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Aestheticism and the Others: The Social Dimension of Nietzsche’s Views on Self-Fashioning

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Słowa kluczowe: Friedrich Nietzsche, Alexander Nehamas, samokształcenie, publiczność, wpływ, konkurs

Abstract

In this article, I shall explore the social dimension of Friedrich Nietzsche’s views on self-fashioning, focusing on the interpretation offered by Alexander Nehamas. First, I shall briefly present Nehamas’s understanding of Nietzsche’s views on self-fashioning and the overall significance of their social aspects. Then I shall investigate the need for the audience to assess one’s attempt at self-fashioning. Furthermore, I shall analyze how one’s pursuit of self-fashioning is influenced by and influences other similar efforts. Subsequently, the article will reveal the role of contest in the phenomenon of influence. Finally, I shall point out some limitations of Nehamas’s interpretation.

Introducing Nehamas's Interpretation of Nietzsche's Views on Self-Fashioning

In what is now regarded as a modern classic, namely his book *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, Nehamas puts forward a prominent aestheticist interpretation of Nietzsche. According to this interpretation, Nietzsche regards the world and the self from an artistic—or more precisely literary—point of view, evaluating them correspondingly (Nehamas, 1985, pp. 3, 39, 165). As Nehamas understands Nietzsche, the latter argues that the self, as a substantial, already unified whole, cannot be assumed as given and always present, but it can figure as a potential goal. In other words, it is possible to achieve selfhood, at least to a certain extent (Nehamas, 1985, pp. 177–178). The more numerous, vigorous, and mutually contrasting drives a self possesses, while holding sway over them through a particular style and fitting them into a single coherent whole, the more worthy of admiration it is (Nehamas, 1985, pp. 7, 187–188). Nehamas claims that Nietzsche thinks of the exemplary person as comparable to the exemplary literary character, with the exemplary life being comparable to the exemplary story. To alter a part of one's life, no matter how minor it may seem, means to alter the whole of one's life. In that case, this life would not belong to the given person anymore (Nehamas, 1985, pp. 154–157, 165, 194). The test provided by the idea of the eternal return illustrates the previous point aptly, i.e., if one was to pursue the project of self-fashioning, then one should live their life in such a manner that one would be willing to live it again, in its entirety (Nehamas, 1985, p. 136).¹

In a sense, this conception of the project of self-fashioning is essentially individualistic; it is focused on cultivating the individual, not on reimagining society in its totality. Nehamas claims that Nietzsche, while having grander ambitions in his earlier period, including the reinvigoration of entire (German) culture, discarded these aspirations later on. Instead, mature Nietzsche believed that the goal of philosophy is to assist in bringing about one's self-fashioning and thus forming the individual, not the wholesale cultural reformation (Nehamas, 1998, p. 141).

¹ I have dealt with Nehamas's interpretation of Nietzsche, focusing on the project of self-fashioning, much more extensively in Čukljević, 2023.

This attitude, perhaps, might be taken to imply that Nehamas does not think that there exists a significant social dimension to one's self-fashioning. Richard Schacht, for example, argues that "Nehamas does not take sufficiently into account" Nietzsche's emphasis on the significance of "social relations" for the formation of the self, as well as the fact "that, at a rather fundamental level, the self is a social phenomenon" (Schacht, 1992, pp. 270–271). While it is true that Nehamas does not, in a systematic manner, enumerate and scrutinize the various social aspects of Nietzsche's proposals for the project of self-fashioning as understood by Nehamas, there are numerous comments about this topic scattered throughout his writings.

For a start, when discussing Nietzsche's rejection of the idea of a (substantial) subject, Nehamas remarks that "Nietzsche correctly believes that consciousness has a social origin and a social function: it is inherently connected with the need to communicate with others (GS [Nietzsche, 2001], 354)"² (Nehamas, 1985, p. 85). This represents, in a manner, a restatement of the previously cited Schacht's claim that, according to Nietzsche, the self is essentially a social phenomenon—a point that Schacht feels Nehamas does not fully recognize. Therefore, Nehamas cannot be accused of simply ignoring this fact.

Furthermore, on the same page where he states that mature Nietzsche concentrates on cultivating the individual, rather than reforming the broader culture, Nehamas points out that this distinction does not mean that the two projects are completely unrelated. As he explains, true individuals exemplify novel ways of living which, as a consequence, can lead to the introduction of new standards of evaluating possibilities of life. This can have significant results on society as a whole (Nehamas, 1998, p. 141; Nehamas, 1996a, p. 238).³ Elsewhere, Nehamas adds that it is not only that self-fashioning individuals can affect larger society, but also that social factors, in turn, can affect these individuals. Hence, there is a mutual impact between the two (Nehamas, 1996a, p. 238). Such reciprocity is consistent with the view of personal identity propounded by Nehamas's Nietzsche, according to which a person does not have an inner essence removed from their interactions (deeds, experiences, thoughts, etc.) with the world, including the other persons;

² Nietzsche's works are cited by section number.

³ See Came, 2014, p. 137.

a person is nothing more than the sum of these interactions, each one's identity being connected to the identities of other persons (Nehamas, 1985, p. 7; Nehamas, 1996a, pp. 237–238).⁴

In the remainder of this paper, I shall single out and analyze three social aspects of the project of self-fashioning, as conceived by Nehamas's Nietzsche. In doing this, I shall attempt to accomplish, at least to a certain extent, what is lacking in Nehamas—an incisive and methodical account of the social dimension of self-fashioning. Briefly stated, these social aspects include the need for an audience, the phenomenon of influence, and its manifestation as contest. I do not claim that these are the only ones; on the contrary, there are others, as shall be evident at the end of this paper. Still, these social aspects are the most prominent, and importantly related to each other. Accounting for them ought to provide a solid basis for further investigation into the social dimension of self-fashioning, as understood by Nehamas's Nietzsche.

Audience as Necessary for Assessing One's Project of Self-Fashioning

If we are to conceptualize life as a work of art, which is what Nehamas's Nietzsche urges us to do (Nehamas, 1985, p. 253), we are naturally led to the question concerning the audience of such a work (Nehamas, 1985, p. 186). Being that reception is a significant aspect of every form of artwork, what is the relationship between one's life, fashioned and appreciated as a work of art, and its audience? Who counts as a member of this audience? Is there a single privileged, "correct" audience, or can there be many different, equally legitimate, audiences? In this section, I shall try to provide answers to these questions.

First off, Nehamas is well aware that, according to Nietzsche, interpretation is an inventive and idiosyncratic process (Nehamas, 1985, p. 38).⁵ Furthermore, one's reception of a person's attempt at self-fashioning, like pretty much any other judgement, is bound to be an interpretative act (Nehamas, 1996b, p. 29). Thus, it is inevitable that one's attempt at self-fashioning

⁴ See Čukljević, 2023, pp. 8–10, 18.

⁵ See Nietzsche, 2017, 767.

might be understood and judged quite differently than how the self-fashioning individual has originally conceived or intended it (Nehamas, 1985, p. 38).⁶

This does not present an intrinsically negative situation for one's project of self-fashioning. As a matter of fact, Nietzsche even celebrates what he regards as the creative potential of the audience. An ultimate interpreter should be "a monster of courage and curiosity" and "a born adventurer and discoverer" (Nietzsche, 2005a, III, 3). This is the audience that Nietzsche himself, self-admittedly, addresses.

Nehamas puts great emphasis on the significance of the audience for one's project of self-fashioning. If a person is to pursue the path of self-fashioning, they should do it in a way that is personal and unique to themselves. Yet, whether and to what extent one has achieved this goal is not up to that person to decide. One can always delude oneself that they have stylized their life in a manner worthy of (aesthetic) admiration. This is, Nehamas observes, in accordance with Nietzsche's insistence that a person does not have knowledge of themselves that is necessarily superior to the knowledge that others have of that person. Therefore, as Nehamas concludes, "the notions of style and character are essentially public" (Nehamas, 1985, p. 186).⁷

Furthermore, Nehamas points out that in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, its eponymous protagonist expresses doubt that the sun's happiness would not be complete—if present at all—if there were not those who can observe and appreciate its beauty (Nehamas, 1985, p. 186).⁸ From this example, Nehamas infers that for the aesthetic quality of one's life—the organization of all its particularities into a single coherent narrative, informed by a distinct style—"to be made manifest and therefore for it to be there," there has to be an audience (Nehamas, 1985, p. 186). Henceforth, one's project of self-fashioning depends, for its full realization, on the existence of an audience to observe and evaluate it. This audience need not include just about everyone, but could be composed of only chosen individuals, who, as Nehamas remarks, need not be contemporaries of the person whose life's

⁶ See Nietzsche, 2017, 767; Conway, 1997, p. 95.

⁷ See Čukljević, 2023, p. 16.

⁸ See Nietzsche, 2006b, Preface, 1; Nietzsche, 2006b, IV, 20.

(aesthetic) merit they have to appraise. They could be awaiting in the future (Nehamas, 1985, p. 186).⁹

Robert B. Pippin raises certain concerns regarding Nehamas's claims about the significance of the audience. For starters, he wonders how Nehamas could account for such a dependence of one's success at self-fashioning on the relevant audience, given Nietzsche's incessant warnings against conformism and herd morality? Does this dependence not, at least potentially, lead to a kind of conformity? Moreover, as Pippin observes, Nietzsche does not present an example of someone pursuing self-fashioning who ends up finding an adequate audience. Nietzsche's Zarathustra, for instance, never succeeds in discovering his proper audience (Pippin, 2015, p. 149).

Second, Pippin wonders: If a person's self-knowledge is essentially no better than others' knowledge about that person—meaning that one's knowledge of themselves, or others, will never be certain—how can one know for sure who their proper audience is? Could a person not deceive oneself into thinking they had found their appropriate audience? Furthermore, the way in which this audience would assess a person's attempt at self-fashioning would unavoidably be socially and historically relative. Who could we hope to find as an adequate audience in, for example, today's consumer mass culture (Pippin, 2015, pp. 149–150)?

Answers to these questions are scattered throughout Nehamas's writings. First, regarding the potential for conformism due to the success of one's effort at self-fashioning being dependent on a certain audience, it is important to acknowledge that Nehamas, while encouraging self-fashioning individuals to be creative and audacious in their pursuits, recognizes that this experimentation can go too far. If no one can make anything out of a person's attempt at self-fashioning, it might not count as an attempt at self-fashioning at all, not even as an exceptionally bold one (Nehamas, 1996b, p. 51).¹⁰ As already stated, according to Nehamas, individuality is not insulated from society; it is possible only against the background of society.

Yet, considering the possible lapse into conformism, two of Nehamas's claims must be reiterated: 1. The relevant audience can include only the select few, excluding the broader masses, thus avoiding conforming

⁹ See Conway, 1997, p. 8.

¹⁰ See Čukljević, 2023, p. 20.

to their mediocre standards;¹¹ 2. This select few need not even be alive at the time a given individual is trying to fashion themselves—hence the self-fashioning individual can, by virtue of their (future) audience, transcend the culture of their time, at least to a certain extent.

To these two claims, a third might be added, which Nehamas does not emphasize sufficiently enough, although he mentions it (Nehamas, 1985, pp. 227–228),¹² but which is emphatically propounded by Daniel W. Conway. According to the latter, the self-fashioning individual does not pursue their project with a certain audience in mind. Such an individual will inevitably expose their life for a reception by some audience, but this is not something that the self-fashioning individual intends to do and is not what motivates them. Instead, it simply happens (Conway, 1997, pp. 9, 76–77, 81–83). Hence, conformity, at least when done on purpose, is out of the question. Conway draws upon Nietzsche’s distinction between “monologue art” and “art before witnesses” (Nietzsche, 2001, 367). The first presupposes the artist altogether forgetting about their audience, while the second presupposes the artist viewing themselves from the perspective of the audience. Nietzsche lauds the first type of art, which Conway relates to the art of self-fashioning (Conway, 1997, pp. 82, 92, 95).

In this way, Pippin’s concerns about Nietzsche not presenting us with a case of self-fashioning individuals finding their proper audience, with Zarathustra failing to accomplish this task, are rendered irrelevant. A person does not need to find a proper audience for their endeavor of self-fashioning themselves—they may be simply physically unable to do so. Consequently, one does not need to, and indeed cannot, know that one has found one’s proper audience.

However, Nehamas goes a step further in this direction and notices a related problem. Even if a self-fashioning individual does not bear

¹¹ See Conway, 1997, p. 9. Nehamas makes a distinction between being famous and being admired (in the sense in which it is required for being successful in one’s attempt at self-fashioning), relying upon Nietzsche’s disparaging comments regarding fame. Being famous is often associated with being praised and celebrated by “the herd” and “the masses,” although it can also be the result of having some particularly bad quality (being infamous). A self-fashioning individual can, as a matter of fact, sometimes raise mistrust and unease in broader society, or they can, as it happens, be received with utter disregard (Nehamas, 1999, p. 7).

¹² See Nietzsche, 2005b, IX, 50.

the burden of finding their proper audience themselves, a question still remains: how can anyone, in principle, know who constitutes someone's proper audience and who does not, if we do not assume a set ahistorical standard that allows us to discern the proper audience from the improper (Nehamas, 1999, p. 7)?

Nehamas does not give an explicit answer to this question. It is safe to say that he would reject the possibility of any transcendent criteria that may distinguish the proper audience from the improper. Besides the possibility of such criteria going against the Nietzschean ethos, Nehamas is quite clear that the great works of art—including life seen as a work of art—do not share any inherent, substantial properties. These properties vary with the context, and whether they are organized in an aesthetically admirable way will be up to a certain audience to judge. The audience's judgement will, inevitably, depend upon contingent factors (Nehamas, 1996b, p. 51).¹³ Hence, the proper audience cannot be defined as "those who are, in some way, able to detect whether one's life possesses certain inherent and substantial aesthetically relevant properties," or as something along these lines.

Nehamas, however, claims that there is a characteristic that everything (aesthetically) admirable shares—namely, its influence lingers on for a long time, potentially never-ending, persisting beyond its creator's (physical) death (Nehamas, 1985, pp. 28, 228; Nehamas, 1996b, p. 51). In the case of one's project of self-fashioning, if this individual's life inspired others to live their lives as if they were works of art (Conway, 1997, p. 8), living them in their peculiar ways, and if this influence lasted through time, that would be an unmistakable sign that this person's attempt at self-fashioning had been a success. Elsewhere, Nehamas suggests that it is those who also pursue a similar project of self-fashioning, and thus are capable of appreciating such attempts at self-fashioning, who constitute the proper audience for one's attempt at self-fashioning (Nehamas, 1999, p. 7).

This is the closest that Nehamas comes to providing an answer to the question of what is the proper audience for one's project of self-fashioning. It follows that the proper audience consists of those who are not mere spectators and interpreters of one's attempt at self-fashioning, but those

¹³ See Schoeman, 2008, p. 432.

who are also more actively engaged with it, being influenced by it in their own pursuits of self-fashioning. Thus, the nature of this influence becomes another important social aspect of one's project of self-fashioning, to which we turn in the next section.

To Be Influenced By and to Influence Others' Attempts at Self-Fashioning

As Nehamas notes, there is no such thing as an absolutely new way of fashioning oneself—one's project of self-fashioning is always dependent upon other similar projects.¹⁴ Hence we should strive to be influenced by the best examples known to us (Nehamas, 1996a, p. 247; Nehamas, 1996b, p. 51). This should be kept in mind when reading some of Nehamas's statements, such as the following: "Nietzsche's self-fashioning [...] is an essentially individual project. It does not allow you to follow, in any straightforward sense, the example set by someone else; for instead of creating yourself you would then be imitating that other person. Individuality, however, is threatened not only if you imitate someone else but also [...] if others imitate you" (Nehamas, 1998, p. 143).¹⁵ At first glance, it might appear as if self-fashioning requires coming up with a completely original way of living, with any significant role that an external influence may have in such a project being rejected (Nehamas, 1998, p. 142). Yet, what Nehamas actually claims here is that one's way of life cannot be a simple copy of another's if one is pursuing self-fashioning. That would prevent a person from developing their own individuality and a particular style through which it is expressed, which is the goal of self-fashioning. If a style were to become shared by all,

¹⁴ The material present in this section is, to a large extent, taken from my paper (Čukljević, 2023, pp. 16–17, 19–20). Here it is restated and extended to some degree, as well as reconfigured in a different context which is provided by the aim of this paper to analyze and mutually relate prominent social aspects of self-fashioning, as envisioned by Nehamas's Nietzsche.

¹⁵ See Nietzsche, 1997, II, 10. Nehamas's claim that there is no absolute originality and that one is always influenced by someone else should also be remembered when Nehamas claims, for example, that the mature Nietzsche believed that "interpretations can [...] be genuinely new" and that "new interpreters [...] introduce genuinely new modes of understanding and life" (Nehamas, 1996b, p. 29).

it would no longer be a style—a style is necessarily related to individuality (Nehamas, 1998, pp. 142–143).

Therefore, being influenced by another's self-fashioning is the *sine qua non* of any effort to fashion oneself. In the arts in general, stylistic influence is as natural and productive as it is inevitable (Nehamas, 1996b, pp. 30, 51). It might be said that it can be expressed in a certain kind of imitation, but the “imitated” style is always reworked in some significant way, thus retaining both its integrity and the integrity of the style that influenced it.

There is a further analogy between self-fashioning and arts in general that Nehamas observes. We cannot create a noteworthy work of art by following some accepted blueprint. It is precisely these sorts of rules that we need to break, in a creative manner, to make a distinguished work of art. This also holds true when pursuing self-fashioning (Nehamas, 1985, pp. 225–226, 228–230; Nehamas, 1998, pp. 142–143).

Yet, breaking the rules does not mean completely forgetting about them. If a work of art, or a self-fashioning individual, strays too far from the established rules, they risk not being recognized as something, or someone, capable and worthy of being interacted with. On the other hand, they also need to pose a certain challenge to these rules, thus inviting others to notice and more deeply engage with them, potentially inspiring those others to pursue (self-)creative activity of their own (Nehamas, 1996b, pp. 30, 51). After all, as we have seen, to influence someone's attempt at self-fashioning is the ultimate validation of one's own such project.¹⁶ It is those others who will, eventually, decide whether one's attempt at self-fashioning has become simply egregious, or whether and to what extent, it has successfully defied the status quo while still being comprehensible and enticing, at least to some people.

The previously described influence that one's attempt at self-fashioning has on another's, be it the inevitable influence that certain others have on one's project of self-fashioning, or, if one is truly successful, one's influence on someone else, is aptly characterized by Marinus Schoeman as “‘emulation in a non-imitative fashion’.” He further claims that “[f]or [...] Nietzsche [...] this relation is an *agonistic* [...] relation” (Schoeman, 2008, p. 434). That is, individuals who are, in the pursuit of self-fashioning, influenced by others,

¹⁶ See also Nehamas, 1985, p. 28; Nehamas, 1996b, pp. 29–30; Conway, 1997, pp. 81, 84; Schoeman, 2008, p. 445.

contest with them to outdo those who inspired them and become recognizably different than their models, maybe even becoming more influential than those who influenced them. It is to this competitive character of influence that we turn in the next section.

The Productive Contest

As many commentators agree, Nietzsche regards competition as highly significant to one's cultivation of the self, as well as to the prosperity of society—and humanity—as a whole.¹⁷ It is therefore all the more curious that Nehamas does not, at least not clearly and distinctly, thematize this as an important social aspect of self-fashioning in general. He does, indeed, discuss at some length the competitive character of influence that Socrates had on Nietzsche's own self-fashioning, which Nehamas deems quite consequential, but does not generalize it to other cases (Nehamas, 1985, pp. 4, 24–30, 34–37, 232; Nehamas, 1998, pp. 137–138).¹⁸ Be that as it may, there is no denying that Nietzsche thought highly of the role that competition has, or at least should have, in individual formation, society's well-being, and humanity's advance.

It is probably in “Homer's Contest,” his early writing which was initially conceived as a preface to a planned but never written book, that Nietzsche most directly and attentively expressed his praise for competition (Conway, 1997, p. 67; Acampora, 2013, pp. 5, 18).¹⁹ Here he claims, approvingly, that ancient Greeks viewed strife that did not result in “hostile struggle-to-the-death,” but rather “as jealousy, grudge and envy, goads men to action [...] of the *contest*,” as “good” (Nietzsche, 2006a).²⁰

¹⁷ See Conway, 1997; Schoeman, 2008; Acampora, 2013; Hatab, 2014; Higgins, 2015.

¹⁸ In her study *Contesting Nietzsche*, to which I shall refer to throughout this section, Christa Davis Acampora could be said to pursue an investigation complementary to that of Nehamas, by focusing on Nietzsche's views on “agonism” that is “affirmative and creative” (Acampora, 2013, p. 2). The competitive relation that Nietzsche had to Socrates and which is the topic that Nehamas deals with, Acampora would characterize as belonging to “Nietzsche's own *agonistic practice*” (Acampora, 2013, pp. 7–8).

¹⁹ As Acampora and Lawrence J. Hatab observe, the views expounded in “Homer's Contest” are the precursor to Nietzsche's teachings on the will to power (Acampora, 2013, pp. 2, 80, 98; Hatab, 2014, p. 115).

²⁰ See Acampora, 2013, p. 18.

The greater a person is, the stronger this kind of strife will be expressed through them (Nietzsche, 2006a). Moreover, as some commentators point out, Nietzsche recognized competition in all forms of cultural activity that the ancient Greeks engaged in (Acampora, 2013, pp. 5–6, 18–19; Hatab, 2014, p. 115),²¹ which could be viewed as a manifestation of the widespread ancient Greek belief that—in the words of Hatab—“the world [i]s an arena for the struggle of opposing (but related) forces” (Hatab, 2014, p. 115).²²

Nietzsche especially emphasizes that such competition should not lead to the dominance of a sole winner, but to a constant struggle between a number of contestants (Nietzsche, 2006a).²³ As some commentators point out, the aim of a contest is not primarily to defeat an opponent at any cost, but to continually test one’s limits, thereby honing one’s abilities and striving for excellence;²⁴ therefore, it is counterproductive to achieve victory over (at least all of) one’s adversaries in a manner that utterly eliminates them, since the competition would cease (Conway, 1997, p. 67; Acampora, 2013, pp. 19, 22–23; Hatab, 2014, p. 115).²⁵ As Nietzsche says, “every talent must develop through a struggle,” an outlook which he ascribes to the ancient Greeks and he himself embraces (Nietzsche, 2006a).²⁶

²¹ Acampora notes that it ought to be kept in mind that in his claims concerning the ancient Greeks, Nietzsche’s primary goal was not to provide an exhaustive and completely historically accurate presentation of their culture, but to highlight—and in this process at least somewhat idealize—certain aspects of that culture that he regarded as useful for the advancement of contemporary culture (Acampora, 2013, p. 70).

²² See Acampora, 2013, pp. 11, 98.

²³ See Hatab, 2014, pp. 115–116. It should be noted that Nietzsche holds that a striving individual does not need to compete only with living persons, but can also contest with a long dead one (Nietzsche, 2006a). This is in accordance with what was previously said—a self-fashioning individual’s audience need not be contemporary with them.

²⁴ It would seem, however, that Conway at least does not conceive this as individuals developing their full potential, but as “transform[ing] themselves momentarily into *signs* of the superfluous vitality that courses through them” (Conway, 1997, p. 67).

²⁵ This does not mean that the contestants cannot be primarily motivated by the desire to defeat their opponents. As Acampora notes, the structure of contest is not reducible to individuals and their desires—the contest is socially instituted and by the methods of honouring, condemning, etc., the audience can shape the way in which participants have to compete in order to achieve victory (Acampora, 2013, pp. 20, 23).

²⁶ See Higgins, 2015, p. 86.

Furthermore, Nietzsche points out that to this outlook also belongs that “the aim of agonistic education was the well-being of the whole, of state society” (Nietzsche, 2006a). He states that one “was to develop” oneself, “through competition,” in such a way as to be of service to society (Nietzsche, 2006a). The contest keeps human (natural) aggressiveness under control and directs it in a socially acceptable fashion, thus generating social cohesion while averting social stagnation and furthering human potential in general, besides stimulating the individual to flourish (Higgins, 2015, p. 86; Acampora, 2013, pp. 6, 8, 22; Hatab, 2014, p. 115). After all, as already remarked, this contest occurs in the public sphere—it is not simply an affair between the competing individuals.²⁷ Acampora expresses this most clearly when she states that “it is the *community* and not any great individual competitor that founds” this sort of contest (Acampora, 2013, p. 17).²⁸

Some may raise the question as to the exact relationship between the aforementioned influence and competition as important social elements of self-fashioning. Namely, does one necessarily imply the other? More precisely, we can ask two separate questions: 1. If a self-fashioning individual competes with another such individual, be they dead or alive, is the first one necessarily influenced by the second one, or is it simply something that normally, but not necessarily, happens in these situations?; 2. If a self-fashioning individual is influenced by another such individual, be they dead or alive, does the first one necessarily compete with the second one, or is it simply something that normally, but not necessarily, happens in these situations? The authors mentioned in this section, at least to my knowledge, do not entertain these questions. Still, they ought to be briefly addressed.

Regarding the first question, if a self-fashioning individual competes with another such individual, can it be imagined that the first person’s attempt at self-fashioning is not somehow influenced by their opponent? If one’s attempt at self-fashioning is not in any way influenced by that other individual, why was that individual chosen to be overcome in the first place? By selecting that particular individual as one worthy of competing with, the self-fashioning individual indicates that their opponent’s self-fashioning holds a certain significance for their own self-fashioning. In this case, can we still refuse to

²⁷ See Conway, 1997, p. 67.

²⁸ See Higgins, 2015, p. 86.

refer to this as “being influenced?” I do not see why we should not declare this a case of influence. Therefore, I believe that competing with someone does entail being influenced by them when it comes to self-fashioning.

Concerning the second question, if a self-fashioning individual is influenced by another such individual, can it be said that the given individual does not, in a way, compete with the one who influenced them? To fashion oneself means to give one’s life a unique style that differs significantly from other individuals’ styles, even—or especially—from those who one counts among one’s influences. Hence one probably needs to work particularly hard to distinguish their style from those of the self-fashioning individuals one admires the most. Does this not mean that one must compete with those individuals? I do not see how one could give a negative answer to this question. Thus, I would say that, when it comes to self-fashioning, being influenced by someone does entail competing with them.

Schoeman appropriately and conveniently brings together some of the main arguments regarding the social aspects of an individual’s self-fashioning examined in this paper—the relationship that such a project has to one’s audience, influence, and contest—when he states, “An action is virtuous if it is performed in a *virtuosic* fashion, hence it can manifest itself only in the *public sphere*, i.e., where others are present as spectators, as an audience, or as co-actors, and where a spirit of *agonism* prevails—in other words where there is mutual contest, a struggle to become the best” (Schoeman, 2008, p. 432).

Friendship and Beyond

Finally, one more social aspect of self-fashioning ought to be briefly mentioned, besides the previous three that were discussed in some detail. Conway argues that Nietzsche believed that self-fashioning individuals eventually “create a community of friends in the peculiarly Nietzschean sense, of fellow travelers who share a common aesthetic sensibility, who mutually elevate one another through conflict and contest” (Conway, 1997, p. 22). Others have also noted that, according to Nietzsche, there is an agonistic character to friendship, on the basis of claims such as the following: “In one’s friend one should have one’s best enemy. You should be closest to him in heart when you

resist him” (Nietzsche, 2006b, I, 14).²⁹ I do not think that Nietzsche should be understood as claiming that contest always and necessary entails friendship, but that a fully developed contest takes the form of a friendship. Similarly, not all friendships need to involve contest, but the exemplary ones do. Even our colloquial use of phrases such as “friendly competition,” which has a meaning akin to the one the word “contest” has in Nietzsche’s use, attests to the importance of the relation between competition and friendship.³⁰ Hence the question of the role of friendship in the project of self-fashioning emerges as a further exploration of the productive contest.

And indeed, Nehamas has devoted a whole book, aptly entitled *On Friendship*, to a philosophical investigation of this phenomenon and how it relates to one’s cultivation of the self. Yet, he touches upon Nietzsche’s views on friendship only in passing, in a sole footnote (Nehamas, 2016, fn. 47). Furthermore, Nehamas alludes to the prominence of contest in friendship only once, again in a footnote (Nehamas, 2016, fn. 3). This should come as no surprise by now; we have seen that he deals with the significance of contest for self-fashioning in a similar way. I believe that this is an indication of a fault which mars Nehamas’s interpretation of Nietzsche. Nehamas is focused on the individualistic facet of self-fashioning, and while he, almost incidentally, recognizes few of its social aspects, he does not genuinely regard the self-fashioning individuals as forming a kind of community. This raises the following questions: how does this community relate to broader society? What should society be like for this community to thrive? Nehamas does not pose such questions. Perhaps this communal facet of self-fashioning could be ignored when dealing solely with audience and influence as social aspects of self-fashioning, which Nehamas does. One’s audience, who one influences, may, in principle, be both temporally and spatially distant from the self-fashioning individual. On the other hand, when dealing with contest and friendship, it becomes almost impossible not to notice that the self-fashioning individuals form a community, as contest, and especially friendship, normally require parties that know each other and that, in pursuing their common interest, form a specific community. After all, and contrary to what Nehamas claims,

²⁹ See Conway, 1997, p. 54; Higgins, 2015, p. 85.

³⁰ Neil Durrant has recently published a book on Nietzsche’s agonistic ideal of friendship (Durrant, 2023).

Julian Young makes the convincing case that Nietzsche retained his early communitarian views throughout his career (Young, 2015, pp. 7, 15–21, 23–28). Thus, in order to further explore social aspects of self-fashioning, one should go beyond Nehamas's interpretation and take into account Nietzsche's social and political philosophy. However, this will have to be the subject of another paper.

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