NIETZSCHE'S REJECTION OF TRANSCENDENT TRUTH

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A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

MASTER OF ARTS (2002)
(Philosophy)

McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Nietzsche's Rejection of Transcendent Truth

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NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 85

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I address Nietzsche's seemingly paradoxical claim that all truth is in fact illusion. I begin with an examination of the claims in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, where the transcendent truth is rejected on the grounds that it is self-contradictory impossibility. However, if this is the case, then how is it possible for Nietzsche to make such a claim? Does he not implicitly exclude his own account from this critique? To investigate this matter, I offer an interpretation of his critique of the history of Western morality since the time of Socrates and how it relates to what he terms the human, all-too-human origins of the concept of truth. This leads to a discussion of his claims concerning the essentially perspectival and interpretive nature of human knowing. I argue that this view of knowledge, in which truth and life are viewed as one and the same, saves Nietzsche from the charge of internal inconsistency.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking my first reader, Dr. Samuel Ajzenstat, whose encouragement and constructive criticism helped to improve the discussion throughout. Thanks also to Dr Sassen and Dr. Planinc for agreeing to be my second and third readers. I also wish to thank family, and in particular my parents, Ches and Ann, for their unending support. Finally, a very special thank you to Marie-Claude, whose understanding, kindness, and great cooking smoothed out the bumps along the way.

To Steve

CONTENTS

Introduction

According to Nietzsche, all is not as it appears with truth. In his posthumously published piece of writing *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,* he argues that truths are illusions, the illusory character of which we have forgotten. Several commentators have convincingly argued that this seemingly paradoxical statement constitutes the rejection only of a particular understanding of truth that has prevailed throughout the Western metaphysical tradition [1] In this way they attempt to make sense of the apparent contradiction involved in Nietzsche's claim to tell us the truth about the falsification which lies at the bottom of truth-claims.

In what follows I will discuss how Nietzsche's denial of transcendent truth ("Truth") is part of a larger critique of what he argues is the decadent form of life that has come to dominate western culture. According to this critique, the inestimable worth that has been attributed to the ideal of truth is the moral valuation of a particular type of life, namely one that has entered a state of decline. This love of Truth actually conceals a hatred of becoming, born out of, and sustained by, a fearful need to escape from a world of change which it finds oppressive; by creating the illusion of an unchanging world humans seek to free themselves from this threatening uncertainty. As Nietzsche sees it, since the time of Socrates, Western philosophy has been the history of the development of this masked

[1] See, for example, John T. Wilcox (*Truth and Value in Nietzsche*), Tracy B. Strong (*Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*), and Allan D. Schrift (*Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation*).

"ascetic, " life-denying ideal. He likens the unfolding of this ideal to the progression of an illness, of which philosophy has been its most "spiritual" or refined expression.

Our relationship to this illness is a complicated one. Despite its inherently decadent perspective, it has been through the inspiration of this ideal that humanity has become, as he says, an "interesting" animal. However, this has come at a considerable cost, for at the heart of this ideal lies a tragic flaw, the full effect of which we are only now coming to feel. The will to seek an unchanging, absolute Truth, as it gains in strength and refinement, strives to put all of life under the dominion of its perspective. Knowledge, namely the true understanding of the way things exist in themselves, comes to be valued for its own sake as *the* good, and whatever phenomena fail to meet its criteria of rational acceptability are cast aside as illusion and/or superstition. However, a difficulty arises when this perspective finally turns its gaze toward itself and its own foundations, where it discovers that the very possibility of Truth is fundamentally unintelligible, and that its entire enterprise has been grounded on illusion. In other words, the last victim of this unmasking imperative is the ideal of Truth itself. The fall of this most cherished belief, in which so much has been invested, eventually leads to the nihilistic devaluation of all values. Helping those who can overcome this chronically ill form of life is one of the tasks Nietzsche sets himself with his writing.

Given his intention to challenge the basic assumptions on which much of Western philosophy has been grounded, it is natural that many of his claims would generate debate. Given its previously unquestioned status, the denial of truth is perhaps the most controversial of these. In Chapter 1 I focus on the arguments of *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,* where Nietzsche offers a two-pronged attack on the conceivability of

truth understood as knowledge of things in themselves. One part of this critique focuses on the assertion that the very conception of such knowledge plunges one into self-contradiction. The other criticism centers on what he thinks is a misunderstanding of the nature and role our perception plays in the formation of concepts and language. In brief, he argues that all perception and conceptual thought is inherently "metaphorical," involving "artistic" simplification designed to meet the needs of just the type of creatures we are. It appears, then, that the very "matter" of truth (i.e., our perception of the world and the language we use to communicate it to others and ourselves) is a distortion of reality. But if we presume that Nietzsche thinks that his own account accurately reflects the way things are, then one might want to ask how he is able to employ this very same language to make his own claims. Does he not have to exempt himself from his own critique?

Properly addressing this question requires some discussion of the particular way Nietzsche understands the terms truth and illusion. I therefore postpone my attempt to deal with this question until the third chapter. In Chapter 2 I turn my attention to an examination of his inquiry into the value of Truth. I discuss what might be called Nietzsche's account of the rise and fall of Truth as a cultural institution, from its inception in the Socratic moral revolution to its eventual demise in "European nihilism." The focus of this account is the assertion that belief in Truth is a tool of an "ascetic" will which uses it to maintain itself in life. In the first two sections I look at Nietzsche's critique of the Socratic revolution in morals and his claim that Socrates is the first world historical figure of decadence. He argues that it is with Socrates that slave morality firmly takes root. This event is analysed in terms of the cultural decay of Greek society to which he thinks it is a response. It is argued that the instincts which had formerly sustained Greek tragic society had degenerated to

such a point that there remained but one solution: to become "absurdly" rational or perish. This is the beginning of abstract moralising, which creates an unchanging "True World" that serves as the ground for life in this one. The basic premise of this form of thinking is that life as it is lived is fundamentally flawed, but can nonetheless be corrected or improved through the power of dialectical reason, which reveals Truth. To Nietzsche's mind, this is nothing less than a disguised ascetic rejection of life.

To properly understand the various sides of his analysis of the ascetic ideal, we need to gain some understanding of the will to power as the creative force of life. After giving a description of this concept, I then explain the role this concept plays in Nietzsche's understanding of several key phenomena related to the rise of Truth. The general goal here is to discover what "value for life"(i.e., what kind of morality - slave or master) these phenomena manifest, so that their human, all-too-human origins may be revealed. Particular attention is paid to cruelty – or, more specifically, the pleasure one feels in exercising power, whether it is over another or oneself – and the role it plays in the creation of both human individuals and their culture. The final section of this chapter looks at Nietzsche's analysis of the development of slave morality and the ascetic ideal after Socrates, first in terms of Christianity and then science. It is with science that the inner contradiction of metaphysical truth finally comes to the fore. This fall from grace leads to the devaluation of values that brings on the final, nihilistic stage of this concept's evolution.

Nietzsche sees that the exposure of the wholly human (and less than noble) origins of the concept of transcendent truth is a first step in the possible overcoming of nihilism. However, given that the problem is with the very form of life people incarnate (a fact Nietzsche thinks Socrates failed to notice), he is far from believing that this alone shall set

people free. In Chapter 3, I explain this view in terms of a discussion of Nietzsche's perspectivism and his understanding of the relation between interpretation and the will to power. Included in this is a study of the role tradition plays in the life of a community and how it relates to the claim that the health of an organism depends upon its ability to bound itself by a horizon. In this regard, I have found it useful to draw a comparison with what I interpret to be Wittgenstein's view concerning the fundamentally practical character of human understanding.

The doctrine of perspectivism has met with a number of objections. In this chapter I deal with two of them: (a) the charge that it is self-contradictory, and (b) that it leads to epistemological and moral relativism. As I see it, Nietzsche would reject these charges on the grounds that they are motivated by the very conception of metaphysical truth he argues is not only unintelligible, but also antithetical to affirmative life. This brings us to the discussion of his own "revalued" understanding of the concept of truth as "irrefutable error." I argue that with this concept Nietzsche stands the accepted (i.e., metaphysical) understanding truth on its head. Given that the beliefs we (necessarily) hold to be true are the product of interpretive activity, the character of which is determined by the particular perspective we embody, who we are is a truth. Thus, truth is not a thing, but an activity, namely the ever-changing interpretive activity of the will to power that an organism incarnates.

In the penultimate section of the essay I contend that this transformed understanding of truth allows for a possible solution to the question left at the end of Chapter 1 regarding the consistency of the description of truth as illusion. The genealogical analysis of the value of Truth reveals a form of interpretive activity that, as it becomes ever more dominant, is

driven to expose its decadent self-deception and reject its contradictory foundation. However, this does not mean that all that has been constructed on that foundation could or should be discarded. In other words, the development of a new interpretation of the genesis of conceptual language does not necessarily invalidate all those concepts which made it up. This would be so if the meanings of those concepts were taken by us to derive from their ability to represent the True World. However, given the wholly practical character of interpretation, this cannot be the case.

The final section of this thesis attempts to provide some understanding of two matters that surface during the course of the discussion. The first concerns what Nietzsche might mean by the term "revaluation," and what form he envisions it taking. The second concerns what qualities an individual or culture transformed by that process might embody.

Chapter 1

The Rejection of Transcendent Truth in *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*

In *On Truth an Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,*[2] Nietzsche challenges the idea that there is such a thing as pure knowledge, understood as the subject's representation of the world (the representing subject included) as it exists in itself. He argues that the belief in such an ability, as well as the unlimited positive estimation of its value, are rooted in a drive to self-deception which has both produced and sustained the particular form of life that we have become. To understand this deception we must comprehend the "metaphorical" character of perception and language development.

The Metaphorical Character of Conceptual Thought

In describing the process of naming, Nietzsche writes: "To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a

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[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies In A Non-Moral Sense," trans. Daniel Breazeale, in Philosophy and Truth, ed. Daniel Brezeale (New Jersey: Humanities Press Inc., 1979), p. 82 Subsequent references to this essay will use the abbreviation *TL*. As mentioned in the Introduction, this essay fragment from relatively early in Nietzsche's writing career (1873) remained unpublished in his lifetime. Some might argue that therefore it does not merit equal consideration in comparison with his other works. However, while it is an early, unfinished piece, many of its assertions (e.g., of the creative character of truth) do appear in his later published writings. Furthermore, for better or worse, it has become a significant part of the body of work commentators cite, especially when it comes to the matter of his critique of truth. For these reasons, I have found it appropriate to begin my discussion with an examination of its central claims.

sound: second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an entirely new and different one."[3] On this view, we are doubly removed from any knowledge of the world as it may exist independently of the experiencing subject. Yet we deceive ourselves in that we believe that the language we use adequately expresses the way things are independently of this artistic transference. But this can only arise through a primordial forgetting which overlooks not only this two-fold metaphorical transference, but the uniqueness of each perceptual experience as well. This, it is argued, is where the concept is born. "Every word instantly becomes a concept precisely insofar as it is not supposed to serve as a reminder of the unique and entirely individual original experience to which it owes its origin..."(ibid.). The goal of conceptual thought is assimilation – words made to simultaneously fit numerous more or less similar cases constitute the imposition of an order and stability on the flux of becoming through which the human organism is able to flourish.

Forgetting is an essential part of this process. At the same time, it is precisely in this forgetting that one of the fundamental illusions of metaphysical thought originates. As conceptual thought becomes increasingly entrenched, words acquire an "occult quality " In forgetting that the conceptual world is a human imposition, a fetishism of concepts arises whereby this fictional world acquires the status of reality. With the use of concepts, that which is unequal is made to appear equal. But as the metaphorical character of this usage is forgotten, concepts take on a life of their own – in addition to each individual leaf, the

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[3] *TL*, p. 82. Nietzsche later describes this metaphorical transformation as an "artistic transference"(*TL*, 85). This idea seems to bear a certain resemblance in its function to Descartes' description of the pineal gland, which was supposed to bridge the gap between physical and mental substance.

concept of "leaf" now appears as part of nature, as that ideal essence which stands under and supports all less perfect discrete instantiations of leaves in the world. Thus, individual leaves and all other things of this world come to be understood as owing their earthly existence to their conceptual counterparts in the ideal True World.

But what of the concept of truth? From whence is it derived? According to Nietzsche, the concept of truth, like all linguistic phenomena, has its origins in human sociability. It is claimed that "out of boredom and necessity"[4] humans join together in community. To reduce the threat that the capacity for deception poses to members of the community, all agree to respect the conventions of language through which the community functions. From this agreement the contrast between truth and lie first arises. The liar is one who breaks linguistic convention and in so doing harms the community and suffers its punishment. Thus, at this early stage in the development of the idea it is the negative consequences of the lie which are of prime concern. Such is also the case with truth, in that it is the beneficial, life-preserving consequences to the individual in the community that being truthful brings which are valued. At this point, pure knowledge - knowledge without consequences[5] - is of little interest, while truths perceived to be destructive are met with hostility.

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[4] Ibid., p.80 (see note 54 for additional comments regarding this matter). This is one of many apparently empirical claims Nietzsche makes regarding the basic instincts of human beings. In spite of his claims concerning the scientific soundness of his observations, he generally makes no reference to any kind of study to defend his assertions. Certainly there are those who would contend many of his interpretations in this regard. This said, a proper consideration of these views would take us too far afield from the task at hand, which is to understand the reasoning behind Nietzsche's denial of the possibility of transcendent truth.

[5] Which is equated with the thing-in-itself. (*TL*, 82)

The situation changes as the social demand to follow established linguistic convention (i.e. use the established metaphors, or "lies," as Nietzsche also calls them) becomes increasingly entrenched, more and more habitual. As this happens, the metaphoric/conventional nature of the behaviour is forgotten. And as it becomes ever more unconscious, the "sense for truth" - that it is one's duty not to deceive (not even oneself) - gains in strength. With this, "a moral impulse in regard to truth"(*TL* 84) develops; the obligation to be truthful is internalized and becomes an operating principle valued for its own sake. Individuals in such a culture become rational, i.e., "place [their] behaviour under the control of abstractions. [They] no longer tolerate being carried away by sudden impressions, by intuitions"(ibid.). This new ability is what allows for the development of an increasingly vast and complex web of concepts and categories by which these new individuals regulate their behaviour. A new world is created, "one which now confronts that other vivid world of first impressions as more solid, more universal, better known, and more human than the immediately perceived world..."(ibid.). The faith in reason manifested therein becomes the new imperative, the operating principle on which this new form of life is based.

Insofar as we fail to recognise its origins, the truth is that we are fundamentally mistaken in our understanding of truth. We labour under the illusion that "the movable host of [ossified] metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms"(ibid.) that constitute our conceptual understanding of the world really do represent the essences that supposedly make up the true world and serve as the stuff of pure knowledge. However, pure knowledge, understood as "the adequate expression of the object in the subject," (*TL* 86) which is what Nietzsche understands the commonly accepted understanding of truth to be,

is precisely what we cannot acquire. It is, he says, "a contradictory impossibility"(ibid.). To understand why, we need to look at his understanding of the relationship between the perceiver and the object known. As he saw it, the accepted view[6] assumed that these are completely separate entities, and that knowledge consisted in "the adequate expression of the object in the subject"(ibid.). This would mean possessing the complete, correct representation of the object in all its aspects in the mind. But, in this case, correctness would be a contradictory impossibility, for it would require a knowledge of some a priori criteria external to the act of perception with which that perception could be compared. It would be to know by some means other than perception the veracity of the representations supposedly in question.

Thus, on its own terms, the ideal of correct perception turns out to be nonsensical. But Nietzsche offers an additional, more fundamental objection to the correspondence theory. He asserts that the radical difference in kind between subject and object means that there can be at most an aesthetic relation between the two. This is to say that the acquisition of knowledge involves "a suggestive transference" from one sphere to the other, "a stammering translation into a completely foreign tongue, for which there is required a freely inventive intermediate sphere and mediating force."(ibid.) This element of free play rules out any talk of a discernible causal relation between subject and object through which the latter would be "literally" expressed in the former.[7]

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[6] Setting aside the question of whether or not Nietzsche accepted it at the time. Certainly his later writings would reject it.

[7] It might be profitable to compare Nietzsche's assertion of the intrinsic uncertainty and indeterminacy which characterises the transference between spheres to Quine's discussion of the indeterminacy of translation. Even though they are dealing with different issues, they do seem to be making similar points, i.e., that there is no absolute criterion

Debunking our pretensions to pure knowledge is one of the strategies Nietzsche employs to bring human understanding back to earth. It is one of the ways in which he challenges what he sees as the unjustifiably high value we have come to place on knowledge. Rather than being understood for what it is, namely a means humans have developed to sustain them in life, it has come to be seen, not only as an end in itself, but as the ultimate good. I will return to why he saw this as such a problem below. But first I would like to discuss what appear to be conflicting claims contained in the discussion of the metaphorical character of perception and concept formation.

Potential Objections to Nietzsche's Analysis of Truth

Nietzsche's challenge to the traditional idea of truth as correspondence to an underlying in-itself reality has been the focus of many commentators' attention. The claims concerning the metaphorical or figurative character of conceptual language have been particularly controversial and open to a number of different, often competing, interpretations. This is due in part to the manner in which Nietzsche presented his ideas. For one thing, he made use of a multiplicity of styles which, according to his own admission, were intended to inspire diverse thinking on the matters in question.[8] But

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available by which we can judge our claims to knowledge. Wittgenstein makes a similar claim in his discussion of rule-following in Logical Investigations, where he argues that correctly following a rule cannot be a matter of correct interpretation, since every interpretation invites further justification, in an endless regress. This will be discussed further in the section of Chapter 3 entitled "Practical reason and Interpretation."

[8] By his own admission, he "despised systematizers," and saw the drive to philosophical system building as a sign of decadence and intellectual dishonesty. While this is not the place to discuss how this fits into his view of how we value "life" as a whole, it would seem to be a reflection of his rejection of "being" and "true-world philosophy" in favour of "becoming."

concerning this issue in particular, matters are further complicated by the fact that many of the claims which have generated the most controversy are found in the posthumously published *TL*. What complicates things here is not so much the fact that Nietzsche chose not to publish it, but that, as a piece of writing which seems intended to present a sustained argument, it is less than rigorous in the presentation of its reasoning and use of terminology and even appears to make contradictory assertions concerning knowledge and the thing in itself.[9]

The first reference to the concept of the thing in itself likens it to "pure" truth, i.e., truth as it would be apart from any consequences it would have for humans. In other words, it would be the truth apart from any relation to human knowing and all that is involved therein (e.g., our interests, perception, or linguistic practices). In effect, it would be knowledge without the activity of the knowing subject. As such, it is "quite incomprehensible,...and something not in the least worth striving for."(*TL* 82) While no mention is made concerning the possibility of the existence of things in themselves, this certainly appears to be an explicit denial of the intelligibility of the thing in itself as an object or ideal of knowledge. The next reference to things of this kind is in the discussion of Chladni sound figures[10], where it is stated that our concepts, given their metaphorical origins, "correspond in no way to the original entities."(*TL* 83) In this case, the possibility of any correspondence continues to be ruled out. In addition, it does appear that the conceivability of the existence of the thing in itself is at least implicitly accepted. However,

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[9] Which, if one wanted to speculate, might be one of the reasons why he chose not to publish it. Whatever the case may be, as stated earlier, it remains that it has become part of the body of works to which people refer when discussing his thought.

a conflicting view appears to be offered in the following paragraph, where the process of concept formation is discussed. Here Nietzsche once again implicitly acknowledges the existence of things in themselves, but then cautions against making any claims as to how our concepts might or might not correspond to the essence of things, on the grounds that any such speculation would be purely dogmatic.

In her book *Nietzsche On Truth and Philosophy,* Clark argues that this contradiction is the result of the combination of (a) the representational theory of perception presented in *TL*, and (b) two incompatible views Nietzsche maintains at different times concerning the possibility and value of transcendent truth. Concerning (a), she asserts that Nietzsche holds that "common sense" affirms the independent existence of the external world (i.e., of things themselves). However, because we do not have access to how things themselves exist outside of our perception of them (that is, outside of our representations), their own true nature is unknowable. This forces Nietzsche to take the further step of identifying things themselves, and thus reality, with the "mysterious X" of the Kantian thing in itself.[11] Concerning the two views of transcendent truth, one, which she terms his Kantian view, holds that "[t]ranscendent truth is both conceivable and of overriding value, but unattainable for human beings."(Clark, 92) She argues that this is the position taken throughout the bulk of the essay. The other, what she calls neo-Kantian or Nietzschean, claims that "[t]ranscendent truth is inconceivable, a contradiction in terms."(Clark, p. 92) It is the adoption of the first view, which Nietzsche recognizes as open to the charge of

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[10] I.e., a figure made in sand produced by the sound waves emitted from a musical instrument, e.g., the plucking of a guitar string.

dogmatism, that forces him to make his agnostic disclaimer concerning any assertion as to whether or not our concepts correspond to the essence of things (and thus contradict the assertion made in the previous paragraph, reflective of the neo-Kantian position, that there is no correspondence).

Clark bases her Kantian interpretation on a passage in *TL* which maintains that all human truths are tautological and therefore of limited value. They are tautological because they only express what we have already projected into the world through our perception; they are of limited value because they contain "not a single point which would be 'true in itself' or really and universally valid apart from man."(*TL* 85) According to Clark, this only makes sense if Nietzsche "considers truth to possess unlimited value, that is, unlimited by considerations of happiness or utility."(Clark, 89) This in turn explains why Nietzsche was forced to adopt the Kantian metaphysical correspondence theory - only truths that satisfy its criteria could possess the kind of value he associated with truth. This, Clark argues, accounts for the contradiction outlined above.

But does Nietzsche really hold such a valuation of truth? I would like to propose an alternate reading which suggests that he does not. When it is argued that our truths are of limited value, it is, as Clark maintains, because they do not correspond to things in themselves. However, it does not follow from this that Nietzsche necessarily believed that such pure truths did have the opposite unlimited value. To assert this is to mistake the general intent of the essay - to bring our understanding and valuation of truth back down to earth. I take the discussion to be of what Nietzsche sees as *our* mistaken valuation of our

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[11] Maudemarie Clark, Nietzsche On Truth and Philosophy, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 81-83. For subsequent references to this text I will cite the

truths, or, more specifically, our mistaken criterion – correspondence to things in themselves – of what should really count for truth. Read this way, we can interpret him as saying that what we have called truth does not meet our accepted (but mistaken) criteria, and that on those terms it must therefore be judged to be of limited value. Again, merely pointing this out does not commit him to the acceptance of the absolute value of transcendent truth.

Contrary to Clark, then, Nietzsche does not need "the Kantian belief in the conceivability of transcendent truth to have a basis for devaluing human truths as illusions,"(Clark, 93) because he is not devaluing them. Rather, he is attempting to effect a change in our evaluative standards. Recognizing our truths for the anthropomorphic phenomena they are only devalues them if one continues to cling to the illusory belief in the value of a transcendent, True World which has a purity unattainable in the here and now. Overcoming this destructive belief will free human beings to revalue truth and scientific knowledge in a healthier way. It will liberate them from the cultural dominance of Socratic optimism[12] which, according to Nietzsche, contains within it the seeds of its own demise. Interpreted this way, pointing out the deception embedded within the accepted valuation is part of his pre-emptive rehabilitation of anthropomorphic truth, prior to what he foresees as its eventual devaluation in the coming nihilistic age.

This said, my critique of Clark's position does nothing to explain the contradictory claims made concerning the correspondence of concepts to the world. Recall the discussion of the Chladni sound figure, where our incapacity for pure knowledge is compared to a deaf

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author's name.

person who believes that in observing a sound figure they are able to gain some insight into what is meant by the concept "sound." He argues that we might be in a similar situation with regard to our beliefs about the relationship between our concepts and the objects that they supposedly represent - just as the deaf person is mistaken when he believes that observing the pattern in the sand reveals something about the nature of sound, so do we deceive ourselves when we believe that our concepts give us knowledge of things themselves. Let us take a closer look at this comparison. First of all, on what grounds do the deaf believe that they have insight into what is meant by "sound"? Presumably it is because the sand figure and sound are believed to share the same cause, namely the vibrating string which produces the sound waves. As such, they are merely different expressions, or, more specifically, the same expression in different media, of the same object. In other words, given their common origin, it is concluded that there must be some kind of identity of meaning (however indeterminate) between the two, and that for this reason the experience of one somehow provides insight into the corresponding nature of the other (the experience of which is impossible).

According to Nietzsche, we are in a similar situation with respect to our belief in the correspondence theory of truth. He writes: "In the same way that the sound appears as a sand figure, so the mysterious X of the thing in itself appears first as a nerve stimulus, then as an image, and finally as a sound."(*TL* 83) Concerning the first half of the comparison, this is to say that the meaning manifested in the experience of the sound is somehow "carried over" into that of the sand figure. This transference of meaning is metaphorical in

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[12] I.e., the idea that it is only through the application of reason, by which we discover transcendent Truth, that life is redeemed and made worthwhile.

the sense that the forms of perception out of which each experience arises are different. Consequently, as indicated above, the meanings manifested in the respective experiences are not literally the same. While knowing that the two phenomena have the same origin suggests a kind of identity or correspondence of meaning, the experience of one does not inform us in any concrete way of the nature of the other. We are in a similar way concerning the relationship between our concepts and things in themselves. In talking about the objects we perceive in the world we think that we are saying something about those objects themselves, i.e., as they exist *in* themselves, apart from our perception of them. However, in this respect we are like the deaf person who believes that her experience of sand figures gives her an understanding of what sound is. As the deaf person is incapable of experiencing sound, so are we incapable of experiencing or knowing what is by definition completely withdrawn from our perceptual abilities. Like the deaf person, who should recognise that her understanding of sound must be metaphorical, so should we recognise that the process of artistic transference (i.e. the leaping over from one sphere into a wholly different one, e.g., from image to sound) involved in concept formation dictates that "we possess nothing but metaphors for things..."(*TL* 83)

The additional conclusion is that there is positively no correspondence between these metaphors and the original objects. This is understandable, given that knowledge of the things themselves is utterly outside the scope of our abilities. But then why does Nietzsche soon after perform an about-face and rule out such an assertion on the grounds that it is dogmatic? I would argue that it is because the offending statements occur in different contexts, which, when recognised, nullifies the contradiction. The denial of any correspondence is made during a discussion of the formation of our concepts. It is based on

the claim that the "artistic" transference from one sphere to another is so radical that anything that we would normally associate with the idea of correspondence (and how one might be determined) does not apply.[13] It is in consideration of the fact that our concepts originate out of this thoroughly anthropomorphic metaphorical transference, as opposed to the essence of things, that the possibility of any correspondence between the two is denied.

In fact, Nietzsche repeats this denial of any relation between things in themselves and the origins of our concepts just before he cautions against indulging in any dogmatic assertions. With this in mind, it seems sensible to read his qualification that "we should not presume to claim that [our concepts do] not correspond to the essence of things," as pointing out that, while there is no relation of correspondence that could possibly obtain between the origin of our concepts and the things themselves, it does not rule out the possibility that, by some cosmic coincidence, the way our concepts describe the world does match the world as it is in itself. But the possibility of this wholly fortuitous resemblance does not contradict the other claim concerning the radical separation of the origin of conceptual thought and the thing in itself (and thus the rejection of the thing in itself as the foundation of that thought and the truth it conveys).

Is Nietzsche's Analysis of Conceptual Thought Internally Consistent?

We have seen that the characterisation of truth as illusion is based in part on the claim that we have forgotten the metaphorical origins of our linguistic practice, that is, our status as an artistically creating subject who molds "a mass of images which originally streamed

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[13] As noted above, the contention is that "between two absolutely different spheres...there is no causality, no correctness, and no expression..."(*TL*, 86)

from the primal faculty of human imagination like a fiery liquid"(*TL* 86) into a stable world of objects we now take for the true world. Our truths are illusions because we have "misunderstood"[14] their origins, which we erroneously have taken to be correspondence with the objects of our perception themselves. This mistake is embodied in our language (e.g., when we talk of "things" "appearing"); consequently, we unwittingly repeat it to ourselves continually. In this way it became first nature to us.[15] For as conceptual language develops, the number of concepts and the complexity of their interrelations increases. As a process, it feeds on itself, and grows in strength and dominance; the structure which develops becomes increasingly rigid, taking on a life of its own. Nietzsche employs several architectural metaphors to help describe this conceptual edifice. For example, the totality of our concepts is likened to a Roman columbarium, where each dead metaphor, in the process of its demise, takes up a position within the overall structure of "reality." This structure contains the material "within and with which the man of truth, the scientist, and the philosopher...work and build."(*TL* 83) At the same time, it is likened to a spider's web, for like spiders, we manufacture this edifice out of material we generate from ourselves. However, given what Nietzsche calls its metaphorical heritage, this structure has a less than secure foundation. The absence of any essential ground, of any inherently necessary connection between the movement from one sphere to the next[16], means that it has the stability of something resting on running water.[17]

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[14] Nonetheless, our form of life could not have arisen without this misunderstanding. As Nietzsche often says, it is this error which has made us who we are.

[15] Which Nietzsche sometimes describes as "irrefutable error."

[16] For, according to Nietzsche, "[e]ven then relationship of nerve stimulus to the generated image is not a necessary one." The reasoning seems to be in line with Hume here – our belief in causal connection is a matter of convention, but one that has evolved over

Insofar as he too is inhabits this conceptual web, one might ask how Nietzsche is able to recognise the truth of the "forgotten" origins of knowledge? On what grounds does he base his own analysis, which must make use of the very concepts he sets out to criticise? It might appear that in rejecting the idea of metaphysical truth as an illusion Nietzsche is also criticising conceptual thought per se, or at least the idea that it provides us with anything that we can call knowledge. If this were the case, he would seem to be in a quandary, in that (a) he certainly seems to be telling us something about the way the world is - even if it is to say that it is, at bottom, a deception – and, (b) he must use the language developed out of this deception in his own critique. Some might say that he therefore implicitly takes as real that which he criticises as illusion? Take, for example, a couple of key concepts, commanding and obeying. On the one hand, these are part of the conceptual edifice born out of our creative "power of dissimulation." On the other hand, by all indications Nietzsche also thinks that they describe what are some of the most elemental forces of life, human or otherwise (and from which conceptual thought arose). So, on one level it is asserted that conceptual thought is a thoroughly anthropomorphic, practical activity (arising out of our need to deceive) we engage in to sustain us in life. However, insofar as Nietzsche uses that thought to provide an account of how this activity came into being, he seems to implicitly acknowledge that at least some of the concepts we use do in fact describe the

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many generations: "When the same image has been generated millions of times and has been handed down for many generations and finally appears on the same occasion every time for all mankind, then it acquires at last the same meaning for men it would have if it were the sole necessary image and if the relationship of the original nerve stimulus to the generated image were a strictly causal one."(*TL*, 87)

[17] As such, this conceptual edifice is also similar to a web in that it must be "delicate enough not to be carried along by the waves, strong enough not to be blown apart by every wind."(*TL*, 85)

world of human understanding as it developed.[18] In other words, in laying out why all truths are illusions, he would seem to be implicitly excluding his own account from this critique. This said, he does appear to explicitly address this question when he writes that "even our contrast between individual and species[19] is something anthropomorphic and does not originate in the essence of things."(*TL*, 83)

This brings us back to the question of justification, and how Nietzsche might claim that his description should be favored over any other. Given that the idea of metaphysical realism – i.e., that our concepts accurately reflect the world as it exists in itself – is rejected outright as unintelligible, on what grounds can we claim that the things we say about the world (ourselves included) *should* be taken as true? In other words, if we are to retain this word, how should we understand the meaning of truth and the claim to obedience it makes upon us?

At this point we need to leave behind these questions concerning the status of Nietzsche's own interpretation to flesh out the content of some of his claims. I will then in the third chapter return to the further consideration of these matters.

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[18] For example, he asserts that "[w]e obtain the concept as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual; whereas nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise with no species, but only with an X that remains inaccessible and undefinable for us." In other words, on principle we have no access to this "sphere." Still it would seem that Nietzsche does think (at least at this point) that we can legitimately infer that such a realm does exist.

[19] Which are two of the concepts on which his account of the metaphorical character of perception and concept formation is based.

Chapter 2

The Ascetic Ideal and the Will to Truth

Much of the discussion in *TL* focuses on showing how the way in which we perceive and form concepts about the world is thoroughly anthropomorphic, i.e., idiosyncratic to the type of creatures we have become, and that consequently there can be no such thing as pure knowledge of things as they exist in themselves. Why, then, did the desire for such knowledge arise? As Nietzsche asks in *TL*, what need does this "drive for truth" manifest, out of what did it originate? We have seen that part of the answer lies in our herd nature, in the fact that to survive and grow, humans had to band together and live in community. This required communication and cooperation, and it was out of this that the convention "truth" was born. How, though, out of these "practical" considerations, did this primitive social necessity develop into the dominant ideal of the western philosophical tradition?

Many of Nietzsche's later writings are devoted to uncovering what he thinks are the underlying physiological and cultural forces that have shaped modern humanity and its "metaphysical need" for belief in a transcendent True World. As he sees it, the belief in, and supreme value attributed to, Truth are expressions of a masked will to negate life (i.e., the world of becoming) which has driven Western thought since the time of Socrates. Understanding how the will to truth could have arisen out of a will to reject the world of

becoming requires that we focus on the "still more basic question" of the value of the will to truth.[20] For this we must turn to Socrates and the moral revolution he began.

Socrates as a Figure of Decadence

What Nietzsche "actually" thought of Socrates has been a point of some contention. Some (most prominently Walter Kaufmann, in Chapter 13 of his book *Nietzsche*) argue that under the criticisms directed against Socrates lies a high degree of admiration, if not envy, for the man. Others take those criticisms at face value and argue that Nietzsche really is as hostile to Socrates as he appears.[21] While a proper investigation of this matter would take us too far afield, it seems fair to say that the answer probably lies somewhere in between. Nietzsche certainly seems to see himself as having a certain kinship with Socrates. As he argues was the case with Socrates, he perceives himself to be living in a period of cultural decay. And he, like Socrates, is an "immoralist"[22] who seeks to effect a radical transformation in the way morality is understood and practiced.[23] However, in this regard, he also understands overcoming the Socratic legacy to be essential to the realisation of that transformation. As we shall see, in terms of his genealogical analysis of the decadence that

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[20] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," trans. Walter Kaufmann in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, ed. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), §1, p. 199. For subsequent references to this text I will use the abbreviation *BGE*, followed by the section number.

[21] See Tracy B. Strong, Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p 313, n. 8 for a list of some of these authors. Please note that for subsequent references to this text I shall cite the author's name.

[22] In other words, he, like Socrates, stands outside the accepted moral view of his time.

[23] In the case of Nietzsche, it is perhaps more accurate to say that he seeks the overcoming of morality altogether, at least as it has so far been understood.

he thinks has engulfed the modern Western world, it is his view that one cannot separate Socrates the man from what he argues had to grow out of his teaching.

Nietzsche finds in Socrates the inauguration of a form of decadence which had continued to inform Western philosophical thinking up to his time.[24] This highly contentious view[25] derives in part from his understanding of the degenerative cultural transformation that was overtaking Athens at Socrates' time. As he saw it, the totality of the Athenian victory in the Persian war had led to increasing social upheaval, to the point that the traditions that had bound the community and led to its great success were losing their power to unify. Athens was becoming populated with both psychic and political potential tyrants who sought to extend their domination to the rest of Greece, both politically and culturally. Consequently, as men strove to outdo one another, a new and threatening form of individualism began to take root.[26] Socrates, Nietzsche argues, was the first to recognise this general state of psychic disintegration within himself. His personal cure, his means of self-preservation, had been to master his dissolute instincts by putting them under the yoke of reason.[27] Subsequently, he "saw through his noble Athenians" and "comprehended that his own case...was no longer exceptional, [that the] same kind of degeneration was quietly developing everywhere."[28] He then realized that "all the world needed him – his means, his

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[24] And whose ultimately nihilistic consequences were now beginning to be felt.

[25] In the following discussion I offer only an explication of Nietzsche's account of the decadent type he asserts Socrates embodied. A full comparison with other competing understandings of Socrates and his philosophy is beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

[26] Strong, pp. 117, 168-169.

[27] Which, as we shall see in Chapter 2, means for Nietzsche that the instinct of reason became the master of Socrates.

[28] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," trans. Walter Kaufmann in The Portable Nietzsche, ed. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Viking Press, 1967), §9, p. 477. From this point on I will refer to this text

cure, his personal artifice of self-preservation"(ibid.). In other words, he took it to be his task to recover a ground for morality through the exercise of self-conscious rationality.

Still, Nietzsche asks, why was it that Socrates and this new form of dialectical moralising, which ran counter to Greek tradition, was so readily accepted by his fellow Athenians? One factor he cites is that it constituted a new kind of intellectual contest (of which Socrates proved to be the master) which appealed to their "agonistic impulses." But the primary reason was the perceived control it offered to a people who were in dire need of being saved from themselves. Dialectic promised to be a cure that would allow all Athenians to achieve the self-mastery that Socrates exhibited.

But what of this cure? Nietzsche argues that it was not a cure at all, but merely the transformation of decadence from one form to another. He writes:

> It is a self-deception on the part of philosophers and moralists if they believe that they are extricating themselves from decadence when they merely wage war against it. Extrication lies beyond their strength: what they choose as a means, as a salvation, is itself but another expression of decadence; they change its expression, but they do not get rid of decadence itself.[29]

As he sees it, the need to fight the instincts, to quell their anarchic struggle against one another, is the very formula for decadence, of the decline of life. This said, in order to stay this moral dissolution, Socrates challenged his fellow Athenians to justify their morality before the bar of dialectical reason. This meant taking Greek moral judgement out of its proper ground in the cultural traditions which alone had given it life, meaning, and

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as *TI*, followed by the section title and number.

[29] Ibid., p. 478-479.

authority.[30] No wonder, then, that in such a foreign setting the claims of his interlocutors to possess moral knowledge were found wanting.[31]

However, for Nietzsche, this was a misplaced criticism. To his mind, it is the sign of a healthy culture that it would not occur to its members that they should feel the need to justify their actions in any way, least of all dialectically. This observation is in keeping with the distinction he makes between master and slave morality. In *BGE*, §260, he argues that a study of the various moralities past and present allows one to conclude that there are two basic types of morality with one basic difference.[32] When masters are the originators of values, they do so from a lofty height, from the recognition that they are superior to those over whom they exercise their power. As moral beings they are self-legislators, and their valuations of good and bad – "my kind is good, you are not of my kind, therefore you are bad" – are accompanied by a feeling of delight in the abundance of their power. Nietzsche writes:

> The noble type of man experiences *itself* as determining values; it does not need approval...it knows itself to be that which accords honor to things; it is *value creating*. Everything it knows as part of itself it honors: such a morality is self-glorification. In the foreground there is the feeling of fullness, of power that seeks to overflow, the happiness of high tension, the consciousness of wealth that would give and bestow...(*BGE*, §260)

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[30] Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Random House, 1967), § 430, p. 234. For subsequent references to this text I will use the abbreviation *WP*, followed by the section number.

[31] I will return to the relationship between tradition and moral practice in Chapter 3.

[32] In making this distinction he adds that "in all the higher and more mixed cultures there also appear attempts at mediation between these two moralities, and yet more often the interpenetration and mutual misunderstanding of both...at times they occur directly alongside each other – even in the same human being, within a single soul."(*BGE*, §260)

Thus, in this kind of morality, "the opposition of 'good' and 'bad' means approximately the same as 'noble' and 'contemptible'...One feels contempt for the cowardly, the anxious, the petty, those intent on narrow utility..."(ibid.)

In opposition to this is the slave morality distinction of "good" and "evil," which is born out of reaction to those who they see as oppressing them. These poor in spirit look at the virtues of the powerful with suspicion and resentful disdain. Those qualities which ease suffering are glorified, e.g., mercy, pity, patience, and humility, for "these are the most useful qualities and almost the only means for enduring the pressure of existence"(ibid.). Similarly, the impotence manifested in slave morality precludes any genuine feeling of contempt for that which opposes it. Unlike the master valuation of bad which designates all that is beneath it, the valuation of evil is reserved for that which threatens and inspires fear. Master morality is a manifestation of ascending life, of an "overflowing abundance" of power which seeks expenditure in deeds. This lust for life is in contrast to the pessimistic attitude of slave morality, which at bottom looks upon the condition of man with bitter resignation. To maintain some sense of worth, "slaves" must be skeptical and suspicious of all that is first honored as good by the nobility - they even persuade themselves that the happiness evinced by the nobility as they manifest these qualities is false or delusional.

For the purpose of this discussion, perhaps the most important thing to note in this analysis is the claim that "moral designations were everywhere first applied to *human beings* and only later, derivatively, to actions"(ibid.). This takes us back to Nietzsche's observation that, in his dialectical practice, Socrates uprooted morality from its proper home in the actual life and traditions of the Greek *polis*. In abstracting the discussion out of its proper context, in failing to properly consider the origins out of which it was born, he

robbed it of all that could give it genuine life. As the dialectical approach took hold on a decaying Athens, that which had made morality possible in the first place was undermined (that it could be undermined confirms the decadence which had beset the society). In placing all authority to justify in abstract dialectical reason (or, perhaps more accurately, in those who could best wield such a method of reasoning), the first step was taken toward the creation of the ideal of the True World. For this reason, Nietzsche sees Socrates as the first world-historical figure of decadence.[33]

The Inception of "True World" Philosophy is a Manifestation of Decadent Morality

How does a morality based on dialectic lead to the positing of a True World which exists as the foundation for the one in which we act? As mentioned above, the "denaturalisation" of moral concepts constitutes a fundamental moral shift that separates them from the presuppositions to which they once belonged. Divorced from their original foundation in the traditions of the culture (in effect they were those traditions), a new ground must be created upon which they can stand. As Nietzsche says, "[o]ne looks for truth in them, one takes them for entities or signs of entities: one *invents* a world where

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[33] In *TI*, he asks if one should not see the Socratic teaching as "an expression of revolt," as "plebeian ressentiment," as an act of revenge against "the noble people whom he fascinates."(*TI*, "The Problem of Socrates," §7) At the same time, as many commentators have remarked, Nietzsche did not simply dismiss Socrates as merely decadent. For example, in the notes written in preparation to this section of *TI*, he mentions the need to analyse "to what extent...a robust health and strength is still exhibited in the whole habitus, in the dialectics, efficiency and self-discipline of the scientific man..."(*WP*, §432) This said, pursuing Nietzsche's multi-faceted understanding of Socrates is beyond the scope of the present investigation.

they are at home, where they originate"(*WP*, §430).[34] Truth, then, is no longer a quality people (i.e., the nobility) embody in virtue of who they are as human beings. In other words, the truth they speak is no longer the truth because it is they who speak it. Rather, it becomes an object, wholly separate from any individual human being (from the authority embodied in one's "character"). One may still speak the truth, but only through the proper use of a method of thinking. Looked at in this way, morality becomes a matter, not of character, but of skill.[35] The same applies to happiness as well, given that it is equated with virtue and knowledge.

Nietzsche contends that this turn toward "rationality at any price,"[36] is at bottom a rejection of "this" world, i.e., the world of becoming (or, as he sometimes says, the earth). However, to call it a rejection does not really capture the urgency and danger involved at the time. For as he remarks in *Twilight of the Idols*, there was really only one choice: "either to perish or - to be absurdly rational."[37] The all-out embrace of rationality was not so much a rejection as it was an escape, a fleeing from a decaying world into a safer, more hospitable, ideal one. However, this flight to this new world engenders a fundamental transformation in how virtue is conceived. As an object which is realized solely through rational thought it becomes teachable, and thus potentially available to all. This

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[34] This is reminiscent of Wittgenstein's discussion of the "subliming of our logic." As I understand it, he similarly argues that the idea that our concepts have some sort of underlying substance is a projection we implicitly make because of the way in which we speak. I.e., it is an illusion of grammar, from which we need to be cured. This will be discussed in greater detail in the section "Practical Reason and Interpretation" in Chapter 3.

[35] Incidentally, according to Nietzsche, this helps explain how Socrates was able to attract (Nietzsche might say "bewitch") Greek society with his dialectic. One of the foundations of this culture was the agon, and the dialectical sparring matches he engaged in constituted a new kind of contest.(*TI*, "The Problem of Socrates," §8).

[36] *TI*, "The Problem of Socrates," §11, p. 479.

democratisation of virtue transforms it into an abstract concept; values are removed from the immediacy of experience and consequently lose any sense of connection or appropriateness to a particular type of person (the noble hero), time, or place.[38]

This transformation inaugurates a new understanding of human responsibility. Insofar as virtue is something to be learned, responsibility can only be understood in terms of the conscious intellectual awareness of the possible consequences of one's actions. That is, it comes to be centered on prudential concerns.[39] With this new sense of responsibility, men would be able to tame those chaotic impulses which threatened the existence of the society. However, all of this would be for naught if those for whom this new ethos was created were not inspired to attain this new form of awareness. Thus the equation: "knowledge = virtue = happiness." In teaching this new, empowering doctrine of "theoretical optimism,"[40] the idea was promulgated that life was something that could be corrected or improved through the power of dialectical reason. In effect, the world could be re-formed in the image of human rationality.[41] According to Nietzsche, it was the acceptance of this view that spelled the death of Greek tragedy and the understanding of life it embodied. In tragedy, the action of the drama is the necessary unfolding of the hero's character - as Strong notes, "character...is destiny,"[42] and it cannot be escaped. Thus, "responsibility" exists only to the extent that one's fate is tied to one's character as the substantive embodiment of what one is. In terms of the unfolding drama, self-conscious knowledge of one's deliberate intentions

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[37] Ibid., §10, p. 478.
[38] Strong, p. 175.
[39] Ibid., p. 176.
[40] Which for Nietzsche is really a disguised pessimism.
[41] Or, more correctly, in the image of the unchanging True World of the Ideas to which it provided access.

(based on prudential concerns) plays no role in the final outcome that awaits each figure. In other words, it is not a battle of abstract ideas, but of men.

With this new tool, Socrates sought to save Athens from itself. However, insofar as the problem was with the character of the populace itself, relying on a method of thought alone did nothing to address the root of the problem. That is, it did nothing to ensure that the same flaws that had lead to the degeneration would not continue to be played out, albeit in another form. As we have seen, in Nietzsche's opinion this is just what transpired. Insofar as the turning away from the gods to the world of ideas did not address the core problem of the dissolution of Athenian noble character, Socrates accomplished the opposite of what he intended. Instead of overcoming the decadence besetting his people, he unwittingly enshrined it in a new form of life. Since this is still very much our form of life, we still embody the decadence which first necessitated the love of wisdom. More specifically, it is the fate of modern humanity to live through the final stage of this unfolding drama. Given that the signature event of this end phase is the devaluation of all values, the irony is that the rejection of the world of tragedy was tragically fated to end in a nihilistic rejection of the very optimistic grounds upon which the Socratic solution was based.[43]

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[42] Strong, p. 176.

[43] This view is summarised in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where Nietzsche writes: "But science, spurred by its powerful illusion, speed irresistibly toward its limits, where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers shipwreck...When they see to their horror how logic coils up at [its] boundaries and finally bites its own tail...(Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," trans. Walter Kaufmann in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, ed. Walter Kaufmann, [New York: The Modern Library, 1968], §15. From this point onward this text will be referred to as *BT*, followed by the section number.)

Life as a Manifestation of Will to Power

In *BGE* §2, Nietzsche contends that the belief in opposite values has been the fundamental faith of all metaphysicians. For them, it is inconceivable that anything could originate out of its opposite, e.g., truth out of error or the will to truth out of the will to deceive. Instead, "the things of the highest value must have another, *peculiar* origin – they cannot be derived from this transitory seductive, deceptive, paltry world, from this turmoil of delusion and lust. Rather, from the lap of Being, the intransitory,...there must be their basis, and nowhere else." According to Nietzsche, understanding how this basic principle arose and remained unquestioned is fundamental to a proper grasp of the question of truth.

A guiding question in the interrogation of these matters concerns the "value for life" these concepts may manifest. We may favour truth over appearance, truthfulness over deception, or the definite to the indefinite, but this tells us nothing concerning the value these concepts may have "in themselves." Rather, it says something about us, namely that we are just that form of life that has developed these concepts as a means to live. Assuming that we are not so vain as to suppose that man really is the measure of all things, then it may just be that the valuations we have come to ascribe to these ideas are "mere foreground estimates;" moreover, it may even be that "what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things – maybe even one with them in essence."(*BGE*, §2) Given that, for Nietzsche, "life itself is will to power"(*BGE*, §13), this is in fact what he argues.

The will to power is a fundamental concept in Nietzsche's writing. Still, its meaning has been a subject of contention, with many commentators providing (sometimes markedly) divergent interpretations. While this is not the place for a detailed analysis of these, some consideration of the role this idea plays in the understanding of truth is required. The statement of *BGE* §13 that "life itself is will to power" occurs within the context of a warning not to take the idea of self-preservation as the most fundamental instinct of organic being. Rather, self-preservation is but one possible manifestation or result of the more basic will to power. Living beings do not merely strive to preserve themselves, maintain their power at some sustainable comfort level; rather, they seek above all to discharge it, which entails overcoming and incorporating that which opposes.[44] In other words, it is the nature of the will to power that, to fulfill itself, it strive to increase its sense of power. As that which is constitutive of life, it is not a thing, but a *pathos*, namely that which provides the impetus for becoming(*WP*, §635). Thus, living things do not possess will to power – rather, they are manifestations of this prior striving toward activity. This drive to overcome and incorporate could otherwise be expressed as the drive to dominate, i.e., as the drive to interpret and impose form on that which is other, through which an organism seeks to bring what opposes under its dominion. Insofar as an organism or species is successful in discharging its power, it continues to exist.[45]

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[44] The recognition of this explains why we should honour and love our enemies. They are valuable to the extent that those who yearn to expend their will to power in a "healthy," affirmative way, i.e., out of a superabundant feeling of power, need worthy enemies over whom they may triumph and glorify themselves. This is in contrast to the Christian sense of the dictum, which is born out of the ressentiment of slave morality.

[45] It is for this reason that self-preservation should be understood as a result of the more fundamental activity of the will to power.

Given this, self-preservation alone cannot serve as the criterion by which a form of life is judged – how an organism or species discharges its power is of fundamental importance. As mentioned above, within the human sphere, there is a distinction to be drawn between the ideal types of master and slave morality. It can now be seen that there is a direct connection between the way the will to power is made manifest and the morality an individual or culture embodies. One way in which the two types of morality can be differentiated is on the grounds of whether or not they manifest an ascending, healthy, type of life, or one that is diseased and in decline. In the case of the former, the discharge of power is characterised by superabundant need – it is a feeling of "overflowing" strength which seeks to expend itself in creative activity, in conquest (i.e., in the extension of its power) in one form or another. The latter is also marked by a need, but it is a need born out of impotence and "exhaustion" It too is engaged in a fight, but it is a reactionary one against the dissolution of its existence.[46] Keeping in mind Nietzsche's denial of opposites, it should be noted that, while master and slave morality are different manifestations of the will to power, they are not opposed to one another in any ontological sense.[47] In fact, the latter develops out of the former. Understanding why Nietzsche sees this to be the case will allow us a better grasp of his denial of truth.

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[46] There are numerous places where Nietzsche discusses this matter. See, for example, *TI*, "Morality as Anti-Nature," §5, and *TI*, "The Four Great Errors," §2. See also The Genealogy of Morals I, §10, which provides a good summary of Nietzsche's understanding of the different qualities and valuations characteristic of master and slave morality.

[47] In other words, they are not two opposed kinds of will to power, say strong versus weak.

The Cruel Truth

> *We should reconsider cruelty and open our eyes. We should at long last learn impatience lest such immodest fat errors keep on strutting about virtuously and saucily, as have been fostered about tragedy, for example, by philosophers both ancient and modern. Almost everything we call "higher culture" is based on the spiritualization of* cruelty, *on its becoming more profound: this is my proposition. That "savage animal" has not really been "mortified"; it lives and flourishes, it has merely become – divine.* (*BGE*, §229)

This passage prefigures one of the central questions of *On the Genealogy of Morals*,[48] namely how slave morality could have arisen out of its supposed opposite, master morality. Appreciating the role of cruelty in human affairs is essential to a proper understanding of this transformation. Indeed, the link between cruelty and pain and the human can be traced back to the inception of human sociability. Recall that it was out of the valuations made by the earliest nobility that the distinguishing concepts of good and bad first arose. That this group was capable of such valuations depended in turn on their ability to make promises, for it was in their ability to engage in such activity that these individuals could first exercise mastery over themselves. But to do this, humans first had to transform themselves from animals "attuned only to the passing moment" to those who could plan, i.e., distinguish the necessary from the contingent, cause from effect, anticipate distant eventualities, and other such activities.[49] In other words, they first of all had to become calculable, regular, and necessary, even in their own image of themselves. These conditions for the possibility of nobility arose out of the long period of human pre-history in which social relations were ruled by rigid obedience to custom, which Nietzsche terms the "morality of mores."

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[48] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Genealogy of Morals," trans. Walter Kaufmann in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, ed. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: The Modern Library, 1968). From this point onward this text will be referred to as *GM*, followed by the essay and section numbers.

In addition to this, the faculty of memory was needed. According to Nietzsche, one of the main tools used in the development of this faculty was pain.[50] In fact, he asserts that "the most dreadful sacrifices and pledges,...the most repulsive mutilations,...the cruelest rites of all the religious cults," all had their origins "in the instinct that realized that pain is the most powerful aid to mnemonics."[51] Through this tool, the first noble breed of human being arose, one which, in virtue of its ability to inflict pain on itself, acquired the strength of memory which enabled it to make promises. These were the first masters; they were the first to develop a sense of responsibility which allowed them to distinguish themselves from those who could not manifest such a power. In such a human being, capable of making promises, of taking responsibility for his actions, we have the first sovereign individual. With this emancipated state, "liberated...from the morality of custom," came "a proud consciousness...of *what* [had] at length been achieved and become flesh in him, a consciousness of his own power and freedom..."(*GM* II,§3). With this newfound mastery over himself, he also won mastery over nature and those without his self-commanding will. How, Nietzsche rhetorically asks, could such beings not be aware of and honour their creative superiority (their "goodness") over others who they saw lacked such power (the despised, the "bad")?

This is Nietzsche's account of the origin of the noble consciousness, of the good conscience. Promise making, which is a kind of creditor/debtor, contractual relationship, is

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[49] *GM* II, §1.

[50] He writes: " 'If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory" – this is the main clause of the oldest (unhappily the most enduring) psychology on earth." (*GM* II, §3)

[51] *GM* II, §3. Indeed, he goes on to claim that the worse a society's collective ability to remember, the greater will be the cruelty of their customs.

the first type of human self-affirmation. In promising to do something, one stood as security for oneself with pride. In the case where one failed to meet one's commitment, some form of requital, or punishment, was necessary. When we look back at the history of such relationships, we often see that the currency of debt-repayment was pain. But, Nietzsche asks, how could the infliction of pain be considered a form of compensation? From the simple, human, all-too-human fact that it was pleasurable to those who perpetrated or witnessed it. This pleasure consisted in the feeling of power associated with the venting of one's power freely over one who was powerless. It was in the enjoyment of the "pathos of distance," of feeling a difference in power. For those of lower rank, it constituted the rare opportunity to participate in a right of the masters – finally he too would be able to enjoy the experience of superiority, of being able to look down on someone else as beneath him.[52]

Nietzsche marvels at "how much blood and cruelty lie at the bottom of all 'good things'"(*GM* II, §3). As he sees it, recognizing the truth of this is essential to a proper understanding of the present-day concept of punishment as a response to guilt. While it may offend our sensibilities, the fact is that the notion of punishment did not have any initial connection to ideas either of the freedom or non-freedom of the will. That somebody was guilty and deserved punishment only if they could have chosen to act otherwise was a concept of justice which, relative to our entire moral history, arrived very late on the scene.[53] To understand how and why it did arrive, we need to examine the origin of

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[52] *GM* II, §5.

[53] To Nietzsche's mind, that many "moralists" transposed this understanding to the inception of morality only betrays their lack of any historical sense, which he describes as

communal life. As just indicated, communal life also had its beginnings in cruelty. The basic claim is that the first social structure was formed out of the tyrannical creative activity of a small conqueror master race, who, by dint of their instinct to command, were able to overpower other groups who, although maybe greater in numbers, were still disorganized and nomadic. This was not the result of a gradual evolutionary process through which humans adapted to new conditions necessitating that they enter into contracts with one another. On the contrary, it was a sudden eruption, the bursting on to the scene of a new human form of life which had to act as it did out of an overflowing need to discharge its power in acts of social creation.[54]

It was out of this creative act through which a community was formed that the concept of guilt, or as Nietzsche also calls it, the "bad conscience," slowly grew. While it was utterly unknown to those "born organizers," who through their "artistic" lust to command first forged a society, it was a by-product of their activity. As the formless populace was molded into an ordered structure, as they became ever more enclosed within the strictures that constituted communal life, the customary channels through which they could expend their own power became fewer. Ultimately there came a point when, unable to vent their power outwardly (i.e., against others in the community, which really means, against the community itself), it turned inward, against themselves. Nietzsche writes:

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one of the family failings of all philosophers. They mistakenly take the present human condition as an eternal fact and starting point for all of their analyses.

[54] This might appear to contradict the earlier contention made in *TL* that humans came together out of "boredom and necessity" if one interprets him as saying in this case that the formation of community was a voluntary affair. However, one might alternatively read him (albeit in hindsight) as saying in this instance that it was out of the boredom that the "born organisers" experienced and the necessity to create that they felt that led to the formation of communities.

> The man who, from lack of external enemies and resistances and forcibly confined to the oppressive narrowness and punctiliousness of custom, impatiently lacerated, persecuted, gnawed at, assaulted, and maltreated himself; this animal that rubbed itself raw against the bars of its cage as one tried to "tame" it; this deprived creature, racked with homesickness for the wild, who had to turn himself into an adventure, a torture chamber, an uncertain and dangerous wilderness – this fool, this yearning and desperate prisoner became the inventor of the "bad conscience." But thus began the gravest and uncanniest illness, from which humanity has not yet recovered, man's suffering *of man, of himself* – the result of a forcible sundering from his animal past, as it were a leap and plunge into new surroundings and conditions of existence, a declaration of war against the old instincts upon which his strength, joy, and terribleness had rested hitherto.(*GM* II, §16)

It was out of this world-transforming event, when suffering instincts, desperate for release, finally turned against themselves (the "internalization" of man), that the human became itself. The whole "inner" world (e.g., of reflective consciousness, the soul) had its origin in this repressed plebian instinct for freedom.[55]

As Nietsche says in *GM* I, §6, it was from within the confines of communal order that the human first became an interesting animal.[56] When the relentless need to discharge power (i.e., the drive to impose form on something) turned inward, against itself, the era of creative self-tyranny began. The defining characteristic of this new form of life is the joy it takes in inflicting cruelty upon itself. In every discharge of power there is a concomitant feeling of joy, but it is a joy in being cruel, i.e., in overpowering an opposing force, in imposing form on it (which always involves the destruction of some aspect of it – there is no creation without destruction; this is the rule of Dionysus). Nietzsche calls this radical transformation an illness, but "as pregnancy is an illness"(*GM* II, §19). For out of this

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[55] "Instinct for freedom" here being synonymous with "will to power." (*GM* II, §17)

[56] Specifically, out of the priestly/ascetic form of humanity which arose with the formation of society.

illness much of what is both great and miserable was born. A passage in *GM* II, §18, which summarises this nicely, is worth quoting at length:

> This secret self-ravishment, this artists' cruelty, this delight in imposing a form upon oneself as a hard, recalcitrant, suffering material and in burning a will, a critique, a contradiction, a contempt, a No into it, this uncanny, dreadfully joyous labor of a soul voluntarily at odds with itself that makes itself suffer out of joy in making suffer – eventually this entire "bad conscience"...as the womb of all ideal and imaginative phenomena, also brought to light an abundance of strange new beauty and affirmation, and perhaps beauty itself. – After all, what would be "beautiful" if the contradiction had not first become conscious of itself, if the ugly had not first said to itself: "I am ugly."

It bears repeating that it is the same "active force," namely the will to power, that lies at the bottom of all human creativity. One of the prime differentiating factors which determines the character of that creativity (e.g., whether it is healthy or decadent, embodies a good or bad conscience) is the "direction" in which it is expended. However, one must be careful not to oversimplify this distinction. It is important to note that in all human artistic activity there is an element of asceticism, which is to say, a self-imposed "no-saying" through which one imposes a form (as in the case of memory formation) on oneself. And each instance of this involves the pleasure in commanding, in inflicting cruelty, on oneself. Thus, it is somewhat inaccurate to distill the different types of humanity (e.g., master or slave) down to whether or not the power manifested in the instincts is vented "outward" or "inward." Rather, one must take into account how an individual or culture justifies or makes sense of the fact of this ironic joy in self-imposed cruelty.[57] Is it (and thus life itself) celebrated, as was the case in noble Greek tragic culture, or is it (and life) castigated and

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[57] According to Nietzsche, "[w]hat really arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering as such, but the senselessness of suffering..."(*GM* II, §7).

rejected, as implied in the case of Socratic optimism and made explicit in the Christian teachings of guilt which grew from it ("platonism for the people", as Nietzsche calls it)?

The language may be somewhat misleading here, for how individuals makes sense of the fact of suffering is itself a sign of the kind of life they are. The imposition of form is an imposition of an order of rank on the multiplicity of instincts one is. In other words, it is not the individual who *does* this;[58] instead, he or she is the embodiment of the activity of the dominant instinct, which unifies and gives direction to the others for whatever type of creativity life one manifests. It must therefore be asked, is the dominant, unifying instinct one which affirms and hungers for more of life in all of its "terribleness,"[59] or is it one that strives merely for the self-preservation of the organism in the face of its own decline?

The latter of these two is the defining characteristic of the *ascetic ideal* and slave morality. As mentioned above, it is also that which distinguishes Socratic morality from that represented in Greek tragedy, which Nietzsche identifies as the last noble culture seen on earth. A sign of their "great health" can be seen in the character and function of their gods. They served to celebrate all those revered, noble qualities which had become palpable within themselves. They facilitated the free, *outward* expression of their instincts in all their aspects – when one of their brethren did something wanton or self-destructive,

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[58] I will briefly discuss Nietzsche's understanding of the fictional status of the "soul hypothesis" in Chapter 3 in the section "Perspectivism and the Question of Nietzsche's Consistency."

[59] As Nietzsche says in *BGE*, §259: "...life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation..." Much the same is claimed in *GM* II, §11: "...life operates essentially, that is , in its basic functions, through injury, assault, exploitation and destruction, and simply cannot be thought of at all without this character."

they did not castigate or lacerate themselves with guilt. Instead, it was a god who shouldered the blame, in the sense that it was the god who must have deluded the mortal, causing him to act in such a way(*GM* II, §23). However, in the period during which Socrates came to prominence there is a cultural shift toward decadence, toward a questioning of the instincts (itself a symptom of their decline) which have lost their way. What accounts for the corruption of this once noble culture?

BGE, §262 contains a description of both the ascension and degeneration of an aristocratic culture. Such a culture develops out of a single-minded struggle for survival (which is not to say for mere self-preservation – such a culture realises that survival requires conquest and dominance, whether it be over hostile neighbours or those they already oppress). The constant struggle to prevail over their enemies teaches them ("conditions them to" might be a better expression) what qualities – hardness, uniformity, simplicity of form – must be cultivated to bring them success, and they dedicate themselves to this task with unrelenting severity and "intolerance." This is to say, they tolerate only those qualities which assist in their struggle; these become their virtues, of which intolerance is one, namely *justice*. "In this way," Nietzsche writes, "a type with few but very strong traits, a species of severe, warlike, prudently taciturn men, close-mouthed and closely linked (and as such possessed of the subtlest feeling for the charms and *nuances* of association), is fixed beyond the changing generations..."(*BGE*, §262). Ironically, the downfall of this community arises out of the power it accumulates through its continued triumph. When such a "single-minded" culture finally triumphs to the point where it no longer has any enemies, it loses that outlet against which it had formerly discharged its power. Suddenly, "the bond and constraint of the old discipline are torn,

[and] variation, whether as deviation...or as degeneration and monstrosity...appears on the scene in the greatest abundance and magnificence; the individual dares to be individual and different"(ibid.).

With this newfound "will to individualism" the old order overcomes itself. The stored superabundance of power that was formerly directed toward the accomplishment of communal goals now manifests itself in the struggle of members of the community against one another. New corrupting virtues are developed, namely those oriented toward the individual in this new struggle for his own preservation and enhancement. In this anarchic period of transition, during which all of this accumulated (nervous) energy is released, a host of new dangers are born, "this time transposed into the individual, into the neighbor and friend,...into one's own heart, into the most secret recesses of wish and will..."(ibid.). The philosophers of such an age ("these acute observers and loiterers"), as the first to recognize the self-destructive power that is enveloping the culture, see that the only salvation, the only protection against total decay, is in embracing mediocrity, the common, the average.

This certainly seems to match Nietzsche's description of what transpired during the transition from the morality of Greek tragic age to that of Socrates. To briefly recount, according to his analysis, Athens had reached that stage of success at which the power acquired in its victories (capped off by its conquest in the Persian War) overwhelmed the capacities of the culture to discharge it in the customary way. As the old virtues lost their power to contain and direct this overflowing energy the unity of the instincts dissolved. Socrates (certainly an "acute observer and loiterer") was the first to be recognise this unfolding illness (i.e., of the anarchy of the instincts) in his fellow Athenians because he

had already lived through it in his own person. But how could this cure be construed as an appeal to mediocrity? The short answer is that since what stood for virtue could now be taught given the right use of method, it became potentially open to all. Through the proper application of dialectical reason, anyone could ascertain *the* truth about justice, courage, and piety.

After Socrates: The Progressive Development of the Ascetic Ideal

We have seen that Nietzsche criticises Socrates for being decadent. He suffers from the war of his soul turned against itself - he cannot allow his instincts free reign, as it would destroy him. The only way he can put his psychic house in order is to subdue all the instincts save one; in becoming absurdly rational he "masters" his wanton drives. However, this really means only that their outward expression is stifled. In fact, the turn to hyper-rationality is nothing other than the expression of the instinct for self-preservation turned inward. More specifically, the resort to "rationality at all costs" as a moral curative measure is really a disguised flight from reality. It is a rejection of appearance, of *becoming*, for a fixed, predictable world of *being*, over which one can exercise a far greater degree of control (necessary for the fractured soul). The will to rationality, to the discovery of "true" knowledge, is really the ascetic will to affirm a True World at the expense of this one. As such, it is a will against life, or as Nietzsche suggests, a concealed will to death.[60]

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[60] The movement to "absurd reason" is a means to preserve the human organism, but it constitutes a rejection of the harsh reality of life. It is born out of a decadence which, at bottom, no longer wishes to live. Competing with this exhaustion is the drive to "life at all costs." This is the signature dilemma of a degenerating soul at war with itself, which seeks release from suffering but yet continues to strive for life. It does not have the courage to "go under." In *TI*, "The Problem of Socrates," §12, Nietzsche speculates that Socrates

The Socratic revolution constitutes the first stage in what has been the long unfolding of the slave revolt in morals. At bottom, the history of this revolt is the history of the development of the ideal of the True World of being.[61] With Christianity, the ideal gains in strength and is transformed from something to be reached through the correct application of reason into a wholly separate, purified sphere of existence. While unattainable in this world, it does await those who are virtuous, which means, those who repent of the guilt which the ascetic priest of Christianity teaches is one with their "natural" humanity. "Why do I suffer?" the Christian asks. "It is a punishment for your guilt – we are all the cause of our own suffering," replies the priest. "We are all guilty before God. We were given free will, but we are weak and let our wanton instincts rule over us." With this move, the spirit of "ressentiment" which characterises slave morality is redirected from their actual oppressors (e.g., the Romans of early Christianity) to the impotent themselves. Ironically, this self-castigation is a form of slave empowerment, for now they have an enemy with which they can deal.

One of the acts of contrition through which this guilt is managed is confession - *all* must confess their guilt, i.e., tell the truth about their corrupt soul. Telling the truth is a means to salvation, by which one eschews evil, and, in gaining entrance to the true world, triumphs over death. As Christianity continues to grow in strength, so does this

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ultimately realised this, i.e., finally understood that his cure reached only the superficial symptoms of a much deeper illness, that of the very form of life he and his fellow Athenians had become. Furthermore, he ultimately saw that this cure was itself a manifestation of the illness he was trying to overcome. This was the "wisdom" reflected in his courage to die – in the end, he understood that death alone could be the physician (see also *BGE*, §191).

[61] See *TI*, "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable" for Nietzsche's outline of the history of this "error."

confessional conscience. However, as is the case with all great things, it finally attains such a level of power that it, too, overcomes itself.[62] Under the care of Christian asceticism the concept of truthfulness becomes increasingly refined and taken more and more seriously to the point where it transforms itself into the scientific conscience of "intellectual cleanliness at any price."[63] It was with this new scientific conscience that the war against Christian dogma commenced. However, as Nietzsche is quick to point out, it left the core of Christian morality - namely the ascetic ideal - intact. For in spite of the fact that it sees itself as disinterested and objective (i.e., devoid of convictions, whose claims are always open to revision) it too rests on the unquestioned - i.e., dogmatic – belief (i.e., faith) in the existence and unconditional value of truth. Thus, as he writes in *GS*, §344, those who believe in science also "affirm another world than the world of life, nature, and history; and insofar as they affirm this 'other world'...must they not by the same token negate its counterpart, this world, *our* world?"

The realisation is that the will to truth embodied in the scientific mindset is the most refined version of the ascetic ideal so far. Consequently, it is now time for the justification of science and its pursuit of knowledge. This really means finally inquiring into the meaning of the ascetic ideal itself and its valuation of truth, which until now had not been *permitted* to be a problem at all.[64] With this we enter the final phase of the working out of the ascetic ideal. The relentless demand for truth ultimately ends with the questioning of

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[62] "All great things bring about there own self-destruction through an act of self-overcoming: thus the law of life will have it, the law of the necessity of self-overcoming in the nature of life..."(*GM* III, §27).

[63] *GM* III, § 27. See also *GS*, § 357.

[64] *GM* III, §24. As Nietzsche says in the following section, the core, unspoken, belief of the ascetic ideal is that truth, which applies to all, is inestimable and cannot be criticised.

that demand itself. Ultimately, this leads to the recognition of the "foundationless" character of the belief in truth, or, more specifically, that it has been founded on a moral valuation which arose out of a form of life diametrically opposed to what science supposedly seeks – the truth about *this* world. Humans now embody a destructive paradox: on the one hand, the will to truth, which has become the will not to deceive, not even oneself,[65] demands that all false beliefs be unmasked; on the other hand, this unmasking imperative reveals that what they have sought, the Truth, the True World, cannot be found. Insofar as this was the bedrock upon which all other values have rested, this revelation leads to the morality of nihilistic despair, to the ultimate devaluation of all values.[66]

This last stage is defined by its utter lack of ideals. However, over two thousand years of moral conditioning cannot simply be wiped out through the demonstrated untenability of its position. Indeed, over this period of time, humanity really has become the rational animal. Humans may realize that the will to truth is built upon illusion, but the "will to will" persists. Thus, as Nietzsche asserts both at the beginning and end of the third essay of the *GM*, "man would rather will nothingness than not will"(*GM* III, §28). Understood from this perspective, nihilism constitutes the last incarnation of the ascetic will itself – it is the ultimate, most refined ("most spiritual") expression of its drive to self-preservation.

The drive to will the void characteristic of nihilistic culture is the response to the loss of its unifying ideals. This is to say, it is the loss of belief in any commonly shared set of

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[65] *GS*, §344.

[66] Again we see that all great things end by overcoming themselves. However, it is equally true that what follows is undetermined. I.e., contra Hegel or Marx, there is no inner law which necessitates what shall follow.

presupposed values (i.e., tradition) that might ground a people's form of life and serve as the foundation for their actions. In our case, the feeling of vacuity arises when we realize that the grounding concepts of transcendent unity, purpose, and truth can no longer be used to interpret existence. When we pull these concepts out of our interpretive schema, the world appears devoid of meaning. As Nietzsche writes in *WP* §12, without any overarching goal or end to existence, the conclusion is that "the character of existence is not 'true,' [but] *false*. One simply lacks any reason for convincing oneself that there is a *true* world." But, as he goes on to point out, it should be our task to understand how and why we acquired such a strong faith in these categories of reason (of course, much of his writing is dedicated toward just this task). Then we can see if we cannot give up our faith in them, for once we have devaluated these categories and demonstrated that they cannot be applied to existence, then we lose all reason for its devaluation.

The problem is, even if we lose all reason for devaluing the world, the problem of nihilism may persist. If we lack any successor ideal which may serve as the new foundation for culture we will remain wedded to a relativistic consciousness which holds that the world simply is what it is, and that nothing can be called more true or meaningful than anything else.[67] In the next chapter, I will examine some of Nietzsche's claims concerning the role the presuppositions constitutive of tradition play in the life of a culture. More specifically, I will discuss his claim that every healthy culture requires a horizon which holds it together. In the process, I will also address the questions raised in Chapter 1 concerning whether or not the account of the illusory nature of conceptual thought and

[67] Strong, p. 23.

Truth is internally consistent. I will then conclude with a few remarks regarding (a) what form a revaluation might take, and (b) the kind of a transformation Nietzsche envisions it effecting.

Chapter 3

Overcoming the Ascetic Ideal: The Role of Interpretation and Perspectivism in Nietzsche's Philosophy

In the examination of the rise of Socratic morality I discussed Nietzsche's assertion that Socrates uprooted Greek morality from the soil of Greek myth. This was the signature event of a process of decay that had been underway for some time. The formerly unquestioned presuppositions (themselves expressive of various instincts) constitutive of the myths which had grounded the culture had weakened to the point where they no longer had the force to unify and direct the life of the society. Indeed, according to Nietzsche, the very fact that they had become questionable proves that they, and the culture they had grounded, were in an exhausted state of decline.[68] From the perspective of science and its "theoretical optimism,"[69] one might be even be tempted to say that it was with the advent of Socratic dialectic that the process of overcoming the need for myth and tradition began. With science and its demand for presuppositionless objectivity, all that which does not stand the test of its form of inquiry is discarded as superstitious belief. Of course, one of at at pains to show is that this paradigm of thought is also based on a myth, and an ultimately

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[68] See *TI*, "The Four Great Errors", §2.

[69] Nietzsche uses this term to describe the "spirit of science", described in §15 of *The Birth of Tragedy* as "the unshakeable faith" that thought, using the power of causal reasoning, can not only "penetrate the deepest abysses of being," but "correct it." As indicated earlier, Nietzsche holds that this illusory "faith in the explicability of nature and in knowledge as a panacea" (*BT*, §17) first came to light in the figure of Socrates.

destructive one at that (namely that of the True World). Far from constituting the end of the need for myth, the move to theoretical optimism is really the exchange of one mythology for another.

This said, it is not the fact of the mythological basis of culture that is the target of Nietzsche's critique, but rather the decadent nature of the particular True World mythology which came to serve as the foundation for Western culture. What is instructive about the Greeks of the tragic age is how they were able to create healthy myths, i.e., ones grounded on presuppositions which affirmed life in all of its various aspects.[70] Understanding how this might have come about is of the utmost importance to us now precisely because the devaluation of all values constitutive of nihilism leaves us without any affirmative tradition on which we might create a new form of life. Indeed, for Nietzsche the presence of tradition is the essential aspect of any culture since it is the unquestioned presuppositions that inform it that allow for the possibility of there being any "real" culture at all.[71]

This is why the death of God is of such monumental importance for the life of modern western humanity. Of course, Nietzsche sees this Christian tradition as part of the larger development of the ascetic ideal, and in that respect its overcoming, however destructive it might be, is welcomed. However, there is still the question of what, if

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[70] This said, it is important to note that this "healthy" affirmation does not constitute a blanket endorsement of all that is. Any healthy affirmation must be selective, must include a "Yes" and a "No". This is Nietzsche's criticism of the last men, which he illustrates in the section entitled "The Ass Festival" of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In their worship of the ass, the 'higher men" exhibit a simple acceptance of everything; this is the opposite of Zarathustra, who, even in his emphatic "no-saying," still affirms life.

[71] A "real" culture for Nietzsche being one which provides a meaning and direction to its people beyond the ideal-less, relativistic, and ultimately nihilistic fashion of thought which he sees as defining modern European culture. I will return to the discussion of this in the following section.

anything, will come afterward. Will humans continue to will the void, i.e., live the nihilistic existence of the "last men" in the shadow of the dead God? Will the "overcoming" of the ascetic consist in the extermination of humanity itself (recall that the will to truth conceals a will to death)? Or, will humans be able to create a new, affirmative, "self-conscious" ideal and tradition for themselves, through which they can transform themselves into fundamentally new creatures (i.e., "overmen")? Such a tradition would have to be self-conscious in the sense that it would incorporate the knowledge of itself as created tradition into itself. Nietzsche recognizes that there is no returning to a "simpler" past (e.g., to the pre-Socratic Greeks), nor does he think that such a transformation would be desirable.

Instead, what is needed is an "honest lie,"[72] which would ground a noble culture in which individuals would be empowered to "open their eyes to themselves," so that they could "distinguish 'true' and 'false' in themselves."[73] The necessity of the honest lie sheds light on Nietzsche's emphasis on the need for art, of its privileged status vis-a-vis science. According to his view, "all of life is based on semblance, art, deception, points of view, and the necessity of perspectives and error"(*BT, Attempt at a Self-Criticism*, §5). Artists (at least as Nietzsche envisions them) are ones who, in their artistic activity, embody this understanding, and in so doing oppose the ascetic ideal much more fundamentally than

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[72] GM III, § 19. I.e., a lie that arises from an "honest," self-conscious, will to deception, which recognises that illusion is an essential aspect of life.

[73] *GM* III, §19. As I understand it, "true" and "false" would be akin to "that which affirms" and "that which negates" life. Incidentally, it would seem reasonable to assert that the doctrine of eternal return is that "honest lie" of which Nietzsche speaks. I offer this in passing, as a detailed examination of this subject is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

those engaged in science. As he says in *GM* III, §25, in art, as opposed to science, "the lie is sanctified and the *will to deception* has a good conscience..." As we have seen, this is to say that the artist's will to deceive does not originate in a decadent, reactive hostility to the world of becoming, but rather is the expression of an outward, "experimental," affirmative discharge of power.[74] Furthermore, as honest deception, both the artist and spectator are conscious of the illusory character of the work (i.e., its status as a human creation), yet this does not necessarily reduce its power to ennoble.

I will return to the discussion of the significance of these claims for the possibility of overcoming nihilism below. Before that, we need to examine in greater detail the role the unquestioned presuppositions constitutive of myth and tradition play in Nietzsche's understanding of human knowledge and culture. In this regard, I have found it useful to draw on some of the claims Wittgenstein makes in *Philosophical Investigations*. As I see it, there is a certain affinity between the two thinkers insofar as both emphasize what I will call the purely practical character of human reason and what might be described as the "non-cognitive" ground of human behaviour. In comparing the two we will also find certain differences which will prepare the way for the discussion of some potentially problematic aspects of Nietzsche's thinking.

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[74] Again, this is in contrast to the Christian/scientific perspective, which, as the manifestation of ascetic morality, strive to unconditionally restrict all interpretation of life to its own point of view.(*BT*, §5)

Practical Reason and Interpretation

In *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* Nietzsche writes that "a living thing can be healthy, strong, and fruitful only when bounded by a horizon."[75] For humans, this horizon is made up of the unquestioned presuppositions which underlie the set of beliefs (e.g., of the inestimable value of Truth) shared by the individuals of a community. Recalling the discussion of *TL*, we can say that these presuppositions acquire their unquestioned status insofar as their origins are forgotten.[76] It is in being forgotten that they acquire the solidity of a perspective which serves as the ground from which the individual is able to interact with (i.e., interpret) the world. I will discuss this in greater detail in a moment, but first let us turn to some of the remarks Wittgenstein makes concerning the matter.

In his examination of rule-following Wittgenstein argues that any interpretation one might give to justify how a rule is to be (or was) followed is itself open to interpretation (i.e., requires its own justificatory interpretation), which leads one into an infinite regress. For this reason, interpretation alone cannot justify the way we behave. In other words, we can give reasons for the reasons we use to account for our behaviour *ad infinitum* until a point arrives where we reach explanatory bedrock, our spade is turned, and we are inclined

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[75] Friedrich Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 63.

[76] Nietzsche holds that the power of forgetting is essential to any productive form of life. Strong summarises his position as follows: "[i]f one cannot forget, such that all is eternally present, then action and life itself become impossible, for all choices appear equally invalid." (Strong, p. 27.)

to say, "This is simply what I do."[77] As he says in § 211 of *PI*, at some point – the point which constitutes the ultimate ground of action – our reasons give out. This is not to say that we act "mindlessly," but that we need to reconsider the practical aspect of what it means to act with intent. Like Nietzsche, Wittgenstein rejects the possibility of "pure" reason. Reasoning is fundamentally practical, i.e., a matter of training and convention.[78] Perhaps one of the prime differences between Wittgenstein and Nietzsche here is that while Wittgenstein appears to be content to leave it at that - see, e.g., his comments on the need to resist the temptation to seek explanations in favour of a descriptive mode of philosophical discourse[79] - Nietzcshe does attempt to provide an explanation (the doctrine of the will to power) of this matter.

However, this difference may not be as great as it might appear, for both thinkers remain in fundamental agreement in their opposition to metaphysical explanation (which, I would argue, is what Wittgenstein means when he exhorts us to stick to description). Both see philosophy as held captive to a "diseased" understanding of rationality which is intimately linked to the language we use.[80] More specifically, they both call attention to the role grammar plays in shaping how we perceive and think about the world. Wittgenstein

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[77] Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1967), p. 85. For subsequent references I will use the abbreviation *PI*, followed by the section number.

[78] In this respect, reason, as manifested in our linguistic practice, is "as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking and playing."(*PI*, §25)

[79] PI, §109.

[80] Take, for example, Wittgenstein's remark in *PI*, §109: "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language." Nietzsche also laments the negative effect of language on our understanding when he remarks of his fear that "we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar"(*TI*, "Reason" in Philosophy," §5). See also his comment that "we really ought to free ourselves from the seduction of words."(*BGE*, §16)

argues that there is a peculiar propensity embedded within our linguistic practice that drives us to unwittingly project platonic essences into the world. We often appeal to these essences when seeking a philosophical explanation of some matter or other (e.g., the nature of "Justice"). The difficulty is, when we seek them out, they are nowhere to be found. However, because this projected illusion is built into the way we speak, it is ever present in our thought.[81] It is, Wittgenstein says, like a pair of glasses which, because we are so accustomed to wearing them, we never think of removing(*PI*, §103). Put another way, it is because this illusion is so close to us – because it is embedded within our way of speaking (which, as Wittgenstein says, is a form of life, informs who we are), and thus remains beyond our language of inquiry (i.e., remains unquestioned) - that it is hardest to recognize. Consequently, when we are frustrated in our inquiries into *the* nature of things, we conclude that the problem must lie with our method of inquiry. If only we were to look harder, or in a different way, we would find the essences we are looking for.[82]

These claims are reminiscent of Nietzsche's criticism of the Socratic cure introduced to stave off the decline of Athenian culture: that it failed to address the root cause of the degeneration, namely the form of life the people themselves had become. Both argue that

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[81] Given that, according to Wittgenstein, "language is the vehicle of thought." (*PI*, §329)

[82] Nietzsche makes a somewhat similar observation regarding philosophers' search for what has being. In *TI*, "'Reason' in Philosophy," §1 he argues that the concept of being is a projection of philosophers' penchant to "de-historicise" whatever subject falls under their view (a reflection of their "hatred of becoming"). However, when they seek out being, it always remains beyond their grasp. Unable to give up their belief in this concept, they then look for the reasons why it is withheld from them. Ultimately, the source of the supposed deception is found in the senses, which provide access only to mere appearance as opposed to the true world. As Nietzsche sees it, the philosophical moral of the story has been that we should "free ourselves from the deception of the senses, from becoming, from history, from lies; history is nothing but faith in the senses, faith in lies."

the problems that beset philosophy are not the result of mere lack of insight, but are to be found in the very form of thinking (expressed in language) itself. As shall be discussed below, one might otherwise say that the problem lies in the kind of perspective from which interpretation takes place.

Nietzsche also calls attention to basic errors of reason that have become petrified in language. As we saw earlier, he argues that our whole conceptual schema is based on perceptual/linguistic illusions (albeit ones necessary for just the type of life we have become). However, it is not the illusory character of language *per se* that Nietzsche derides[83] – see, e.g., his comment in *BGE*, §4: "The falseness of a judgement is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgement." – but rather the quality of that illusion, i.e., whether it affirms or negates life. Perhaps the most egregious of the life-negating errors is the actor/action distinction through which we posit a world of being. The subject/object structure of our grammar reflects and surreptitiously perpetuates an ancient prejudice that all "doing" requires a "doer." To take one of Nietzsche's examples, we say, "the lightning flashed." With this (supposedly) purely descriptive statement we mistakenly fabricate a separation of the "thing" called lightning from its action, the flashing, when they are in fact one and the same action. In other words, "this doubles the deed; when [one] sees the lightning flash, it is the deed of a deed: it posits the same event first as cause and then a second time as its effect."[84] The "doer" (i.e., the realm of being) is merely a linguistic

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[83] Indeed, given its perspectival nature, illusion or error is an essential component of life.

[84] *GM* I, §13. See also *TI*, "Reason in Philosophy," §5.

fiction added to the deed.[85] On its own, this might seem innocent enough, just a harmless linguistic idiosyncrasy. However, Nietzsche sees that this error is at play in all of our most "dangerous" illusions, e.g. the concept of opposites, substance, the soul (the ego, the subject), causality, and the True World. Indeed, much of his writing is devoted to exposing our belief in being as the decadent illusion he understand it to be.

This last observation points to a significant difference between Wittgenstein and Nietzsche. On the one hand, both see language as the "carrier" of an illness one might call platonic idealism. On the other hand, they have quite different ideas about its root cause. According to Wittgenstein, the concepts we use are public customs into which we are trained - they arise, acquire the meaning they have for us, out of regular use. In continuing to do a thing in a certain way (e.g. say a word, make a gesture with a hand, play a game) a transition from 'random' act to meaningful institution takes place. It is this established regularity which is the ultimate foundation for how these things are understood (i.e., is the unquestioned bedrock or horizon upon which all interpretation ultimately rests). Look, for example, at how we teach a concept signified by a word. It is through the use of examples and practice, drills and testing. Along the way the teacher encourages or corrects usage, and prompts the student to venture out on his own (the 'teaching' of creativity). As Wittgenstein points out, in doing all of this the teacher imparts no more than she herself knows (*PI*, §208). But can this seemingly mundane training really be all there is to it? Mustn't there be at least something more to the understanding of the training? Wittgenstein's reply is: "Have I got more than I give in the explanation?" (*PI*, §209) His

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[85] As outlined in the first chapter, this fiction arises out of the metaphorical nature of our perception and concept formation. I will return to this in Chapter 3, in my discussion of

answer is no. If we seek out some deeper explanation to justify what we do, we eventually run out of reasons (i.e. interpretations of our actions), hit bedrock, and are faced with the fact that this is just what we do.

Why then the feeling that there is "more to it"? The answer is that embedded within the mastery of a technique is a certain forgetfulness which gets carried over into our way of speaking. We do things which in retrospect seem inexplicable precisely because we no longer need to "think about it,"[86] i.e., take care in what we are doing. We forget that the way has been paved for these activities through our training which is itself part of our form of life. When for example we grasp in a flash the meaning of a word it seems mysterious because we do not have in view that we are already masters of a myriad of techniques that set the place for this activity. (*PI*, §31) In overlooking the role our mastery plays in how we understand (or misunderstand) our behaviour, we arrive at certain mistaken preconceptions about the nature of reality.[87] The way we use language is a part of our form of life – given that it too is a mastered practice, it conceals its origins in that practice from us. In our attempt to understand the world and ourselves our manner of speaking points us in a mistaken direction, away from our actual "doing" to an ideal order. It is under the influence of these supposed necessary presuppositions that we seek out *the* essence of things as definitive of understanding. Wittgenstein's cure for this metaphysical malady is to get "back to the rough ground,"(*PI*, §107) i.e. change the focus of our philosophical inquiries

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Nietzsche's critique of freedom.

[86] Again, in so far as "language is the vehicle of thought," this applies to thinking itself.

[87] I.e. that reality must have a nature, that there must be a true world which underlies this one. I am indebted to a seminar on Wittgenstein led by Dr. Rockney Jacobsen for this interpretation.

to the ways in which we use our ordinary language. It may not have the crystalline purity that we crave, but it may lead us out of the idealist fly bottle that he thinks has so often been the home of philosophical thought.

It would seem that there is much here with which Nietzsche would be in agreement. Still, for better or worse, one can imagine him lamenting that Wittgenstein does not descend deep enough into the moral depths which are the ultimate source of the sickness (i.e., morality itself). In remaining at the level of technique, Wittgenstein's critique does not address why it is that we *engage* in just this kind of forgetfulness of our mastery; he does not ask what sort of interests of life are being served by our embodiment of this particular form of life. In other words, Nietzsche would agree with Wittgenstein's emphasis on the practical character of thinking and his observation that our interpretations are based on an unquestioned, conventional foundation. However, he would not want to stop there with the observation that "this is simply what we do." Instead, he would argue that this is where we should be most suspicious and vigilant in our investigation.[88]

This brings us back to the role the concepts of interpretation and perspective play in Nietzsche's philosophy. Wittgenstein distinguishes between interpretation, which for him has to do with the reasons we give to explain something (e.g., word, game, or mathematical formula), and the practice (the custom) which underlies it. Nietzsche would reject such a distinction – for him, the customary practice is also a manifestation of the interpretive activity of the will to power. Reason, as it comes to consciousness in language, is only a

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[88] As Nietzsche writes in *BGE*, §289: "Every philosophy also conceals a philosophy; every opinion is also a hideout, every word also a mask." This, of course, would apply to his own writing as well; perhaps the difference is that he acknowledges it.

superficial manifestation of this deeper activity, a sign world developed in accord with our needs as herd creatures to communicate (to command and obey). As he argues in *GS*, §354, it is a tool the human drive for self-preservation,

> ...the result of a "must" that for a terribly long time lorded it over man. As the most endangered animal, he *needed* help and protection, he needed his peers, he had to learn to express his distress and to make himself understood; and for all of this he needed "consciousness" first of all, he needed to "know" himself what distressed him, he needed to "know" how he felt, he needed to "know" what he thought. For to say it once more: Man, like every living being, thinks continually without knowing it; the thinking that rises to consciousness is only the smallest part of all this....

One of the essential features of thinking is the fitting of new material into old schemas, the making equal and familiar what is new and unique (*WP*,§499). This applies to the thinking that we "know," as well as to what occurs below the surface of consciousness. Both are manifestations of the interpretive activity of the will to power, for interpretation is the process of making sense of what is foreign and questionable. This, Nietzsche argues, is fundamentally an act of commanding, appropriation and incorporation. All living beings, embedded in webs of relations with other beings, are constantly engaged in interpretation, in seeking to impose their own order on that with which they come in contact.[89] Understood this way, interpretation is the creative discharge of power from which customs constitutive of tradition emerge and are sustained.

Interpretation always occurs within the context of a particular perspective or amalgam of perspectives which, taken together, shape its creative activity. At the same time, a perspective is also the product of prior interpretation. There is a reciprocal relationship

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[89] In fact, Nietzsche asserts that this applies to "pre-organic" life as well: "'Thinking' in primitive conditions...is the crystallization of forms, as in the case of crystal."(*WP*, §499)

between the two that is in a constant state of development[90]; all "centers" or "loci" of power (i.e., stable configurations of power) are constantly in a state of becoming, each seeking to discharge its power[91] in relation to the others as effectively as it can. The relative stability of a perspective definitive (in part or on the whole) of an individual organism, species, or culture is the expression of an accumulated strength to organize and command over a sustained period of time. In this sense, a "thing" (e.g., an organism or a convention) is this perspective or unity of perspectives through which the activity of the will to power - interpretation - is channeled.[92]

In the case of the human organism, Nietzsche distinguishes between three general types of perspective: the sensory, the instinctual, and the socio-historical, the combination of which determine the overall point of view from which it confronts both itself and the world (e.g., as the embodiment of master or slave morality).[93] They comprise our situatedness in the world, and both enable and restrict our capability for knowledge. As he says in *GM* III, §12, trying to conceive of pure, perspective-less knowledge (of, e.g., the Kantian thing-in-itself) is as absurd and nonsensical as trying to conceive of an eye turned in no particular direction, "in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone

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[90] As Schrift says, "...perspectives never 'exist' outside some form-giving interpretive matrix and this interpretive matrix is always already perspectivally conditioned." (Allan D. Schrift, Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation, (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 145-146.

[91] I.e., its "lust to rule," its will to impose as the norm its perspective on all it confronts. (*WP*, §481)

[92] At the risk of sounding repetitious, one must keep in mind that, according to Nietzsche, there are no "things," understood as "substantive" entities that exist outside the world of becoming. Each thing, whether it is a protoplasm or human being, is an activity, the expression of the unending striving of the will to power.

[93] For a summary of these forms of perspective with pertinent quotes see Schrift, pp. 146 – 149.

seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking...." At the same time, a perspective constitutes the horizon, which limits what we can know. Echoing observations made in *TL*, Nietzsche remarks in *Daybreak*, §117 that perspectives are like epistemological spider's webs, which allow us to know only that kind of thing that may be caught in just the kind of webbing that makes up our net.

As this arachnidan metaphor suggests, we must be careful to remember that knowledge is not a thing, but an activity. It is not something we uncover, but something we create. But even this is a misleading way of speaking, insofar as we are this creative activity. All of the particular perspectives through which our interpretive activity is channeled, through which we come to know the world (ourselves included), are at bottom different expressions of what might be described as the most basic perspective of life, namely the will to discharge strength (*BGE*, §13). To repeat an earlier observation, they have become and continue to be what they are because we are just those creatures who need it so for the continuation of life. We interpret the way we do, from the perspectives we do, because precisely this way of behaving facilitates our survival and growth as individuals and as a species.[94]

To this point I have attempted to explain the reasoning behind Nietzsche's claim that all truth is illusion. The truth in question is that which resides in the True World, the world of being, of unchanging forms, which exists in opposition to this world of mere appearance.

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[94] In *WP*, §494 Nietzsche writes: "It is improbable that our 'knowledge' should extend further than is strictly necessary for the preservation of life. Morphology shows us how the senses and the nerves, as well as the brain, develop in proportion to the difficulty of finding nourishment."

According to his analysis, this True World is a fiction created by a decadent form of human life through which it strives to overcome its own weakness, as well as those who it sees as its oppressor. At bottom, it belongs to the perspective of slave morality and the spirit of ressentiment and the ascetic ideal which drives it. Through the course of his various analyses he shows how this ideal of *the* truth, as it undergoes a number of transformations, gains in strength and destructive power until it finally reaches the point at which it questions its own right to existence. Part and parcel of the unmasking this degenerate fiction is the reaffirmation of the world of becoming. The destruction of the True World mythology also means the destruction of any dualistic understanding of reality as the opposition of the True (being) and apparent (becoming). Now there is only the world of becoming, our knowledge of which must be fundamentally perspectival and idiosyncratic to the type of creatures we are.

The doctrine of perspectivism has met with a number of objections. One is that it is self-contradictory; another is that it leads to a skeptical relativism. In the following section I will discuss these charges with respect to Nietzsche's understanding of the ascetic ideal. Through this examination I hope to shed more light on his rejection of metaphysics, as well as lay the groundwork for a possible answer to the questions that remained at the finish of Chapter 1.

Perspectivism, Relativism, and the Ascetic Ideal

One of the controversies surrounding perspectivism concerns the issue of self-referential inconsistency. As in the liar's paradox, the claim that all knowledge is a matter of interpretation seems to refute itself. In his book *Nietzsche as Philosopher,* Arthur Danto

puts it this way: "Does Perspectivism entail that Perspectivism itself is but a perspective, so that the truth of this doctrine entails that it is false?"[95] From the perspective of metaphysical truth, the answer must be yes. But given that this is the perspective which Nietzsche is working to overcome, it is perhaps a misplaced criticism. As we have seen, the critique of the value of truth opens the presupposed sovereignty of logic to question. From this new perspective, which challenges the foundational belief in the truth of being (by exposing its status as a belief – see *BGE*, §11), the principle of non-contradiction requires justification just as much as a statement which violates it. In citing the principle of non-contradiction as an objection one is arguing that the form of a statement should take precedence over content. But why should the utilisation of paradox or contradiction as a rhetorical device be prohibited if it enables us to say something about the way the world is for us? More to the point, perhaps there are some things which can only be expressed through the use of these devices. Whatever the case may be, it remains that, according to Nietzsche's analysis, the objection that a statement is self-contradictory is really a moral indictment reflecting a certain understanding of the way the world *should* be, not necessarily the way it is.[96] Consequently, it seems that one should first address his critique of the grounding perspective of the True World before invoking as criticism principles which are based on the very thing he calls into question.

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[95] Arthur Danto, Nietzsche as Philosopher, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 80.

[96] Wittgenstein also discusses this compulsion to "sublime" our understanding of logic (*PI*, §§ 38, 89, 94). He also views logic as a set of conventions born out of human practical activity. However, for reasons which are beyond the scope of this essay to elaborate, the way we use language leads us to posit them as reflecting an ideal order which we mistakenly believe underlies and guides our practice.

If, as it is asserted, our understanding of the world is based not on fact, but on the necessary belief in its existence, then a criteria other than truth must serve as the arbiter between competing judgements. Thus the observation that the "falseness of a judgement is not necessarily the objection to a judgement..."[97] Nietzsche readily admits that "in this respect our new language may sound strangest," but it is fundamental to his main concern, the challenging of the moral paradigm that he thinks has plagued western civilization for over two thousand years. In this respect, what is of prime importance concerning the evaluation of a perspective is not merely its logical rigour, but its value for life, i.e., "to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating."[98] From this point of view, denying perspectivism on the grounds that it is self-refuting would be to fall victim once more to the will of the ascetic ideal (under the guise of the demand for logical cleanliness) which wants to be the sole arbiter of what forms of discourse[99] are permitted in the world.[100]

Still, one might object that if there is no ultimate foundation for judgement, then any evaluation of what constitutes life promotion or species cultivation will itself be the reflection of one among a number of possible perspectives. At this point, the objection concerning relativism comes to the fore. If all knowledge is a matter of perspective, then does this not make Nietzsche's own interpretation (in this particular case, of what might constitute "species promotion") just one among any number of other possible interpretations that we may accept or reject depending on what particular perspective we

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[97] This and the following two quotes are from *BGE*, §4.

[98] Which is not to say that these two are not related. As we shall see, one of the gauges of the health of an organism is the extent to which it assigns itself impossible tasks.

[99] And, by extension, what forms of human life.

happen to manifest? In some respects, it seems as though the answer must be yes. However, in others, it would seem to be no. I will try to explain.

The denial of "truth" in favour of an interpretive account of knowledge is sometimes critically equated with the acceptance of a relativistic position which holds that each viewpoint is equally valid. Is Nietzsche susceptible to this criticism? It is certainly not a position for which he has any sympathy, given that he devotes much of his writing to the critical discussion of the kind of value (decadent or affirmative of life, or a combination of the two) an interpretation manifests, and who often criticises other thinkers for their bad philology and lack of historical sense. Still, the question remains: does the absence of even the possibility of any objective standard to which one might appeal reduce these assertions to "mere opinion," by which I mean the expression of a form of life, of a particular instantiation of the will to power, which, simply in virtue of the fact that it is, has as much "right" (because in fact there are no absolute rights in themselves) to existence as any other? From a Nietzschean perspective, a key to resolving this matter is to realize that such a question is itself a reflection of the nihilistic perspective he is trying to expose. Arguing that the absence of any ground for absolute truth means that "all is permitted" is to continue to embody an ascetic metaphysical dualism which should be overcome.

Let us look once more at what a truth is for Niezsche. He maintains that truths are necessary illusions, i.e., errors without which we cannot live. They are illusions or errors because, as the product of interpretation, they involve the necessary perceptual/conceptual "artistic simplification" of the world reflective of the needs that have informed the particular form of life we have become. The acceptance of beliefs as true is based on the

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[100] See *GM* III, §23 for his analysis of the totalitarian aspirations of the ascetic ideal.

existence of presuppositions which, precisely because they are unquestioned, serve as the ground for all that we take for true. To repeat, they are the foundation of the activity of a particular form of life. For at bottom, this unconscious acceptance is the affirmative activity of the will to power of an organism, which, in its expression, affirms its own perspective. With the successful discharge of power there is overcoming and appropriation – so long as it is successful, it imposes itself on the organism and thus determines the perspective from which it acts. When the opposite situation obtains, i.e., when a belief is questioned, it is because the will to power informative of that perspective no longer has the strength to affirm and justify itself, i.e., impose itself on the world.

Thus, it is not the case that first there is human life which, through its intellectual powers, discovers independently existent truths about the world. Rather, according to this analysis, every form of life is a truth.[101] But again, truths are nothing more than errors without which we cannot live. This paradoxical statement makes sense if we realise that, for Nietzsche, calling something an error does not necessarily imply that it is false.[102] If such were the case, it would imply that we could have knowledge of what *the* truth is. Of course, this is just what he denies - the possibility of such knowledge would depend on our already knowing what being is which, as we have seen, he regards as a logical impossibility.[103] Thus, as Strong points out, in calling our truths errors, Nietzsche is trying to escape from the metaphysical habit of judging in terms of opposites, that is, in terms of

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[101] See Strong, p. 51. Of course, it does not follow that this should be taken as an endorsement of that life, for, according to Nietzsche, not all truths are created equal.

[102] Strong, p. 51.

[103] See *WP* §486 for a summary of this view.

what something is not.[104] As he would see it, the charge of relativism contains just such a mistake: "If there is no way to judge what is true in itself, then all must be judged equally valid (or invalid)," is another way of saying that all judgement must be suspended. This inability for a "Yes or No" to various aspects of human life is nothing less (or more, depending on how one looks at it) than an expression of the nihilistic devaluation of all values that results when those who realise the untenability of the True World continue to live on in the shadow of the dead God.

As I have outlined it, Nietzsche would defend against the charges of self-refutation and relativism by rejecting the metaphysical premises upon which those charges are based. In fact, from his point of view exposing the unintelligibility of the error of the True World reveals how fundamental interpretation and judgement are to life. Of course, this must also apply to Nietzsche's own thinking – he must also see that his conception of the will to power is a matter of interpretation. This is a conclusion he not only acknowledges but welcomes. As he writes in *BGE* §22: "Supposing that this also is only interpretation – and you will be eager enough to make this objection? – well, so much the better." This is a particularly interesting, if not perplexing, passage. Is it an admission he is "forced" into for the sake of consistency? Or is he simply saying that, in effect, he could be wrong? That this is just his stab at solving the riddle of existence? While there may be some truth to these views, I believe he is saying more.

To begin with, Nietzsche is acknowledging that, like all truths, the will to power is not an eternal fact – as he says, there are no facts, only interpretations (*WP* §481). But if

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[104] Strong, p. 51.

this is the case, then perhaps Danto is right after all when he argues that the statement cancels itself out. To repeat, this *would* be the case if those concepts acquired their meaning and validity from their ability to refer to a substantive True World. But this is just what the will to truth finally reveals as unintelligible illusion. The challenge, then, is to figure out how we might assert truths about the world – i.e., affirm a particular perspective (an essential activity of human life) – without "falsely" appealing to some external standard for its justification. Put another way, the task is to reconcile the need for knowledge with the observation that, as was noted in the earlier comparison of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, explanation must stop somewhere (more specifically, somewhere short of *the* truth). Nietzsche makes much the same point when he argues that, since the intellect is incapable of knowing itself absolutely, an exhaustive critique of itself is impossible. In this sense, we are necessarily "unknown to ourselves" (*GM*, "Preface," §1). However, at the risk of sounding repetitious, it does not necessarily follow that self-knowledge is impossible. What is essential is that we reconsider what kind of knowledge it might be.

Our problem began when, unable to cope with our finite status (i.e., as creatures wholly situated in the world of becoming), we attempted to overcome this condition of our existence by positing a True World in which we might find and thus regulate ourselves. What we really accomplished was our alienation, not only from the world, but from ourselves as well. This led to the disease of nihilistic despair Nietzsche thought had begun to envelop European culture. Indeed, for him, humanity really is beset by an illness. As he sees it, one of the gauges of the health (or, lack thereof) of a culture is the degree to which it sets itself impossible tasks. In this regard, modern humanity is gravely ill. Again, because the truths we affirm (e.g., now refuted error of the True World) are a manifestation of the

unquestioned presuppositions which inform the perspectives out of which we act, this sickness has its origins in the form of life humanity has become. Thus, as evidenced by those who continue to live on in contradiction in the shadow of the dead God, merely recognising the source of the illness is not enough. What is required is a change in the form of life that humans currently incarnate.

This brings us back to Nietzsche's acknowledgement of the interpretive nature of the will to power. His endorsement of the "objection" that his analysis of existence in terms of the will to power is also an interpretation reflects the fact that, according to that analysis, the will to power *is* interpretation. Of course, this cannot be "proven" by any of the now discredited (as he sees it) means formerly at the disposal of philosophy. Indeed, the desire to do so betrays the increasingly paralytic decadent anxiety we feel when confronted with uncertainty and the possibility of error. This reaction is part of the illness that must be overcome. For the sake of our health we must embrace the perspectival nature of our knowledge in an affirmative manner. In other words, to save truth we must embrace the knowledge that all is "error." Not only must we embrace this perspective – as just suggested, we must somehow make it the dominant instinct (i.e., unquestioned presupposition) that grounds our life. I will return to this matter in the conclusion to this essay. But first, I need to address the questions left at the end of Chapter 1.

Perspectivism and the Question of Nietzsche's Consistency

Two closely related questions were left unanswered at the finish of Chapter 1. The more general one was this: given the rejection of metaphysical realism, on what grounds might we still take the things we say about the world as true? More specifically, it was

asked how Nietzsche could consistently argue that all conceptual language was illusory, given that he had to use that very language to make his critique? In other words, how could he use the very conceptual language he criticises as illusion to tell us the truth about that illusion? Did he not make an exception of himself in this regard, i.e., remove his own account from the critique? The answers I propose follow from the account of Nietzsche's perspectivism outlined above.

Concerning the more general question, we have seen that the re-interpretation of the meaning of the word truth is an essential component of Nietzsche's critique. Truth does not reside in a sphere separate from the world of becoming, to be uncovered through the correct application of reason. Instead, who we are is a truth – it is our form of life, grounded on the unquestioned presuppositions that underlie the perspectives out of which we create our world, that constitutes the foundation for what we take as true. This said, it does not follow that, after all, man really is the measure of all things, for it is not we who make values and pass judgement on life. As indicated earlier, such a view of knowledge is an unintelligible error – to do so, we would have to be able to occupy a position outside of life from which we could make such judgements. Rather, as Nietzsche states in *TI*, "Morality as Anti-Nature," §5, "life itself forces us to posit values; life itself values through us when we posit values." It should be noted that, on this view, the necessity of truth does remain. However, as stated above, it is the necessity of the errors we create to sustain us in life.

This transformed understanding of truth offers a possible solution to the second question. Perhaps the first thing to note here is that it is from within the unfolding perspective of rational/conceptual thought, more specifically the will to truth, that Nietzsche is able to make the claims that he does. Since he is a part of that tradition, and it

an inherent part of his form of life,[105] he cannot help but use its language, even if it is in the service of a radical critique.[106] As we have seen, the genealogy of the will to truth reveals a form of interpretive activity that, in the end, is driven to expose its self-deception and reject its contradictory foundation. In this sense, rational interpretive activity, as a form of life, points beyond itself, which is to say, beyond the necessary illusions it constructed to ground its activity. However, it does not follow that everything that has been created on this illusory foundation could or should be discarded. The development of a new understanding of the origins of our conceptual language does not necessarily invalidate all the concepts which have come to make it up.

To repeat, this would obtain if the meaning and validity of those concepts derived from the fact that they referred to a "substantive" True World. However, given the thoroughly practical nature of reason, this is not the case. As Nietzsche writes in *GM* II, §12,

> The cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a becoming master, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous meaning and purpose are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.

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[105] As noted above, he saw that he also took his motivational fire from a belief in truth.

[106] The language of a critique, to be intelligible, must be commensurable with that of the subject in question. This places restrictions on the attempt to say something radically new. Nietzsche touches on this when he writes of the awkwardness of language which "will continue to talk of opposites where there are only degrees and many subtleties of gradation." (*BGE*, §24)

Of course, Nietzsche's thinking is no exception. His critique is also a part of the historical process in which life posits values. Given that we are this process, no matter how strongly we may feel the need for a radical transformation, we cannot completely transform our form of life in one stroke, i.e., create a whole new language to replace the one in which we now live.[107] Nor is it necessary to do so. Once we understand that the body of truths that constitutes knowledge consists of a web of necessary errors, it becomes possible – for those who would be capable – to perform a kind of epistemological surgery on the part of those errors infected with the True World virus. This would be the first step to overcoming the ascetic ideal which now dominates the cultural landscape (I will return to this matter in the concluding remarks).

Thus, there are many concepts which, once they have been "revalued," can be profitably retained. The belief in the subject (the "soul superstition"), which Nietzsche never tires of criticising, is a good example. He writes: "Between ourselves, it is not at all necessary to got rid of the soul...and thus...renounce one of the most ancient and venerable hypotheses...But the way is open for new versions and refinements of the soul-hypothesis; and such conceptions as "mortal soul," and "soul as subjective multiplicity," and "soul as social structure of the drives and affects," want henceforth to have citizens rights in science"(*BGE*, §12). This also applies to science itself, given that it, too, is infected with the doer/doing distinction. As in the case of the concept of human subjectivity, it may also be put to good use (i.e , in the service of life) once a revaluation of all values overcomes the

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[107] In effect, that would be to fall into the one of the errors that Nietzsche argues Socrates made – thinking that one could somehow stand outside of life in this world to create it anew.

ascetic will to truth which dominates it.[108] Finally, there is the concept of truth itself, which, as we have seen, becomes "irrefutable error."

I have argued that Nietzsche can consistently claim that all knowledge is based on illusion, as *he* uses the terms. It is not unreasonable to suggest that he chose this mode of expression, at least in part, for its performative effect. In other words, it was designed to shock what he thought was a thoroughly corrupted culture out of the comfort of its decadent decline. In retrospect, one might describe it as an early salvo launched in his war against the hollow idols of reason that he thought must be destroyed if a revaluation of all values, leading to the overcoming of nihilism, was to come. I will conclude this essay with a consideration of what the concept of revaluation, at least in its preliminary stages, might mean, as well as what Nietzsche hoped it might bring about.

Concluding Remarks: A Philosophy of the Future?

Nietzsche says little about what form a revaluation might take.[109] Perhaps the notion of eternal return was to be the doctrine which would shed light on this matter. Whatever the

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[108] Incidentally, this shows that, while Nietzsche rejects the appeal to Truth as the criterion for acceptable judgement, he is neither anti-truth nor "against" knowledge or rigorous, methodological investigation. Indeed, there are many comments, which demonstrate that he saw great merit in science. For example, in §3 of *Human, All-Too-Human* he states: "It is the mark of a higher culture to value the little unpretentious truths which have been discovered by means of rigorous method more highly than the errors handed down by metaphysical and artistic ages and men, which blind us and make us happy"(my italics). Note that he is not asserting that science is to be valued because it is capable of some day giving us the truth. In fact, the previous aphorism ends with the explicit claim that "everything has become," and that "there are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths" (Friedrich Nietzsche, Human, All-Too-Human: A Book for Free Spirits, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], p. 58. For subsequent references I will use the abbreviation *HH*, followed by the volume and section numbers).

case, it is plain that he saw the exposure of the many idols of our reason as a necessary preliminary stage. If the illness we embody could not be overcome through traditional rational argumentation, then at least through the sheer destructive force of his critique a way might be cleared for the appearance of those new philosophers who might overcome the ascetic ideal and create a new, affirmative form of life. This is not to say that Nietzsche's writing is merely destructive – his inquiry into the (ascetic) foundations of our beliefs inserts new questions into the philosophical discourse that force us to examine ourselves anew. In this respect, he has much in common with Socrates, against whom much of his criticism was directed. Like Socrates, he sees that his culture is gravely ill and in need of a fundamental transformation. However, unlike Socrates, he does not offer any clearly articulated, definitive solution which would save his world. Neither should he, given his claims concerning: (a) the lack of any absolute starting point for, or necessary end to, our truth-creating activity, and (b) the need for a fundamental change in what I have called (borrowing from Wittgenstein) our form of life.[110]

At the same time, if it is the case that all truth is error, it is also true that not all errors are created equally. For Nietzsche, some errors – those manifesting values that affirm life – are more valuable than others. Given our current situation, one of the challenges facing

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[109] He does argue for a "proliferation of perspectives," through which the virtually absolute dominance the ascetic ideal now exercises over how we understand and live might be challenged. As he says in *GM* III, §12, "the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity,' be."

[110] To repeat an earlier observation, if the very form of life of an individual or a culture is the problem, then mere instruction on how to overcome the "illness" will be ineffective, since those to whom it is offered will necessarily interpret it in terms of the "diseased" perspective they are, thus perpetuating the problem and defeating the purpose of the instruction. See Strong, pp. 53-56, 71-72, for discussions of this matter.

humanity is how it might self-consciously create a new horizon that will affirmatively re-anchor it to the earth. If humanity is to overcome its descent into nihilism, its artistic powers must be directed to this task of self-justification.[111] Nietzsche thinks that the preliminary stages of this process will inevitably involve great ideological conflicts of and for minds (which is not to say that they will be without violence). As the illusions underlying the traditions on which various slave moralities rest become increasingly untenable and weak, their ability to unify will come to increasingly depend on the power of coercion. Given that slave morality defines itself in terms of what it is against, where these cultures clash there will be "wars such as there have never yet been on earth."[112] While this is terrible enough, there is no guarantee that anything resembling a redemptive form of life might emerge from the ashes. This would depend on (a) the emergence of a new breed of philosopher/artists who would create the transforming affirmative values to ground their community, and (b) the community's successful internalization of those values.

This said, what might be involved in a revaluation, at least in its earliest stages?[113] It is argued that life is nothing but the moment to moment necessary unfolding of the will to power. The truths we create and all that stands upon them is really nothing more nor less than life positing values through us. This is one of the things Nietzsche tries to impress upon his readers – that humans are never so removed from life, from the world of becoming, that they could act independently of it (as, for example, in the pursuit of

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[111] As Nietzsche says, it is only as an aesthetic object that the world can be justified. For a description of this task see *BGE*, §230.

[112] Friedrich Nietzsche, Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 127.

[113] As I understand it, a full discussion would entail a detailed examination of the doctrine of eternal return, which is beyond the scope of the present study.

knowledge of things in themselves). In this sense, we cannot help but become who we are The problem is, who we have become now requires fundamental change. According to Nietzsche, one of the primary challenges we face in this regard concerns how we might incorporate this "new knowledge" that everything (including this knowledge) is necessity. In other words, it is a question of how humanity might "transform itself from a moral to a knowing mankind"[114] and thus move beyond the ascetic valuations of good and evil.

As Nietzsche sees it, this is no easy task. Nor is it one that many will be capable of performing (certainly not in the early stages), for it will require that individuals come face to face with the truth of their morality. To help explain, I need to briefly discuss his critique of free will. He argues that the current notion of free will is a decadent concept which has its roots in the ascetic bad or guilty conscience which sought in itself the cause (i.e., the explanation and justification) of its suffering. This view not only revealed the cause of suffering, but also offered a means by which it might be overcome. With the recognition that there is nothing outside the whole of becoming, and that no one or thing is responsible for the fact of suffering, then the possibility arises that we might overcome this destructive mode of understanding life.[115] For the few who are initially capable of bearing it, the knowledge of the necessity of suffering and all else that has made them who they are – itself a form of suffering, in that it constitutes the loss of the metaphysical comfort of the True World – will constitute a kind of liberation and first step toward the reclamation of

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[114] One should be careful here not to confuse the expression "knowing mankind" with science.

[115] Which is not to say that we therefore overcome suffering itself – recall that for Nietzsche, cruelty is an intrinsic component of the creative process that is essential to human life.

themselves and the earth.[116] In accepting the necessity of their less than exalted origins (including their former guilt), Nietzsche thinks that these individuals will be able to not only redeem their past, but affirm a future (a goal) as part of the overcoming of the human, all-too-human.

Of course, the possibility also exists that, with no one else to blame for one's suffering, one might then turn to the outright condemnation of life itself. Here we would have the ascetic ideal in its unvarnished form. However, understanding that there is no standpoint outside of existence from which it could be judged at all could be the first step in overcoming this "suffering from suffering." For those incapable of affirming this understanding (even if they do in fact recognise it), they might still play a positive role if they have the strength to follow their conviction and "go under." This is an admittedly harsh judgement, and one which I will make no attempt to defend, but it does reflect the scale of the challenge and stakes of the game Nietzsche sees being played out. For him, what is needed, at least in the preliminary stage, is the internalisation of a principle of selection which will slowly expunge[117] those decadent aspects of human history from current life. Ironically, embracing the necessity of the past – which includes the recognition that all is in a state of flux (*HH* I,§107) – is one of the keys to overcoming it.

If Nietzsche wrote little on what form a revaluation would take, he wrote even less on what he thought it might produce. Perhaps he thought that, given the fact that the problems he diagnosed were with human beings themselves, a mere teaching or description of the

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[116] In *HH* 1, §107, they are likened to "birth pangs."

[117] Nietzsche often speaks in terms of thousands of years, which makes sense considering the length of time it has taken slave morality to attain its current position of dominance.

goal would be ineffective, if not harmful. This does not have to stop us from speculating on what he might have envisioned. I will conclude this essay with a brief consideration of this matter. In this regard, I will focus on what I see are two of the main, (closely) related themes in Nietzsche's thought. The first is the need to fully embrace the world of becoming in all of its necessity that we have just discussed; the second concerns the need for the creation of a new ideal through which humanity might transform itself in an affirmative manner.

As we have just seen, Nietzsche thinks that the "new knowledge" that "all is necessity" is of central importance to overcoming the bad or guilty conscience which he sees as having infected man for the last 2500 years. If all is necessary, then human beings should have nothing to feel guilty about. Turning this knowledge into our new instinct – i.e., making it one of the unquestioned presuppositions of the dominant perspective which grounds our activity – must be one of our tasks. This said, overcoming guilt does not lead by itself to a new ideal (the last men are proof of that). In what way might the embrace of the necessity of becoming direct us to that goal, which Nietzsche describes as the development of "conscious innocence"(ibid.). Perhaps it is this. In fully embracing the necessity of becoming, we are able not only to overcome ascetic guilt, but affirm the fact that, as a piece of this whole, it is precisely in virtue of the necessities which inform who we are that we are at all. This is not to say that we should fatalistically resign ourselves to the fact that all is determined – necessity in this case does not equal mechanistic

determination.[118] Rather, it is more like play, which is a combination of both necessity and chance.

In playing a game, there are rules which set out the possibilities for action. However, precisely because they are what allows for the action they are not felt as constraints at all.[119] This is because we are those rules. As Wittgenstein points out, the rules of a game do not exist in some ideal world, but develop out of the continued practices of players over time. The authority invested in them to direct players' activity (i.e., their necessity) derives solely from that historical practice itself. Furthermore, players enter into a game with the knowledge that the outcome is (at least potentially) undetermined. Indeed, this element of chance is essential to the spirit of the game. Without it, the potential for the exercise of one's power in genuine competition is lost. One enters into play realising that, while it constitutes the opportunity to exercise their will, the outcome is necessarily undetermined. Still, it is this indetermination that is crucial to the playing of the game itself. Players enter the game not only with the intention of winning (to do otherwise would be dishonest and ruinous to the game), but also with the understanding that the outcome is in question. It is in embracing these constraints and overcoming the anxiety that the reality of uncertainty and error presents that play is possible at all.[120] As Niezsche sees it, bringing this

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[118] To be able to say that all is determined, one would once again have to be able to occupy a position outside of existence from which to make that determination.

[119] Strong, p. 279. The comments on games are inspired by Strong's discussion of eternal return.

[120] How well a game is played often depends at least in part on the degree to which one embraces this indetermination. The inability to control anxiety in the face of potential misplay (i.e., error) often leads to ineffective judgement, if not paralytic indecision.

perspective to bear on our own lives is a crucial step on the path to the affirmation of existence.

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