Beyond Ethical Egoism: A Clarification of the Nietzschean Noble Soul

While it is true that James Rachels concludes his essay “Ethical Egoism” with the line, “It is this realization, that we are on a par with one another, that is the deepest reason why our morality must include some recognition of the needs of others, and why, then, Ethical Egoism fails as a moral theory,” he also prefaces this statement with a conveniently sly caveat: “Any moral doctrine that assigns greater importance to the interests of one group than to those of another is unacceptably arbitrary unless there is some difference between the members of the groups that justifies treating them differently” (Rachels 199, emphasis added). It is precisely the italicized text where a Nietzschean philosophy departs from Rachels. Nietzsche argues that there are differences between members of two groups or classes that, in fact, do make one class “so special,” to use Rachels’s wording and emphasis (Rachels 199). Contrarily, Rachels sees no fundamental difference between groups of human beings because they all have similar desires. This, he claims, is why we should care about the interests of other people: “their needs and desires are comparable to our own” (Rachels 199).

I will argue in this paper that Rachels’ attack on ethical egoism is primarily an attack on an unsophisticated and possessive driven materialist philosophy. This philosophy, propounded by the likes of Ayn Rand, and hijacked from a more thorough, persuasive, and comprehensible Nietzschean philosophy of the soul, erroneously replaces Nietzsche’s “noble” with a simplistic “self-interest.”

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1 What I mean by materialist in this sense is not the same materialism of Marx. Materialism here simply represents the desire to control, own, or exploit physical and material goods.
However, before we go deeper into the issue, it will be necessary to clarify just what Nietzsche argues in his *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

**Nietzsche Summarized**

Ever famously beginning *On the Genealogy of Morals* by discussing “these English psychologists,” Nietzsche immediately calls upon philosophers to quit thinking unhistorically. He decries the notion that the concept “good” evolved ahistorically in approval of unegoistic actions deemed useful. Instead, Nietzsche explores the history of the term “good.” He finds that it originated in relation to “the good themselves,” those who displayed goodness, “the noble, powerful, high-stationed and high-minded,” those “of the first rank, in contradistinction to all the low, low-minded, common and plebeian.” In this way, the term “good” did not originate with utility as others had supposed. Rather, it originated out of power, out of a “higher ruling order in relation to a lower order,” whereby “the origin of language itself” became “an expression of power on the part of the rulers” This is how the dichotomy of “good” and “bad” was actually established (Nietzsche 111-3).

However, somewhere along the line, a priestly class (exemplified by Nietzsche in the Jews) inverted the valuation of “good” and “bad” to become “good” and “evil.” The priests, Nietzsche contends, are vengeful and hateful of the vigorous and knightly noblesse, and so initiate the “slave revolt” in morality by which weakness, lowliness, sickness, and ugliness (among other qualities) become “good,” and power and strength, noble qualities as Nietzsche sees it, become “evil.” Moreover, we no longer see this slave morality that began with the Jews because over the course of 2,000 years, it has won (Nietzsche 120-2).
In Nietzsche’s opinion, this slave morality has allowed the weak and clever to gain power by beginning with *ressentiment*, a resentment of noble morality. This resentment thrives on a “hostile, external world.” It points its finger at that world, claiming that it is evil, whereas the sufferers and victims of “evil” are the “good.” The person of *ressentiment* shames those who do not need this hostile external world to thrive. Those who Nietzsche sees as noble (and slave morality views as evil) affirm themselves positively. (Nietzsche 124-5). They seek to identify their lowly opposite so that they can “affirm” themselves “more gratefully and triumphantly.” The noblesse is active whereas the slave is passive (Nietzsche 126). The noblesse respects enemies because only through competition can he achieve honor and distinction, whereas the person of *ressentiment* views the enemy as evil (Nietzsche 127).

Further demonstrating his point, Nietzsche compares the weak (person of *ressentiment* with a slave morality) to a lamb, and the strong (the noble) to a bird of prey. “That lambs dislike great birds of prey” Nietzsche writes, “does not seem strange: only it gives no ground for reproaching these birds of prey for bearing off little lambs” (Nietzsche 133). He claims that asking of strength to contain itself is ridiculous, that if one is strong, why should that person not realize their strength? Why should they contain that expression of their being? Why should they not be living fully and vigorously (Nietzsche 133)? In reality, the vengefulness and hatred of slave morality condemns a bird of prey for being what it is: a bird of prey, the strong (Nietzsche 134).

And so, a morality that praises lowliness, sickliness, unworthiness as worthy, and weakness as strength has been beaten into the conscience of western society, limiting the truly strong and noble, shaming them, labeling them “evil.”
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Rachels in the Context of Nietzsche

Rachels sees most humans as having the same desires and needs, and from this draws the conclusion that we are all on par with one another. One problem with this is that the conclusion does not necessarily follow from the statement “most humans have the same desires and needs.” Nietzsche would not disagree that humans have the same desires and needs. In fact, he would argue that all humans have one very basic desire-- the will to power, in which “it will want to grow, expand, draw to itself, gain ascendancy-- not out of any morality or immorality, but because it lives, and because life is will to power” (Nietzsche, BGE 194). In this, Nietzsche looks beyond morality because he is trying to express that a will to power-- a will to achieve the noble, to be strong in spirit-- is imbibed in life itself. It is the product of no morality, indeed, “it lives.” The will to power is the bird of prey because the bird of prey exists. In this sense, people are not “on par” with one another because some are created for strength and others for weakness.

Rachels might claim that such a doctrine is “arbitrary” because he grossly misunderstands Nietzsche’s “will to power,” that which constitutes “nobility,” the only motivation that truly flows from life itself. Rachels, in his critique, replaces this “master morality” with the simplistic “self-interest.” Indeed, he writes, “Ethical Egoism would have each person assign greater importance to his or her own interests than to the interests of others. But there is no general difference between oneself and others, to which each person can appeal, that justifies this difference in treatment” (Rachels 199). However Nietzsche’s “noble” and Rachels’s “self-interest” are not synonymous. As mentioned above, Nietzsche’s “noble” stems from a will

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3 I, of course, realize that Rachels is not directly responding to Nietzsche, but I would like to treat it as though he is so that we might salvage Nietzsche’s philosophy from the odd “Ethical Egoism” it seems to have become.
to power. This is something embedded in the nature of life itself. Indeed, there may be some who are not strong enough to become the noble spirit or members of the noble class. Rachels’s philosophy interprets this as meaning that there is “ourselves and all the rest,” and that we regard the interests of our own class as more important than all the interests of others (Rachels 199).

Again, this is where Rachels would grossly misread a truly Nietzschean philosophy. For Nietzsche, there exists not “ourselves and all the rest.” Rather, there exists the noble class and the slave class. Of course, according to Nietzsche, slave morality has inverted the “good/bad” dichotomy to the “good/evil” dichotomy whereby a slave morality triumphs. Yet at a time when the more appropriate “good/bad” dichotomy ruled, the master morality also dominated. This morality did not invert life-affirming, human values like the slave morality does. So, with such a morality, one does not have “ourselves and all the rest.” They have the strong and the weak-- the strong earning their place through fulfilling a will to power; the weak knowing their place in their weakness. In this sense, the weak can be an “ourselves” in the context of Rachels’s quote, but it does not view its interests as more or less important than those of the nobility. The weak’s interest is in being weak. The nobility’s interest is in being strong. A noble class by Nietzsche’s standards affirms life, and is natural to life. This is something that the strong, as well as the weak, must accept.

There is more. Not only would Rachels’s conception of “ourselves and all the rest” be a false reading of Nietzsche, the very notion itself is really no more than a reflection of a Nietzschean slave morality whereby “in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world” (Nietzsche 124). It is this hostile external world that Rachels’s ethical egoist needs to justify its selfish actions. In the same way the priestly class would claim all others
besides themselves as the forces of evil, so too does the ethical egoist of Rachels view “ourselves and all the rest.”

One cannot say for certain whether or not this “all the rest” is evil by Nietzsche’s philosophy. However, it is quite clear that, in interpreting the philosophy of Ayn Rand, Rachels concludes that Rand views the “ethics of ‘altruism’ as a totally destructive idea, both in society as a whole and in the lives of individuals taken in by it” (Rachels 195). Of import is the manner in which Rachels paints the picture of Rand. Rand’s take on the “ethics of altruism” seems to be concerned primarily with material wealth and possession (Rachels 195). In this way, Rand’s philosophy satisfies Rachels’s notion of the self-interested individual-- we are, after all, talking about neglecting children dying of diarrhea, as well as starving individuals. But in order for this self-interested animal to exist, it is necessary to have a “hostile external world” that wants to take away all of one’s material possessions-- that desires a sacrifice (of material wealth, apparently). As Rachels quotes Rand, it is these “parasites, moochers, looters, brutes and thugs” that are of no worth to the individual (Rachels 195). It is of no surprise that the nouns Rand uses to depict her hostile external world that wishes to take one’s individual material wealth are words such as “parasites,” “moochers,” and “looters.” These are words of the material, not words of Nietzsche’s “noble soul.” They are words of the ethical egoist’s “self-interest,” not of the Nietzschean “nobility.” Indeed, in On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche references the words the Greek nobility (a class Nietzsche is in very much reverence of) used to distinguish the classes lower than itself as almost all signifying “unhappy” or “pitiable.” This designation primarily derives from Greek terms for “beast of burden” or “wretched” (Nietzsche 125). These words in no way reference material possessions as do Rand’s. Rather, they specifically reference one’s
character whereas Rand’s “looters” and “moochers” relate the nature of oneself to actions carried out in order to obtain someone else’s material wealth. Seen in this light, Rand’s philosophy that Rachels decries is distinguished by both its view of a “hostile external world,” as well as its focus on material possession. Rand’s philosophy is the philosophy of “ourselves and all the rest,” the philosophy of “self-interest.” Nietzsche’s philosophy is the philosophy of the “noble soul,” which affirms itself positively by its vigor for life in that it believes will to power is a philosophy for life stemming from life itself. Rand’s philosopher is the priestly philosopher terrified of the evil of the “ethics of altruism,” of a sacrifice of the individual by means of giving up material possession, whereas Nietzsche’s “philosopher of the future” (as he categorizes him in *Beyond Good and Evil*) is the noble soul that embraces life, that does not need an evil world, that is primarily concerned with his very soul and being in the world.

Ultimately, this is what distinguishes Rachels’s ethical egoist from Nietzsche’s “noble soul.” To live life fully and vigorously, to become “noble,” one must assess the merits of one’s soul. One must understand that our current society operates under a system of slave morality that inhibits one to live fully. This system has categorized the most human and life-affirming characteristics as “evil,” the noble values. Rachels’s attack on ethical egoism is primarily an attack on the material selfishness of people such as Ayn Rand, not on Nietzsche’s philosophy. In the sense of a material philosophy that Rachels attacks, humans are indeed on par with one another: everybody has to eat. In the sense of a Nietzschean philosophy of the soul, people are not on par with one another. There are two classes of people, the weak of spirit and the strong of spirit. This doesn’t relate to whether or not the lowly are able to be fed, but rather establishes power hierarchies based on life-affirming values natural to humanity, that is to say, the will to
power.

And while it is both sad and inconvenient that, at large, many people consider Nietzsche to be the forebear to Rand’s philosophy of ethical egoism, Nietzsche himself is by no means and under no circumstances an ethical egoist concerned with pithy “self-interest.”