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Conferencia Internacional / International Conference

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Actas / Proceedings

**Breeding, Taming, and Eugenics: Nietzsche's
Naturalist Morality of Cultivation**

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Introduction

Nietzsche's endorsement of a "morality of breeding" or "cultivation" (*Züchtung*), which he opposes to the morality of "taming" or "domestication" (*Zähmen*) (*TI*, "Improvers" 5), invites worry that his philosophy may be compatible with ethically dangerous forms of eugenics and, consequently, with the historically associated, abhorrent practices of discrimination, racism, and genocide. While there is a general, if not absolute, consensus that Nietzsche does not *actively* endorse discrimination or violence, the failure to clearly exclude such egregious views would be sufficient reason to dismiss any positive contribution Nietzsche might make to ethical philosophy.

In this paper, I directly oppose Nietzsche's endorsement of a morality of breeding to all forms of comparative, positive eugenics: the use of genetic selection to introduce positive improvement in individuals or the species, based on negatively or comparatively defined traits. This category includes social Darwinist theories common in the United States and the United Kingdom in the early twentieth century, the racial eugenic theories of National Socialism, and contemporary "liberal," non-coercive eugenics.

I begin by explaining Nietzsche's contrast between two broad categories of morality: breeding and taming. I argue that the ethical dangers of positive eugenics are grounded in their status as forms of taming, which preserves positively evaluated character traits and types through the active de-selection of negatively evaluated ones. The morality of taming is not a form of selection, but de-selection: the production of counter or anti-traits and types. Consequently, in its attempt to improve humanity, it tends necessarily toward violence as the elimination of de-selected forms of human life. In contrast, Nietzsche's morality of breeding selects traits and types by protecting them from de-selection—specifically, by attacking moral ideas, values, and practices designed to eliminate them. It tends not towards the destruction but preservation of types; its negativity targets not life but the ideas that disable, disempower, and eradicate forms of life. I argue, further, that the fundamental ethical difference between breeding and taming, and so between Nietzschean morality and eugenics, is found in their attitudes toward the natural world. The violence of eugenics as taming is grounded in its status as anti-natural, while Nietzsche's morality of breeding resists violence through

its foundational affirmation of the conditions and limitations of the natural world: its resolute moral naturalism.

Finally, I apply my interpretation of breeding and taming to two cases of comparative, positive eugenics: the historical case of racial eugenics and the so-called “designer baby” case in contemporary liberal eugenics. Nietzsche must condemn both as forms of the anti-natural morality of taming, to which the morality of breeding is diametrically opposed.

I. Breeding as Selective Empowerment, Taming as De-selective Disempowerment

Nietzsche does not explicitly say whether “breeding” is meant literally, figuratively, or both. Given his well-known Lamarckian belief that individually developed traits can be inherited by offspring, it is likely that Nietzsche includes biological reproduction as part of his conception of breeding. However, we cannot limit his usage to the literal, and we should give priority to the figurative meaning. In his only extended discussion of a concrete example of the morality of breeding, the Hindu laws of Manu, Nietzsche includes marriage customs as well as forms of social, political, and spiritual discipline, suggesting that biological breeding is included only as a method of reproducing *psychological* traits and types (*TI*, “Improvers of Mankind” 3).

With this in mind, my discussion will assume that breeding refers to the selection of psychologically, not biologically, identified types, and leave open the question of whether breeding reproduces types biologically, through social institutions and training, or both. I will also focus on breeding and taming as general categories, not specific instances, so my discussion will not include the specific traits or character types a Nietzschean morality of breeding might promote (although it will suggest that Nietzschean morality preserves from deselection *all* true traits and types, including non-selected types).

I will begin by showing that Nietzsche’s distinction of moralities of breeding and taming is continuous with his critical contrast of natural and anti-natural forms of morality. We can identify breeding as natural and taming as anti-natural in three key ways: first, in their effects upon natural affects and abilities (their relation to human nature); second, in their consequences for the natural diversity of types in the human species (their relation to natural contingency); and third, in the destructiveness of their methods of morally transforming humanity (their relation to natural change). I will first consider their effects upon human nature.

It should be noted that Nietzsche’s notion of moral breeding does not imply a contrast between natural and artificial forms of human development. *Züchtung* can also suggest “selection,” as in H.G. Bronn’s 1860 influential German edition of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, which translates “natural selection” as “*natürliche Züchtung*.” This accidental interpretive twist in the German reception of Darwin is fortuitous, since for Nietzsche there is no essential divide between natural and non-natural selection. Breeding and selection both suggest the development of the species through the preservation, reproduction, or extinction of traits and types – a process that remains

natural, whether the product of accident or human intervention, because both processes operate by the contingent preservation of natural traits.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche does believe there are “natural” and “anti-natural” moralities and ways of intervening in the process of natural selection. Anti-natural moralities are distinctive in their negative foundation, method, and purpose: they express a “condemnation” of “the instincts of life,” while natural moralities are “dominated by an instinct of life” (*TI*, “Morality as Anti-Nature” 4). That is, natural morality selects and preserves human affects, in turn preserving the character traits and types grounded in the affects, while anti-natural morality selects against them; it seeks to “annihilate” (*vernichten*) or “excise” (*ausschneiden*) negatively evaluated aspects of human nature and, in so doing, eliminates the variation they bring to human personalities and types.

Anti-natural moralities are, consequently, against nature in the sense that they do not enhance the natural process of selection but work against it: they do not select, but rather de-select; they do not breed traits into individuals and the species, but rather breed them out. They produce supposed “improvement” by removing undesirable natural traits rather than by authentically selecting, choosing from, and preserving natural traits.

In contrast, natural moralities are authentically selective, because they directly affirm and preserve traits, and only indirectly and accidentally negate non-selected traits. Natural moral negations are indirect, because they serve more primary affirmations. When a natural morality condemns, it does so in order to promote another affect, trait, or form of life and character: “Some commandment of life is fulfilled through a certain canon of ‘shall’ and ‘shall not’” (*TI*, “Morality” 4). Unlike the thoroughgoing condemnation of anti-natural moral judgments, natural morality negates only negations, it rejects only counter-traits: those that are harmful to selected traits: “Some hindrance and hostile element on life’s road is thereby removed.” Consequently, natural moralities condemn only in the form of transformation, not extermination; they do not eliminate a troublesome desire, but rather seek to “spiritualize, beautify, deify,” to find an alternate form of its expression, thus preserving and affirming it (*TI*, “Morality as Anti-Nature” 1).

This difference between natural and anti-natural forms of morality is also the decisive difference between the moralities of breeding and taming, an opposition that Nietzsche introduces in the section of *Twilight of the Idols* entitled “The ‘Improvers’ of Mankind.” The morality of taming, he says, does not actually improve individuals, but weakens them: “they become sick by the depressing emotion of fear, by pain, wounds, and hunger” (*TI*, “Improvers” 2). In keeping with the category of anti-natural morality, taming is described as condemnation, negation, and the removal of characteristics: sickness, fear, and pain as the direct negation of health, confidence, and happiness. Although Nietzsche does not directly describe the contrasting form, the morality of breeding, its character is clear from the contrast: if taming weakens and sickens, then breeding strengthens and enhances health. While it might be objected that this claim depends on Nietzsche’s questionable evaluative assumptions about strength and health, it is, on the contrary, a simple, non-evaluative, and substantive distinction: taming disempowers and disables, while breeding empowers and enables (regardless of what positive or negative value we might attach to a given power or ability).

Consider a literal example: while I might, in the process of breeding a horse for its swiftness, breed out other traits, such as the horse's unique color, the negative effect on other traits is a contingent one, extrinsic to breeding's purpose or method. Breeding is cultivation; it preserves and enhances, enables and empowers. Taming, in contrast, is an anti-natural moral method: it does not preserve and enhance desirable powers, but de-selects and exterminates undesirable ones. Taking, again, a literal example: to domesticate an animal is to breed out the traits of size, strength, aggressiveness, and independence. Even if such traits are truly harmful or undesirable, the method remains one of de-selection, disabling, and disempowering. And, while it is true of domestic animal breeding that we sometimes breed positive traits—for example, sociability in dogs—these are not properly cases of “taming” at all, but the breeding of a different variety of domesticated dog. The crucial distinction is whether the principal aim is negative or positive in relation to the trait: whether the goal is to reduce or enhance a characteristic or ability.

Nietzsche's distinction of moralities of breeding and taming is, then, continuous with that of the natural and anti-natural. Moreover, their positive or negative relation to nature determines their consequences for life as empowering or disempowering, enabling or disabling—generally, as beneficial or harmful to life.

II. Breeding as Proliferation and Variation, Taming as Reduction and Normalization

Breeding and taming also reflect Nietzsche's contrast of natural and anti-natural moralities in their relation to the natural world as a whole. As a natural morality that selects and preserves abilities rather than deselected and disempowers, breeding affirms nature as a whole in its basic characteristic of contingency. It affirms nature as accidental, endless selection, even while it selects intentionally. Breeding tends necessarily toward proliferation, the preservation of new types, as well as toward variation, through the preservation of the diversity of types. Taming, in contrast, tends toward reduction, the elimination of negatively evaluated types, as well as toward normalization, the universal reproduction of a single moral type in all members of the species.

For Nietzsche, variation and proliferation are processes intrinsic to natural selection and development. Natural processes have no governing aim; their contingency thwarts every attempt to bring human development to a single, lasting end. The human individual, he says, “is not the subject of an attempt to attain to an ‘ideal of man’ or an ‘ideal of happiness’ or an ‘ideal of morality’—it is absurd to want to hand over his nature to some purpose or other. We invented the concept ‘purpose’: in reality purpose is lacking” (*TI*, “Errors” 8). Given this absence of teleological end, nature tends inevitably toward a rich diversity of contradictory, blossoming and perishing, forms and types; it is characterized by a “wealth, luxury, even absurd prodigality” that is indifferent to human evaluations of progress or perfection and tends, on the contrary, toward the “defeat of the stronger, the more privileged, the fortunate exceptions” (*TI*, “Expeditions” 14)

This natural condition of contingency, purposelessness, and impermanence does not support moral attempts to transform humanity as a species into a single improved or perfected type. Any morality that seeks to reduce humanity to a single type is directly at odds with a fundamental limitation of nature: “Reality shows us an enchanting wealth of types, the luxuriance of a prodigal play and change of forms: and does some pitiful journeyman moralist say at the sight of it: ‘No! Man ought to be different?’” (*TI*, “Morality” 6). Consequently, by attempting to universally realize a single, perfected human type, taming acts against nature’s tendencies toward proliferation and variation. Its ideal is “anti-natural” in the dangerous sense that it can succeed only through the active destruction of naturally proliferating variations from that ideal. If everyone cannot be tamed, if every individual cannot be transformed into the “last man,” then the last man can be realized only through the elimination of every other. In the next section, we will see that breeding, in direct contrast, does not eliminate non-selected types. Its form of selection, like that of nature, is the preservation of types from extinction, not the destruction of other types or the direct reduction of variation within the species.

III. Breeding as Preservation of Types and Taming as Destruction through Anti-Types

The final way that breeding and taming reflect Nietzsche’s distinction of natural and anti-natural moralities is in their relation to natural change —specifically, in the destructiveness of their methods of preserving selected types against non-selected types. Unlike taming, breeding does not actively eliminate non-selected traits and types. It is “selective” in the truest sense: it refuses to de-select. In keeping with Nietzsche’s commitment to the affirmation of the whole of existence and the love of fate (“*amor fati*”), breeding does not engage in true destruction, since it only selects against anti-types or false types: types defined by the absence of traits. Breeding destroys only moral ideals and practices that seek to produce such anti-types through active disabling and disempowering; it affirms, in contrast, all variations of true types within the diversity of the species.

This indirect affirmation of non-selected authentic types may appear to be inconsistent with Nietzsche’s repeated suggestion that breeding involves destruction. Nietzsche often uses the language of violence figuratively, but there are troubling places where he seems to directly or indirectly condone true harm. For example, in one deeply troubling passage, he says that the “higher breeding (*Höherzüchtung*) of humanity” calls for “the remorseless destruction (*schonungslose Vernichtung*) of all degeneracies and parasites (*Entartenden und Parasitischen*)” (*EH*, “Birth of Tragedy” 4), while in another, he complains that Christian morality preserves “what ought to perish” (*BGE* 62).

We should note that Nietzsche uses *Vernichtung* for “destruction,” which he has already, in *Twilight of the Idols*, identified with antinatural morality’s extermination of the passions (*TI*, “Morality as Anti-Nature” 1). More importantly, such comments, while not figurative, do not refer to the destruction of types as collections of human individuals, but of types as such. It is not the perishing of beings but forms of character, not persons but forms of life. For example, in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche

suggests we can reverse the development of bad conscience (the principal harmful effect of moral taming), by fusing the feeling of guilt to unnatural rather than natural instincts (*GM II: 24*). This is a paradigmatic case of what Nietzsche means by “destruction” and the refusal to preserve what “ought to perish”: here he is calling for the destruction of the guilt-ridden personality, the elimination of bad conscience as a form of human life.

The priest, in contrast, responds to the suffering of the guilty by preserving their type. By offering temporary relief in the form of forgiveness and penance, by continuing to interpret suffering as moral punishment for sin, the priest preserves not individual lives, but guilty conscience as a form of personality. Nietzsche’s reinterpretation of suffering as the innocence of becoming is an attempt to destroy this form of life: to end the reproduction of guilty character by destroying the interpretation of suffering that regenerates it. In effect, Nietzsche’s misleading and provocative endorsement of destruction means, not that we should harm or let perish those who suffer, but that we should cease harming those who do *not* suffer. What ought to perish is the systematic reproduction of a destructive form of personality, not its victim.

Moreover, this destruction of personalities rather than persons is not accidentally beneficial. It follows necessarily from breeding’s selective character that it cannot select against true types, but only against false types: forms of character defined negatively, based in values and practices that actively disempower, disable, and exterminate true, positively defined character types. Nietzsche’s dangerous, irresponsible language of “degeneracies and parasites” refers to these negatively characterized forms of personality. They are degenerate (*Entartet*) or declining as forms, because they disempower and disable. They are anti-kinds rather than kinds (*Arten*), existing parasitically upon the traits and types they weaken or destroy.

Consequently, breeding does not authentically destroy at all. In its destruction of anti-traits and types, it does not remove form but preserve it. In doing so, breeding preserves all true types, including the non-selected, by destroying the values and practices that would eliminate them, by protecting the existence of character as such from the morality of taming, which, as authentically destructive, seeks the eradication of character as such in the universal realization of a negatively defined moral ideal.

IV. Comparative Eugenics as Morality of Taming: A Nietzschean Critique

We are now in a position to conclude that all comparative, positive forms of eugenics are instances of the morality of taming, share in its dangerous tendency toward destructiveness, and are diametrically opposed to Nietzsche’s morality of breeding. By comparative, positive eugenics, I mean the promotion of traits valued positively, but based in comparison, such as evaluations of superiority and inferiority. I will begin with the most extreme case: historical forms of racial eugenics that have led to racism, discrimination, oppression, and genocide. I will then close the paper with a discussion of contemporary “liberal” eugenics and the so-called designer baby case.

The principal characteristic of racial eugenics is its foundation in what Nietzsche calls the slavish mode of evaluation: its concept of the good, the health of the race, is

negatively defined in relation to a more primary negative evaluation, the racist identification of one or more out-group as inferior or degenerate. This negative foundation grounds the primary, supposedly positive, concept of “purity.” The good is equivalent to the elimination of evil: racial superiority is defined by what it excludes rather than what it includes, by the absence of traits rather than by their presence.

As in the morality of taming, racial eugenics produces a moral ideal that rejects competing types. Because the ideal is both universal (claiming superiority on the level of the species) and negative (defined as the exclusion of an outgroup), it cannot exist alongside competing types. Like the negative anti-types of taming, the racial eugenic ideal is realized precisely through the direct negation of competing types, and so it tends necessarily toward domination, oppression, and violence. Consequently, racial eugenics is clearly an instance of the morality of taming. Indeed, any eugenic theory whose conception of superiority is universal and grounded in direct negation must be a morality of taming. The distance between Nietzsche’s morality of breeding from ethically dangerous historical forms of eugenics is not simply substantial, but absolute: they are related only in their direct opposition to each other.

Finally, we can conclude that contemporary “liberal,” non-coercive varieties of positive eugenics also fall into the category of the morality of taming, and for the same reason: their positivity is an illusion. They do not select for true traits, but against them. This is also the basis of their ethical failure: they do not truly benefit the selected, but rather harm the de-selected.

I will focus on perfectionist liberal eugenics, in which parents use direct genetic intervention to enhance their child’s abilities or traits (sometimes referred to as “designer baby” cases). The ethical worry in such cases is that genetic enhancements give such children an unjust social and economic advantage over others. However, I have emphasized the positivity of Nietzsche’s morality of breeding —its affirmation of ability, power, and difference. Surely, it might be argued, this includes the affirmation of *superior* ability? Must we, then, conclude that Nietzsche would endorse liberal perfectionist eugenics as a true morality of breeding?

On the contrary, perfectionist eugenics is a morality of taming, since designer baby cases do not involve the selection of truly positive abilities, but rather the de-selection of falsely perceived disabilities. Since we are concerned only about cases where fairness or justice is endangered, I will limit the argument to cases involving the introduction of abilities significantly superior to the norm, for example, superior intelligence or beauty.

Perfectionist eugenics selects abilities not for their own sake but for their relative value; it selects *comparative* abilities. But a comparative ability is not a different kind of ability. For example, being more intelligent than someone else is not an ability different in kind from being intelligent —it is one and the same ability, evaluated relationally. So, parents who genetically select for intelligence are not really selecting *for* intelligence, but *against* average or inferior intelligence, perceived as a disability. Moreover, this deselection is of a falsely perceived disability: inferior intelligence is only comparatively negative —in itself, it is a positive ability. The parents are not really de-selecting average or inferior intelligence in their own child, but instead de-selecting intellectual superiority in other children. The target of their genetic intervention is not their child, but

the social norm against which their child will be measured. While they claim to select for a positive ability in their own child, they are instead producing a negative, relative disability in other children.

Consequently, perfectionist eugenics is a morality of taming, characterized by de-selection rather than selection, disempowerment rather than empowerment, the reduction and normalization of types rather than their variation and proliferation, and active harm to the de-selected, rather than the protection of the differentiated types. We may conclude that Nietzsche's morality of breeding is opposed in every way and to every form of eugenics that selects for negatively or comparatively defined identities, traits, or abilities. Far from being compatible with ethically dangerous forms of eugenics, it provides us with a critical basis for their decisive rejection.