

THE DEHUMANIZATION OF NATURE AND THE
NATURALIZATION OF THE HUMAN: A STUDY OF SPINOZA AND
NIETZSCHE

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I shall argue that Spinoza and Nietzsche alike were committed to a twofold task: that of *dehumanizing nature* and *naturalizing the human*. I will further argue that this is an *ethical* task insofar as their ultimate objective was to discover the real basis for human excellence. The versions of naturalism articulated, respectively, by these two philosophers, have been given considerable notice, especially in more recent commentaries on their work, but there is scarcely any mention of the ethical underpinnings of that naturalism. One of the central aims of this dissertation is to show that their commitment to a naturalistic rendering of all aspects of human life is itself ethically motivated. It arises out of a prior conviction that in and by means of its naturalization, humanity will rediscover itself, albeit in a new incarnation.

To complete this twofold task, both Spinoza and Nietzsche unmask *that type of* anthropocentrism that first, sets humanity at a remove from nature and, second, divests the latter of all value. Both question the veracity of a cluster of ideas—including freedom of the will, teleology, and the moral world order—which are largely responsible for the intractable delusion that human beings occupy a privileged position in nature. However, the task of naturalizing the human is not accomplished merely in exposing lies *as* lies but requires that, as Nietzsche claims, humanity itself be brought “to reason,” to the real significance of its naturalness. This shift from dehumanizing nature to naturalizing the human also marks a shift from their revaluation of values to their positing of a new, naturalized ethics. I will propose that it is an ethics of love—a love of the self that is simultaneously a love of the whole of which one is a part. As I intend to show, Spinoza’s *amor dei* and Nietzsche’s *amor fati* are different renderings of this same idea.

DEDICATION

For Avery and Max

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It is tempting to go in search of the core intuition from which a philosopher's body of thought emerges and, moreover, to find it in ambiguous turns of phrase, suggestive metaphors, and especially in what lies between the lines, what is *not* said. The temptation is even greater when one confronts a body of thought that seems to revolve interminably around a singular insight which itself remains, in some important respect, concealed. Spinoza and Nietzsche, in my view, did not deliberately avoid being explicit, or surreptitiously bury their most controversial insights in their texts, only truly understood by a select, like-minded few. I am convinced, however, that what is most prominent in their writing – namely, Spinoza's metaphysical system and the method of deductive, logical reasoning he employs, and Nietzsche's critical genealogy and aphoristic form of composition – to some extent conceals an underlying purpose. More specifically, I would suggest that these most obtrusive aspects of their work are actually working in the service of a driving *philosophical task* that is itself not made entirely explicit. This task, in my view, is of an essentially *ethical* nature; it obliges the philosopher and is performed for the sake of humanity.

Why suppose that there is such a *task*? Further, why presume that even if there is a task, it is singular and as central to their philosophical work as I am proposing? There are two reasons. Firstly, their writing is as *rhetorical* as it is discursive. Above all, it makes an entreaty, calling upon their readers not only to entertain what they say, but to take it to heart. They write so as to transform the reader who engages in earnest with that writing. Secondly, to suppose that there is such a task makes sense of some curious incongruities that appear consistently

(though differently) in the work of each. In Spinoza's case, it reveals how the marked difference in the inflection, tone, and narrative style of the scholia is compatible with that of the propositions and proofs. In the scholium he discloses the idea which in fact prefigured the propositions; that is, the idea as it originally came about—as a response to critics, an injunction or plea to the misguided, a burst of rancorous outrage at the conduct of his adversaries, and so on—and still saturated with affective overtones. In Nietzsche's case, it shows how his systematic deconstruction of the concept of truth is nevertheless in accord with his own, occasionally bold, truth claims. Above all, with respect to both philosophers, it gives coherence to the seeming discrepancy in their thought between an absolute denial of the objectivity of value and their own propositions concerning what is good and bad, noble and base, beautiful and ugly.

The task, stated as succinctly as possible, is this: *to recover the nature in humanity*. It might just as accurately be characterized as the task of *redeeming* humanity, a term that Nietzsche uses provocatively in reference to his work. Both Spinoza and he possess, strangely, the same ultimate objective as religion—however, they treat it irreligiously, or even anti-religiously, investing it with the *opposite* meaning so that it now signifies restoring the nature in us. Why resuscitate this term at all? As we shall see, these two philosophers routinely appropriate concepts or terms long invested with religious significance and invert them. As a result, these terms retain the seductive potency they had acquired under religious tutelage while at the same time signifying that which is antithetical to religion. Thus, “redemption” suggests with an especial acuity, owing precisely to its religiosity, that humanity is in a state of servitude from which it needs restitution; it has gone astray and so requires a directive, a signpost, a path to proceed along. However, for Spinoza and Nietzsche, the act of redeeming

necessarily implies rescuing humanity *from religion itself*. They sought, above all, to replace the possibility for redemption back into earthly life; they wanted to reclaim the ethical sphere for this world. In this sense, as Yovel remarks, Spinoza and Nietzsche are truly “moral” philosophers—opposed, ultimately, to the “immorality” of religion.¹

What I am proposing, then, is that Spinoza and Nietzsche alike were guided in their philosophical writing by a task of recovery; its objective, as said, is to retrieve something lost or forsaken, namely the nature in humanity and, by extension, nature as such. It is also an ethical task insofar as what is *ultimately* sought in the recovery of this long obscured, over-inscribed nature is the *real* basis for human excellence. It is a twofold task, consisting of *dehumanizing nature* and *naturalizing the human*. Their respective versions of naturalism have been given considerable notice, especially in more recent commentaries on their work, but there is scarcely any mention of the ethical underpinnings of this naturalism. One of the central aims of this dissertation is to show how their commitment to a naturalistic rendering of all aspects of human life is itself ethically motivated. It arises out of a prior conviction that in and by means of its naturalization, humanity will get itself back, albeit in a new incarnation.

Before describing what specifically their naturalism consists of, let me briefly clarify one point mentioned above. I have named their philosophical task the “recovery” of the nature in humanity but, in truth, it is less concerned with *going back*, or retrieving a state of affairs that prevailed in some by-gone past, than with laying the ground for the future of humanity,

¹Yirmiyahu Yovel, “Nietzsche and Spinoza: *amor fati* and *amor dei*,” in *Nietzsche as Affirmative Thinker*, ed. Y. Yovel, Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986, p. 187.

or with paving the way for its *ascent*, as Nietzsche says. Therefore, once it (or *if* it) recovers this nature, it will be an altogether new humanity. On the other hand, it might appear nonsensical to refer to a recovery of something that in fact was never really lost at all. Nevertheless, it does make sense to speak of “recovery” as meaning the act of retrieving our naturalness from obscurity or bringing it to the fore, without making any conjectures as to what it will actually turn out to be. In this context, then, “recovery,” along with the concomitant notion of “redemption,” does not signify returning to an original state of moral purity or innocence, especially where these connote an anti-natural condition; religion (and, incidentally, romanticism) has, under false pretenses, misconstrued the concepts of salvation or redemption in these very terms. For Spinoza and Nietzsche both, the ascendance or perfectibility of humanity is contingent upon reviving—or, perhaps, introducing—a good conscience concerning the nature in human beings.

These two philosophers are perhaps most explicitly kinsmen in their mutual espousal of a thoroughgoing naturalism. Interestingly, both philosophers wrote expressly of their unflinching resolve to observe human beings as other organisms in nature are observed, which is to say, *scientifically*. Spinoza insists that he “shall consider human actions and appetites just as if they were an investigation into lines, planes, or bodies.”² In a key passage, in which he explicitly gives a brief account of what he takes to be his “strange and insane task,” Nietzsche similarly speaks of seeing to it “that man henceforth stands before man as even today, hardened in the discipline of science, he stands before the *rest* of nature.”³ The science each refers to is, needless to say, quite different. However, this divergence is less

² *Ethics*, III, Preface

³ BGE 230

significant than one might suppose. What is important, for both, is that the philosopher view humanity as an entirely *natural* species and, “with intrepid Oedipus eyes and sealed Oedipus ears, deaf to the old metaphysical bird catchers,” refuse to be seduced by the vain illusion that it is something other than natural.⁴ Neither endorses a strict scientism, which aims to explain the nature of all phenomena solely by means of the application of scientific principles and methods. They employ science merely and only to the extent that it is uniquely proficient for revealing the fictitiousness of some of our most cherished notions concerning human life.

It is true that Spinoza appears to possess a greater confidence in the discoveries and methodologies of science, assuming that the first expresses unequivocal truths about nature and that the second presents us with a sure procedure for arriving at those truths. Yet, even he treats science as a handmaiden to philosophy, and not the reverse. Nietzsche is often interpreted as having an exaggerated estimation of the value of science, during his so-called positivist period, which he later abandoned. However, it is evident that he neither unskeptically embraced science nor it gave it up altogether. He commends the procedures of science, and criticizes its objectives, praises it for its “hardness” and “coldness,” and finally admonishes it for its asceticism—and he does so throughout his writings. What he, like Spinoza, consistently applauds is its intractable resolve to view all phenomena, excepting none, naturalistically. As I shall discuss, what science affords (and why it is of special value to these philosophers) is quite literally a *disposition*; that is, it facilitates a step back to achieve clear-sightedness—in particular with respect to resilient and pervasive anthropocentrism.

⁴ BGE 230

Their likeness in respect of their commitment to naturalism is also especially notable because theirs, unlike that which is typical of both their contemporaries and our own, manages to avoid reductionism. The naturalism of today, as Donagan points out, tends to be materialist;⁵ theirs is decidedly not. More specifically, they never attempt to account for cognitive processes using the concepts of science or otherwise reduce thought to matter. They develop, as I shall discuss, novel and cogent hypotheses concerning the emergence of consciousness out of bodily states. Also, neither treats the universe as analogous to a machine, comprised of functional parts that interact in a predictable pattern. In general, Spinoza and Nietzsche have no conception of matter as solely constituting reality; in fact, they either make no reference to or deny the very existence of “matter” understood as something homogenous, having mass, and (by some accounts) atomic in nature.⁶

Instead, they both remarkably comprehend the universe in terms of energy or force. Each depicts reality as comprised of “particles as centers of energy,” as Hampshire puts it, and the relatively stable, self-sustaining configurations these “particles” form.⁷ Moreover, each assigns a central place in their accounts of nature to a basic impulse or drive, called *conatus* by Spinoza and *will to power* by Nietzsche. I will mention here only two points concerning their respective accounts of this basic drive that are of special relevance to their versions of naturalism. Firstly, they insist that it is common to every organism and is that which makes a species or an individual what it is; an ant, the moon, a birch tree, and a human being is such because of its *conatus* or will to power. They further specify that it defines the individual *as such*, understood as, in Hampshire’s words, “a psycho-physiological organism with a quantity

⁵ Donagan, *Spinoza*, Chicago: Chicago University, 1988, p. xi

⁶ Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1951, pp. 79-80.

⁷ Hampshire, *Spinoza*, p. 78.

of undifferentiated energy.”⁸ What this means, as I shall endeavor to show in the forthcoming discussion, is that *conatus* and will to power figure in these naturalistic accounts as a principle of individuation; but, despite the apparent implication that these drives work *upon* or operate *in* the thing, they are in fact one and the same as the organism itself.

Ultimately, both philosophers construe it as the drive *to become what one is*, a quantum of energy or force, or a *power*, capable at once of increase and of sustaining a coherent unity.

In any event, in their *consideration* of this central drive, both philosophers begin with, and repeatedly refer to, the body. Though neither, as Deleuze emphasizes, assigns real priority to either the mind or body, both take the body *as a model* for the organism and then nature, in their entirety.⁹ The originality of their naturalism, I believe, is indebted to the fact that both ground their propositions concerning nature in observations about the body. Adopting the body as their model once again prevents their naturalistic accounts from becoming reductionist. They recognize that the body and, analogously, nature as such, remain to some degree elusive, opaque, and irreducible; they remain fundamentally resistant to our persistent efforts to make it intelligible. Accordingly, the conception of nature to which each appeal is itself incomplete and both concede the inevitability of its being such.

One last respect in which their versions of naturalism are unparalleled by those expounded today is that they remain inseparable from questions concerning the good life. Today’s naturalism is deficient for the reason that it is, as Donagan puts it, “culturally barren.” He explains that “to questions about why human life matters and how it should be lived its

⁸ Stuart Hampshire, “Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. 46 (1960), p. 205.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. R. Hurley, San Francisco: City Light, 1988, 18.

answers are either evasive or contemptible.”¹⁰ As mentioned previously, the view I shall advance in this dissertation is that their naturalism is inextricably connected to an ethical task that they, as philosophers, are called upon to perform. The final objective of this task is to re-conceive human excellence, and it requires that each articulate a *new naturalized ethics*. It is imperative, for them, to construct a model of human perfection or greatness, using the same materials out of which the naturalized human being is formed. Accordingly, their ethics *emerges out of* a revised (and naturalized) ontology. One might infer that they thereby commit the naturalistic fallacy. If their ethics were grounded in moral imperatives then this would, indeed, be the case. However, both refuse to do precisely this; they categorically reject morality and likewise discard its proclivity for issuing “oughts.” Strictly speaking, then, no attempt is made to derive an “ought” from an “is.” On the other hand, as Soll explains, this type of fallacious inference is attributed to a confusion of “what we in fact desire and what we should desire.” In one sense, Spinoza and Nietzsche describe a discrepancy between what *is* and what *should be* desired. In Soll’s words, they show that “with respect to a plurality of specific and competing desires, what one wants can easily be something other than what one should want.” Nevertheless, with respect to the single basic drive, *conatus* and will to power, that each identifies with desiring *as such*, it is impossible to “want something other than what we should want.” But there is no real discrepancy, as these multiple desires are simply “varied and superficial expressions” of the one fundamental drive.¹¹

¹⁰ *Spinoza*, xi

¹¹ Ivan Soll, “Nietzsche on Cruelty, Asceticism, and the Failure of Hedonism,” in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals*, ed. R. Schacht, Berkeley: University of California, 1994, pp. 170-171. Soll is here referring to Nietzsche and J.S. Mill, but his point applies equally well to Spinoza.

It must also be emphasized that neither adopts a top-down approach, applying a pre-conceived notion of nature to moral life.¹² Their naturalism evolves out of an ethical task and, in turn, informs the outcome of that task. Both avoid presupposing a set of terms describing nature and making substantive assertions regarding the character of the universe. Instead, they begin with what Williams terms a “method of suspicion,” the aim of which is to achieve a pared down and more realistic moral psychology.¹³ First and foremost, it calls into question the veracity of a cluster of ideas all of which underscore and support a morality they abhor. Interestingly, one of the few references Nietzsche makes to Spinoza mentions their similarity in this respect. He writes that “this most unusual and loneliest thinker is closest to me precisely in these matters: he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world order, the unegoistic, and evil.”¹⁴ The most central of these is the first he names, the freedom of the will, and it receives a sustained attack by both philosophers. This erroneous notion is largely responsible for a long-standing and intractable delusion, namely, that human beings occupy a privileged position in nature. Both thinkers proceed to demonstrate that in conjunction with this single error a multitude of others come into existence; most of these are (or are directly related to) moral concepts, including those Nietzsche lists in the above quote.

Furthermore, they reveal that ostensibly objective features of the natural world are actually fictions that, once again, reflect an idiosyncratically human type of egoism. As a consequence, the task of naturalizing the human *necessarily* entails dehumanizing nature. In

¹² Bernard Williams, “Nietzsche’s Minimalist Moral Psychology,” in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals*, ed. R. Schacht, Berkeley: University of California, 1994, p. 239.

¹³ Williams, “Nietzsche’s Minimalist Moral Psychology,” p. 241.

¹⁴ Postcard to Overbeck, July 30, 1881, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. W. Kaufmann, New York: Penguin, 1954, p. 92.

practice, this means deconstructing *that type of* anthropocentrism that first, sets humanity at a remove from nature and, second, divests the latter of all value. It is unavoidable that by dehumanizing nature, human vanity will be injured, for the extent to which we are under the spell of a narcissistic fantasy will be revealed. Indeed, it might appear to disparage humankind insofar as it categorically refuses us the special privileges and uncanny capacities with which we have outfitted ourselves. But both Spinoza and Nietzsche treat the task of dismantling anthropocentrism as a necessary corrective and, as such, a preliminary means for achieving *another* goal, that of naturalizing the human. Above all, they cherish humanity; the criticisms and charges they level at it are meant to condemn only those who, in their opinion, endanger the very *possibility* of a future humanity. Certainly, this naturalization is underway once dehumanization begins, but the task of naturalizing the human is not accomplished in this deconstructive act alone. It requires that humanity be given something back—or, really, that humanity itself be brought “to reason,” to the real significance of its naturalness. This shift from dehumanizing nature to naturalizing the human also marks a shift from their revaluation of values to their postulation of a new, naturalized ethics.

What kind of an ethics is it? Yovel calls it “an ethics of self-overcoming”;¹⁵ Deleuze refers to it as “an ethics of joy.”¹⁶ I suggest that the ethics espoused by these naturalistic philosophers *implies* a perpetual self-overcoming, but that this is not its objective. Likewise, they construe joy, especially a type of self-enjoyment, as the affective experience of “ascent,” or of attaining to human excellence. Nevertheless, it is still derivative, for *what* engenders this joy is still wanting. I will propose that it is an ethics of love—a love of the self that is

¹⁵ “Nietzsche and Spinoza: *amor fati* and *amor dei*,” pp. 189-190.

¹⁶ *Practical Philosophy*, p. 28.

simultaneously a love of the whole of which one is a part. As I intend to show, Spinoza's *amor dei* and Nietzsche's *amor fati* are different renderings of this same idea. In addition, this ethics is explicated by means of portraiture; both philosophers sketch a model of the person who, as Curley explains, "we would necessarily desire to be if only we could form a clear conception of that kind of person."¹⁷ As noted, both issue an exhortation to their readers, a "call to reflection on the right way of life."¹⁸ It is thus fitting that they should choose to *show* what this life is, or who the person is who lives it, in contrast to *telling* us what to do—that is, prescribing duties, or establishing the grounds for moral obligations, as is typical of moralists.¹⁹

The exemplary person we are introduced to is firstly, the same in essence as every other person: a being desiring of his or her own good. Secondly, however, this person is different in respect of his or her exhibiting a preference or *taste* for what is truly good for him or her. We are also shown, as Bennett observes, "a 'bad' way of life, and then a 'good' one," where these value-terms have been redefined.²⁰ Interestingly, Deleuze observes the absence of a moral opposition between these terms, as they are used by Spinoza and Nietzsche; however, this does not mean that *no* distinction remains. Rather, these thinkers describe an ethical difference that, in Deleuze's words, "appears in various equivalent forms: that between the reasonable man and the foolish, the wise and the ignorant, free man and slave, strong and weak."²¹ Once again, it is a difference that pertains not to *conatus* or will to power as such, but to that which determines them: the sad or joyous affects, and the relations these affects

¹⁷ E. Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, Princeton: Princeton University, 1988, p. 123.

¹⁸ Hampshire, "Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom," p. 207.

¹⁹ Yovel, "Nietzsche and Spinoza: *amor fati* and *amor dei*," p. 187-188.

²⁰ Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984, p. 290.

²¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, New York: Zone Books, 1990, p. 261.

emerge out of. “Good” and “bad” thus refer respectively to what enhances and inhibits the fullest expression of our powers. Moreover, it is a difference in which the two terms are not mutually exclusive but reside on a continuum, so that there are gradations of reasonableness, wisdom, freedom and strength. As such, excellence is only ever achieved more or less and by degrees. In sum, then, what Spinoza and Nietzsche show us is, first, precisely what this difference between “bad” and “good” forms of life consists in, and second, how to proceed, to the extent that one is capable, from the worse to the better. Noteworthy in both Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s ethics is the modesty of their expectations; neither, for instance, recommends expunging our souls of unruly passions or stridently observing the path of righteousness, dutifully resisting any lingering temptation. They implore us, rather, to truly become what we are—which includes what “we have it in us to become”²²—and to rejoice in it.

It is the aim of this dissertation to draw out or explicate the ethical project underlying Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s naturalism, and it will do so by reconstructing the movement described by each philosopher, from a state of ignorance, servitude, vice, or weakness to one of wisdom, freedom, virtue, and strength. It is a movement that can be traced along any of these several corresponding lines, and in each case consists of three stages or “moments.” It begins with an insidious affliction, leads to a diagnosis of that affliction, and concludes with a course of treatment; or, it originates in ignorance, shifts to a cognizance of that ignorance, and finally ends in the pursuit of knowledge; or, lastly, an initial state of bondage is overcome with the achievement of “negative” liberty which, in turn, is transformed, in increments, into a “positive” freedom. It is also a movement that, on the other hand,

²² This is Richard Schacht’s phrase, “How to Naturalize Cheerfully,” p. 190.

emerges out of an (paradoxically) alienating type of anthropomorphizing of nature and concludes with a “return” to nature. How is this last related to the previous three? As I hope shall become evident in the coming chapters, the humanization of nature, in at least *some* of its varieties, is symptomatic of ignorance, servility, or impotence, and typically coincides with the denaturalization of the human. As such, overcoming this way of being necessarily entails dehumanizing nature and recovering our own naturalness. Insofar as we remain impervious to the nature in us, and nature itself is submerged in obscurity, we are also consigned to living an impoverished life; conversely, acquiring an understanding of ourselves as natural beings, which requires coming to some at least provisional understanding of nature, has the effect of expanding our field of interests and of allowing us a more complete enjoyment of our capacities.

Interestingly, when Spinoza and Nietzsche themselves speak of this movement, they do so most explicitly in terms of the first sequence—of experiencing the effects of an incipient insanity or debilitating illness, investigating and, ultimately, diagnosing, the causes, and, lastly, indicating a way to a new health. Why is this set of terms most salient for their purposes? These terms have a personal and philosophical significance; this movement is, initially, a course that they have *personally* travailed—in the double sense of labouring and journeying. It begins with their own suffering of a disease; and it is this disease that is responsible for prompting first, their recognition of an infirmity and, second, the taking up of a sustained examination of the etiology and symptomology of the disease. They reside, as it were, at the apex of this movement, looking retrospectively at the conditions under which they contracted their illness, while also searching for traces of a possible remedy. This is the point at which a thoroughgoing critical assessment of what is generally accepted as true or right

occurs and, as such, it is the proper locale of the philosopher—indeed, it is precisely where each realizes his calling. It is not a sober inquisitiveness that prompts the philosopher’s self-realization but is rather a sign of having already reached maturity. Disease, as Nietzsche intimates, brought him “to reason.”

It begins, then, with an affliction that has, in modern times, achieved epidemic proportions. In brief, it is a psycho-physiological condition that compromises the health of the entire organism. All of the various organs, ligaments, bones and also the memories, sense impressions, ideas remain more or less intact, for this affliction, unlike a local infection or injury, does not corrupt isolated parts of the organism. It infiltrates the whole of the body, and the mind, in a manner analogous to poison, cancer, or an autoimmune disease; it spreads insidiously, secretly concealed in the blood, or in assuming the form of healthy cell, and corrupts the very integrity of the organism. In both Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s accounts, this malaise is expressed as a dissolution of the *relations* among the functional parts of the body, or the sequence of thoughts that constitute the mind; among the afflicted, they detect some in whom these relations have fossilized, thus exhibiting a characteristic rigidity or paralysis (and accompanying loss of sensibility), while in others they perceive a flagrancy, manifested in a tendency toward dissipation and irresoluteness. Though opposites, both conditions are indicative of a chronic anarchy in the “soul,” a greater or lesser loss of coherence and order among the constitutive parts or forces of the organism.

Spinoza and Nietzsche then outline how they each extricated themselves from this condition. I will mention only a couple of key points about this liberation now and reserve a discussion of the details for later. First, it invariably implies that a modicum of health or

sanity has been preserved—enough, more precisely, for initiating a *reversal* in the progress of the disease. The break from this disease is dramatic and terminal, like Alice’s leap through the looking glass. Once released from its tyranny, they occupy a new vantage point, from which they can survey their previous condition and scrutinize it. What takes place, then, in this second stage of the movement they describe, is a sudden cognizance of *what* they have been released from but had not perceived to be a state of captivity—namely, being caught up in an egoistic reconstruction of the world in their own image. They consequently recognize that things are not as they appear to be *and* that how they appear is itself significant. For instance, the emotion of pity, contrary to appearances, induces sadness; yet that it has the appearance of being good, serves the interests of those who preach a “morality of pity.” However, it is not the falsity of the beliefs they had held as such that is alarming to them, but the devastating *effect* of such beliefs. Both speak of realizing the full measure of their infirmity, and of the urgency of finding a remedy. Thus, this is the point in the movement at which a decisive turn occurs, and where the philosopher receives his or her calling. But, as such, it is only the beginning of a search for a corrective.

It is also an axis point at which a transition takes place, from servitude to freedom or, analogously, illness to health. But it is mainly characterized by the shift from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge. At this juncture, liberty is sought in knowledge, for the latter is construed as having redemptive power. This is as true for Nietzsche as it is for Spinoza; initially, or at this mid-point, they appeal to reason as a trusted guide, to steer them away from the dangers encroaching upon them and toward the prospect of health. Thus, in this stage, deliverance from infirmity rests solely upon the pursuit of knowledge. Spinoza and Nietzsche begin with a similar hypothesis: that a true conception of what human beings are

is necessary for conceiving what they could become. Both are also, as said, resolved to achieve a naturalized conception of human beings, rid of its former pretensions.

Accordingly, each strives to place human beings back into nature, for which knowledge of nature is required. In particular, they set out to discover a basic organizing principle in human life and ultimately discover that it is everywhere the same in nature. What is altogether omitted from their conceptions of nature is any normative significance, any signs indicating how human beings ought to be. How, then, do they devise a notion of human excellence or perfectibility? To an extent, they merely happen upon it: while endeavoring to know nature, they discover that excellence is itself cultivated in the process of acquiring such knowledge. Therefore, Spinoza and Nietzsche succeed in not only describing, but also in showing, how knowledge lifts us, at least momentarily, out of an insidious and self-injurious egoism.

What they find, ultimately, is that the circle has been reversed; its originally vicious involution has turned on itself and is now productive. By expanding the scope of their knowledge, they simultaneously enlarge their field of engagement, so that the world, which had receded so far into the obscuring fogs of fantasy, re-emerges in the foreground. To one who is in recovery, this world no longer inspires fear or dread but the opposite: it becomes an object of love. Thus, Spinoza and Nietzsche locate an antidote to their affliction, along with the egoism that is symptomatic of it, in the very activity of pursuing it. This is true despite the radical difference between their views on knowledge. As shall be discussed, Spinoza sought it by means of deductive reasoning, and in self-evident truths; for him, it consists in a progressively more complex but coherent system of ideas. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, knowledge emerges out of multiple perspectives, assuming a shape or

pattern that remains fluid and provisional. But, as Nietzsche himself observes, this difference between them is largely, and perhaps surprisingly, inconsequential. What is significant is their shared conviction that knowledge is, in Nietzsche's words, "the most powerful affect."

Similarly, they offer starkly contrasting accounts of nature but, of far greater importance is that both believe that it remains, of necessity, partially opaque, hidden, and ineluctably impersonal—and it must be so, given that it is the ultimate beloved. True love (as distinct from narcissistic or idolatrous love)²³ is, for both, divested of all traces of vanity; the lover does not look to his beloved to "acquire his faith in himself."²⁴ In Nietzsche's praise of Spinoza's manner of seeing the world, we find the most apt description of the one who truly loves it; he, Nietzsche says, "looks down on the world as on a god and loves this god."²⁵

This dissertation, then, maps the movement summarized above, but twice over. The explication of it in Spinoza's thought is discussed in the first three chapters, followed by three chapters on Nietzsche. I have chosen to present a comparison of these philosophers in a sequential order, rather than within each chapter singly, for two reasons. One is that I wish to preserve the logic inherent to each of these accounts, as well as the distinctiveness of their contrasting styles. I want to show how it is that each describes and performs this same movement, but differently. By tracing the progression of this movement in Spinoza's thought, and then again in Nietzsche's, we learn of two very different but complementary sets of signposts. The other reason is that I believe that this structure effectively serves an

²³ This distinction is discussed by Amelie Rorty in "Spinoza on the Pathos of Idolatrous Love and the Hilarity of True Love," in R. Solomon & K. Higgins (eds.), *The Philosophy of Erotic Love*. Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1991.

²⁴ Nietzsche uses this phrase in reference to the vain man (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "On Human Prudence," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. W. Kaufmann, p. 255).

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, 492, trans. R.J. Holligdale, Cambridge: Cambridge university, 1982.

auxiliary purpose: to highlight a second and less notorious lineage of philosophers, to which Spinoza and Nietzsche belong. That is, it reveals a strong and productive continuity in the thought of two philosophers who are separated by considerable differences in time and culture.²⁶ It is thus my intention to show that Spinoza and Nietzsche are philosophical kinsmen: distinctive in style, speaking in voices that are unmistakably their own, but responding to the same call to take up the obscure task of preparing the way for our future.

I should also note that I have focused almost exclusively on the primary works of Spinoza and Nietzsche in the body of this dissertation and reserved a discussion of secondary literature mainly for the footnotes. This methodological approach is loosely anchored in philosophical hermeneutics, and specifically that which was developed by Hans Gadamer.²⁷ Very briefly, this hermeneutics, as G. Madison explains, is concerned with “explicating the possible senses that a text has for us today,” as opposed to strictly “reconstituting a past, originating meaning.” The reading of a text is not treated as an act by which we can ascertain or replicate its original or intended meaning, but nor is it a form of free-ranging play. Rather, it is understood that we achieve a genuine understanding of a text by entering into a direct “dialogue” with it, in the course of which the reader brings questions that are prompted by her own specific, concrete situation, and that, in turn, reanimate the text, reinvigorating the “answers” that are contained in it. The key to “unlocking” the meaning of a text is the

²⁶ To phrase this point in another way: it allows me to reveal the ways in which Nietzsche may be informatively taken back, and Spinoza may be usefully brought forward. Scholarship on Nietzsche has mainly tended to stress his influence on post-modern thought; conversely, with the exception of a few recent commentaries, the contemporary relevance of Spinoza’s thought has been largely neglected.

²⁷ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.

reader's approach to and appropriation of it; and, therefore, every text has a "surplus of meanings" which are disclosed by means of innumerable readings by different readers. This form of hermeneutics maintains that a full understanding of a text "does not simply give rise to more writing...but has its fulfillment (end) outside of itself, in the realm of the existential-practical, in the transformation it produces in the reading subject."²⁸ I believe that this method is especially well-suited to this discussion of Nietzsche and Spinoza insofar, as stated at the start of this introduction, as it is principally concerned with what I propose is their self-appointed task of eliciting a transformative effect in the reader, and not merely in performing a careful conceptual analysis, though both also do precisely that. Deleuze similarly remarks that both philosophers "maintained that there is the deepest relationship between concept and affect," and cautions that a conceptual analysis of Nietzsche's work, though indispensable, "will always be ineffective if the reader grasps them in an atmosphere which is not that of Nietzsche."²⁹ The same, in my view, could be said of Spinoza.

For this dissertation I have interpreted the works authored by these two philosophers with a view to discovering what they, as philosophical kinsmen, though separated in time and place and utterly distinctive in style, have to say about where we are here and now and what our future might hold for us. I have also, in a more peripheral way, sought to understand what it could mean to do philosophy in an age of crisis. Accordingly, my engagement is, in the main, with the primary philosophical works of these two philosophers. I have endeavored to have a dialogue, to be a careful and inquisitive interlocutor, with these texts and to articulate the

²⁸ Madison, G. B. *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity: Figures and Themes*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1988, p. 331.

²⁹ *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. xii.

“answers” that I discovered therein to questions that are born out of this specific cultural and historical situation: questions about how to understand nature, what it means to be human (in relationship to the natural world), and what sort of ethics is appropriate given the foregoing. I also, subsequently, address scholars who are exemplary readers of each of these two philosophers and who provide indispensable guidance explicating these texts in light of the questions I was concerned with; but I consigned this conversation mainly to footnotes as, in my view, it occurs in parallel with the interpretation of the primary works that I undertake in the body of the dissertation. To merge the two dialogues, in my view, would detract from both; it is akin to speaking with a circle of interested audience members about a philosopher who has presented a lecture and is still in the room. For, to my mind, these philosophers are still in the room, still ready to greet a new interlocutor, to speak to what is of concern to us today.

CHAPTER 2: FEIGNING & FICTIONS

I. Anthropomorphisms

In the appendix to the first part of his *Ethics*, Spinoza pauses in his exposition to speak to a cluster of prejudices that he expects may dissuade even attentive readers from accepting his proofs. Such is how he appears to proceed: he rarely makes note of them in the course of his exposition—instead faithfully presenting the procession of ideas that will, of itself, unfold naturally—but nevertheless turns to unmask them in their furtiveness at the last, in a departing scholium or concluding appendix.³⁰ He does not then relinquish them until they are brought “before the bar of reason,” where their deceit and intractability are exposed. There is no need, however, to recount every such prejudice for, Spinoza informs us, all of those that concern him have their origin in a single one: “the widespread belief among men that all things in Nature are like themselves in acting with an end in view.”³¹ He goes on to elaborate that, “they hold it as certain that God himself directs everything to a fixed end; for they say that God has made everything for man’s sake and has made man so that he should worship God.”³²

The erroneous belief that he singles out is, in its most general form, anthropomorphic. Our erring in this case evidently stems not from conceptual blunders made while we sought valiantly to capture Nature in all its strangeness. The ‘root’ prejudice out of which all others

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze comments that “the *Ethics* is a book written twice simultaneously; once in the continuous stream of definitions, propositions, demonstrations, and corollaries, which develop the great speculative themes with all the rigors of the mind; another time in the broken chain of scholia, a discontinuous volcanic line, a second version underneath the first, expressing all the angers of the heart and setting forth the practical theses of denunciation and liberation” (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, p. 29).

³¹ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

³² *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

were born consists of the most impoverished and infantile error, seeing one's own image in everything else. Thus do we regard all of nature as following our suit and acting toward an end. In Spinoza's analysis the supposition that all natural things possess a *telos* follows from this primary error. If we ourselves lacked such purpose, so, presumably, would nature. Yet not only do we "find" that all natural things resemble us in being purposive but also that God created everything for our sake alone and, in turn, created us to worship him. Thus, the more specific form of the belief that Spinoza names our root prejudice concerning nature is unabashedly anthropocentric. "In seeking to show that nature does nothing in vain—that is, nothing that is not to man's advantage—they seem to have shown only this, that Nature and the gods are as crazy as mankind." What sort of madness is this? It is an insanity that accompanies even the most innocent *hubris*. Spinoza accuses us of no malicious art or perversity; nor does he find fault with our special preoccupation with our own advantage. What he marks out as our gravest error is not, that is, our ungenerous bias—our tendency to favour that which agrees with us—but rather our arrogant, albeit unconscious, making over of the entire world.

The nature of this error, a species of the fallacy of composition, is that it is reductive. It conflates a numerous and diverse plurality of things or kinds with one instance of that plurality; or, in other words, it reduces the whole to one of its parts.³³ It does so insofar as it is broadly anthropomorphic, recasting the processes or behaviours of natural kinds and individual phenomena into an ill-fitting human form. Reducing the universal laws of Nature to the particular laws of human nature further allows us to "conceive man in Nature as a

³³ The fallacy of composition, defined by Peter A. Angeles in the *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981, p. 97), is of several types, the relevant one here being that of arguing "that what is true of some parts of a whole is also (necessarily) true of the whole itself."

kingdom within a kingdom.”³⁴ The larger, encompassing kingdom of nature is thus thought to support, according to God’s design, the kingdom of “man”; but the latter is not thereby a part of the kingdom of nature. We believe, Spinoza says, that “[man] disturbs rather than follows nature’s order, and has absolute power of his actions, and is determined by no other source than himself.”³⁵ Nature appears to mimic humankind or, specifically, the laws that are expressed in our conduct; but it does so mechanically, under divine direction, while we act spontaneously. This is how we came to win supremacy in nature: by first embellishing it with human-like qualities, then by assigning it a self-serving *telos*, and finally by conceding to ourselves full autonomy with respect to it. Thus Spinoza illustrates how an evidently egoistic species engages in humanizing the world *so as to* occupy a position of privilege within it. Our anthropocentric aspirations cannot—or so it seems—be realized in a world that is, on its own, unconcerned with us, that has not already been made thoroughly anthropomorphic.

The drive to style things after our own pattern does not stop at the limits of nature but extends to God himself. Spinoza remarks that we ourselves have posited God and nature as two distinct powers of contrary kinds, nature being a creation of and subordinate to God’s will. We imagine “God’s power to be like the rule of some royal potentate, and Nature’s power to be a kind of force and energy.”³⁶ To God, then, we accord a free will like our own and an unconditional right over things so that, to us, he is a kind of king of kings.³⁷ His sovereignty also, then, consists in a boundless freedom, his power in a monstrous will.

Nature, meanwhile, is imagined “to be so limited that [we] believe man to be its chief part.”³⁸

³⁴ *Ethics*, III, Preface.

³⁵ *Ethics*, III, Preface.

³⁶ *TPT*, 6.

³⁷ *Ethics*, II, P3S.

³⁸ *TPT*, 6.

We assume that it has no intelligence, no will, no capacity to posit a goal for itself; its power consists of force or energy that entirely lacks form and purpose by itself but is given such by God. And so, we conclude, God assigned it one particular purpose, namely, to be of service to human beings. This, then, is the widely accepted and foolishly vain belief that is, in Spinoza's account, the progenitor of a family of fictions concerning nature and ourselves.

The remaining fictions that Spinoza notes all presume, then, that nature was created on our behalf³⁹ and that we have sovereignty over it. Moreover, they all rest on one of two assumptions implied by the above-mentioned belief: first, that the value of non-human things depends solely on their utility and, second, that human beings possess a free will. To the first, Spinoza observes, we owe the formation of such notions as good and bad, order and confusion, hot and cold, beauty and ugliness; the second gives rise to another set of notions that includes praise and blame, right and wrong. He explains that we selectively judge as most valuable those things or qualities that are most useful and esteem as being of the "highest excellence" those from which we receive the greatest profit.⁴⁰ Regarding natural things as no more than the necessary means for the flourishing of our species, we take offence at natural events that cause us personal harm. Similarly, when a group of things is arranged so that, once having been within the purview of our senses, we can easily recall an image of it, we judge it to be orderly or well-arranged; "and since those things we can readily picture we find pleasing compared with other things, men prefer order to confusion, as though order were something in Nature..."⁴¹ Finally, we assess a person's conduct or character according to how much or little that person has profited or cost us. In sum, then,

³⁹ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

⁴⁰ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

⁴¹ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

Spinoza shows that nature, as it is commonly conceived, is enshrouded in fictions; the nature *we* perceive is thoroughly humanized. In our assessment, nature does as we do, and for our good alone and, as such, the value of any natural thing depends entirely on its utility. Thus Spinoza suggests that our unceasing, albeit unconscious, efforts to make over the world express a very resilient—and misguided—egoism. He concludes that “every single man thinks he knows everything, and wants to fashion the world to his own liking; he considers things fair or unfair, right or wrong, according as he judges them to be to his profit or loss.”⁴² As he will proceed to show, a quite blameless self-regard coupled with a fecund imagination result in a delusion of superiority that obscures our actual ignorance about nature and our own selves.

Having exposed our fantastical fictions about nature as just that and, in so doing, also revealed that they are of human invention, Spinoza goes on to explain how it is that we arrived at that primary prejudice from which the remainder are derived. He then indicates how, specifically, these latter develop in conjunction with the first. As shall be seen, Spinoza will demonstrate that our root prejudice is the product of a type of fallacious reasoning that consists of linking a series of specious inferences the origin of which is simply a rudimentary self-awareness. The remaining fictions, which spring from the imagination, acquire the spurious appearance of being objective properties of things only once this antecedent prejudice is accepted as true—that is, once it has become a conviction. What shall further be made apparent is that Spinoza does not fault fictions or imaginings as such; rather, he insists on the importance of identifying them as such and not mistaking them for fully adequate ideas, as well as recognizing their proper function or province. In other words, he does not

⁴² *TPT*, 17.

recommend disposing of fictions but assigns them a fitting place, namely, the mid-point between clear and distinct ideas and utter obscurity.

Before proceeding further, however, let us note a feature of the mind that is presupposed, for Spinoza, in all fiction making. He says that “the less the mind understands while yet perceiving more things, the greater its capacity to form fictions,” and thus “the less men know of Nature, the more easily they can fashion numerous fictions,” including the fantastic and superstitious notions of people being transformed into stones or springs, of gods assuming the shape of a person or beast, and so on.⁴³ Given that we perceive a vast number of things but understand relatively few, it is unavoidable that we will adapt or invent fictions to serve an explanatory function. They tenuously occupy a continuous gap dividing ignorance from understanding. As mere impressions and recollections of things perceived, their veracity is simply unknown. Thus are fictions the instrument by which humanity interprets or makes sense of what the intellect has not yet scrutinized; thus does the imagination guide us through a natural world that never ceases to elude, puzzle, and overwhelm. Fiction-making or feigning, then, occurs where there is a lack of knowledge, and yet, as G. Lloyd remarks, “feigning is nonetheless a positive response to our limitations as knowers.”⁴⁴ Interestingly, the fictions that Spinoza speaks of here in passing, as well as most of those he refers to repeatedly in his writings, are unambiguously anthropomorphic. To the extent that we are still ignorant of the ways of nature, we project qualities we attribute initially to ourselves (be they real or illusory) onto nature—with the result that trees, so forbidding and majestic, are made to speak to us in our own language; and that both the

⁴³ *TEI* p. 247.

⁴⁴ *Spinoza and the Ethics*, p. 61 & *Collective Imaginings*, p. 34.

human form and that of other creatures is suddenly turned into a vessel for a god of indescribable power and unpredictable temper. Fictions are the primary means by which we overcome the disquieting opaqueness of nature.

So how do we, according to Spinoza, acquire the belief that nature possesses, by God's decree, a *telos* and, moreover, that it is none other than our own? In short, how did we come to regard it as nothing except the means to the survival and prosperity of our species? He observes that this fiction originates in a state of ignorance—which is, as we noted above, a condition for the emergence of all fictions. He finds “that all men are born ignorant of the causes of things, that they all have a desire to seek their own advantage, a desire of which they are conscious.”⁴⁵ In our original state, we are ignorant of the intricate web of causes that have resulted in our coming to be, in the particular configuration of things and events that prompt us to act as we do, and so on. We thus not only lack knowledge about which efficient causes have produced specific states of affairs but lack any notion of efficient causes at all. There is only one aspect of reality that we are immediately conscious of: *our own desire*. The sole object of this desire, according to Spinoza, is our own advantage. That the actual character of the world remains largely obscure is a consequence of what the mind *lacks* but also what it *possesses* inherently—a desire that is solely directed toward possessing our good. Unlike the relatively innocuous condition of ignorance—which has no object, aim or reason, but is strictly privative—desire advances with a purpose and, though it speaks of or signifies a lack, it also keeps its object within view. Plain ignorance does not impede our investigation of the world nor the occasions in which we are surprised by some insight into

⁴⁵ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

its nature. But our most basic desire is thoroughly self-regarding, and so the scope of its trajectory is confined to a field of objects that are believed to be useful to us.

What Spinoza will later disclose in the *Ethics* is that this desire is the very essence of human beings, that our incessant desire for our own good is what is distinctively human. Our consciousness of this desire in its full, inescapable immediacy, then, is also a basic awareness of our selves. It does not appear, however, that we are *reflectively* cognizant of this fact; that is, we do not know ourselves as the desiring beings we are. By Spinoza's account, our usual sensibility noticeably lacks a self-reflexive capacity⁴⁶ and, as such, it is doubtful that it would occur to us that we in fact desire our own advantage. It is more likely, given Spinoza's analysis, that we are vaguely sensible only of having plural desires, and for various objects—in other words, that we take ourselves to be subjects “standing behind” our passing desires, a playing field for spontaneously occurring desires that, in and of itself, remains unchanging and neutral. There is no positive proof, of course, that we are such. We only suppose ourselves to be prior to and independent of our desire because, once again, we are conscious of *having* desires for various objects and unconscious of the fact that we *are* desiring beings and that the first are merely a manifestation of the latter. We are also, Spinoza adds, unconscious of the causes of things; we notice only *effects* divorced from the causes that preceded them, including the desires and volitions that are produced in us. Therefore, we regard ourselves as the host of a collection of desires and set out after the fact to infer the causes of those desires.

⁴⁶ As shall be discussed in a later chapter, Spinoza argues that this capacity can and must be developed as a condition for acquiring true knowledge of both our selves and nature.

From the fact that we are conscious of our desires but unconscious of the causes that produced them, Spinoza remarks, “it follows, firstly, that men believe that they are free.”⁴⁷ Experiencing our desires as if they take place *within* us—not imagining that their cause could reside *externally* or, more precisely, in the specific interaction of our bodies with others—we infer that we are, firstly, something other than or besides these desires and, secondly, the original site of their fleeting appearance. This account of our relationship to our desires may strike the reader as odd, but it provides insight into how we conceive of our freedom. If we considered ourselves to be identical with our desire, it would be impossible to entertain the belief that we possess a free will. To do so it is necessary that we first distinguish between our *selves* and our *desires*, and then seal these vagrant desires within us, like birds in a cage. Ostensibly, then, we would retain autonomy both in respect of our *desires*, and in respect of external influence. The freedom of our will appears to consist in being *unmoved* by the force of desire or by the compulsion of powers external to us. It is expressed most aptly in acts of resistance or refusal, in saying “no.” It has nothing to give it form or meaning other than what it denies, nothing to invest it with a positive meaning; it is merely an extension of the neutral subject we claim ourselves to be.⁴⁸ What is remarkable about Spinoza’s analysis here is that he traces the notion of a free will to our having a consciousness of *desire alone*, of having only a mediated relationship to external things. Emerging in contrast to this all-encompassing desire, in his account, is a strangely faceless will, awaiting a call, a goal, some reason to advance.

⁴⁷ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

⁴⁸ The view just mentioned resembles that which Descartes advances, especially in *The Passions of the Soul*. There he describes the will as engaging in conflict with the passions, such that the soul is inclined, on the one hand, to desire something and, on the other, compelled by the force of a volition to avoid it (in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. 1, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff & D. Murdoch, I, 47). He thus postulates that the strength of a will can be measured by the extent to which it “can conquer the passions and stop the bodily movements which accompany them” (I, 48).

Thus far, then, Spinoza has considered the core desire that guides virtually all of our activity, and the fiction of free will that results from the fact that we are conscious of this desire, but not of its cause or its real nature. Now he turns to the object of this activity, for “men act always with an end in view, to wit, the advantage they seek.”⁴⁹ This is the sole object of the primary desire he has described. Though we have no understanding of this desire, nor of its object in themselves, we are quite cognizant of the many incarnations they assume. I am well aware of having a desire for chocolate, as well as a vague sense that fulfilling this desire, tasting chocolate, is “good.” All of our acts express a desire *for* something, whatever happens to be advantageous to or “good” for me at any time. Or, more correctly, as desiring beings we always and without fail have an object in sight and act so as to obtain it. In this way we derive a second inference: that activity or events *in general* have a final cause. Spinoza does not suggest that this inference is explicit, but only assumed; “it happens that [men] are always looking only for the final causes of things done,”⁵⁰ and therefore have *already* reached the conclusion that such causes do exist in nature. This is the habit of explaining things by analogy, and the two things assumed to be similar in some significant respect are the behaviour of human beings and that of nature as a whole. This form of analogical reasoning is, again, unavoidably reductive and, as such, the conclusions derived are very likely to be entirely unfounded. What we suppose to be similitude is in fact the spurious result of the projection of human qualities on non-human nature. It thus seems that, in Spinoza’s assessment, we unreflectively read ourselves into nature, seeing a preponderance of final causes that have no objective reality.

⁴⁹ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

⁵⁰ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

This inference, in turn, leads to two others. Spinoza explains that typically people are content once they identify final causes in nature, as there appears to be “no reason for further doubt.”⁵¹ However, if none are discovered in the world then “they have no recourse but to turn to themselves, and to reflect on what ends would normally determine them to similar actions, and so they necessarily judge other minds by their own.”⁵² Thus, if I should fail to discover a final cause for which a person—say, who leapt into oncoming traffic—performed this act, I am inclined to look for some possible reason for my behaving in a like manner, and to attribute it to this person. We account for the behaviour of other animals also by analogy with ourselves, construing animal minds to be sufficiently like our own. For example, we observe that salmons exhaust their strength swimming upstream and, having reached their destination, lay their eggs and die; then we posit a final cause for this puzzling act of what appears to us as self-sacrifice, such as the safe keeping of the eggs that will develop into a future generation of salmon. Lacking evidence of some external source for a final cause, we identify some end for which we ourselves would commit the act that is in question.

Secondly, from this same misconception that final causes are concealed in and define the nature of every activity we also infer that all things in nature are “means for [our] own use.”⁵³ We are predisposed to look only for the end, to ask of any act or event “for the sake of what?” or “for what purpose?” Consequently, any occurrence that has no apparent purpose

⁵¹ *Ethics*, I, Appendix. This, obviously, does not mean that there is not ultimately a reason to doubt our finding, but that no such reason is (as yet) obvious to us.

⁵² *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

⁵³ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

or function will receive scant notice. What is, conversely, of special interest to us are those things or events that pertain directly to the end and goal of our activity. Moreover, given our propensity to esteem the purposive generally, and that which serves our own ends in particular, at the expense of all other considerations, we fall into error in another way. We regard a thing as existing *so as to* fulfill a function or, put differently, we assume that in all cases there is a reason for something coming to be, namely a function to perform. Thus, “since [men] find within themselves and outside themselves a considerable number of means very convenient for the pursuit of their own advantage—as, for instance, eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, cereals and living creatures for food, the sun for giving light, the sea for breeding fish—the result is that they look on all the things of Nature as means to their own advantage.”⁵⁴ From our observation that a great many things are *conducive* to our good, coupled with our preconception that things exist or act for some determinate end, we wrongly conclude that things are merely *means* to our advantage.

Finally, having discovered that nature proffers much that is of use to us, and thereby formed the notion that nature must be what it is *for our sake*, it only remains for us to determine how this state of affairs came to be—assuming, as we do, that we had no part in it. Spinoza suggests that once again we resort to reasoning by analogy. He explains that, “on the analogy of the means which they are accustomed to produce for themselves, they were bound to conclude that there was some governor or governors of Nature, endowed with human freedom, who have attended to all their needs and made everything for their use.”⁵⁵

Supposing that nature could only come into being, and be what it is, owing to some creator

⁵⁴ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

⁵⁵ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

who is able to produce it at will and according to some design, we infer that this creator must be like the governors of our societies. Thus are gods fashioned as rulers holding reign over a universe, preoccupied with human affairs, while remaining always at a remove. Our gods, in other words, inherit the character of their creators, though their virtues are appropriately magnified given the job they must perform; they too have a free will and are largely devoted to securing our safe keeping and prosperity. They, on their part, insist—just as our own governors do—on being “held in the highest honour.” An unspoken pledge is made between gods and people: the gods provide for and protect their people, while the people worship their gods. The relation is construed as one of fair exchange and, as such, it is commonly thought that the greater the gift, the more compelling the prayer, the more favour the god will show to his disciple. “So it came about,” Spinoza tells us, “that every individual devised different methods of worshipping God as he thought fit in order that God should love him beyond others and direct the whole of Nature so as to serve his blind cupidity and insatiable greed.”⁵⁶

We have discussed what Spinoza reveals as the central prejudice around which a collection of prevailing fictions revolves and sketched his analysis of how this prejudice was formed out of several errors concerning human nature, nature as such, and God. But, as mentioned, he provides a more complete account of fictions—what constitutes them, how they emerge, and what function they perform. We will now briefly turn to this account so as to fully comprehend how, in Spinoza’s view, we came to so thoroughly invest nature with fictions, that is, to so completely humanize it. What we shall discover is that he construes such fiction-making or feigning as a natural function of the human imagination and maintains that

⁵⁶ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

fictions are not necessarily antithetical to the truth. Fictions are, of themselves, only imaginings; that is, they consist of images reflecting various aspects of the world *as we experience it*. Their veracity cannot be determined until they are subjected to the scrutiny of the intellect. As Spinoza is careful to point out, engaging in fiction making on its own presents no risk of error.⁵⁷ What, then, is problematic about the fictions we have considered? He remarks that they are in fact “nothing but modes of imagining...and yet the ignorant consider them as important attributes of things because they believe...that all things were made on their behalf.”⁵⁸ Our error, then, lies in judging them to be objective properties of the world or, in other words, in *mistaking fiction for reality*. Our failing consists not in authoring or entertaining fictions but in neglecting to recognize them as such. G. Lloyd observes that Spinoza recommends avoiding cognitive confusion or error “not by avoiding imaginings but by knowing their inadequacy.”⁵⁹ In other words, it is necessary that they be identified *as* imaginings and not mistaken for fully adequate ideas. Moreover, Spinoza seems to further suggest here that our erring occurs as a direct consequence of the fact that we *already* subscribe to the false belief that “all things were made on [our] behalf.”⁶⁰ If this is the case, he is in fact referring to *two* orders of fiction, one of which presupposes the other; the first is that which we described as the product of a chain of baseless inferences and the second is comprised of moral and aesthetic evaluations of nature. Ignorance about the actual order of nature causes us to posit the fictions of free will, final causes, and God as governor of nature, all of which acquire the patina of truth and are accepted as given, and then we interpret our speculative imaginings in light of them.

⁵⁷ *TEI*, pp. 248-49.

⁵⁸ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

⁵⁹ *Spinoza and the Ethics*, p. 66

⁶⁰ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

II. Fictions and the Imagination

Spinoza describes fictional ideas as originating “in certain sensations that are (so to speak) fortuitous and unconnected, arising...from external causes, in accordance as the body, dreaming or waking, receives various motions.”⁶¹ As our body encounters and is affected by various other bodies in the world, a corresponding image of that encounter forms in the mind. This image represents neither our body in itself nor the body that has affected us, but is expressive of the sensation itself, which contains traces of both bodies. In fact, Spinoza observes that we are cognizant of our own bodies only when they are in contact with other bodies⁶² and of these other bodies only through the sensations occurring in our body.⁶³ As a consequence, we always perceive other bodies along with our own which, in turn, suffuses every sensory impression we have of other bodies.⁶⁴ Traces of these sensory impressions are retained in the body. Spinoza explains that contact with another body leaves an imprint on our own that is erased when another imprint is transposed on top of it. Consequently, whenever this specific locale on the body receives a stimulus, a recollection of the other body is prompted.⁶⁵ The capacity to recall something—that is, to imagine as present something that is not—resides in scars or markings, a signature of a kind left by some affecting body, and the image that is spontaneously “retrieved” when these residual markings are once again affected. If multiple impressions are haphazardly inscribed on the body, a convoluted web of images is created so that the triggering of one induces the recollection of another and so on. For example, if I see a VW van, I instantly recall an extended camping

⁶¹ *TEI*, p. 255.

⁶² *Ethics*, II, P19.

⁶³ *Ethics*, II, P26.

⁶⁴ *Ethics*, II, P16.

⁶⁵ *Ethics*, P17P.

trip in my early youth together with a several aspects of that trip: my mother cooking over the campfire, the coolness of the tall evergreens. The image of one event or object is like an entrance point into a collection of others, all of which are interwoven by association.⁶⁶ Thus, images of things that are actually present, and those that are recalled occur both spontaneously and by habit, and they reflect the *conjoining* of ourselves with some external body as opposed to one or the other in themselves.

Given the nature of these images, whatever knowledge we derive from them is inevitably partial and fragmented. To the extent that other bodies are implied in any perception of our own selves, we will have only confused, or inadequate, ideas of both.⁶⁷ Importantly, for Spinoza, images are not *in themselves* false; rather, “falsity consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate ideas...involve.”⁶⁸ As Spinoza illustrates, when we look at the sun and regard it as no more than two hundred feet from us, we have not committed an error. Our error emerges in consequence of the fact that we are ignorant of the true distance of the sun from the earth and will be corrected once we learn what this distance actually is. Nevertheless, Spinoza maintains that the imagining itself remain intact. Thus, we know that the sun is in fact a very distant star and, *at the same time*, we still perceive it as being in close proximity to us.⁶⁹ A fictitious idea, then, is confused as a result of what it *lacks*, but this confusion does not of itself entail that the idea is mistaken. Spinoza explains that “all confusion arises from the mind’s having only partial knowledge of a complete whole or a

⁶⁶ *Ethics*, P18S.

⁶⁷ *Ethics*, II, P 25 & P27.

⁶⁸ *Ethics*, II, P35.

⁶⁹ *Ethics*, II, P35. G. Lloyd cites this example as evidence that Spinoza, though unequivocally a rationalist, did not claim that ridding imaginings of error required that reason dispose of them altogether. Rather, she suggests, “the imagination has a resilience which can coexist with the knowledge of its inadequacy” (*Spinoza and the Ethics*, p. 67).

unity composed of many constituents.” All fictitious ideas refer to a complex as opposed to single things, a situation rather than discrete bodies, and are invariably perspectival. As S. Hampshire suggests, they reflect the order of things or causes “in one particular fragment of Nature.”⁷⁰ What these ideas reveal, that is, is simply what happens to be encountered in the trajectory of a body; they are comprised of the *effect* produced by the intersecting of different bodies.

While such fictions vividly disclose events, they fail to capture things in themselves; while they speak of sensations, they are silent on the nature of bodies as such. Thus, fictions are expressive of our “being-in-the-world,” of our shifting perspectives as we navigate our immediate environs. They offer glimpses of the changing aspect of the world, and it is only by means of them that we become acquainted with it, even if not *as a whole*. On the other side, fictions fail to “distinguish between the known and the unknown” precisely because they are mere imaginings; it is impossible to verify the truth or falsity of a fictitious idea simply by referring to it alone—this is the province of the intellect. In Spinoza’s account, then, fictions involve no error *of themselves*; they simply present the world as it affects us. As J. Collins points out, by assigning fictions this measure of veracity, this role in the labour of acquiring knowledge, “Spinoza avoids the sceptical dilemma of cognizing everything or nothing about nature.”⁷¹ He does not regard the mind as some all-seeing demigod nor as incurably “bereft of any reasoned knowledge,”⁷² but concedes to it a great number of incomplete and yet not mistaken notions concerning nature.

⁷⁰ *Spinoza*, p. 84.

⁷¹ *Spinoza on Nature*, p. 107.

⁷² *Spinoza on Nature*, p. 107.

The question then is: how is it that these fluid and tenuous imaginings evolve into resilient and misleading fictions, as they oftentimes do? Spinoza tells us that when a preponderance of images occur together, the mind is only able to “imagine all the bodies confusedly without any distinction, and will comprehend them, as it were, under one attribute, namely, that of *entity, thing*, etc.”⁷³ For Spinoza, then, abstract universals are no more than vacuous fabrications—and merely the by-product of a default response on the part of the mind to a bewildering onslaught of images. In addition, the actual significance of universals varies considerably among individuals, as each construe them “according to the conditioning of his body.”⁷⁴ The unique configuration of our sensory receptors and nervous system, shaped by the history of our happenstance encounters, inspire divergent views on what are supposed to be universal genus types. What each person perceives to constitute the type “man,” for instance, will vary considerably; “those who have more often regarded with admiration the stature of men will understand by the word ‘man’ an animal of upright stature, while those who are wont to regard a different aspect will form a different common image of man, such as that man is a laughing animal, a feather-less biped, or a rational animal.”⁷⁵ However, once formed, these ideas tend to be regarded as inviolable models that even nature itself observes—or, in the case of ideals, should observe. When people “see something occurring in Nature at variance with their preconceived ideal of the thing in question, they believe that Nature has then failed or blundered and left that thing imperfect.”⁷⁶ In sum, then, vague imaginings often sediment into intractable fictions when the mind, besought by a surplus of

⁷³ *Ethics*, II, P40.

⁷⁴ *Ethics*, II, P40.

⁷⁵ *Ethics*, P40S1.

⁷⁶ *Ethics*, IV, Preface.

images, resorts to fabricating universals as a means of imposing a semblance of order upon them.

As an abstraction does not pertain to a specific body, it rarely undergoes alteration or perishes, as fleeting images are wont to do. In fact, it *takes the place of* the many particulars and their very particularity is then obscured by it. However, it is precisely this fixity and intractability that makes it possible for universals to function as *models*; they are readily recalled whenever we conceive of “man” or “horse,” acting as convenient placeholders for all of the various instances of that genus. Accordingly, the fictions that tend to have the greatest utility, in Spinoza’s view, are those that have the appearance of universality and objectivity. Our moral and aesthetic judgements appear to derive from precepts that are discovered in nature, and it is owing to this fact that values seem as if they are objective properties. Spinoza observes that we measure the perfection of things by comparing them to each other in terms of how closely each approaches the ideal. In our assessment, those that attain the greatest perfection, however, will be merely those that affect us most intensely. For instance, if I regard a white horse of tall stature as the model for the genus “horse” it is because these features affect me more than others. Horses that resemble this model will, in my view, be more perfect or beautiful than black or stout horses. Spinoza goes on to explain that, “as for the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ they likewise indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves, and are nothing but modes of thinking, or notions which we form from comparing things with one another.”⁷⁷ What one considers “good” or “ordered” another will declare “bad” or “confused,” according to their respective psycho-physiological

⁷⁷ *Ethics*, IV, Preface.

constitution.⁷⁸ All such notions, as we have seen, “denote not the nature of any thing,” except the way our bodies are disposed.⁷⁹

Thus, Spinoza describes fictions of varying kinds.⁸⁰ All consist of imaginings that disclose aspects of the world *as it experienced by us*; but some, such as abstract universals and moral and aesthetic values, have the false appearance of being objective properties of nature. Such fictions are unavoidably anthropomorphic insofar as they are products of the imagination and all imaginings spring from and reflect our bodily sensations. Our access to the world is necessarily mediated by the body and, as such, the impressions we cull from its explorations will be perspectival—that is, shifting and always partial views of whatever fragment of nature we happen to traverse. As noted, Spinoza finds that such imaginings do not, in themselves, involve error, for nothing is either affirmed or denied in it. However, when they evolve into abstract universals, or types, they in fact falsify precisely that which they are believed to represent, for no “entity” or “thing” or “man” exists in nature. Spinoza suggests that the mind’s propensity for propagating fictions of this sort is remedial—a natural function by which it restores order. In themselves, they are relatively innocuous and thus Spinoza finds

⁷⁸ Spinoza again speaks to this point when he asks Henry Oldenburg in a letter (dated November 20, 1665) “to note that I do not attribute to Nature beauty, ugliness, order or confusion. It is only with respect to our imagination that things can be said to be beautiful, ugly, well-ordered or confused.” However, Spinoza does describe fictional or inadequate ideas as “confused.” I would suggest that in these cases Spinoza is applying this term to images that, abounding in the body, do not conform to the order of nature or, in other words, an order of logical necessity. Thus, the term “confused” here signifies something about the nature of images and not their value. Stuart Hampshire also seems to interpret Spinoza’s use of this term in this way (*Spinoza*, pp. 88-89). For a more detailed discussion of this apparent inconsistency see Jonathan Bennett’s *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, pp. 180-181.

⁷⁹ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

⁸⁰ G. Lloyd and M. Gatens also identify different types of illusions or fictions, including “unavoidable but harmless illusions which arise from bodily structure,” which I am here referring to as simply imaginings (of which all fictions are comprised). They also speak of two other types: “avoidable illusions through which the unenlightened are misled and coerced” and “more adequate fictions through which philosophy is enabled to grasp [certain] elusive truths” (*Collective Imaginings*, pp. 35-36). I will discuss the second, which consist mainly in superstition, below.

no reason to object *categorically* to such fictions. However, he *does* fault those fictions that treat the whole of nature as merely means for our survival; that depict as good only that which agrees with us and as absurd or evil that which disagrees with our nature.⁸¹ He criticizes our habit of presuming to “read” values in nature and to judge things as “more or less perfect to the extent that they please or offend human senses, serve or oppose human interests.”⁸² As suggested, Spinoza mentions that our tendency to do just this results, at least in part, from our prior conviction that God created nature for our sake. Having accepted this specious hypothesis, we then erroneously conclude that human beings, by some special birthright, have supremacy over all things in nature. It is *this* cluster of fictions that Spinoza objects to for, unlike other varieties of fiction, they do not offer us greater access to a vast and largely incomprehensible world but deceive us into believing that the world is no greater than us.

III. Superstition

Ultimately, however, the resilience of this variety of fictions derives less from idiosyncratic cognitive processes or from illogical reasoning than from powerful affects, especially hope and fear. In a condition of ignorance most are susceptible to the influence of these twin emotions and, accordingly, to the lies and fictions that either assuage or sustain them. Thus, “among so many of Nature’s blessings they were bound to discover quite a number of disasters, such as storms, earthquakes, diseases and so forth,” and, assuming that natural occurrences pertain—often profitably but in these instances adversely—to human beings, “they maintained that these occurred because the gods were angry at the wrongs done to

⁸¹ *TPT*, 16.

⁸² *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

them by men, or the faults committed in the course of their worship.”⁸³ What motivates an appeal to such a fiction? Fear lends credence to the notion that the gods evoke floods, hurricanes, and droughts as punishment for some moral failing or neglect on our part. “And although daily experience cried out against this and showed by any number of examples that blessings and disasters befall the godly and ungodly alike without discrimination, they did not on that account abandon their ingrained prejudice.”⁸⁴ Spinoza says that the multitude call natural events that defy any ready explanation a “mystery,” and claim to have no capacity for understanding the judgement of the gods but only of the verdict and penalty they issue.⁸⁵ It is “easier,” as he says, for most to designate such events, the causes of which are concealed from us but the effects of which are devastating, a form of punishment, decided upon by powerful agencies, and for reasons that we cannot hope to comprehend—it is “easier,” that is, than developing a rigorous, coherent, and well-supported explanation. He assumes that most people lack the conceptual tools necessary for constructing a scientific account of nature and, perhaps even more importantly, the strength of character required for intellectual honesty. In fact, it seems probable that most avoid the task of attempting to “understand the works of Nature as a scholar,”⁸⁶ not only or even mainly because it requires careful attention and considerable capacities but because to do so one needs an unusual courage—that is, to overcome the fears for which these fictions are an effective antidote.

Given our much-cherished belief that nature does nothing that is not for our sake—or does nothing “in vain”—every natural event appears to signify something *for us*. The significance

⁸³ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

⁸⁴ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

⁸⁵ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

⁸⁶ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

itself *is* a mystery, or it is such until we give it a specific meaning; but that these events are taken to be signs, to convey secret meanings that we must decipher, both flatters our vanity and inspires terror. We tend thus to be of two minds: we regard ourselves as situated at the very apex of all of creation, its reason and greatest hope; and also as mere mortals, at the mercy of gods who are enraged by the slightest offence and take revenge by orchestrating natural catastrophes. We are thus both the vainest and the most fearful of all creatures. On the other hand, we assume that we are uniquely entitled to the blessings of nature; having thus an “immoderate greed for fortune’s fickle favours,” we become “the wretched victims of alternating hopes and fears.” As a consequence, Spinoza adds, our “credulity knows no bounds.”⁸⁷ If in doubt concerning the inconstant inclinations of two-faced fortune, we waver between hope and fear;⁸⁸ at other times, when there is no immediate reason for doubt, we are “overconfident, boastful and arrogant.”⁸⁹ Spinoza argues that fictions prove to be especially efficacious to us when we vacillate between the emotions of fear and hope—and especially compelling are those of a superstitious nature. Fearing the vicissitudes of nature and, as such, alert to any apparent sign relating to us, we “read extraordinary things into Nature as if the whole of Nature were a partner in [our] madness.”⁹⁰ In something that makes us spontaneously recall a pleasurable or painful event of the past, we sight an omen of good or evil to come; happening upon something anomalous, we see in it the vengeful anger of a deity.⁹¹ Spinoza thus reveals the intimate connection between what he later terms “sad passions,” faith in superstition, and fanaticism. As Y. Yovel writes, the “temptation to invest

⁸⁷ *TPT*, Preface.

⁸⁸ Spinoza defines hope as “inconstant pleasure arising from the idea of a thing future or past, of whose outcome we are in doubt” and fear as “inconstant pain arising from the idea of a thing future or past, of whose outcome we are in some doubt” (*Ethics*, III, P18S2). Thus, both emotions presume the presence of doubt.

⁸⁹ *TPT*, Preface.

⁹⁰ *TPT*, Preface.

⁹¹ *TPT*, Preface.

one's faith in superstitious explanations" increases in proportion with our vacillation between hope and fear and, in addition, that these result in the irrational "outbursts of cruelty and violence" and the propensity to adopt fanatical positions.⁹² L. Strauss also comments that "faith is not a disinterested guessing, but is hoping or fearing," or, more specifically, a dizzying vacillation between these passions produces an irresolute state of mind and, "not knowing which way to turn, driven hither and thither," people are "willing and ready then to believe anything and everything."⁹³

But Spinoza also identifies another, more sinister, motive for preserving the fictions of superstition. "Those to whom the common people bow down to as the interpreters of Nature and the gods," namely priests and other despots, aim to keep the multitude in a state of subjection, and to this end exploit their ignorance. Encouraging superstitious belief—a statue of the Virgin Mary shedding tears of blood, the entrails of a beast revealing God's decrees in grotesque sign language—they first elicit fear of unpredictable and terrifying "mysteries" and then, by claiming to possess some esoteric knowledge by which they can decipher their concealed meaning, they dispel these fears and offer solace. Thus superstition appeals to the multitude owing to the fact that it soothes fears and awakens hope; it appeals to the priesthood because it is a means of securing political tyranny. The multitude, enslaved by sad passions and the tyrants who, though also so enslaved, are able to profit from the slavery of others, depend on each other; a compact between them is forged out of dissoluteness and desperation.⁹⁴ L. Strauss explains that the multitude, in bondage to unruly passions, and prone to be credulous, easily fall prey to "the lust for power" of priests and

⁹² *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason*, p. 131.

⁹³ *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, p. 220.

⁹⁴ G. Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, p. 27.

rulers. The latter, he adds, “do not so much invent as exploit” the products of superstitious fear for the sake of their own ends. He also observes that it is impossible to determine whether, in Spinoza’s analysis, priests are themselves “prey to superstition” or whether “they merely adapt their utterances to the superstitious notions of the multitude.”⁹⁵ Yet, they could not be entirely victim to the seductions of superstition if they exhibit—as Spinoza clearly believes they do—some skill in utilizing them for their own gain.

The administrations of the priest are, on the surface, curative—insofar as they quell the vagaries of the soul—but they actually, and insidiously, work to prolong or worsen this condition. The people’s slavery, at first a result of cognitive confusion and a perpetual vacillation between fear and hope, thus renders them susceptible to political slavery. The priest answers their pleas for comfort, repose, and salvation, with the false assurances and spectacles they crave; but this remedy is not actually intended to cure, and the tranquillity it offers is short-lived. In Spinoza’s assessment, then, superstition functions mainly as an instrument of oppression.⁹⁶ Ambition and avarice being its chief motives, the priesthood forsook its original vocation of providing instruction in the moral law contained in scripture, and religious practice degenerated into the dissemination of dogma and the observance of an empty form of ritual in place of true worship.⁹⁷ But what Spinoza finds most reprehensible is that an increasing reliance on dogma results in “degrading rational man to beast, completely inhibiting man’s free judgment and with the set purpose of utterly extinguishing the light of

⁹⁵ *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, p. 222.

⁹⁶ Y. Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, p. 132.

⁹⁷ *TPT*, Preface.

reason.”⁹⁸ He does not object to the teaching of scripture—instruction in the revelations of the prophets—but specifically to the disabling effect that dogmatism has on the mind.

The common people, in his assessment, “can no more be freed from their superstition than from their fears,” and cling to prejudices masked in the “guise of piety” with a fierce obstinacy.⁹⁹ Instructing them in the precepts of scripture may be beneficial to the extent that it secures their obedience, that is, it persuades them to abide by the moral law prescribed therein. He maintains that this is the sole objective of the scripture for, appealing largely to the imagination, it is suitably adapted to the sensibilities of the people.¹⁰⁰ For Spinoza, then, piety is strictly pragmatic and has no connection whatsoever with true knowledge. If a superstitious belief compels obedience to moral law, then it is pious; on the contrary, if a belief gives “license to sin or rebel,” then it is impious.¹⁰¹ That scripture contains revelations that do not disclose divine doctrine as such, but are fitted to the character and cognitive capacities of the prophets who received them; that it promotes piety by means of superstition; that it is consistently adapted by sectaries to conform to their own beliefs, are not points of contention for Spinoza. It is precisely for these reasons that scripture is compelling. However, he is opposed to the fact that religious authorities, while taking great liberty in “interpreting” scripture themselves, *deny this same freedom to others*; “all those who do not share their opinions, however righteous and truly virtuous the dissenters may be, they persecute as God’s enemies, while those who follow their lead, however dissolute they may be, they cherish as God’s elect.”¹⁰²

⁹⁸ *TPT*, Preface.

⁹⁹ *TPT*, Preface.

¹⁰⁰ *TPT*, Chpt. 14.

¹⁰¹ *TPT*, Chpt. 13.

¹⁰² *TPT*, Chpt. 14.

One of his chief aims, then, is to liberate reason from this state of bondage. As he cautions in the preface to his *Theological-Political Treatise*, he does not address the multitude itself on whom, he thinks, his words would be wasted, but rather the priesthood. His objective is to restore reason to a province of its own, to protect the freedom of the intellect for those, namely philosophers, whose vocation consists in seeking natural knowledge. L. Strauss similarly writes that Spinoza's overarching concern is with securing the "freedom of philosophizing" a condition for which is "the liberation of men's minds from those prejudices which the theologians have implanted."¹⁰³ Spinoza gives no affront to priests who practice their calling honestly, without arrogance or malice, nor does he insist that, "Scripture should be ancillary to reason, or reason to Scripture."¹⁰⁴ Rather he avoids assigning either priority, recommending only that each, according to its own aim, remain exclusive. As Strauss points out, Spinoza wants to "limit the authority of Scripture to its own realm" in order to *thereby* "make philosophy independent of the authority of Scripture."¹⁰⁵ Any effort to reconcile reason and faith is, in his opinion, sure to fail: any attempt to make scripture conform to reason will end up ascribing to the prophets ideas they could not have had; any attempt at the reverse "has to accept as divinely inspired utterances the prejudices of common people of long ago, which will gain a hold on his understanding and darken it."¹⁰⁶ In the first case, the effectiveness of scripture, which lies in spectacle and fancy, is

¹⁰³ *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, p. 112. Strauss further argues that a critique of these prejudices must precede—and so cannot presuppose—philosophy as such; it is pre-philosophic. This kind of critique is a "necessary prolegomenon to philosophy as such" insofar as liberty of the mind is necessary for philosophic liberty (p. 112). Thus, the prejudice it targets first and foremost is that "reason must subject itself to the supra-rational revelation laid down in Scripture" (p. 144), for contained in this prejudice is a presumed justification for devaluing and disarming the power of reason.

¹⁰⁴ *TPT*, Chpt. 15.

¹⁰⁵ *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, p. 114.

¹⁰⁶ *TPT*, Chpt. 15.

largely diminished; in the second, the power of reason is compromised. Faith and reason will invariably contradict one another, for faith depends on obedience while reason requires the freedom of the mind. His argument in this treatise once again proves that Spinoza's aim is not to dispose of fictions as such, nor to ridicule or admonish those who place their faith in them. Though he accuses the priesthood of disguising corrupt motives under the cloak of piety, he regards true piety as essential for the salvation of most of humankind. He thus carefully distinguishes his own position from that held by dissenters whose main objective is to bring reason to bear upon superstitious beliefs. He, for his part, only asks that those who are able and desirous of living by reason be given the freedom to do so.

Conclusion

In sum, then, Spinoza shows that our basic prejudice concerning nature and our place within it is the product of a series of false inferences, all of which originate in our immediate or pre-reflective consciousness of our selves as desiring beings. We arrive first at the illusory notion that we are uniquely, of all the inhabitants of the earth, possessors of a free will and secondly, that all things in nature are purposive. From this last supposition we derive two more: first, that others act toward the *same* ends as we do and, second, that all things exist to serve *our* purposes. These two inferences depend on the assumption that final causes occur in nature but, in addition, are informed by the analogical reasoning from which they result. Both betray the fact that we sought to explain the nature of the world *by reference to ourselves*. The first claim, while perhaps valid to a limited extent and only if applied strictly to human beings, is plainly anthropomorphic if applied to non-human animals; the second is so clearly anthropocentric that it is without any credibility. Notably, Spinoza's account of these inferences again shows that, at least in this case, an anthropocentric bias is preceded by and

depends upon a view of the world as anthropomorphic. The conception of natural things as guided by a final cause, or *telos*, must be accepted in order to establish that this *telos* is in fact the advantage of the human species. Lastly, it is inferred that nature was brought into being and receives its function and design from a lordly deity, a god or pantheon of gods, who also resembles human beings (or, more accurately, the self-image promoted by human beings) in their more virtuous aspects. Thus do we construct the fictions of a free will, of final causes, of a transcendent God,¹⁰⁷ and finally arrive at our guiding prejudice that God created nature to have a single purpose, that is, to nourish, protect and give enjoyment to his most favoured creation and that we pay recompense in the form of loyal devotion.

However, as we have discussed, Spinoza does not condemn fiction-making as such. He observes that, originally, imaginings are simply tenuous, inconclusive impressions of a universe that we come to know only partially and in fragments—and, indeed, they are indispensable for the acquisition of that knowledge. Where we err is in presuming them to be fully adequate. He does not find fault, then, with our devising fictions as such, but with our failing to recognize their inadequacy. This oversight is problematic when imaginings are erroneously posited as abstract universals and subsequently regarded as inviolable models for things in nature. Furthermore, in Spinoza's view, they become deleterious when they take the form of superstition; sustained by the twin emotions of fear and hope, superstition breeds fanaticism together with an abhorrent dependence on the priesthood. It is one of his

¹⁰⁷ G. Deleuze suggests that this triple illusion—"the illusion of finality, the illusion of freedom, and the theological illusion"—is constitutive of consciousness. That is, consciousness is not deluded in entertaining such illusions, but is by nature the very locus for such illusions. This is so, Deleuze reasons, because consciousness only apprehends effects (*Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, pp. 20). I agree with his characterization of consciousness as 1) the site of illusion and 2) only registering effects, but his account of *how* these transitory effects (of bodies colliding with my body), or imagining them, manifest these enduring explanatory fictions remains unclear.

principle aims, then, to dispel the enchantment of such fictions. As we shall see in the next chapter, he sets out to do this mainly by emending, strengthening the power of the mind, and only secondarily, by proving the falsity of superstitious belief.

CHAPTER 3: EMENDING THE INTELLECT

Thus far Spinoza has scrupulously removed the deceptive guise of “truth” from long-cherished fictions concerning nature. As noted in the previous chapter, he only does so in the *Ethics* as an interlude, a strongly worded aside to those readers whose convictions, he suspects, will prevent them from following him as he proceeds through his exposition. In his *Theological-Political Treatise*, he does so only to prove first that while faith relies upon these fictions, reason is in service solely to the truth, and second to release reason from the bonds of theology. He apparently has no interest in contemplating falsehoods and clever deceptions simply for the sake of exposing them as such. He thus sets out to identify specifically those fictions that will prevent his readers from accepting the truth of his proofs and to lead them to the “bar of reason” so as to expose them as fictions. Yet, just as revealing the truth about error as such is not his main purpose, so—and more surprisingly—is disclosing the truth as such only a means to another end. In fact, he is prompted to do so for a strictly *practical* purpose. Initially, this purpose is vague and undefined; his motive at this point derives solely from his awareness of a lack. He remarks on his disillusionment with the petty goods that are sought after by the multitude, his doubt about their presumed benefit and suspicion that they generally result in ill effects; he wonders if there might not be another, more certain good. Spinoza thus demonstrates, in a first-person account reminiscent of Descartes’ *Meditations*,¹⁰⁸ that an inquiry into the truth is, at the start, a tenuous and uncertain venture

¹⁰⁸ J. Collins mentions that Spinoza was probably following an academic model recommended by Adrian Heereboord, a professor of philosophy at Leiden, who followed in the stead of Descartes. He advises the philosopher to furnish information on his life-situation, the specific occasion for his writing, and the cause motivating him to treat his theme or problem, namely, the liberation or correction of our mind (*Spinoza on Nature*, pp. 78-79).

that is only begun when one can no longer place one's trust in what is generally accepted, when one awakens with a sense of urgency and danger to the task of the philosopher.

As we shall discover, his fledgling attempt to find a corrective for the malaise that he has succumbed to—and that deceptively masks itself as health—ultimately results in a method for emending the intellect. However, this method is not designed to diminish the intensity of wayward desires or fortify the intellect against their influence. Rather, it acknowledges at the outset that desire is essential to human life; to dispense with it altogether would be impossible, and to cause its diminution would be ruinous. It is designed to fulfill one objective: to identify the proper object of this desire, the supreme good, namely that which will promote the wellness, health, or virtue of a human being. This entails achieving an accurate self-knowledge, replacing the anthropocentric delusions we have fabricated with a more faithful portrait of the kind of beings we are and *could* be. To this end, Spinoza recommends a study of nature but, interestingly, only to the extent that it discloses the conditions for our own perfectibility. In this chapter we will briefly recount his observations concerning the affliction he diagnoses and outline the method he devises as a corrective. In the second part, we will sketch out what he concludes, using this method, about nature as such, and human beings, in particular.

In his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza credits experience with first inducing his doubt regarding the veracity and value of that which is familiar; it taught him “the hollowness and futility of everything that is ordinarily encountered in daily life,”¹⁰⁹ of

¹⁰⁹ *TEI*, p. 233.

everything that one inherits at birth, that one accepts as true or right simply on the grounds—if they can be called such—that it is customary. What he realizes, more specifically, is “that all the things which were the source and object of my anxiety held nothing of good and evil in themselves save in so far as the mind was influenced by them.”¹¹⁰ His first insight, then, is into the fictitiousness of good and evil; that they are not *in things*, but actually describe how things *affect* us. In other words, the anthropomorphic genesis of good and evil, concealed by the elaborate façade of accepted morality, is disclosed to him. An insight such as this has, as one might expect, dramatic results. What had once been sought after—and remained a constant source of care and worry—is suddenly divested of the value that one had believed it to possess. But a new task awaits this person; he or she now faces the task of undertaking an unusual enquiry: first, into the *value of values* themselves and second, into what goal or purpose remains for us “beyond good and evil.”

Surveying the objects which most people pursue, Spinoza singles out three types of so-called goods that are typically assigned the greatest value: riches, honour, and sensual pleasure. He discovers that, contrary to popular opinion, all three tend to cause injury rather than promote well-being. In the ensuing analysis, he explains how the pursuit of each can be severely debilitating in its effects. First, Spinoza notices that these three goods so preoccupy the mind that it is incapable of reflecting on any other good. “With regard to sensual pleasure, the mind is so utterly obsessed by it that it seems as if it were absorbed in some good,” but even for those who resist the seduction of such pleasures and prefer wealth and reputation will find that the pursuit of these too “engrosses the mind to no small degree.”¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ *TEI*, p. 233.

¹¹¹ *TEI*, p. 223.

Thus, these goods are dangerous in so far as the desire for them tends to be *obsessive*. Second, he observes that “the more each of them is possessed, the more our joy is enhanced, and we are therefore more and more induced to increase them both.” For whatever duration our riches or reputation lasts, and we may derive enjoyment from it, it is invigorating. But, once it is dissipated or ruined, our condition changes dramatically. A state of elation or excitement is replaced by one of depression. After exhausting some pleasure, for instance, “there ensues a profound depression which, if it does not completely inhibit the mind, leads to its confusion and enervation.”¹¹² Likewise, if amassed riches are depleted, or a fine reputation is lost, a descent into melancholy usually follows. Thus, these so-called goods are also harmful in so far as they manifest a *manic-depressive* effect. Both of these effects, in turn, produce a crippling inhibition of the mind for it suffers a general loss of vitality and, more specifically, loses its capacity to consider *other* possible goods. Therefore, although such goods may appear to promise enhancement, they usually result in some impairment. Finally, according to Spinoza, given that all three of these goods are by nature perilous, and that we nevertheless pursue them in earnest, they can ultimately cause our demise.¹¹³ He therefore estimates that their *real* value is negligible or worse on the grounds that they “contribute nothing to the preservation of our being but even hinder it, being frequently the cause of the destruction of those who gain possession of them, and invariably the cause of the destruction of those who are possessed by them.”¹¹⁴

¹¹² *TEI*, p. 233.

¹¹³ L. Strauss suggests that the passions of greed, ambition, and lust, and the ‘goods’ that correspond to these, naturally follow from, and simultaneously contradict the desire for, self-preservation. As such, the effort to secure our preservation by means of these goods is necessarily self-vitiating (*Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair, New York: Schocken Books, 1965, p. 217).

¹¹⁴ *TEI*, p. 234.

Spinoza proposes a new criterion by which to assess the value of something—especially those ends that are presumed to be good in themselves: it measures the degree to which something *actually* promotes the preservation of our being. As mentioned, this is in fact always our objective or, perhaps, our *concern*. Spinoza does not suggest that another would be preferable, as none besides this could possibly suit us better. As a philosopher, however, he *explicitly* elects our native interest in self-preservation to the status of an ultimate good.

Judging the petty goods with which we are typically preoccupied according to this criterion, he discovers that they are not what they appear to be. Thus does the philosopher unwittingly become a diagnostician of his own state of health and, by extension, that of others: “I saw that my situation was one of great peril and that I was obliged to seek a remedy with all my might, however uncertain it might be, like a sick man suffering from a fatal malady who, foreseeing certain death unless a remedy is forthcoming, is forced to seek it, however uncertain it be, with all his might, for therein lies all his hope.”¹¹⁵ His diagnosis reveals the seriousness of the malady, the urgency of administering a remedy; twice he repeats that he must find a remedy “however uncertain it may be.” He knows with absolute certainty that a remedy to correct his situation must be sought and that *this* is now his sole purpose; but the nature of that remedy—or a new “guiding principle”—is not clearly discernible.

I. Method of Emending the Intellect

At this point, then, he sets out without a sure path or compass, but directed nonetheless by a mission to discover a corrective for self-destructive desires or pursuits. Interestingly, the remedy he seeks consists not in expelling those goods that tempt and ruin us, or in fortifying our resolve to resist such temptations; in other words, he refrains from recommending a

¹¹⁵ *TEI*, p. 234.

cure that entails self-denial as such. He finds no fault with our original impulse to possess goods that are, or seem to be, conducive to our preservation. In fact, his search for a corrective is not different *in kind* from the incessant striving to secure petty goods, for both ultimately *aim* at the same end; it is “the achievement of the highest human perfection,”¹¹⁶ which he names the “supreme good” and all that is the means to it, or “true goods.” The difference is that now he is explicitly cognizant of his goal—that is, he knows that enjoying this perfection *is* the supreme good—and, in addition, that the means to it has yet to be discovered. The multitude, on the other hand, is misled into mistaking false for true goods, and failing to distinguish between these and the supreme good. Thus, winning high praise or amassing wealth becomes their sole objective, for they erroneously identify success in achieving reputation or riches with greatness.

Here Spinoza merely alludes to this supreme good as consisting of “the knowledge of the union which the mind has with the whole of nature.”¹¹⁷ As yet, he cannot say *how* it is to be attained or what it will eventually signify; these will be revealed in the course of his investigation. But that he is cognizant *of* this good and what it consists in is sufficient for him to realize that he must “direct all the sciences to [this] one end and goal.”¹¹⁸ He accordingly regards other scientific pursuits as extraneous and in so far as they do “nothing to advance us towards our goal,” they must “be rejected as pointless.”¹¹⁹ Spinoza is confident that science, amongst other things,¹²⁰ will provide the way or means for him to realize his self-appointed task, but cautions against treating scientific investigation as an end in itself.

¹¹⁶ *TEI*, p. 234.

¹¹⁷ *TEI*, p. 235.

¹¹⁸ *TEI*, p. 236.

¹¹⁹ *TEI*, p. 236.

¹²⁰ *TEI*, p. 236.

Science must be given a goal, a reason to proceed, or its activities have no real significance; as such, he intends to summon its various branches to collectively direct their research toward a goal that he esteems as more worthy and of greater urgency than any other. Thus science receives its command: to find the proper means for acquiring human perfection. But where should its investigation begin? Spinoza provides a comprehensive list of the areas in which scientific study is needed and the first item that appears on this list specifies that science must attempt “to understand as much about Nature as suffices for acquiring such a nature,”¹²¹ that is, a nature that expresses the highest possible perfection. Notice again that his purpose, which he enlists science to assist him with, is entirely pragmatic, and he considers the study of nature to be simply one of several conditions, albeit an essential one, for accomplishing his task. The first step toward this goal consists in constructing an accurate and “exact knowledge of our nature which we wish to perfect,” to replace the distorted self-image we have fabricated. To this end, it is necessary “at the same time to know as much of the nature of things as is necessary,”¹²² which entails removing the layers of anthropomorphic fictions that obscure the actual nature of things.

Accordingly, he proposes to devise a method, modelled on science, “of emending the intellect and of purifying it, as far as is feasible at the outset, so that it may succeed in understanding things without error and as well as possible.”¹²³ This method must enable the intellect to attend solely to nature as it is. At this point also, he is evidently less concerned with the fitness of our intellect as such as he is with “rendering it apt for the understanding

¹²¹ *TEI*, p. 236.

¹²² *TEI*, p. 238.

¹²³ *TEI*, p. 236.

of things in a manner appropriate to the achievement of [his] purpose.”¹²⁴ Thus does he establish a starting point—to design a method for emending the intellect so that it may comprehend as much of nature as is required to fulfill his specified purpose. He also has an order of investigation that proceeds systematically from a study of nature to a study of the various facets of human life. And finally, he adds, as an adjunct but necessary consideration, provisional ‘rules for living,’¹²⁵ to replace those he can no longer live by. Like Descartes, he has ceased to have recourse to the customary modes of living and so must formulate a new set of temporary rules of conduct to sustain himself—and perhaps also to avoid notice—as he prepares to begin the task awaiting him.

As a preliminary step, Spinoza reviews all of the modes of perceiving so as to select that which is best suited to acquiring the type of knowledge sought after. Each of these modes of perceiving generates knowledge of a kind but only one is suited to his purpose. The first variety of perception was discussed in the last chapter; that which involves conventional symbols, such as language; sensory awareness; and inferential reasoning. Spinoza classifies all of these as ‘knowledge of the first kind,’ ‘opinion’ or ‘imagination.’¹²⁶ He identifies two other modes of perception as most appropriate for his task because they are uniquely a reliable source of *adequate* ideas; these include reasoning and a third form of perception that he describes as that which “we have when a thing is perceived through its essence alone, or through knowledge of its proximate cause.”¹²⁷ Interestingly, for Spinoza the truth of any such idea needs no verification, but is immediately apparent; “for the certainty of truth no

¹²⁴ *TEI*, p. 236.

¹²⁵ *TEI*, p. 236.

¹²⁶ *Ethics*, II, P40, S2.

¹²⁷ *TEI*, p. 237.

other sign is needed but to have a true idea,” which is the same as having an idea of the objective essence of a thing. Once this essence is discovered, there can be no question of whether it is true or not.¹²⁸ Therefore, he concludes, his method is not an instrument for testing “or seeking a sign of truth after acquiring ideas,” but is simply “the path whereby truth itself” is revealed.¹²⁹ More precisely, it is by way of this method that we *arrive* at adequate ideas in their proper order; as such, the method itself, he says, may be conceived simply as *the idea of an idea*, or as ‘reflexive knowledge.’¹³⁰

The method to be employed, then, is not entirely complete prior to the investigation it is intended for. Its main function is to introduce the novice to “how the mind is to be directed according to the standard of a given true idea,”¹³¹ which is also, as said, the only criterion for truth. Initially, then, it operates as a signpost, an indicator of the standard to be followed. Thereafter, it itself develops organically and gradually as the mind engages in the process of reasoning. This type of knowledge, for Spinoza, progresses by extending outward, like a ripple in water. He notes that “there must first of all exist in us a true idea as an innate tool”¹³² and, once we have an understanding *of* this idea—that is, a reflexive knowledge of it—we also realize what a true idea *is*, and its difference from other perceptions. Our enquiry, then, begins with a true idea and the *idea of* this idea as being such. In addition, Spinoza explains that, “an idea is situated in the context of thought exactly as is its object in

¹²⁸ The certainty of a true idea, that is, is neither denied nor explicitly affirmed, but simply experienced as such, for “he who has a true idea knows at the same time that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt its truth” (*Ethics*, II, P43).

¹²⁹ *TEI*, p. 241.

¹³⁰ *TEI*, pp. 241-42.

¹³¹ *TEI*, p. 242.

¹³² *TEI*, p. 242.

the context of reality.”¹³³ That is, every idea, like every object in nature, is interrelated; thus, from a single true idea other ideas may be logically deduced “and these in turn will be interrelated with other ideas, and so the tools for further progress will increase.”¹³⁴ As one core idea branches into countless other ideas, our knowledge of nature develops in increments and, likewise, so does the mind accumulate more tools which broaden its capacity for yet further investigation, ending only at “the summit of wisdom.”¹³⁵

It may appear that Spinoza reverses the usual order of precedence between method and knowledge. So, as P. Machery explains, in *Hegel on Spinoza*, method “is not the condition of the manifestation of the true, but on the contrary its effect, its result,” or in other words, that it “does not precede the development of knowledge but expresses or reflects it.”¹³⁶ I would suggest, somewhat differently, that Spinoza begins with a method that initially only guides the intellect to a *comprehension* of true ideas and which, in the course of his investigation, gradually acquires ever more definition in proportion to the ever increasing comprehensiveness of one’s knowledge. In turn, one’s capacity to further extend this knowledge is enhanced by the evolving method. Thus, neither method nor knowledge has any definitive priority; rather, each contributes to the development of the other. G. Lloyd argues for a very similar interpretation, saying that “rather than setting itself to acquire true ideas, it begins from the awareness of true ideas we already have.” She further points out that Spinoza thereby refutes the logic of skepticism in so far as he shows that skeptics “have

¹³³ *TEI*, p. 242.

¹³⁴ *TEI*, p. 242.

¹³⁵ *TEI*, p. 240.

¹³⁶ Pierre Machery, *Hegel on Spinoza*, transl. S.M. Rudick. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1979, p. 43.

not begun the process of reflection on knowledge already possessed, which is the path to self-knowledge and wisdom.”¹³⁷

Spinoza further specifies that this method is comprised of two parts. The first consists of distinguishing “the true idea from other perceptions” and preventing the mind “from confusing false, fictitious, and doubtful ideas with true ideas.” The specific character of a true idea, for Spinoza, is intrinsic to the idea itself rather than in any extrinsic relation. As such, he maintains, truth is detected in the idea itself “without reference to other thoughts,” and without assuming “its object as cause.”¹³⁸ The truth of an idea does not consist, then, in either its representation of an object or in its relation to other ideas, but resides *in* the idea itself and depends entirely “on the very power and nature of the intellect.”¹³⁹ As discussed earlier, the imagination, which is the sole source of false or fictitious ideas, is comprised of sensations arising not from the mind alone but from causes outside of itself; as a consequence, imaginings are fortuitous and unconnected.¹⁴⁰ An idea, on the other hand, derives from the intellect itself. To use Spinoza’s example, we can form the concept of a perfect sphere, although no such geometrical shape exists in nature, by positing a cause at will, such as a semicircle rotating around its center. The concept of the sphere is, on its own, true. However, if we were then to, independently of this concept, affirm or claim that a semicircle rotates, we would commit an error, for nothing in the concept of a semicircle implies this motion. Thus, Spinoza concludes, falsity can only enter into ideas by one way—that is, by affirming something of “a thing when it is not contained in the conception we

¹³⁷ *Part of Nature: Self-Knowledge in Spinoza’s Ethics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994, p. 56.

¹³⁸ *TEI*, p. 251.

¹³⁹ *TEI*, p. 251.

¹⁴⁰ *TEI*, p. 251.

have formed of the thing.”¹⁴¹ If the intellect refrains from extending or augmenting this simple idea, it will avoid producing falsehoods.

Thus, if the intellect forms only simple ideas, as opposed to compounded ones, the truth of those ideas is ensured.¹⁴² As long as the mind is comprised of these ideas, it simply has no capacity for confusion or falsehood. This entails, most particularly, preventing the mind from conceiving of things *abstractly*, for the resulting conceptions “always have a wider extension in the intellect than is really possessed by their particular exemplifications existing in Nature.”¹⁴³ The tendency to form abstractions is, as discussed earlier, natural to the mind when it is flooded by sensory impressions so that the differences between things becomes obscured; even the keenest mind may on such occasions confuse the many things in nature whose difference is in fact “so slight as to be hardly perceptible.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, it is of special importance to guard against all forms of abstraction. According to Spinoza, when the mind is comprised only of simple ideas, even the possibility of *doubt* is eliminated. Where there is a simple idea, there is no other idea to complicate it—that is, to raise doubts concerning its truth. In addition to the idea itself, there is only an accompanying awareness *of* that idea. “Doubt arises through another idea, which is not so clear and distinct,” and as such which we can neither admit as true nor exclude as false. Referring to Descartes’ speculation concerning the existence of a deceiving God, Spinoza remarks that such a notion can only be entertained when “we find nothing there to convince us that he is not a deceiver.”¹⁴⁵ This notion, like a ghostly presence in the mind, then induces doubt concerning our belief in

¹⁴¹ *TEI*, p. 252.

¹⁴² *TEI*, p. 252.

¹⁴³ *TEI*, p. 253.

¹⁴⁴ *TEI*, p. 253.

¹⁴⁵ *TEI*, p. 253.

God. However, he observes, if the intellect attends strictly to the clear and distinct ideas it possesses, without contemplating notions as *might* be true, vain, or delusory doubts will have no opportunity to arise.

The second part of the method is concerned with the means of first *attaining* true ideas and then *arranging* them in such an order that “the mind may reproduce in thought the reality of Nature, both as to the whole and as to its parts.” Spinoza warns that scientific enquiry must avoid proceeding from the abstract to the particular, for to rely upon the results of such reasoning, as we have seen, is likely to result in distortion. He advises instead that a thing be conceived strictly through its essence or its proximate cause. If this thing exists in itself, it can only be truly understood through its essence; if, on the contrary, it is not self-caused, it needs to be conceived through its proximate cause.¹⁴⁶ Spinoza claims that the surest means of discovering the nature of real things is to begin with a good definition and, therefore, the second part of this method hinges entirely on “getting to know the conditions of a good definition, and then devising a way to discover them.”¹⁴⁷ He lists several conditions, but the main requirement is that it discloses either the essence, if the thing is self-created, or the proximate cause, if it is a created thing, and that the properties of each may be deduced from the definition. In addition, of the utmost importance is that it is confined to *particulars*, specifically particular fixed and eternal things. It is neither possible, nor necessary to comprehend every mutable thing; they are, to begin with, innumerable and are affected by an infinite number of factors, and secondly, the essences of such things “are not to be elicited from their series or order of existing, which would furnish us with nothing but their extrinsic

¹⁴⁶ *TEI*, p. 257.

¹⁴⁷ *TEI*, p. 257.

characteristics, their relations, or, at the most, their circumstances.”¹⁴⁸ What we would learn from observing a series of transitory things is merely their accidental aspects, rather than their actual essence. In fact, Spinoza tells us, the essences of these things can only be conceived indirectly, by means of proper definitions of singular *eternal* things. As shall be explained shortly, these created things “depend so intimately and essentially (so to phrase it) on the fixed things that they can neither be nor be conceived without them.”¹⁴⁹ As immutable things are the proximate causes of the mutable, it is the essence of these that requires explication.

Finally, with respect to this second part of his method, Spinoza asserts that “as soon as is possible and reason demands, we should ask whether there is a being—and also what kind of being—which is the cause of all things so that its essence represented in thought is also the cause of all our ideas.”¹⁵⁰ By identifying the origin or first cause of all things in nature, we also discover the source of all other ideas; the natural order of things and the intellectual order of ideas parallel one another perfectly and form a coherent unity. Instead of engaging in the futile and digressive enterprise of tracing the endless sequence of transient things, our mind will “reproduce Nature as closely as possible: for it will possess in the form of thought the essence, order, and unity of Nature.”¹⁵¹ Proceeding from this single idea, we can correctly deduce the primary elements of nature without risk of confusion; for just as all real things are derived from a single cause, so too all ideas follow logically from the idea of the same.

¹⁴⁸ *TEI*, p. 259.

¹⁴⁹ *TEI*, p. 259.

¹⁵⁰ *TEI*, p. 259.

¹⁵¹ *TEI*, p. 259.

Spinoza begins his own investigation at precisely this point: identifying the cause of all things and specifying what sort of being it is.

II. God or Nature

The opening page of the *Ethics* contains a series of definitions that, like a set of instruments that one is unexpectedly presented with, have no obvious purpose at first. Each cogently explicates the meaning of that which it refers to but, as a group, they do not suggest or betray their purpose. Though the reader is not initially aware of it, these definitions are the conceptual tools that are essential to our enterprise. Indeed, it is here at this first page that we learn that we, the readers, are to share in it at all; it is, in effect, an invitation to follow the steps in Spinoza's reasoning, to check his progress, to discover for ourselves the conclusions he reaches. Thus he does as he advises the philosopher to do: to refrain from indulging in a dogmatic declaration of truths. As such, his philosophy does not start with a claim that the origin of nature is X, but with several precise and simple definitions that are to serve as our guides. We will not rehearse these here, nor replicate the entire sequence of steps Spinoza takes. What must be noted at the outset, however, is that his positive philosophy expresses precisely that upon which his method is premised: that all of nature, and all of our ideas, have one source, namely God; or, that everything follows from God. Thus, the first section of the *Ethics* is, appropriately, devoted to an exposition of God and the kind of being he is. As is supposed in his method, the first section does not merely precede and introduce the remainder of his study, for God, according to his account, is not prior to and simply the first cause of nature; in this treatise, the beginning contains the end and all that takes place in between.

From several key definitions and a group of axioms, Spinoza arrives at his most contentious conclusion: that “in Nature there exists only one substance,”¹⁵² and that substance is God.¹⁵³ That which has been conceived of as multiple substances, including those of extension and thought, are, he contends, several of infinite attributes of substance. This ancient error has occurred, he explains, as a result of the mutual exclusivity of attributes. The intellect accurately perceives an attribute as revealing the essence of substance,¹⁵⁴ but incorrectly infers that plural substances exist from the fact that it discerns more than one such attribute. This error, in turn, gives rise to more conceptual confusion regarding how these substances are then causally related, that is, how and which one produces another. Spinoza thus contradicts the entire hypothesis that nature is comprised of entities deriving from dual substances; he intends to prove conclusively that nature is one substance, God, of which there are infinite attributes, each of which is expressive of God. Each attribute reveals substance *in its own way* and all do so completely and simultaneously.¹⁵⁵ Accordingly, all things in nature may be apprehended in terms of thought, extension, or some other attribute that is unintelligible to us. We cannot do otherwise than regard an entity under some attribute;¹⁵⁶ but, on the other hand, we may conceivably see it under any attribute. What the intellect discloses is, therefore, not a singular, uniform substance *as such*, but the multiple ways in which it is manifest.

¹⁵² *Ethics* I, P10S.

¹⁵³ *Ethics*, I, P14.

¹⁵⁴ *Ethics*, I, D4.

¹⁵⁵ *Ethics*, I, P10.

¹⁵⁶ *Ethics*, I, P10.

Because Spinoza indicates in places that substance “consists of” its attributes,¹⁵⁷ some commentators, such as E. Curley, have interpreted him as construing substance as either an aggregate or the totality of attributes¹⁵⁸ However, when referring to how attributes are related to substance, Spinoza typically asserts that each attribute “*expresses* the reality or being of substance,”¹⁵⁹ which is itself singular. As G. Deleuze suggests, attributes do not introduce a quantitative or numerical distinction into substance but a qualitative or real distinction. In this sense, a single substance can be said to be a “qualitative multiplicity.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, each attribute is, ontologically, one of infinite aspects or explications *of* substance. The terms ‘expressing’ or ‘explicating’ could signify reflecting or mirroring substance, or, alternatively, in some manner actualizing it. Though Spinoza does not specify his intended meaning, it seems very possible that he is referring to some combination of these meanings. By his description, attributes are not entirely external to substance, or, like properties, that which adhere to it, and as such, they cannot be said to “mirror” substance, in the sense of representing a likeness of it. Though Deleuze contends that “attributes are not so much mirrors as dynamic or genetic elements,”¹⁶¹ there is no clear indication that Spinoza regarded them in this way either. In fact, there is no real textual evidence to support the idea that he regarded them as actualizations of substance. Yet, Deleuze’s analysis, as G. Lloyd points out, emphasizes the fact that the expressiveness of attributes is “no passive reflection, but an active, dynamic articulation.”¹⁶² Another and, in my view, more probable interpretation is that they are in fact *ways of being* where there is no distinguishable “being in-itself.” They may

¹⁵⁷ *Ethics*, I, D6.

¹⁵⁸ See Chpt. 1 of *Behind the Geometrical Method*.

¹⁵⁹ *Ethics*, I, P10S, italics mine.

¹⁶⁰ G. Deleuze develops this idea of the expressive character of attributes in Chpt. 1 of *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*.

¹⁶¹ *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, pp. 80-81.

¹⁶² *Spinoza and the Ethics*, p. 30.

be described as analogous, in this way, to bodily expressions; all such expressions are of necessity attributable to a feeling, which, in turn, necessarily has an expression of some sort. An “expression,” then, is intimately a part of, and manifests, what it is an expression of, without constituting it *per se*.¹⁶³ This interpretation to some extent straddles both Deleuze’s view of an attribute as dynamic or effusive, and that of J. Bennett, who describes it as a “basic and irreducible way of being.”¹⁶⁴

Ultimately, Spinoza refrains from conjecturing what substance is, *in itself*, other than a unity that has multiple ways of being. As Bennett argues, the distinction that Spinoza draws between substance and attribute is not “contentful” but strictly formal. That is, substance remains “that which has” any one attribute but which has no additional content that distinguishes it from any such attribute.¹⁶⁵ The question nevertheless remains why Spinoza would omit any explanation of how this one substance differs from its plural expressions, except numerically.¹⁶⁶ It could be that he required no such explanation. It seems, in fact, that his primary concern is with the ways in which the essence of substance is *perceived*, and in correcting the view that a multiplicity of attributes implies a multiplicity of substances. This interpretation of Spinoza’s intent here is supported by the fact that he defines an attribute strictly as “that which the *intellect perceives* of substance as constituting its essence.”¹⁶⁷ What the mind actually perceives is extension and thought; what is incorrectly inferred from this perception is that dual substances exist. This definition does not imply that either attributes

¹⁶³ Incidentally, this analogy implies that, contrary to the assumptions of idealism, what is expressed, e.g. a feeling, exists in and through its expression (and not apart from it) but, contrary to the presuppositions of behaviourism or crude materialism, what is expressed, e.g. a feeling, is nevertheless more than the sum total of its expressions.

¹⁶⁴ *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, p. 61.

¹⁶⁵ *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, pp. 62-63.

¹⁶⁶ See E. Curley’s discussion of this question in *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza’s Ethics*.

¹⁶⁷ *Ethics*, I, D4, italics mine.

are *only* conceptions the intellect forms of substance, or that they could be different from the conception of them.¹⁶⁸ It simply specifies how the intellect *is related to* substance; it suggests that the intellect invariably conceives of substance *as being* X or Y (i.e.. thought or extension) in essence. Spinoza thus places special emphasis, in this case, on the epistemic aspect (the way in which we perceive substance) over the ontological aspect (the nature of the substance that is perceived) of attributes. He accordingly stresses that God is known only *in* and *through* his expressions, and that we cannot know what he is *besides* these expressions. Thus, he tells us, we distinctly perceive that God is a thinking thing *and* an extended thing; he is as thoroughly “corporeal” as he is completely “spiritual.” According to this reading, then, there is no real discrepancy between Spinoza’s definition of attribute and his assertion that substance has infinite attributes. The first, as said, concerns how and what we know about substance. Given that he so defines attributes, and the significance he assigns to definitions as such, it seems that this statement should be given priority. In addition, it is consistent both with his strategy of beginning with what is already known, that is, with existing true ideas, and proceeding from these to what is as yet unknown, and also with his overall purpose, that is, of *emending the intellect* so that it is capable of true self-knowledge. Spinoza arrives at his second conclusion concerning the infinity of attributes in the following way: he deduces that the greater the reality or being of substance, or God, the more attributes it must have; or, in other words, that an absolutely infinite substance must have infinite attributes.¹⁶⁹ His purpose here is to prove that there is only *one* substance in nature, complete and perfect in itself. In other words, this proof aims to establish that God or substance is all of reality, or

¹⁶⁸ For further explanation of this point see G. Deleuze in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, p. 34, 61-64 and A. Donagan in *Spinoza*, p. 70.

¹⁶⁹ *Ethics* I, P9 & P10S and *Short Treatise*, Chpt. II, 17.

that reality is nothing but God. It follows from this conclusion that any *possible* conception of reality must relate to some attribute.¹⁷⁰

What does he, then, deduce about the nature of substance? He finds that God is an “absolutely infinite being,”¹⁷¹ or boundless, indivisible¹⁷² substance; that God is eternal and immutable¹⁷³ is also evident from the fact that his attributes are thus. God does not, by his account, reign over this world while residing in some transcendent realm; he *is* this world. To say that all is ‘in’ God is perhaps misleading, for it again implies that God contains or encompasses everything, while he himself remains at a remove.¹⁷⁴ It would also not be quite accurate to interpret Spinoza as asserting the reverse, namely that God is ‘in’ everything, for this suggests that things are vessels suffused with divine substance. Spinoza unequivocally treats God and substance as synonymous; there is nothing as such that makes God distinct from the world. However, God as “being-in-itself” does not confront us *as such* in the world; we only ever encounter the world under a particular attribute. Thus, God is not reducible to *our* world, or to any of his myriad expressions. God is fully expressed as extended matter and as thought, but is equivalent to neither one nor the other, nor the two combined.¹⁷⁵ While Spinoza thus preserves the notion of God as total irreducible Being, he in no sense concedes

¹⁷⁰ See G. Lloyd’s analysis of this topic in Chpt. 2 of *Spinoza and the Ethics*.

¹⁷¹ *Ethics*, I, D6.

¹⁷² *Ethics*, P13. Spinoza explains in a letter to Ludwig Meyer, dated April 20, 1663, that the “strong natural tendency to divide extended Substance” results from conceiving quantity abstractly, “as we have it in the imagination with the help of the senses.” By the imagination, then, a quantity is calculated numerically, be it a measure of time—that is, duration—or of substance. The intellect, on the other hand, rightly conceives of substance as eternal and indivisible.

¹⁷³ *Ethics*, II, P1 & P2.

¹⁷⁴ Spinoza himself does state that “whatever is, is in God” (*Ethics*, P15) but I am inclined to conclude that he meant something like “a part of God,” given that he clearly does not mean that all things are “in” God like water is “in” a glass.

¹⁷⁵ For a discussion of the relationship between God and the world see G. Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics*, pp. 38–41.

that God is transcendent. Accordingly, he advances the bold and puzzling thesis that *God is nature*. Denying God of transcendence would appear to rob him of precisely that which makes him god-like. But Spinoza does not thereby cause God to perish; rather, he places him in a newly redeemed nature.

Only once God has been severed from nature—posited as prior to and a directing intellect concealed obliquely behind it—does nature devolve into mundane matter or purposeless force. By re-uniting them Spinoza does not thereby abolish what is godlike in God, or erroneously reduce the creator to his creation; if this were the case, he would be at fault for wrongly conflating two distinct powers. But he argues, as we have seen, that firstly these two powers do not exist as such but are the fanciful work of the imagination. Secondly, and more significantly, he insists that the truth about nature is obscured by the generations of fiction that are superimposed on it. Spinoza’s unity of *God or nature* will prove to be dramatically different from our accepted notions of each separately. In itself, this unity figures at once as both, in his terms, “*natura naturans*” and “*natura naturata*.” The first is the one “God or nature” as it is “in itself and conceived through itself.”¹⁷⁶ This is the aspect we have considered thus far, namely, substance as “total being, beyond which there is no being,”¹⁷⁷ expressed in infinite attributes. *Natura naturans*, then, is “God or nature” considered *as such*, as that which exists and acts freely, or solely from its own nature.¹⁷⁸ It could be said to approach the religious notion of God most closely to the extent that God figures as the

¹⁷⁶ *Ethics*, I, P29 S. Earlier in this chapter I suggested that Spinoza does not assign any positive content to substance that would make it distinct from its various attributes. Therefore, I interpret the phrase God or nature “in itself” as merely signifying substance as (to use J. Bennett’s phrase) “that which has” a multiplicity of expressions.

¹⁷⁷ *TEI*, p. 253.

¹⁷⁸ *Ethics*, I, P17C2; *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, Chpt. VIII & IX.

active principle and free cause; however, in Spinoza's account, he is radically reconfigured as immanent. The second refers to "all that follows from the necessity of God's nature, that is, from the necessity of each one of God's attributes."¹⁷⁹ This second aspect we shall consider next: it is that which reveals the plenitude of finite things in nature, all of which follow from and must be conceived through the attributes. These things too are of "God or nature" as its modal incarnations, in other words, all of earthly life that comes to be and passes away.¹⁸⁰

Thus *natura naturata* bears some affinity to the old conception of nature except that forms of life are not regarded as the product of God's will but as intrinsically a part of nature.

Some commentators, including E. Curley and J. Collins, argue that despite Spinoza's use of the phrase "God or Nature," implying an equivalence between these two terms, he does not actually intend to posit a relation of strict identity between them. More specifically, it could be that he means merely to identify God with the first, active part of nature, *natura naturans*, and to exclude him from the second, passive part. So interpreted, Spinoza's division of nature involves a categorical distinction between God as creator or first cause and his creation.¹⁸¹ Admittedly, as mentioned, each of these two parts respectively bears a resemblance to the traditional conceptions of God and nature; but such a resemblance may only signify that Spinoza was not entirely able to divest himself of the limitations imposed by language and the restricted currency of concepts available to him in his own time. However,

¹⁷⁹ *Ethics*, P29 S.

¹⁸⁰ It should also be noted that *natura naturata* also includes infinite modes, such as motion and rest, which are not transient.

¹⁸¹ See Chpt. 1 of *Behind the Geometrical Method* and Chpt. 2 of *Spinoza on Nature*. One reason for wanting to preserve some distinction between God and nature and identifying the first with the active part of nature, is to avoid suggesting that God could be acted upon as this, to Spinoza, signifies a "palpable imperfection." However, Spinoza is careful to distinguish being acted upon by another or by oneself and thus clarifies that "one can never say of such an agent [as God], which acts in himself, that he has the imperfection of being acted on, because he is not acted on by another...since it is an immanent cause, who would dare say that it is imperfect when it is acted on by itself?" (*Short Treatise*, Chapt. II, 24).

his division of nature also does not necessarily entail this distinction, and to reintroduce the latter is inconsistent with his unequivocal charge that positing a duality of powers, one divine and the other natural, is false. Neither God nor nature in their customary guises is indicated in Spinoza's twofold nature; in his philosophy, *both* are "dead." In their place stands a simple unity of the divine and the natural, one that is not adequately expressed as an ill-fitting compound or complex of two opposed powers.¹⁸² It is more appropriate to regard this twofold nature as having complementary aspects or "faces." *Natura naturans*, then, would be the "face" of nature that is universal and eternal; it consists of the unchanging attributes of extension, thought, and the other attributes. *Natura naturata*, on the other hand, is the aspect of nature that discloses a multiplicity of finite things or modes. Both parts are equally real aspects of God or nature.¹⁸³

One point of confusion yet remains: in what sense is this newly conceived God the "origin" of nature? How is it that all forms of life, or modes, are "created" by this God? Spinoza reveals that two divergent paths of enquiry are available to us in answering the question of how things come to be, depending on which of two orders of causes we attend to.¹⁸⁴

Scientific reasoning charts the common order of causes in nature and, accordingly, renders an explanation that gives priority to the *sequence* of things. It observes that each mode is

¹⁸² In the *Short Treatise* Spinoza refers to God as a "simple being" and indicates that all "parts" attributed to nature are "beings of reason" as opposed to "actual beings" (Chpt. II, 18).

¹⁸³ On the other side, W. Montag suggests that there is not, strictly speaking, *any* equation between God and nature because they are not reversible; "instead, the first term is translated into and then displaced by the second" (*Bodies, Masses, Power*, p. 5). Thus God is reinterpreted as nature and, in the process, vanishes into it. I agree with Montag's claim to some extent but would add that it is essential that the second term, nature, be first reinterpreted. As I've suggested, our conception of nature itself needs to be revised before our conception of God is dissolved into it. Otherwise, as Montag mentions a few pages later, nature simply remains essentially "a secondary, distant expression of something more real, as a mere means to the end of God's will" (p. 7) like a shadow in the absence of a body, or clay without a potter to give it shape.

¹⁸⁴ See Stuart Hampshire's discussion of this topic in "Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. 46 (1960), pp. 188-89.

causally determined to exist and to act by some other mode, and this mode by another, and so on ad infinitum.¹⁸⁵ Consequently, no mode freely decides to conduct itself as it does but is constrained in its actions. By Spinoza's definition, it cannot act by "free necessity" as God does, because it issues from the cause preceding it. Every finite thing, "however complex its structure and varied its functions," is akin to a stone that "receives from the impulsion of an external cause a fixed quantity of motion whereby it will continue to move when the impulsion of the external cause has ceased."¹⁸⁶ Each cause imparts a quantity of force to its effect that, in turn, defines the nature of that effect. Every mode can thus be seen as occupying a position, and persisting for a limited duration, within an endless sequence of causes and effects. In sum, then, this line of reasoning inquires into the order of things as they appear in nature, from which it derives knowledge of the *properties* of these things. However, another path of enquiry, concluding in what Spinoza terms "intuitive" knowledge, is, in his estimation, superior insofar as it grasps the *essence* of things through a conception of the essence of nature as a whole. This is the route to knowledge that he alludes to in his outline of a method for conducting a proper study of nature.

Recall that Spinoza maintains that from the idea of God, rightly conceived, all other ideas will logically follow. If the resulting order of ideas is to precisely pattern the order of things in nature,¹⁸⁷ as he further promises, then modes must necessarily follow from God. In fact, he proposes that, "from the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinite things in infinite ways."¹⁸⁸ All modes, then, are derived causally and logically from God or nature.

¹⁸⁵ *Ethics*, I, P28.

¹⁸⁶ Letter to G. H. Schuller, October 1674.

¹⁸⁷ *Ethics*, II, P7.

¹⁸⁸ *Ethics*, I, P16.

Whether God or nature is conceived of in terms of thought or extension, “we find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes.”¹⁸⁹ A sequence of ideas and a corresponding series of things proceed necessarily from this unity. Therefore, God is the first cause of all things occurring in nature,¹⁹⁰ but he is such immanently. As J. Collins explains, Spinoza’s account of nature categorically excludes “any cause whose firstness consists in a claim to subsist apart from nature and to originate nature as a realm of being that is entirely other than itself.”¹⁹¹ Spinoza maintains that God or nature is a first cause, while at the same time denying that it is transcendent. Consequently, any real distinction between creator and creation disappears. Moreover, this “naturalized” God, unlike his previous transcendent version, does not possess a free will by which he chooses to create or not to create that which appears in his intellect. Consequently, he also does not, as Leibniz supposed, select the best of all possible worlds; all that appears in nature is “everything that can come within the scope of infinite intellect.”¹⁹² That all things come to be from the necessity or “laws” of God’s nature does not mean, however, that he is himself constrained in his actions. Nothing exists externally to God, and hence, he must be self-caused.¹⁹³ Spinoza must dismantle the most persistent prejudices to establish that God neither creates by will nor by constraint;¹⁹⁴ by his account, God is free, indeed, he has the greatest freedom, precisely because he “exists solely from the necessity of [his] own nature” and is not

¹⁸⁹ *Ethics*, I, P7S.

¹⁹⁰ *Ethics*, I, P16 C3.

¹⁹¹ *Spinoza on Nature*, p. 111.

¹⁹² *Ethics*, I, P16.

¹⁹³ *Ethics*, I, P17.

¹⁹⁴ See for instance his reply to Hugh Boxel, in a letter from October 1674, in which he attempts to clarify that constraint and necessity are not synonymous, and that necessity and freedom are not contraries. He explains that the fact “that a man wills to live, to love, etc. does not proceed from constraint, but is nevertheless necessary, and far more so is God’s will to be, to know and to act.”

prompted to action by anything else.¹⁹⁵ Thus Spinoza rejects the idea of free decision and in its place designates what he terms “free necessity.”¹⁹⁶

Every particular mode, according to Spinoza, expresses “in a definite and determinate way the power of God whereby he is and acts, and no thing can have in itself anything by which it can be destroyed, that is which can annul its existence.”¹⁹⁷ Things possess a power or, to be more precise, they *are* a power, which is the same as God’s; in other words, that a thing exists means that it is a definite expression of God’s power. Again, it is clear that Spinoza is not suggesting that God assigns a portion of power or a measure of perfection to things.

There is no species of nature that is either refused or granted a share of God’s power because all alike are manifestations of this power. This also means that there can be nothing intrinsic to a thing that would cause its demise; anything that is adverse or hostile to a thing must be, in origin at least, external to it.¹⁹⁸ Spinoza says that it “opposes everything that can annul its existence; and thus as far as it can and as far as it is in itself, it endeavours to persist in its own being.”¹⁹⁹ It is precisely this endeavouring, or *conatus*, that constitutes the essence of particular things. Though the term *conatus* refers to a basic drive or inherent tendency common to all forms of life, it should not be construed as a capacity or property of such things. *Conatus* is *equivalent* to power and, as mentioned, things themselves are such a power

¹⁹⁵ *Ethics*, I, D7.

¹⁹⁶ Letter to G. H. Schuller, October 1674.

¹⁹⁷ *Ethics*, III, P6 P.

¹⁹⁸ Interestingly, Spinoza attributes even acts of suicide to “unobservable external causes” that transform the body that it possesses a “nature contrary to the previously existing one, a nature whereof there can be no idea in mind” (*Ethics*, IV, P20 S).

¹⁹⁹ *Ethics*, III, P6 P.

(that is, a determinate expression of God's power). Therefore, a particular thing *is*, in essence, "the power or conatus by which it endeavours to persist in its own being."²⁰⁰

What does it mean, then, for a thing to persist in its own being? It does not entail identity over time in terms of substance, but in terms of a constant ratio of motion and rest among the parts of the body. The body is composed of various parts, each of which possesses a different nature; its self-identity is a function of an unvarying relation among these parts and is not contingent upon any part remaining the same substantially. Distinguishing one body from another, then, is a certain ratio of motion and rest that is preserved among its multiple parts.²⁰¹ Given that the body is a multiplicity of different, smaller, bodies, it requires "for its preservation a great many other bodies, by which, as it were, it is continually regenerated."²⁰² Each constitutive body depends upon other, external bodies for its survival. A complex body, however, requires that its numerous parts sustain the same proportion of motion and rest among themselves. In sum, then, the survival of the body involves a constant communication among diverse bodies both internal and external to it; it entails a constant change, in the form of a regeneration of parts singly, *and* a strict identity of the motion among parts in combination. The conatus or power of the human body, being the *power of activity*, strives to sustain an unvarying relation of motion and rest among its parts; the conatus or power of its plural parts, on the other hand, aims to preserve the nature (which is to say, the particular motion) of each part singly.

²⁰⁰ *Ethics*, III, P7 P.

²⁰¹ *Ethics*, II, P13 D.

²⁰² *Ethics*, II, P13 Post 4.

To the extent that the human body is favourably affected by other bodies—appropriating or combining with them—its power of activity is increased; these other bodies, with their diverse natures, join the existing parts of the human body, and act in unison with them. The human body thereby acquires greater *breadth*, becoming more variegated and expansive than it had been previously; in turn, moreover, it becomes still more amenable to affecting and being affected by other bodies.²⁰³ Therefore, an increase in power of activity does not imply that the body's ability to persist as it *was* has improved; if this were the case, the body must remain continuously the same, while its power is nevertheless variable, and no such distinction can be made between a body and its power of activity. Whenever this power is augmented, the body is itself enhanced. Furthermore, given that the human mind is “basically nothing else but the idea of an individual actually existing thing,”²⁰⁴ namely the body, its own conatus or power, being the *power of thought*, is contingent upon that of the body. Any change in the mind's power to perceive, then, is coincidental with a change in the body's power to act; as such, the mind's capacity to perceive many things “will vary in proportion to the variety of states which its body can assume.”²⁰⁵ In sum, then, for a thing to persist means that it preserves an unvarying ratio of motion and rest among the parts of its body. It does not strictly entail that a body remain *in every respect the same*, though its form be identical; it can and does undergo increase, expansion, growth, or the opposite.

Conclusion

²⁰³ Accordingly, Spinoza advises that it is the “part of the wise man to make use of things and to take pleasure in them as far as he can...for the human body is composed of many parts of various kinds which are continually in need of fresh and varied nourishment...” (*Ethics*, IV, S2)

²⁰⁴ *Ethics*, II, P13.

²⁰⁵ *Ethics*, II, P14.

For Spinoza, conceiving of God or nature in the aspect of *natura naturans* has priority procedurally although it has no real priority. By attending at first to this aspect exclusively, our investigation is not waylaid by digressions into the infinite series of modes but proceeds directly to the one genetic source they all share. In other words, we find our initial footing in the unity that is explicated in a plurality of modes, the one total being of *natura naturans* richly variegated in the manifold *natura naturata*. This radical thesis can perhaps be best understood if we reflect upon the fact that, for Spinoza, God or nature as such is perfect or, what amounts to the same thing, has absolute power; lacking nothing, it could not be other than what it is. Particular things in nature are expressions of this perfect nature. Thus, modes originate in, and express, the perfect fullness of God or nature.²⁰⁶ What is of special significance in Spinoza's account of God is that he denies that God performs discrete acts or has a supreme agency and instead describes him as an essentially expressive being; God is thus neither active nor passive in the usual sense but like the sun ceaselessly emanating heat and light. From his perfect nature a bounty of things come into being.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, given the perfection of God or nature, things also "could not have been produced in any other way or in any other order than is the case."²⁰⁸ There is no deliberate design by which things are created; they occur when and how they do of necessity. It thus follows that modes also *cannot be other than what they are*, but each has its measure of perfection and power owing to the fact that "they have necessarily followed from a most perfect nature."²⁰⁹ According to

²⁰⁶ G. Lloyd also notes the connotation of "the fullness or plenitude of divine perfection" in Spinoza's account of God and observes that this echoes earlier ideas of the same (*Spinoza and the Ethics*, p. 30).

²⁰⁷ In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza makes this connection between freedom and perfection more obvious; there he states that God's freedom consists in His being the cause of all perfection through His own perfection (Chpt. IV, 5) and, later, he adds that His freedom does not consist in doing or not doing something, but "what makes [God] do something can be nothing other than his own perfection (Chpt. IV, 8).

²⁰⁸ *Ethics*, I, P33.

²⁰⁹ *Ethics*, I, P33 S2.

Spinoza, then, God or nature, and all that issues from this unity,²¹⁰ is necessary; due to the absolute perfection or power of the whole, neither it, nor its plurality of modes, could be different.

As we have learned, every finite thing comes into being out of God's or nature's necessity. But their connection to God or nature does not end here; they continue to be and to act only if determined to do so;²¹¹ moreover, "a thing which has been determined by God to act in a particular way cannot render itself undetermined."²¹² Thus, all things are produced and proceed from the universal laws of nature, or God; that is, everything happens solely through the power of nature or God.²¹³ There are no exceptions to this rule, for the laws of nature, according to which all things "act in one and the same fixed and determinate manner" are absolutely binding.²¹⁴ Such laws are clearly not imposed as imperatives, or decrees delivered by a God who is not subject to them.²¹⁵ In so far as modes are the progeny of, and depend entirely on nature, they are instantiations of this law. This is not to say that modes have no power or perfection of their own, only that they have such by virtue of their being *a part of nature*.²¹⁶

²¹⁰ It should be noted that, as God or nature as such is only manifest in infinite attributes, modes do not derive directly from God as such, but originally from his attributes (Ethics, I, P25 C). Specifically, a class of 'universal' modes, of which we know only two—Motion and Intellect—follow immediately from the attributes, and from these, in turn, are produced all particular modes. Spinoza discusses this point in Chapter 9 of the *Short Treatise* and P 22 and P23 of Part 1 of the *Ethics*.

²¹¹ *Ethics*, I, P26.

²¹² *Ethics*, I, P27.

²¹³ *TPT*, Chpt. 3.

²¹⁴ *TPT*, Chpt. 4.

²¹⁵ G. Deleuze discusses this point in connection with Spinoza's analysis of the story of Genesis in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, p. 58.

²¹⁶ See G. Deleuze's treatment of the connection between the power of God or substance and that of modes in Chpt. 5 of *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*.

CHAPTER 4: PERFECTING (HUMAN) NATURE

However, Spinoza's ultimate end is not simply to present a well-crafted and seamless account of nature. His primary task is, from the beginning to the end, an *ethical* one. Recall that Spinoza specifies that providing an account of nature as it actually is, divested of countless species of anthropomorphisms, is only a means to another end; more strangely, it is also a means for *defining* that end. At the beginning of his inquiry, Spinoza asserts that his sole objective is to find a remedy for those persisting ills that he had only just diagnosed as being such. He resolves to discover what he has no knowledge of: a corrective for the illness he had mistaken for health, liberty from the bondage he had regarded as freedom, a true good to replace the numerous counterfeit goods he had formerly pursued. So, finally, we must return to the questions that initiated Spinoza's inquiry: what *is* the supreme good that continuously eludes us, despite our tireless searches? And *how* is it to be attained? At the beginning, he sets out to discover and himself acquire the *one* good that he remains certain of because it is the final end of all of our actions: the greatest power. Such power, he concludes, is one and the same as human *perfection*; initially, then, it is the *enjoyment* of this perfection that he calls the *supreme good*.²¹⁷ Regardless of the sort of petty good that is sought after—be it sensual pleasure, wealth, or honour—and how it is sought, it is in itself *not* that which we really want. We are unconscious both of the fact that perfecting our nature *is* our ultimate end and of what this perfection consists. Spinoza himself is also, at first, only conscious of this much; he too does not know what, substantively, human perfection consists of. Rather than begin by fabricating a model of perfection out of thin air, and subsequently identifying

²¹⁷ *TEI*, p. 235.

what fits that model, he proceeds in the reverse order. He names the *means* to this end, the primary one being to acquire *sufficient* knowledge of the nature of things and our own nature; in so doing, coincidentally, he also begins to articulate the nature of this perfection. Having determined what nature *as such* is, he derives a true understanding of human nature; from this understanding, in turn, a model of human perfection finally *suggests itself*.

There is one insight, nonetheless, that Spinoza conveys at the very start concerning such perfection. He detects a paradox in virtually all human activity: that it consistently aims at securing certain goods, and that these goods are *intrinsically corrupting*. As mentioned earlier, he observes that individuals strive incessantly to enjoy sensual pleasures, to amass riches, to win honour, and yet those who succeed rarely profit from these goods. In fact, he notes, these goods are “frequently the cause of the destruction of those who gain possession of them, and invariably the cause of the destruction of those who are possessed by them.”²¹⁸

Those, on the other hand, who strive in vain for, or eventually lose, such coveted prizes suffer also. Both success and failure in these pursuits, then, will procure a loss or injury and, as such, it appears to be the good *itself* that is the cause of these evils. What Spinoza concludes from his realization of this fact will form the basis for his explication of human perfection: “that all happiness or unhappiness depends solely on the quality of the object to which we are bound by love.”²¹⁹ If this object is by nature uncertain—that is, it can only be possessed temporarily—then the love of it will also be the cause of sorrow or envy. Love of perishable things, then, is likely to incur strife, but love of eternal things promises only joy.²²⁰ Moreover, joy is *essentially* conducive to human perfection, while strife is antithetical to it.

²¹⁸ *TEI*, p. 234.

²¹⁹ *TEI*, p. 234-5.

²²⁰ *TEI*, p. 235.

At the beginning then Spinoza knows only that his sole objective is to find a supreme good, and that this good is the enjoyment of human perfection; he has, in addition, discerned that it consists in the love of something eternal. But he has no insight at that point into the real nature of this perfection and, as such, he is not cognizant of the way in which it is specifically connected to love. He is confronted with a peculiar predicament: he must, of necessity, identify something that he cannot, in his present state, conceive of with any clarity. He recognizes that all the accepted notions of what is good and bad are useless to him; in fact, he knows these to be essentially misleading. He also realizes that he cannot dispense with these terms altogether, for in their most general sense, they simply signify that which is and is not conducive to precisely that which he seeks. He proposes, therefore, to invest them with a new meaning; “in what follows,” he says, “I shall mean by ‘good’ that which we certainly know to be the means of our approaching nearer to the model of human nature we set before ourselves, and by ‘bad’ that which we certainly know prevents us from reproducing the said model.”²²¹ The obvious question then is: how is it possible to decide what is good and bad in the *absence* of such a model? He intimates that he desires to “form the idea of a man which we may look to as a model of human nature” and has retained these terms *for this purpose*. Beginning with only his minimal conception of perfection *as power*, he turns to the task of mapping out the means for attaining it. But as he describes each of these means—which he calls *true goods*—the idea of perfection *itself*, or of the type of individual who embodies it, gradually comes into relief.

I. Knowledge as the Primary True Good

²²¹ *Ethics*, IV, Preface.

In Chapter 2, we discussed the first of four conditions that Spinoza identifies as necessary for achieving his end. It consists in obtaining “an exact knowledge of our nature which we wish to perfect, and at the same time to know as much of the nature of things as is necessary.”²²² This first condition may be called the *primary true good* insofar as the remaining three all follow from it. Moreover, for Spinoza, it is only upon discovering the truth about our *actual* nature that we can ascertain how to perfect it. In his ensuing investigation it becomes evident that such knowledge cannot be garnered by means of empirical observation, which only discerns certain *apparent* facts about human nature. A study of this sort would err insofar as it tends to confuse matters of fact with necessary truths concerning its object. It must, given its own methodological commitments, *assume* precisely that which Spinoza regards as either false or inessential—for instance, that things that are presumed to benefit human interests are good and, conversely, those that appear to harm these same interests are bad. Spinoza’s method, on the other hand, seeks to understand things in terms of their *own* particular essences and not merely in terms of how they affect us. By selecting this method, he makes a decisive move to divest his analysis of any sort of anthropocentric bias. He has confidence that, using his intellect as his guide, he will perceive the real nature of things, independent of human preferences. Yet, once again, Spinoza has no real interest in disclosing the truth about things *per se*; his initial motive in this context is not to know things in their *distinctiveness*, but only insofar as is necessary to comprehend human nature and what it is *capable of*.

The conclusion that Spinoza arrives at with respect to the nature of things is, as we saw, antagonistic to our anthropocentric biases: namely, that human beings, like all other things,

²²² *TEI*, p. 238.

are a *part of nature*. Each person and thing is, more precisely, an expression of the power (or reality) of God or nature; as such, each is itself essentially a power, or a *conatus*, by which it strives to preserve itself. It follows that nothing in nature, considered *in itself*, can be imperfect or deficient. Insofar as the nature of things is necessarily derived from the perfect nature of God, all things possess some measure of perfection that is co-extensive with their essence.²²³ Spinoza clarifies that when a thing passes from a state of perfection to its opposite, or vice versa, it does not undergo a change in *form* but remains substantively identical; rather, its *power of action* has been enhanced or diminished.²²⁴ To say that it is more perfect is to say that it has become more capable of both affecting and of being affected by things; if it is less perfect, this capacity has, conversely, suffered a diminution. Accordingly, he recommends that the perfection of things be judged “solely from their own nature and power,” without regard to “the extent that they please or offend human senses, serve or oppose human interests.”²²⁵ In order to have true knowledge of something it is not sufficient to merely observe how it appears to me, for then I will have discerned an affect, or “myself-in-relation-to-the-thing.” I will have learned very little about the nature of that thing, its composition, or its relative *power*, or about the nature of my own body. More importantly, I will have also, consequently, neglected to discover how that thing is actually *capable of* affecting me, be it adversely or favourably, profoundly or only slightly. Such pragmatic knowledge is precisely what Spinoza is concerned with at this point.

²²³ Letter, January 1665.

²²⁴ *Ethics*, IV, Preface.

²²⁵ *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

The second means or true good follows upon the first. It entails accurately inferring “the differences, agreements, and oppositions of things.”²²⁶ Having acquired some knowledge of the nature of things, it is possible to rightly conceive how these things are really, as opposed to fortuitously, connected to one another and, more importantly for our purposes, to our selves. In Spinoza’s account, things that *differ* in nature are, of necessity, mutually exclusive. He explains that they differ strictly in terms of a difference in the relative proportion of motion and rest that is definitive of their respective bodies. As a consequence, they cannot communicate their motion to one another—like two terms in a disjunction, they remain irrevocably separate. However, Spinoza distinguishes a relation of difference from one of disagreement, without assuming that the first implies the second. Even things that differ in their entirety, and not only in respect of a composite part, may exist together harmoniously, as do various species of flora within a forest or the several planetary systems within our galaxy. Whatever effect results from their co-mingling, it will be inconsequential in terms of their respective essence, for neither is capable of augmenting or detracting from the power or *conatus* of the other.²²⁷ Therefore, things that share nothing in common are merely indifferent to one another. That which *agrees* in nature, on the other hand, necessarily combines and, as a result, “they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one singly.”²²⁸ Things that are compatible, then, do change each other essentially, insofar as they now form a single body, though without disrupting the coherence or order intrinsic to each. The greater the agreement, the more both will profit from their union.²²⁹ Finally, *opposing* or contrary things always diminish their respective power insofar as their encounters upset this

²²⁶ *TEI*, p. 239.

²²⁷ *Ethics*, IV, P29.

²²⁸ *Ethics*, IV, P18 S.

²²⁹ *Ethics*, IV, P31 C.

internal coherence.²³⁰ While agreement is thus conducive to preserving the integrity of a thing, opposition does the reverse, resulting ultimately in its disintegration.

The third good is implied by the second. As a result of identifying how things are *actually* related to each other, we are able “to conceive aright the extent to which things can, and cannot, be acted upon.”²³¹ As we have seen, the manner in which things coincide or intersect, given their natures, is not a matter of idle interest. It is precisely in these encounters that each thing’s power of activity is affected, favourably or adversely. To put it more plainly, we, who are these variable powers, are *constituted by* our interactions with other things. Spinoza depicts bodies as constantly impinging on one another, forming wholes or dividing into parts, imparting or impeding motion, assisting or refracting each other in their trajectories. Yet they are not, as seems to be suggested, analogous to billiard balls that merely collide; the meeting of bodies, according to Spinoza, affects them intrinsically. These relations are more like chemical processes in which the combined elements are altered by the interaction of their properties; their effect upon the bodies is, to varying degrees, either formative or destructive. Therefore, by determining the nature of the relations among things, we can also measure the extent to which things are resistant or receptive to the influence of other things. It becomes possible to assess the relative magnitude of each thing’s power or, in other words, to predict the *force* with which one thing can impact upon another, to the benefit or detriment of the latter. If that which is opposed in kind enters into some relation, both will suffer some loss as a consequence; but if the force exerted by one far exceeds the other, it could injure or destroy its opponent while suffering only slightly itself. Just as the

²³⁰ *Ethics*, IV, P30 P.

²³¹ *TEI*, p. 239.

qualities of agreement, disagreement, and opposition are, in every case, relative, so are these quantities of power; as such, Spinoza comments, “there is in Nature no individual thing that is not surpassed in strength and power by some other thing.”²³² Regardless of the kind of thing it is, or the measure of its force, “there is another more powerful by which the said thing can be destroyed.”²³³ Only nature *as a whole* is not surpassed in power by anything else.

The fourth and final good also derives from the one preceding it. Correctly estimating the power of things ultimately enables us “to compare this result with the nature and power of man.”²³⁴ Once we acknowledge that we are a part of nature, and nothing besides, we must also admit that the force by which we continue to exist is limited insofar as it is “infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes.”²³⁵ It is by knowing ourselves to be thoroughly natural that we become fully cognizant of the fact that we are not autonomous, self-determining beings. We realize that, as creatures of nature, we are necessarily to some degree *passive* or only the partial cause of that which occurs in or to us. Contrary to what our anthropocentric legacy had long taught us, we cannot “be conceived independently of other parts”²³⁶ of nature to which we are intrinsically connected. In truth, we are largely constituted by affects born of our interactions with others, rather than sovereign beings who remain impervious to external influence. The intensity or resilience of a passive emotion is not defined by our conatus alone but is in each instance decided “by the power of external causes *compared with* our own power.”²³⁷ When the power of any such cause surpasses our

²³² *Ethics*, IV, Axiom.

²³³ *Ethics*, IV, Axiom.

²³⁴ *TEI*, p. 239.

²³⁵ *Ethics*, IV, P3.

²³⁶ *Ethics*, IV, P2.

²³⁷ *Ethics*, IV, P5. Italics mine.

own, the affect elicited by our encounter will persevere; it subsides only when this cause, and the affect it evokes, is eventually replaced by another which is stronger.²³⁸ Thus, Spinoza cautions us that “it is impossible for a man not to be a part of Nature and not to undergo changes other than those which can be understood solely through his own nature.”²³⁹ It is inevitable that we will be subject to passive affects, that we will follow the “common order of Nature,” either combining with or deflecting whatever other bodies we chance upon.²⁴⁰

To be able to accurately assess the power of things external to us, and compare it with our own, is one of the only means, then, for achieving some degree of self-mastery. Measuring the full extent of our power of activity, or that of any other, *as such* is impossible, for it is not fixed; it is continuously subject to increase or decrease, depending on the nature of the relations we, or any other thing, enter into. It is nevertheless possible to judge approximately the degree to which we are capable of affecting or being affected by things, given their respective character and power. Delineating the parameters of our capacities with respect to some things is not difficult. It is obvious that the force of lightening is of a magnitude that overwhelms my own, and that it is also of a kind that is quite capable of destroying me; an earthworm has neither a type of nature nor a quantity of power that is obnoxious or injurious to me. Things that appeal to one part of us and repel another part may be more problematic, like a fruit that tastes delicious but also causes an allergic reaction, or a flower with a beautiful scent and poisonous pollen. As our knowledge of things accumulates, however, our aptitude for mapping the extent of our capacities improves. “The more things the mind knows, the better it understands . . . its own powers” and, Spinoza adds, “the

²³⁸ *Ethics*, IV, P6 & P7.

²³⁹ *Ethics*, IV, P4.

²⁴⁰ *Ethics*, IV, P4 C.

better it understands its own powers, the more easily it can direct itself and lay down rules for its own guidance.”²⁴¹ Knowledge of this kind, then, is indispensable for achieving self-governance; it instructs us both in the necessity and the means of realizing how we are situated in nature.

II. The Perfection of Human Nature as the Supreme Good

The four “goods” outlined above characterize, in a sequential order, the general movement that Spinoza describes from a state of imperfection to a state of perfection. Perfection, as it is defined here, is equivalent to reality;²⁴² both terms signify a state that consists of a continuum from nullity to completeness and is susceptible to variation. To the degree that something is perfect, it has a corresponding degree of reality or being. In addition, the reality that something possesses is one and the same as its “ability to exist,” or its power.²⁴³ Spinoza thus concludes, as noted earlier, that perfection and power of activity are identical. Of special importance here is the fact that, for Spinoza, perfection has no moral significance, but only an ontological one; it describes the essence of things, which he identifies with power. As shall be discussed, it is integral to his conception of ethics that perfection be understood strictly as descriptive of the essential “what-ness” of things because he will also re-conceive virtue itself in terms of power of activity. In any event, each of the four means outlined must be regarded as necessary for acquiring a kind of perfection that is not itself an ultimate state but is attained in degrees only. Perfection is not an *ideal*, or the end and culmination of the four goods that Spinoza identifies as the conditions for its realization. Rather, each of these

²⁴¹ *TEI*, p. 242.

²⁴² *Ethics*, IV, Preface.

²⁴³ *Ethics*, I, P11 S.

goods singly contributes to perfecting our nature and, in addition, intimates the good that follows upon it.

What Spinoza suggests regarding human perfection—or, indeed, the perfection of any sort of thing—generally is that it consists in our *becoming what we are* as opposed to being otherwise. According to Spinoza, we often do not act in our own best interest and, consequently, we become in actual *fact* a species that is peculiarly at odds with itself; instead of cleaving to ourselves, we are incessantly searching for that which promises gratification, growing dissipated or fragmented as a result. Preoccupied with obtaining the things that we desire, or avoiding those that are antagonistic to us, we remain largely ignorant of what we *ourselves* are, namely desiring beings. As we alternately strive to enjoy sources of pleasure and evade sources of pain, we also assume these to be good or evil in themselves; we fail to see, once again, that they are only so with respect to *us*, and only because we are a quantum of power or force that is subject to variation depending on our relation to things. This ignorance concerning our nature—coupled, as we have seen, with a resilient self-deception—results in a profound estrangement from ourselves. While this condition, in and of itself, may not necessarily be bad or harmful, Spinoza believes that it is also coincidentally one in which we are interminably assailed by sad passions. Moreover, it is typically self-perpetuating and, as such, causes a progressive decline. As noted earlier, being related passively to our environment to some extent is a necessary feature of our existence, and not one that need be of concern. Nonetheless, if this passivity is generalized or protracted, such that it becomes characteristic of us, it engenders what we will call, after Nietzsche, a *reactive* way of being. This reactivity is the antithesis of the active way of being that Spinoza associates with strength, freedom, and virtue—in short, with the qualities that belong to

human perfection. The true goods mentioned previously, then, can also be construed as stages by which we gradually progress from being passive to being active.

III. Passive Desire: Bondage

Being passive and active are, in Spinoza's description, the two primary modes of being; every organism is a power, but human beings are so either passively, actively, or, as is usually the case, both to varying extents. When we are passive, whatever arises in us originates in something other than ourselves alone.²⁴⁴ In this state, who we are—or, more precisely, the person we are evolving into—is not primarily of our own making. Strictly speaking, passivity does not signify being determined by an external cause that remains entirely independent of us; it implies, rather, that we are determined inter-subjectively, or that our involvement with something else is formative. Passivity and, as we shall see, its opposite, cannot be construed as merely a transitory state that we enter into and take leave of unaltered; for Spinoza, it is constitutive of the persons we are. More particularly, these terms refer to the *form* that our desire or conatus assumes—and when we are passive, our desires are inconstant, conflicting, and excessive.

The inconstancy of desire is a result of the fact that we ourselves are changed in the act of enjoying something, such that the desire for it is extirpated. A desire does not vanish merely *because* its object is in our possession (that is, we are no longer lacking it). Rather, Spinoza explains, it happens that “while we are enjoying what we are seeking, that from that very enjoyment the body changes to a new condition . . . and at the same time the mind begins to

²⁴⁴ *Ethics*, III, D 2.

think of and desire other things.”²⁴⁵ Satisfying a desire, then, is conclusive in one respect but not in another: *that* specific desire is extinguished, but a *different* desire is simultaneously kindled. Eating salty peanuts will satiate a craving for salt or peanuts, and it will just as surely elicit a thirst for a glass of water or beer. A vacation at a sunny resort may offer all that could be desired by someone in want of relaxation, but after a week or so of lounging on a beach chair, staring idly at the blue sea, that person is likely to grow restless and begin to think of other, less sedentary, occupations. Therefore, passive desire tends to be continuous but also variable in its object. No respite is possible; this is necessarily so because we are *essentially* desiring beings, but it is also contingently so insofar as we are such *passively*. Therefore, while we cannot be rid of desiring *as such*, it is not the case that we must desire objects of countless number and variety. This inconstancy is closely connected to two other features of passive desire, namely that it is typically directed at a plurality of objects at the same time, causing both *conflict* and *vacillation*. Different parts of the body may diverge in their wants and longings, and so strive against one another; moreover, they are likely to be affected, each in its *own* way by one and the same object. Thus, our desire is often not univocal but attaches to several objects at once, so that it is not only inconstant but also variegated. If, as we are wont to do in such circumstances, we begin desiring incompatible objects or responding in divergent ways to one and the same thing, we will be susceptible to conflicting emotions and vacillate hopelessly in our disposition toward things.²⁴⁶

For this reason also, Spinoza observes, our desire is oftentimes excessive. Although people are usually assailed by numerous emotions, he remarks that, “there are some in whom one

²⁴⁵ *Ethics*, III, P59 S.

²⁴⁶ *Ethics*, III, P17 S.

and the same emotions stay firmly fixed.”²⁴⁷ Passive emotions tend to be associated with a part of the body instead of the whole; distinct parts engage differently with a single object, producing affects that are then related specifically to the part involved. It appears that if these emotions are of nearly equal intensity or force then they may simply co-exist, either antagonistically or congenially. However, if one part of the body is affected *more* than the rest, the corresponding emotion will be excessive,²⁴⁸ of greater intensity than any competing affect. For instance, video games, which stimulate specific sites in the brain, are designed to excite certain emotions, including anxiety, hope and disappointment, trepidation, and an overweening pride, all in excess so as to prolong the interest of the player. These emotions can acquire such intensity that they interfere with or suppress even our most basic desires for food or sleep. That an emotion of this kind can be excessive—and, in Spinoza’s assessment, it is generally such as a rule—might not always be a cause for concern. If a single part, given the contingencies of its own nature and environs, is susceptible to greater pleasure or pain than the rest for a limited duration and, as such, enjoys a gain or suffers a loss of strength for that time, it is unlikely that any enduring injury to the whole body would result; as circumstances change, another part will simply receive the advantage or disadvantage, will profit or lose from it and, in this way, an overall balance is restored. However, he observes that an excessive emotion invariably leads to an *obsession* with the object implicated in it and that as a result the emotion itself remains fixed, resisting the vagaries of contingency. He accounts for this fact by suggesting that an excessive emotion, which augments the strength of one part, gives rise, in turn, to an excessive desire—namely, the desire to sustain the advantage that this single part has acquired. Spinoza explains that if

²⁴⁷ *Ethics*, IV, P44 S.

²⁴⁸ *Ethics*, IV, P44 S.

one part prevails over the rest, it will not attempt “to abate its own strength in order that the other parts of the body may perform their function, for then it would have to possess the force or power to abate its own strength, which is absurd.”²⁴⁹ In other words, it will *affirm* itself as a power and cannot do otherwise; it is incapable of denying itself for the sake of something else. Consequently, because it pertains to one part only, excessive desire “takes no account of the advantage of the whole”²⁵⁰ even if this neglect implies eventual harm to that very part.

Passive desire, then, is intrinsically ruinous; even if it manages to secure a good or avoid an evil and, in so doing, affirms itself, it also inadvertently assists in its own decline. Spinoza maintains that it is such not because it is, in and of itself, morally contemptible, but because it invariably produces ill effects. The passions out of which this desire emerges, by their very nature, elicit changes in our bodily composition that, in turn, cause it to be wanting again in some respect, or susceptible to yet another passion. Being subject to countless passions of this kind and to the constant alterations in our selves wrought by their visitations is painful, even if occasions for pleasure also occur intermittently. Moreover, given their propensity to enhance or diminish parts of the body *singly*, rather than influencing the whole, such passions are bound to be disruptive, causing internal divisions or even overall anarchy. Thus, Spinoza treats them as agents of a psycho-physiological imbalance that is costly to any organism, even if they augment the strength of one or several parts. Of greatest significance with respect to the passions, for Spinoza, is that they neglect to account for the *advantage of the whole*; they are necessarily short-sighted, restricted in their field of interest, and too fleeting to

²⁴⁹ *Ethics*, IV, P60 P.

²⁵⁰ *Ethics*, IV, P60 P.

take the full measure of what is good for the person in his or her entirety. The consequences, in his view, are tragic: we pursue the worst course while believing that it is the better. In places he indicates that we may actually see the better course, but cannot act accordingly,²⁵¹ and in others he suggests that we “can neither see nor do” what is for our own good.²⁵² Regardless, both predicaments reveal a grievous lack of self-knowledge insofar as, in either instance, we fail to grasp what is truly to our advantage *as being such*; moreover, that we also erroneously identify *false* goods as true only serves to fortify this ignorance. As Hampshire explains, “this alternation of desires, this fluctuation of the mind, is the state of fantasy, obsession, and unenlightenment.”²⁵³ To this condition Spinoza assigns the term “bondage,” declaring that the “real slave” is one who is “at the mercy of his emotions” and has not sufficient power to check them.²⁵⁴

IV. Active Desire: Freedom & Virtue

To be active, according to Spinoza, is to do or be precisely the reverse of that which is described above; we are said to be active “when something takes place, in us or externally to us, of which we are the adequate cause.”²⁵⁵ It does not entail, as might be supposed, conceiving of human beings as free agents who cause events to occur solely by an act of the will. Being active is not, in other words, the actualization of a free will, where being passive signifies the latency, or putting into abeyance, of this same faculty. Spinoza clarifies that we are active, or an adequate cause, “when from our nature there follows in us or externally to

²⁵¹ *Ethics*, IV, Preface.

²⁵² *TPT*, Chpt. 16.

²⁵³ “Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom,” p. 189.

²⁵⁴ *Ethics*, IV, Preface.

²⁵⁵ *Ethics*, III, D 2.

us something which can be clearly and distinctly understood through our nature alone.”²⁵⁶ In this case, the effect, or what occurs in ourselves or in that which is proximate to us, may be understood in its *entirety* in terms of our nature, being its cause.²⁵⁷ An effect of this sort follows, moreover, from our *nature as such*, and not, as is generally presupposed, from a discrete act of the will owing, in turn, to a prior mental decision, which is specific to a certain time and place. For Spinoza, our nature is, in essence, eternally the same; that is, a quantum of power or force or, in other words, that which expresses modally the power of God or nature. Whatever takes place as a result of our being active, then, is reflective of us *as such* rather than a discrete act of the will.

When we are passive, or only a partial cause of that which is happening to us, it is impossible to identify a single cause clearly and distinctly; the effect in this case is not directly the product of distinct causes—namely my own body *or* that of another—but more specifically of their mutual interaction. As such, the cause remains obscure, though its effect is immediately and fully discernible. In a state of passivity, then, we are inclined to regard this or that thing as it appears before us, or according to “the common order of nature,” and even then only in and by means of a transitory affect.²⁵⁸ Today the sky is overcast, dark rain clouds casting a long shadow over the ridge of mountains, and I feel melancholy. Has the weather alone inspired this affect? Or is it the weather coupled with the disturbing news story I heard on the radio this morning? It is obviously true, conversely, that when we are active whatever occurs through ourselves *exclusively* can be traced to us alone and, as such, the cause and the sum of effects proceeding from it may be perceived distinctly. As such, it

²⁵⁶ *Ethics*, III, D 2.

²⁵⁷ *Ethics*, III, D 1.

²⁵⁸ *Ethics*, II, P29 S.

is only in a state of activity that we are able to conceive of ourselves and other things *in themselves* and “to understand their agreement, their differences, and their opposition”;²⁵⁹ only to the extent that we are active, in other words, is the mind able to *reason*, or to acquire true ideas of things and their relations.

In a state of activity, therefore, there is no real discrepancy between reason and desire. The mind, insofar as it is passive, can form only confused, fragmented notions of both itself and other things. While in this state it is unable to cleave to itself but is (to use Spinoza’s metaphor) submerged in a sea of affects. It is besought by vague images of the disparate things that impinge upon it by chance and in whatever order they happen to do so. It knows itself and that portion of the world it traverses, then, strictly by means of its capacity for imagining and for forming associations, and not for intellection or reasoning. In this case, our desire, being that which is essential to us, is not in direct conflict with reason as much as it is entirely divorced from it. One might say that passive desire and reason *contradict* rather than oppose one another, that the existence of one implies the non-existence of the other. G. Lloyd remarks that Spinoza does not construe the passions as “rival forces to reason,”²⁶⁰ or reason as “an alternative source of motivation, competing with that of the affects.”²⁶¹ Rather, the passions, as their name implies, “reduce us to passivity,” causing a diminution of our power of activity, which Spinoza identifies with reason.²⁶² When the mind is active, on the other hand, it affirms itself; for when it engages in reasoning, and is constituted largely of ideas that proceed from its own activity, it experiences pleasure in *its own activity* rather than

²⁵⁹ *Ethics*, II, P29 S.

²⁶⁰ *Collective Imaginings*, p. 48.

²⁶¹ *Part of Nature*, p. 86.

²⁶² *Collective Imaginings*, p. 49.

solely in the object of that activity. Our desire is no longer dissipated in an effort to possess myriad objects, and instead *involves itself*. What we then desire above all else is precisely this self-enjoyment. In sum, “the recall to reason,” Hampshire explains, “is a recall from fantasy... towards an active and present enjoyment of [one’s] energies.”²⁶³

It is for this reason, Spinoza maintains, that being active is invariably connected to pleasure alone, and never to pain.²⁶⁴ It is not that by *means of* our activity our success is assured or we procure things that are useful to or delight us. Rather, it is simply being active in and of itself that is pleasurable. The body feels pleasure as it progresses to a higher grade of activity, that is to say, as it increases its power; the mind, correspondingly, enjoys an enhanced capacity for reasoning, which is also a source of pleasure. Secondly, Spinoza suggests that when the mind engages in reasoning, it is also able to regard *itself* clearly and distinctly; that is, it contemplates itself in the act of reasoning, and this too gives rise to pleasure.²⁶⁵ Thus, our being active is pleasurable in itself first in an immediate or non-reflective sense, when we experience the power of our body and mind, which occurs with any increase in that power;²⁶⁶ in addition, we derive pleasure reflectively in the act of self-contemplation while we are active. The real significance of Spinoza’s observation that being active and receiving pleasure are correlative is that pleasure must then be regarded as *good in itself*.²⁶⁷ “The more we are affected by pleasure,” he writes, “the more we pass to a state of greater perfection; that is, the more we necessarily participate in the divine nature.”²⁶⁸ He regards perfection as residing,

²⁶³ “Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom,” p. 206.

²⁶⁴ *Ethics*, III, P59.

²⁶⁵ *Ethics*, IV, P52 P.

²⁶⁶ *Ethics*, III, D 2 & 3.

²⁶⁷ *Ethics*, IV, P41.

²⁶⁸ *Ethics*, IV, P45 S.

then, not in asceticism, nor in the exercise of reason where reason is construed as passionless. Refuting what many revered sages and eminent philosophers have maintained, he declares unequivocally that it is *only* pleasure that allows us to become *more* perfect; it is precisely that by which our power is increased, and in the increase of power, we are in turn further affected by it.

Reason is thus intrinsically in accord with active desire, and both aim solely at our supreme good. It does not impose injunctions to do or to forbear from doing things that are not in our nature, for perfection in no respect entails self-abnegation. In fact, Spinoza assures us that reason demands “that every man should love himself, should seek his own advantage (I mean his real advantage), should aim at whatever leads a man towards greater perfection, and, to sum it all up, that each man, as far as in him lies, should endeavour to preserve his own being.”²⁶⁹ What Spinoza proposes is consistent with reason directly contradicts precisely that which is commonly associated with it, namely self-denial, self-sacrifice, or any form of selflessness. Reason only recommends *self-love*. Now, love, by Spinoza’s definition, “is merely ‘pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause,’”²⁷⁰ which, in this instance, is oneself. In fact, self-love is contingent upon being active, as it is only then that one is a source of pleasure for oneself. Furthermore, he adds that whoever loves “necessarily endeavours to have present and to preserve the thing he loves.”²⁷¹ It thus follows from the fact that one has self-love that *one will also seek to preserve oneself*.

²⁶⁹ *Ethics*, IV, P18 S.

²⁷⁰ *Ethics*, III, P13 S.

²⁷¹ *Ethics*, III, P13 S.

This does not mean that conatus itself is a function of self-love; it is, in itself, unaffected by the aversion or approbation with which we might regard ourselves, though our success in actually achieving our advantage may be. In a condition of passivity, we are inclined to stake our well being on securing external things; our conatus, that is, is expressed only in connection with those objects that we count as good or beloved, such that our contentment depends on obtaining them (often exclusively) for ourselves. Instances of this abound in literature as well as in life. The main character in Balzac's *The Quest for the Absolute* provides a striking, though perhaps unusual example. He devotes all his attention, and his considerable wealth, to his scientific experiments, in a vain attempt to discover the "absolute element." He regards the elusive object of his quest as the one good that trumps every other, and he pursues it to the detriment of his family's security and ultimately, his own health. More typically, people are not tempted to make such an extraordinary sacrifice to attain the good they seek; modest wealth, the companionship of a faithful lover, a modicum of professional recognition suffice for their happiness. Nevertheless, regardless of the extent of their ambition, or the obscurity of their object, the fact remains that their well-being is contingent upon the possession of an external good. When we possess love *for ourselves*, on the other hand, our conatus becomes self-affirming. We will still, as we must, act so as to preserve our own being, but in this case we do so by cleaving to ourselves. We cease to be reactive, for instance, in response to the greater or lesser powers of other things, vigilantly eluding threats of evil, competing with others for prized objects, coveting the cherished object in our possession; in short, we can begin to "pursue good directly and shun evil indirectly,"²⁷² rather than expending the better part of our efforts on accomplishing the latter alone.

²⁷² *Ethics*, IV, P63 C.

The above also describes what it means, for Spinoza, to be *free* and to have *virtue*. In a letter to a perplexed correspondent he comments, “I say that a thing is free which exists and acts solely from the necessity of its own nature, and I say that a thing is constrained which is determined by another to exist and to act in a fixed and determinate way.”²⁷³ Only God or nature can be said to be free in an unqualified sense, for anything that is a part of nature will be, to some degree, conditioned by something else. Nonetheless, to the extent that we are active—that is, acting from or in accordance with our own nature—we are also free. Interestingly, though this definition does not imply that we are able to act otherwise than we do, it also suggests that we only act in a “fixed and determinate” manner, that is, reactively or mechanically, when we are *not* free. When we are passive, we are subject to passions arising out of a chain of reactions; something impinges on another thing that, in turn, impinges on another, and so on. Each reaction stems from that which preceded it; a determinate force is conveyed from one thing to the next indefinitely. Hampshire thus notes that, “in experiencing these passions, we are merely reacting to external causes.”²⁷⁴ We can also, then, be compelled to behave *contrary to our nature*, despite the fact that it is impossible for us (or for anything) to positively act in violation of the “laws” of our nature. Someone may be determined, by a long series of causes and effects (the full extent of which she is likely unaware), to compromise her health—and potentially that of others—by smoking cigarettes. Her conduct may appear to contravene the basic “law” of self-preservation, but in fact it does precisely the reverse, albeit indirectly: smoking relieves her of a crippling anxiety, making it possible for her to maintain social relations, perform professional or domestic duties, and so on, all of which are required for her preservation. According to this

²⁷³ Letter October 1674.

²⁷⁴ *Spinoza*, p. 134-5.

interpretation, she does not persist in this habit so as to hasten her death—not even, as a psychoanalyst might suggest, unconsciously. However, in this respect she obviously does act against her own interest, and she does so *compulsively*; she is neither able to do what is positively to her advantage, nor are her actions free. When we are active, conversely, we do not act compulsively or reactively, though we still act necessarily; in this case, we may act in any number of ways but always from, and in a manner consistent with, our nature.

Virtue, similarly, is “to act from the laws of one’s own nature.”²⁷⁵ Spinoza remarks that it is the same as *power*, or is “man’s essence in so far as he has the power to bring about that which can be understood solely through the laws of his nature.”²⁷⁶ Once again, he rejects the notion that what we *should* be diverges significantly from what we essentially *are*. Though he firmly maintains that virtue is not apparent in the conduct of most people, he dismisses with equal vehemence the proposition that they ought to pursue other, ideal, objectives. He is especially adamant that virtue and blessedness are not a reward for renunciation and repression; as Hampshire explains, he regards the latter as “signs of weakness and of failure in the individual’s realization of his own vitality as an individual.”²⁷⁷ Virtue consists wholly in being *able* to be what one really is²⁷⁸ or, to state it as Nietzsche might, *to become what one is*. For Spinoza, virtue entails having or, more accurately, *being* a power that enables us to act in accordance with our nature as opposed to conforming to something else; in other words, it implies being active. The basis of virtue, then, is nothing besides our capacity to preserve ourselves.²⁷⁹ It follows, he concludes, that virtue is *strength* and, by implication, vice is *weakness*.

²⁷⁵ *Ethics*, IV, P18 S.

²⁷⁶ *Ethics*, IV, D 8.

²⁷⁷ “Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom,” p. 202.

²⁷⁸ *Ethics*, IV, P18 S.

²⁷⁹ *Ethics*, IV, P18 S & P22.

or, in Hampshire's words, "that diseased state of the organism, in which neither mind nor body functions freely and efficiently."²⁸⁰ Furthermore, as there can be "nothing preferable to [virtue] or more to our advantage, for the sake of which it should be sought," it must be sought only for its own sake.²⁸¹ A virtuous individual, then, is one who is strong, or sufficiently so that he or she may act to his or her actual advantage; contrariwise, the one who must submit to stronger forces and, as a consequence, cannot adequately sustain him- or herself, tends to be weak or susceptible to vice.²⁸²

The two principal virtues that Spinoza names are *courage* and *nobility*. Both are related to desire or conatus insofar as it is active and, specifically, they describe activities that follow from strength of mind (and, thus, of body also).²⁸³ He classifies under courage "those activities that are directed solely to the advantage of the agent, and those that are directed to the advantage of another under nobility."²⁸⁴ Whenever we *actively* strive to preserve our being, we do so with strength of mind or, which is the same, "in conformity with virtue."²⁸⁵ To be courageous, then, requires only that one do what is (truly) in one's interest; nobility, in turn, is an extension of courage, for "it is when every man is most devoted to seeking his own advantage that men are of most advantage to one another."²⁸⁶ Yet acts of courage or nobility, diverse as they may be, are all chiefly concerned with one end, to *understand*.²⁸⁷ The mind recognizes that there is nothing except understanding that is truly to its advantage, for

²⁸⁰ *Spinoza*, p. 142.

²⁸¹ *Ethics*, IV, P18 S.

²⁸² *Ethics*, IV, P20 S.

²⁸³ *Ethics*, III, P59 S.

²⁸⁴ *Ethics*, III, P59 S.

²⁸⁵ *Ethics*, IV, P24.

²⁸⁶ *Ethics*, IV, P35 C2.

²⁸⁷ *Ethics*, IV, P26.

it will possess in the same measure both understanding *and* virtue or power; if it has only a narrow range of true ideas, it will have an equally negligible portion of virtue, and vice versa. Therefore, our highest virtue consists in *perfecting the intellect* or, which is the same, acquiring a true conception of things; and our greatest blessedness, accordingly, is the *self-contentment* that accompanies this virtue.²⁸⁸

V. Knowing/Loving God or Nature

At the conclusion of the *Ethics*, Spinoza reveals the supreme good that he has sought throughout: *the enjoyment of the life of the mind*. It is in “conceiving things as they are in themselves,”²⁸⁹ that we also perfect our nature; it is solely in our taking pleasure in this perfection, or in *self-enjoyment*, that our supreme good consists. But what does it mean to perfect the intellect? His answer has already been disclosed in the preceding chapters: “to perfect the intellect is . . . nothing other than to understand God and the attributes and actions of God that follows from the necessity of his nature.”²⁹⁰ *To know God or nature* is the intellect’s highest virtue, the means by which it attains the greatest possible perfection. It should be noted that this knowledge is not, in and of itself, our *supreme* good; but it is the highest good of the mind,²⁹¹ which is the *only* condition for achieving this supreme good. In other words, it is not strictly in knowledge itself that our ultimate good consists, but in the *enjoyment* of it. Whether or not this enjoyment pertains to the activity of the mind—to the act of knowing itself—or derives directly from the quality of that which is known is not made entirely clear. It seems likely, nonetheless, that it is directly related to the first and indirectly

²⁸⁸ *Ethics*, IV, Appendix 4.

²⁸⁹ *Ethics*, IV, P73 S.

²⁹⁰ *Ethics*, IV, Appendix 4.

²⁹¹ *Ethics*, IV, P28.

to the second. The mind, as mentioned previously, not only engages in thought, but also reflects upon itself as it does so, and thereby comes to know itself in the act of knowing. It also takes pleasure in its own activity and, as noted above, feels *self-love*. Evidently there is, then, a joy that has its origin in the *activity* of knowing. In addition, for Spinoza, there is no knowledge that does not have an affective quality.²⁹² When it concerns that which is a true good or of real advantage to us, then it will also in itself be a source of joy. Knowledge of God or nature, then, is necessarily joyous; it also begets a *love* of God or nature.²⁹³ In sum, knowing God or nature entails also knowing ourselves; and knowing God or nature and our selves also *necessarily* implies both a love of God and self-love.

But though the activity and object of knowing are interconnected, and both alike produce the affect of joy, Spinoza appears, perhaps surprisingly, to assign priority to the first. That he does so is especially apparent in the fact that he is ultimately concerned with “showing the degree and the nature of [the mind’s] command over the emotions in checking and controlling them.”²⁹⁴ He returns, in the final analysis, to a consideration of the power of the mind, and of the extent to which it can obtain freedom. In the end, his inquiry is not intent upon discovering the truth as such, but with *showing* how it is that knowing the truth makes us free. What he will reveal in the final chapter of the *Ethics* is that knowing and loving God or nature is, as mentioned above, precisely what the mind’s perfection consists in and, as such, it is *required* for our enjoyment of that perfection, or our self-love. The truth is not an end in itself but is good insofar as it enhances the power of the mind; the power of the mind, in turn, is commensurate with the extent of our freedom. Knowing God or nature is

²⁹² *Ethics*, IV, P8.

²⁹³ *Ethics*, V, P32; Letter January 28, 1665.

²⁹⁴ *Ethics*, V, Preface.

useful to us, Spinoza goes on to explain, in two ways, both of which serve to strengthen the mind: it mitigates the influence of sad passions, and it fosters an enduring love that is necessarily good.

What is most notable about the strong-minded individual is that foremost in his or her mind is this: “that everything follows from the necessity of the divine nature.” From this fundamental truth he derives the conclusion that “whatever he thinks of as injurious or bad, and also whatever seems impious, horrible, unjust and base arises from his conceiving things in a disturbed, fragmented and confused way.”²⁹⁵ Knowledge of God or nature teaches us, above all else, that *everything is as it must be*. It reveals that everything is governed by necessity and so could not be otherwise; consequently, nothing, considered in and of itself, could be deficient or lacking and therefore evil. The *effect* of this truth is twofold. Firstly, it fortifies the strength of the mind by rendering it “less passive to the emotions that arise from things, and less affected towards the things themselves.”²⁹⁶ Conceiving of things as links in “an infinite chain of causes,”²⁹⁷ as opposed to believing that they occur either by accident or an act of the will, enables the mind to achieve a measure of detachment. Furthermore, if we recognize that a thing is what it is owing to *multiple* causes, then the mind is simply forced to “regard several objects simultaneously”²⁹⁸ and, as such, it avoids committing the error of isolating one cause alone.²⁹⁹ It is not rendered impervious to things, but its propensity to fixate on them will be diminished; therefore, both the intensity and resilience of any affect arising in

²⁹⁵ *Ethics*, IV, P73 S.

²⁹⁶ *Ethics*, V, P6 P.

²⁹⁷ *Ethics*, V, P6 P.

²⁹⁸ *Ethics*, V, P9 P.

²⁹⁹ Another way to state this point is that the “intentional threads” that bind the mind to an object exclusively are loosened when it is presented with several objects at once.

connection with them is likely to be less. One afternoon, a friend makes an insulting remark to me; I become angry with him. Why? It is my first assumption that his remark was instigated by ill will and that, consciously or otherwise, he wished to inflict some injury on me. I later learn that he had been in a foul temper that afternoon after receiving a rejection letter and, the night before, quarrelling with his spouse, or that he had taken a dose of medication or been plagued by insomnia, causing irritability, I am no longer preoccupied with the injury and my anger subsides, for I realize that several other possible causes may have prompted my friend's remark. As W. Bernard observes, by tracing an act or event to multiple causes, either proximate or remote, the fixation on a single cause is dispersed and, with it, the original affect.³⁰⁰

The truth concerning eternal necessity makes us less susceptible in a second way to those passions that, according to Spinoza, are especially prone to enslaving the mind: hatred, envy, derision, pride, contempt, and pity. It compels the mind to turn back, or *reflect* upon, itself: to realize that the fact that these passions exist does not necessarily signify that their object is deficient or evil in some respect—and, as such, deserving of blame, retribution, or pity—but only that the mind itself has a partial and confused conception of that object.³⁰¹ Again, this truth is effective insofar as it inhibits a degenerative habit of the mind, that of becoming wholly engrossed with its object. It teaches us, as W. Bernard explains, to “see even our own hurts, our own grievous mistakes, our own sufferings and sorrows almost as pure events in nature.”³⁰² We cannot be grieved over the loss of some good, Spinoza says, if we realize that

³⁰⁰ “Psychotherapeutic Principles in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, *Speculum Spinozanum*, 1677-1977, ed. S. Hessing. London: RKP, 1978, p. 69.

³⁰¹ *Ethics*, IV, P50 S & P73 S.

³⁰² “Psychotherapeutic Principles in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” p. 70.

its loss was inevitable, or that no effort could have possibly saved it.³⁰³ While he may have overestimated the efficacy of the truth to assuage grief, the main point seems to be that though this grief may not vanish altogether, it would cease to preoccupy the mind entirely or exclusively. Spinoza thus shows that this one fundamental truth is redemptive in a negative sense insofar as it makes the mind *less* passive, although he does not attempt to prove that it can protect the mind altogether from the vicissitudes of fortune.

Secondly, he proposes that to whatever degree the mind is made less passive, it is also rendered more impervious to sad passions. For as long as we are not assailed by these passions, we retain the power “to arrange and associate rightly the affections of the body,” according to the order of the intellect.³⁰⁴ During these intervals, the mind is able to transform itself by actively reconfiguring the paths of association that trigger the repetition of sad passions. It does so—lacking, as it must, a complete knowledge of things—by disengaging the affect from the image it had originally formed of the agent of that affect, and then associating it with *other* causes. It thereby disrupts a recurrence of sad affects that results from our being unreflectively reactive; it stops us, for instance, from reciprocating acts of hatred with the same by binding this affect to images that represent that which is an antidote to it, such as nobility of character.³⁰⁵ By combining, for instance, the wrongs and misdeeds often perpetrated by humankind with examples of acts of nobility, we are less inclined to be outraged at such wrongs, or to repay them with ones of our own. In the same way, Spinoza advises, we should “reflect on courage to banish fear,” so that we may respond to everyday dangers with resourcefulness and strength of mind, rather than timidity or abject terror. In

³⁰³ *Ethics*, V, P6 S.

³⁰⁴ *Ethics*, V, P10 S.

³⁰⁵ *Ethics*, V, P10 S.

effect, then, the mind spins a web of associations for itself that shields it against an onslaught of negative passions. Ultimately, this strategy is most effective, Spinoza suggests, when all of these images are not only *internally* related but if each is also related to a single true idea, namely, that of God or nature.³⁰⁶ Then each image will be associated with the *love of God* or nature that necessarily attaches to this idea, and this love, in turn, will be related to all bodily affects. Moreover, this love will be continuously fostered by virtue of its being recalled with every affect and, in turn, it will transfigure any sad passion into a joyous one; in this way, Spinoza concludes, the love of God or nature gradually comes “to hold chief place in the mind.”³⁰⁷

Finally, Spinoza claims that, in addition to augmenting the strength of the mind negatively, by making it less susceptible to sad passions, knowing God or nature also does so positively by cultivating a love that is *in itself* an enduring good because its object is also good *and* eternal. “It begets a love,” Spinoza remarks, “towards something immutable and eternal which we can truly possess, and which therefore cannot be defiled by any of the faults that are to be found in the common sort of love, but can continue to grow more and more and engage the greatest part of the mind and pervade it.”³⁰⁸ A love such as this, in contrast to the love of perishable things, is only capable of *increase* and, given that its object is eternal, it must also be boundless. It gradually pervades the mind, investing it with enhanced power and the mind, in turn, rejoices in this, its own perfection. When Spinoza refers to a union of the mind and God or nature, he therefore means this: a union forged by the bonds of love, in which the mind, in loving God or nature, both *loves itself* and is simultaneously *God or nature*

³⁰⁶ *Ethics*, V, P14.

³⁰⁷ *Ethics*, V, P16.

³⁰⁸ *Ethics*, V, P20 S.

loving itself. Insofar as the mind is itself part of God or nature, its love is likewise “part of the infinite love wherewith God loves himself.”³⁰⁹ This is not to suggest that the mind is entirely reducible to that which it is a part of, namely God or nature. This union of mind and God or nature, of finite and infinite, implies instead that each is capable of *affirming* itself, rejoicing in or loving itself, only in connection with the other. A love of the self implies, necessarily, a love of God or nature; a love of the whole, conversely, entails a love of each part.

Conclusion

We have now come full circle; we began with Spinoza’s critique of a thoroughly humanized nature and have concluded with his portrait of a thoroughly naturalized human. In the first chapter, we observed him disentangle a complex web of fictions concerning our selves as free agents, nature as intrinsically purposive, and our place *in* nature as its lords or masters, and the children of a benevolent and occasionally punitive deity. Of particular interest was his discovery that anthropocentric fictions are constructed upon a conception of the world that is itself anthropomorphic: nature invariably acts toward a certain end, which is the prosperity of our species. In a sense, a condition for our occupying a place of privilege in nature is that nature has already been made over in our likeness. In the second chapter, we saw him propose a method of correcting, and perfecting, the intellect so that that it could divest itself of those fictions that had proved to be debilitating and replace them with a true measure of our capacities. He makes a second surprising discovery: that in the process of devising a method, the knowledge it was intended to furnish had already been acquired. First, he learns about nature *as it is*, and then identifies how the human species is situated within it. Finally, in this last chapter, we saw his attempt to also redeem the human, that is,

³⁰⁹ *Ethics*, V, P36.

to faithfully describe, in its now naturalized incarnation, the extent and means of its perfectibility. The conclusion we have arrived at, following Spinoza, is that it consists in a peculiar form of self-love that, contrary to the vanity that prevails in our species, springs from a love of nature. In the next section, also of three chapters, we will turn to Nietzsche, and follow in his stead as he completes this same circle in way that is distinctive to him and yet remarkably consistent with that of Spinoza's.

CHAPTER 5: FICTIONS

Throughout his writings, Nietzsche exposes error and deception in their shifting guises and hiding places. However, it is not error *as* error that he aims to make conspicuous. There is, for Nietzsche, nothing objectionable about error as such, or as a consequence of its presumed falsity. Of ultimate concern to him, as it was to Spinoza, is being able to differentiate errors that are beneficial or merely innocuous from those that are corrupting. Therefore, he distinguishes several species of error, though mainly with respect to the *effect* they produce and only incidentally in terms of the nature of their falsity.³¹⁰ Moreover, he determines whether or not a type of error is acceptable according to a general criterion that weighs its relative *value* and, as such, the reader of Nietzsche's work finds him praising some errors while condemning others. To avoid misconstruing him as inconsistent, it is necessary to enumerate specifically what it is *about* error, or specific types of error, that Nietzsche is commending or objecting to, and for what reason. In this chapter, we shall investigate precisely this problem, namely, the value of error.

In the first part, we will give an account of Nietzsche's observations regarding the *origins* of error, which are remarkably consistent with those mentioned by Spinoza. Both explain that fictions typically result from the natural functioning of the human mind; specifically, that they are interpretive devices by which we make sense of a natural world that appears

³¹⁰ It will, therefore, also become clear that Nietzsche does not evaluate error in terms of its source or origin—and so he does not, contrary to appearances, commit the genetic fallacy in his analysis of fictions. He discloses the origin of some errors for another reason, namely, to undermine faith in those errors. When he shows that what has been regarded as truth in fact originates in faulty cognitive processes or expresses the psycho-physiological constitution of a certain type of human being, he does so to reveal that they *are* fictitious—or true only in the very limited sense of being true for a particular type of human being, but not true in any absolute sense.

perplexing and sometimes hostile; and that they are thereby also usually, though to a greater or lesser extent, anthropomorphic. He also agrees with his precursor's appraisal of this general class of fictions: they are "innocent," that is, neither good nor bad in themselves, but evidently serving no ill purpose, and producing either no effect at all or one that is vitalizing. Nietzsche finds fault, as Spinoza did, with a second type of fiction or error, one that is anthropocentric. These fictions are the progeny of a resilient vanity, fortified by ignorance, and invariably rest upon the presumption of human superiority. They assume that we are, first, free beings in a universe governed by unvarying laws and, second, the sole measure of the value of things.

In the second part, then, we will discuss Nietzsche's critique of anthropocentric fictions. He remarks that it is precisely this variety of fiction that initially aroused his suspicion for the reason that it appeared to him as thoroughly deceptive, as a *lie*; upon discovering that this lie is also *malignant*, he then sought to expose it as such. The most pervasive and insidious form it has assumed thus far, he reveals, is as the lie of metaphysics: it consists of a spurious evocation of a second world which in every aspect represents the antithesis of *this* world; and it assigns supreme *value* to this second world by means of a reversal in which it becomes the "first," "real," or "true" world and *this* world, in turn, is maligned as being merely "apparent" or "illusory." That he recognizes God as a fiction is not, Nietzsche says, what distinguishes him as a philosopher, but that he finds "what has been revered as God, not as godlike but as miserable, as absurd, as harmful."³¹¹ Affirming a "beyond" negates the sensible world; promising an eternal after-life impoverishes the here and now; positing a transcendent "God" devalues nature; placing a singular emphasis on the salvation of the "soul"

³¹¹ A 47

encourages a neglect of the body. His primary intention, then, is to reveal God and, still more, all of God's multifarious "shadows," as not only erroneous but also insidious to life.

I. Anthropomorphic Fictions: The Errors of Consciousness

This section will begin by examining Nietzsche's discussion of the world of "appearance," disclosed by sensory perception and rendered intelligible by science, in its opposition to the reality of the "true" world. Interestingly, Nietzsche concludes that the first is, like the second, fictitious; paradoxically, both of these contraries are false. He nevertheless singles out a significant difference between them: the "apparent" world is, to some extent, expressive of an underlying reality, whereas the "true" world is entirely premised upon an outright rejection of that reality. The "apparent" world, he claims, is "an arranged and simplified world, at which our practical instincts have been at work."³¹² For Nietzsche, our rapport with our earthly environs is inevitably informed by "human all-too-human" interests; to discard or suspend these interests in an attempt to reveal a naked reality is, in his view, impossible. Any such reality will always elude us and, therefore, the question of whether or not it *actually* exists will remain irresolvable. What we can know, according to Nietzsche, is *our* world, a world already made over by our practical instincts. Consequently, any conceptions we have about the world are true only in a very narrow sense, that is, as true for us.³¹³ A. Nehamas argues that Nietzsche is not simply making a claim concerning the limits of our epistemic capacities, but unequivocally declaring that "the world has no features," apart from those that are attributed to it.³¹⁴ The evidence he offers in support of his

³¹² WP 568

³¹³ For Nietzsche, that we have no capacity for knowing the "real" world—or for knowing if it exists at all—is of no consequence, except with respect to the traditional (correspondence) theory of truth, with which he disagrees. This point will be discussed in the next chapter.

³¹⁴ *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p. 45.

argument, however, speaks only to the point made above, namely that, as Nietzsche writes, “we simply lack any organ for knowledge.”³¹⁵ It follows that we are not “entitled,” as Nietzsche phrases it, to posit any unequivocal antithesis between a “real” and an “apparent” world, but neither are we justified in rejecting it. Without the requisite “organ for knowledge,” there are no grounds for either affirming or denying that the world possesses a determinate set of features in and of itself.

In addition, for Nietzsche, as for Spinoza, fictionalizing occurs as a function of ordinary cognitive processes and, as such, is unavoidable. Both philosophers propose that fictions emerge in response to the fact that the universe confronts us as interminably opaque and, in virtue of its opaqueness, as strange and terrifying. According to Nietzsche, error is inevitably introduced along with the birth of the intellect; sense impressions, he tells us, undergo considerable editing and revision once conceptual schemas are superimposed upon them, such that they lose their “fuzziness and chaos.”³¹⁶ Inchoate impressions are radically re-configured so as to serve a practical purpose, namely, to be conducive to symbolic communication. Nietzsche offers the hypothesis that human beings, the “most endangered animal,” sought the aid and security of others of their kind, but for this they required a means of communicating. Accordingly, he conjectures, “becoming conscious” became necessary: one *perceives* the object of distress as being such, *recognizes* that one feels distress, and *conveys* this cognizance to others. Becoming conscious, he adds, also entails its opposite, becoming unconscious; as consciousness makes the world intelligible *in its own terms*, so does it obfuscate or suppress that which is disclosed by the senses. Therefore, for the purposes of

³¹⁵ GS 354

³¹⁶ WP 568

forming a coalition, a type of symbolic communication is needed; and this, in turn, is possible only if we can consciously identify and refer to something that is “firm, simplified, capable of precision.”³¹⁷ *Our* reality then, consists of a surface-world amenable to reckoning and calculation, a spectacle of signs.

Free Will and Natural Causality

When a “sentient individuum observes itself,” Nietzsche explains, “it regards every sensation, every change, as something isolated, that is to say unconditioned, disconnected: it emerges out of us independently of anything earlier or later.”³¹⁸ Based upon this naïve observation, Nietzsche suggests, we postulate the existence of the will *as cause*.³¹⁹ The will in itself is regarded as effective, and willing as “something simple, absolutely given, underivable, and intelligible in itself.”³²⁰ In actuality, Nietzsche explains, it is simply the *feeling of* will that suffices for us to assume cause and effect generally.³²¹ We derive the concept of natural causality entirely from the erroneous conviction that we, ourselves, possess this agency; however, he hypothesizes, “we have misunderstood the feeling of strength, tension, resistance, a muscular feeling that is already the beginning of the act, as the cause.”³²² Thus, we introduce a real distinction of cause and effect into willing where no such distinction exists. Nietzsche further argues that what is termed “willing” is comprised of a collection of

³¹⁷ WP 568

³¹⁸ H 18

³¹⁹ H 18. Nietzsche here speculates that all organic life makes this error. But in GS 127 he indicates that willing requires the representation of a sensation, that is, the intervention of the “*interpreting* intellect;” and, as such “the vast majority of organisms has nothing like it.”

³²⁰ GS 127

³²¹ GS 127

³²² WP 551. In another note (WP 664) he makes a similar point: “When we do something there arises a feeling of force, often even before the deed, occasioned by the idea of what is to be done. . . We instinctively think that this feeling of force is the cause of the action, that it is ‘the force.’ Our belief in causality is belief in force and effect; a transference from our experience.”

sensations, “namely the sensation of the state ‘*away from which*,’ the sensation of the state ‘*towards which*,’ the sensation of this ‘*from*’ and ‘*towards*’ themselves, with an accompanying muscular sensation.”³²³ Oblivious to these sensations in themselves, and yet keenly aware of their *effect*, we mistake the effect for a cause. In fact, the bodily sensation “begins its action by force of habit as soon as we ‘will’ anything.”³²⁴

We infer, therefore, that causality is evident in nature from the fact that we believe our own willing to be causal, a belief that we infer, in turn, from a bodily *feeling*. Like Spinoza, Nietzsche discovers that our original, and anthropomorphic, fictions are manufactured out of a series of false inferences: from a subjective experience of desire, impulse, or sensation, we erroneously infer first, that we possess causal agency and, second, that this property is also exhibited in nature itself. As Richard Schacht points out, such fictions may be useful, even indispensable, for us, “but even if this is so, the only inferences we are entitled to draw [from these fictions] are inferences about ourselves.” Accordingly, he takes Nietzsche to be cautioning his readers not against “speaking and thinking in terms of them entirely,” but strictly against importing them into “our philosophical reflections upon what there is in the world.”³²⁵

Ego and Substance

Eventually, Nietzsche maintains, the concept of will as cause is supplanted by that of the *ego* and acquires two forms: the *thing* and the *subject*. He explains that the notions of *being* and

³²³ BGE 19

³²⁴ BGE 19

³²⁵ *Nietzsche*, p. 143.

substance were derived from the concept of ego, “our oldest article of faith.”³²⁶ By his account, then, Spinoza’s critique of abstract universals falls short of being exhaustive, for he neglects to question the veracity of the notion of substance itself. What was to Spinoza self-evidently and hence indisputably true turns out to be, under Nietzsche’s philosophical scalpel, a presupposition slipped inconspicuously into his proofs. Nietzsche shows that a hybrid concept of ego-substance develops which, in turn, has its own progeny: by superimposing this concept on the world, we invent the “thing”³²⁷ as well as the “subject,” which is subsequently inserted behind or prior to the act and then identified as its cause. Initially, Nietzsche says, all events were conceived of as a doing and “all doing the effect of the will”;³²⁸ in all happenings a *deed* was discerned. Later, events came to imply a multiplicity of doers; “a doer (a ‘subject’) was slipped under all that happened.”³²⁹ The subject was thus first introduced *as the antecedent cause*.³³⁰

For Nietzsche, however, the intentions of the subject that are believed to precede and determine the act are as much an ingredient of willing as bodily sensations.³³¹ In fact, he suggests that the goal or purpose does not instigate willing, but is often merely an accident and or a “beautifying pretext, a self-deception of vanity *after the fact*.”³³² Thus Nietzsche, like

³²⁶ WP 635

³²⁷ TI “Reason in Philosophy” 5

³²⁸ TI “The Four Great Errors” 3

³²⁹ TI “The Four Great Errors” 3

³³⁰ Previously, as said, all events were regarded *as* deeds, that is, as purposeful or acts of the will; we noticed an event, sought a reason for it and, originally, this entailed seeking an *intention* in it. Later we sought “above all someone who has intentions, a subject, a doer” (WP 550). The reason for an event is no longer regarded as concealed in the event itself, but in the “author” of the event.

³³¹ The formation of this concept of subject is also presupposed in the phrase “I think,” which Descartes maintained was an indisputable or certain truth. In BGE 16 Nietzsche questions a host of “daring assertions” that he finds contained in this single phrase, namely that there is an “I,” that thinking is an operation performed by this “I” considered as cause, and that what thinking is, is fully intelligible.

³³² GS 353. Italics mine.

his precursor, also remarks on our propensity to read purpose into nature, to peer *behind* things or events in order to identify the reason for them. More specifically, they both observe that upon discovering the *utility* of something, we are in the habit of inferring that we have correctly identified its original purpose. Nietzsche warns that “when one has demonstrated that a thing is of the highest utility, one has however, thereby taken not one step towards explaining its origin.”³³³ That it is useful (to us) in some respect does not mean that it is so intrinsically or necessarily. Over time, in fact, “whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends.”³³⁴ If we were to trace the history of something, we would not find an uninterrupted “*progressus* toward a goal,” but rather “a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations.”³³⁵

Finally, Nietzsche also concludes that the concept of natural law is insupportable. “‘Things,’ he claims, “do not behave regularly, according to a rule: there are no things (they are fictions invented by us).”³³⁶ That we can devise a “formula by which to express an ever-recurring kind of result” does not mean that we have discerned the cause of this recurrence.³³⁷ The concept of natural law falsely supposes that a thing invariably acts in *obedience* to a law and that it could act otherwise in the absence of any such law.³³⁸ However, as we shall learn, Nietzsche maintains that such regularities in nature are proof only of the fact that “things are unable to be other than they are,”³³⁹ that they act neither in accordance with nor digress

³³³ D 37

³³⁴ GM II 12

³³⁵ GM II 12

³³⁶ WP 634

³³⁷ WP 632

³³⁸ H II 5 & WP 632.

³³⁹ WP 634

from a rule.³⁴⁰ It may appear that on this point Nietzsche has exposed a second key concept in Spinoza's philosophy as untenable. In fact, Spinoza likewise recognizes the error in conflating *human* and *natural* law. He conceives of the eternal laws of nature as *expressive* (of God or nature) as opposed to *prescriptive* and, as such, they cannot be construed as divine edicts that are imposed upon all natural things. In his view, nature displays an orderliness, consistency, and regularity not because it is governed by fixed laws but because it is such by necessity—that is, the fact that it remains unalterable is a result of its being perfectly and necessarily what it is. There is no real distinction, then, between these laws and God or nature or even between them and finite things, insofar as things are simply manifestations of God or nature. Therefore, for Spinoza also, *things cannot be other than what they are*.³⁴¹

II. Anthropomorphic Fictions: Moral & Aesthetic Values

“Let us beware of attributing to [the universe] heartlessness or unreason or their opposites: it is neither perfect, nor beautiful, nor noble, nor does it want to become any of these things; in no way does it strive to imitate man! In no way do our aesthetic and moral judgments apply to it!”³⁴² That we see beauty or goodness, ugliness or evil, in nature is the consequence, Nietzsche declares, of our putting it there. Nature itself is without value; what appears to have value intrinsically has in fact been assigned this value and “*we* were the givers and granters!” And it is precisely by investing the world with value that “we have created the world *that concerns human beings*!”³⁴³ It thereby becomes not only an intelligible or calculable world, as it did in the process of conceptualization, but one that is imbued with a moral

³⁴⁰ WP 632

³⁴¹ This point will be discussed in greater detail in the final chapter.

³⁴² GS 109

³⁴³ GS 301

significance. This humanized world, for us, possesses a visage, the expressions of which signify nobility or baseness, serenity or tumult, harmony or chaos; in this sense, it is familiar or “speaks” to us. That this meaning is of our own making must, however, remain concealed or be forgotten, or we would cease to *believe* in it. As Nietzsche explains, just as people once assigned a sex to all things and believed in these designations, only later to realize that they had erred, “in the same way man has ascribed to all that exists a connection with morality and laid an *ethical significance* on the world’s back.”³⁴⁴ Venerable men once enjoyed the music of the spheres and, though this melody is no longer audible, “wise and noble men still believe in the ‘moral significance of existence.’”³⁴⁵ Thus, in his view, we have ascribed to nature a long lineage of moral and aesthetic values and mistaken them for objective properties.³⁴⁶

Thus, in Nietzsche’s analysis, we have given ourselves all good and evil.³⁴⁷ “We have thought the matter over and finally decided that there is nothing good, nothing beautiful, nothing sublime, nothing evil in itself, but that there are states of soul in which we impose such

³⁴⁴ D 3

³⁴⁵ D 100

³⁴⁶ Zarathustra aptly observes that, “no people could live without esteeming,” for it is by devising and living in accordance with a table of goods that it preserves itself (Z “On The Thousand And One Goals.”). Thus, every people has tended to praise that which is good and censor that which is bad *for it*; moreover “whatever makes them rule and triumph and shine . . . that is to them the high, the first, the measure, the *meaning* of all things” (Z “On The Thousand And One Goals.” Italics mine). *What* significance the world acquires has varied considerably and in response to the needs of a particular people. Nietzsche notices, for instance, a remarkable reversal over time in the European conception of nature. Initially, he says, these people “saw everywhere themselves and their kind, especially their evil and capricious qualities, as it were hidden among the clouds, storms, beast of prey, trees and plants: it was then they invented ‘evil nature’” (D 17). But later, in the age of Rousseau, they sought to remove all traces of humanness from nature in an effort to unearth an uncorrupted, pure, and wholly “good” nature, “they were so fed up with one another they absolutely had to have a corner of the world into which man and his torments could not enter” (D 17). Nietzsche maintains that nature has *always* been thus enshrouded in many guises, by peoples who unconsciously adorned it with a significance uniquely suited to their sensibility.

³⁴⁷ Z “On The Thousand And One Goals”

words upon things external to us and within us.”³⁴⁸ Values, for him, designate *states of the soul*, “the values of a human being betray something of the *structure* of his soul and where it finds its conditions of life, its true need.”³⁴⁹ Every soul, like every body, is uniquely constituted and, as such, it perceives, interprets, and responds to needs *differently*. In addition, as some affects or drives come to the fore in it and others recede, its preferences and aversions also change. Consequently, “which group of sensations is aroused, expresses itself, and issues commands in a soul most quickly, is decisive for the whole order of rank of its values and ultimately determines its table of goods.”³⁵⁰ Any ranking of values is indicative of the order of command among the drives in the soul. No one morality, then, can be said to prevail of necessity, or claim the right to call itself *the* morality; each, without exception, is a “sign language of the affects,”³⁵¹ and a response to a definite need. Nietzsche thus remarks on the purpose of a range of moralities, a purpose unconsciously shaped by the character of their creator; some moralities offer self-assurance and comfort, others justify wreaking revenge, and still others induce forgetfulness.

Finally, for Nietzsche these judgments are, without exception, illogical and, as a result of their particular illogic, “unjust.” He offers two reasons: firstly, as already mentioned, they are “illogical” insofar as they objectify value; secondly, they presume a kind of knowledge that is impossible. In either case, they are also “unjust” because they are invariably unconditional.

The claim that something *is* X (e.g. good, bad, pleasing, disgusting, honourable, base) implies

³⁴⁸ D 210

³⁴⁹ BGE 268. Nietzsche’s employment of the word “soul” here appears to be a peculiarity, given his rejection of the religious concept of soul. But he invests it with a new sense, that of “mortal soul,” “soul as subjective multiplicity,” or “soul as social structure of the drives and affects.” His reinvention of the concept of the soul captures its original intimacy with the body, as that which is expressive of the body’s sensations or affects.

³⁵⁰ BGE 268

³⁵¹ BGE 187

not only that X is a real property of that thing but also that whoever asserts this claim is fully acquainted with X and, as such, can make an accurate or fair assessment of it. But such knowledge, in Nietzsche's opinion, is impossible. "Our experience of another person, for example, no matter how close he stands to us, can never be complete, so that we would have a logical right to a total evaluation of him; all evaluations are premature and bound to be."³⁵² As Nehamas suggests, all perspectives, being precisely that, are to some degree partial.³⁵³ It would seem to follow that we ought to refrain from judging altogether. However, it would be equally impossible, in Nietzsche's view, for us "to *live* without evaluating."³⁵⁴ It is also not necessarily desirable, for "without esteeming, the nut of existence would be hollow";³⁵⁵ by virtue of our propensity to simplify and approximate, we "introduce harmonies of colours *into the things themselves*."³⁵⁶ Thus, for Nietzsche, a measure of ignorance (and hence injustice) invariably informs our evaluations of things. Nonetheless, because "we have for millennia made moral, aesthetic, religious demands on the world, looked upon it with blind desire, passion or fear, and abandoned ourselves to the bad habits of illogical thinking, this world has gradually *become* so marvellously variegated, frightful, meaningful, soulful, it has acquired colour."³⁵⁷ In this respect, Nietzsche commends the surplus of fictions that populate the world as *valuable*; he applauds the fact that their existence at once bespeaks a creative act and gives expression to its significance, it evinces the drive to invent meaning and the meaning invented.

³⁵² H 32

³⁵³ *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, pp. 50-51.

³⁵⁴ H 32

³⁵⁵ Z "On The Thousand And One Goals"

³⁵⁶ D 426

³⁵⁷ H 16

Thus both Nietzsche and Spinoza reject outright the prevailing belief that values are real or objective properties, and argue the opposite: that values are of our own making and signify only how things affect us. Given the diversity of psycho-physiological types, there is a corresponding variation among distinct moral schemas. Thus Nietzsche comments that the origin of one morality lies in “the detestable petty conclusions: ‘what harms *me* is something *evil* (harmful in itself); what is useful to *me* is something *good* (beneficent and advantageous in itself); what harms me *once or several times* is the inimical as such and in itself; what is useful to me *once or several times* is the friendly as such and in itself.’” A moral schema antithetical to this one originates in an entirely different set of conclusions. Accordingly, he illustrates, there is no *necessary* connection between, for instance, utility or selflessness and goodness. It must be observed, however, that to say that this connection is not necessary is not to say that it is not *natural*, as Nehamas claims when he proposes that, “altruism or utility is anything but natural.”³⁵⁸ In fact, for Nietzsche, any value designation is natural, and yet all are also contingent and variable; the “bad” of one morality, for instance, is incommensurable with the “evil” of another. These terms do not only refer to diametrically opposed objects, but they function in contrary ways: the first occurs strictly as an “afterthought” and is of auxiliary importance whereas the second is the first and ruling thought, and definitive of that morality.³⁵⁹

Thus far we have observed that Nietzsche identifies even our most distorting anthropomorphic fictions as innocent in both origin and effect. He shows that we are, indeed, the sole authors of the falsified, ideational world that we inhabit. But Nietzsche, like

³⁵⁸ *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p. 109.

³⁵⁹ Nietzsche’s account of these moralities will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Spinoza, also reveals that our anthropomorphizing occurs spontaneously rather than by calculated design, and tends to be unabashedly, even naively, self-expressive as opposed to deliberately deceptive. Insofar as we humanize nature it reflects our familiar image back to us; our rapport with it is therefore based entirely on rendering it *identical* in certain key respects to us. In addition, Nietzsche suggests that this falsification is not only unavoidable but also in many instances commendable. As we shall see, what he will find fault with is the hegemony of one univocal perspective that suppresses the proliferation of others and, specifically, that ruling perspective which dispenses entirely with any value originally accorded to *this* world and instead privileges an illusory transcendent world.

III. Anthropocentric Fictions: Decadence and the Ascetic Ideal

Concealed behind every assertion concerning the value of existence *as such*, Nietzsche claims, is a certain physical constitution. An affirmation or denial of its value has no significance in and of itself but must be “considered first of all as symptoms of certain bodies.”³⁶⁰ Every bold proclamation regarding the value of existence is a lie; and yet it does disclose the history of a body, “of its success or failure, its fullness, power and high-handedness in history, or of its frustrations, fatigues, impoverishments, its premonitions of the end, its will to an end.” Thus, Nietzsche adds, sages and wise men of most, if not all, ages have judged alike concerning life: that “it is no good.”³⁶¹ However, their agreement on this matter does not prove, as has been assumed, that they have all alike spoken the truth; “it shows rather that they themselves, these wisest men, agreed in some *physiological* respect, and hence adopted the

³⁶⁰ GS 2

³⁶¹ TI 1

same negative attitude to life—*had* to adopt it.”³⁶² The same sentiment is audible in all of their speech, “a sound full of doubt, full of melancholy, full of weariness of life, full of resistance to life.”³⁶³ What does this reveal about their physiologies? In *what* respect are their physiologies alike? All these honoured sages, Nietzsche concludes, are “*types of decline*.”³⁶⁴ Their exhaustion and despondency, their unreserved antipathy for life, is suggestive of a distinctive pathology; in fact, our most revered wise men, including Socrates³⁶⁵ and Jesus,³⁶⁶ have suffered alike from a common ailment. Their disparaging of life as “no good” is, in Nietzsche’s view, *symptomatic* of a psycho-physiological condition that he terms “decadent” and, in addition, their remedies for alleviating it are invariably only further expressions of it.³⁶⁷

Decadence, as Nietzsche describes it, is a state of distress resulting from an “anarchy of the instincts.”³⁶⁸ It is thoroughly pervasive, in his estimation, among human beings of late cultures, most especially of the modern era. He explains that modern peoples “have in their bodies the heritage of multiple origins, that is, opposite, and often not merely opposite, drives and value standards that fight each other and rarely permit each other any rest.”³⁶⁹ Given this cacophony in the soul, the absence of respite from warring instincts, their affective life is chiefly comprised of fatigue and despair. Decadents are not deficient as such in their native vitality; however, as D. Conway explains, “the discordant soul largely exhausts

³⁶² TI 2

³⁶³ TI 1

³⁶⁴ TI 1 & TI 2

³⁶⁵ TI “The Problem of Socrates”

³⁶⁶ See A 29

³⁶⁷ TI 11

³⁶⁸ TI 4

³⁶⁹ BGE 200

itself in an internal conflict between competing instinctual systems.”³⁷⁰ Like caged creatures, decadents show signs of impoverishment, dejection, apathy, and, finally, they develop a suspicion toward life itself. At once depleted and excitable, all contact with things is felt too keenly.³⁷¹ Their bodies and the sensuousness of other things have ceased to be sources of pleasure and wonderment; intimacy becomes abhorrent to them. For those labouring under the influence of a diseased soul, then, *their* life is to them “no good.”

Decadence speaks unequivocally of a declining life. Yet, interestingly, it is also one in which the protective instinct remains *intact*, and so it continuously seeks out “new expedients and devices” to preserve itself.³⁷² An instinct of self-preservation still prevails, then, in the midst of other conflicting instincts. Muller-Lauter suggests that decadence, which he associates with disintegration, must therefore be understood as “not a state but a process.” He argues that if this disintegration were to be fully realized—and the soul were to cease to exhibit any organization at all—it would no longer make sense to speak of decadence; in other words, decadence implies that the “dissolution of an organization is *intended*.” He further suggests that, “the ruling will in such a whole must therefore be a will to disintegration, which strives

³⁷⁰ “The Birth of the Soul: Toward a Psychology of Decadence,” in *Nietzsche and Depth Psychology*, ed. J. Golomb, W. Santaniello & R. Lehrer, Albany: State University of New York, 1999, p. 61. Conway more specifically argues that decadence is the “inevitable result of the artificial mode of internal regulation required by civilization and imposed by consciousness” (56). Once the uninhibited expression of natural drives has been forfeited in exchange for the security and peace of civil society, drives become introjected and, subsequently, demonized. The resulting instinctual discord is, according to Conway, the cause of decadence. He furthermore argues that Nietzsche forecasts a dismal outcome for decadents, namely that that “they can do nothing but enact their constitutive chaos” (67). I would propose, somewhat differently, that for Nietzsche, the origin of decadence is not reducible to one, fateful, historical moment, but is a form of life that has, by his own testimony, come to fruition in the modern age, as a cumulative effect of generations of intermingling between diverse societies. In addition, as I shall suggest in Chapter 6, decadence is also not (at least unequivocally) depicted as terminal. The multiplicity of instincts that are at war in the decadent are one and the same as those that achieve a complex order in the comprehensive soul.

³⁷¹ A 29 and A 30

³⁷² GM III 13

for the end or non-existence of the unity it had organized.”³⁷³ Nehamas similarly maintains that it is a manifestation of a will “that aims at its own destruction.”³⁷⁴ According to my reading, on the contrary, it is the still surviving will to self-preservation that imparts a level of organization to an otherwise chaotic soul. Nietzsche says that decadents experience “any resistance, even any compulsion to resist, as unendurable displeasure” but they betray no signs of resignation. That reality, in its very strangeness, remains inscrutable is perceived by the decadent as *dangerous*, which their instinct warns them against.³⁷⁵ Although unfit to actively appropriate or assimilate the foreign, that is, to “simplify the manifold, and to overlook or repulse whatever is totally contradictory,”³⁷⁶ the decadents’ urge to do so survives.

How does the decadent respond to this incongruence between the drive for self-preservation that survives in him or her and its object, which remains impossibly out of reach? Nietzsche appears to assume, like Spinoza, that no drive could seek its own diminution or demise (i.e., for the sake of a competing drive). So, the decadent has only one course of action available to him or her: to narrow the horizons of its world, so that any aspects of it that are offensive are simply excluded. The first definitive act of the decadent is, therefore, defensive. A newly configured drive assumes command in the soul; as Nietzsche describes it, it issues in “a suddenly erupting decision in favour of ignorance, of deliberate exclusion, a shutting of one’s windows, an internal No to this or that thing, a refusal to let things approach, a kind of state of defence against much that is knowable, a satisfaction with the dark.”³⁷⁷ The decadent

³⁷³ *Nietzsche: His Philosophy of Contradictions and the Contradictions of His Philosophy*, pp. 43-44.

³⁷⁴ *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p. 117.

³⁷⁵ A 30

³⁷⁶ BGE 230

³⁷⁷ BGE 230

type does not accept itself, then, as a particular form of life but sets itself against life *as such* with an unforgiving enmity. It finds its standing, its self-justification, in an uncompromising denial of life—or, what is the same, it affirms its existence and its existence alone.³⁷⁸ Thus is it, as Nietzsche observes, intrinsically paradoxical: *a form of life that is inimical to life itself*. It makes a claim for itself not by seeking to modify, edit, or assimilate that part of life that it chances upon; it desires mastery over life *as such*, “over its most profound, powerful, and basic conditions.” Everything that speaks of a flourishing life—especially physiological health, beauty, and joy—is “viewed askance”³⁷⁹ and approached with suspicion and malice. The opposite of what is life-affirming is affirmed so that “pleasure itself is felt and sought in ill-constitutedness, decay, pain, mischance, ugliness, voluntary deprivation, self-mortification, self-flagellation, self-sacrifice.”³⁸⁰

According to Nietzsche, the ascetic ideal is the highest, most “spiritual” expression of decadence. Self-contradictory, the decadent type finds *its* meaning, *its* goal in a paradoxical ideal: *to will nothingness*.³⁸¹ The ascetic ideal, he says, “springs from the protective instinct of a degenerating life,” and is the expedient by which it struggles to sustain itself.³⁸² Thus, he points out, its significance is actually the opposite of that which is attributed to it by those who hold it in reverence; rather than being the voluntary cessation of all willing, it is both the crowning creation of a diminishing life and its chief device for preventing its demise. In

³⁷⁸ GM III 7

³⁷⁹ GM III 12

³⁸⁰ GM III 12. Ivan Soll comments that Nietzsche “viewed the ascetic as one who introjects a cruelty whose primary object is making others suffer.” As a consequence of this introjection, he explains, the ascetic undergoes a kind of self-division, identifying with that part of him or her which “is able to overcome an opposing will,” and disassociating from that part which is subjugated (“Nietzsche on Cruelty, Asceticism, Failure of Hedonism,” in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. R. Schacht, Berkeley: University of California, 1994, pp. 185-186).

³⁸¹ GM III 1

³⁸² GM III 13

Nietzsche's words, "life wrestles in it and through it with death and *against* death; the ascetic ideal is an artifice for the *preservation* of life."³⁸³ Weakened by antagonistic drives battling each other for supremacy, it lacks the vitality needed to directly confront the vicissitudes of life. The ascetic ideal supplies it with a new goal, by which it resuscitates its will and, along with it, a feeling of power: that of *nothingness*. Willing nothing, depriving the sensuous world of its worth and appeal, is decidedly preferable to the decadent, Nietzsche observes, than not willing at all.³⁸⁴ This ideal contains no substantive content of itself, no significance apart from conferring value on "that which is not." But it nevertheless functions as a positive goal for those bereft of any other. As S. Kofman and A. Nehamas both point out, though this ideal essentially involves negation and expresses the negative, it is nevertheless affirmative of the type for whom it is an ideal.³⁸⁵ Nihilism is, therefore, a last resort; it represents a final attempt to find meaning precisely in the rendering of earthly life as meaningless.

How the ascetic ideal is concretely interpreted, or lived, varies. In the case of "the *majority* of mortals," Nietzsche says, it signifies "an attempt to see themselves as 'too good' for this world."³⁸⁶ The paradoxical nature of decadence is nowhere more apparent than in this self-concept; a species of the world regards itself as essentially *different* from and *superior* to it. Echoing Spinoza's remark that human beings are conceived of as "a kingdom within a kingdom,"³⁸⁷ he says that our self-concept reflects a view of "'man *against* the world,' of man as 'world-negating' principle, of man as the measure of the value of things, as judge of the

³⁸³ GM III 13

³⁸⁴ GM III 1

³⁸⁵ Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, p. 128; Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p. 124.

³⁸⁶ GM III 1

³⁸⁷ *Ethics* III Preface.

world who finally places existence on his scales and finds it too light.”³⁸⁸ The core assumption here is that “the juxtaposition of “man *and* world” is real.”³⁸⁹ Yet this juxtaposition has no real significance except as a postulate that subsequently permits us to rank the human species as superior. The *justification* offered for our claim to superiority has historically assumed two forms, and in both cases is as specious as the claim itself. In the first, “the feeling of the grandeur of man” was sought in his divine origin,”³⁹⁰ and so he owed his superiority to this divine parentage.”³⁹¹ Later, however, we dispensed with this spurious supposition, only to introduce another, namely that “the way mankind is going shall serve as proof of his grandeur and kinship with God.”³⁹² According to this hypothesis, the human species is not the beneficiary of a special birthright but is nevertheless “the great hidden purpose of the evolution of the animals.”³⁹³ What both theories have appealed to as proof of our natural ascendancy—whether by virtue of our origin or *telos*—is the fact of our having *consciousness* and a *free will*. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Nietzsche divests both notions of the significance attributed to them. In his analysis, “free will” turns out to “denote a resultant, a kind of individual reaction” rather than to signify a first cause; similarly, consciousness is “nothing less than the symptom of a relative imperfection of the organism,” and a device by which the phenomenal spectacle is made intelligible, which is to say, superficial.³⁹⁴

³⁸⁸ GS 346

³⁸⁹ GS 346

³⁹⁰ D 49

³⁹¹ A 14

³⁹² D 49

³⁹³ A 14

³⁹⁴ A 14

The vanity expressed in this claim to natural superiority is revealed by Nietzsche to be both entirely unfounded and supremely useful. He remarks that every creature of the earth stands beside the human being “on the same level of perfection.”³⁹⁵ No matter how far we might evolve, we “cannot pass over into a higher order, as little as the ant and the earwig can at the end of their ‘earthly course’ rise up to the kinship with God and eternal life.”³⁹⁶ This is not to deny that the creatures of the earth vary in terms of their respective capacities. Nietzsche, for instance, agrees with Spinoza that the capacity to reason is distinctively human. Yet he, like his precursor, also claims that this capacity is entirely natural, and does not confer upon us any special missive or status. There is no reason in his view for an exception to be made “on behalf of some little star or for any little species upon it.”³⁹⁷ He further suggests that vanity originates in a sense of inferiority and consists mainly in the pretence of superiority; “to wish [one’s] superiority to be publicly acknowledged,” when this superiority is lacking is vanity.³⁹⁸ Thus, the vain are less concerned with actually *acquiring* predominance than they are with sustaining a false belief that they possess it as a birthright.³⁹⁹ Generally speaking, they employ any means to propagate a good opinion of themselves *in order to* believe in it themselves; in Nietzsche’s words, the vain individual, in effect, “induces error and then believes in this error.”⁴⁰⁰ Vanity is, as such, of great utility to those who are cognizant of their impotence and, in addition, have sufficient spirit to be deceitful because, for them, “it is easier to augment belief in power than to augment power itself.”⁴⁰¹ In proportion to the degree that we are sensible of our decline, then, we tend to indulge in vain fantasies and attempt to

³⁹⁵ A 14

³⁹⁶ D 49

³⁹⁷ D 49

³⁹⁸ H 170

³⁹⁹ H 545

⁴⁰⁰ H 89 & BGE 261

⁴⁰¹ H 181

foster false opinions of ourselves. This vanity has its origins in precisely that which it strives to conceal or compensate for: the faltering, chaotic soul of the decadent.

In addition to revealing a thoroughgoing mendacity, this same vanity is suggestive of a desire for tyranny over those aspects of life that the decadent is prohibited from enjoying—namely, those that are “cruel” or indifferent to their plight. They aim to “*represent* justice, love, wisdom, superiority” *as if* such virtues were the only that qualify as being such, and *as if* such virtues belonged to them and them alone. The decadents’ will is thus *necessarily* tyrannical. They monopolize virtue, declaring that goodness is their exclusive possession; “they walk among us as embodied reproaches, as warnings to us—as if health, well-constitutedness, strength, pride, and the sense of power were in themselves necessarily vicious things for which one must pay one day, and pay bitterly.”⁴⁰² What is most perspicuous in this silent reproach is *ressentiment*, an insidious malice that wants all things to be deprived of whatever it lacks itself. As he often does, Nietzsche assumes the point of view of this type and voices its unconscious sentiments: “because there is *something* I cannot have, the whole world shall have *nothing*! The whole world shall *be* nothing!”⁴⁰³

Nietzsche thus detects signs of a pervasive and intransigent pathology among the people of modern times. More precisely, he finds that the *symptoms* of this pathology are unmistakably evident in the prevailing conception of “man *against* the world” that ostensibly justifies the self-appointed task of judging the value of existence (and finding it deficient). The division of “man” and “world” is, he suggests, simply expressive of a prior *ressentiment* and vanity that

⁴⁰² GM III 14

⁴⁰³ D 304. For an in-depth discussion of *ressentiment* see Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, pp. 111-146.

strives to achieve an affirmation of oneself in opposition to that which one is not. The conjunctive in this case is not added to unite but to distinguish the two terms so as to confer supreme value on the first and divest the second of value altogether. In addition, he cautions that the word “man” in this case refers to *one* (historical) type of human being. Moreover, he warns that this pathology has worsened, becoming a contagion, as a result of the stratagems and devices employed by “physicians of the soul,” namely, metaphysicians and priests of the great religions. It is by virtue of their devious intervention that this original pathology, Nietzsche argues, now poses a threat to the very future of humanity.

The Religious Interpretation of Existence

“The moment when a religious crisis overcomes a people is invariably marked by epidemics of the nerves,”⁴⁰⁴ Nietzsche says. In a state of acute psycho-physiological distress, the afflicted seek consolation or relief and inadvertently become the “thoroughly morbid soil,” for the growth of religion. “The religious man, as the church wants him, is a typical decadent,” not because this man requires religion for his salvation but because “Christianity *needs* sickness . . . to *make* sick is the true, secret purpose of the whole system of redemptive procedures constructed by the church.”⁴⁰⁵ The church is concerned, above all, with effecting the complete subjugation of the faithful, rather than with setting aright or “saving” lost souls. For the priesthood, given its designs and according to its ends, decadence is therefore supremely propitious. The priestly “type of man has a life interest in making mankind *sick*,”⁴⁰⁶ because to cure would be contrary to his or her own interests. Moreover, they are

⁴⁰⁴ A 51

⁴⁰⁵ A 51

⁴⁰⁶ A 24

actually incapable of properly diagnosing or healing this insidious epidemic because they are themselves ravaged by antagonistic drives, by an unending vacillation between “brooding and emotional explosions,” and as such they have no insight into the conditions for health. As Nietzsche observes, the fact that the priest and the multitude are in sympathy is contingent on the fact that they share the *same* sickness. Yet, “so as to be both trusted and feared by the sick, so as to be their support, resistance, prop, compulsion, taskmaster, tyrant, and god,”⁴⁰⁷ the priest must, in addition, possess a stronger will than they. In the priesthood, then, we find a different type of decadent: at least a modicum of self-mastery has been achieved in an otherwise anarchic soul. In this case, however, self-mastery is not concomitant with a harmonious soul. The reigning drive cannot impart coherence and order to the drives and, instead, acts as an agent of repression, imposing a state of tyranny within the soul.

Nietzsche thus overturns two presuppositions about the religious order; first, that it has “holy” ends, and second, that the priest is a good-willed functionary of this order. He maintains that the sovereign religions in each case tend “to preserve, to preserve alive whatever can possibly be preserved; indeed as a matter of principle, they side with [decadents] as religions for *sufferers*; they agree with all those who suffer life like a sickness and would like to make sure that every other feeling about life should be considered false and should become impossible.”⁴⁰⁸ On the surface, they are as they appear to be, namely religions *for* the people and the strongest advocates of the interests and sentiments of the “down-trodden.” At the same time, they are merely instruments of power, whose principal

⁴⁰⁷ GM III 15

⁴⁰⁸ BGE 62

function is to *exploit* the faithful. Like Spinoza, then, Nietzsche is clearly cognizant of the fact that the union of the priest and the people is forged out of greed on the part of the former and “sad passions” on the part of the latter. The priest, like the multitude, displays an uncanny artistry in what he makes of the life that he cannot freely enjoy; “these born artists ... can find the enjoyment of life only in the intention of *falsifying* its image,” in resolving upon a “long-winded revenge on life” by thinning down, blanching, deifying its image.⁴⁰⁹ Both refuse *categorically* to acknowledge reality as it is and consistently clothe it in a disguise that is more to their liking.

Of central importance to Nietzsche, however, is that with the priest “this faulty perspective on all things is elevated into a morality, a virtue, a holiness; the good conscience is tied to faulty vision; and no *other* perspective is conceded any further value.”⁴¹⁰ Compelled by an insatiable lust for power, the priesthood skillfully establishes the hegemony of their perspective by constructing a morality out of it. Moreover, to protect this univocal perspective from the vagaries of contesting perspectives, that morality is represented as *unconditional*. As W. Klein writes, because it “promotes itself as a code of behaviour which . . . embodies the ultimate truth of existence,” this morality is forced to “deny its conditionality as interpretation and, consequently, to exclude the possibility of other, competing interpretations.”⁴¹¹ But, one might ask, do not *all* moralities make some claim, if only an implicit one, to being unconditional? Any evaluation implies a prior knowledge of its object that is complete and accurate; it involves, in other words, a firm belief that the judgement

⁴⁰⁹ BGE 59

⁴¹⁰ A 9

⁴¹¹ *Nietzsche and the Promise of Philosophy*, Albany: State University of New York, 1997, p. 139.

concerning that object is in fact true and may be universally accepted.⁴¹² Nietzsche does not object to such a claim, even if unjustified. It is the morality regarding this claim *itself*—specifically, that to cast suspicion on its veracity or simply by introducing a different but equally viable morality is itself a moral transgression—that he vehemently opposes. This type of morality claims to be unconditional *with the aim of* securing a general conformity on the part of the populace. Nietzsche thus distinguishes between two types of moralities, in which the claim to being unconditional inherent in each evolves out of opposing kinds of drives.

What Nietzsche terms the “noble” type of morality originates in gratitude and self-love,⁴¹³ so that the designation “good” is an *expression* of these positive affects; that is, it both emerges from, and functions as, “a triumphant affirmation of itself.”⁴¹⁴ It seeks its opposite only as a secondary means for occasioning self-affirmation and, as such, its negative concept of “bad” is formed only as “a subsequently pale, contrasting image to its positive basic concept.”⁴¹⁵ The system of values devised by the noble type is unconditional insofar it posits its good as *the* good. However, it is in no respect dependent upon its counterpart, the negative concept of “bad” which occurs in it as a mere “afterthought.” In other words, noble morality is primarily concerned *only with the noble* and, as such, it does not present general *obedience* to it as imperative. Religious, or what Nietzsche calls “plebeian,” morality, on the other hand, is expressive of “the tyrannical will of someone who suffers deeply, who struggles, is tortured,

⁴¹² Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p. 131.

⁴¹³ GS 370

⁴¹⁴ GM I 10

⁴¹⁵ GM I 10. Deleuze ties this form of spontaneous self-affirmation to activity. Designating oneself as “good” is not consequent upon evaluating the merits of one’s actions or works in comparison to those of others. As Deleuze observes, no such sundering of action and affirmation is evident in this morality. Rather, “he who affirms and acts is at the same time the one who *is*.” Thus, this morality is premised on what is positive, and only secondarily and tangentially expresses the negative—namely that what is *not* me is “bad” (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 119-120).

and who would like to stamp as a binding law and compulsion what is most personal, singular, narrow, the real idiosyncrasy of his feeling, and who as it were takes revenge on all things by forcing, imprinting, branding *his* image on them, the image of his torture.”⁴¹⁶

Articulated in the form of laws, this morality insists as a matter of principle upon absolute compliance to its rules of conduct. Accordingly, as Nehamas writes, “slave morality aims to make everyone conform to a single code of behaviour, while those who subscribe to the noble mode of valuation find any such goal ludicrous, if at all conceivable.”⁴¹⁷ In fact, Nietzsche intimates that the noble type is largely dismissive of or simply indifferent to other codes of behaviour, while the primary motivation of the plebeian type is to compel all individuals alike to abide by its own code. He explains that this morality begins with, and is essentially characterized by, a “No to what is ‘outside,’ what is ‘different,’ what is ‘not oneself’; and *this* No is its creative deed.”⁴¹⁸ The negative concept, in this case, is given priority and assumes the more sinister form of “the *Evil One*,” which is none other than the “good” individual as it is portrayed in noble morality. It therefore affirms itself only by condemning otherness or difference.⁴¹⁹ Importantly, Nietzsche finds fault with this morality not on the grounds that it assumes the universality of its perspective, nor, as Klein proposes, that this perspective expresses an unmitigated hostility toward life as such;⁴²⁰ but that it insists on absolute obedience, which it secures by representing contesting perspectives or modes of conduct as immoral.

⁴¹⁶ GS 370

⁴¹⁷ *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p. 126.

⁴¹⁸ GMI 13

⁴¹⁹ GMI 10 & 11

⁴²⁰ *Nietzsche and the Promise of Philosophy*, p. 140.

How does religious morality operate in practice? How does it win the conformity it requires? Nietzsche suggests that religion-founders borrow a pre-established way of life and set of customs within a community, and then “give just this life an interpretation that makes it appear illuminated by the highest worth, so that henceforth it becomes a good for which one fights and under certain circumstances even gives one’s life.”⁴²¹ The genius of these priestly rulers consists less in their reforming long-standing custom than in their surmising, “for the first time what it can be used for and how it can be interpreted.”⁴²² They deliberately *select* what has endured, surviving even the fading recollection or traces of its original purpose, so that it appears to be timeless; then they confer upon it a novel (that is to say, a religious) significance. What does religion gain by appropriating old customs? Tradition solicits an obedience that tends to be unvarying and unchallenged, even in the absence of any compelling reason to obey; as Nietzsche explains, it is obeyed “not because it commands what is *useful* to us, but because it *commands*.”⁴²³ Tradition owes its longevity, its uncontested authority, only to the fact that it commands and the command itself is, above all else, useful. Nietzsche also suggests it is also inherently conservative, privileging the community over the individual⁴²⁴ and, as such, any interests or proclivities that are suggestive of individuality are routinely read as signs of capriciousness and incalculability. Therefore, the “morality of custom” that Nietzsche describes is an implicit and not fully explicated system of values; it consists principally in a precept declaring that, “the individual is to sacrifice himself.”⁴²⁵ As it is expedient for members of a community to acquire an “instrument-nature,” the highest honours are bestowed on “staying-true-to-oneself,” on “immutability in views, aspirations,

⁴²¹ GS 353

⁴²² GS 353

⁴²³ D 9

⁴²⁴ D 9

⁴²⁵ D 9

and even vices,” and change or unpredictability are regarded with disapprobation.⁴²⁶ Custom instructs the individual “to be a function of the herd and to ascribe value to himself only as a function.”⁴²⁷ Ultimately, then, *obedience itself is the highest virtue* in the morality of custom. “Goodness” consists in complying with custom *as if* by nature or “as a result of a long inheritance.”⁴²⁸ Therefore, a largely unconscious but intractable “herd morality” precedes and paves the way for religious morality.

Nietzsche is not arguing that every community ruled by custom inevitably surrenders to the tyranny of the religion-founders; as mentioned, he suggests that religion requires, for its success, not just any sort of “herd” in the habit of obedience, but one which needs to be commanded, for whom a “*Thou Shalt*” is necessary. Nietzsche claims that religions are first and foremost “teachers of fanaticism in times of a slackening of the will and thereby offered innumerable people support, a new possibility of willing, a delight in willing.”⁴²⁹ *Fanaticism*, he suggests, is the only strength of will attainable by the decadent, as it does not depend on bodily vigour or robust spiritedness; it is “a type of hypnosis of the entire sensual-intellectual system to the benefit of the excessive nourishment (hypertrophy) of a single point of view and feeling which is now dominant—the Christian calls it his *faith*.”⁴³⁰ Thus, according to Nietzsche, faith, subjection to a religious order, and fanaticism are intrinsically connected, just as Spinoza had previously proposed. As he says, faith expresses a fundamental need “for some kind of unconditional Yes and No”; the person of faith, he adds, is “one who cannot posit *himself* as an end, one who cannot posit any end at all by himself,” and so depends on

⁴²⁶ GS 296

⁴²⁷ GS 116

⁴²⁸ H 96

⁴²⁹ GS 347

⁴³⁰ GS 347

the priest to lend him this “Yes” and “No.”⁴³¹ They search for something that is regulatory and absolutely binding to which they may submit; subjection to an impersonal law is sought as a condition for their survival. Thus, Nietzsche contends that “every kind of faith is itself an expression of self-abnegation, of self-alienation” and, accordingly, a morality that makes a *virtue* of self-abnegation is highly regarded.⁴³²

In sum, then, Nietzsche argues that the priest offers the poor in spirit, in whom the sensuous, the earth itself, arouses disgust and who struggles against fatigue and decay without relief, a religious *justification* for turning away from reality. He exposes each of the priest’s major fictions, most notably that of the transcendent world,” as being “malignant counterfeits.” He consistently reveals that these fictions are innocent in origin but once appropriated by priests they invariably serve a sinister purpose. Though Nietzsche, as said, is unconcerned with error as such, he is unrelenting in his efforts to show that the apparent truths of religion are not only fallacious but also employed for ill ends. His conscience, he says, knows “what these uncanny inventions of the priests and the church are really worth, what ends they served . . . [they] are instruments of torture, systems of cruelties by virtue of which the priest became master, remained master.”⁴³³ Thus, there is a striking confluence here between Nietzsche’s and Spinoza’s respective analyses of the origin of fictions: both regard them as the work of a fanciful imagination, as relatively innocuous and even possibly conducive to the prosperity of their authors. There is also a marked similarity in their observance that, under the influence of a corrupt priesthood, these innocent, tenuous fictions sediment into intractable convictions that can be damaging: they often function as

⁴³¹ A 54

⁴³² A 54

⁴³³ A 38

instruments for keeping the faithful in a state of subjection (in which they are complicit), and are used as weapons to vilify, discredit, or silence any opposition. In the remainder of this chapter, we will briefly examine what Nietzsche identifies as the key fictions of religious morality.

The Moral World Order

The fiction that religion has used chiefly for the purpose of giving the *world itself* a new significance, dying it in shades of colour that are flattering to the artist, is that of the “moral world order.” It was borrowed, in large part, from a species of superstition that instructs people to look for supernatural causes in natural events; Nietzsche explains that, traditionally, “whenever an evil chance event—a sudden crop failure or a plague—strikes a community, the suspicion is aroused that custom has been offended in some way or that new practices now have to be devised to propitiate a new demonic power and caprice.”⁴³⁴ The religion-founders supplanted these inchoate and changeable demonic powers with a fixed moral world order conforming, they claimed, to the will of God. Behind both calamitous and fortuitous events, there is now a personal God dictating rules of conduct, demanding obedience to these rules, and “punishing and rewarding according to the degree of obedience.”⁴³⁵ As a reward for obeying God’s will, the faithful may expect to receive a blessing, and as punishment for a transgression, they can be assured that they will incur a loss or injury.⁴³⁶ The consequences of every deed are no longer seen as *natural* but in every instance *moral*, that is, “as reward, punishment, hint, means of education”;⁴³⁷ people thus

⁴³⁴ D 33

⁴³⁵ A 26

⁴³⁶ A 25

⁴³⁷ A 49

cease to believe in innocent misfortune, as they did in antiquity. The “moral world order,” or the “will of God” are, Nietzsche informs us, exploitative fictions by which a general obedience—which is one of the essential “conditions for the preservation of priestly power”⁴³⁸—is sustained. They consistently elicit fear of punishment or hope for divine blessing among the faithful, who are then only too willing to submit to their own subjugation.

The Lie of the Ideal or the “Other” World

The definitive act of the priesthood, by Nietzsche’s account, is to *denature* natural values⁴³⁹ or divest “everything that contained value *in itself*”⁴⁴⁰ of precisely that value; it is the ultimate act of negation, by which the priests stamp *their* valuation on existence as such. What does he mean by value “in itself” or natural value? In this context, it signifies that which expresses “an instinct for life,” and is reflected in social practices that promote “the life and growth of a people.”⁴⁴¹ The priest’s annihilation of this value constitutes a reactive opposition to this basic “life instinct.” Yet, Nietzsche denies that it is the antithesis of this instinct for life, that is, an instinct *for* death. The denaturing of value is itself expressive of this same instinct, but on the part of a disintegrating form of life; it is a *condition for* “the growth and prosperity of the life-inimical species”⁴⁴² Therefore, the priests’ denaturing *is itself* natural for they are themselves a species of life that is turned against life itself. In this manner value comes to be disengaged from its initial moorings in the natural conditions of life; in particular, it ceases to be associated with occasions for joy and gratitude, such as receiving bounty, achieving

⁴³⁸ A 26

⁴³⁹ A 25

⁴⁴⁰ A 26

⁴⁴¹ A 26

⁴⁴² GM III 11

victory, enjoying bodily vigour, in short, anything that is suggestive of prosperity. The priest decisively turns away from life and “juxtaposes it (along with what pertains to it: “nature,” “world,” the whole sphere of becoming and transitoriness) with a quite different mode of existence which it opposes and excludes.”⁴⁴³ This “other” world is, in fact, nothing other than the *inverse* of this world and is in every respect “rooted in hatred of the natural (of reality!); it is the expression of a profound vexation at the sight of reality.”⁴⁴⁴ The earthly world is subsequently “deprived of its value, its meaningfulness, its truthfulness, to precisely the extent to which one has mendaciously invented an ideal world.”⁴⁴⁵ Nietzsche emphasizes that spinning tales of an “other” world makes no sense at all unless it is elicited by an “instinct of slander, detraction, and suspicion against life,” that is, unless it is an oblique means of avenging oneself against it.⁴⁴⁶

In its origins, however, this bifurcation of reality, upon which all of religion and metaphysics is grounded, was entirely innocuous. By Nietzsche’s account, it began in the dream; “the man of the ages of barbarous primordial culture believed that in the dream he was getting to know a second real world.”⁴⁴⁷ Asleep, this unwitting forefather of metaphysics entered a reality that vanished during the waking hours and so he concluded that the universe consisted of dual realities. “Without the dream,” Nietzsche concludes, “one would have had no occasion to divide the world into two.”⁴⁴⁸ But whereas dreams consist in an imaginative

⁴⁴³ GM III 11

⁴⁴⁴ A 15

⁴⁴⁵ EH Preface 2

⁴⁴⁶ TI “Reason in Philosophy” 6. It is, in addition, a circuitous means by which we take refuge from ourselves, the repugnance we feel at the sight of our own sickness; for before us, well-concealed but promised, is a “dehumanized inhuman world which is a heavenly nothing” (Z “On the Afterworldly”).

⁴⁴⁷ HI 5

⁴⁴⁸ HI 5

play on reality, be it horrifying, comical or pleasing, metaphysics resolutely “falsifies, devalues, and negates reality.”⁴⁴⁹

The Ideal of the “Holy God”

The concept of God also did not spring, fully formed, from the imagination of the priests, but rather they adapted it to suit their purposes. Originally, by Nietzsche’s account, gods are the rich repositories of the self-affirming projections of a particular people; “in him it reveres the conditions which let it prevail, its virtues: it projects its pleasure in itself, its feeling of power, into a being whom one may offer thanks.”⁴⁵⁰ A god such as this “must be able to help or harm, to be a friend and enemy,” and is admired equally for his destructiveness as for his goodness, for his acts of violence as for his acts of benevolence.⁴⁵¹ As a people undergo change, then, so does the god who resembles them. Nietzsche observes that when they begin to feel themselves perishing, their confidence in future prosperity starts waning, and submission begins to seem necessary for the sake of survival, then their god must become “a sneak, timid and modest; he counsels ‘peace of soul,’ hate-no-more, forbearance, even ‘love’ of friend and enemy.”⁴⁵² This god, the God of Christianity, ceases to embody a range of virtues, and is transformed into a “god of the good alone,” who no longer possesses the capacity for wrath, revenge, or scorn.⁴⁵³ The old god and his cardinal virtues of bravery, pride, strength, becomes in turn the embodiment of evil, the fallen angel.

⁴⁴⁹ A 15

⁴⁵⁰ A 16

⁴⁵¹ A 16

⁴⁵² A 16

⁴⁵³ A 16

The new *all good* God signifies, to Nietzsche, a “*reduction* of the divine” to a symbol, merely a “staff for the weary.”⁴⁵⁴ This Christian concept of “God” thus represents “the low-water mark in the descending development of divine types.”⁴⁵⁵ Whereas previous concepts of the divine had typically remained life-affirming, this “God” was posited as the *contradiction* of life, “as the declaration of war against life, against nature, against the will to live.”⁴⁵⁶ He identifies “God,” along with the “beyond,” as concepts derived strictly by means of a categorical negation of what is natural or this-worldly; the genesis of God, for instance, begins in an enmity against life and, consequently, God *is* the counter concept to life.⁴⁵⁷ This rendering of God is not, it should be recalled, the God that Spinoza speaks of in the *Ethics*. That a God exists is, for him, self-evident or logically necessary. But *what* God *is* is in no respect antithetical to or even distinguishable from nature because his God is fully immanent. As discussed, Spinoza does not simply reduce one term to the other, either by naturalizing God or divinising nature; rather, he replaces the religious conception of both. Rejecting the common notion that the divine and the natural are contraries, he describes a unity that he refers to as “God or Nature.” That Spinoza still describes this unity as existing in itself may seem to prove, nevertheless, that he was unable to entirely step outside the “shadow of God.” Nietzsche might charge him with neglecting to remove the lingering imprint of the transcendent God in the form of “being in-itself”; he might, in addition, suggest that if Spinoza’s thought had been fully exorcized of the pervasive shadow, this simple, perfect unity would dissolve into its infinite expressions. Yet, arguably, Spinoza may have avoided

⁴⁵⁴ A 17. Nietzsche suggests that this diminution of the divine is the direct result of type of masochism, a “*will* to erect an ideal—that of the ‘holy God’—and in the face of it to feel the palpable certainty of [one’s] own absolute unworthiness” (GM II 23).

⁴⁵⁵ A 18

⁴⁵⁶ A 18

⁴⁵⁷ EH “Why I am a Destiny” 8

committing what Nietzsche calls the basic error of all metaphysics: that of evoking the specious phantom of “being.” As mentioned in Chapter 2, Spinoza never explicitly indicated that God is anything *besides* his myriad expressions; if any substratum underpinning all of these expressions exists, it remains elusive and inessential to his argument concerning the nature of God.

Sin, Impossible Virtue, and The Immortal Soul

Representing what is *contra* natural in every respect, the Christian God is the perfect personification of the conscience and idolizing him is but another means of triumphing over our natural instincts. Worship of the “holy God” and that part of us which is “God-like,” entails, Nietzsche adds, that we “diabolize the other part,” as the work of a “devil.”⁴⁵⁸ The association of naturalness with sin, and of achieving an impossible ideal with salvation, is continuously emphasized in religious superstition. Original sin, for instance, is one artifice by which a suspicion of all natural processes, and shame at being clothed in “nature’s garb,” are fostered.⁴⁵⁹ Oppressed by the conviction that one is sinful *by nature*, a corresponding desire for salvation arises. Christianity, Nietzsche insists, sets out to persuade humanity that it is inexorably sinful in order to impose moral demands upon it that are virtually impossible to fulfill. A canon of “*impossible virtue*” is contained in the New Testament, and “those still striving after morality are in the face of such a canon to learn to feel themselves ever more distant from their goal.”⁴⁶⁰ The purpose of prescribing such a moral ideal is evidently not to improve, edify, or purify the “sinful,” but rather to instruct them in the full extent of their

⁴⁵⁸ H 137

⁴⁵⁹ H 141

⁴⁶⁰ D 87

depravity.⁴⁶¹ Moreover, it imparts a cruel significance to human life, namely, that it is “a mistake that is made right by deeds—that we *ought* to put right.”⁴⁶² The priest returns our life to us, then, as a *duty*, as that which we are obliged to set right by exemplary deeds; every deed, in turn, becomes significant with respect to the salvation of one’s soul. In short, according to the priest, our life *here* is a long bridge that one crosses, proceeding in measured steps and by way of good deeds, with an unwavering resolve to purify one’s soul of its sinfulness.

In addition, Nietzsche observes that the concept of the immortal soul, “the dissection into soul and body is also connected with the oldest idea of the dream.”⁴⁶³ The “spirit” is experienced as taking flight into the realm of dreams while the body slumbers and, consequently, the life of the soul is imagined to be independent of the body. This whimsical notion is usurped by Christianity and Judaism and transformed into the “great lie of personal immortality.” This lie, and not the fiction of a “soul” as such, is objectionable because it effectively removes “any *sense* in living” and encourages a futile preoccupation with cleansing one’s soul in preparation for its long anticipated ascent to the “beyond.”⁴⁶⁴ The emphasis on personal salvation deserves the greatest contempt, according to Nietzsche, for it signifies, paradoxically, “an intensification of every kind of selfishness into the infinite.”⁴⁶⁵ The natural world, enveloped in the shadow of a heavenly beyond and the immortality of the soul, no longer revolves around envisaging and promoting communal welfare, be it in ritualistic acts

⁴⁶¹ H 141

⁴⁶² GM III 11

⁴⁶³ H I 5

⁴⁶⁴ A 43

⁴⁶⁵ A 43

of gratitude for one's ancestors, or in attending to the health of the body, but simply around "me."⁴⁶⁶

Religious Morality: Pity

According to Nietzsche, this selfishness is, strangely, further exacerbated by Christian pity, which "has been made *the* virtue, the basis and source of all virtues."⁴⁶⁷ Moral conduct, as it is conceived within this religion, essentially consists of "other regarding" acts and, specifically, those performed *out of pity*. But in the injunction to be "selfless," Nietzsche discerns "the social effect of timidity," an underlying hope "that all the dangers which life once held should be removed from it, and that everyone should assist in this with all his might."⁴⁶⁸ In his assessment, pity is baptized a virtue in response to a profound fear of that which is perilous, uncertain, or dangerous in life, for it ensures *common security*. Pity, then, is actually egoistic, a handmaiden to a wholly *self*-protective drive. The merit of pity, for the Christian, is that it "defends those who have been disinherited and condemned by life."⁴⁶⁹ However, pity for another's plight usually obscures the significance that a person's trials and misfortune might have for them, as it presumes that suffering is invariably an evil. Nietzsche complains that wherever pity visits, the solace of solitude is banished, for it is utterly lacking in any "sense of shame, of respect, of sensitivity for distances."⁴⁷⁰ Yet, in the absence of solitude, no opportunity remains for someone to learn from, or be changed by, suffering. He

⁴⁶⁶ A 43

⁴⁶⁷ A 7

⁴⁶⁸ D 174

⁴⁶⁹ A 7

⁴⁷⁰ EH "Why I Am So Wise" 4

remarks that pity is not intended to give relief or pleasure, as is evident from the fact that it is often coupled with a suspicion toward expressions of *joy*.⁴⁷¹

But what Nietzsche identifies as the real danger of pity is that it can *transform decadence into a contagion*. Pity tends to disseminate, rather than alleviate, misery because it requires that people share in their neighbours' pain and accept their estimation of life as worthless. He observes that anyone who sought out occasions for pity and "set before his soul all the misery available to him in his surroundings would inevitably grow sick and melancholic."⁴⁷² It has an essentially depressive effect and, in fact, is opposed to all the "tonic emotions" that restore vitality. Once it is erroneously associated with goodness or virtue, then, "pity makes suffering contagious."⁴⁷³ While it may assuage the agony of some, it can adversely affect others, inducing a similar despondency and disparaging view of life. Therefore, a morality of pity, Nietzsche warns, causes a general diminution of human life. In this sense, it is the *practice of nihilism*, for it realizes, in concrete social relations, the life-negating ideal of religious morality. Berkowitz suggests that Nietzsche regards pity as a "catastrophe for the higher types" specifically and, accordingly, proclaims that it is incumbent upon the philosopher to "excise the cancer ravaging the body politic in order to save not the soul of the body politic but his own soul and the souls of his fellow Hyperboreans."⁴⁷⁴ However, here as elsewhere, Nietzsche is quite explicitly not concerned with advancing or protecting the interests of a "higher type" at the expense of the body politic. In fact, in the same aphorism Berkowitz refers to, he enjoins his kindred philosophers "to be physicians *here*, to be inexorable *here*, to

⁴⁷¹ TI 37

⁴⁷² D 134

⁴⁷³ A 7

⁴⁷⁴ *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*, Cambridge: Harvard University 1995, p. 105.

wield the scalpel *here*,” where pity has taken root because “that is *our* part, that is *our* love of man.”⁴⁷⁵ He enlists the aid of his fellow Hyperboreans to practice their villainous art, to stop a contagion—such, he says, is their calling, and an expression of a love of humanity that, unlike Christian pity, does not disguise an underlying malice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Nietzsche finds the religious order objectionable on the grounds that it invariably monopolizes the word “truth,” and disparages those who contest it.⁴⁷⁶ For as long, then, as the priest is esteemed as a higher type, “truth” is indistinguishable from the lie. That the priests’ malignant fictions are accepted as indisputable truths solely on the grounds of their specious authority is of concern to Nietzsche mainly because it inhibits a proliferation of different perspectives. But Nietzsche’s reasons for calling the priest dangerous do not end here. That the priest designates precisely that which is injurious to life as the true and the good is itself injurious. The priest derives his or her “true” and “false” strictly by *reversing* the original significance of these terms so that “whatever is most harmful to life is called ‘true’ [and] whatever elevates it, enhances, affirms, justifies it, and makes it triumphant, is called ‘false.’”⁴⁷⁷ Nietzsche remains undisturbed by this conflation of truth and value; that is, he makes no protest against aligning the truth with particular preferences or interests. What is of concern to him is the *effect* this reversal—which places value on what is *inimical* to life—will have on our future. Specifically, he fears that what the priest calls “true” will then *become* true for us. Believing in these “truths” is sufficient, he suggests, for us to gradually live *as if* they were incontrovertible; like a self-fulfilling prophecy, these beliefs can

⁴⁷⁵ A 7

⁴⁷⁶ EH “Why I am a Destiny” 5

⁴⁷⁷ A 9

potentially manifest the conditions they assume. The seemingly sage “truth” that life is suffering, or that human nature is incurably sinful, eventually, and insidiously becomes flesh, so that life *is* suffering *for us*, our nature *is* sinful *to us*.

CHAPTER 6: MODEST TRUTHS

As discussed in the previous chapter, Nietzsche, like Spinoza, maintains that fictions are not corrupting as such, or merely as a consequence of being false. The *ends* to which lies are told, or the *effect* that they produce, is what distinguishes the innocent from the malignant fiction. Those which serve “unholy” ends, he claims, also tend to exacerbate the morbidity that is prevalent among modern peoples. Nietzsche finds these malignant lies especially in the successful, prospering religions, operating as exploitative devices by which they augment their considerable power. The “truths” of theologians and priests thus become suspect, in his view, precisely to the extent that they are *useful* to those who propagate them, and *damaging* to those who have faith in them. In league with his precursor, his main concern is with targeting specifically those fictions that are first, dangerous to the extent that they manifest a cultural contagion, and second, extremely resilient insofar as a faith in their truth is guarded by the priesthood. Both philosophers describe priests as skilled in cunning and intricate deceptions, as consumed by an insatiable greed for power, as capable of inflicting the most pervasive and ruinous harm and, therefore, as their own greatest adversary. But Spinoza addresses these fictions with a degree of caution, an apparent reluctance to dwell for too long on them, and only to the extent that they obstruct his communication of (what he regards as) self-evident truths. It is sufficient, for him, to dislodge prejudices that are prohibitive to philosophical reasoning; once such reasoning is allowed to proceed uninhibited, he assumes that fictions will fall to the side of their own accord. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, the only kind of truths he will admit of, namely those that he calls *modest*, have no hope of countering the vanity that is nourished by the beautifying illusions of religious faith. What truths there may in fact be, there are none that have the potency of self-

evidence or some other native persuasiveness. This chapter will examine Nietzsche's account of truth as it is for the type he baptizes the "free spirit": what it is, how it is attained, and what value it has. We will first recount his description of the emergence of this type and its strange, unprecedented task. Then we will examine the method of genealogy that he recommends, and employs himself, for this task; and, finally, we will turn to the specific "modest" truths that this method discloses, namely those about morality and the natural world.

I. Free Spirits and The Will to Truth

Inquiry into the truth begins for Nietzsche in the same way as it does for Spinoza: in a radical rupture from the customary, which is also, coincidentally, the occasion for a great liberation. Nietzsche too offers a personal testimony of his coming to be what he names a "free spirit." At the same time, strangely, he admits that the "free spirit," as a general *type*, is his invention, and that in actuality there are no others besides himself. What is his reason for evoking a non-existent type? He tells us that he needed them—to be his fanciful friends, to keep him "in good spirits while surrounded by ills . . . as brave companions and familiars."⁴⁷⁸ But they are not only friends to Nietzsche in his loneliness. He also intimates that their actual arrival may be imminent, "that free spirits of this kind *could* one day exist, that our Europe *will* have such active and audacious fellows among its sons of tomorrow and the next day, physically present and palpable and not, as in my own case, merely phantoms."⁴⁷⁹ So Nietzsche imaginatively evokes them for a second purpose: to *facilitate* their coming and to beckon and guide them as they approach. Thus, he says, "perhaps I shall do something to

⁴⁷⁸ H Preface 2

⁴⁷⁹ H Preface 2

speed their coming if I describe in advance under what vicissitudes, upon what paths, I *see* them coming?”⁴⁸⁰ By narrating the tale of his own metamorphosis into a free spirit, he in effect erects signposts for those he anticipates will follow in his stead. But, above all, he stresses that the route they take will necessarily be theirs and theirs *alone*, and that “all the perils, accidents, malice and bad weather which assail [the free spirit] he has to tackle by himself.”⁴⁸¹

Why does Nietzsche believe these free spirits are *now* on their way? He remarks that these seemingly untimely ones are in fact most timely, and their arrival is propitious and necessary. All that has happened hitherto, the whole course of history until the present, has led to “the greatest recent event,” not as its terminus or fulfillment, but as the beginning of an uncharted future—and these free spirits are the voices sounding this calamitous event, and heralds of what is yet to come. This event is the “death of God,” by which Nietzsche means “that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable.”⁴⁸² The putatively indestructible legacy of the transcendent is in ruins; faith in the supernatural is surrendering to skeptical doubt. He remarks on this event as a *fait accompli*, as having already happened, and so an irreversible fact of the past, but *what it will mean* has yet to be determined. He is perhaps strangely silent on what precipitated this catastrophic event, but in his mind, it is certainly not the work of any conscious agency. In a brief note on the nature of life in general, Nietzsche observes that “all great things bring about their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming; thus the law of life will have it, the law of the necessity of ‘self-

⁴⁸⁰ H Preface 2

⁴⁸¹ D Preface 2

⁴⁸² GS 343

overcoming' in the nature of life."⁴⁸³ Thus, the "death of God" is a declaration after the fact, which refers to the demise of religion and metaphysics, occurring by necessity but to no certain end. He suggests that in the "godless men of today" the hidden operations of this event are dimly perceptible because these individuals are the heirs of this millennia, of its piety and idealism, and "the executors of its innermost will."⁴⁸⁴ They are the *last* stage of a faith in morality, in which this faith itself is called into question. They are contradictions, in accordance with the contradictoriness of their age, for in them the "self-sublimation of morality" is accomplished out of morality itself.⁴⁸⁵

The event of God's "death" is not intelligible as such because, to most, "the event is itself too great, distant, and out of the way even for its tidings to be thought of as having arrived yet."⁴⁸⁶ Though it may be common knowledge that the event has occurred, its full significance is unimaginable. Indeed, Nietzsche suggests that *what* this event will mean is uncertain and will only be decided in time. At present, this event invites and, still further, entails, a "long, dense, succession of demolition, destruction, downfall, upheaval" at the end of which the entirety of religious morality, constructed upon the faith in God, will collapse. To use Nietzsche's metaphor, the forbidding shadow of God's "death" will seem to most (especially the faithful) to eclipse a life-giving sun, abandoning them to chill darkness. But to a few, he adds, whose eyes, "or the suspicion in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough for this spectacle, some kind of sun seems to have set; some old deep trust turned into doubt." To the free spirited, the age of morality has gone under, like a setting sun, and an entrenched

⁴⁸³ GM III 27

⁴⁸⁴ D Preface 4

⁴⁸⁵ D Preface 4

⁴⁸⁶ GS 343

faith has changed into its opposite, *doubt*. It is to these few that Nietzsche's aphorism, "belief in truth begins with doubt as to all truths believed in hitherto,"⁴⁸⁷ applies. These free-spirited souls, and they alone, recognize that the "death of God" is in fact pregnant with an unforeseeable future. As Nietzsche so aptly, and with obvious joy, tells us, "at hearing the news that the 'old god is dead,' we philosophers and 'free spirits' feel illuminated by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, forebodings, expectation—finally the horizon seems clear again, even if not bright; every daring of the lover of knowledge is allowed again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; maybe there has never been such an 'open sea.'"⁴⁸⁸

For Nietzsche, these free spirits are "born guessers of riddles who are so to speak on a lookout at the top of a mountain, posted between today and tomorrow and stretched in the contradiction between today and tomorrow."⁴⁸⁹ He insists that they are not exceptions to their age, nor do they represent a contradiction to it. They too inherit those erroneous articles of faith that have almost become "part of the basic endowment of the species,"⁴⁹⁰ but they are also the first and late "deniers and doubters of such propositions." Historically, they are the manifestation of a long, concealed coming to be of a *will to truth*, of a protracted struggle between this new will and those basic errors that have been in currency since time immemorial. As mentioned, Nietzsche believes that error of this kind owed its longevity to the fact that it happened to be a condition for (*one* type of) life; only much later does truth come to contest the supremacy of error, and only once it also emerges as a condition for

⁴⁸⁷ AOM 20

⁴⁸⁸ GS 343

⁴⁸⁹ GS 343

⁴⁹⁰ GS 110

(*another* type of) life. The free spirit “is now the being in whom the drive to truth and those life-preserving errors are fighting their first battle, after the drive to truth has proven itself to be a life-preserving power too.”⁴⁹¹ Free spiritedness, as the spirit of truthfulness, thus develops out of untruthfulness; it does not leave the legacy of errors behind, but itself consists in calling into question, turning back upon, and reversing, what previously masqueraded as the truth.

The free spirit’s own decadence also testifies to its timeliness; that it is, in addition, untimely, is apparent in the fact that the will to truth that is definitive of this type is, *for it*, a resurging will to health. In Nietzsche’s account, this type thus uniquely straddles the past and future, decay and renewal, decadence and health. Decadence itself reaches an ultimate stage in these faithless ones, such that it begins to turn into its opposite, and becomes an illness suggestive of a new health. “The less men are bound by tradition,” Nietzsche explains, “the greater is the fermentation of motivations within them, and the greater in consequence their outward restlessness, their mingling together with one another, the polyphony of their endeavours.”⁴⁹² As once cohesive communities dissolve—no longer bound together by custom—individuals lose a sense of loyalty or strong attachments to specific places or peoples. The present age, Nietzsche remarks, thus acquires a novel significance “through the fact that in it the various different philosophies of life, customs, cultures can be compared and experienced side by side.”⁴⁹³ *As yet*, however, very few are cognizant of this significance; for the majority, the fact that a great liberation has occurred is still unapparent.

⁴⁹¹ GS 110

⁴⁹² HI 23

⁴⁹³ HI 23

Nietzsche and his free-ranging spirits, on the other hand, “feel the tug toward freedom as the strongest drive of [their] spirit and, in antithesis to the fettered and firm-rooted intellects, see [their] ideal in a spiritual nomadism.”⁴⁹⁴ A lack of order or coherence, the anarchy of drives that is the distinctive mark of a decadent soul, is finally productive. “The past of every form and way of life, of cultures that formerly lay right next to ours or one on top of the other, now flows into us ‘modern souls;’ and, thanks to this mixing of ages, preferences, and modes of life, “we are ourselves a kind of chaos.”⁴⁹⁵ Only by virtue of their thorough decadence can the “free-ranging” spirit be free ranging. Decadence thus propagates this type and is instrumental in preparing the way for an uncharted future.⁴⁹⁶ The whole history of an ever-deepening contagion, of the widening circle of religious morality, ultimately turns into the agency of its *own* destruction. In the free spirit, Nietzsche says, the long-standing “will to mere appearance, to simplification, to masks, to cloaks, in short, to the surface—for the surface is a cloak—is *countered* by that sublime inclination of the seeker after knowledge who insists on profundity, multiplicity, and thoroughness, with a *will* which is a kind of cruelty of the intellectual conscience and taste.”⁴⁹⁷ The strife resulting from the collision of these two antagonistic, though intrinsically related, wills characterizes the present age. The will to truth occurs, historically, when the belief in God ceases to be believable; they are two faces of one and the same event. As faith in the transcendent desists, the drive for truth acquires prominence, and these opposed life-preserving powers—embodied in the priest and the free spirit—enter into conflict.

⁴⁹⁴ H II 211

⁴⁹⁵ BGE 224

⁴⁹⁶ For further discussion of this point see A. Mullin, “Nietzsche’s Free Spirit,” in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38 (3), July 2000.

⁴⁹⁷ BGE 230

Let us briefly return to Nietzsche's first-person account of how the free spirit comes to be. He surmises that free spirits will begin as the most severely fettered spirits; they will not, he says, be those who hold their obligations lightly or half-heartedly. Such fettered youth, Nietzsche says, display *reverence*, "that reserve and delicacy before all that was honoured and revered from of old, that gratitude for the soil out of which they have grown, for the hand which led them, for the holy place where they learned to worship."⁴⁹⁸ The sincerity and seriousness of this fledgling spirit's reverence will, interestingly, remain typical of this type. Then comes what Nietzsche refers to as a "great liberation." Again, he does not specify what prompts this event, but it is clearly not consciously willed; these youths, he emphasizes, are nothing apart from the liberation they will undergo. An altogether obscure will takes command in their soul and declares: "better to die than to go on living *here*." Nietzsche adds, "and this 'here,' this 'at home' is everything it had hitherto loved!"⁴⁹⁹ The emerging free spirit has won what Nietzsche calls its "first victory" and, from here on, it is a "will to a *free* will." In fact, with this victory, the free spirit wins the *possibility* of willing freedom; for Nietzsche, as for Spinoza, freedom itself is only ever attained in increments. Thus, a free spirit may be more or less free, but in every case, is a "will to a *free* will."⁵⁰⁰ That this type is interminably lacking the fullest freedom is most evident in the fact that what is singularly characteristic of it is its resolute "No" to duty and faith, its revolt against the customary, its voracious desire for "travel, strange places, estrangements, coldness, soberness, frost, a hatred of love."⁵⁰¹ A new mastery is sought in acts of wilfulness—of resistance,

⁴⁹⁸ H Preface 3

⁴⁹⁹ H Preface 3

⁵⁰⁰ It follows that, as A. Mullin points out, free-spiritedness is "a matter of degree," and is achieved in stages ("Nietzsche's Free Spirit," p. 388).

⁵⁰¹ H Preface 3

interrogation, refutation—by means of which it exposes that which undergirds the veiled and sacred, and bestows praise on what is reputed to be bad.

Spinoza similarly recalls experiencing a rupture in the usually seamless everyday-ness of communal life; an alienation from all the things he had loved and sought after; and his first doubts concerning the value of accepted values. In his description, it is as if he was set at a remove from all that had been closest to him and so can no longer touch or be touched by, speak or be spoken to, them. But he is quite unlike Nietzsche's free spirit insofar as his own liberation does not inspire a new and vigorous wilfulness that aims to undermine custom. He assumes the burdensome task of the philosopher, like the free spirit, because he *must*; but his motive for doing so is somewhat different. Spinoza explains that he recognized that he lacked the well-being he had believed he possessed and was in "great peril." He compares himself to a man who is compelled to go in search of an unknown remedy for a malady that he is sure will be fatal if his search is unsuccessful. Thus, his liberation has, oddly, a distinctive gravity; it is concomitant with the full, startling consciousness of his own spiritual decrepitude. For Nietzsche's free spirits, on the other hand, their liberation is a sign of recovery and even suggests a new health. Moreover, Spinoza begins his investigation into the truth because the deceptions he had formerly accepted on authority had proven to be intrinsically injurious; the free spirits seek to reverse old truths, to expose them as lies, to rid themselves of the oppressiveness that they find so repugnant.

What impassions the free spirit is unmasking the "forbidden," namely, the *truth*. Nietzsche accuses the founders and honoured sages of the great religions of discrediting reason in order to sustain the people's faith; they know, he explains, that "it is a matter of complete

indifference whether something is true, while it is of the utmost importance whether it is believed to be true.”⁵⁰² The pretence of truthfulness is sufficient for faith, where faith amounts to “not *wanting* to know what is true.”⁵⁰³ Consequently, the free spirited individual who desires to see freely is necessarily a skeptic.⁵⁰⁴ For these early heralds of a new age, to see freely is to see truthfully and, for them, *to be truthful means exposing lies as lies*. Thus does Nietzsche say: “I was the first to *discover* the truth by being the first to experience lies as lies—smelling them out.”⁵⁰⁵ At this stage, then, the truth figures strictly as that which contradicts the lie; accordingly, in the same aphorism, Nietzsche also claims to “contradict as has never before been contradicted.” He makes no claims regarding what truth *is* nor does he intimate that it is anything besides the function it here performs.⁵⁰⁶

For Nietzsche *as* a free spirit, truth is a counterforce to be reckoned with. Truth, he adds, “speaks out of me,” a truth that is “*terrible*, for so far one has called *lies* truth.”⁵⁰⁷ Berkowitz argues that the free spirit “attains true but deadly knowledge of the fundamental character of existence.”⁵⁰⁸ However, Nietzsche does not claim that truth *as such* is either intelligible or terrible; rather, the truth of the free spirit is terrible because it consists in exposing the lie as a lie. It is *intrinsically* opposed to the integrity of faith, and that is precisely what makes it the truth of the free spirit. As such, Nietzsche says that the distinguishing feature of the free spirit is “not that his opinions are more correct but that he has liberated himself from

⁵⁰² A 23

⁵⁰³ A 52

⁵⁰⁴ A 54

⁵⁰⁵ EH “Why I am a Destiny” 1

⁵⁰⁶ Nehamas also maintains that Nietzsche, while often denying the tenability of the traditional, correspondence theory of truth, does not “propose his own positive theory instead.” In particular, he shows that attributing a pragmatist theory of truth is problematic (*Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, pp. 53-55).

⁵⁰⁷ EH “Why I am a Destiny” 1

⁵⁰⁸ *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*, p. 244.

tradition.” This spirit is more likely, he adds, to “have truth on his side, or at least the spirit of inquiry after truth” simply because “he demands reasons, the rest demand faith.”⁵⁰⁹ As Nehamas suggests, Nietzsche’s remark also reveals that he did not esteem the free spirit for being strong enough to, in Kofman’s words, “want the truth, that is, to become conscious of . . . the enigma that life is, and to offer, accordingly, an indefinite multiplicity of possible interpretations.”⁵¹⁰ Indeed, it is indisputable that the free spirit wants nothing more than the truth; but, for this type, it is entirely unrelated to some dawning comprehension of the “enigma that life is.” In this context, what is significant for Nietzsche about the truth is how it *functions*; the will to truth, according to him, is resolutely and vehemently opposed to the hegemony of tradition and religious faith.

The conscience of the free spirit, then, is manifest in its principled service to the truth. Nietzsche explains that such service requires, first and foremost, a *renunciation* of which only a few are capable; “one has to surrender for it almost everything to which the heart, to which our love, our trust in life, cling otherwise.”⁵¹¹ Metaphysical consolations, beautiful sentiments, and inherited convictions—including the myths of an immortal soul, a blessed afterlife, an omnipotent God, and a sublimely moral universe—are no longer tenable. As Berkowitz mentions, “solitude is thus a basic feature of freedom or independence,”⁵¹² but only, it must be added, of that freedom which is specific to the free spirit.⁵¹³ Furthermore, unlike previous philosophers, these tireless seekers of truth avoid adopting a single

⁵⁰⁹ HI 225

⁵¹⁰ *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p. 60.

⁵¹¹ A 50

⁵¹² *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*, p. 242.

⁵¹³ Again, it must be kept in mind that Nietzsche is not proposing here to outline the character or conditions of freedom as such. As Mullin argues, solitude “belongs not to the fully emancipated free spirit, but to certain stages of his development” (“Nietzsche’s Free Spirit,” p. 396).

deportment or a univocal point of view; their search is incessantly exploratory, their inquiry proceeds by investigating, testing, and excavating “an ancient faith.”⁵¹⁴ This free spirit is “restlessly alive,” enervated by experimentation, never “stiffening through constant change.”⁵¹⁵ To seek out the forbidden as these spirits do requires that they renounce what is “all too human”—and to be, in a manner of speaking, both godless and inhuman. Such renunciation is necessary to become, as Nietzsche says it must, no longer concerned with the question of whether truth is useful.⁵¹⁶ Of the utmost importance to the free-spirited, then, is the *disinterested* pursuit of truth; their passion is strictly for the truth itself. To describe the free spirit, then, as “anything but disinterested,” since “they no longer see the will to truth as the effort to discover, once and for all, the real nature of the world,” is surely inaccurate. By Nietzsche’s account, they have no interest in constructing, as Nehamas claims, “a world in which their own values...are manifest,”⁵¹⁷ but only in dismantling a sedimented edifice of lies that has postured as the bastion of truth. They are entirely indentured to the will to truth, its executors, or agents; as such, they cannot assume any vantage point that is external to it. Moreover, as Mullin points out, “free spirits are not characterized by values that they have in common, but are instead identified by their ability to shake loose of contemporary value judgements.”⁵¹⁸ However, interestingly, Nietzsche also observes that they must possess specific virtues in order to facilitate their difficult undertaking; “every attainment, every step forward in knowledge,” Nietzsche observes, “follows from courage, from hardness against

⁵¹⁴ D 2

⁵¹⁵ H I 637

⁵¹⁶ A Preface

⁵¹⁷ *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p. 68.

⁵¹⁸ “Nietzsche’s Free Spirit,” p. 387.

oneself, from cleanliness in relation to oneself.”⁵¹⁹ Courage, honesty, and intellectual cleanliness are, therefore, the cardinal virtues of this newly emerging free spirit.

In sum, then, the free-spirited soul is fixedly ruled by a single wish: to rescue long-banished truths, to be the valiant defenders of knowledge. To this end, they also have a single, “subterranean” task, which is to chisel away the sediment of lies that supports the “faith in morality.” To Nietzsche, on the other hand, this truthfulness is *itself* significant insofar as it serves a world-historical purpose, of which even the free spirit is unaware: the “self-overcoming of morality, out of truthfulness.”⁵²⁰ He defines the real task of the free spirit, then, as one of *preparing for the future of humanity*, a future that is contingent upon the completion of this self-overcoming of morality. Their task begins with the “insight that humanity is *not* all by itself on the right way,”⁵²¹ that the “holiest value concepts” may impinge upon the unfolding of this future. Yet, it clearly does not entail propounding *the* truth, as free spirits reject all forms of dogmatism. Nietzsche indicates what this new task involves in his statement that: “the question concerning the origin of moral values is for me the question of the very first rank because it is crucial for the future of humanity.”⁵²² To question the origin of religious morality—to reveal its parentage, history, and legacy—is to counter the pernicious quietism surrounding the belief that “everything is really in the best of hands.” Raising doubt “that a book, the Bible, offers us definitive assurances about the divine governance and wisdom in the destiny of man,”⁵²³ and that the priesthood is the best

⁵¹⁹ EH Preface 3

⁵²⁰ EH “Why I am a Destiny” 3

⁵²¹ EH “Dawn: Thoughts about Morality as a Prejudice” 2

⁵²² EH “Dawn: Thoughts about Morality as a Prejudice” 2

⁵²³ EH “Dawn: Thoughts about Morality as a Prejudice” 2

governor, educator, and physician, the free spirit challenges the intractable “will to suppress the truth” that would have *nothing be different*.

For Nietzsche, then, the real objective of free-spirited philosophers is to prepare for the possibility of a future and, accordingly, their primary task is the *revaluation of values*. As “preparatory, brave human beings,” who are instinctively “predisposed to look, in all things, for what must be *overcome*,”⁵²⁴ this task will not be strange to them. Nietzsche says of himself that “the good fortune of my existence, its uniqueness perhaps, lies in its fatality,” that is, in his “dual descent, as it were, both from the highest and the lowest rung on the ladder of life, at the same time a *decadent* and a *beginning*.”⁵²⁵ Owing to this native duality, he is able to adopt the perspectives of both sickness and health, can readily discern signs of ascent and descent, and remain impartial with respect to the “problem of life.” As a consequence, he concludes, he has the rare ability “to reverse perspectives” which is a precondition for a revaluation of values. The task that awaits the free spirit emerges, then, out of its own contradictoriness; in other words, the arrival of the free spirit coincides with the emergence of the task of a revaluation of values. Today, Nietzsche claims, we are confronted with the necessity of “resolving on a reversal and fundamental shift in values,” we stand “at a threshold of a period which should be designated negatively, to begin with, as *extra-moral*.”⁵²⁶ Free spirits are the *conscience* of this today;⁵²⁷ they attain, as a result of a tremendous variety in their soul that nevertheless does not devolve into complete anarchy,⁵²⁸ to a position *outside* of the predominant religious morality.

⁵²⁴ GS 283

⁵²⁵ EH “Why I am so Wise” 1

⁵²⁶ BGE 32

⁵²⁷ H II 6

⁵²⁸ EH “Why I am so Clever” 9

For Nietzsche, then, the first and principal requirement of the new, free spirited philosopher is “that he take his stand *beyond* good and evil and leave the illusion of moral judgement *beneath* himself.”⁵²⁹ *At present* this entails attaining to some point “beyond *our* good and evil,” which is, “the sum of commanding value judgments that have become part of our flesh and blood.”⁵³⁰ As we have seen, free spirits are predisposed to see what must be overcome, to dispense with whatever oppresses, obliges, and burdens them, and drive their “will to knowledge into such a distance and, as it were, beyond [their] time.”⁵³¹ How far-reaching the free-spirit’s vision is, however, depends on the extent to which it is cultivated; “one has to create for oneself eyes to survey millennia and, moreover, clear skies in these eyes.”⁵³² To have insight into one’s own time, Nietzsche insists, one must “first of all have ‘overcome’ this time in himself—this is the test of his strength—and consequently not only his time but also his aversion and opposition *against* this time, his suffering from this time, his untimeliness, his *romanticism*.”⁵³³ The free spirits’ facility as critics of their time ultimately rests upon their success at overcoming this time in *themselves*. This feat cannot be accomplished by means of direct self-observation, which, Nietzsche cautions, only ever discerns our timeliness, or the most recently acquired and superficial aspects of our selves. For self-knowledge, he advises, “we require history, for the past continues to flow within us in a hundred waves; we ourselves are, indeed, nothing but that which at every moment we experience of this continued flowing.”⁵³⁴ The stable properties that we detect in our

⁵²⁹ TI “The ‘Improvers’ of Mankind” 1

⁵³⁰ GS 380

⁵³¹ GS 380

⁵³² GS 380

⁵³³ GS 380

⁵³⁴ H II 223

consciousness are, in fact, created in the very act of our becoming conscious of ourselves. Conversely, a real understanding of our selves reveals only a continuous flow, in which traces of various ages and cultures intermingle.⁵³⁵ It is incumbent, then, upon the free spirit, to see *through* pessimism, which means recognizing it as symptom of a historically contingent condition—namely, decadence. Such “eyes” can see through our decadence, our good and evil, and discern how the present has *become* what it is. Thus, the free spirit, who has been a guest “in many countries of the spirit,” who has the resolve and readiness to venture into such foreign places and ages, will learn how we became what we are and, consequently, also what we *could* become.

II. Method: Historical Philosophy

It is these free spirits who are uniquely suited for a philosophical method that Nietzsche calls *historical philosophy*, for they possess precisely that which had been lacking in previous philosophers, namely a “historical spirit.” As a rule, he observes, philosophers have considered “‘man’ as an *aeterna veritas*, as something that remains constant in the midst of flux, as a sure and fixed measure of things,” but all of their propositions are “at bottom no more than a testimony as to the man of a *very limited* period of time.”⁵³⁶ Consequently, they misconstrue the most recent incarnation of human beings, acquired “under the impress of certain religions, even certain political events,” as eternal.⁵³⁷ Failing to recognize that (and

⁵³⁵ In any event, Nietzsche insists that the free spirit should speak “only of that which one has *overcome*,” (H II Preface 1) dismissing anything else as mere “chatter.” They must refrain, he advises, from using speech as a tool of deception, a vehicle for winning acceptance, an outlet for purging that which has not been overcome; “writing ought always to advertise a victory—an overcoming of *oneself* which has to be communicated for the benefit of others” (H II 152). As such, philosophical writing should not contain confessions in the form of self-indulgent monologues on personal trials; it should tell only of what now lies *behind* one (H II Preface 1): what one *has suffered* and why one is “now reposing in joy” (WS 128).

⁵³⁶ H I 2

⁵³⁷ H I 2

how) the human species has evolved, they believe that they have disclosed inalterable facts concerning human nature; they then apply these facts to nature, as a means of understanding its secret operations. “The whole of teleology,” Nietzsche concludes, “is constructed by speaking of the man of the last four millennia as of an eternal man towards whom all things in the world have had a natural relationship from the time he began.”⁵³⁸ Like the untutored minds they claim to educate, philosophers have engaged in naïve anthropomorphizing, eternalizing a single type of human being, manufacturing a model of it, and superimposing it on the world at large. Referring to the Stoics, Nietzsche declares that “while you pretend rapturously to read the canon of your law in nature,” according to which, they recommend, one ought to live, “your pride wants you to impose your morality, your ideal, on nature.”⁵³⁹ He also accuses philosophers of borrowing the propositions suggested by more modest moralists and then ruining them “inasmuch as they have taken them for unqualified propositions and sought to demonstrate the absolute validity of what these moralists intended merely as approximate signposts or even as no more than truths possessing tenancy only for a decade.” All philosophy, once it “begins to believe in itself,” he concludes, invariably reinvents nature in its own image and “cannot do otherwise.”⁵⁴⁰

Historical philosophy, on the contrary, avoids both dogmatism and idealism, for it originates in a deep suspicion of accepted truths and proceeds by revealing the conditions under which morality developed. Throughout, it is guided by the question of the *value of values*, and implicitly aims to *prepare the way for a future*.⁵⁴¹ It begins with the recognition that long-standing

⁵³⁸ HI 2

⁵³⁹ BGE 9

⁵⁴⁰ AOM 5

⁵⁴¹ GM Preface 6

and unchallenged ideals, the entire panorama of moral sensations, and seemingly timeless truths, *are* historical and unmistakably of human design. By charting the convoluted evolution of a morality, the free-spirited philosopher at the same time maps out a *natural* history, that is, “the history of the war of the spiritual-moral forces against fear, imaginings, inertia, superstition, folly, and their victory over them.”⁵⁴² This is a history of forces, of sensations and chemical processes, taking place in both social and individual bodies. For Nietzsche, then, a historical account of moral phenomena will, at the same time, offer a *physiological* explanation. That historical philosophy explains all religious, moral, and aesthetic values in terms of psycho-physiological processes means that, in every case, it is a refutation of metaphysics; in other words, that a physiological investigation of tables of values *can* be performed is antithetical to the “revealed” truths of religion. It will also, for the first time, provide evidence of the fact “that the history of the moral sensations is the history of an error.”⁵⁴³ By removing the façade of religious morality, it effectively entails the ruin of its tremendous power.

Finally, Nietzsche adds that science may be usefully enlisted to advance the aims of historical philosophy. As science consists of “the imitation of nature in concepts,” it searches for a precise and accurate natural explanation for phenomena; in so doing, it also incidentally “registers a protest against the alleged inexplicability, indeed, unapproachability, of [moral] phenomena.”⁵⁴⁴ Even if a natural cause for some apparent effect is, as yet, unidentified, science at no point concedes that this omission signifies that a miracle, or an act of divine

⁵⁴² H II 184

⁵⁴³ H I 38

⁵⁴⁴ H I 136. Science, Nietzsche also remarks “knows no regard for final objectives”—such as the advancement or well-being of our species—and therefore, though it may discover things of great utility, it will do so by accident or happenstance (H I 38).

intervention, has occurred. Science is thus an unwitting but effective opponent to religious faith and superstition. For Nietzsche, the actual results of scientific inquiry are of less significance than its procedures “for the scientific spirit rests upon an insight into the procedures, and if these were lost all the other products of science together would not suffice to prevent a restoration of superstition and folly.”⁵⁴⁵ Science scrupulously insists upon rigour and, as such, it will only grant admission to those convictions that “step down to the modesty of a hypothesis, a tentative experimental standpoint, a regulative fiction.”⁵⁴⁶ By comparison, it is revealed that “the worst of all methods of acquiring knowledge, not the best of all, have taught belief” in metaphysical “truths,” for such truths are consistently begotten by error and self-deception.⁵⁴⁷ Therefore, science may be a useful handmaiden to philosophy given its exemplary demand for rigour and also because it can, to some extent, unmask the genesis of the ideational world.⁵⁴⁸ But it has no educative or formative influence because “it is incapable of making any essential inroad into the power of habits of feeling acquired in primeval times.”⁵⁴⁹ Only a historical philosophy is capable of effecting significant change here.

On this point Nietzsche and Spinoza agree to a surprising extent. They both maintain that science is of immeasurable value to their philosophical aims and yet of no real value independently. Neither proposes that science in its methodology or results is good or useful as such. However, both also commend science for precisely this impartiality; it is its steadfast indifference to human interests that makes it uniquely profitable to philosophy. Nonetheless,

⁵⁴⁵ H I 635

⁵⁴⁶ GS 344

⁵⁴⁷ H I 9

⁵⁴⁸ H I 16

⁵⁴⁹ H I 16

they are not of the same opinion regarding the status of scientific truths. Spinoza regards the results derived by the proper application of scientific procedure as indisputably veridical. Science, by his account, is fully capable of furnishing us with adequate or true ideas about the nature of things and so renders nature at least partly intelligible to us. Nietzsche remains skeptical concerning the truths of science; he does not share Spinoza's conviction regarding the soundness of the scientific method or the veracity of its discoveries. He applauds science strictly on the grounds that it intrinsically "registers a protest" against the errors of metaphysics.

III. History of Morality

The Fiction of Moral Sensations

Let us, finally, turn to the "modest" truths concerning morality and nature that are revealed in Nietzsche's own genealogy. He focuses on two beliefs that are wrongly presumed to be true and, in his estimation, dangerous: first, that drives and actions *have* intrinsic moral qualities and, second, that human beings possess moral agency, that is to say, a free will. A survey of the history of morality, as we have observed, confirms that the first belief is insupportable, given that one and the same drive has been baptized "good" and "bad" by conflicting moralities. Of greater importance, though, is Nietzsche's insight into the curious fact that a drive is always attended by a definite sensation of pleasure or pain depending on the moral character it is *given*. In itself, a drive has no moral properties or any specific affective qualities but it acquires these as a second nature.⁵⁵⁰ Under the impress of custom and morality, drives become abhorrent or commendable; in Nietzsche's words, "the passions

⁵⁵⁰ D 38

become evil and malicious if they are regarded as evil and malicious.”⁵⁵¹ Thus, for example, Christianity has succeeded in making sexual urges evocative of guilt or shame by pronouncing them diabolical; and, in general, by transforming “necessary and regularly recurring sensations into a source of misery,” it has managed to make “inner misery a necessary and regularly recurring phenomenon *in every human being!*”⁵⁵² He insists that a bad conscience is associated with sensations or actions that have been given the appearance of evil but are not evil in and of themselves. Consequently, he also denies outright the premise of all moral judgements, that is, that they are founded on objective facts; this entails especially that though countless people may *feel* themselves to be immoral, this feeling is not proof that they in fact are such.⁵⁵³

A history of religious and ethical sensations, then, instructs us in “the origin of that calamitous weightiness we have for so long accorded to things.”⁵⁵⁴ Specifically, it reveals the contingency of moral feelings and, in so doing, introduces the possibility of disentangling natural drives from the moral significance that has been assigned them. Nietzsche and other free spirits are able, by means of historical philosophy, to begin the long process of expelling the burden of bad conscience from the world.⁵⁵⁵ It thus serves a therapeutic function, offering an opportunity for learning to “*think differently*”—in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: *to feel differently*.⁵⁵⁶ This, then, is one important means by which the free spirit revives the possibility of a future. By separating naturally occurring instincts from their

⁵⁵¹ D 54

⁵⁵² D 76

⁵⁵³ D 103

⁵⁵⁴ WS 16

⁵⁵⁵ D 164

⁵⁵⁶ D 103

moral evaluation, an interpretive space is established within which the philosopher can perform a counter-reckoning of accepted values. By means of this counter-reckoning, in turn, Nietzsche says, “we shall restore to men their goodwill” toward all of the actions decried as egoistic and evil, and simultaneously “restore to these actions their *value*.”⁵⁵⁷ In other words, free spirits will re-baptize human drives and actions so as to “remove from the entire aspect of action and life its *evil appearance*!”⁵⁵⁸

Nietzsche predicts that these free spirits will attempt to reassess the value of all things by simply *reversing* old values, or by reinstating what was named immoral, like Robin Hood-type bandits, in an effort to cast off the excesses of metaphysical baggage. But he warns that it is equally necessary to take a *step back*, “for without such a retrograde step he will deprive himself of the best that mankind has produced hitherto.”⁵⁵⁹ If they aim exclusively for the negative goal of unmasking the errors of metaphysics and of toppling entrenched values, they may commit errors resulting from oversight. Thus, he cautions first, that they must be wary of uncritically embracing the opposite conclusions to those that are widely accepted, and which are often equally erroneous, or of assuming that by simply reversing an error they derive a truth.⁵⁶⁰ Secondly, he warns them against neglecting precisely what has been responsible for our advancement as a species, namely, these errors themselves.⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁷ D 148

⁵⁵⁸ D 148

⁵⁵⁹ H I 20

⁵⁶⁰ H I 30

⁵⁶¹ H I 20. In particular, Nietzsche commends the long labour of instilling a “memory of the will” in human beings in order to make them calculable. Notwithstanding the “severity, tyranny, stupidity, and idiocy involved in it,” this labour bred “an animal with the right to make promises.” With the aid of its insidious lies, religion produced a being in whom the faculty of repression, of forgetting, by which psychic repose and happiness had been guaranteed, was disabled and replaced with “an active desire not to rid oneself,” to *remember*. To create such a memory, to render a few ideas (or errors) inextinguishable in a mind that was originally obtuse, was the work of religious asceticism. By means of blood, torture, and sacrifice, religion created creatures with a conscience and a protracted will, and hence with the capacity for assuming the “privilege of responsibility”

The Fiction of Free Will

Of all the fictions that underscore and lend support to the prevailing morality, it is the illusion of a *free will* that Nietzsche, like Spinoza, consistently targets as the most objectionable,⁵⁶² and he credits science with helping to undermine belief in this illusion. Science supplies us with increasing evidence of natural causality and, in so doing, annihilates “countless imaginary causalities hitherto believed in as the foundations of customs.”⁵⁶³ As this evidence accumulates, the fictionalized world inevitably shrinks, for “the real world is much smaller than the imaginary.” Nietzsche observes, as did his predecessor, that where we typically see capriciousness—as we do, he says, even in such natural phenomena as a waterfall cascading down a rocky cliff—science shows that everything occurs by necessity. It is the same, he adds, with human actions; though “the actor himself, to be sure, is fixed in the illusion of free will,” he sustains this illusion only as a result of having limited understanding, owing to his finitude.⁵⁶⁴ In fact, this illusion itself may be necessary. What science suggests—and is, moreover, intent on proving—is that there is no act or event that cannot conceivably be accounted for in terms of natural causality. Nietzsche is suspicious, ultimately, of the provability of the notions of causality and natural laws; these too, he speculates, may be no more than specious abstractions. But, with respect to his objectives, their veracity may also be of no great consequence. That science renders a convincing

(GM II 2). Therefore, Nietzsche discovers that, owing to the most malignant lies, a type of human beings came into possession of a future which they had previously not had, that is, they became *conscious* of having a future. Nietzsche assigns the name *the sovereign individual* to the type described here—the unintended progeny of religious morality. We will return to a more detailed account of this type in the next chapter.

⁵⁶² EH “Why I Am So Wise” 6

⁵⁶³ D 10

⁵⁶⁴ H I 106

hypothesis concerning the unfreedom of the will, that it can *compel a belief in fate*⁵⁶⁵ as a regulative fiction, is what really matters.

Nietzsche's critique of natural causality does not, however, lead him to dispense with the concept of necessity as such; in fact, he derives from it an alternate doctrine of necessity. He argues that the principle of causality reifies a continuous flux insofar as it posits a series of isolated events or acts, all of which are causally linked. As such, it does not essentially diverge from nor contradict the postulate of a free will—in fact, it is a precursor to it. As discussed in the previous chapter, Nietzsche suggests that a cause that is initially construed simply as “will” is later changed into the subject as cause, which wills or refrains from willing a particular act. The same spurious atomism is, in his analysis, presupposed in these fictions. Once this atomism is shown to be erroneous, the individual subject also turns out to be an error; not an atom, not a link in a causal chain, the individual is in fact “the whole single line of humanity up to himself.”⁵⁶⁶ The universe also ceases to appear as a collection of things, traits and properties; it becomes a whole, of which every “part,” including the single human being, is “a piece of *fatum*.”⁵⁶⁷ It becomes apparent, he says, that “one is necessary, one is a piece of fatefulness” not because one is a discrete entity, subject to the unyielding laws of nature, but because “one belongs to the whole, one is the whole.”⁵⁶⁸

How can one, as Nietzsche here suggests, “belong to” and at the same time “be” a whole?

His response is obscure: “the fatality of one's essence is not to be disentangled from the

⁵⁶⁵ H II 363

⁵⁶⁶ TI “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man” 33

⁵⁶⁷ TI “Morality as Anti-Nature” 6

⁵⁶⁸ TI “The Four Great Errors” 8

fatality of all that has been and will be.”⁵⁶⁹ What could this mean? Construing Nietzsche’s description of the whole in strictly spatial terms—as consisting of a complex web of relations—may be somewhat misleading. According to this interpretation, the whole is itself a collection of interrelated parts; but if this is so, it makes no sense to speak of one part, i.e., an individual, as *being* the whole. More importantly, situating a part in a nexus of relations suggests that it is what it is by virtue of its being so situated. In other words, its being such-and-such is a function of its *place* within the whole. Yet Nietzsche explicitly rejects this suggestion. In fact, he denies that an individual is what it is as a result of anything *external* to it; it is impossible, by his account, to divorce a thing from its “fatefulness.” He claims, for instance, that Mohammedan fatalism “embodies the fundamental error of setting man and fate over against one another as two separate things.”⁵⁷⁰ But “in reality every man is himself a piece of fate”; whether he resists, strives to defeat, or resigns to it, “it is precisely fate that is here fulfilling itself.”⁵⁷¹ The fatality Nietzsche refers to is perhaps best understood in terms of a *temporal continuity*. The “individual” would then be construed as that through which all of history flows, and all of the future is intended. In other words, the whole, considered temporally, is all that *has been* and all that *will be*, or, more accurately, just endless “*becoming*”;⁵⁷² accordingly, the part is only an arbitrarily designated point at which the past and future intersect. This means that we are, as Nietzsche says, “nothing but that which at every moment we experience of this continued flowing.”⁵⁷³ Contrary to our most cherished beliefs regarding the *ego*, he claims that “when we desire to descend into the river of what seems to

⁵⁶⁹ TI “The Four Great Errors”⁸

⁵⁷⁰ WS 61

⁵⁷¹ WS 61

⁵⁷² While the notion of the whole as “becoming” seems more suggestive of a cohesive unity than a cumulative totality of things, it has nothing in common, as Bergson says, “with the abstract, motionless, and empty unity which the concept of pure unity circumscribes” (*An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 31).

⁵⁷³ H II 223

be our most intimate and personal being, there applies the dictum of Heraclitus: we cannot step into the same river twice.”⁵⁷⁴

Nietzsche thus conceives of all events as necessary, but he aligns necessity with contingency or flux. In this sense, he diverges radically from his precursor. For Spinoza, that nature is strictly deterministic, manifesting invariant and universal laws, is a self-evident truth. Nevertheless, by his account, to describe nature strictly as a causally determined modal order is to conceive of it in only one of two ways—namely that which is consistent with scientific reasoning. The other form of understanding differs considerably from the first, though it in no respect contradicts it. It comprehends nature as a unity from which all of existence necessarily flows. In this second conception of nature, necessity signifies the inseparability of a thing’s existing and its’ being what it is. In this case, the individual mode is not regarded as an existent thing that conforms to unvarying causal laws. Therefore, both philosophers claim that something cannot be other than what it is; and, as shall be explained further, this is precisely what is significant about their respective notions of necessity.

Nietzsche, for instance, proposes his doctrine of necessity for a particular purpose: to undermine belief in free will. For this reason, he says, it is the *only* doctrine that can be held by the free spirit. It directly contradicts the notions of free will and moral responsibility that have functioned as the cornerstone of religious morality. Firstly, it proves that no one is accountable for “man’s being there at all, for his being such-and-such, or for his being in these circumstances or this environment,” not God, society, one’s ancestors, nor oneself.⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁷⁴ H II 223

⁵⁷⁵ TI “The Four Great Errors” 8

There is no determinate agency, special or mundane, divine or human, responsible for our being at all, let alone being what we are. Secondly, it shows the absurdity of moral prescriptions that declare, “man *ought* to be such and such,” and therefore presume a knowledge of “what man should be like.”⁵⁷⁶ Nietzsche reminds us that there is no universal model of virtue; every moralist who sets up such a model, he says, invariably “paints himself on the wall and comments, ‘*Ecce homo!*’”⁵⁷⁷ Even if nature did provide an image of human perfection, no person is able to *will* himself or herself to conform to it and, as a result, all punishment and reward, praise and blame, are utterly groundless.⁵⁷⁸ Ultimately, for Nietzsche, the doctrine of necessity reveals that “it is because man *regards* himself as free, not because he is free, that he feels remorse and pangs of conscience.”⁵⁷⁹ If this is true, then it is a *habit* of feeling that one can become disaccustomed to; once a person was fully persuaded of “the unconditional necessity of all actions and their complete unaccountability and to make this part of his flesh and blood”⁵⁸⁰ then they would cease to have a bad conscience about who they are.

IV. The Hypothesis of The World as Will to Power

But what is the status of Nietzsche’s claims concerning the will to power, given his reticence to permit himself any doctrine other than the doctrine of necessity? In his published writings, Nietzsche addresses the subject only briefly and tentatively. He introduces it in *Beyond Good and Evil* as a *hypothesis* and, later, specifically claims it to be *his* proposition; moreover, both statements occur in an aphorism in which he performs a thought-

⁵⁷⁶ TI “Morality as Anti-Nature” 6

⁵⁷⁷ TI “Morality as Anti-Nature” 6

⁵⁷⁸ H I 105

⁵⁷⁹ H 38

⁵⁸⁰ H 133

experiment. Interestingly, this experiment consists in stripping the world, all at once, of manifold layers of interpretations and concepts—a feat that surely can only be accomplished *as a thought-experiment*. He asks the reader to suppose that “nothing else were ‘given’ as real except our world of desires and passions, and we could not get down, or up, to any other ‘reality’ besides the reality of our drives,”⁵⁸¹ in other words, to entertain the idea that every proposition we assert about the nature of the world is expressive of our drives. From this position, he invites us to consider whether it would not be permissible “*to make the experiment*”⁵⁸² of taking this “given” as a basis for understanding *all* of reality—that is, for conceiving of it “as a more primitive form of the world of affects,” or “a kind of instinctive life in which all organic functions are still synthetically intertwined.”⁵⁸³ Finally, he conjectures, one could venture the hypothesis that this instinctive life is “the development and ramification of one basic form of the will—namely of the will to power.”⁵⁸⁴ His line of reasoning—which he presents as hypothetical in its entirety—proceeds directly from *our* reality, comprised of drives affecting other drives, to reality as such. If nothing is given to us except these drives or forces, then “the world viewed from the inside, the world defined and determined according to its ‘intelligible character,’” that is, the world *we know*, “would be ‘will to power’ and nothing besides.”⁵⁸⁵ Nietzsche, for his part, makes no claim to some privileged insight into the world *in itself*, and so commits no real contradiction regarding his oft-repeated denial of the soundness of such claims.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸¹ BGE 36

⁵⁸² BGE 36, italics mine

⁵⁸³ BGE 36

⁵⁸⁴ BGE 36

⁵⁸⁵ BGE 36

⁵⁸⁶ I will only be considering Nietzsche’s references to the concept of the “will to power” that appear in his published writings. In other unpublished notes on this concept, he speaks of it quite differently, not hypothetically but as W. Muller-Lauter comments, “with unambiguous decisiveness” (*Nietzsche*, p. 128). That Nietzsche may have been convinced himself that this concept accurately describes the nature of the world is, however, not necessarily relevant. I am inclined to consider Nietzsche’s decision to *not* present the will to

But the question remains: why does Nietzsche offer this proposition concerning the will to power at all? Given that he is not resolved on proving the truth of this proposition, it must again serve a particular function. It is likely, in my view, that the hypothesis of the will to power—like his doctrine of necessity—is primarily a means for undermining the belief in a fictitious free will. If we were to conduct the experiment “of positing the causality of the will as the only one,” or, in other words, to suppose that the will alone is efficient, then wherever we see effects we must infer that will, drive, or force, has produced them.⁵⁸⁷ For Nietzsche, the implications of this experiment are of special significance: the subject, the neutral substratum surreptitiously appended to the event of willing as *first cause*, has been eliminated. In the absence of a subject there can also, obviously, be no will as a faculty. Once again, we see that his thought-experiment begins by setting aside or bracketing anthropomorphic fictions until only what we experience as “given” is left intact, namely, that which he variously calls will, drive, and force. He thereby demonstrates that the notion of free will rests entirely and precariously on these fictions. That this thought-experiment, which concludes with his proposition concerning the will to power, is devised for the purpose of challenging our belief in free will, is borne out by his arguments against the notion of a free will, that appear throughout his published writings. In the *Genealogy of Morals*, for instance, he unequivocally reiterates in direct, positive terms the same conclusion that he arrives at in performing his thought-experiment. Here he asserts that “a quantum of force is equivalent to a quantum of drive, will, effect—more, it is nothing other than precisely this very driving,

power except as a hypothesis in the work he prepared for publication as significant; moreover, given that his mention of it in this thought-experiment occurs in the section entitled “The Free Spirit,” and that he identifies himself as one of this type, I would speculate that his “conscience” forbids him to present the will to power as anything but a hypothesis, or as a proposition that he explicitly identifies as “his.”

⁵⁸⁷ BGE 36

willing, effecting, and only owing to the seduction of language (and of the fundamental errors of reason that are petrified in it) which conceives and misconceives all effects as conditioned by something that causes effects, by a ‘subject,’ can it appear otherwise.”⁵⁸⁸ By displacing the “doer” that was covertly added to the “deed,” he destroys the illusion of free will.⁵⁸⁹

V. Nature and Life as Will to Power

Nonetheless, elsewhere Nietzsche does make the seemingly bold assertion that *life* itself is will to power. Is he, like the philosophers he criticizes, deceptively painting his own picture on the wall while representing it as a faithful portrait of life in itself? His references to life are few and pointedly brief but, most importantly, they occur in the context of an argument against the prevailing account of life, which assigns priority to the instinct for self-preservation. His claims concerning life as will to power contradict the notion that self-preservation is the principal *telos* of organic life and, more generally, that nature as such is teleological. Accordingly, it seems more appropriate to regard his contention that life is will to power as a *counter-concept* as opposed to a fully-fledged but woefully unsupported theory about the nature of life. His intention here is still consistent with his overarching aim of casting suspicion on those fictions that are disparaging of this world.

⁵⁸⁸ GMI 13

⁵⁸⁹ W. Klein similarly suggests that Nietzsche does not intend the concept of will to power to be explanatory, but argues that he regards it as “one way among others of describing nature” (*Nietzsche and the Promise of Philosophy*, p. 156). In Klein’s view, he introduces the will to power to demonstrate that “the essence of nature consists in the fact that it can be interpreted in a variety of ways none of which can claim unconditional authority over the other” (p. 154). While Klein’s argument seems plausible, it does not account for why Nietzsche offers the description that he does, or any description of his own at all; he could have proved this point by citing any number of existing interpretations. What I am suggesting instead is that this concept functions specifically to undermine an especially intractable fiction, that of the free will.

That the instinct for self-preservation is assigned priority by scientists and philosophers alike is, according to Nietzsche, not the result of disinterested experimentation and reasoning, nor is it mere accident; it is indicative of the fact that “they were simply people in distress.”⁵⁹⁰ To posit self-preservation as the goal of life is, in his estimation, suggestive of decadence; one’s own survival is at risk and, consequently, the *conditions for one’s preservation* become explicit where these would otherwise remain largely unconscious. If the “wish to preserve oneself is a sign of distress,”⁵⁹¹ then inferring that it is the cardinal instinct of organic life generally is grossly unfounded. What such a wish actually expresses is a diminution of life, a longing *for* vitality on the part of a form of life that is facing its own demise, rather than an expression *of* life as such. Nietzsche proposes that, “the struggle for survival is only an *exception*, a temporary restriction of the will to life.”⁵⁹² When we attend to the processes of life and organic functions on a larger scale, he says, the will to life would *generally* be characterized by growth and expansion, that is, a will to power.⁵⁹³ Notice that, in this context, the term “will to power” signifies only a tendency exhibited by an organism to “become more”—to grow, expand, proliferate—as opposed to merely preserving itself. This tendency is observable, for example, in virtually all plant life, which self-propagates and grows to the fullest extent possible, that is, until inhibited by competing life forms or unfavourable environmental conditions; if its expansion were not *externally* restricted, it would continue indefinitely. That a healthy organism thereby also preserves itself is, he suggests, perhaps “only one of the indirect and most frequent results,”⁵⁹⁴ of this more basic instinct for growth. Thus, he refutes the prevailing notion that all forms of life typically strive to preserve themselves by means of

⁵⁹⁰ GS 349

⁵⁹¹ GS 349

⁵⁹² GS 349, TI “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man” 14 & GM II 11

⁵⁹³ GS 349 & A 6

⁵⁹⁴ BGE 13

ever more “efficient inner adaptation to external conditions,” by asserting its antithesis: what assumes priority in life is “the spontaneous, aggressive, expansive, form-giving forces,” in the wake of which “adaptation” occurs.⁵⁹⁵ In performing this reversal, does Nietzsche not commit the error he warns the free spirit against? It is possible that he does. As mentioned, however, it seems more likely that his assertions are primarily speculative rather than conclusive; that they are meant to function mainly as a refutation, rather than offered as an explanation.

Nietzsche criticizes Spinoza for firstly, characterizing this basic drive as purposive and, secondly, positing self-preservation as its only *telos*; he accuses his precursor of thereby introducing “*superfluous* teleological principles.” However, Nietzsche is here misreading Spinoza, for he neglects to consider Spinoza’s account of the *nature* of this drive and its apparent goal and, instead, blames his apparent “inconsistency” for the fact that physiologists have ever since committed the error of naming “the instinct of self-preservation as the cardinal instinct of organic being.”⁵⁹⁶ The difference between Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s own description of this drive is, in fact, not as significant as it first appears—or as Nietzsche had assumed it to be. Neither philosopher conceives of this drive as a property of a substantially self-identical thing; rather, both describe things as forces or powers that are subject to variation. Both find, in addition, that they exhibit a general tendency or disposition, a “drive,” that is expressive of the kind of thing they are: Spinoza identifies it *primarily* as self-preservation, Nietzsche *primarily* in terms of expansion.

⁵⁹⁵ GM II 12. I am suggesting that it is Nietzsche’s contention that forms of life or life-processes are instinctively *active*, that is, tending towards expansion and discharge; only *incidentally* do they accomplish what is (erroneously) taken as the goal of their activity, namely self-preservation.

⁵⁹⁶ BGE 13

But the question is: how does each regard the relationship between these contrary impulses? Y. Yovel claims that “the only coherent way to construe Spinoza’s theory is to see the one goal as subservient to the other: enhancing the power of existence and of action is desirable because it increases the prospects of self-preservation.”⁵⁹⁷ Similarly, R. Schacht observes that, contrary to Nietzsche, Spinoza proposes that the enhancement of power is “something always sought, but only derivatively and in a limited way—namely with a view to self-preservation.”⁵⁹⁸ However, as I have argued, it is not the case that for Spinoza a growth in power entails that a thing’s survival, or success at maintaining itself *in the same state*, is more probable. A dynamic interplay between it being a distinctive, singular thing and it being a variable power figures ambiguously in his thought: it must preserve *internally* a constant ratio of motion and rest and yet, to do so, it must engage *externally* with other bodies, as a result of which its power—or rather, *the thing itself as a power*—will undergo change. Thus, for him, as for Nietzsche, this basic drive may be more accurately described as expressive rather than purposive; and he, even more so than Nietzsche, discerns how one tendency of this drive is intimately connected to its opposite.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have observed Nietzsche herald what he anticipates will be the historically propitious arrival of the “free spirits,” of which he counts himself as one. What warrants the fanfare with which Nietzsche greets these soon-to-come spirits? In them he discerns the completion of an age of decadence and the beckoning toward a yet to be

⁵⁹⁷ “Nietzsche and Spinoza: *amor fati* and *amor dei*” in *Nietzsche as Affirmative Thinker*, p. 192.

⁵⁹⁸ “The Nietzsche-Spinoza Problem: Spinoza as Precursor?” p. 180.

determined future. They are, by his account, the unwitting agents of this historical turn of tides; they are at once benefactors of a legacy of long-accepted articles of faith and progenitors of a fledgling will to truth that wants to expose those articles of faith as entirely fictitious. Thus, Nietzsche attributes a heroic task to these skeptics and nay-sayers: to *prepare for the future of humanity* by means of an unremitting revaluation of values and expunging of erroneous beliefs. As discussed, chief among such beliefs is that concerning a “free will,” a fiction that undergirds the prevailing morality. As I have argued, Nietzsche’s doctrine of necessity and hypothesis of the will to power challenge the intransigence that protects this foundational belief. His proposition more specifically that life may be characterized as will to power also serves to posit a counter-concept, this time against the broadly accepted notion of self-preservation as the principal *telos* of all forms of life. In the next and final chapter we will turn from the skeptical eye of the free spirit to the far-reaching vision of the philosopher of the future, a vision that begins to sketch a portrait of human greatness. As we shall see, for Nietzsche, as for Spinoza, what human beings may *become* has its origin and source in what they actually *are* and entails a self-love and love of the whole that are intimately bound together.

CHAPTER 7: NATURALIZING THE HUMAN

Nietzsche deconstructs ancient faiths, most notably those that form the bedrock of religious morality, but this deconstructive project is not his ultimate end. Rather it is a means to an end, which itself remains, of necessity, unarticulated.⁵⁹⁹ In fact, it is a preparation for the *future*, for that which has yet to be determined. For this reason, Nietzsche assigns a special task to the philosopher of the future: to discover what *human excellence* consists of. He echoes his predecessor in alluding to a supreme good and intimating that it is connected to self-love and love of necessity; in addition, he also outlines a model of a type who exemplifies human greatness. Finally, he bases his description of this ideal type on the conclusions he has drawn about the nature of human beings as such. For him, as for Spinoza, what we may *become* is necessarily grounded in what we truly *are*; he too contends that human beings (and all other forms of life) are variable quanta of power, affecting and being affected by other such quanta. We can begin to sketch out a portrait of human excellence, then, by attending to how Nietzsche conceives of human beings as such.

I. Beast and Overman, Creature and Creator

Upon arriving in a marketplace and in his first address to people following a long absence, Zarathustra speaks of what human beings *are* and then proceeds to name what their *greatness* is. “Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and

⁵⁹⁹ As Nietzsche says, self-overcoming—including, in this case, that of metaphysics—is no more than a means and must not be confused with an end in itself.

stopping.”⁶⁰⁰ It might appear that Nietzsche is merely referring to the physical evolution of human beings from an earlier primitive or animalistic stage to a later (not yet attained to) stage marked by the appearance of a superior type, the *overman*. But this reading ignores the fact that Nietzsche challenges the notion of historical progress together with the more general conception of teleology; that is, it implicates him in an assumption that he forthrightly rejects, namely that we are no longer beasts and will, one day, be superseded by a higher type. It is more plausible that he is suggesting that human beings are that which *spans* a past and a future, which inherit both the legacy of the beast and portend the arrival of the overman. This suggestion can, moreover, be read as referring to us both as human beings *as such* and as *historical* beings. In either case, the significance of the terms *beast* and *overman* is, as Nietzsche uses them here, relative and open-ended. We can say that at *any* time in history, the beast is what we were, the overman is what we will be; as Zarathustra notes, we presently regard our predecessors as apes, that is, “a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment,” but our future successors will see us in precisely this same way also.⁶⁰¹ No progress is intimated here; no final *telos* is implied in this evolution. Rather, he asserts that historically, *human beings have always overcome themselves*. In fact, all life forms “so far have created beyond themselves,” the worm becoming an ape, followed by the ape turning into a human being.⁶⁰²

There is also evidence that Nietzsche is here proposing a conception of human beings *as such* and not only historically. In one aphorism Nietzsche comments that “in man *creature* and *creator* are united: in man there is material, fragment, excess, clay, dirt, nonsense, chaos; but in man there is also creator, form-giver, hammer, hardness, spectator, divinity, and seventh

⁶⁰⁰ Z Prologue 4

⁶⁰¹ Z I 3

⁶⁰² Z I 3

day.”⁶⁰³ He discerns in human beings an intrinsic *duality*; they are both creatures, being that which merely exists as it is, and creators, imposing form or meaning on *what is*. The creaturely aspect of us is the material from which we are made; the creative aspect of us is what gives form to that material. What is definitive, then, of human beings *as such* is that they possess a capacity for *self-transcendence*, precisely because they consist of a duality of matter and form, nonsense and sense, animality and divinity. To be human means being a convergence of distinct terms, a union of antitheses. But the convergence in this case is not the result of one term possessing a natural priority over the other, such as mind over body. Rather, it occurs in and as a part of a process of self-overcoming; we are both that which is simply given, or reposing in itself, and also that which is for-itself, turning back upon the given and lending it shape, articulation, meaning. Therefore, we are (like life as such) in essence *that which overcomes itself* in consequence of the intrinsic *difference* and *complementarity* of the dual aspects of our selves.

When Zarathustra remarks, in a later passage, “that man is something that must be overcome—that man is a bridge and no end,”⁶⁰⁴ he is not, then, simply imposing an injunction that insists upon overcoming “man” as he is, for instance, in his present form; he is, firstly, making a claim concerning what it is to be human. He makes it explicit that to be that which “must be overcome” is to be a “bridge and no end.” There is no purpose to which the process of self-overcoming is subservient, no overriding *telos* that guides it. It is strictly a process and nothing besides and, as such no particular type, or species of human being can claim to be the end and conclusion of those which have preceded it. Whoever may

⁶⁰³ BGE 230

⁶⁰⁴ Z III “On Old and New Tablets” 3

be esteemed as a higher type, and as a reason and justification for the countless evils that prepared the way for his or her coming, *there will be another*. The overman of one age is, therefore, fated to be the beast of the next. Interestingly, when Zarathustra then shifts from speaking of what human beings are to what their greatness is, he repeats the same phrase to describe the second as well as the first. “What is *great* in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an overture and a going under.”⁶⁰⁵ Thus, for Nietzsche, as for Spinoza, such greatness is achieved only once we have recovered, or come to understand, what we truly *are* and not in the attainment of an ideal. Moreover, it exhibits nothing of the *character* of an ideal, which is fixed, unchanging, law-like, and contrary to reality; in fact, as we have seen, what human beings are, and hence what comprises their greatness, conforms to the character of life *as such*. Notably, Nietzsche also pairs this claim concerning human greatness with a second that refers to what can be *loved* in us and, again, these are one and the same. He thus forges a connection between greatness and love that we shall discuss at greater length in a later section of this chapter.

II. The Last Man

We can get further insight into Nietzsche’s conception of human greatness by attending to his occasional allusions to what is, on the contrary, contemptible in human beings: our *smallness*. He calls the type that is most completely contemptible in this sense the *last man*⁶⁰⁶; he warns that this type is increasingly prevalent in our age and presents our greatest danger for the future because it signifies a general “diminution and leveling of European man.”⁶⁰⁷ Within and among individuals of this type all distance and difference is absent; it is entirely

⁶⁰⁵ Z I 3 italics mine

⁶⁰⁶ Z Prologue 5

⁶⁰⁷ GM I 12

lacking in the expansiveness and complexity of the soul that is presupposed in all self-overcoming. It is as if no drive that would contest the reigning order in the soul has survived and, as a result, there is also no longing for some distant or future goal. Nietzsche indicates that the last man's residing so fixedly in a static here and now is not symptomatic of apathy as much as it is of having lost and *forgotten* what it means to create, to long for, to love.⁶⁰⁸ In a sense, then, the last man has forgotten himself *as a creator*, having lost what one must have to create, "to give birth to a dancing star," namely, a little chaos. Recalling only what came before him, he regards himself instead as a terminus, as merely a thing in-itself.

Thus, this type, as Zarathustra describes it, is intractably small or deflated, as if collapsed in on itself: content with resembling everyone else; clever in the sense of knowing everything already and, consequently, inclined to derision; moderate by virtue of a pettiness or absence of real desire, reserving "one's little pleasure for the day and one's little pleasure for the night."⁶⁰⁹ But how is it that such smallness, in Nietzsche's assessment, poses a threat?

"Together with our fear of man we have also lost our love of him, our reverence for him, our hopes for him, even the will to him."⁶¹⁰ The smallness of the last man does not make him inconsequential, however; his smallness is oppressive, so that, as Nietzsche says, "the sight of man now makes us weary."⁶¹¹ Incapable of becoming greater, of even *wanting* to become greater, he is also incapable of inspiring this desire in others. In fact, Nietzsche suggests that the last man discourages any bold attempts to do just this simply by *presuming* that such attempts are futile and deriding those who make them. It is the exceptional person

⁶⁰⁸ Z Prologue 5

⁶⁰⁹ Z Prologue 5

⁶¹⁰ GM I 12

⁶¹¹ GM I 12

who still aspires for greatness while the rest, as Nietzsche says, get “‘better’ all the time,” that is, more mediocre, indifferent, prudent, in short, *small*. The last man is, therefore, dangerous because he in effect forecloses on the very possibility of greatness or of a future

III. The Ideal of Greatness: The Comprehensive Soul

For Nietzsche, the concept of greatness is both trans-historical and historically specific. In places he appears to speak of this concept as trans-historical and in others he explicitly refers to it as signifying something that is historically contingent. Nevertheless, he suggests that this distinction is not problematic: it does not result, for instance, in any inconsistency in his allusions to what this greatness *is*; nor does it imply, in this case, that the historical concept is a poor imitation of the non-historical. Rather, the second simply *follows from* the concept of the human being as such, while the first is only ever defined with reference to what human beings have *in fact* become. The historical concept is a work of *art* that is produced by philosophers; any such concept will, incidentally or in the absence of some design or purpose, be in agreement with the other non-historical concept. However, the latter, as said, evolves out of and refers only to that which we are as such, that is, as *natural* beings. So, as we shall observe, the philosopher’s artistic rendering of a new or revised concept of greatness is in every instance, according to Nietzsche, consistent with a naturalized conception of what it means to be human.

Not only in this but in *every* age the philosopher is “a man of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow”; he has always found himself, Nietzsche explains, “in contradiction to his today [and] his enemy was ever the ideal of today.”⁶¹² The philosopher, then, is always *of the future*,

⁶¹² BGE 212

an intimation of that which is *not yet*; a personage in whom one can foresee the inevitable demise of what seemed timeless, most especially the ideals of an age. Like free spirits, they too apply “the knife vivisectionally to the chest of the very *virtues of their time*,”⁶¹³ and expose these as being nothing more or less than *timely*. But, in contrast to these uncanny kinsmen, they do so with a concealed purpose, namely “to know of a *new* greatness of man, of a new untrodden way to his enhancement.”⁶¹⁴ Their work and goal lies not in overcoming the past—this is the labour so assiduously performed by free spirits—but in determining “the Whither or For What of man.”⁶¹⁵ *Their* task is to indicate a way, a means to our enhancement, which they, as forecasters of the future, can discern. Thus, as A. Mullin suggests that the free spirits’ tireless excavation of the foundation of moral values is “preparatory to the task of the philosopher of the future.”⁶¹⁶ But Nietzsche suggests that these “genuine” philosophers are not simply prophets or seers of a future overman, speaking of that which they cannot have full or certain knowledge of, nor does he identify them as living examples of the overman. The philosopher, by Nietzsche’s account, is one in whom greatness is *immanent*; she possesses qualities and virtues that have come to fruition, after being cultivated by generations of ancestors,⁶¹⁷ and who, as a consequence, has a drive to grasp what greatness is, to know and embody it. Thus, this greatness must also exist in some respect—in an unrealized form—in the philosopher herself.

In what, then, does greatness consist? Nietzsche replies that the philosopher will discover it in precisely what is *opposite* to the man of today: “in his range and multiplicity, in his

⁶¹³ BGE 212

⁶¹⁴ BGE 212

⁶¹⁵ BGE 211

⁶¹⁶ “Nietzsche’s Free Spirit,” p. 401

⁶¹⁷ BGE 213

wholeness in manifoldness.”⁶¹⁸ This concept or ideal of greatness, then, is the inverse of what is most characteristic of the modern soul; it consists in *wholeness* where the soul is anarchic, in *manifoldness* where the soul is peculiarly narrow or small.⁶¹⁹ To be “capable of being as manifold as whole, as ample as full”⁶²⁰ is suggestive of a rare strength or virtue. Greatness then consists in being both *one* and *many* where neither is subsumed in the other, resulting in either chaos or complete homogeneity. Moreover, while weakness compels one to strive for a tenuous tyranny over those aspects of oneself, of others, of life itself, that put one in peril insofar as they resist conformity and assert their difference or uniqueness, greatness invites the opposite. In fact, the very comprehensiveness that is essential to greatness rests upon precisely this kind of difference remaining intact. It comes about when, among different drives within the soul, there develops a *pathos of distance*; a ruling drive elects itself as *that which is in command*, as requiring the obedience of other drives, thereby keeping them at a distance.⁶²¹ It need not resort to obliterating or obscuring whatever is subordinate, but simply *wants its own distance, its own difference*.

This *pathos*, then, is what invests the soul with coherence; as such, the order that is established consists not in maintaining a strict identity or equality among parts, but in the very “craving for an ever new widening of distances within the soul itself, the development of ever higher, rarer, more remote, further-stretching, more comprehensive states.”⁶²² This soul has *breadth* and is incessantly expansive; rather than subsiding or reposing in itself, it is

⁶¹⁸ BGE 212

⁶¹⁹ This concept is as fitting for humankind as it is for the individual, although Nietzsche usually describes it only in terms of the latter.

⁶²⁰ BGE 212

⁶²¹ BGE 257

⁶²² BGE 257

inclined to extend itself ever further. Therefore, it is the antithesis of the decadent soul which, cognizant of its failing strength, strives only to narrow its horizons and suppress anything antagonistic to it. It is also opposed to the type of last man in whom all distance or difference, indeed striving itself, is altogether absent. The comprehensive soul, “which can run and stray and roam farthest within itself . . . the soul which flees itself and catches up with itself in the widest circle,”⁶²³ “has” itself and yet not as an unchanging datum, it “*wants* to want and will” but not to correct a deficiency. This *pathos*, then, enables the soul to not merely accept or withstand strife and contradiction, but to *rejoice* in it. For it is precisely this *tension* in the soul, resulting from the command of a reigning drive, a command that seeks to *preserve rather than destroy a distance*, that is responsible for its self-enhancement. Finally, then, greatness *as such* consists in the soul’s capacity to overcome itself, to be both that which commands and that which obeys, creator *and* creature.

IV. The Sovereign Individual and Eternal Recurrence

We must then ask the following question: what will the philosopher’s concept of greatness consist of *today*? What is the philosopher’s ideal for *this age*? Again, it will consist of that which is *untimely*, or generally regarded as strange, abhorrent, diabolical, for it is precisely this that guarantees “the continual ‘self-overcoming of man.’”⁶²⁴ Nietzsche observes that what is now most timely is *weakness of the will* and, as such, “strength of the will, hardness, and the capacity for long-range decisions must belong to the concept of ‘greatness.’”⁶²⁵ In this same aphorism, he announces that, “today the concept of greatness entails being noble, wanting to

⁶²³ Z “On Old and New Tablets” 19

⁶²⁴ BGE 257

⁶²⁵ BGE 212

be by oneself, being able to be different, standing alone and having to live independently.”⁶²⁶

In an age in which the most celebrated virtues weaken or attenuate the will, in which the “ideal of the dumb, renunciatory, humble, selfless humanity”⁶²⁷ is accorded the highest esteem, the philosopher must propose as a *counter*-ideal the opposite type, that is, the one who is loneliest, concealed, deviant, supra-moral, and, above all, over-rich in will:⁶²⁸ the *sovereign individual*. This individual, who is in every respect a reversal and overturning of the uniform, regular, “like among like,” man and woman of today, is actually the “ripest fruit,” of the morality of mores.⁶²⁹ In this type, Nietzsche says, there is a distinctive and proud consciousness of being the *completion* of humankind as we have known it, and “of what has at length been achieved and become flesh in him, a consciousness of his own power and freedom.”⁶³⁰ Emancipated from the severity, stupidity, the “social straightjacket,” of the moral age, the sovereign individual is “the ‘free’ man, the possessor of a protracted and unbreakable will.”⁶³¹

What is most distinctive about this individual, then, is his or her intractable *will*; in *this* age such a will acts as an instrument of emancipation and redemption for it is uniquely that which can save us from the oppressive tutelage of current morality. At present, freedom

⁶²⁶ BGE 212

⁶²⁷ BGE 212

⁶²⁸ BGE 212

⁶²⁹ GM II 2

⁶³⁰ GM II 2

⁶³¹ GM 11 2. It must be emphasized, as Schacht does, that Nietzsche does not attribute the “autonomy” and “protracted will” of the sovereign individual to some “nonnatural and extrasocial faculty.” As we have demonstrated, Nietzsche categorically denies the veracity of any such attribution. Schacht argues that while Nietzsche refrains from construing human action as determined by our biological endowments or by social institutions, “he does hold that it is grounded in the social transformation of our fundamental biological nature; and he takes the more exceptional forms of action to which autonomy and independence may legitimately be ascribed to be a matter of the individual transformation of a previously established social nature” (“Of Morals and *Menchen*,” in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, p. 445). Importantly, Nietzsche regards this individual not merely as an aberration, or an anomaly, but as the overcoming of the “social nature” of which he or she too is a legatee.

cannot mean an “abandonment to one’s instincts” because what is peculiarly characteristic of the modern soul is that its “instincts contradict, disturb, destroy each other” resulting in “physiological self-contradiction.”⁶³² Nietzsche even suggests that where this inner anarchy exists, *there is no individual*; the individual “has to be made possible by being pruned,” where “possible” is understood to mean *whole*.⁶³³ If the soul is merely a cluster of competing drives, it cannot be said to be singular, whole, individual; it must possess an inherent order that, while preserving the distinctiveness of these various drives, also makes them cohere. Such order, as we have discovered, is achieved only when the instincts do not remain *on par* with each other or of equal force but when one is permitted “to gain in power, to become strong, to become master” over the others.⁶³⁴ An individual *becomes an individual* only once this dominant instinct assumes command; only then does one *experience* oneself as having power *over* the self, even over fate itself. In this sovereign individual, Nietzsche tells us, this instinct figures as the *conscience*, for one possesses a “right to make promises,” a “right to stand security for oneself” in consequence of having a will that cannot be compromised by ill or good fortune, that remains constant in the face of contingency.⁶³⁵ Conscience, then, is an expression of power and confers a right or privilege upon him or her who has it as a ruling instinct; it most especially gives one the ability and the right to affirm what one is most in possession of, namely *oneself*.

The doctrine of eternal recurrence, articulated by Nietzsche in his perhaps most enigmatic aphorisms, has the greatest salience in connection with this sovereign individual. Accepting

⁶³² TI “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man” 41

⁶³³ TI “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man” 41

⁶³⁴ TI “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man” 41

⁶³⁵ GM II 2 & 3

that eternal recurrence is most plausible or defensible as an existential test rather than as a cosmological theory, the question emerges: what is this test meant to evince? what is revealed in the performance of this test? Significantly, the doctrine is explicated most clearly by Nietzsche as a *hypothetical* proposition, one that he identifies as signifying “the heaviest burden:”

What, if some day or night, a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life, as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh... must return to you—all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again—and you with it, speck of dust!” Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: ‘You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine!’ If this thought were to gain possession of you, it would change you as you are, or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “do you want this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal.⁶³⁶

This proposition is uttered by a demon who surreptitiously finds the individual in his or her “loneliest loneliness” and hence at her most vulnerable—alone and without consoling

⁶³⁶ GS 341

distractions or delusions, or the sympathy of compatriots. Though the demon confronts this individual with a vision of life recurring in an identical fashion, for all of eternity, the function of this test is not to prompt a reckoning of the merits or faults of all her decisions or actions hitherto. Rather, it is meant to elicit a more unreflective response that is itself indicative of the strength or weakness of the will; specifically, it will induce one of two responses: resentment and denial, or gratitude and affirmation. The past is precisely that which marks the limits of the will; it is that which forms an intractable bulwark on the other side of the present moment, representing the terminus of human agency. For the weak or decadent (anarchic) will, the past can only be redeemed if it is superseded by a future that promises to correct for the specter of evil, for injustices committed, and the losses and injuries suffered—a future in which one is relieved of the earthly, of the body and its cacophony of affects. In other words, the ideal world, where only perfect justice, goodness, and beauty reside, is posited as that which annuls the past. This will, then, expresses unmitigated rage at the prospect of a past that overtakes the future and spells the ruin of the redemption it had guaranteed. To entertain forfeiting the ideal, which had functioned as a counterweight to the burdensome past, is to experience the “greatest weight,” namely that which belongs to the individual will: the weight of responsibility. In the absence of the ideal, this will flounders—it is deprived of even the possibility of willing “nothingness,”⁶³⁷ or the negation all that is loathsome or offensive in this earthly life, the negation that is the very origin of the ideal.

It is the sovereign individual, the one in whom a strong, independent will has come to fruition, who responds positively to the prospect of shouldering this weight. This individual

⁶³⁷ GM 28

relishes rather than regrets her solitariness, for she experiences, in (or “as”) herself, an abundant power or vitality, an untrammelled freedom, against which even the inalterable past presents no threat. As Nietzsche suggests, she has acquired the right to exercise a conscience, to make promises, to assume responsibility. The gravity of this right is not felt as a burden, for it is conferred by the fact that she possesses a protracted will and hence can “stand security for herself.” Deleuze, following a related line of thought, claims that “the eternal return can complete nihilism because it makes negation a negation of reactive forces themselves.” In other words, the will to nothingness becomes transformed into the willing of eternal recurrence, such that originally “reactive forces *become active*.”⁶³⁸ I’m proposing that the sovereign individual is the uniquely “strong spirit” in whom this transformation occurs, and in whom, therefore, nihilism reaches “completion.”

Also, as Nietzsche suggests, the feeling of power, which is essential to the sovereign individual’s “willing,” needs resistance—and the irremediable past offers a formidable resistance.⁶³⁹ Little pleasure is to be had in willing in a vacuum; but to engage one’s will in triumphantly, joyfully, imposing the stamp and seal of eternity on a past that is as unmovable as a mountain, in shouting “da capo” to all that was, without exception⁶⁴⁰—this bestows an unqualified feeling of power and freedom. For Nietzsche, it follows that the sovereign individual is also uniquely capable of affirming herself. She does not wait or wish for the external validation of the prevailing morality, as that mantle has not been placed on her

⁶³⁸ *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 70.

⁶³⁹ R. Comay gives a detailed account of the reactive response to this resistance, a reactivity that she describes as consisting, physiologically, in hypersensitivity. Reactive irritability becomes, she says, “an intolerance to resistance, a warning against resistance, a resistance to resistance” (“Redeeming Revenge: Nietzsche, Benjamin, Heidegger, and the Politics of Memory,” p. 35).

⁶⁴⁰ BGE 46

shoulders. Unhampered by such restrictive fetters, she is conscious of herself *as free, as an individual*, as one who can stand at the threshold of the future and “will backwards.” She alone embodies the legacy of all that preceded her, she is its “completion” and crowning glory; thus, to want or will eternal recurrence, for the sovereign individual, is an occasion to *affirm herself*, including all that came before and begat her, all that has culminated in the will that is her signature, her mark of greatness.⁶⁴¹

Thus, Nietzsche supplies us with a portrait of greatness; or, rather, an image of it both *as such*, or in an enduring sense, and in terms of what it signifies *today* in the sovereign individual. Yet he also seems to believe that any effort to cultivate it in one’s own person would be futile. One is bred for such greatness; “for every high world one must be born.”⁶⁴² It is true that Nietzsche reserves what he terms “a right to philosophy” for a select few in whom a rare confluence of qualities have been inherited.⁶⁴³ Even these privileged ones are not assured greatness *merely* as a consequence of their origins or ancestry, for circumstances may or may not actualize what is still only immanent in them. But it would be an error to

⁶⁴¹ Some commentators have interpreted Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence as itself expressing an ill-will toward revenge or resentment; if this is true, one who wills eternal recurrence is still plagued by, rather than rid of, these passions. Thus, Berkowitz suggests that the attempt to extinguish the “spirit of revenge” by willing eternal recurrence is, in fact, indicative of an enslavement to that same spirit (*Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*, p. 178). Similarly, Schutte finds that Zarathustra is only able to affirm the idea of recurrence by simultaneously disavowing the value of human life, at least in its given incarnation, for “human weakness and failure elicit in [him] a sense of nausea for the whole of humanity.” She concludes that Nietzsche’s intention to overcome nihilism is, as a result, not fully realized. (*Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche without Masks*, p. 189-90). I contend, on the contrary, that the sovereign individual represents a type that is postulated by Nietzsche as uniquely equipped with the “will” that is sufficiently robust to affirm eternal recurrence, to affirm herself *as an individual*, together with the perpetuation of all that participated in her coming to be. There is no *attempt* on the part of this individual to contravene “the spirit of revenge” or to quell misgivings about the value of human life—for Nietzsche, the sovereign individual does not appear to form any such judgement, or to direct her will toward correcting or redeeming what might be found wanting. Zarathustra admittedly does cherish the notion that the doctrine of eternal recurrence can ensure redemption and suffers from nausea at the prospect of that same recurrence. But there is no reason to suppose—and indeed, I would deny that—Zarathustra is a mouthpiece for Nietzsche, or an example of the sovereign individual that Nietzsche upholds as capable of a new-found greatness.

⁶⁴² BGE 213

⁶⁴³ BGE 213

read Nietzsche as if he was, in the end, regarded as resigned or a “failed voluntarist,” and not, in some respect, still issuing an appeal, a sign of hope, and even a call to action. Indeed, he admonishes those who would curse sickness or *ressentiment*, or condemn the ironic complacency of the last man. Not only does contempt of this sort betray an ill-concealed cowardice, in his view, it also results in a “philosophy of poverty and discouragement.”⁶⁴⁴ Indeed, Nietzsche proposes an entirely different approach: as he himself turned his “will to health, to *life*, into a philosophy,”⁶⁴⁵ so does he urge others to do the same. He also, in fact, claims that his own sickness acted as “an energetic stimulus for life, for living more.”⁶⁴⁶ As we shall show in the following section, Nietzsche devotes a great deal of attention in many of his writings to reflecting on the *way* to enhancement, a way that leads from a state of bondage or dependence to one of freedom.

V. The Way to Enhancement: Bondage

Nietzsche construes the state of bondage as a psycho-physiological condition; for him, as for Spinoza, this state is not imposed and sustained from *without*, by an external force or agency, but refers to a *way of being*. He too recommends that we conceive of ourselves as a power that is variable; moreover, he proposes that though we can measure the extent of our particular capacities, we cannot estimate our power *as such*. “Our circumstances do not only conceal and reveal it to us,” he adds, “they magnify and diminish it.”⁶⁴⁷ If circumstances should happen to favour us, our capacities could “equal the highest ever known,”⁶⁴⁸ but if, on the contrary, they are hostile to us, or we are subject to ill fortune, our powers may be depleted.

⁶⁴⁴ EH “Why I Am So Wise” 2

⁶⁴⁵ EH “Why I Am So Wise” 2

⁶⁴⁶ EH “Why I Am So Wise” 2

⁶⁴⁷ D 326

⁶⁴⁸ D 326

Thus, Nietzsche agrees with his precursor that we, together with all other forms of life, are powers whose magnitude or force is necessarily affected by the vicissitudes of our circumstances—and thus, that *passivity* is a necessary feature of our existence. In addition, he also observes that the usual if not inevitable result of a prolonged passivity, in which we are entirely or largely at the mercy of random events, is a loss of inner equilibrium. This condition of general imbalance or incoherence, in which each drive strives against every other, is what figures principally as bondage in Nietzsche's, as well as Spinoza's, thought and derivatively as the condition for a social malaise.

Nietzsche describes the drives of the human soul as desiring gratification of some sort; a drive may long for the “saturation of an emptiness,” but it may just as likely want a “discharge of its strength.”⁶⁴⁹ Drives are in every instance intentional or, more precisely, desiring of some object. However, this does not mean that they emerge out of a lack or poverty but may, on the contrary, possess a surplus or fullness. In fact, Nietzsche depicts all drives, even those that aim at expending an excess of energy, as essentially desirous. Each, insofar as it is uniquely itself, does so independently of all others, having wishes and a will of its own. As Nietzsche explains, it “regards every event of the day with a view to seeing how it can employ it for the attainment of its goal; whether a man is moving, or resting or angry or reading or speaking or fighting or rejoicing, the drive will in its thirst as it were taste every condition into which the man may enter.”⁶⁵⁰ If it finds something suitable for itself there, it is nourished and grows stronger; if it finds nothing, it will continue to thirst, eventually perishing if no gratification is forthcoming.

⁶⁴⁹ D 119

⁶⁵⁰ D 119

Naturally, circumstances will tend to offer nutriment to these drives indiscriminately, for “our daily experiences throw some prey in the way of now this, now that drive, and the drive seizes it eagerly.” Nietzsche notes, like Spinoza does, that any such drive never refuses itself nourishment for the sake of satisfying “the nutritional requirements of the totality of drives,”⁶⁵¹ but will exploit every event to its own advantage. Thus, if left to chance, nutriment will be given in abundance to some drives and withheld entirely from others, resulting in overfeeding on the one side and starvation on the other.⁶⁵² “Every moment of our lives,” Nietzsche writes, “sees some of the polyp-arms of our being grow and others of them wither, all according to the nutriment which the moment does or does not bear with it.”⁶⁵³ Ultimately, he concludes, the fully mature polyp is as accidental as its haphazard growth has been; for better or for worse (and most commonly the latter), it is merely the work of the rather fickle and uneven artistry of chance. Zarathustra describes a terrible sight that met him, upon his returning to society after a long absence, namely that of human beings in ruin, mere fragments or limbs, “scattered as over a battlefield or a butcher-field.”⁶⁵⁴ The terribleness of this vision lies not only in the disarray or ugliness of the scene, in the absence of any order or harmony, but also in the lack of a “refined self-concern, any protection by some commanding instinct,”⁶⁵⁵ any ability to discriminate between that which is beneficial, and that which is harmful, to us. There is no evidence that a well-turned-out individual survives; but worse than that is the fact that there is no sign of one emerging from these ashes and carnage because a *self-regarding instinct is altogether missing*.

⁶⁵¹ D 119

⁶⁵² D 119

⁶⁵³ D 119

⁶⁵⁴ Z “On Redemption”

⁶⁵⁵ EH “Why I Am So Clever” 2

Nietzsche suggests that it is *usually* the case that the nourishment we receive is wholly subject to the vagaries of fortune--or what is the same, that we are only passively related to our environment—for the reason that we generally have scarcely any knowledge of the drives that constitute our being. Typically, an individual cannot “name even the cruder ones: their number and strength, their ebb and flood, their play and counter play among one another, and above all the laws of their nutriment remain wholly unknown to him.”⁶⁵⁶ Here Nietzsche’s observations are strikingly similar to those of Spinoza’s, namely that we are vaguely conscious of “having” multiple desires, and yet insensible to the fact that we are, in essence, *desiring beings*. This ignorance is, in part, inevitable for the reason that consciousness, as explained earlier, falsifies or obscures the physiological processes it is presumed to represent; as Nietzsche writes, it is “more or less a fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, but felt text.”⁶⁵⁷ Accordingly, it is very likely impossible for us to put into abeyance the images and fantasies of consciousness and access the “text” of which they are an interpretation.

Nevertheless, there is another and more grievous reason for this unmitigated passivity, this total neglect of what promotes well-being: there exists a “feigned disrespect for all the things which men in fact take most seriously, *for all the things closest to them*,”⁶⁵⁸ or a false selflessness that is encouraged by idealists, most especially among the priesthood. Nietzsche regrets that such things as our selection of food, housing, clothes and companions, as the profession and type of leisure we pursue, even the pattern of activity in our day, is so trivialized that they are

⁶⁵⁶ D 119

⁶⁵⁷ D 119

⁶⁵⁸ WS 5

deprived of the consideration they deserve; as a consequence, he concludes, we commit “continual offences against the most elementary laws of the body and spirit,” which inevitably “reduce us all, young and old, to a disgraceful dependence and bondage.”⁶⁵⁹ In fact he declares that “*almost all of the physical and psychical frailties* of the individual derive from . . . not knowing what is beneficial to us.”⁶⁶⁰ In no uncertain terms he accuses priests and other teachers of morality who, out of a lust for power, instruct us in a host of fictions all of which distract us from these mundane matters and promote self-abnegation. In so doing, they assist in our remaining ignorant about “the smallest and most everyday things and [in our] failing to keep an eye on them,” which, according to Nietzsche, effectively “transforms the world into a ‘vale of tears.’”⁶⁶¹

For those in whom a remedial instinct survives the possibility and hope remains that they will experience a reversal. Nietzsche claims, regarding himself, that “only my sickness brought me to reason,” for owing to this sickness he came close to the end and “*because* [he] was close to the end” he began to reflect upon the *unreason*, or idealism, that had hitherto guided him in his life.⁶⁶² The worsening of his sickness caused him to call into question what is widely accepted as good in itself and also advantageous to us. Spinoza similarly compares himself to “a sick man suffering from a fatal malady who, foreseeing death unless a remedy is forthcoming, is forced to seek it.”⁶⁶³ When it finally becomes perilous, then, sickness can prompt reflection. Spinoza realizes that though self-destructive desires largely occupied his

⁶⁵⁹ WS 5

⁶⁶⁰ WS 6

⁶⁶¹ WS 6

⁶⁶² EH “Why I Am So Clever” 2

⁶⁶³ TEI 234

mind, still “those evils were not so persistent as to refuse to yield to remedies.”⁶⁶⁴ Both philosophers thus intimate that sickness itself cannot produce a *cure* but, in fact, a condition for recovery is that “*one be healthy at bottom.*”⁶⁶⁵ That is, if some residual instinct to *overcome* this sickness is still intact, the possibility for health remains. As Nietzsche is fond of emphasizing, one who is still able to *must*, above all else, privilege a kind of *selfishness* over the harmful selflessness (or the pretense of selflessness) endorsed by the “heavy and pregnant errors” of morality and metaphysics.⁶⁶⁶ This means that we must once again become “*good neighbours to the closest things* and cease from gazing so contemptuously past them at clouds and monsters of the night.”⁶⁶⁷ As we have learned to despise what is closest, namely the “basic concerns of life itself,” it is precisely here one must begin to *relearn*.⁶⁶⁸

VI. The Way to Enhancement: Freedom & Virtue

If bondage consists largely in neglect of one’s own interest and if it is maintained by means of a moral injunction to act selflessly, then liberation will *begin* in a reversal of precisely this habit of neglect and the value assigned to selflessness. But how is this accomplished? Nietzsche counsels his reader to practice *self-defense* in which, he suggests, our instinct for self-preservation “gains its most unambiguous expression.”⁶⁶⁹ He states that the first proof that one is not merely an “accident,” that is, entirely passive to contingency or chance, is that one exhibits prudence by beginning to refuse, “to say No when Yes would be “selfless” but also to say *No as rarely as possible.*”⁶⁷⁰ In this act of refusal, which includes even refusing

⁶⁶⁴ TEI 235

⁶⁶⁵ EH “Why I Am So Wise” 2

⁶⁶⁶ WS 50

⁶⁶⁷ WS 16

⁶⁶⁸ EH “Why I Am So Clever” 10

⁶⁶⁹ EH “Why I Am So Clever” 8

⁶⁷⁰ EH “Why I Am So Clever” 8

unnecessary and costly “defensive expenditures,” self-concern prevails over and against a countervailing selflessness. It is this drive to discriminate, to be oneself a “principle of selection,” that Nietzsche calls *taste*. In the first stage of recovery and liberation, then, the exercise of taste is principally restricted to *not* seeing or hearing many things, to *not* permitting “many things to come close,” but also and more crucially to avoiding those situations that require one to “become a mere reagent.”⁶⁷¹ By Nietzsche’s description this initial stage of liberation is mainly restorative; one begins the process of recovery by being protectively selfish, by keeping to oneself, which *initially* entails resisting the moral demand to be selfless while also learning to “react as little as possible.”⁶⁷² It may be observed that here Nietzsche already implies that liberation is a recovery of *oneself*, and that it consists in a gradual shift from being wholly passive to being active.

Selfishness is a sign of—as well as perhaps a condition for—being active. For Nietzsche, however, it signifies something other than its usual or customary meaning. What he refers to as selfishness could easily be misinterpreted as childish narcissism, a nihilistic disregard for the bonds of community, or a conception of human beings as basically preoccupied with securing a portion of limited resources. There is no doubt that Nietzsche employs this term provocatively, as an affront to moral custom. And yet he also clearly takes its meaning to be something akin to *self-regard* or, to use his phrase, *reverence for oneself*. To be selfish does not entail and may even forbid a romantic kind of letting oneself go or abandonment, or a Scrooge-like miserliness that wants only to exploit and profit from every occasion and at any cost to others. On the contrary, it is synonymous with being faithful or cleaving to oneself,

⁶⁷¹ EH “Why I Am So Clever” 8

⁶⁷² EH “Why I Am So Clever” 8

where the self is itself expansive, burgeoning, and richly variegated as opposed to some fixedly self-identical and homogenous datum that seeks single-mindedly to *preserve itself as it is*. Nietzsche praises selfishness for being an antidote to the ills associated with “herdiness:” a uniform leveling of all differences among people, a general conformity in both conduct and feeling, and, above all, an insistence on being selfless, be it for the sake of personal salvation or the welfare of the state. Nietzsche thus recommends selfishness insofar as it serves as a remedy for the self-neglect resulting from idealism. Spinoza similarly insists that the state of being active entails that every individual aim at that which is their (real) advantage, a practice which he denotes as self-love.⁶⁷³ Thus for him, also, self-abnegation, or depriving oneself of pleasure, is actually deleterious. Interestingly, like Nietzsche, he observes that the reactivity associated with passive desire subsides with the cultivation of self-love and, consequently, the active individual can “pursue good directly and shun evil indirectly.”⁶⁷⁴

What specifically are the merits of selfishness? It prompts us to take notice of the distinctive composition of our soul; in the shift from self-neglect to self-regard, we come to see that the conditions for health, freedom, and virtue, is largely particular to the *individual*. It gives us insight into the falsity of any proposition that represents some one version of these as universally applicable. We are simply forced to deny such propositions if we are attentive to how various we are, as it becomes evident that “that which one individual needs for his health is to another a cause of illness, and many ways and means to freedom of spirit may to more highly developed natures count as ways and means to unfreedom.”⁶⁷⁵ Moreover, Nietzsche adds that how health, for instance, is itself defined “depends on your goal, your

⁶⁷³ *Ethics* IV P18 S

⁶⁷⁴ *Ethics* IV P63 C

⁶⁷⁵ H 286

horizon, your powers, your impulses, your mistakes and above all the ideals and phantasms of your soul.”⁶⁷⁶ Nietzsche, then, is making the claim that the end itself is individual rather than merely asserting that diverse means must be employed to achieve one and the same end. There is in no sense a normal health, or even a normal illness, as physicians suppose;⁶⁷⁷ similarly, there is no virtue or vice as such, as moralists espouse. The meaning of these concepts is, of necessity, changeable and various. In addition to the countless variations among individuals in disposition, “there are innumerable healths of the body”⁶⁷⁸ of one individual; both, furthermore, are susceptible to continuous change. What might well appear as health for one, be it of the body or soul, could be the opposite for another. As such, if you possess health, it must be considered as *yours* only and “if you have a virtue and she is your virtue, then you have her in common with nobody.”⁶⁷⁹

Therefore, selfishness at once spells the ruin of universal morality and invites the cultivation of particular virtues. Nietzsche observes that a person’s *real* virtues develop out of what is richest or especially fecund in them: lonely pride or sociability, “the spirit of contradiction” or, alternatively, that of assent.⁶⁸⁰ If in any of these cases “the seeds of virtue had, through the ineptitude of teachers and the vagaries of chance, not been sown in that region of his nature . . . then they would be without morality and weak and joyless men.”⁶⁸¹ The most inept of such educators, the “evil fatality” that inhibits the prosperity of such virtues, is the moral fanatic according to whom “the good can grow only out of the good and upon the

⁶⁷⁶ GS 120

⁶⁷⁷ GS 120

⁶⁷⁸ GS 120

⁶⁷⁹ Z “On Enjoying and Suffering the Passions”

⁶⁸⁰ WS 70

⁶⁸¹ WS 70

basis of the good.”⁶⁸² By Nietzsche’s account, then, your virtue is “your self and not something foreign, a skin, a cloak”⁶⁸³ and, as such, selfishness is necessary for virtuousness. To have virtue does not entail removing the stain of sin or abstaining from tempting vices, but of accentuating one’s strengths, or that which is remarkable in one’s nature. Furthermore, one who regards virtue in this sense *wants* it to be particular, for as such it is expressive of oneself, instead of a divine law or human statute that is imposed like a forbidding signpost.⁶⁸⁴ For this reason, Nietzsche wishes that virtues will be, to those who possess them, “too exalted for the familiarity of names,” too much revered and loved as one’s own to be prescribed to another.⁶⁸⁵ Moral prescriptions are, in his view, indicative of a lack of virtuousness *and* they fail to correct for this lack. Indeed, tendering prescriptions as to the path to virtue or to happiness will usually hinder rather than assist anyone seeking this path.⁶⁸⁶

It should be said that though Nietzsche vigorously disputes the legitimacy of morality, he does not thereby deny that there are many actions deemed immoral that ought to be avoided, or that there are others regarded as morally praiseworthy that ought to be encouraged.⁶⁸⁷ Rather it is the “moral feelings” attached to these actions that he objects to, most particularly those of shame, pity, and fear. These feelings, which have been cultivated under the tutelage of the ascetic ideal, are not “natural” but thoroughly habitual, a second nature that obfuscates that which underlies it. Once the mind is freed of this tutelage, and

⁶⁸² WS 70

⁶⁸³ Z “On the Virtuous”

⁶⁸⁴ Z “On Enjoying and Suffering the Passions”

⁶⁸⁵ Z “On Enjoying and Suffering the Passions”

⁶⁸⁶ D 108

⁶⁸⁷ D 103

the habit of acting in accord with “moral feelings” subsides, Nietzsche anticipates that “individual virtues, moderation, justice, repose of the soul” will be consciously adopted because they will be recognized as eminently useful.⁶⁸⁸

“A virtue must be our own invention, our own most necessary self-expression and self-defense”⁶⁸⁹ and as such, we need, Nietzsche maintains, to sanctify our own virtue. How, then, do we determine what virtues are fitting for us, as individuals? On what grounds do we justify a moral duty that applies to each of us alone? Nietzsche alludes to a kind of formula by which such determinations can be made: “an action demanded by the instinct of life is proved to be *right* by the pleasure that accompanies it.”⁶⁹⁰ An action is *right*, in his account, if it springs from an “inner necessity,” that is expressive of the individual, and is accompanied by pleasure. As opposed to the negative emotions that drive the performance of moral action, the virtues acquired by individuals who appoint their own good and evil are the progeny of their happiness. Thus, Nietzsche declares that his formula, in contradiction to the formula on which all religion and morality has been founded hitherto is: “a well-turned-out human being, a “happy one,” *must* perform certain actions and shrinks instinctively from other actions; he carries the order, which he represents physiologically, into his relations with other human beings and things.” The individual is therefore not acting, by means of the impetus of the will, in obedience to a moral duty—and one which typically requires self-abnegation. A person’s actions, as Nietzsche envisages them, should carry no traces of “moral feelings,” but be expressive of who that person is or has become, and as such, will

⁶⁸⁸ H 212

⁶⁸⁹ A 11

⁶⁹⁰ A 11

necessarily be associated with pleasure. Thus, Nietzsche says, “his virtue is the effect of his happiness.”⁶⁹¹

Here Nietzsche is spelling out in positive terms a cornerstone of his ethical project: that those individuals who cast off the yoke of the ascetic ideal, who thereby absolve themselves of the negative passions it inculcates—most especially shame—will discover what it means to *become who they are*. Such individuals possess active natures, who act “not according to the dictum know thyself, but as if there hovered before them the commandment: will a self and thou shalt become a self.”⁶⁹² The phrase “as if” is important in this statement; there is, in fact, nothing external that issues an injunction, or that requires the intervention of a (free) will. That “fate seems to have left the choice still up to them,”⁶⁹³ means simply that they *embody in themselves* a principle of selection, an inner necessity to act or to forbear, that is expressive of who they are—or are constantly becoming. Acting freely from “inner necessity” as opposed to from negative incentives, such as fear of moral censure, heightens the feeling of power, and with it, the experience of happiness or joy.⁶⁹⁴ Thus, these individuals are no longer plagued by the self-alienation that is the hallmark of religious morality, are no longer beguiled by the self-delusion it fosters, but now possess a consciousness of self, a consciousness that is imbued with pleasure. On this point, he is unmistakably the philosophical kinsman of Spinoza, who claimed that to be *free* and to have *virtue* is to act “solely from the necessity of [one’s] own nature.”⁶⁹⁵ Again, he too denies that necessity is synonymous with constraint or a prescribed course of action; rather, to act freely

⁶⁹¹ TI “The Four Great Errors” 2

⁶⁹² H 366

⁶⁹³ H 366

⁶⁹⁴ A 2

⁶⁹⁵ Letter, October 1674

and virtuously signifies embodying sufficient power or strength to cleave to oneself, as opposed to being subject to the vicissitudes of one's circumstances.

VII. Knowing/Loving Nature

To translate man back into nature; to become master over the many vain and overly enthusiastic interpretations and connotations that have so far been inscribed over that eternal basic text of *homo natura*; to see to it that man henceforth stands before men as even today, hardened in the discipline of science, he stands before the rest of nature, with intrepid eyes and sealed up ears...⁶⁹⁶

Again and again, from the first to the last of his writings, Nietzsche takes up this strange task, unmasking the long history of anthropocentric renderings of nature, and deciphering the lie contained in the “siren” song: “you are higher, you are of a different origin!”⁶⁹⁷ And, as we’ve seen, he does so to bring us back to ourselves—not to some fictional and idealized state of nature in which our original goodness remains uncorrupted, not to an “Eden” before the temptation to sin—but to become the “naturalized” beings we are, composites of multiple drives, fitted with virtues that express our particular dispositions, exhibiting a discerning taste for what promotes our well-being. Only by dispensing with the self-deceit that is evinced in the arrogant claim to a special right or status in the natural order of things, and that is also concealed in shame, guilt, and fear in the face of an impossible moral ideal,

⁶⁹⁶ BGE 230

⁶⁹⁷ BGE 230

can we begin to see what human greatness might in fact be. But how, ultimately, is this arrogant fantasy dispelled? How are we to be cured of these sad passions?

Nietzsche alludes to how this is accomplished by citing how a transformation can occur in one who has suffered—precisely on account of this bipolar affliction. It begins, he recounts, when suffering alters how we see the things around us; where before we had been beguiled by “all those little lying charms,” we now “look out at things with a terrible coldness.” He describes the experience of pain as a sobering agent that exiles us from the world of fantasy that we had previously occupied. Our pride, he continues, swells in rebellion against precisely that which would keep us in a state of misery and disaffection: pessimism. In answer to those who insinuate that we should “bear witness against life,” we become an “advocate of life.”⁶⁹⁸ Finally, he concludes, we enter a state of convalescence and, with it, that overweening pride that seeks to triumph over pessimism subsides; it is then that we can “gaze again at man and nature—now with a more desiring eye,” that we “know something new and different about them” for a “veil has fallen.”⁶⁹⁹ What Nietzsche describes here is again evidence of the fact that sickness can bring us to reason; suffering solicited a desire to bear witness to reality, shorn of the colour and plumage of the many anthropocentric fictions we have clothed it in. In other words, it awakens us to the *value of knowledge*.

Interestingly, Nietzsche does not share Spinoza’s faith that knowledge in and of itself can dispel our *hubris* and the sad passions that it invariably produces. As we shall show, he does—perhaps surprisingly—agree with his predecessor that the activity of the intellect in

⁶⁹⁸ Here Nietzsche is directly opposing Schopenhauer’s pessimism or his “maliciously ingenious attempt” to defend “a nihilistic total depreciation of life” (TI 21).

⁶⁹⁹ D 114

the act of knowing *and* the content of knowledge are curative. But Nietzsche maintains that “the nature of the after-effect of knowledge is determined by a man’s temperament,” and one’s temperament, in turn, reflects the state of one’s “soul.”⁷⁰⁰ The requisite temperament, he tells us, is one that is cheerful rather than sullen, that displays a strength that is so robust that it need not be self-protective, that has achieved freedom from the customary fetters; in other words, a temperament exhibited by a well-ordered or active soul. Indeed, knowledge is only attainable by one in whom self-mastery has already been achieved, who is already in possession of a comprehensive soul. Referring to Spinoza’s proposition that understanding is that which opposes laughing at, lamenting, despising, Nietzsche claims that “before knowledge is possible, each of these three impulses must have presented its one-sided view.” These conflicting passions must have each asserted themselves within this triad and then become reconciled with the others--a reconciliation that permits each to “finally feel its right vis-a-vis all the others.”⁷⁰¹ The intellect, Nietzsche cautions, does not *effect* this reconciliation, as if it were a judge meting out justice, but signifies this ultimate appeasement among them. What is important in Nietzsche’s account of the intellect is not so much that he dethrones it, denying that it occupies, by some natural right, a place of the highest honour in the order of the soul—but that he foregrounds the influence of diverse affects or drives in the formation of knowledge.

For Nietzsche, striving to attain a “single deportment of feeling, a single attitude of mind” is, contrary to popular belief, counterproductive. Aiming to become a single, inalterable, individuum inhibits our ability to “listen instead to the gentle voice of each of life’s different

⁷⁰⁰ H 34

⁷⁰¹ GS 324

situations,”⁷⁰² and to employ a variety of perspectives in service to knowledge. For, by his account, “there is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective knowing; and 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.”⁷⁰³ Likewise, attempting to silence an affect will only result in narrowing the scope of our knowledge, in compromising the extent of our objectivity. As W. Klein claims, for Nietzsche, “the richness of our understanding of a thing is proportional to the number of perspectives and the variety of truths that can be brought to bear on it.” Thus, that Nietzsche construes knowledge as perspectival does not entail that he denies the possibility of truth as such, but rather that he, as Klein argues, challenges “the plausibility of the metaphysical concept of truth, whose logic leaves no room for the possibility of competing, equally veridical perspectives and interpretations.”⁷⁰⁴ Furthermore, I would add, knowledge requires that the affects or drives associated with these perspectives be composites of a well-ordered (as opposed to an anarchic) soul, one in which the differences in these rival perspectives are retained while an agreement is nevertheless established among them.

What, then, does this newly baptized “perspectival” knowledge teach us? “Everything is necessary—that says the new knowledge; and this knowledge itself is necessity. Everything is innocence: and knowledge is the path to insight into this innocence.”⁷⁰⁵ As shown in the previous chapter, science is the progenitor of this new knowledge, for its account of natural causality is fatal to the fiction of free will and offers a gateway to Nietzsche’s doctrine of

⁷⁰² H 618

⁷⁰³ GM 2

⁷⁰⁴ *Nietzsche and the Promise of Philosophy*, p. 140

⁷⁰⁵ H 107

necessity. But what Nietzsche underscores throughout his work is the “after-effect” of this knowledge, for, like Spinoza, he consistently maintains that knowledge has a profound remedial effect. The proposition that “everything is necessary” could taste like the “bitterest draught” to one who is accustomed to regarding moral duty as “the patent of his humanity,” whose evaluations have been utterly discredited. But that one “may no longer praise, no longer censure, for it’s absurd to praise and censure nature and necessity,” is also an invitation to see the actions of others and of oneself, unclouded by approbation or condemnation, and simply to “admire their strength, beauty, fullness” as one admires works of art or the behaviour of plants and animals.⁷⁰⁶ He foresees that “under the influence of purifying knowledge,” the violent and erratic passions that have hitherto tyrannized the human soul could gradually grow milder, until, at last, one would relate to others and to oneself “without praising, blaming, contending, gazing contentedly, as though at a spectacle, upon many things for which one formerly felt only fear.”⁷⁰⁷ As noted in the previous chapter, Spinoza similarly credits knowledge with fortifying the mind against sad passions; indeed, he further suggests that the mind is thereby able to actively transfigure the paths of association that prompt the habitual recurrence of those passions.⁷⁰⁸

⁷⁰⁶ H 107. Often, Nietzsche is interpreted as proposing that necessity is invariably offensive to human interests and, as such, a clear-sighted apprehension of the fact that “everything is necessary” will cause most to lament, and an exceptional few to triumph *over* necessity by means of a heroic act of the will. For example, Yovel contends that for Nietzsche, “necessity is opaque and unintelligible *fatum*, devoid of essence or rational ground and pressing upon all creatures as an inescapable burden” (“Nietzsche and Spinoza: *amor fati* and *amor dei*,” p. 186). Berkowitz argues that “human excellence for Nietzsche, consists in facing squarely, comprehending accurately, and overcoming the ugly necessity that governs the human condition, by bringing that necessity under the will’s dominion” (*Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*, p. 4). What I’m suggesting, in contrast, is that Nietzsche understands one’s response to this knowledge may be of (at least) two different and opposing kinds—despair or delight—depending on one’s physiological/psychological constitution. In neither case does the will figure as a faculty that may be employed, independently, to subdue or achieve “dominion” over necessity.

⁷⁰⁷ H 34

⁷⁰⁸ *Ethics* V P10 S

Nietzsche thus celebrates, above all, the therapeutic effect knowledge has on disturbances of the affects, especially those wrought by the influence of religious morality. Repeatedly, throughout his writings, he refers to the “repose of the soul” that is achieved when one “desires little more of things than knowledge.”⁷⁰⁹ He echoes Spinoza in declaring that when one is preoccupied solely with *simply knowing as fully as possible*, one ceases to be tormented by ideas such as sinfulness or the tortures suffered in Hell, by any impulse to “decry the desires as heretical and to exterminate them.”⁷¹⁰ Thus does an increase in this knowledge effect a commensurate decrease in “bile”⁷¹¹ or *ressentiment*; everything that had been made “savage” in the human soul is soothed by the recognition that such ideas are no more than the lingering “phantoms of false ways of viewing life and the world.”⁷¹² While previously we sought that which would inspire reverence and happiness in works of the imagination, now it is possible to experience pleasure in even the smallest discoveries regarding the nature of reality. While Nietzsche disavows that anything is beautiful “in itself,” he is confident that one who possesses knowledge regards the world as an object of beauty precisely because the discovery of this world inspires happiness. “The happiness of the man of knowledge enhances the beauty of the world and makes all that exists sunnier; knowledge casts beauty not only over things but in the long run into things.”⁷¹³ This seeker of knowledge delights in becoming familiar with reality, de-robed of its anthropocentric cloak and, in turn, this delight accentuates the beauty of that which is known. Thus does Nietzsche conclude, with obvious delight of his own, by recalling that philosophers as different as Plato and Aristotle, as

⁷⁰⁹ H 56

⁷¹⁰ H 56

⁷¹¹ H 348

⁷¹² H 56

⁷¹³ D 550

Descartes and Spinoza, alike arrived at this same conclusion, for “they must all have enjoyed knowledge!”⁷¹⁴

And yet, a state of equanimity, or even of happiness, is not what Nietzsche upholds as the ultimate or highest state that is attainable. To aim merely at the cessation of suffering is not sufficient to effect a real transformation, to fully realize his ethical project of “redeeming” humankind—which is to say, to “naturalize” it. Knowledge delivers us to the threshold of reality: it now stands before us, or us before it, and what we observe is that “one is necessary, one is a piece of fatefulness, one belongs to the whole, one is in the whole; there is nothing which could judge, measure, compare, or sentence our being, for that would mean judging, measuring, comparing, or sentencing the whole.”⁷¹⁵ As stated, this observation can offer relief for one who has suffered from the full complement of negative affects that are fostered by precisely the moral valuation alluded to here. If human beings are, at bottom, “a piece of *fatum* from front to rear,” it is nonsensical to instruct them to change themselves at will, to perform or abstain from performing certain actions, as to do so would be to “demand that everything be changed, even retroactively.”⁷¹⁶ But Nietzsche’s aspirations for human beings do not stop with the alleviation of pain, the negation of negative affects; it consists not merely in *bearing* what is necessary, but in *loving* it. Hence does he declare that his “formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*.”⁷¹⁷

⁷¹⁴ D 550

⁷¹⁵ TI “The Four Great Errors” 8

⁷¹⁶ TI “Morality as Anti-Nature” 6

⁷¹⁷ EH 10

There are two equally important aspects to *amor fati*. The first is that it implies a type of individual who “conceives of reality as it is, being strong enough to do so; this type is not estranged or removed from reality but is reality itself.”⁷¹⁸ This individual perceives the necessity of all of the many faces of existence, including those that have hitherto been denied or disparaged; she recognizes that nothing is dispensable, nothing may be subtracted—a piece of knowledge for which courage, and hence strength, is required.⁷¹⁹ The second aspect, however, is what makes *amor fati* indicative of greatness—and not evincing of strength or courage alone. It is what Nietzsche calls a “Dionysian affirmation of the world,” namely, *affirming* “the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection.”⁷²⁰ Such an affirmation is not made with steely resolve, or a nagging sense of privation or deficiency; it is “born of fullness, of over-fullness,” an “ultimate, most joyous, most wantonly extravagant Yes to life.”⁷²¹ Deleuze suggests that this Dionysian affirmation has even “conquered nihilism and divested negation of all autonomous power.”⁷²² It does not exile negation altogether or set itself in opposition to all “nay-saying;” if this affirmation were to banish all traces of such negation, the latter *would* retain an autonomous power. *Amor fati* must affirm nihilism (or negation) as an aspect of reality—but in so doing it, it also divests it of precisely this power.

Finally, what binds these two aspects of *amor fati* together is love. By Nietzsche’s account, it is not a covetous love, that wants to possess the beloved eternally; nor can it be an idolatrous love that would deny or remain willfully blind to those features of the beloved that

⁷¹⁸ EH 5

⁷¹⁹ EH 2

⁷²⁰ WP 1052

⁷²¹ EH 2

⁷²² *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 183

contradict what is posited as the idol. Such forms of love are consistent with precisely that which Nietzsche is adamantly opposing: the fetishization of an ideal expunged of all difference, of anything antithetical, that also resides eternally in a state of perfection. Instead, Nietzsche proposes that we conceive of love in this sense:

What is love but understanding and rejoicing at the fact that another lives, feels and acts in a way different from and opposite to ours? If love is to bridge these antitheses through joy it may not deny or seek to abolish them—even self-love presupposes an unblendable duality (or multiplicity) in one person.⁷²³

Thus, love only exists where antitheses between the lover and the object of love remain intact, even if one is both terms in oneself. To love is to recognize another in all of his or her difference—and to bridge rather than annihilate that difference through joy. It thus follows that “whatever is done from love always occurs beyond good and evil,”⁷²⁴ for there is no evaluation of the object of one’s love in moral terms, no praise or condemnation—but only affirmation of who they are. Though Spinoza does not remark on the necessity of retaining differences in relations of love, it seems implied in his definition of love as “pleasure accompanied by the idea” of the beloved. By his account, one seeks to “have present and to preserve” the object of one’s love, which presupposes that the distinctiveness of that object is kept intact—even when that object is one’s own self.⁷²⁵ Y. Yovel, by contrast, characterizes *amor fati* as involving “an inner rupture and distance, bridged by an act of defying affirmation.” Accordingly, he suggests that *amor fati* is markedly distinct from

⁷²³ H 75

⁷²⁴ BGE 153

⁷²⁵ *Ethics* III P13

Spinoza's *amor dei* insofar as the first exhibits this "structure of defiant affirmation," whereas the latter "expresses a harmonious agreement with the universe."⁷²⁶ In my view, Nietzsche is not assigning this kind of agency to the one who affirms necessity, nor is he postulating that a rift exists between "the affirming person and the universe he affirms and loves." I am suggesting that the love of *amor fati* preserves the "distance" (or difference) that exists between lover and beloved, and that the affirmation it expresses is joyous rather than defiant. Thus, to my mind, *amor fati* and *amor dei* are compatible insofar as both entail first, recognizing that "everything is necessity," and, second, affirming that truth—which is to say, loving it. Where these doctrines diverge to some extent, is in their respective accounts of necessity for, as Yovel also points out, Spinoza conceives of it as exhibiting a rational structure, whereas Nietzsche identifies it with flux and contingency. The significance of this divergence may, however, be largely insignificant; what remains important, for Spinoza and much as for Nietzsche, is, again in Yovel's words, "not only to redirect attention to this life and this world...but also to reawaken the love of it."⁷²⁷

Amor fati, then, begins with the knowledge that everything is necessary, that all aspects of existence are intertwined and indispensable; and it is fully realized in a joyous affirmation of this world, taken as a whole. It should be noted that it is not a state that is accomplished at a stroke but is cultivated through long practice. Nietzsche attributes a "genius" to a handful of philosophers—Spinoza included—who "possess the pure, purifying eye which...looks down on the world as on a God and loves this God."⁷²⁸ This "eye" is equipped to discern the true nature of reality, stripped of its anthropocentric guise and, in doing so, sees the world with

⁷²⁶ "Nietzsche and Spinoza: *amor fati* and *amor dei*," p. 200.

⁷²⁷ "Nietzsche and Spinoza: *amor fati* and *amor dei*," p. 201.

⁷²⁸ D 497

love, perhaps the kind of love formerly reserved for a god. Nietzsche famously declares his own resolution to call *amor fati* his own love: “to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them—thus I will be one of those who make things beautiful.” He further adds that this love spells the end of all negating, all accusing, all waging war against ugliness.⁷²⁹ He, as lover, remains distinct from the beloved, the world in its entirety; and yet his love of it makes its beauty apparent to him—and he simultaneously endows it with beauty.⁷³⁰ These cannot be mistaken as two separate moments, but rather as two aspects of the love that bridges that which is uniquely itself, while preserving that very uniqueness. While negating, accusing, waging war implies antagonists, each of whom aims solely at the annihilation or subjugation of the other, love permits antitheses to exist, each in its difference, in an irresolvable tension, but as equally necessary. To love “fate” or necessity, in an active sense, does not then entail engaging the will, as the doctrine of eternal recurrence does. *Amor fati* describes an *affirmation* of reality that flows from an abiding gratitude, that is “born of fullness, of over-fullness, a yes saying without reservation...even to everything that is questionable and strange in existence.”⁷³¹ Such “yes-saying” is expressive of one who loves, who is capable of loving, all that exists without exception, including herself. Notably absent is the desire to shun or conceal that which is antagonistic to human interests, a desire that invariably wants things to be different than they are; absent also is the will of the Stoic to “merely bear what is necessary.” Nietzsche ultimately declares that his

⁷²⁹ GS 4 276

⁷³⁰ For Nietzsche, nothing exists that is “beautiful in itself;” it is an *affective state*, namely of happiness or joy (such as that which accompanies knowledge), that “enhances the beauty of the world and makes all that exists sunnier.” With respect to *amor fati*, Nietzsche is similarly suggesting that love allows us to see beauty in what is given, and thereby to “make” this beauty manifest.

⁷³¹ EH “The Birth of Tragedy” 2

formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*, to love what is necessary, a love that also, and incidentally, marks the cessation of wanting and of willing.⁷³²

Conclusion

We have thus completed a second cycle—this time tracing Nietzsche’s line of reasoning, from his thoroughgoing critique of anthropocentric fictions to his portrait of a new, unprecedented form of human greatness. In the first of these chapters, we observed his dismantling of a host of fictions, some innocuous, others pernicious, and all of which express a drive to *humanize* the world. More specifically, he, like Spinoza, reveals that moral and aesthetic values signify how we, the author of those ascriptions of value, are *affected* by things, rather than objective properties of the things themselves. Importantly, both concede that this propagation of fictions is unavoidable, and, to some extent, advantageous—it is a feature of the peculiarly human way of deriving meaning. For them, it is the practice of scaffolding nature in *anthropocentric* lies that is objectionable, on the grounds that these lies are

⁷³² EH “Why I am so Clever” 10. Many commentators either conflate or attempt to reconcile the doctrines of eternal recurrence and *amor fati*. Birault offers what is, in my view, an intriguing hypothesis concerning the relationship between them. He proposes that Nietzsche describes the will, originally “a will for annihilation, a will that begins by saying ‘no’ to existence,” (“Beatitude in Nietzsche,” in *The New Nietzsche*, p. 226) as evolving into love, “without ceasing to be will and Will to Power” (p. 230). However, I think that even this hybrid of love and will—intended to reconcile *amor fati* and willing eternal recurrence—remains obscure and not well-supported by that which Nietzsche (rather obscurely) says about these two doctrines. R. Comay argues that Nietzsche prescribes, as a remedy to revenge, “the affirmations of *amor fati*, by the willed renewal of time’s own pastness” (p. 26) and so similarly treats these doctrines as co-extensive. But she also poses the question of whether revenge itself may be reconceived as potentially redemptive, insofar as it could “disrupt the very metaphysics of the will as self-assertive subject” (p. 25). What remains “unthought” in Nietzsche’s philosophy, she claims, is the possibility of the “transvaluation of the will” itself, “beyond self-assertion and its opposite, beyond power and acquiescence, beyond affirmation and negation...and becomes the locus of pure resistance” (p. 36). What is clear, in my view, is that Nietzsche does not conflate or attempt to bring these two doctrines into agreement. Both refer to a way of responding to that which is necessary, but the responses he describes are different in kind. In my reading, Nietzsche conceives of the *love* in *amor fati* as divested of any trace of willing by a “self-assertive subject.” It *does* occur “beyond” all of what is attributed to such willing—and yet it also does not exert “pure resistance.” It is affirmative, but strictly in the sense of an “embrace,” rather than a stamp of approval.

malignant in the effect they invariably produce. Nietzsche identifies the origin of these lies in what he terms *decadence*—a pervasive disintegration of drives that results in a state of distress; this decadence, he claims, asserts itself as a form of life that is *inimical to life itself*. It evokes an ideal (in the form of an all-good God, an immortal soul, a moral world order, etc.) that is simply and nothing more than the *inverse* of this (earthly) world.

In the last chapter we outlined a shift in Nietzsche's thought from deconstructing fictions to signaling the emergence of a will to truth, embodied in a type that he baptizes the "free spirit." The task appointed to these free spirits, Nietzsche declares, is the *revaluation of values*, a task that entails exposing those errors of metaphysics that undergird those values, including most especially the belief in a free will. Here Nietzsche permits himself to conjecture, proposing a hypothesis about the world as *will to power*. We find that this hypothesis effectively deals a fatal blow to the concept of a free will, of the "deed" that is executed by a "doer," by imaginatively conjuring a world from which such agency has been eliminated and only will as *force* or *drive* remain. Finally, in this last concluding chapter, we arrived at precisely that juncture that Nietzsche has sought so assiduously to preserve: that which marks the demise of an age of decadence, of the "last man," and the inception of future in which he beholds a glimpse of a new form of human greatness. Nietzsche tasks the philosopher of the future with unveiling that which we may (yet) become, a task that requires also discerning accurately what we, in fact, *are*. Ultimately, Nietzsche finds his "formula for greatness" in *amor fati*—that is, in the individual who is uniquely capable of affirming, or loving, reality as it is, shorn of the anthropocentric guise with which it has long been enshrouded. This individual, as Nietzsche conceives her, exhibits the same strong-mindedness that Spinoza insists is required to apprehend that *everything is as it must be*, an apprehension that begets an

enduring love. Thus do both philosophers conclude with a portrait of human perfectability or greatness that is anchored in a self-love, and a love of the world—a love that harbours no trace of vanity, or of an ill will toward reality.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

There is global concern that we have laid waste to the planet we inhabit and that we will, seemingly inevitably, be solely responsible for making it completely inhospitable for most living things. We are variously visited by grief, shame, and fear at what we have done and continue to do in spite of ourselves. In turn, these negative affects have mainly inspired two responses: denial of the extent or acuity of our impact (outright or, more often, implicitly in action) and a vigorous effort to abate voracious consumption, to plead for the practice of self-abnegation and, more generally, to expunge nature of the ills perpetuated by the human, whose actions are (quite appropriately) considered analogous to a rapidly metastasizing cancer in an otherwise healthy organism. Our once self-congratulatory praise for the exceptionality of our species and thorough making over of the world in our image, is now an embarrassment and regret. Not surprisingly, then, environmental philosophy has been much preoccupied with anthropocentrism—its origins, its various incarnations and ill effects and, most importantly, its antidotes. The remedies sought share one main objective: to scale back the unwieldy and injurious impact of human actions on the natural world. To this end, they typically foreground the value (and sometimes rights) of non-human entities and, consequently, the value of the human is put into abeyance, or recast as consisting in playing the role of a self-effacing shepherd, whose proper task is to protect and harbour all living things.

But perhaps what is recommended as a remedy is nothing other than a different iteration of the same misconception regarding what it means to be human. What if this attempt to nullify or radically reduce our noxious influence is still assuming that we possess a kind of will and

rationality that, in fact, has never been ours, and that is altogether a fiction? We hope in vain to reverse the direction of our will, to remediate our misguided intentions—but, I would suggest, these are artifacts of our imagination. While we were at first self-congratulatory, flaunting this rare pairing of power and intelligence and robbing the earth of its trove of “useful” treasures, now we are shame-faced, urging our wayward species to harness that swaggering will, to putting our rational faculties in service to correcting the wrongs we have inflicted. We have our sights set on back-peddling, on curbing our unslakable desires and compulsive exploitation of nature (or what is still termed “natural resources”), as if going back is the only refuge from a future that looks foreboding. There is scant attention paid to the possibility of reimagining the human, perhaps as we have reimagined the non-human, which for too long was conceived of with a paucity of imagination, in the form of senseless, formless matter.

It is my contention that Spinoza and Nietzsche alike provided a thoroughgoing analysis of anthropocentrism, prior to any indication that an environmental catastrophe was to be the most conspicuous legacy of humankind. I have sought to show also that their analysis is distinctive insofar as it is grounded in a larger ethical project that aims not only to dismantle anthropocentrism but to construct a fully naturalized model of human excellence. Indeed, for them, this two-fold task places priority on the second of these; dehumanizing nature is a necessary condition for naturalizing the human, and not an end in itself as is often presumed in contemporary scholarship. While both philosophers are intent on upending the self-appointed regency of human beings, they are equally resolved on resituating the human on firmer ground—namely, in a reconceptualized (dehumanized) nature. While it may seem, today, that the human can only be redeemed by either improving our capacity to “manage”

the natural world or by restricting the extent of our influence, Spinoza and Nietzsche propose a radically different hypothesis. Perhaps surprisingly, both describe nature, divested of human ascriptions, as force or power, and the human as nothing more (or less) than a phenomenon of nature. Undoubtedly this conception of humankind may be regarded as diminutive, for though contemporary environmentalism entreats our species to practice self-restraint in our exploits, or to redirect our intelligence toward novel solutions to a fast-approaching annihilation of the natural world (and the means of our own species survival), it at no point denies that we possess a free will or an unusual intelligence. Humankind is still treated as occupying the apex of the natural world, though now in a villainous shape; and the natural world, for its part, remains, despite our increasing knowledge of its complexity, dumb and inert, enlivened only by biochemical processes, and owing any significance it might have to the human actors that continue to use it as a stage for their self-aggrandizing drama.

My intention in this dissertation has been to outline what I believe is an overarching movement in the thought of two philosophers, Spinoza and Nietzsche, who are uniquely, as the latter declared, “philosophical kinsmen.” Each charts a line of reasoning that he claims has its origins and impetus in a plight that has besought him—a plight that could be described as physiological as it is existential. It begins in a malady that has deleterious effects but for which a pathogen remains unknown. This “sickness,” though pervasive and debilitating, ultimately brings them “to reason,” to a dawning cognizance of the true nature of this disease, namely an anarchic or dissolute state of the “soul,” accompanied by a bedlam of sad passions. Their affliction, in other words, is a kind of self-alienation, in which one is pulled asunder by competing drives and assailed by affects that, even when pleasurable, leave one in perpetual want. Both philosophers acknowledge that this state is not fated, nor is it

incurred by means of a flaw or a vice in our nature, as has been supposed; and that it is not remedied by any attempt to vilify and vanquish such drives and affects, as has also been supposed. Instead, they realize that their affliction was concomitant with a shroud of beliefs, and that in their convalescence, they begin to discern not only the falsity of those beliefs but also, and more importantly, the deplorable effects that a particular species of those beliefs produce, namely those that bestow a special status to humankind, as the pinnacle and perfection of all “creation.” The first glimpse of this truth is what inaugurates their full-scale efforts to interrogate these fictions, to expose the malice and deceit with which they are propagated, and, above all, to reveal that they render unmitigated suffering and enslavement.

As discussed, the anthropocentric fictions that both Spinoza and Nietzsche are most resolved on dismantling are those that fortify the presumed supremacy of our species: that of a natural teleology, a moral world order, and a free will. By means of these fictions, devised by and for the sake of human beings, the non-human world is assigned the sole purpose of supporting human life and, similarly, a measure of value proportionate with its utility, that is, with the extent to which it is advantageous to us. Even more grievous is the lie of metaphysics: the evocation of a second, transcendent world, that is the inverse and contradiction of the earthly one to which our bodies are irrevocably bound. Finally, the fiction that is most intransigent, in the estimation of these philosophers, is that of a free will. That these fictions mislead and beguile is the least of their offences. What both philosophers document in detail is how these fictions *function*, or the ill effects they invariably elicit. While these lies install the human at the summit of the natural world, they simultaneously deprive us of any ability to be *actively* related with other things, to achieve a coherence or order within ourselves—or to cultivate a self-regard or self-love as a species in place of the vanity with

which we remain beleaguered. Fictions of this kind foster a protracted state of unease, a bipolar vacillation between mania and depression, fanaticism and apathy, an overweening egoism and abject fear and trepidation.

But we have observed that Spinoza and Nietzsche do not stop at unmasking anthropocentric fictions in all of their ostentatious guises. Indeed, this is only the inaugural part of their two-fold task in the ethical project to which they are committed—the part that entails a negation of that which they identify as ruinous to their (and collectively, our) health, as even obscuring any clear understanding of what would constitute health and the conditions for fostering it. Indeed, they perform this preliminary task *in order to* proceed to another that follows from it: to naturalize the human. This second task, in turn, entails first giving an account of nature as such, or rid of the anthropocentric rendering of it and, second, articulating a portrait of the naturalized human. Interestingly, both philosophers elect to devise a new method of inquiry that is specifically suited for this purpose. Spinoza proposes an emendation of the intellect with the aim of “purifying it, as far as is feasible at the outset, so that it may succeed in understanding things without error and as well as possible.” His intention, as stated here, is modest, at least relative to the ambitiousness of his task; however, it is so because he is forging a new line of inquiry, clearing his intellect of the fictions that have clouded it, like a thickening fog, and cannot foretell where it will lead. Nietzsche similarly proposes a revaluation of values, a method fitting for free-spirited practitioners who, he claims, can dissect prevailing beliefs and values with a surgical precision and detachment, and will only admit of “modest truths.” What those truths will disclose is, for him, also not evident at the outset.

The outcome achieved by means of these methods is surprising; for both philosophers observe that the very *application* of them is amelioratory. The activity of acquiring discernment, exposing error and deception, tracing the lineage of values to their ancestral origins—this activity itself sets in motion a course of remediation for two reasons. The first is that it prompts us to become self-reflexively cognizant of the ideas we already possess, rather than steering us toward a blind search for an elusive truth. In other words, this activity is primarily directed toward ourselves, and specifically to those ideas most intimate to, most cherished by us. The second is that this activity itself is pleasurable and pleasure, for both Spinoza and Nietzsche, is not merely a fleeting sensation, but is constitutive of the beings we are. Thus, the devising of a method, and its implementation, marks the beginning of their recovery, their liberation. Both also agree that knowledge, acquired in tandem with the progress of this method is, in turn, also curative or emancipatory, again for two reasons: as the “most powerful affect,” it is capable of stilling the tumultuous sea of passions, of effecting a reconciliation among diverse drives; and, most importantly, it offers a glimpse into the true character of nature, not fully explicated but sufficient to achieve an understanding of what it means to be human, in a fully naturalized sense. Briefly, then, both postulate that all forms of life are phenomena of force: what Spinoza terms *conatus* and Nietzsche calls *will to power*. They diverge in their conceptions of nature as such, for Spinoza identifies it as one substance, namely God, while Nietzsche, rejecting the notion of substance as specious, alludes to it only as flux or becoming. Nevertheless, what I believe is significant in their respective accounts is that the human remains singularly focal, and the human being is described as, essentially, like all organic life forms, a measure or quantum of force or power. We are, in “soul” as much as in body, and in every cell of that body, a mode or iteration, and an expression of nature.

But the ultimate hope of these kindred philosophers, the final end sought by both, is to articulate, if only in a partial or provisional way, a new, naturalized ethics. Their intention, as I've suggested, was not to stop at ridding nature of obscuring anthropocentric fictions or at resuscitating a naturalistic rendering of the human. These are preliminary, for both, to reconceiving what *we may become*, given what has been disclosed about the kinds of beings *we actually are*. They insist that excellence is not achieved by acting in conformity with moral prescriptions (that, ostensibly, ameliorate our deficiencies or "sins" or produce exemplary character): acting selflessly, neglecting to heed what is closest to us, especially the body, submitting to the will of a moral "authority," denigrating earthly life in general. It does not entail putting one's desire into abeyance, for that desire is an expression of the quanta of force or energy of which we are comprised. But nor is it achieved by doing the opposite, namely, letting go, relinquishing any hold, however tenuous, on an instinctual life that is marked by disorder and unrest. So, excellence is not rendered either by self-denial nor by self-abandonment, by assiduously striving to become other than what one is, or by forfeiting any residual drive to instill order or coherence to one's manifold desires. Indeed, there is, arguably, no real self at all in either of these instances; in the first, one relinquishes any vestiges of individuality and in the second, a pervasive anarchy of desires and impulses precludes the emergence of a self. For Spinoza and Nietzsche alike, excellence is only attainable once there is a clear understanding of the human *as* force or energy. What follows is that to be human is, essentially, to be one and the same as all natural organisms; humanness is no different in kind, than tree-ness or dog-ness. We are alike compositions of force, capable of expansion and restriction, variegation and simplification. So, the

perfectibility of our species is not premised on an exceptionality, or entitlement, that sets us apart from the rest of nature, nor is it contingent on a disavowal of the nature in us.

Spinoza and Nietzsche offer a compelling alternative: that human excellence is grounded in *what we are*, but in a modality that permits its fullest or richest expression. Both philosophers distinguished between two modes of being: that of being passive and that of being active.

The former prevails when one is subjugated to a moral will that requires absolute obedience (where one is subordinate to a “higher” moral authority) or when one is overrun by anarchic drives (where one is enslaved by one’s passions). In both instances, passivity is associated with being primarily reactive and at odds with oneself. While both philosophers concede that it is a constant feature in human life, both reveal it as debilitating when it acquires predominance in the human soul. To be active, on the other hand, is to permit oneself a measure of “selfishness,” or to practice self-regard—and in doing so, become alert to our constitutive drives, to the manner in which they are related to each other, to what nourishes and what poisons, to what is “good” or “bad” for us. It is as active beings that we can experience ourselves *as* desiring, as powers or forces that subside or swell, that are enlarged or diminished, and proffer pain or pleasure in relation to other beings. What we learn, we learn from *the feeling of* becoming greater or lesser, stronger or weaker, more joyous or melancholy. In sum, to put it as Spinoza and Nietzsche suggest, to the extent that we are active, we act according to an “inner necessity,” not by rule or rote, not by wild abandon—but also not by “willing.” It is to cleave to oneself as a uniquely disposed force (of nature), aligning ourselves with those things with which we share an affinity, and avoiding those that are antagonistic to us.

To know nature, as it is, and thereby also ourselves, is simultaneously to experience, affectively, a love of both. It teaches us that everything is as it must be, and as such that nothing is deficient or corrupt in and of itself (though it may be so, in effect, and in relation to other things). To see this, in Spinoza's and Nietzsche's view, is not merely to perceive the necessity of all aspects of existence—which might well inspire resignation or resentment—but to also acknowledge that “everything is innocence.” It forbids us from dis inheriting that which we find offensive, of accusing it of sinfulness, viciousness, or delinquency. Regarding every human being, every creature of the earth, every organism, as “a piece of fatum,” ushers us into a new relationship to the world. Rather than grieve and regret that particular things are as they are (and to the extent that they affect us negatively) we can, at the very least, accept them as a piece of nature, much as we accept the cataclysmic force of a hurricane, or the tireless labouring of carpenter ants. But, for both philosophers, the perfectibility of our kind is, ultimately, expressed not in mere tolerance of that which is aggravating or noxious to us, but in a profound love for the natural world of which we are, intimately, a part. This kind of love, relating as it does to the whole of nature, with which we are inexorably bound, is uniquely affirmative, and extends to all things, including ourselves. It does not solicit an edited version of existence or require that any aspect of it undergo revision; there is no trace of willing or wanting things to be other than they are.

But to return to the concern mentioned at the start of this conclusion: does this (naturalized) ethics of love not promote a kind of quietism and inaction that is unconscionable at the moment of crisis, such as we are facing in the present? Spinoza and Nietzsche did not address this question directly or specifically—nor, of course, could they have anticipated *our* world crisis. But, in conclusion, I would like to clarify that to regard things as “innocent”

does not entail that we be silent and inactive in response to injustice and injury; it does follow that to name that which inflicts injury or commits injustice “evil” or “unnatural” is to apply a designation that is meaningless, and unnecessary. We can, in good conscience, intervene to stop actions, or mitigate against them, on the grounds that they will produce harm, deliberately or inadvertently, and still forbear from making a moral assessment of the actor. Indeed, I would argue that Spinoza and Nietzsche prove that it is preferable to proceed in our efforts to correct our course by encouraging an altogether new relationship to the natural world, and to ourselves as natural beings. If a bond of love existed where fear and shame (and still, vanity) now reign, if a broad affirmation of all the faces of existence were to banish the multiplying injunctions to practice self-abnegation, it *might* be the case that we could discover a hitherto unknown, or long obscured, value in our earthly world and in our own species. Such a discovery *might* also issue in a kind of action that is more effective for having its origin in a clear-sightedness regarding nature and our place in it, and in the gratitude and joy that is commensurate with such clarity, in place of the sad passions that currently prevail.

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