

Herbert Spencer – A Case History of Nietzsche’s Conception of Decadence

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[Forthcoming in *Nietzsche-Studien – Internationales Jahrbuch für die Nietzsche-Forschung* (final draft, post-refereeing)]

ABSTRACT: Nietzsche characterises some influential individuals – such as Socrates and Wagner – as ‘decadents’ because they promote life-inhibiting values that potentially undermine the flourishing of humanity. A clearly stated but less prominent example of such a decadent is Herbert Spencer. While Nietzsche’s observations concerning Spencer are far fewer than those on Socrates and Wagner, they still have considerable significance for understanding Nietzsche’s philosophy – particularly his views on morality and science – and consequently their role in his conception of decadence. This article argues that Nietzsche considers Spencer to be a decadent not just because of the latter’s advocating of a morality based on altruism, but also the projection of the decadent values of this morality as inevitable, as part of his belief in objective, scientific and sociological truths.

1 Introduction

Herbert Spencer is now best known as the coiner of the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’,¹ and perhaps mistakenly so, as the father of Social Darwinism.² He developed an influential system of evolutionary ethics with the intent of discovering and elaborating the principle of right and wrong conduct on a scientific basis, which was premised on the idea that nature is inherently moral.³ Spencer’s exposition is perhaps best described as a kind of physiological utilitarianism, claiming that evolution leans towards the refinement of altruistic principles which culminates in the reconciliation of egoism with altruism.⁴ This ‘Synthetic Philosophy’

¹ Spencer, Herbert (1864), *The Principles of Biology*, Williams and Norgate, (London), §164 & §165.

² Francis, Mark (2011), ‘Herbert Spencer’, in Ritzer, George & Stepnisky, George (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists*, Vol. I, pp. 165-184, Blackwell, (Chichester), p. 168.

³ Spencer, Herbert (1879a), *The Data of Ethics*, Williams and Norgate, (London), §21.

⁴ Spencer, Herbert (1879a), §91.

as Spencer called it, was then an ambitious endeavour to unify elements of metaphysics, the sciences of biology, sociology, psychology, and morality through the theory of evolution.⁵

Although Nietzsche's published works⁶ contain only six direct references to Spencer⁷ – all from his later works that express his interest in decadence⁸ – his notebooks contain more than thirty, reflecting an engagement with his thought from around 1875 onwards.⁹ He appears to have acquired¹⁰ two translated special editions of Spencer's *The Study of*

⁵ Spencer, Herbert (1879a), Preface.

⁶ The following abbreviations are used for citations of Nietzsche's writings, and are associated with an applicable translation or original German edition: *A*: = *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche (2005), *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, Ridley, Aaron & Norman, Judith, (Eds.), Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge); *BGE*: = *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche (2002), Horstmann, Rolf-Peter and Norman, Judith (Eds.), Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge); *BT*: = *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche (1999a), *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, Geuss, Raymond and Speirs, Ronald (Eds.), Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge); *CW*: = *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche (2005); *D*: = *Daybreak*, Nietzsche (1997), Clark, Maudemarie and Leiter, Brian, (Eds.), Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge); *EH*: = *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche (2005); *GM*: = *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche (2007), Ansell-Pearson, Keith (Ed.), and Diethe, Carol (Trans.), Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge); *GS*: = *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche (2001), Williams, Bernard, (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge); *HH*: = *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche (1996), Hollingdale, R. J. (Trans.) and Schacht, Richard (Intro.), Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge); *KSA*: = *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Nietzsche (1999b), Colli, Giorgio und Montinari,azzino, (Eds.), De Gruyter, (Berlin); *MT*: = My Own Translation (as a published one is not available); *TI*: = *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche (2005); *WLN*: = *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, Nietzsche (2003a), Bittner, Rüdiger, (Ed.), Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge); *WP*: = *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche (1968), Kaufmann, Walter (Ed. & Trans.) and Hollingdale, R. J. (Trans.), Vintage Books, (New York, NY); *Z*: = *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche (2006), De Carlo, Adrian and Pippin, Robert B., (Eds.), Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge).

⁷ *GS*: 373, *BGE*: 253, *GM*: I, 3 & II, 12, *TI*: Skirmishes, 37, & *EH*: Destiny, 4.

⁸ Nietzsche nearly always uses the French spelling of *décadence* and *décadent[s]*, but for simplicity's sake, I will henceforth use the English equivalent unless an original translation does otherwise. His published works from approximately mid-1885 onwards patently show an implicit discussion of decadence, which then only becomes explicit in those written in 1888 when he starts using these terms.

⁹ The scholarly application of Nietzsche's notebooks (*Nachlass*) is contentious. Magnus, Bernd (1986), 'Nietzsche's Philosophy in 1888: The Will to Power and the Übermensch', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 24, pp. 79-98, The Johns Hopkins University Press, (Baltimore, MD), has made a useful distinction between two broad types of Nietzsche scholars. On the one hand there are 'lumpers' who regard the use of the notebooks as unproblematic despite its inherently tentative nature, and on the other 'splitters', who make a sharp distinction between the published and unpublished writings. In fact, any discussion of decadence is an interesting example of how to approach this divide, because in his published works decadence is presented essentially as a pre-established phenomenon. Nietzsche therefore makes few concessions to the reader with regard to this conception and he does not clearly and comprehensively elucidate what exactly he means by it, nor how the phenomenon functions in any specific detail. He does, however, do this to a greater degree – but in a highly fragmented manner – in his notebooks, where one can discern his attempts to construct a theory and methodology pertaining to it. However, we should note that caution is required when referring to Nietzsche's 'theory of decadence', as the only time he uses such terminology is in an early 1888 notebook entry referring to a chapter heading for the second part of an abortive book: "*Theory of decadence. Second Part.*" (*Theorie der decadence. Zweiter Theil.*), *Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA*: 13:14[77] = *MT*.

¹⁰ See Campioni, Giuliano, D'Iorio, Paolo, Fornari, Maria Christina, Fronterotta, Francesco, Orsucci, Andrea and Müller-Buck, Renate (2003), *Nietzsches persönliche Bibliothek*, De Gruyter, (Berlin), for details of Nietzsche's personal library.

*Sociology*¹¹ in 1875,¹² and then a translated copy of his *The Data of Ethics*¹³ in circa 1880,¹⁴ but some initial enthusiasm of the latter¹⁵ seems to have quickly cooled.¹⁶ Thereafter, his acquaintance with Spencer's thought was to remain second-hand through acquiring the Anglo-German zoologist William Rolph's *Biologische Probleme (Biological Problems)*¹⁷ in 1884,¹⁸ which include a popular response to Spencer's views that Nietzsche had mixed feelings about.¹⁹ Spencer was the catalyst for Nietzsche's own project of 'physiological ethics' from 1880-1883,²⁰ and also had a major impact on his use of moral vocabulary, for Nietzsche started using the term 'altruism' (*Altruismus*) in place of 'unegoistic' (*Unegoistische*) after reading Spencer's *The Data of Ethics*.²¹ Despite these influences, Nietzsche came to perceive Spencer and his philosophy very negatively,²² as a brand of the Darwinism that he

¹¹ Spencer, Herbert (1875a), *Einleitung in das Studium der Sociologie, Vol. 1*, Marquardsen, Heinrich (Ed.), F. A. Brockhaus, (Leipzig), and Spencer, Herbert (1875b), *Einleitung in das Studium der Sociologie, Vol. 2*, Marquardsen, Heinrich (Ed.), F. A. Brockhaus, (Leipzig).

¹² Brobjer, Thomas, H. (2008), *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography*, University of Illinois Press, (Urbana and Chicago, IL), p. 64 & p. 255, and Holub, Robert C. (2018), *Nietzsche in the Nineteenth Century: Social Questions and Philosophical Interventions*, University of Pennsylvania Press, (Pennsylvania, PA), p. 345.

¹³ Spencer, Herbert (1879b), *Die Thatsachen der Ethik*, Vetter, B. (Trans.), Schweizerbart, (Stuttgart).

¹⁴ Moore (2002a), *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge), p. 62, Brobjer (2008), p. 219 & p. 255, and Holub (2018), p. 345. Many sources from Spencer are listed in Nietzsche, Friedrich (2003b), *Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Abteilung V, Band 3: Nachbericht Zur Funften Abteilung Morgenrothe*, Colli, Giorgio und Montinari, Mazzino, (Eds.), De Gruyter, (Berlin).

¹⁵ At one point he was so enamoured as to urge his publisher to obtain the German translation rights. Moore (2002a), p. 61.

¹⁶ Emden, Christian, J. (2014), *Nietzsche's Naturalism*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge), p. 37 & 56.

¹⁷ Rolph, William H. (1884), *Biologische Probleme: zugleich als Versuch zur Entwicklung einer rationellen Ethik*, Englemann, (Leipzig).

¹⁸ Moore, Gregory (2002a), p. 47, Brobjer (2008), p. 91 & p. 254, and Holub, pp. 349-351.

¹⁹ "Rolph, Biological problems in 1881. Of course, apart from the polemic there is nothing to praise about the book;". (Rolph, *Biologische Probleme* 1881. Freilich, vom Polemischen abgesehen ist an dem Buche nichts zu loben;), Nachlass 1884-1885, KSA: 11:35[34] = MT.

²⁰ Moore (2002a), p. 62.

²¹ Small, Robert (2005), *Nietzsche and Rée: A Star Friendship*, Oxford University Press, (Oxford), pp. 169-171.

²² Two quotes from Spencer are entitled: 'Inscriptions for the Door of a Modern Madhouse', Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:14[48] = WP: 541.

fundamentally disagreed with,²³ even though Spencer's conception of evolution perhaps has more in common with Lamarck's model²⁴ than Darwin's.²⁵

The later Nietzsche's antipathy towards Spencer is characterised by emphatically labelling him a decadent.²⁶ Out of the dozen or so individuals that earn this distinct opprobrium,²⁷ he is the only one who could be remotely construed as a scientist.²⁸ Yet despite Nietzsche's obvious interest in Spencer, the secondary literature examining this relationship²⁹

²³ Nietzsche describes *The Data of Ethics* as "a combination of stupidity and Darwinism". ([. . .] Vereinigung von *bêtise* und Darwinismus [. . .]), Nachlass 1884-1885, *KSA*: 11:35[34] = *MT*.

²⁴ Call, Lewis (1998), 'Anti-Darwin, Anti-Spencer: Friedrich Nietzsche's Critique of Darwin and "Darwinism"', *History of Science*, Vol. 36, Issue 1, pp. 1-22, Sage Publishing, (Thousand Oaks, CA), p. 4, but Francis (2011), p. 170, demurs.

²⁵ Small (2005), p. 165, Johnson, Dirk, R. (2010), *Nietzsche's Anti-Darwinism*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge), pp. 4-5, and Emden (2014), p. 165.

²⁶ *TI*: Skirmishes, 37 & Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:14[40] = *WP*: 53.

²⁷ Ferdinand Delacroix – or possibly Charles Baudelaire (*EH*: Clever, 5), Epicurus (*A*: 30), Socrates (*EH*: BT, 1) and the *Goncourt brothers* (Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:15[88]) are each an example of a "typical decadent", as is Richard Wagner (*CW*: 5 & 7), who is also labelled "the artist of decadence" (*CW*: 4 & 5), whereas his muse Arthur Schopenhauer is "the philosopher of decadence" (*CW*: 4). The latter, together with Charles Baudelaire are two of "[t]he modern pessimists as decadents:". (Die modernen Pessimisten als Décadents: Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:14[222] = *MT*). These also include Giacomo Leopardi, Philipp Mainländer, Fyodor Dostoevsky and either Edmond or Jules de Goncourt. Plato is described as "a first-rate decadent of style" (*TI*: Ancients, 2), but Pyrrho is merely one proponent of "two forms of Greek decadence", with Epicurus as the other (Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:14[99] = *WP*: 437). This list of exemplars would not be complete without Nietzsche himself, who explosively proclaims: "I am a decadent, I am the opposite as well" (*EH*: Wise, 2). He believes that he has successfully resisted decadence, which explains why he also uses the past tense to refer to a time "[w]hen I was a decadent" (*EH*: Wise, 6). However, further exemplar decadents can be discerned implicitly. For example, following a discussion of decadent types pertaining to the Gospels that mentions the Messiah, Nietzsche obliquely refers to a "most interesting decadent", which is almost certainly a characterisation of Jesus (*A*: 31). In a similar fashion, the following individuals can also be considered to be exemplars as their names are mentioned in connection with the term 'decadence': Buddha (*A*: 42), Saint Paul (*A*: 24 & Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:14[57] = *WP*: 171), Immanuel Kant (*A*: 11 & *TI*: Reason, 6), Leo Tolstoy (*A*: 7), Victor Hugo (Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:16[29] = *WLN*, pp. 274-275/*WP*: 838), Blaise Pascal, Gustave Flaubert (Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:16[29] = *WLN*, pp. 274-275/*WP*: 838), and Johannes Brahms (*CW*: 2nd Postscript).

²⁸ The German term '*Wissenschaft*' has a broader meaning than the English 'science' and encompasses both the hard, natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, biology and physiology, and the human sciences like psychology, sociology, history, and philology. When Nietzsche speaks of 'science' he is potentially referring to both, but normally has the latter in mind.

²⁹ Whilst focusing on a variety of topics – especially Nietzsche's understanding and critique of Darwinism – the following secondary literature discusses Nietzsche's views on Spencer: Call (1998); Moore (2002a); Moore, Gregory (2002b), 'Nietzsche, Spencer, and the Ethics of Evolution', *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, No. 23, pp. 1-20, Penn State University Press, (Pennsylvania, PA); Richardson, John (2004), *Nietzsche's New Darwinism*, Oxford University Press, (Oxford); Small (2005); Fornari, Maria Cristina (2005), 'Die Spur Spencers in Nietzsches „moralischem Bergwerke“', *Nietzsche-Studien*, Volume 34, Issue 1, pp. 310–328, De Gruyter, (Berlin); Fornari, Maria Cristina (2009), *Die Entwicklung Der Herdenmoral: Nietzsche Liest Spencer Und Mill*, Schröder, Leonie (Trans.), Harrassowitz Verlag, (Wiesbaden); Johnson (2010); Solms-Laubach, Franz zu (2012), *Nietzsche and Early German and Austrian Sociology*, De Gruyter, (Berlin); Emden (2014); O'Connell, Jeffrey (2017), 'Nietzsche's Rejection of Nineteenth-Century Evolutionary Ethics' in Ruse, Michael & Richards, (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Evolutionary Ethics*, pp. 28-42, Cambridge University Press,

offers little in the form of a concise analysis of why Nietzsche considers Spencer to be a decadent. This paucity is in marked contrast to a number of studies of Nietzsche's more conspicuous exemplar decadents including himself, Wagner,³⁰ and especially Socrates.³¹ In this article I will argue that what invites Nietzsche's disapproval of Spencer's thought, such that he considers him a decadent, is not just Spencer's advocating of a morality based on altruism. Rather, what is perhaps of greater concern to Nietzsche, is Spencer's projection of the decadent values of this morality as inevitable, as part of his belief in objective, scientific and sociological truths. I will begin by outlining Nietzsche's presentation of decadence as the upshot of a life-inhibiting, physiological condition with psychological consequences,³² which according to Nietzsche results in first, Spencer's need for moral certitude and secondly, his claims of scientific 'objectivity'. I will then progress by discussing in more detail what Nietzsche sees as Spencer's subsequent rejection of reality and embracing of decadent ideals pertaining to morality and society.

(Cambridge); & Holub. (2018). An early thesis trying to unify opposing elements of Nietzsche's and Spencer's thought is: Selle, Carl Friedrich (1902), *Herbert Spencer und Friedrich Nietzsche*, Barth, (Leipzig).

³⁰ E.g.: Benson, Bruce Ellis (2008), *Pious Nietzsche*, Indiana University Press, (Bloomington, IN), pp. 55-78 & pp. 97-117, respectively.

³¹ E.g.: Ahern, Daniel R. (1995), *Nietzsche as Cultural Physician*, Pennsylvania State University Press, (Pennsylvania, PA), pp. 51-84; Benson (2008), pp. 79-95; Evans, Daw-Nay (2010), 'Socrates as Nietzsche's Decadent in Twilight of the Idols', *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 340-347, The Johns Hopkins University Press, (Baltimore, MD); Huddleston, Andrew (2019), *Nietzsche on the Decadence and Flourishing of Culture*, Oxford University Press, (Oxford), pp. 82-87.

³² Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44. Cf., Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:15[10] = WP: 851. Schacht, Richard (1983), *Nietzsche*, Routledge, (Abingdon), p. 27, succinctly characterises decadence when discussing Nietzsche's portrayal of a predilection by some philosophers: "[T]o develop various metaphysical schemes involving a distinction between 'this world,' construed as a merely 'apparent world,' and another realm to which all honors are accorded. 'The latter has hitherto been called the "real world," "truth," "God."' For Nietzsche, however, it is a 'world invented by a lie,' which 'we have to abolish' – a 'lie' born of a lamentable disposition he seeks to diagnose [. . .] He often links the prevalence of this disposition to the general condition he calls 'decadence'; and he diagnoses the phenomenon of 'decadence' ultimately as a consequence of certain physiological deficiencies and psychological defects." Whilst focusing on art, Piazzesi, Chiara (2003), *Nietzsche: Fisiologia dell'arte e decadence*, Conte, (Lecce), also offers a physiological grounded interpretation, portraying decadence as a disharmony of forces in the individual resulting in a pathological condition that is reflected in their judgement and values. Huddleston (2019), pp. 77-96, discusses the relationship Nietzsche sees between the decadence of individuals and the decadence of whole cultures.

2 Spencer's Need of Moral Certitude

In a long section of *Twilight of the Idols* entitled 'Skirmishes of an Untimely Man' where Nietzsche refers to Spencer in a discussion of what he considers to be the ills of modernity, he portrays decadence in the individual as an unconscious and instinctive process of self-dissolution. A decadent like Spencer, according to Nietzsche, cannot help but act out their constitutive contradictions that are part of the physiological constitution. Their inherent physiological weakness leads the individual's everyday life-governing instincts astray, pointing them in the wrong direction.³³ A corresponding set of psychological weaknesses develop that entails that the decadent wastes their ever-diminishing remaining power in pursuits of a harmful orientation, such as being driven by selfless motives that devalue the importance of the individual's desires and needs. The decadent opts for what denies life over what promotes life for he erroneously believes that it is life-enhancing:

To choose instinctively what is harmful to *yourself*, to be *tempted* by 'disinterested' motives, this is practically (*giebt beinahe*)³⁴ the formula for decadence. 'Not to look for your own advantage' – that is just the moral fig leaf for an entirely different, namely physiological, state of affairs: 'I don't know how to *find* my own advantage any more' . . . Disintegration of the instincts (*Disgregation der Instinkte*)!³⁵

In a notebook entry Nietzsche states that one constructs a formula and uses it to simplify or condense the description of entire phenomena for the purpose of facilitating possible knowledge.³⁶ By so doing he is not constructing or affirming a 'law', but is instead broaching the question, 'how is it that there is a regular occurrence of a certain phenomenon?' A key ingredient for a formula that accounts for the pervasive phenomenon of decadence is the

³³ "[. . .] one fails to understand decadence as a physiological condition [. . .]", Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44.

³⁴ Literally: 'gives almost'.

³⁵ *TI*: Skirmishes, 35. *Cf.*, *TI*: Socrates, 11 & A: 15.

³⁶ Nachlass 1885-1887, KSA: 12:7[14] = WP: 629.

aforementioned form of instinctual turmoil, which as above, is usually described as one of ‘disintegration’ in translation. In fact, in the original German Nietzsche refers to this condition as a case of ‘disgregation’, by which he means a separation of components or ‘atoms’ from a cohesive whole resulting in anarchy or disunity.³⁷ As the accepted predominant force that previously organised the unity degrades in power and influence, the subordinate forces strive for independence and assertiveness. According to Nietzsche, instinctual disgregation results in a loss of an individual’s energy and reduction of actual power and feeling of power. He characterises this deficiency as a general exhaustion³⁸ or weakness of the will³⁹ (*Schwäche des Willens*),⁴⁰ which is then exhibited in an individual’s inability to resist external stimuli and influences.⁴¹ Consequently, Nietzsche claims that “the whole is not whole any more. But this is the image of every decadent style: there is always an anarchy of the atom, disintegration (*Disgregation*) of the will”;⁴² and that “[e]very mistake in every sense is the effect of a degeneration of the instincts, of a disintegration (*Disgregation*) of the will: this is almost a definition of what it means to be *bad*.”⁴³

The term ‘disgregation’ is applied by Nietzsche to a number of entities especially an individual’s impulses *i.e.* drives⁴⁴ and instincts,⁴⁵ and will,⁴⁶ but also informatively to a

³⁷ Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:17[6] = WP: 44.

³⁸ CW: 5.

³⁹ Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:14[73] = WP: 42 & 13:14[219] = WLN, p. 266/WP: 46.

⁴⁰ Weakness of will is not to be narrowly understood as cases where an agent’s appetites force her to act in ways that simultaneously go against her better judgement. Although those cases form part of what Nietzsche means by weak will, his conception of weakness of will is wider. Moreover, in Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:14[219] = WLN, p. 266/WP: 46, Nietzsche admits at he regards weakness of the will as a metaphor he finds misleading. This is because for him *there simply is* “no will” (*keinen Willen*). ‘Will’ does not exist as any sort of entity as, for example, Schopenhauer would hold. It is an abstraction based on the power experienced in willing, Nachlass 1880-1882, KSA: 9:3[91], 9:11[102]; Nachlass 1882-1884, KSA: 10:9[10], 10:13[1], 10:24[32] = WP: 671 & 767, 10:24[34] = WP: 671; Nachlass 1884-1885, KSA: 11:26[254], 11:27[1]; Nachlass 1885-1887, KSA: 12:5[9] = WLN, p. 106, 12:9[98] = WLN, pp. 158-159/WP: 488; Nachlass 1887-1889, 13:11[73] = WLN, pp. 212-213/WP: 715 & 13:14[219] = WLN, p. 266/WP: 46.

⁴¹ *TI*: Morality, 2 & Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:14[73] = WP: 42, 13:14[113] = WP: 334 & 13:17[6] = WP: 44.

⁴² CW: 7.

⁴³ *TI*: Errors, 2.

⁴⁴ Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:14[219] = WLN, p. 266/WP: 46.

⁴⁵ *TI*: Skirmishes, 35.

power-centre,⁴⁷ and personality.⁴⁸ For Nietzsche, unconscious and underlying drives and instincts⁴⁹ – such as the drive for food or sex that direct behaviour – are reflected in our conscious thoughts and actions. Drives are desires or needs (*Bedürfnisse*) such as the drive to seek sustenance – that seek to dominate and orientate a person. As Nietzsche puts it in a late note, “[e]very drive is a kind of lust for domination (*Herrschaft*); each has its perspective, which it would like to impose as a norm on all the other drives.”⁵⁰ Nietzsche regards Spencer as decadent because the drives (and instincts) that constitute him are disgregated by being subjugated by one predominant and inappropriate drive, in this case, an altruistic disposition

⁴⁶ *TI*, Errors, 2. Cf., *CW*: 7, Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:14[83] = *WP*: 444, 13:14[133] = *WP*: 684 & 13:17[6]. See Hamacher, Werner (1986), “Disgregation Des Willens”. Nietzsche über Individuum und Individualität’, *Nietzsche-Studien*, Volume 15, Issue 1, pp. 306–336, De Gruyter, (Berlin).

⁴⁷ Nachlass 1884-1885, *KSA*: 11:43[2].

⁴⁸ Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:15[106].

⁴⁹ Stern, Tom (2015), ‘Against Nietzsche’s ‘Theory’ of the Drives’, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, pp. 121-140, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge), p. 124, states that: “Despite the differences in their use in ordinary language, these terms may be treated as equivalent [. . .] In the human case, drive or instinct may therefore be taken to be a nonconscious urge or guiding power that makes a person act in a way that *seems* rational and purposive but that is not in fact (consciously) rational and purposive.” Katsafanas, Paul (2016), *The Nietzschean Self*, Oxford University Press, (Oxford), p. 10, declares that: “Nietzsche’s most important psychological concept, [is] the drive (*Trieb* or *Instinkt*) [. . .] Drives are non-conscious dispositions that generate affective orientations.” Conway, Daniel W. (1997), *Nietzsche’s Dangerous Game*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge), pp. 30-32, claims that due to his theory of decadence, from 1888 Nietzsche makes a subtle distinction between drive or impulse (*Trieb*), and instinct (*Instinkt*), and that prior to this date, he had always used the terms interchangeably. Conway’s distinction has generally been rejected: “According to Conway [. . .] *Instinkt* refers to a *Trieb* that has been “organized” or “trained to discharge” in a specific way [. . .] I find Conway’s textual evidence for this alleged distinction unpersuasive”, Katsafanas, Paul (2013), ‘Nietzsche’s Philosophical Psychology’, in Gemes, Ken and Richardson, John (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, pp. 727-757, Oxford University Press, (Oxford), p. 727. In a similar vein – and in my view with more success – Huddleston (2019), p. 85, argues that when discussing decadence in *TI*: Socrates, 11: “Nietzsche in this passage uses ‘instinct’ [*Instinkt*] in both its singular and its plural form, two times each. He is not always consistent with his terminology, and in this context, ‘instinct’ (singular) and ‘instincts’ (plural) make most sense when seen as referring to different things: ‘Instincts’ are animalistic drives (though shaped somewhat as well by one’s social context). ‘Instinct’ (as it is used in the singular here) is being able to act in a way that comes as second nature. Acting with instinct (in this sense) is not a matter of just letting impulses (instincts in the former sense) take their course; it is an ability one develops or achieves through painstaking work (Cf., *BGE*, 188).” Alfano, Mark (2019), *Nietzsche’s Moral Psychology*, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge), p. 27, states that “between 1886 and 1887, *instinct* largely replaces *drive* in his thinking”, and argues, p. 50, “that instincts are an important subclass of drives: they are innate, whereas drives can be either innate or acquired [and that] an agent’s instincts and other drives constitute her psychological type”. Fornari (2009), p. 126, argues that: “The two terms *instinct* and *drive* are not synonymous . . . even if Nietzsche does not always consistently maintain the semantic distinction. Indeed, the *instincts* appear as a result of a selection, structuring and incorporation of the *drives*, a kind of crystallization of the precipitations that the drives have found in organic memory (exactly as suggested by Spencer).” (Die beiden Begriffe *Instinkt* und *Trieb* sind nicht gleichbedeutend . . . auch wenn Nietzsche ihre semantische Unterscheidung nicht immer konsequent durchhält. Die *Instinkte* erscheinen in der Tat als Ergebnis einer Selektion, Strukturierung und Einverleibung der *Triebe* eine Art Kristallisierung des Niederschlags, den die Triebe im organischen Gedächtnis gefunden haben (genau wie von Spencer suggeriert)).

⁵⁰ Nachlass 1885-1887, *KSA*: 12:7[60] = *WLN*, p.139/*WP*: 481.

and attitude that tyrannizes all other drives. As such, Spencer then is an exemplar of decadence just like the more frequently discussed Socrates and Wagner, who according to Nietzsche were controlled by rationality⁵¹ and acting⁵² respectively.

Nietzsche never explicitly lists the attributes of a decadent,⁵³ but considers them to be the “ill-constituted” (*Mißrathenen*),⁵⁴ the embodiment of physiological corruption and weakness that may be expressed in different psychologically ‘corrupt’ ways – particularly in the moral beliefs, values and behaviour of individuals.⁵⁵ Perhaps what Nietzsche considers the most telling occurrences for the decadent are to be found in the following quote from *Ecce Homo*, where he contrasts a strong, life-affirming instinct to a degenerative, weak one that turns the individual against life:

Knowledge, saying yes to reality, is just as necessary for the strong as cowardice and *fleeing* in the face of reality – which is to say the ‘ideal’ – is for the weak, who are inspired by weakness . . . They are not free to know: decadents *need* lies, it is one of the conditions for their preservation.⁵⁶

Since Nietzsche refers to knowledge and knowing, the decadent’s general psychological weakness has an important epistemological consideration. Their inherent weakness is reflected in their knowledge claims and choice of supporting ideals, such as those of a God, immortality and freewill, which underpin the values of their morality and religion, thereby codifying weakness into life-inhibiting decadent values and beliefs. The mention of flight from reality for the haven of the ideal also denotes the metaphysical, and a tendency to denigrate the world we reside in as illusory or inferior in preference to a ‘true world’ (*wahre*

⁵¹ *TI*: Socrates, 10.

⁵² *CW*: 8. *Cf.*, *GS*: 368.

⁵³ Although a notebook entry lists the traits of the “Psychology of the good: a *decadent*” (*Psychologie des Guten: ein decadent*), and “The *decadence-instinct* in the good” (*Der decadence-Instinkt im Guten*), that includes and expands upon the smaller criteria I mention, Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:23[4] = *MT*. *Cf.*, Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:16[77].

⁵⁴ Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:23[1] = *WP*: 734. *Cf.*, Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:11[371] = *WP*: 153.

⁵⁵ *A*: 6 & 44 & *CW*: 5. *Cf.*, Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:14[108] = *WP*: 271 & 13:14[113] = *WP*: 334.

⁵⁶ *EH*: BT, 2.

Welt), where weak individuals can identify their ‘true’ self with fictitious notions such as an eternal soul and after-life.⁵⁷ Additionally, I interpret the assertion that decadents are ‘not free to know’ as reference to their inhibited agency. A weak and decadent individual is incapable of embracing this terrestrial life by forging their own will, and instead their need of an illusory alternative as a form of escape or even redemption from it, leaves them at the mercy of the insidious power of interpretative delusions provided by others.⁵⁸

For Nietzsche, any weakness regarding epistemological matters is highly pertinent to a contemporary scientist like Spencer. For Spencer is simply following his instinctual drives, which includes the basic human drive for knowledge as he progresses his allegedly objective scientific endeavours. However, if any drive aims to achieve mastery over other drives, the resulting science in Spencer’s case is symptomatic of one underlying but dominant drive. This drive and its normative goal guide the construction of the scientist’s resultant explanation, seeking to merely validate the world in accordance with an unknown, pre-existing moral bias, rather than in an affective and reflective equilibrium that Nietzsche favours.⁵⁹ Therefore for Nietzsche, Spencer is in the grip of a value and searching for justifications for it, such that any alleged value that altruism has is merely couched in the language but not the substance of scientific explanation.

Nietzsche’s claim concerning Spencer’s biased orientation is clearly made in a passage from the fifth book of *The Gay Science* entitled “‘Science’ as prejudice”. Nietzsche’s interest – as illustrated by the scare quotes – is not science as such, but rather a certain problematic practice of science. This practice is one that is already guided by moral prejudgements, a thinking that to him is indicative of mediocrity, where the drive or will for

⁵⁷ *EH*: D, 2 & Destiny, 8.

⁵⁸ *TI*: Skirmishes, 38.

⁵⁹ *D*: 119. On perspectivism that aims at a more reflective drive-affect equilibrium, see *GM*: III, 12.

‘objective’ knowledge or truth⁶⁰ loses to the drive or will for value, such that the world becomes represented in the scientist’s values:⁶¹

It follows from the laws that govern rank ordering (*Rangordnung*) that scholars, insofar as they belong to the intellectual middle class, are not even allowed to catch sight of the truly *great* problems and question marks; moreover, their courage and eyes simply don't reach that far – and above all, the need that makes them scholars, their inner expectations and wish that things might be *such and such*, their fear and hope, too soon find rest and satisfaction.⁶²

Nietzsche construes anyone seeking mere reassurance in scientific objectivity and certitude as psychologically weak. In order to supplant any anxiety arising from the internal turmoil between the drives striving and competing for orientation in an uncertain world, one tyrannical drive is involuntarily allowed to dominate, which for Spencer is that of altruism. Hence, the phrase ‘rest and satisfaction’ is almost certainly an allusion to the ancient Greek ethical doctrine of *ataraxia* – the striving for tranquillity and equanimity – which Nietzsche considers to be essentially an escapist practice founded upon ascetic principles as advocated by the decadents Pyrrho and Epicurus.⁶³

Nietzsche argues that Spencer is an example of the kind of scholar who wants to find the world to be in accordance with what he wishes, that once his ‘will to value’ has been satisfied to represent the world in a way that conforms to what he values – he will then rest content, for the truth has been ascertained and ignorance, error and unease have swiftly been laid to rest.⁶⁴ Spencer is unaware that his views are partially constructed using empirical

⁶⁰ *BGE*: 6.

⁶¹ *BGE*: 9.

⁶² *GS*: 373

⁶³ Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:14[99] = *WP*: 437.

⁶⁴ *TI*: Morality, 3 & Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:15[46] = *WP*: 452.

evidence gathered by viewing it through his own value-tinted glasses, and that the consequent ‘fables’ he generates are constituted by the prevailing group or ‘herd’ values:

What makes, for instance, the pedantic Englishman Herbert Spencer rave in his own way and makes him draw a line of hope, a horizon which defines what is desirable; that definitive reconciliation of 'egoism and altruism' about which he spins fables – this almost nauseates the likes of us: a human race that adopts as its ultimate perspective such a Spencerian perspective would strike us as deserving of contempt, of annihilation! But *that* he had to view as his highest hope what to others counts and should count only as a disgusting possibility is a question mark that Spencer would have been unable to foresee.⁶⁵

As I shall show next, according to Nietzsche, Spencer’s disgregation of the will that results in a predilection for moral certitude leads directly to his inability to correctly evaluate knowledge claims.

3 Spencer’s Claims of Objectivity

Spencer argued in his first book, *Social Statics* (1851), that the propositions of ethics have a self-evident quality akin to Euclidean geometry. He subsequently reiterated and combined this view with evolutionary theory and proposed that morality should be treated as a science.⁶⁶ Nietzsche criticises Spencer’s propensity of treating his conclusions regarding ethics, evolution, and social theory, as being inevitable and having an unconditional validity akin to that associated with mathematical and logical theorems. Nietzsche opposes Spencer’s materialism-inspired but misguided notion of an ‘ultimate perspective’ – that the practical benefit of a judgement is evidence for its truth and value – where subjective cognitive

⁶⁵ GS: 373.

⁶⁶ Spencer (1879a), §45.

constructs reflect objective structures inherent to the world since they have derived by adaptation to it.⁶⁷

For Nietzsche, there is no access to such indubitable knowledge. Rather the comparative benefit of certain beliefs shows them to be useful for a particular form of life. In the case of geometry, this usefulness is pertinent to human experience and with no substantial correspondence to some sort of metaphysical entities.⁶⁸ If one cannot step outside of one's own mind, then we have no certainty that any world interpretation produced by "four-cornered little human reason" grasps reality as it really is, let alone from this grasp what it ought to be.⁶⁹ Nor should one be dismissive of other interpretations, as the truly scientific person is one who is modest about his interpretations of the world, or 'of reality'. As there are many different perspectives on the world and each one is indicative of some set of needs, emotion or interest,⁷⁰ attempts to go beyond these perspectival valuations are bids for 'wisdom', which Nietzsche regards as indicative of the weakening of the scientist's interpretive power.⁷¹ For Nietzsche, claims of objectivity are symptomatic of decadence as they are due to a disgregation of the will. The scientific perspective aiming at objectivity, presupposes a high degree of indifference (*Adiaphorie*) towards other "normal drives" that commonly shape one's perspectives and orientate one's life, resulting in their isolation and a resistance to them (*Widerstand gegen die Normal-Triebe*).⁷²

Spencer's evolutionary ethics – like the morality of Kant – are an example of an unwitting "inner psychological tendency". Such surreptitious tendencies "conceal and corrupt the facts of how our thoughts have come to us [. . .] The driving forces and evaluations have

⁶⁷ GS: 373.

⁶⁸ Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:14[152] = WP: 515.

⁶⁹ GS: 373.

⁷⁰ GS: 344.

⁷¹ Nachlass 1885-1887, KSA: 12:5[14] = WLN, p. 108/WP: 608.

⁷² Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:14[83] = WP: 444.

long lain below the surface; what comes out is effect.”⁷³ As indeed is any quest for an objective science-effect:

I fight against all the hypocrisy of scientific attitude [. . .] in the claims to *objectivity*, to cold impersonality, where, as in all valuations, we tell something about ourselves and our inner experiences in a few words.⁷⁴

Nietzsche’s “account of the objective spirit” in *Beyond Good and Evil* can be construed as highly pertinent to his evaluation of Spencer’s stance,⁷⁵ for he further elaborates on this claim that it is a dispositional impossibility to claim to be both objective and person less, whilst also genuinely claiming to affirm or negate.⁷⁶ For Nietzsche, Spencer’s marriage of ethics to an objective science is an example of a general scepticism concerning the validity of knowledge claims that has changed its appearance – a “dressed-up skepticism (*aufgeputzte Skepsis*) and paralysis of the will”⁷⁷ — that reflects the inherent weakness of someone who cannot fully realise and accept that there is no *absolute* truth. Spencer is an exemplar of someone who avoids seeking the truth of reality because of a tacit and fearful acknowledgement that it cannot really be known. Yet he still aspires to a scientific kind of objective certitude founded upon moral principles. Nietzsche interprets Spencer’s quest for objectivity as betraying a related form of psychological weakness that I will turn to next: a need for illusory metaphysical ideals that reject reality.

4 Spencer’s Rejection of Reality and the Embracing of Ideals

Nietzsche’s interest in decadence in his later works introduces a propensity to look at science as a problem that must be looked at in a new way. As a result he develops a critique of its

⁷³ Nachlass 1884-1885, *KSA*: 11:35[31] = *WP*: 424.

⁷⁴ Nachlass 1884-1885, *KSA*: 11:35[32] = *WLN*, p. 20/*WP*: 424.

⁷⁵ *BGE*: 208.

⁷⁶ *BGE*: 207.

⁷⁷ *BGE*: 208.

allegedly metaphysical foundations.⁷⁸ He now comes to see science as erected on moral grounds, and its belief in truth belies its inheritance of the ascetic ideal, which is to say self-denying practices that either that go against the instincts of life or not pursuing one's own interests.⁷⁹ The scientist operates like an ascetic priest, furthering the principles of the ascetic form cloaked in the garb of scientific objectivity, and requires the ascetic ideal for science's continuation. Neither the formal methods, nor the resultant conclusions of scientific practice, can be perceived as the origin of the sciences' value creating power. Nietzsche argues, in a famous passage, that the origin of any normative force of scientific accounts of the world must lie elsewhere:

No doubt, those who are truthful in that audacious and ultimate sense which faith in science presupposes *thereby affirm another world* than that of life, nature, and history; and insofar as they affirm this 'other world', must they not by the same token deny its counterpart, this world, *our world*? [. . .] it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests – that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine . . .⁸⁰

The way in which we frame scientific accounts itself needs to be naturalized in order to get a clearer understanding of the sciences' alleged normative force.

In Nietzsche's view, Spencer's notion of truth is tainted by implausible claims to objectivity and echoes the traits of metaphysical and dogmatic philosophy. Spencer is unable to see that what guides his scientific practice is piety.⁸¹ His dogmatic insistence on the value of objectivity for Nietzsche amounts to a denial of the particularity of our perspectives. Just

⁷⁸ *BT*: Self-Criticism, 2, *GS*: 344 & *GM*: III, 24.

⁷⁹ *BT*: Self-Criticism, 1.

⁸⁰ *GS*: 344. *Cf.*, *GM*: III, 24.

⁸¹ Nachlass 1884-1885, *KSA*: 11:35[31] = *WP*: 424 & 11:35[32] = *WLN*, p. 20/*WP*: 424.

like the ancient Greek quest for *ataraxia*, Spencer is following an ascetic principle of abstinence when he orients himself beyond the needs and knowledge of this world.

Spencer's synthesis of biology and morality is an attempt to rise to the challenge of a naturalised understanding of values. Yet it also reflects his perception of a wider need in society to find a new justification for the prevailing Judeo-Christian moral values.⁸² This arises because the traditional values are in the process of becoming disconnected from any metaphysical foundation.⁸³ These and other concerns are implicit in the passage from *The Gay Science* examined above where Nietzsche claims that science is prejudiced by moral values. They are more clearly reiterated in a notebook entry intended as a retrospective preface for the 1887 edition of *Daybreak*:

*Fundamental problem: where does this unlimited power of belief come from? Of belief in morality? (– which also betrays itself in the way even the fundamental conditions of life are misinterpreted in favour of morality, despite knowledge of the animal and plant worlds.) 'self-preservation': Darwinian perspective on the reconciliation of altruistic and egoistic principles.*⁸⁴

The reference to the reconciliation of altruism and egoism is an allusion to Spencer, and Nietzsche clearly thinks Spencer is wrongly interpreting the basic conditions of life. Rather than working in a scientifically rigorous manner, Spencer offers erroneous hypotheses that are in direct conflict with the contemporary scientific knowledge for the sole purpose of accommodating his moral concerns. Hence, it is ironic that Spencer – the agnostic – is unaware that his science is based on Christian ideals.

⁸² See Fitzgerald, Timothy (1987), 'Herbert Spencer's Agnosticism', *Religious Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4, pp. 477-491, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge).

⁸³ *GM*: III, 24.

⁸⁴ Nachlass 1885-1887, *KSA*: 12:2[165] = *WLN*, pp. 92-94/*WP*: 253.

Since these ideals are at the heart of Nietzsche's portrayal of Spencer as a decadent, I will examine them in some detail. I will start with the ideals pertaining to morality and altruism, before moving on to discuss how these ideals have become implicit to the functioning of society, and hence the then emerging discipline of sociology.

4.1 The Decadent Ideals of Morality and Altruism

The general thrust of Nietzsche's attack on Spencer is captured in a notebook entry:⁸⁵ "As a biologist, Mr. Herbert Spencer is a decadent; as a moralist, too (he considers the triumph of altruism a desideratum! ! !)."⁸⁶ Nietzsche accepts that most moralities make a fundamental distinction between egoistic and altruistic motives or actions. Altruism, based wholly on concern for the welfare or benefit of others, involves an intended sacrifice of one's interests in order to advance another's. Nietzsche's aversion to altruism is captured by his curt exclamation "*No altruism!*",⁸⁷ and stems from his belief that the general view that altruism is essential to moralities is a mistaken superstition that dubious "historians of morality" – particularly English ones, such as Spencer – are all too willing to blindly repeat and "serve as its shield-bearers and followers".⁸⁸ Nietzsche embarks on a critique of altruism based on three elements. First, he rejects the view that the motivation of altruism is selfless. Secondly, he disputes that altruistic acts have greater value than self-interested acts. Thirdly, he claims that altruism has other natural foundation than the physiology of the decadent, ill-constituted person, and that its value is purely based on social custom. I will examine and evaluate these three criticisms in turn.

Nietzsche is inherently suspicious of the impetus and attitude of self-sacrifice of one's interests to advance those of another that is considered fundamental to altruism. The first element of his critique involves a questioning of the coherence of many of the examples of

⁸⁵ See Moore (2002b), and Richardson (2004), pp, 139-177.

⁸⁶ Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:14[40] = *WP*: 53. *Cf.*, *TI*: Skirmishes, 37.

⁸⁷ *GS*: 119.

⁸⁸ *GS*: 345.

supposedly selfless actions. Nietzsche fundamentally disagrees with Spencer's attempt to establish the presence of altruism in all organisms. He mocks Spencer's interpretation of propagation as altruism, especially when it is extended to the lowest forms of life like amoebas.⁸⁹ Nietzsche further ridicules Spencer's efforts to demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of altruism by claiming the term can be applied to any basic physiological activity that involved a loss of substance – so called “automatic altruism”⁹⁰ – particularly when trying to explain reproduction⁹¹ as a non-conscious form of self-sacrifice.⁹² Nietzsche therefore aims to reduce the prevalence and legitimacy of altruism:

Recently Comte's superficial comparison of altruism and egoism – but there is no altruism at all! – Exported from France to England; and now we see, for example, in Herbert Spencer, the attempt to reconcile himself, with such a refusal to take any concept in a strict sense, that in England now even **urination** (*Urin-lassen*)⁹³ is supposed to belong among the altruistic activities.⁹⁴

Whereas Spencer postulates a refinement of primitive altruistic principles, Nietzsche argues the opposite. He claims that organic change is a process of progressive individuation, and there is an evolution towards the individual, a refinement of egoism that is inhibited by altruism:

⁸⁹ Nachlass 1885-1887, *KSA*: 12:10[13] = *WP*: 653.

⁹⁰ Spencer (1879a), §75.

⁹¹ Nachlass 1880-1882, *KSA*: 9:6[137].

⁹² Nachlass 1884-1885, *KSA*: 11:26[303].

⁹³ Literally: ‘urine-letting’.

⁹⁴ Von Frankreich her ist neuerdings noch die oberflächliche Gegenüberstellung Comte's vom Altruismus und Egoismus — aber es giebt gar keinen Altruismus! — nach England gedrunen; und nun sehen wir z.B. bei Herbert Spencer den Versuch, auch damit wieder sich zu vertragen, mit einem solchen schlechten Willen, irgend einen Begriff noch streng zu nehmen, daß nunmehr *Urin-lassen* in England bereits schon unter die altruistischen Tätigkeiten gehören dürfte. Nachlass 1884-1885, *KSA*: 11:35[34] = *MT*.

[T]he altruistic drive is an *obstacle* to the recognition of the individual [. . .] because the weak people fear the strong individual and prefer the *general weakening*, rather than the development to what is the individual.⁹⁵

Indeed, Nietzsche offers an argument that attempts to abolish altruism altogether, along with egoism. It can be found in a long notebook entry from autumn 1887, entitled ‘The History of Moralization and Demoralization’,⁹⁶ and is a prototype that parallels the structure of the famous passage ‘How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable’, with one striking difference.⁹⁷ Whereas the published six-point polemic is, despite its departure from normal modes of philosophical inquiry, a masterpiece of brevity, clarity and also wit, the notebook version – which also has at its core six stages – is a rather convoluted exposition by comparison, that would require significant analysis to elucidate properly.⁹⁸ In order to highlight its significance, I will simply map the logical structure of the clearer and better known published argument onto the notebook version.

The published version describes the descent from ‘truth’ to ‘fable’ of the supposed ‘real’ world of the idealism of Platonic forms whose abolition also does away with the ‘apparent’ world as one of *mere* appearance.⁹⁹ This generates a new appreciation of the world of appearance as the only reality, the abolition of any distinction between truth and appearance, and with it the opportunity for new ways of thinking about reality. In a similar fashion, the notebook version references the conflict of altruism and egoism as portrayed in

⁹⁵ [D]er altruistische Trieb ist ein *Hinderniß* für die Anerkennung des Individuums [. . .] weil die schwachen Menschen das starke Individuum fürchten und lieber die *allgemeine Schwächung* wollen, statt der Entwicklung zum Individuellen. Nachlass 1880-1882, *KSA*: 9:6[163] = *MT*.

⁹⁶ Nachlass 1885-1887, *KSA*: 12:10[57] = *WP*: 786.

⁹⁷ *TI*: Fable.

⁹⁸ See Small (2005), pp. 172-177.

⁹⁹ Nietzsche does not use the term ‘idealism’ (*Idealismus*) in either the everyday utopian sense of believing in unrealistic goals or values, nor to refer to any of the loosely related philosophical theories that argue the empirical world is somehow ‘created’ by the mind as expounded in different ways by Berkeley, Kant or Hegel. Rather he uses the term ‘idealism’ to refer to any philosophical, religious or ethical doctrine that denigrates the world we reside in as illusory or inferior in preference to a metaphysical ‘true world’ and regards them as ‘errors’, the products of ‘cowardice’, *EH*: Preface, 3.

Spencer's *Data of Ethics*. The notebook entry traces the path of altruism from its usurpation of moral value, through the progressive decline of its authority to the point that it becomes superfluous, and contrasts this with a rehabilitation of egoism from the status of suppression and slander. The intention is to eliminate the distinction between altruism and egoism, to the point that altruism, just like the 'true world' becomes a fable. This exposes the egoism disguised as altruism, which in reality is a drive to express one's own power and strength, for example, by 'giving alms' to those who are lower in the order of rank of humanity:

[F]inally, one grasps that altruistic actions are only a species of egoistic actions – and that the degree to which one loves, spends oneself, proves the degree of individual power and personality.¹⁰⁰

The parallel with the 'fable' of the true world breaks down in the end. Just as is the case that the demise of the real world abolishes the apparent one,¹⁰¹ so too it could be construed that with altruism he aims to abolish egoism also. If this is so, then this goes beyond Spencer's position, who clearly upholds the distinction between altruism and egoism even when expounding their interdependence in everyday life and their reconciliation in an impending utopian society.

This is not the only instance where Nietzsche presents a potentially misleading picture of Spencer's position. It is however, perhaps not as striking as Nietzsche's misleading statements that Spencer sees something desirable in the "victory" (*Sieg*) of altruism¹⁰² – rather than a more accurate "reconciliation" (*Versöhnung*) of it with egoism that he sometimes states¹⁰³ – for Spencer clearly writes of a "compromise"¹⁰⁴ and "conciliation" of

¹⁰⁰ Nachlass 1885-1887, *KSA*: 12:10[57] = *WP*: 786.

¹⁰¹ *TI*: Fable.

¹⁰² *TI*: Skirmishes, 37. *Cf.*, Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:14[40] = *WP*: 53.

¹⁰³ *GS*: 373 & Nachlass 1885-1887, *KSA*: 12:2[165] = *WLN*, pp. 92-94/*WP*: 253. *Cf.*, Nachlass 1884-1885, *KSA*: 11:35[34].

¹⁰⁴ Spencer (1879a), §91.

altruism and egoism.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, Spencer's endorsement of altruism is overall actually rather limited. To give one example, he remarks in his work *Social Statics* that someone who shares in the happiness of others will gain more sources of satisfaction from that fact, which may be a plausible observation, but appeals to self-interest in making the case for altruism.¹⁰⁶

Nietzsche's second strand of criticism is the general belief that acts of altruism are of greater value and benefit to humanity than those that are motivated by self-interest. For Spencer, the alleged value of altruism extends beyond being a personal and social virtue to include socio-political practices, whereas Nietzsche argues that altruistic acts contribute to human weakness and degeneration. By denying that altruistic actions are of the greatest value Nietzsche is not only denying the value of what is normally regarded as the mark of moral behaviour, he is building a case for egoism. Since "morality never has an inherent value", he is intentionally avoiding the challenge to replace the conception of 'moral behaviour' with a superior one.¹⁰⁷ Instead Nietzsche is in favour of replacing the notion of moral value with another kind of value standard for evaluating actions – that they must enhance and empower a person's life.¹⁰⁸

In *The Genealogy*, Nietzsche contrasts Spencer's explanation of morality with that of Paul Rée's genealogical account, describing the former as more sensible and psychologically tenable, though no closer to the truth:

How much more sensible is the opposite theory (that doesn't make it any more true –), which is held, for example, by Herbert Spencer: he judges the concept 'good' as essentially the same as 'useful', 'practical', so that in their judgments 'good' and 'bad', people sum up and sanction their *unforgotten, unforgettable* experiences of what is

¹⁰⁵ Spencer (1879a), §95.

¹⁰⁶ Spencer, Herbert (1851), *Social Statics*, Chapman, (London), I, III, §2.

¹⁰⁷ *TI*: Skirmishes, 37.

¹⁰⁸ Nachlass 1885-1887, *KSA*: 12:2[190] = *WLN*, pp. 95-96/*WP*: 254.

useful-practical, harmful-impractical. According to this theory, good is what has always shown itself to be useful: so it can claim validity as 'valuable in the highest degree', as 'valuable as such'. This route towards an explanation is wrong, as I said, but at least the explanation in itself is rational and psychologically tenable.¹⁰⁹

Nietzsche's rejects this crucial assumption of Spencer's evolutionary ethics, which has taken the value-neutral conception of benefit and distorted it into a distinct sort of morality with substantive claims. He argues that it is founded on a profoundly erroneous conception of morality's origins.¹¹⁰ Nietzsche's well-known hypothesis in *The Genealogy* is that the labelling of altruistic actions as 'good' began as part of a slave revolt in morality, and was instigated by the socially inferior classes of individuals out of feelings of resentment against their aristocratic masters, that motivated them, with the help of the priests, to create new value distinctions.¹¹¹

In one passage, Nietzsche argues against Spencer's position without identifying him. He claims that actions that are substantially or wholly motivated by selfish concerns and so according to common use of the term are considered 'morally evil', are in fact as a beneficial to humanity as those actions that are usually taken to be selfless and other-regarding and commonly regarded as 'morally good':

Nowadays there is a thoroughly erroneous moral theory which is celebrated especially in England: it claims that judgements of 'good' and 'evil' sum up experiences of what is 'expedient' and 'inexpedient'; that what is called good preserves the species while what

¹⁰⁹ *GM*: I, 3.

¹¹⁰ Nachlass 1880-1882, *KSA*: 9:1[106].

¹¹¹ *GM*: I, 2.

is called evil harms it. In truth, however, the evil drives are just as expedient, species-preserving, and indispensable as the good ones – they just have a different function.¹¹²

He elsewhere argues that actions motivated by selfish considerations are as beneficial to humanity as ones that are taken to be selfless,¹¹³ or possibly even more so and will actually enhance mankind,¹¹⁴ including ones that are considered ‘evil’.¹¹⁵

More central to Nietzsche’s disdain is this mistaken valuing of selflessness or self-denial at the expense of prizing natural self-interest. This evaluation is the basis for a specific practice of self-abnegation that Nietzsche calls ‘unselfing’ (*Entselbstung*)¹¹⁶ or “the morality of unselfing” (*Entselbstungs-Moral*¹¹⁷/*Moral der Entselbstung*¹¹⁸), and “demonstrates a will to the end, it *negates* life at the most basic level.”¹¹⁹ This ‘morality of selflessness’, as it is often referred to in the secondary literature, is a form of self-denial that is the clearest articulation of a life-negating ethic that involves a battle against one’s very own instincts, will and vitality.¹²⁰ Indeed, he is extremely critical of all forms of benevolence,¹²¹ based on sympathy,¹²² compassion or pity.¹²³ As stated in a notebook entry, “[t]he altruistic one [who] talks much of pity—and is distinguished by the weakness of the personality”, which is indicative of a disgregation of the will, and so a common form of decadence that is

¹¹² GS: 4.

¹¹³ BGE: 44.

¹¹⁴ BGE: 2.

¹¹⁵ GS: 4.

¹¹⁶ A: 54. Cf., BGE: 207, GM: III, 11 & 17 & CW: Epilogue.

¹¹⁷ EH: D, 2, Destiny, 7, “morality of self-negation”, or “morality of depersonalization”, Nachlass 1885-1887, KSA: 12:10[128] = WLN, pp. 196-197/WP: 388, Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:12[1] & 13:23[3].

¹¹⁸ “[M]orality of self-abnegation”, A: 54, Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:11[48] & 13:16[14].

¹¹⁹ EH, Destiny, 7.

¹²⁰ For example, Janaway, Christopher (2007), *Beyond Selflessness*, Oxford University Press, (Oxford), pp. 2-3, defines the ‘morality of selflessness’ in the following way: “[T]he morality that has arisen from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, whose values, according to Nietzsche, give priority to selflessness, holding it good to be compassionate and self-sacrificing, to suppress one’s natural self, to feel guilt about one’s instincts, and to value a projected ‘higher world’ of absolute value of which one’s imperfect human nature is unworthy.”

¹²¹ EH: Destiny, 4.

¹²² TI: Skirmishes, 37.

¹²³ A: 7.

essentially inimical to life.¹²⁴ Moreover, these forms of benevolence are ultimately incompatible with the selfish urges that are Nietzsche claims, the source of all individual achievement.¹²⁵ Instead the proper priority is concern for oneself, the freedom associated with self-selection of one's own personal virtues and values,¹²⁶ to achieve self-creation through having one's own laws.¹²⁷

Nietzsche's third strand of criticism applies a physiological approach to valuation, and he concludes that there is no physiological basis to attribute a 'law' for the supposed merits of altruism.¹²⁸ A valuation based on altruism is caused by corrupted instincts that were originally egoistical in nature, and convey a disparaging judgement of one's self-worth that is a symptom of a declining life:

The ascendancy of an altruistic way of valuating is the consequence of an instinct of being ill-constituted. The value judgement on the most basic level says: 'I am not worth much' – a purely physiological value judgement, or more clearly still: the feeling of powerlessness, the absence of the great affirming feelings of power (in the muscles, nerves, centres of motion). Depending on the culture of these classes, the value judgement translates itself into a moral or religious judgement (– the predominance of religious and moral judgements is always a sign' of lower culture –) [. . .]¹²⁹

Altruism runs counter to his idea of rank ordering of people and their intellects,¹³⁰ and it contributes to human weakness or degeneration and damages self-interests.¹³¹ The removal of the distinction leads Nietzsche to a 'revaluation' of egoism,¹³² where altruism is replaced by

¹²⁴ Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:17[6] = *WP*: 44. *Cf.*, *TI*: Skirmishes, 35.

¹²⁵ *GS*: 13.

¹²⁶ *Z*: I, Creator.

¹²⁷ *GS*: 335.

¹²⁸ Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:15[41] = *WP*: 52.

¹²⁹ Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:14[29] = *WLN*, pp. 242-244/*WP*: 373.

¹³⁰ Nachlass 1885-1887, *KSA*: 12:7[9] = *WLN*, p. 133/*WP*: 681.

¹³¹ Nachlass 1885-1887, *KSA*: 12:9[30] = *WP*: 785.

¹³² *D*: 148 & *GS*: 328.

self-regard, the value of which depends upon whether individuals represent “either the ascending or the descending line of life”.¹³³ A notebook entry goes as far as to make the sweeping claim that “[i]n fact, everything ‘unegoistic’ is a phenomenon of decadence.”¹³⁴

For Nietzsche, life should not be merely a struggle for existence as presented by Spencer but also an on-going striving toward ever-greater diversity, complexity, creativity and power that increases the quality of life forms. However, the very practice of altruism actually supports the natural tendency for the human animal to evolve toward common mediocrity, by artificially aiding the weak and sick and thereby prevents them from being ‘deselected’.¹³⁵ A less controversial and more palatable interpretation is that in Nietzsche’s view we need to guard against merely reacting to stimuli, for losing the power of self-control to defend oneself against the weak and sick is indicative of a weakness of personality due to decadence.¹³⁶ In the place of altruism he proposes a healthy dose of selfishness.¹³⁷ Selfishness is linked to the superior unconscious organization of one’s own diverse nature, over any conscious self-knowledge and the employment of any imperatives,¹³⁸ especially those of an altruistic nature.¹³⁹ Altruism risks wasting or further corrupting the little selfishness that survives:

An 'altruistic' morality, a morality in which selfishness *fades away* –, is always a bad sign. This is true for the individual, it is even more true for peoples. You are missing the best part when selfishness begins to fail. [. . .] People are done for when they become altruistic.¹⁴⁰

¹³³ *TI*: Skirmishes, 33.

¹³⁴ Thatsächlich ist alles „Unegoistische“ *décadence*-Phänomen. Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:22[22] = *MT*.

¹³⁵ *EH*: *Destiny*, 8.

¹³⁶ Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:17[6] = *WP*: 44.

¹³⁷ *TI*: Skirmishes, 35.

¹³⁸ *EH*: *Clever*, 9.

¹³⁹ Nachlass 1885-1887, *KSA*: 12:7[6] = *WLN*, pp. 131-132/*WP*: 286.

¹⁴⁰ *TI*: Skirmishes, 35.

Altruism, then, is a decadent value because it is detrimental to the evolution of ever more capable forms of human beings. A world free of decadent values would, Nietzsche claims, make room for life with a self-regarding instinct for growth. Yet according to Nietzsche, these decadent values are the foundation for Spencer's view of an ideal society that I will now turn to.

4.2 The Decadent Ideals of Society

As I have shown, Nietzsche's individualist stance can be taken as a response to his belief that in general Spencer's interpretation of morality is characteristic of a mediocre individual seeking happiness.¹⁴¹ In particular, Nietzsche construes Spencer's defence of altruism as hazardous to humanity due to its emasculating capacity of protection within the collective 'herd':¹⁴²

[T]o demand that everyone should become 'good', herd animals, blue-eyed (*blauäugig*),¹⁴³ benevolent 'beautiful souls' – or altruistic, as Mr Herbert Spencer would have it, – would mean robbing existence of its *great* character, would mean castrating humanity [. . .]¹⁴⁴

For Spencer, social altruism arose at a time when competing groups or societies were at war with one another and could only survive and prosper by subordinating the individual's welfare to that of the group's. So long as societies fight one another, they must constrain their members to sacrifice their interests to the group. In a future world that is at peace, the need for these constraints on individual self-interest will cease.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ *EH*: Destiny, 4.

¹⁴² Nachlass 1885-1887, *KSA*: 12:7[6] = *WP*: 286 & 13:14[5] = *WLN*, pp. 240-241.

¹⁴³ Figuratively: 'naïve' or 'gullible'.

¹⁴⁴ *EH*: Destiny, 4.

¹⁴⁵ Spencer (1879a), §76.

In Nietzsche's view, the group selection of interests contains two features that contradict Spencer's optimistic prediction about society. First, Nietzsche has a very different theory about what traits enable a group to survive and expand. By far the most important virtue is unity and cohesion, which is achieved by uniformity in its membership through an instinct for sharing of practices and customs. Secondly, these customs aren't selected to just serve society, but are also devised to mould society into a more favourable medium for their own proliferation. The most successful customs are those that function to bond and unite, forming a 'herd' to ease their propagation. These new selective processes instil into societies a drive to imitate and copy others – a "herd-instinct" (*Heerden-Instinct*) – to want and do the same as they do, a nature that is in the interest not of the individual, but of society that functions as a herd.¹⁴⁶

The values that are propagated via this selective mechanism have become the prevailing virtues of society.¹⁴⁷ The most fundamental is equality which induces uniformity via the guided and coerced sharing of resources, practices and customs. Altruism and pity are the principal virtues produced by the values of equality and civilization that subordinate one's own interest to those of the social whole. The misguided effort to overpower humanity's natural drives through a civilizing social selection of practices has turned it into a herd of sick animals.¹⁴⁸ Society then is effectively tamed into a pro-group and anti-individualist habit of altruism. Consequently Nietzsche associates decadence with all these values.¹⁴⁹ In their place, Nietzsche encourages the adoption of changed social practices that encapsulate new virtues and a suggestion of biological regulation.¹⁵⁰ He advocates the manipulation of reproduction in such a way as to train, but also to reinforce, those drives themselves, such that people will

¹⁴⁶ *GS*: 50, 116, 117 & 296.

¹⁴⁷ *GS*: 21.

¹⁴⁸ *BGE*: 62.

¹⁴⁹ Equality: Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:23[1] = *WP*: 734. Civilization: Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:15[67] = *WP*: 122. Altruism: *TI*: Skirmishes, 35. Pity: *A*: 7.

¹⁵⁰ *A*: 3.

stand in an order of rank that replaces the prevailing equality of mediocrity.¹⁵¹ The healthy individual would be one that seeks out what is best for him, utilising the values embedded in his natural constitution, which may contribute to, or be enhanced by, immersion in a life-prompting culture. This in turn depends on the individual's drives being directed towards goals that serve growth and will and are in the individual's interests.

For Nietzsche then, Spencer's conception of what is required for a healthy society is based on decadent principles. Hence Nietzsche's exclamation: "Spencer always puts 'human equality' ahead."¹⁵² Many of his principles have already become institutionalised in the contemporary era of egalitarian, democratic, liberal *laissez faire* capitalism. Nietzsche dismisses the resulting convention as the "Shopkeeper's philosophy of Mr. Spencer; complete absence of an ideal, except that of the mediocre man".¹⁵³ In another retrospective preface written in 1886, Nietzsche provides a description of the symptoms of decline of a formerly noble epoch and its modern incarnation that can be interpreted as a summary of a number of the key features of Spencer's philosophy:

[I]t was precisely during their period of dissolution and weakness that the Greeks became ever more optimistic, more superficial, more actorly, but also filled with a greater lust for logic and for making the world logical, which is to say both more 'cheerful' and more 'scientific' – could it then perhaps be the case, despite all 'modern ideas' and the prejudices of democratic taste, that the victory of *optimism*, the predominance of *reasonableness*, practical and theoretical *utilitarianism*, like its

¹⁵¹ *BGE*: 221.

¹⁵² Spencer setzt immer „Gleichheit der Menschen“ voraus. Nachlass 1880-1882, *KSA*: 9:1[98] = *MT*.

¹⁵³ Nachlass 1885-1887, *KSA*: 12:10[118] = *WP*: 382. *Cf.*, Nachlass 1885-1887, *KSA*: 12:9[44] = *WLN*, pp. 149-150/*WP*: 901.

contemporary, democracy, that all this is symptomatic of a decline in strength, of approaching old age, of physiological exhaustion?¹⁵⁴

Nietzsche traces the degeneration of cultures to the inexorable waning of the practices, customs, and institutions that jointly mould the dominant character of a society and people.¹⁵⁵ For him, ascending ages are inexorably followed by decline just as strong peoples eventually deteriorate. Nietzsche was convinced that nineteenth-century European society was not a high point of cultural evolution, and did not epitomise the apogee of evolutionary human development as Spencer argued.¹⁵⁶ Rather, Nietzsche's perception of contemporary Europe was a society of social and cultural decline – particularly in comparison with the Renaissance era – one that was fundamentally a faltering expression of exhausted, nihilistic moral and social values devoid of ultimate value and meaning that are tottering on the point of implosion and are now hostile to future life.¹⁵⁷

Spencer's vision of a future humanity in a perfect state of physical and moral adaptation to their environment – his so-called “ideally moral man”¹⁵⁸ – is for Nietzsche an embodiment of herd consciousness and an example of stagnation and degeneration.¹⁵⁹ He snidely refers to Spencer's conception as the “the stable human” or “permanence human” (*der Dauermensch*)¹⁶⁰ in an 1881 notebook entry.¹⁶¹ Spencer's evolved “ideal moral man” later re-emerges as Zarathustra's contemptuous “*the last human being*” (*der letzte Mensch*). The last human is ‘the last’, the culmination of evolutionary and cultural development and he is also ‘last’ in that he is devoid of sufficient energy to produce another generation. It is an object of contempt for Nietzsche, for as it shirks danger and pain, seeks comfort, base

¹⁵⁴ *BT*: Self-Criticism, 4.

¹⁵⁵ *TI*: Skirmishes, 39.

¹⁵⁶ Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:14[123] = *WLN*, pp. 258-260/*WP*: 685.

¹⁵⁷ *TI*: Skirmishes, 37.

¹⁵⁸ Spencer (1879a), §30.

¹⁵⁹ *Z*: I, Prologue, 5. Cf., Nachlass 1882-1884, *KSA*: 10:4[171], 10:4[204] & 10:5[32].

¹⁶⁰ Moore (2002a), p. 71, and Moore (2002b), p. 10: “enduring man”.

¹⁶¹ Nachlass 1880-1882, *KSA*: 9:11[44] = *MT*.

personal gratification, individual survival, and the hope for a long and uneventful life in the pursuit of happiness. Thereby the last human is ascribed very similar properties to Nietzsche's later portrayal of decadents – such as Epicurus – for whom the goal of life is happiness with the most pleasure and least pain and attaining *ataraxia*.¹⁶² Nietzsche also sees the last human as all too close to the typical contemporary European. The latter's tendencies for self-indulgence, mass culture and a dominant desire to ease the toil of existence, is merely to pursue a lifestyle that is so stable that it no longer develops.

Nietzsche parodies the view that currently humanity is the apex of creation with the idea of the Overhuman (*Übermensch*), which suggests that humanity is no such thing.¹⁶³ A stage of humanity that he hopes will be surpassed.¹⁶⁴ The Overhuman is the culmination of Nietzsche's idea of the process of progressive individuation, a metaphor for human potential and self-overcoming and so the antithesis of both the stable human and the last human. This future human being will be able to surmount or utilise the conflicting impulses and perspectives that form his or her existence, one who has not been shackled by the disaffecting experience of serving ends that are not his own but is instead free to postulate his own goals and values. For Nietzsche, human nature is not of itself an end or carries within itself a determinate *telos* – it is viewed as potential for some higher, yet to be determined, and never final, end.

What is clear from this discussion of the functioning and development of society is that Nietzsche regards the emerging 'scientific' discipline of sociology, as practised by Spencer and Comte, as clearly embedded in a prevailing *Zeitgeist* that embodies the spirit of decadence. In his words: "Even the ideals of science can be deeply, yet completely

¹⁶² A: 30.

¹⁶³ The *Übermensch* precursor is the "liberated man" (freigewordener Mensch), Nachlass 1880-1882, KSA: 9:11[182] = MT. Nietzsche also contrasts "Herded people and exceptional people!" (*Heerdenmenschen und Sondermenschen!*), Nachlass 1880-1882, KSA: 9:11[209] = MT.

¹⁶⁴ Z: I, Prologue, 3.

unconsciously influenced by decadence: our entire sociology is proof of that.”¹⁶⁵ Sociology is also lacking a “*pathos of distance*”, a suitable degree of detachment from the subject under investigation.¹⁶⁶ Nietzsche believes that without sufficient critical distance sociology can never provide a viable scientific account of the social processes that it is itself part of. Again, he regards sociology to be both a symptom as well as a part of modernity that utilises a decadent style of analysis:

[T]he unconscious effects of decadence have even come to dominate the ideals of some of the sciences. My objection to the whole discipline of sociology in England and France is that it has only experienced the *decaying forms* of society, and innocently uses its own instinct of decay as the norm for sociological value judgments. *Declining* life, the loss of all the forces of organization, which is to say separation, division, subordination, and domination, is formulated as an *ideal* in sociology today . . . Our socialists are decadents, but Mr Herbert Spencer is a decadent too [. . .]¹⁶⁷

According to Nietzsche then, sociology examines the constituent parts and development of decadence, of which itself is a part, and thereby operates within a flawed, decadent frame of reference.

As a consequence, sociology raises these components of decline to a normative prominence, and Nietzsche interprets them as fundamentally nihilistic: “everywhere the Christian-nihilistic value standard still has to be pulled up and fought under every mask; e.g., in present-day sociology”.¹⁶⁸ Despite Nietzsche’s relative ignorance of Spencer’s thought, it does not stop him from conveniently – without detailed argument – integrating his critique of

¹⁶⁵ Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:14[40] = *WP*: 53.

¹⁶⁶ *BGE*: 257.

¹⁶⁷ *TI*: Skirmishes, 37.

¹⁶⁸ Nachlass 1887-1889, *KSA*: 13:14[6] = *WP*: 51.

sociology into his more fundamental and structural evaluation of society at the end of the nineteenth century,¹⁶⁹ which for him is characterised by decadence and nihilism.¹⁷⁰

5 Conclusion

As I have shown, Nietzsche interprets Spencer's thoughts on science, morality, and sociology, as the consequence of the decadent socio-political and moral values of the current age. Collectively, Spencer's views culminate in an optimistic prediction concerning the future of humanity, a perspective that Nietzsche presents as the product of a severely biased, dominant altruistic drive that censors alternative possible interpretations, including different scientific hypotheses. Yet what is also of interest in Nietzsche's 1888 classification of Spencer as a decadent is that the basis for his interpretation can be traced back to a notebook entry from 1880/1881. There Nietzsche expresses this disdain for Spencer's ideal of an adaptation that abolishes the individual and clearly alludes to the decadence of humanity:

Such an adaptation as Spencer has in mind is conceivable, but so that every individual becomes a useful tool and only feels like it: thus as a *means*, as a *part* – that is, with the *abolition of individualism*, according to which [individualism] one wants to be *purpose* and wholeness, and in both a uniqueness! This transformation is possible, and yes *perhaps* history is going in this direction! But then the individuals become **weaker and weaker** – it is the story of the *downfall of humanity*, where the principle of the disinterestedness of *vivre pour autrui* [to live for others] and sociality reign!¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:14[40] = WP: 53.

¹⁷⁰ Benson (2008), p. 133, argues that that nihilism should be considered a subcategory of decadence since for him, nihilism is the recognition of the meaningless of life, and decadence is a turning against life. However, presumably one can be a decadent by turning against life but without finding life to be meaningless – perhaps too painful rather than too pointless. Benson's general point follows Conway (1997), p. 109: "All nihilists are also decadents, but not all decadents are nihilists".

¹⁷¹ Es ist eine solche Anpassung wie sie Spencer im Auge hat denkbar, doch so daß jedes Individuum zu einem nützlichen Werkzeuge wird und sich auch nur so fühlt: also als *Mittel*, als *Theil* — also mit *Aufhebung* des *Individualismus*, nach dem einer *Zweck* und eine Ganzheit sein will, und zwar in beiden eine *Einzigkeit*! Diese Umbildung ist möglich, ja vielleicht läuft die Geschichte dahin! Aber dann werden die Einzelnen immer

A slightly earlier entry also explicitly mentions altruism in the context of science with regard to Spencer. Nietzsche accuses the moralist scientist of nothing other than being led by unconscious wishful thinking:

The value of altruism is not the result of science; instead the people of science let themselves be misled by the *now predominant drive*, to believe that science confirms the wish of their drive! cf. Spencer.¹⁷²

Nietzsche's criticism of the lack of a will of one's own – of being guided by the internalised dominant values of an ascetic, decadent culture that falsely gives scientific results the air of necessity – is corroborated by a further entry written a few months later:

At every moment of a being's present state, countless ways are open for its *development*: but the dominating drive only sanctions one as good, the one of its ideal. In this way Spencer's image of the future of humanity is not a *scientific necessity*, but a *wish* according to the ideals of the present.¹⁷³

So, although this period significantly pre-dates Nietzsche's use of the term 'decadence' whose steady usage only begins from November 1887, I construe these entries as already working out and describing some of the symptoms of Spencer's decadence.

What Nietzsche describes in these early examples is nothing other than part of the process of decadence: when a thinker like Spencer finds in science a justification of his instincts, he is really guided by dominant drives that are not his own but infused with –

schwächer — es ist die Geschichte vom *Untergang der Menschheit*, wo das Princip der Uninteressirtheit des vivre pour autrui und die Socialität herrschen! Nachlass 1880-1882, KSA: 9:10[D60] = MT.

¹⁷² Der Werth des Altruism ist nicht das Ergebniß der Wissenschaft; sondern die Menschen der Wissenschaft lassen sich durch den *jetzt vorherrschenden Trieb* verleiten, zu glauben, daß die Wissenschaft den Wunsch ihres Triebes bestätige. (cf. Spencer). Nachlass 1880-1882, KSA: 9:8[35] = MT.

¹⁷³ Von jedem Augenblick im Zustand eines Wesens stehen zahllose Wege seiner *Entwicklung* offen: der herrschende Trieb aber heißt nur einen einzigen gut, den nach seinem Ideale. So ist das Bild Spencer's von der Zukunft des Menschen nicht eine *naturwissenschaftliche Nothwendigkeit*, sondern ein *Wunsch* aus jetzigen Idealen heraus. Nachlass 1880-1882, KSA: 9:11[98] = MT.

Nietzsche might say corrupted by – the predominant values of a decadent culture. Given his decadence, a scientist like Spencer will not discover the drives and instincts need to assist an individual in affirming their own ‘will’ and hence ‘freedom’ in Nietzsche’s sense – which is to say as autonomy – such that the intentions, beliefs and values *etc.*, that are expressed in an individual’s actions, can be considered their own.

For Nietzsche, Spencer was the epitome of the worst sort of nineteenth-century scientist. One, who was so utterly convinced of the objective truth of his theory of evolutionary ethics, that he was completely disinclined to entertain the prospect that it might be only one possible interpretation amongst many alternatives. Nietzsche speculates that such a scientist may well be devoted to knowledge, but in fact only part of him is due to his physiological make-up, with one or some instinctual drive(s) dominating and subjugating other drives. Spencer’s tyrannical drive configuration can be construed as another example of a predominant kind of person that Nietzsche introduces in a notebook entry using the heading ‘Morality as decadence’:

The “good man” as tyrant [. . .] a certain species of man treats the conditions of its existence as conditions which ought to be imposed as a law, as "truth," "good," "perfection": it tyrannizes– It is a form of faith, of instinct, that a species of man fails to perceive its conditionality, its relativity to other species.¹⁷⁴

Spencer’s flawed constitution brings about a single, solitary perspective that is not sufficiently disengaged to appreciate other possibilities, the upshot of which is a “*bad scholar*” imbued with decadence.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, Spencer is typical of the contemporary scientists’ way of following his instincts as he progresses his scientific investigations, but those instincts

¹⁷⁴ Moral als decadence. Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:14[158] = MT/WP: 354.

¹⁷⁵ Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:14[83] = WP: 444.

have become corrupted, inculcated by the prevailing cultural values.¹⁷⁶ While the pursuit of science itself is characteristic of the basic human will for knowledge, the resulting science as practised by people like Spencer is indicative of instincts weakened by decadence:

[O]ur desire, our will even to knowledge is a symptom of a tremendous *décadence* . . . We strive for the opposite of what is willed by *strong races, strong natures* – understanding is an *ending* . . . That science is possible in this sense, as it's practised today, proves that all life's elementary instincts, instincts of *self-defence* and *protection*, have ceased to function – we are no longer accumulating, we are squandering the capital of our forebears, even in our way of *knowing* –¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:14[29] = WLN, pp. 242-244/WP: 373.

¹⁷⁷ Nachlass 1887-1889, KSA: 13:14[226] = WLN, p. 267/WP: 68.