Nietzsche on nobility

This handout follows the handout on ‘Master and slave morality’. You should read that handout first.

**Nobility**

The morality of nobility has developed from master morality, and it finds its ideal form in the new philosophers. The noble person has a sense of the themselves as determining what is good and bad, and new philosophers will create values. The noble person feels full of greatness and power, the new philosophers express the will to power in its purest form and are full of joy in the affirmation of life. The noble person despises what is weak; the new philosopher ranks people by what how much truth and suffering they can bear. Both are independent and are not moved by the suffering of common people.

The best sign of a high rank, Nietzsche says, is an instinct for rank (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §263), not only among human beings, but a sense of what is great. Every elevation of human beings has been and will be achieved by hierarchical societies (§257). Nobility involves a ‘grand attitude’ (e.g. the perspective of eternal return) and a longing for ‘expansive inner states’, not a sense of being caught up in oneself, but a continual ‘self-overcoming’. This shouldn’t be understood in the usual moral or spiritual terms, e.g. overcoming one’s selfishness or transcending human desires. It isn’t guided by fixed values, but involves the creation of new values, which requires the self-overcoming of all that is too weak to sustain such originality.

So what kind of person is the noble or higher person? In Nietzsche’s discussions in §§259-270, some of his remarks on nobility are inspired by past aristocratic classes, but for the present and future, Nietzsche finds nobility in individuals (of a certain ‘type’). In other writings, his examples included Goethe, Beethoven and himself. There are five important character traits:

1. The noble man is solitary, independent, and dealing with others as means to his ends (§§26, 212, 273).
2. He is driven by his work, having unified his personality to focus on his project, and seeks responsibilities.
3. He is essentially ‘healthy’, knowing what is good for him and choosing that.
4. He wills his life unconditionally, and perhaps can will eternal return as well.
5. He has reverence for himself, honouring himself as powerful, and exercising power over himself in setting and striving for his own values. This sense of reverence extends also to the past (§§260, 287) – there is no assumption that what is new is better.

The higher man is most likely someone involved in artistic or creative work (see also §188), which precisely requires solitude, an obsessiveness about one’s projects, an indifference to others’ opinions, a certainty about oneself, and a respect for the tradition one has inherited.
The noble person’s sense of self-worth has several consequences. First, they can’t understand vanity (§261): why would anyone ‘try to elicit a good opinion of themselves that they themselves do not hold… and then… nevertheless believe this good opinion’?? They start from a good opinion of themselves, independently of what others think, and then demands that their worth is recognised by others. The common person, by contrast, starts from what others think in forming their opinion of themselves (just as a slave’s worth is bestowed by the master’s opinion). (Nietzsche comments that this desire to value oneself, originally rare, has become more common – an example of the mixing of different value systems.) Second, they are egotistical in believing that others must sacrifice themselves, as only right (§265). This shouldn’t be narrowly interpreted as selfishness, because they take responsibility for the whole human race in their projects. Third, they respect and revere other noble people, because they see something of themselves in them (§265). Finally, noble people don’t ‘look up’ – it is very unlikely, therefore, that the noble person will believe in God. Nietzsche thinks the idea of God – at least a perfect, moralistic God who judges us, and before whom everyone is equal – belongs with slave morality, not nobility.

To be noble, one’s response to suffering, in oneself as much as in others, must not be to alleviate it, but to use it in becoming greater still. The noble person suffers greatly but is unwilling to cease their commitment to being great. Nor will they invite pity. So they will not try to display their suffering, but will hide it behind a mask, e.g. a mask that treats all suffering casually (§270). The terrible suffering of the higher person, and the herd morality that encourages the alleviation of suffering, means they often come to ruin (§269). They need to forget what they know about life and themselves, their contempt and revulsion; and so they become seduced by flattery and lose their nobility to become someone ‘great’, revered by the herd.

A noble person has mastered themselves. Integrating their will to subdue any part that does not fall into line with their project is one expression of their will to power. And in other works, Nietzsche identifies this act of ‘self-creation’ as central to becoming a higher person.

**DISCUSSION**

Some of Nietzsche’s ideas of nobility do not seem very radical. A sense of one’s goodness independent of others’ opinions, a willingness to take responsibility, and an ability to tolerate and use suffering in the quest to make something of oneself and one’s life, all express a strong, positive, healthy personality. But can we coherently endorse just these values while ignoring the egoism and inegalitarianism Nietzsche argues goes with them? If someone pursues greatness in their life, how will they react to the lack of anything great or distinctive in others? Nobility is not compatible with an inability to face the truth about human beings.

But recall that Nietzsche is not attempting to defend values for everybody to adopt. He wants to free higher people from living by the standards (of equality, modesty, mediocrity) of the ‘herd’. Conversely, it would be most inappropriate for herd people to attempt to be noble. To falsely believe one is full of power and goodness is self-deception. Nobility is not compatible with an inability to face the truth about oneself.
Nietzsche’s positive vision is not as compelling as his critical analysis of conventional morality, as his inegalitarianism and exclusive focus on greatness is not the only alternative. In many of his remarks, Nietzsche gives familiar values a new, life-affirming interpretation and foundation (e.g. neighbourly love not based on fear, generosity not based on selflessness, etc.). Nietzsche allows that many acts considered moral should still be done, and immoral ones avoided, but for different reasons. If these are the ‘new values’ the new philosophers are to create, then their project is not as radical as it seems. This is something we can take from Nietzsche, though not what Nietzsche intended, as it ignores the essential inegalitarianism of his philosophy.