is everything’. Accordingly, I propose a processual reading of agency in GM 1 13 which draws both on Nietzsche’s reflections on grammar, and on the Greek middle voice, to displace the opposition between deeds and events, agents and patients by introducing the notion of middle-voiced ‘doings’. The relevant question then is not ‘is this a doing or a happening?’ but ‘what is the process unfolding in the doer, and what is her engagement with it?’. I argue (a) that this middle voiced reading makes better sense than either naturalist or expressivist interpretations of the key thought in GM 1 13 that ‘there is no doer behind the doing’, and (b) that GM 1 13 does not only provide us with a critique of slave morality, as is often said, but also with an example of a middle-voiced doing: self-deception. I explore the phenomenology of middle-voiced doings in other passages and show that it has at least three features: (pre-)reflective awareness of being engaged with an internal process, responsiveness, and absence of reflective control.

KEYWORDS: Nietzsche; agency; activity; passivity; middle voice; process.

Those who seek to characterise Nietzsche’s views on agency tend to fall into two camps: naturalists¹ usually start from the agent’s drives, and expressivists, from the agent’s deeds. Nietzsche’s famous claim in GM I 13, ‘das Thun ist Alles’, is taken as support for expressivist readings and translated as ‘the deed is everything’ (as in the title of Ridley (2018)). I argue below that Nietzsche’s choice of ‘Thun’ (rather than, say, other action nouns such as ‘Handlung’ or ‘Tat’), in conjunction with the use of processual terms (in particular ‘wirken’ (effecting) and ‘werden’ (becoming)), warrants translating ‘das Thun ist Alles’ as ‘the *doing* is everything’. I further argue that if the doing really is *everything*, then at least in some cases (including GM I 13) agency is best understood, not as an intentional process carried out by a doer (a view which already underlies expressivist interpretations and is compatible with non-eliminativist naturalist readings), but from the perspective of the doing itself, as a response to an internal process the agent finds herself

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¹ By ‘naturalists’ I refer to a set of Nietzschean interpreters who self-identify in this way (e.g. K. Gemes, P. Katsafanas, B. Leiter, B. Reginster or J. Richardson amongst others). I do not make any claim about naturalism in general.

engaged with. In Nietzsche's words, 'one should take the doer back into the doing [Thun] after having conceptually removed the doer and thus emptied the doing; and one should take (...) the 'aim', the 'intention', the 'purpose', back into the doing after having artificially removed all this and thus emptied the doing' (WP [675] (1887-1888) tr. modified). If we are to understand certain exercises of agency, we must start *in medias res*: not prospectively, from the perspective of the agent setting out to carry out her intentions, nor retrospectively, from the perspective of the deed as allowing us to identify which intentions were expressed (and what they say about the agent). Equally, we must work from the doing itself to characterise what counts as being a doer. We cannot assume the primacy of intention (expressive or not) to understand agency, nor - as is implicitly conveyed by the etymology of the word 'agent'² - that being a doer always consists in having the ability to initiate an action. But given how ingrained these assumptions have become, how can we do this?

I take my lead from Nietzsche's frequent admonitions (including in GM I 13) against the ways in which our understanding of agency is shaped by grammar, in particular by the two following features. The first is voice ('diathesis'). The grammatical voice marks the relationship between the action (or state) expressed by the verb on the one hand, and the grammatical subject on the other. Most modern Indo-European languages have two voices, active and passive. As is well known, Nietzsche is deeply suspicious of the ways in which voice shapes our understanding of agency: 'people are following grammatical habits here in drawing conclusions, reasoning that "thinking is an activity, behind every activity something is active -' (BGE: 17). The second feature, also specific to Indo-European languages, is the fact that 'the verb only refers to the subject. (...) Everything is ordered and presented around the subject' (Benvéniste (1966): 169, my translation). This inbuilt reference is marked by the declension of the verb, which indicates person and number. Nietzsche picks up on this grammatical feature by complaining about 'our grammatical custom that adds a doer to every doing [Thun]' (WP [484], tr. modified). Or in the published work: 'even the "it" [grammatical subject of 'it thinks'] contains an *interpretation* of the process and does not belong to the process itself (BGE 17, Nietzsche's italics. See also WP [549] (1885)).

If we are trapped by our 'faith in grammar' (BGE 34) into thinking that 'every activity presupposes an agent' (WP 550 (1885-1886)), then perhaps a good way of illuminating the idea that 'the doing is everything' is to have recourse to a different grammar, one which Nietzsche

² 'Agere' is notorious for having many meanings but its primary signification, and the root of all subsidiaries (including 'to do'), is 'to set in motion'. For this reason, I shall refrain from using the word 'agent' when presenting my own reading of GM I 13, preferring the more neutral 'doer' instead.

knew very well: ancient Greek. This is in keeping with the genealogical spirit: investigating a past practice so as to gain more distance from, and a better understanding of, our current grammatical practice. A distinctive feature of ancient Greek is that it included a third voice, the ‘middle voice’.³ The reason why the middle voice may help us to rethink agency from the doing, rather than from the doer or the deed, is that in ancient Greek the use of the middle, firstly, marks the action expressed by the verb as processual and, secondly, indicates an internal relation of the subject to the process: it puts the doer ‘back in the doing’. As Benvéniste says, ‘in the middle (...) the verb indicates a process of which the subject is the locus [siège]; the subject is internal to the process. (...) He accomplishes something which accomplishes itself in him’ (1966: 172).

In section I, I characterise the conception of the agent operative in naturalist readings of Nietzsche as broadly Humean and argue that if one starts from this conception, then GM I 13 reads as a manifesto for eliminativism about agency. I briefly point out the difficulties, textual and otherwise, of such a reading and turn in section II to expressivist interpretations of GM I 13. I argue that expressivists too are faced with textual and theoretical difficulties, in particular because they implicitly fall back on the broadly Humean understanding of action. In section III I discuss translation issues and suggest that in the case of GM I 13 what the weak do is best understood from the perspective of the process which unfolds in them (the ‘smouldering of hatred and revenge’). In section IV I turn to the middle voice to explore this thought further and apply my findings to GM I 13. This sheds a different light on the passage by allowing it to be read, not simply as an attack on the creation of new values by the weak (a common reading), but as highlighting the peculiar exercise of agency which made such creation possible: self-deception as a middle-voiced doing. For all its importance in GM, however, self-deception is only one instance of middle-voiced doings. In the last section, I examine two passages written by Nietzsche about himself (EH, ‘*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*’, §3 and GS, Second Preface: 5) in order to bring out key aspects of the phenomenology of middle-voiced doings.

Two methodological provisos: firstly, there is a relative mismatch between the ideas that this paper develops and the medium used for this purpose. I cannot write in the middle voice: in a non-negligible sense, I am writing against the very grammar I use. This is unavoidable but perhaps not without consequences on my ability to communicate what I seek to convey (I mean this in an observational, not exculpatory, manner). Secondly, my aim in this paper is not to attribute to

³ A caveat: in what follows I speak of ‘the’ middle voice as if it was a simple and univocal concept. In this, I follow Benvéniste’s and Gonda’s attempts to draw out the most important characteristics of the middle voice. But there are many subdivisions regarding the middle (e.g. reflexive, eventive, dative, etc.). For a detailed study, see Kemmer (1993).

Nietzsche a general theory of agency as middle-voiced, but rather to suggest that there are important phenomena in human life which are more complex with respect to agency than either naturalist or expressivist views can accommodate on their own.

STARTING FROM THE AGENT'S DRIVES: NATURALIST READINGS OF GM I 13

Naturalist readers do not start from the agent in the sense of the rationalist tradition, for which to be an agent is to have the ability to initiate an action for reasons deemed capable of suspending motives and which are transparently available to the agent, either at the time of the action or retrospectively. Most naturalist interpreters start from Nietzsche's psychology of drives. In a nutshell, drives are non-conscious dispositions which generate affective orientations and motivate human comportment. Drives take a two-part complement, having both an aim (a characteristic form of activity) and an object (an occasional end which will allow the temporary discharge of the drive). Drives compete with each other and an individual's comportment results from a particular (often temporary) ordering of the drives, which motivates her to seek certain ends rather than others. For example, a hungry individual in whom the sexual drive is dominant will typically ignore her hunger to seek new partners for sexual intercourse. The psychology of drives is used to illuminate Nietzsche's claims about the will to power. According to B. Reginster, to will power is to will 'the very activity of overcoming resistance' (2008: 127). As with any drive, the will to power expresses its characteristic activity (overcoming resistance) by motivating the individual to seek first-order ends which will afford maximum resistance (Reginster's typical examples are sports and games), the main role of deliberation being to determine the best means to overcome such resistance.

What emerges here is a broadly Humean picture of agency: the psychology involved is much more complex than Hume's own distinction between passions as motivational power on the one hand, and instrumental reason on the other. But it is Humean still, because the structure of the two accounts is very similar. Drives and affects motivate individuals to achieve certain (first order) ends, with deliberation and reflection playing a mostly ancillary role when the pursuit of these ends is intentional (as opposed to resulting sub-personally from the drives).⁴ In the former case, individuals cause the action by carrying out the intentions that arise from the combination of their motives and instrumental considerations.

⁴ On Katsafanas' 'vector' model of the will, deliberation can influence action by providing further motives. However it cannot suspend motives, nor initiate ('trigger') action on its own.

A common complaint against Humean approaches is that rather than taking agency as a power *of* the agent, they reduce agency to a play of pro-attitudes *in* the agent. Katsafanas implicitly endorses this concern by pointing out that in many cases an agent's comportment may only count as 'mere behaviour' (an echo of Velleman's (2000) notion of 'mere activity') because the agent is simply a vessel for her drives (see also Gemes 2009: 42: a 'passive conduit for disparate forces'). The worry is that a merely Humean approach to agency will result, paradoxically, in eliminativism about the agent. Some interpreters, such as B. Leiter, are happy to endorse this position. Others introduce what might be called a 'selfhood' clause on agency: intentions must arise from a 'self' as an 'enduring coordinated hierarchy of drives' (Gemes 2009: 46). For example, 'sovereign' individuals will only form intentions that are secondary in the sense that they follow an initial resistance to external stimuli. Conversely, such agents are capable of binding themselves to the carrying out of their intentions in a much tighter way: they have the capacity to 'promise'. In such cases, the agent and her drives serve as a starting point to think of action in the more robust sense that only selves are capable of true action, as opposed to 'mere behaviour'.

Thinking agency from the perspective of the agent, however, does not sit well with the claims in GM I 13 that 'there is not 'being' behind the deed' or that the 'doer is invented as an afterthought'. If these claims were meant to target solely the rationalist conception of the agent opposed by naturalists (and by Nietzsche himself) there would, of course, be no difficulty. But Nietzsche's sweeping reference in GM I 13 to 'the seduction of language and the fundamental errors of reason petrified in it' suggests that this is not the case. The error is not to construe the agent as endowed with free will but to 'construe and misconstrue all effecting (Wirken) as conditional on an "effector" (Wirkendes). As I mentioned earlier, it is a structural feature of Indo-European languages that verbal forms bear a reference to the grammatical subject (e.g. 'cogito', '[lightning] flashes'). Accordingly, the error of the 'common people', who see that lightning flashes and make a 'doing a deed' out of it, is largely induced by grammar.⁵ The grammatical subject (lightning) becomes reified into an entity which pre-exists the deed (the flash) and serves as its *explanans*: the agent is 'behind' the deed in the sense that s/he causes it. As Nietzsche puts it, we (mistakenly) believe that 'every event is a deed, that every deed presupposes a doer' (WP [550] (1885-1886)). But (on this line of interpretation) lightning just *is* the flash. Correlatively, the correct conclusion is to reject the distinction between event and deed and to hold that there are

⁵ It also has psychological origins in bodily perception: 'the oldest and most enduring psychology was at work here, doing absolutely nothing but this: it considered all events to be deeds, all deeds to be the result of a will, (...) a doer ('subject') pushed its way under all events' (TI: 178); see also WP 47 (1885-1886)).

only events (which our unavoidable use of grammar continually pushes us to misconstrue as deeds).

Paradoxically, the most straightforward interpretation of GM I 13 is the very eliminativism that many naturalist readers of Nietzsche on agency seek to avoid by developing their broadly Humean assumptions into a more robust conception of the agent as a unified self. This eliminativist line, however, is not without its difficulties. Perhaps the most developed criticism is R. Pippin's. Textually, it is not as easy to read the strong (Starken) out of strength expressing itself as it is to read lightning out of the flash: 'the language of doer-deed is not dropped. A strong person's strength is *expressed* in a desire to overcome, a desire to throw down, to become master' (Pippin 2015: 223, his italics). Pippin's broader argument takes the form of a *reductio*: without our being entitled to give them 'psychological meaning' by attributing them to the strong, the various 'bodily movements' involved in such activities ('overcoming' etc.) would be unintelligible, and indistinguishable from similar random bodily movements. More generally, on Pippin's view the whole genealogical attack on Christian morality would become non-sensical because it 'appears to rely on a traditional understanding of act descriptions (that the act is individuated as an act mainly by reference to the agent's intentions), and [Nietzsche] invokes a complex picture of unconscious motives, operative and motivating, but inaccessible as such to the agents involved' (Pippin 2006: 137).⁶

Given this, expressivists follow Pippin in adopting a different strategy: rather than presupposing a doer as the cause of the deed, they start from the deed in order to understand the doer's intentions. The claim that becomes central, then, is the idea that 'the deed is everything'.

STARTING FROM THE DEED: EXPRESSIVIST READINGS OF GM I 13.

Expressivist interpretations of GM I 13 rely mainly on two claims: (a) expressive intentions cannot be specified prior to the action and (b) the relation between intentions and deeds is not causal but expressive. Regarding (a), Ridley sets up a contrast between what he calls 'basic' and 'expressive' actions. Basic actions are such that their 'conditions of success can be non-trivially specified independently and in advance of any attempt to meet them' (2018: 38). Ridley's

⁶ Eliminativists may object that individuating acts by reference to the agent's intentions is merely a retrospective fiction and that actions are best characterised as patterns of behaviour. However, the presence of such patterns cannot by itself count as evidence of agency: sunflowers regularly follow the sun. Unless eliminativists want to give up on the vocabulary of agency altogether, they are faced with the difficulty of accounting for agency without agents. For my part, I seek to account for certain instances of agency in Nietzsche by reference to middle-voiced 'doers' rather than 'agents'.

recurring example is making a cup of coffee. Basic actions rely on a model of agency very similar (if not identical, see further down) to the broadly Humean model examined above: the intentions involved are prospective and play a causal role in the genesis of the action. Basic actions are common; by contrast, expressive actions are fairly rare. They are characterised by the fact that the conditions of success of realisation of the intention are not specified in advance of such intention being realised in the deed.⁷ Artistic creation is taken as a paradigm of expressive action because an artist cannot specify in advance what the work will look like, nor what its conditions of success will be. Ridley also gives examples from everyday life: if I am looking for a word, I won't know what the correct word is until I have found it (Wittgenstein). The intention 'comes into a kind of focus' in the finding of the word (2018: 42).

Regarding (b), since a cause must precede its effects the fact that our expressive intentions do not pre-exist our deeds entails that the appropriate relation between intention and deed should not be understood as causal. As Pippin puts it, "expressivism" is a claim that shares an assumption with all accounts of actions as such— that there are bodily movements or mental happenings that stand in a relation to a subject's mindedness— and it argues for a kind of relation different from all causal, compatibilist and voluntarist, free-will accounts' (2006: 233). Ridley (2018: 31) develops the claim by stating that the relation between intention and deed is a relation of mutual constitution whereby both come into existence together. In the example borrowed from Wittgenstein, the intention is specified in the finding of the right word. Conversely, it is the presence of this expressed intention which makes the finding of the word an action (rather than, say, a case of Tourette syndrome).

To return to GM I 13, on an expressivist reading the doer is not 'behind the deed' because *qua* doer s/he does not operate as a cause. The agent's intentions (in the expressive sense) do not pre-exist the deed but can only be discovered in it retrospectively: the deed, as the expression of the inner in the outer, is 'everything'.

There are, however, difficulties with this line of interpretation too, both textual and theoretical. Textually, the problem is the converse of the one encountered by eliminativism: while the example of strength seems to bring grist to the expressivist mill, the case of the flash is harder to make sense of. Pippin states that 'we cannot say that the flash is just an electrical discharge in the air. Clearly, a certain sort of meteorological event is "expressed"' (2010: 88). Note the

⁷ Such conditions of success cannot be fixed in reference to the agent's expressed intention only: they are also dependent on an existing context of social norms and practices, and the agent's own understanding of her intentions has no epistemic privilege.

quotation marks, which could be taken as a give-away of Pippin's unease about the applicability of expressivism to the flash of lightning. The argument given is that a phenomenally identical 'flash' could be artificially produced, without it being lightning: thus the 'distinctness of the flash depends on *what* it is expressing' (Pippin's italics). Yet the argument does not seem very convincing. Assuming that it is possible to produce a flash identical to that of lightning in artificial conditions (which may be difficult given the scale involved), presumably the most natural way to account for the difference would be to say that lightning is a *natural* electrical discharge (vs one artificially produced), not that the flash 'expresses' lightning.

But there is a deeper problem: in spite of having introduced a 'technical' concept of intention, expressivism still relies on the presence of intentions in the sense of the broadly Humean model. We can call such intentions 'framing intentions': while fairly indeterminate, they serve as a starting point for the carrying out of the relevant action. Ridley's would-be writer begins 'with a description of what he is after: "I want a word that means, roughly, such and such"' (2018: 42). A little further down, Ridley states that 'in the cases that I have mentioned the agent would have no difficulty in declaring his intention: 'I'm trying to find the right word', he might say (2018: 43). Ridley continues in expressivist spirit by saying that 'what he cannot do is specify in advance just which word that is'. The fact that its conditions of success cannot be specified in advance is what makes the action the *particular* action it is (a 'certain thing' rather than 'a thing of a certain kind' 2018: 42). But what makes the action an *action* is that it is the carrying out of the framing intention of finding the right word, even if the modality of such carrying out is not determinate at the time. This implicit reliance on the broadly Humean model of agency is confirmed by Ridley's explicit endorsement of Regenster's interpretation of the will to power,⁸ which he uses to re-describe expressivist actions: 'expressive undertakings are a subset of the class of 'challenging things' and are hence amongst the most natural of appropriate candidates, when an agent has a first-order desire to engage in them, to provide the will to power with determinate content' (2018: 127). So, there would be no 'expressivist undertaking' without a 'first-order desire' from which the relevant intention(s) arise(s): if this is true, then even the expressivist agent stands in a causal relation to her action, in which case it would seem that the deed is not everything and that there is, after all, a doer behind the deed.

⁸ 'The details of Regenster's defence of this interpretation are absorbing (...). Here, though, I propose simply to accept what he says, and to regard the will to power as the will to confront challenges—and prevail' (2018: 124).

‘THE DOING IS EVERYTHING’.

GM I 13 thus presents us with a dilemma between eliminativism and expressivism: either we give up on the event/deed distinction, at the risk of failing to make sense of agency, or we endorse it at the cost of failing to do justice to the thought that ‘the deed is everything’. I propose that closer attention to the use of processual verbs and nouns in the text may afford us a way forward.

It is just as absurd to ask strength not to express itself as strength, *not* to be a desire to overthrow, crush, become master, to be a thirst for enemies, resistance and triumphs, as it is to ask weakness to express itself as strength. A quantum of force is just such a quantum of drive, will, action, in fact it is nothing but this driving, willing and **effecting** [Wirken] and only the seduction of language (and the fundamental errors of reason petrified within it), which construes and misconstrues all **effecting** as conditional on an **effector** [Wirkendes], a ‘subject’, can make it appear otherwise. And just as the common people separates lightning from its flash and takes the latter to be a **doing, the effect** [Wirkung] of a subject, which is called lightning, popular morality separates strength from the manifestations of strength, as though there were an indifferent substratum behind the strong which had the *freedom* to manifest strength or not. But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind the **doing, effecting, becoming** [Thun, Wirken, Werden] ‘the doer’ is added to the doing as an afterthought, – the doing is everything. Basically, the common people double a **doing**; when they see lightning, they make a **doing-doing** [Thun-Thun] out of it: they posit the same **happening** [Geschehen], first as cause and then as its effect.

GM I 13, Nietzsche’s italics, amendments in **bold**.

Without wanting to make too much of translation issues, ‘doing’ seems a better translation for the key word ‘Thun’ than ‘deed’.⁹ Duden defines ‘Thun’ as ‘jemandes Ausführung einer Handlung, Beschäftigung mit etwas’: the carrying out (Ausführung) of an action, being occupied (beschäftigt) with something. In everyday German, the question ‘was tut er denn da?’ (‘what is he doing?’) suggests that the onlooker is witnessing an ongoing process without being sure what the action is. Both the dictionary and common use emphasise the ongoing, imperfective aspect of ‘Thun’ by contrast to ‘Tat’. This is confirmed *a contrario* by the one instance of ‘Tat’ in GM I 13: ‘as though the weakness of the weak were itself (...) a voluntary achievement, something wanted, chosen, a *deed* [That], an *accomplishment*’ (Nietzsche’s italics). A Tat is an ‘accomplishment’ [Verdienst], the finished result of a process: in that spirit, Tat was the word chosen by Goethe to translate the beginning of Genesis (‘Im Anfang war die Tat’). It is almost certain that Nietzsche knew this, which makes his choice of ‘Thun’ more significant.

What rides on this translation issue? It allows a key idea to come to the fore, namely that the main characteristic of a ‘doing’ is not that it originates in an agent but that it is an ongoing process.

⁹ My thanks to Fabian Freyenhagen for his help with translations.

This is emphasised by the claim in GM I 13 that ‘es giebt keine “Sein” hinter dem Thun, Wirken, Werden’. Carol Diethe (CUP) translates this as ‘there is no “being” behind the deed, its effect and what becomes of it’. Yet this seems to take Thun in the sense of Tat, as a completed action which can then have effects or undergo further changes. It also introduces the idea of a progression from the deed to its effect and what becomes of it further down the line, as if Nietzsche was hinting at a narrative of what may happen to a deed after it has been completed. Kaufman gives a better translation as ‘there is no “being” behind doing, effecting, becoming’. It is then natural to read ‘Wirken’ and ‘Werden’ as appositions specifying the meaning of ‘Thun’. The thought seems to be that a ‘doing’ counts as such not because it is the operation of an agent (note the impersonal infinitive forms in German, and the equally impersonal gerundive in English), but because it produces effects and changes through time. So, a doing is best characterised as a process, the temporal unfolding of a (series of) change(s) unified by internal norms of development.¹⁰

Are we back to eliminativism then (after a somewhat tortuous detour through translation issues)? For, it would be tempting to conclude from the above picture that there are only ‘strength events’, as Pippin puts it. This, however, would be too hasty. To see why, let us return once more to the examples of lightning and strength/weakness. While both are processual, there is an important difference between the two. The unfolding of the process which leads to the flash of lightning only requires that certain atmospheric conditions should be met. By contrast, strength and weakness in Nietzsche’s sense here (not the tensile strength of steel or the weakness of clay) require participation from the individuals they develop in. This is because otherwise the ‘smouldering of revenge and hatred’ in the weak would be analogous to the development of an undiagnosed and asymptomatic illness: it would happen at a sub-personal level and the weak would just be the passive site of the unfolding of a process they have no awareness of. As we shall see, this clashes with Nietzsche’s moral intuition that the weak are deceiving themselves. So, the thought conveyed by GM I 13 seems to be that doings are characterised by the fact that a process unfolds in the doer in such a way that s/he participates in it. But how should we understand such ‘participation’? Is the doer active or passive? In which sense(s) is s/he a ‘doer’? In the spirit of Nietzsche’s keen awareness of the importance of grammatical structures for the way we think, I now turn briefly to the middle voice to seek help with these questions.

TEACHINGS FROM THE GREEK MIDDLE VOICE: SELF-DECEPTION AS A MIDDLE-VOICED DOING IN GM I 13.

¹⁰ See for example Stewart (2012).

A good way to capture the type of engagement described by the middle voice is to start from the contrast with the active.¹¹ In the active, Benvéniste tells us, the grammatical subject is external to the action: '[active] verbs denote a process which accomplishes itself from the subject and outside of him' (1966: 172). For example, 'πολέμον ποιεῖ' (active) means 'he makes war' in the sense of making the war happen, for example by declaring it. Similarly, 'κοιμᾷ' (active) means he 'sleeps [someone]', i.e. he puts someone to sleep. Or again, 'γαμέο' (active) means 'I marry [you]', where the (typically male) agent gets the process of marriage underway. In such cases, the use of the active presupposes that the grammatical subject should be understood as a separate agent whose function is to initiate a process. By contrast, in the middle voice the diathesis is internal: the use of the middle forms 'indicates that something takes place in the person of the subject so as to affect him' (Gonda 1960: 49). To return to the previous examples, 'πολέμον ποιεῖται' (middle) means 'he is making war', this time not by declaring it but by fighting the war. 'Κοιμᾶται' means 'he sleeps himself' (he is sleeping). 'Γαμέομαι' is constructed with the dative, not the accusative, and is typically the form used by women, seen as less active than men. It can be translated as 'I am giving myself in marriage [to you]' but as Gonda indicates, the meaning of the phrase is closer to something like 'I respond to the process of marriage befalling me [in relation to you]'.

The contrast between the active and the middle voices is clear. In the active, the doer initiates a process (s/he is an agent in the etymological sense of the term). In the middle voice the process takes place in the doer, in such a way that she participates in it (she is 'internal' to the process). Consequently, middle-voiced forms typically involve a reciprocal relation between activity and passivity. This is most clear in what is called the 'reflexive' middle, in which the verb expresses an immediate self-relation. Whereas English requires a pronominal form to express a reflexive action such as 'I wash myself', ancient Greek only needs the middle 'λούωμαι'. The use of the middle conveys that the process of washing takes place in the doer, in such a way that the doer can equally describe her involvement with it as active or passive: I am washing myself, and I am being washed (by myself). In her study of 'Aristotle on Action', Coope (2007) notes that even in the case of non-pronominal translations such as 'I move' the use of the middle voice suggests by itself that the doer is both active and passive. This can be brought out by considering the difference, not just between the middle and the active, but between the middle, active and passive. Κίνεῖν (active infinitive) means 'to move/change' (something else); κίνεσθαι (passive) means 'to be

¹¹ Contrary to what the name suggests, the middle voice is not between the active and the passive: historically, the original grammatical opposition was between the middle voice and the active. The passive evolved out of the middle and often has the same verbal forms.

moved/changed'; but κίνεσθαι (middle) means something like: 'to undergo moving/changing'. The contrast between the passive and the middle suggests that it is possible to be moved without undergoing moving (if someone just lifts me and puts me somewhere else). By contrast, to undergo moving is to play an internal role in the moving in such a way that the latter can be described as active or passive: I move and I am moved (by myself).

What can we learn from this brief examination of the Greek middle voice? Firstly, it helps us to understand what it means for an agent to be the locus of the unfolding of a process. The process does not unfold in the agent like water is poured into a glass, or like an unknown illness grows inside us. The doer participates in the sense that she is aware that the process is unfolding, is affected by it and affects it in return. Secondly, what matters primarily to understand a middle-voiced doing is the perspective of the process itself: whether I wash myself or am being washed by myself is of less importance than the fact that the process of washing is unfolding in me, with my participation. From this perspective, the right question is not: 'is this a doing or a happening?', as in contemporary theories of agency, but rather something like: 'what is the process unfolding in the doer, and what is her engagement with it?'. Call this the 'middle-voiced question'. If I am right to think that GM I 13 invites us to think of at least some 'doings' as middle-voiced, then one would expect the middle-voiced question, and the above considerations on activity and passivity, to help us make sense of the text. I shall now argue that they do, and that this allows us to read GM I 13 in a different light, as drawing attention not so much to the creation of new values by the weak as to the specific *manner* in which such values were created: self-deception as a middle-voiced doing.

So, what is the relevant process? Nietzsche tells us that is the 'smouldering of hatred and revenge' in the weak. The rest of the passage implicitly answers the second part of the middle-voiced question by explaining what the engagement of the weak with the process consists in. The narrative presupposes what is described in the first few sentences of GM I 13, namely the belief that every event is a doing and that there is a doer 'behind' every deed. Given that Nietzsche's explanation for the formation of this belief is 'the seduction of language', and that most of (if not all) the time we are unaware of the ways in which grammatical structures shape our ways of thinking, it is plausible to think that this part of the story is sub-personal: the weak may not be aware that they hold this belief. Correlatively the belief in the agent as an initiator of action, albeit incorrect because it results from a grammatical falsification, is not a moral belief. However, things change when 'the entrenched, secretly smouldering emotions of revenge and hatred put this belief to their own use'. They do this by turning the belief into a different, but related, belief, which

‘they [hatred and revenge] defend passionately’: ‘the strong are free to be weak, and the birds of prey are free to be lambs’. At this point, the weak enter the scene and hold a speech. They ‘say to each other with the vindictive cunning of powerlessness: “let us be different from evil people, let us be good! (...) And a good person is (...) like us who are patient, humble and upright”’. The weak build on this new moral belief by inferring from it that they would be free to behave like the strong and that their ‘restraint’ is ‘something wanted, chosen’, a matter of ‘patient virtue’ rather than necessity.

It is the first time in the narrative of GM I 13 that the weak are shown to be doing anything. So, what is it that they do? From their perspective, the holding of the speech looks like an action in the broadly Humean sense outlined above. They form intentions (proximally: to speak, and more distally: to ‘construe their mode of existence as a particular accomplishment’) and carry these out by holding their speech. But recall that this speech is framed by the smouldering of revenge and hatred unfolding in the weak. From this perspective things look different: the weak now seem passive conduits for the smouldering of hatred and revenge, which ‘put the belief to their own use’. The speech of the weak looks like an instance of what Katsafanas calls ‘mere behaviour’, something which has the form of activity but in fact is the result of forces at work deep in the agent. From being agents of their speech, the weak have turned into patients.

Yet for the weak to be passive in this way, the smouldering of hatred and revenge would have to unfold in a sub-personal manner, on the model of the illness previously evoked. But this is not how GM I 13 presents the situation: the speech of the weak is said to be an instance of the ‘counterfeiting and self-deception of powerlessness’ (see also GM I 10, where ‘men of resentment (...) lie themselves into happiness’). This emphasis on mendacity suggests, firstly, that the virtues extolled as having intrinsic authority by the speech (such as patience, humility and uprightness) have instrumental value only: they allow the ‘lambs’ the satisfaction of revenge against the ‘birds of prey’. Secondly, it indicates that the speech does not express a commitment to truth but the ‘need to believe in an unbiased “subject” with freedom of choice’ (ibidem). On this picture, the weak have a background awareness that their speech is motivated by revenge and hatred: yet they ‘sanctify every lie’ out of their ‘instinct of self-preservation and [reactive] self-affirmation’. Accordingly, GM I 13 concludes that the reason the subject (...) has been until now the best doctrine on earth, is perhaps because it facilitated that sublime self-deception whereby the (...) weak of every kind could construe weakness itself as freedom’. So, what the weak are doing in holding their speech is deceiving themselves.

One may object that the fact that the weak are self-deceived does not mean that *they* are doing the deceiving: the self-deception could be sub-personal, and so not a doing at all. In Wallace's terms, the weak 'need not be aware, at any level, that the adoption of new values will bring about the [desired] effect' (Wallace 2007: 12n). In that case, then, the relevant values would be genuinely internalised. Textually, however, the fact that the speech of the weak is presented as an example of the '*cleverness* of the lower rank' (my italics) and a 'counterfeiting' (also in GM III 14) strongly suggests that the self-deception is intentional. Further, the absence of true internalisation of the relevant values is typically marked by a discrepancy between the beliefs professed by a person on the one hand, and her comportment on the other. GM I 13 portrays the weak as exhibiting just this discrepancy. The manner in which they hold their speech is not 'patient and humble': they speak to each other with the 'vindictive cunning of powerlessness'. They extol their own merits ('like us who are patient, humble and upright') in a way which is anything but humble (or upright).¹² This practical dissonance indicates that the weak are 'in some sense both aware and motivatedly not aware of their efficacious motives' (Poellner (2015): 199; also 203-210). Their motives are in principle available to them, but they have a pre-reflective intention to avoid self-knowledge: in Nietzsche's terms, they show 'mendacity to avoid admitting this hatred as hatred' (GM III 14).

So, Nietzsche's answer in GM I 13 to the second part of the middle-voiced question (what is the doer's engagement with the relevant process?) is something like: the weak engage with the unfolding of revenge and hatred within them by deceiving themselves into extolling the values that allow them to believe that their weakness is an accomplishment. In typical middle-voiced fashion (perhaps not so surprising given that *self*-deception has a reflexive structure), the weak are both active and passive: they deceive themselves because they intentionally avoid their pre-reflective awareness of their own motives becoming first personal, but they are also deceived in the sense that they are taken in by their own propaganda. Importantly, the possibility and coherence of such self-deception rests on the existence of an intermediary level between, on the one hand, unconscious contents which operate at a sub-personal level and do not come to awareness and, on the other hand, conceptually articulated, reflectively conscious perceptual contents or intentions. This level, which the phenomenological tradition calls 'pre-reflective',

¹² See also GM I 14: 'they speak of love, and they sweat'.

characterises contents which are phenomenally conscious, and so in principle available to conscious awareness, but which are not the focus of attention and so remain non-articulated.¹³

It would be wrong, however, to infer from GM I 13 that all middle-voiced doings are instances of self-deception. I now turn to instances of middle-voiced doings in Nietzsche's own experience, with a view to bringing out their phenomenology. I propose that such phenomenology involves three key features: (pre-)reflective awareness of being engaged in a process, responsiveness and absence of reflective control.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIDDLE-VOICED DOINGS.

EH, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, §3 - (...) The idea of revelation in the sense of something suddenly becoming *visible* and audible with unspeakable assurance and subtlety, something that throws you down and leaves you deeply shaken this simply describes the facts of the case. You listen, you do not look for anything, you take, you do not ask who is there; a thought lights up in a flash, with necessity, without hesitation as to its form, - I never had any choice. A delight whose incredible tension sometimes triggers a burst of tears, sometimes automatically hurries your pace and sometimes slows it down; a perfect state of being outside yourself, with the most distinct consciousness of a host of subtle shudders and shiverings down to the tips of your toes; a profound joy where the bleakest and most painful things do not have the character of opposites, but instead act as its conditions, as welcome components, as *necessary* shades within this sort of excess of light; an instinct for rhythmic relations that *spans wide expanses* of forms the length, the need for a rhythm that spans wide distances is almost the measure of the force of inspiration, something to balance out its pressure and tension... (p. 126, Nietzsche's italics)

Recall the middle-voiced question: 'what is the process unfolding in the doer, and what is her engagement with it?'. The answer to the first part of the question is: 'revelation' becoming 'visible and audible'. Nietzsche's engagement with the process begins with his becoming aware of the process: something suddenly becomes 'visible and audible (...), something that throws you down and leaves you deeply shaken'. This coming to awareness of himself as a 'medium' (*ibidem*) is traumatic. It is also first personal and conscious (Nietzsche knows that he is 'deeply shaken'). Nietzsche's engagement with the process unfolds in a set of pre-reflective responses which are initially presented in the second person, presumably as a rhetorical device to involve the reader directly. Firstly, 'you listen': the process of revelation makes something 'audible' for the first time.

¹³ There are many examples of such pre-reflective contents in Husserl or Sartre. We can be attracted by a person without having an articulated awareness of the fact that we are so inclined, nor of the reasons why. Similarly, as Poellner puts it, we can 'be actively aiming to bring about a certain state of affairs (as opposed to merely wishing for it or imagining it) without [our] intention-in-action being conceptually represented by [us] at the time of being engaged in the relevant physical or mental actions' (2015: 204).

But being audible is not the same thing as being listened to. Hearing is passive, the registering of sound waves on the inner ear. It is not within our control: we can't help hearing a noise if the relevant stimulus is ongoing, but we can fail to listen to it. Listening requires us to focus our attention on the relevant sensory content. This makes the listener less sensitive to other solicitations, in particular self-centred ones such as the possible discomfort or fearsome character of the experience of revelation. So, the listener is 'outside himself' in the sense that he is focused away from himself by the experience of listening, attuned to the external solicitations which the experience presents.

Secondly, 'you do not look for anything, you take'. While 'taking' seems the paradigm of an action starting from the agent, the context suggests that in this case taking could equally be described as a being given: 'everything offers itself up as the closest, simplest, most fitting expression'. In typical middle-voiced reversibility between active and passive, taking is receiving, which is why there is no need to 'look for anything': it is already there. Thirdly, 'a thought lights up in a flash' (yet another flash!): one may be tempted to view the individual as the passive site of such flashing. In the context of EH3, however, the 'lighting up' of the thought is more plausibly understood as enabled by the listener's attentiveness.

At this point Nietzsche speaks in the first person for the first time (to powerful rhetorical effect) and avows the experience as his: 'I never had any choice'. Again, the temptation is to read this in an eliminativist manner, as indicating that Nietzsche is just a passive vessel for revelation. But on a middle-voiced conception of agency, the idea that the doer 'never had any choice' is not an argument against their being a doer because the doing was never a question of choice in the first place (insofar as choice typically starts from the agent, involving the representation of possible options and the carrying out of an intention to pursue one of these). So, the observation that 'I never had any choice' is best read, not as an indicator of passivity, but as the recognition of the middle-voiced character of the doing as a response to finding oneself already engaged with revelation as a process. This is confirmed by the end of the passage, which states that 'all of this is involuntary to the highest degree but takes place as if in a storm of feelings of freedom, of unrestricted activity, of power, of divinity'. Finally, note that while Nietzsche is aware of the process, he does not have (nor seeks) reflective control over it ('all of this is involuntary to the highest degree'): his engagement is pre-reflective, a matter of attunement to the process unfolding in him.

Thus EH 3 presents a powerful evocation of a middle-voiced doing as finding oneself the 'medium' of revelation and responding non-reflectively, through attentiveness. The next passage is

different because this time the response is, at least in part, reflective: it takes the form of an ‘experiment’. The relevant process is ‘distress philosophising in the sick thinker’.¹⁴ That the sick thinker has reflective awareness of being the medium of this process is taken for granted, since he responds with a deliberate experiment:

Here an experiment is possible. Just like a traveller who resolves to wake up at a certain hour and then calmly gives himself up to sleep, so too we philosophers, should we become ill, temporarily surrender with body and soul to the illness - we shut our eyes to ourselves, as it were. And as the traveller knows that something is *not* asleep, something that will count the hours and wake him up, we, too, know that the decisive moment will find us awake, that something will then leap forward and catch the mind *in the act*, i.e. in its weakness or repentance or hardening or gloom, and whatever else the pathological states of the mind are called that on healthy days are opposed by the *pride* of the mind (for the old saying still holds: ‘the proud mind, the peacock, and the horse are the three proudest animals on earth’).
GS, p.5. (Nietzsche’s italics)

The sick thinker’s response relies on the formation of two reflective intentions: to perform the experiment itself, and to ‘surrender with body and soul to the illness’. This is illustrated by a metaphor, to ‘shut our eyes to ourselves’.¹⁵ This is different from going to sleep (if sleep is taken to be a sub-personal state): shutting our eyes to ourselves means *not* to focus our attention on ourselves so that something else acquires the possibility to register on the ‘surface’ of consciousness (EH: 97). The experiment consists in seeking an intermediary, pre-reflective state in which self-awareness is peripheral only. So, shutting one’s eyes to oneself is the same as listening, but taken in reverse: listening is a focusing of attention on a determinate content which turns attention away from the self. Shutting our eyes to ourselves is a turning of attention away from the self, intended to allow something yet indeterminate to appear.

This is illustrated by the analogy with sleep. A traveller who goes to sleep ‘knows that something is *not* asleep, something that will count the hours and wake him up’. Presumably, this ‘something’ counts the hours because the traveller has formed, prior to going to sleep, the intention of waking up at a certain time. What makes this case different from a straightforward case of agency as the forming and carrying out of intentions is that the sleeping agent does not

¹⁴ Although the passage is written in the third person, given the decisive influence Nietzsche attributed to illness when reflecting on his own philosophising there is little doubt that the excerpt can be taken to apply to him.

¹⁵ Interestingly, Nietzsche describes self-deception by using a very similar metaphor in the *Antichrist*: it is a ‘closing of one’s eyes to oneself’ (46). On my reading both are middle-voiced doings; yet whereas self-deception is a way of blinding oneself to one’s true commitments, the shutting of one’s eyes in GS: 5 has the opposite function. It allows epistemic access to certain truths about the self (in this case, that it pathologically gives in to weakness or repentance) which would otherwise remain inaccessible.

have reflective control over the process. The case of the sick philosopher is both similar and dissimilar (which is why sleep is an analogy only). It is similar because just as sleep allows the intention to wake up to run in the background and manifest itself at the right time, in the same way the focusing of attention away from the self (the shutting our eyes to ourselves) allows 'something' to 'leap forward and catch the mind *in the act*, i.e. weakness or repentance or hardening or gloom'. This 'something' is not specified directly but the next sentence identifies the '*pride of the mind*' (Nietzsche's italics in both cases), as what 'on healthy days' opposes the 'pathological states of the mind'. If one considers 'weakness, repentance, hardening or gloom' as examples of such pathological states, then plausibly what catches the mind 'in the act' is the proud, healthy part of the mind that the focusing of conscious attention away from the sick self has allowed to emerge.¹⁶

There are two key differences with the case of sleep. The first is the much greater indeterminacy of the process. The traveller forms a determinate intention (to wake himself up at X hour) and the outcome of the process is accordingly predictable, although not guaranteed. The sick philosopher, however, only forms the vague intention to focus away from his sick self – an intention which may be difficult to carry out in the first place because it draws attention (*a contrario*) to the sick self, and so may seem self-defeating. Since the intention is largely indeterminate (in particular as regards what would count as the appropriate means), what its carrying out will allow to manifest itself, and the form taken by such manifestation, are equally indeterminate. Contrary to the traveller, who expects to wake up at a time he has chosen himself, the sick philosopher cannot know in advance in which act his sick mind will be caught, nor when, nor how. It is not even clear that he can know in advance what exactly will happen (remember that Nietzsche recounts the experience retrospectively, in the light of his posterior knowledge). All the sick philosopher can do is set in place the conditions under which something will happen, in a middle-voiced manner. Insofar as he turns attention away from himself, he is active. Insofar as his mind is 'caught in the act', he is passive. As with the sleeper, there is no reflective control over the process.

Thus EH 3 and GS 5 present us with two different cases of middle-voiced doings.¹⁷ The common points are that in both cases the doer becomes aware that he is engaged with a process (revelation becoming audible, illness philosophising in oneself) which he has not initiated, and

¹⁶ Note in this respect the middle-voiced formulation: the sick thinker neither awakens nor is awakened but is 'found awake' by the 'decisive moment'.

¹⁷ Further examples of middle-voiced doings include the well-known EH 9 p. 97 and EH 4 p. 118.

responds to this process in ways which can be described both as active and passive. His responses can be pre-reflective (as in the case of revelation) or reflective (as in the case of the experiment and the shutting of one's eyes on oneself). However, even when the response is reflective its aim is to generate a state of pre-reflectiveness in which an up-to-then unknown part of the self can become manifest, in ways which are very hard to foresee. In neither case does the doer have reflective control.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that we should consider the meaning of the word 'Thun', and its relation to the other process verbs in GM I 13, more carefully: the 'doing', not the deed, is everything. In the case of middle-voiced doings, the doer is both passive in that she finds herself already engaged in a process, and active in that she responds to it. There is no doer 'behind' the doing because it is the doer's (pre-) reflective awareness of being engaged with an internal process which constitutes her as a doer. The doer finds herself in the doing, both in the sense of discovering herself *in medias res* and of becoming the doer she is through her response to the process unfolding in her.

From this perspective, the claim that the 'doing is everything' serves to displace the dominant opposition between deeds and events, agents and patients. As we saw, the most relevant question to think of middle-voiced doings is not 'is this a doing or a happening?' but rather 'what is the process unfolding in the doer, and what is her engagement with it?'. I have argued that using this question as a lens to read GM I 13 puts the excerpt in a new light, as presenting us, not only with a criticism of common morality, but with a key example of a middle-voiced doing: self-deception. Finally, I have looked at two other instances of middle-voiced doings in Nietzsche's work and brought out three features of their first-person phenomenology: pre-reflective awareness of being engaged with a process, responsiveness and absence of reflective control.

There would be much more to say about middle-voiced doings but for now I wish to emphasise two points. The first is that for Nietzsche not all doings are middle-voiced. It is only when doers find themselves engaged with an internal process and respond to it that they are acting in a middle-voiced way. Much of what we do can more immediately be understood from the perspective of the agent, as the carrying out of prior (or expressive) intentions. It is also possible for an individual to start with a prior intention and then to engage in a middle-voiced manner with the process that her intention has started (as in the case of the 'experiment'): perhaps the experience of writing may itself be understood in this way. We start the process of writing intentionally but once we find ourselves in it we comport ourselves in a middle voice manner, by

responding to what we write as it unfolds: we are both affected by the process and affect it in return. At any rate, middle-voiced doings are only a part, albeit arguably an important part, of what we do.

However, the thought that it is best to start from the agent's intentions to understand agency has become so dominant that it is very easy to overlook the existence of middle-voiced doings, with their reliance on the doer's awareness of a process unfolding in her and their trademark combination of activity and passivity. If I am right to think that some of Nietzsche's work can be read as drawing attention to the middle-voiced aspects of life, then perhaps this may serve as a prophylactic against the dominance of the agent (and of the active voice) in understanding all exercises of agency.

Secondly, Nietzsche clearly attaches a positive value to at least some middle-voiced doings. The case of self-deception is ambivalent: if GM is right it has been the cause of much harm in human history. Yet Nietzsche also sees self-deception as protecting us from truths which would make it hard for us to carry on living. But Nietzsche unequivocally values the middle-voiced doings described in EH §3 and GS 5. The thought seems to be that in each case, the middle-voiced character of the doing allowed him to achieve what he could not have done through a more straightforward exercise of agency (show appropriate receptiveness to revelation, having his mind caught 'in the act' of giving in to pathological states), and that there is genuine worth in being able to do this. So, there definitely is a place for middle-voiced doings in our ethical life. In previous work (Han-Pile 2009; 2017) I started exploring this place in relation to two of Nietzsche's main ethical ideals, *amor fati* and the affirmation of life. Further exploration will be work for another paper.

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