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A black and white portrait of Friedrich Nietzsche, showing him from the chest up. He has a high forehead, receding hair, and is wearing round-rimmed spectacles. He has a thick, dark mustache and is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt and a dark bow tie.

Nietzsche's

On the Genealogy of Morality
An Introduction

Lawrence J. Hatab

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NIETZSCHE'S *ON THE GENEALOGY OF MORALITY*

Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) is a forceful, perplexing, important book, radical in its own time and profoundly influential ever since. This introductory textbook offers a comprehensive, close reading of the entire work, with a section-by-section analysis that also aims to show how the *Genealogy* holds together as an integrated whole. The *Genealogy* is helpfully situated within Nietzsche's wider philosophy, and occasional interludes examine supplementary topics that further enhance the reader's understanding of the text. Two chapters examine how the *Genealogy* relates to standard questions in moral and political philosophy. Written in a clear, accessible style, this book will appeal to students at every level coming to read the *Genealogy* for the first time, and a wider range of readers will also benefit from nuanced interpretations of controversial elements in Nietzsche's work.

LAWRENCE J. HATAB is Louis I. Jaffe Professor of Philosophy at Old Dominion University.

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An Introduction

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page vi
<i>Abbreviations</i>	vii
Introduction	i
1 Nietzsche's thought and life	8
2 The preface	25
3 The first essay	37
4 The second essay	69
5 The third essay	113
6 Reflections on the <i>Genealogy</i>	172
7 The <i>Genealogy</i> and moral philosophy	204
8 The <i>Genealogy</i> and political philosophy	243
<i>References</i>	274
<i>Index</i>	279

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Abbreviations of Nietzsche's works

Cited numbers refer to text sections, except in the case of *KSA* where volume and page numbers are given. I have occasionally modified published translations.

- A* *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954).
- BGE* *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966).
- BT* *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings*.
- CW* *The Case of Wagner*, in *Basic Writings*.
- D* *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
- EH* *Ecce Homo*, in *Basic Writings*. The four main chapters will be indicated by roman numerals, with book titles in Chapter III abbreviated accordingly.
- GM* *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- GS* *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974).
- HAH* *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- KSA* *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967).
- TI* *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*. The chapters will be numbered in sequence by arabic numerals.

- UDH *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Part 2 of *Untimely Meditations*
- UM *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- WP *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967).
- WS *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, Part 2 of *Human, All Too Human*.
- Z *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*. The four parts will be indicated by roman numerals, the sections by arabic numerals according to Kaufmann's listing on pages 112–114.

Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* is a forceful, perplexing, important book. It is widely recognized in philosophical treatments as a major text in Nietzsche's writings, and it has been the focus of much analysis in recent years. The *Genealogy* is taught and assigned in other disciplines as well, particularly in political philosophy and literary theory. One reason for the text's popularity, besides the power of its ideas, is that of all Nietzsche's writings after *The Birth of Tragedy*, it most resembles the form of a "treatise," with extended discussions of organized themes and something of a historical orientation. As distinct from Nietzsche's typical aphoristic or literary styles, the *Genealogy* offers some advantages for classroom investigations. Yet one can hardly call this book a typical academic treatise. Nietzsche calls it a "polemic" and it is loaded with hyperbole, ambiguity, misdirection, allusion, provocation, iconoclasm, invective, prognostication, experiment, and Nietzsche's own vigorous persona.

Since Nietzsche has become a respectable figure in the academy (and he is one of the few post-Kantian continental philosophers taken seriously in Analytic circles), it is hard to appreciate the radical nature of the *Genealogy* in its nineteenth-century setting. Some readings tend to domesticate Nietzsche by pressing the text into the standard logistics of professional philosophers and contemporary theoretical agendas. Other readings miss the intellectual power of the book by overplaying its radical character in the direction of unhinged celebrations of difference and creativity (which actually perpetuates another kind of domestication).

In its own historical moment, the *Genealogy* is something of a bombshell. It aims to diagnose esteemed moral traditions as forms of life-denial, in that what is valued as "good" in these systems stands

opposed to actual conditions of natural life. Yet Nietzsche's text is not promoting an "immoral" or "amoral" posture on behalf of presumably value-free life forces. Rather, Nietzsche wants to explore new possibilities of life-affirming values by drawing from historical sources that were deemed "immoral" by traditional moral systems, but that can be redeemed as morally defensible life-values. Accordingly, the "polemical" character of the *Genealogy* implies a double-negative structure, a fight against life-denying values on behalf of life-affirming values.

Although Christian morality is a prominent target in the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche's critique pertains to much more than simply religion. Christianity was a world-forming force at every level of culture, and Nietzsche maintains that even so-called modern "secular" moralities have not escaped the formative influences of Christianity and its life-negating elements. Moreover, the polemic in the *Genealogy* is not limited to morality narrowly construed as ethics. According to Nietzsche, moralistic judgments against natural life have also marked the bulk of Western intellectual and cultural history, not only in religion and ethics, but also in philosophy, politics, psychology, science, and logic.

These preliminary remarks can be borne out by considering the *Genealogy* in relation to the book immediately preceding it in Nietzsche's published works: *Beyond Good and Evil*. Walter Kaufmann notes that the title page of the *Genealogy* is followed by these words: "A sequel to my last book, *Beyond Good and Evil*, which it is meant to supplement and clarify."¹ "To supplement" translates *Ergänzung*, which can also mean "completion." So it is particularly important to take *Beyond Good and Evil* into account when reading the *Genealogy*. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche says that *Beyond Good and Evil* began his No-saying turn after the Yes-saying force of the *Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*, that it began his "great war" against established values (*EH* III, *BGE* 1). He further indicates that *Beyond Good and Evil* "is in all essentials a critique of modernity, not excluding the modern sciences, modern arts, and even modern politics, along with pointers to a contrary type that is as little modern as possible – a noble, Yes-saying type" (*EH* III, *BGE* 2). Thus the *Genealogy*, as a "completion" of this prior book, must also be read as a critique of the

¹ *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 439.

modern world and the full range of intellectual constructs bearing on modern life. Of course, questions of ethics and politics are at the core of the *Genealogy*, but it should be recognized that its critique of “morality” is also a gateway to larger questions of knowledge, truth, and meaning, the traditional approaches to which Nietzsche diagnoses as likewise harboring moralistic judgments against natural life.

How should the *Genealogy* be approached as a philosophical text? Nietzsche rejects the notion that philosophy is an “impersonal” pursuit of knowledge; philosophy so conceived conceals a “personal confession,” an “unconscious memoir,” and so a philosopher’s thought bears “decisive witness to *who he is*” (*BGE* 6). In considering a philosophical claim, one should ask: “What does such a claim tell us about the man who makes it?” (*BGE* 187). Philosophy can never be separated from existential interests, and so “disinterested knowledge” is a fiction (*BGE* 207; *GM* III, 12, 26). Perspectives of value are more fundamental than objectivity or certainty. There is no being-in-itself, only “grades of appearance measured by the strength of *interest* we show in an appearance” (*WP* 588). Philosophy so construed means that the standard of demonstrable knowledge should be exchanged for the more open concept of “interpretation” (*GS* 374). Interpretation is the “introduction of meaning (*Sinn-hineinlegen*)” and not “explanation” (*KSA* 12, p. 100).²

The logical limits of answers to the deepest intellectual questions are an obvious feature of the history of thought, given the endurance of unresolved critiques and counter-critiques in philosophy. Rather than give up on such questions or resort to mystical, transcendent, even relativistic solutions, Nietzsche focuses on philosophy as an embodied expression of psychological forces. Critical questions that follow such a focus would no longer turn on cognitive tests (How can you prove X?) but on psychological explorations and probes (Why is X *important* to you?). Accordingly, for Nietzsche, philosophy is always value-laden and cannot be reduced to descriptive, objective terms or to a project of logical demonstration; and he is consistent in recognizing this in the course of his own writing: “What have I to do with refutations!” (*GM* P, 4). He often enough indicates that

² For an important study, see Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

philosophy, including his own textual work, is a circulation of writing and reading that stems from, and taps into, personal forces and dispositions toward life. This does not mean that philosophy is nothing more than personal expression, even though the first person singular appears so often in Nietzsche's texts. For one thing, Nietzsche deploys the "we" as much as the "I," which suggests the importance of collective dimensions in culture. Moreover, Nietzsche explores a full range of philosophical questions about reality, the world, life, knowledge, and truth, with the aim of advancing compelling answers to these questions. Yet he insists that such advances cannot be understood adequately in a purely third-person fashion, *apart from* their meaning for human interests in the life-world.

The prevalence of the "I" and the "we" in Nietzsche's writings also implies a pervasive second-person perspective, that of "you" the reader. That is why we must engage Nietzsche's texts in their "addressive" function, because "reader response" is inseparable from the nature of a written text. Nietzsche's stylistic choices – hyperbole, provocation, allusions, metaphors, aphorisms, literary forms, and historical narratives not confined to demonstrable facts or theories – show that he presumed a reader's involvement in bringing sense to a text, even in exploring beyond or against a text. Nietzsche's books do not presume to advance "doctrines" as a one-way transmission of finished thoughts. Good readers must be active, not simply reactive; they must think for themselves (*EH* II, 8). Aphorisms, for example, cannot merely be read; they require an "art of interpretation" on the part of readers (*GM* P, 8). Nietzsche wants to be read "with doors left open" (*D* P, 5). This does not mean that Nietzsche's texts are nothing but an invitation for interpretation. Nietzsche's *own* voice and positions are central to his writings, and he takes many forceful stands on philosophical questions. Yet he did not write as, and did not want to be read as, a typical philosopher constructing arguments in pursuit of "objective truth." Whatever truth comes to mean in Nietzsche's philosophy, it cannot be a strictly objective or logical enterprise because truth must be *alive* in writers and readers.³

³ An excellent study in this respect is David B. Allison, *Reading the New Nietzsche* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

Nietzsche's vivid address to the cultural "we" and to "you" the reader is a baseline textual feature of the *Genealogy*, despite its surface resemblance to a treatise form. The book aims to stimulate an "introduction of meaning" between writer and reader which reaches further than the written text as such. Moreover, the question of meaning forged in the book presents deep challenges and dark provocations to traditional confidences and normal expectations about philosophy. Here is what Nietzsche says about the *Genealogy* in *Ecce Homo*:

Regarding expression, intention, and the art of surprise, the three inquiries which constitute this *Genealogy* are perhaps uncannier than anything else written so far. . . . Every time a beginning that is *calculated* to mislead: cool, scientific, even ironic, deliberately foreground, deliberately holding off. Gradually more unrest; sporadic lightning; very disagreeable truths are heard rumbling in the distance – until eventually a *tempo feroce* is attained in which everything rushes ahead in a tremendous tension. In the end, in the midst of perfectly gruesome detonations, a *new* truth becomes visible every time among thick clouds. (EH III, GM)

As indicated earlier, some treatments of the *Genealogy*, while recognizing its unusual features, move to position the text in terms of current philosophical methods and agendas, or to situate it among previous thinkers and standard philosophical concepts. Other treatments take the book to be more wide open or enigmatic than any such placement. Much can be gained from all such approaches, but I have always been dissatisfied with them. Nietzsche was surely pursuing philosophical work of the highest order, and yet he specifically found fault with most philosophical methods as typically construed; and he challenged most traditional philosophical concepts as inadequate to the task of thinking. Nietzsche was a trained classicist, and so he knew quite well standard scholarly techniques and could have so deployed them in his writings. That he deliberately did otherwise shows that he *intended* his texts to display a disruptive *tension* with traditional academic work.

My own approach to the *Genealogy* can be summarized as follows: I try as far as possible to read the text on its own terms, in its own movements and counter-movements, with its own language and thought experiments. I try to avoid "translating" the text into this or that "theory" or this or that "-ism" or "-ology." I do this not out of some mere exegetical constraint of textual fidelity, but because

Nietzsche's text has its own kind of philosophical power that can be missed or suppressed when translated into familiar scholarly settings.⁴

In the Preface to the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche grants that some readers might find the book "incomprehensible and hard on the ears" (*GM* P, 8). He then suggests that the book will be clearer to those who "have first read my earlier works without sparing themselves some effort or trouble (*Mühe*).⁵ Thus reading the *Genealogy* without much background in Nietzsche's thought can be a disadvantage. That is why my first chapter will provide an orientation in Nietzsche's philosophy that should provide some help. Succeeding chapters will take up the Preface and the three Essays of the *Genealogy*, moving through the numbered sections of the Essays in sequence. Yet my treatment cannot simply inhabit each section in its own textual space, because some flexibility is required in moving around the text for cross-referencing, and occasional excursions to some of Nietzsche's other books can be illuminating (this is particularly true with respect to *Beyond Good and Evil*, as has been noted). Also, in the course of my analysis, there will be occasional "Interludes" that engage supplemental topics or questions that should enhance comprehension of the material at hand. My hope is to provide readers of the *Genealogy* with as rich and nuanced an understanding of the book as possible. Yet the precautions about Nietzsche's writings sketched in this Introduction should always be kept in mind. As Nietzsche puts it (*GM* P, 8), his books "are indeed not easily accessible," and the *Genealogy* in particular requires "an art of interpretation," which is articulated as an "*art* of reading, a thing which today people have been so good at forgetting – and so it will be some time before my writings are 'readable' –, you almost have to be a cow for this one thing and certainly *not* a 'modern man': it is *rumination*." "Rumination" is a translation of *Wiederkäuen*, literally "chewing again," or "chewing over" a text in a slow, careful manner.

⁴ For the purposes of my commentary, I will not overload the text with extensive discussions of the secondary literature, yet I will try to give readers enough guidance for recognizing and exploring a host of relevant scholarly treatments. Several sources will be drawn from the following collections: *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals: Critical Essays*, ed. Christa Davis Acampora (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); *Nietzsche's Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future*, ed. Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Richard Schacht (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

As we will see, Nietzsche is notorious for castigating the “herd” and celebrating the “beast of prey.” Yet it is interesting that, with respect to reading, he recommends a cow-like pace rather than, shall we say, “wolfing down” a text in big chunks, too quickly to savor every particle of thought. For Nietzsche, to read well is to “read slowly” (DP, 5). It is not simply a matter of speed here, but the kinds of analytical chunks that frame the text in familiar shapes, which are then swallowed whole. Moreover, we know that chewing food well is good for both our taste and our stomachs. Reading the *Genealogy* with rumination will not only reveal more complex and subtle flavors, it will also decrease the chances of indigestion.

CHAPTER I

Nietzsche's thought and life

What follows is not an overview of all or most of the main elements of Nietzsche's thought but a sketch of those elements that I think will have particular relevance in engaging the *Genealogy*.¹

FROM METAPHYSICS TO NATURALISM

We can best gain entry to Nietzsche's philosophy by beginning with his critique of metaphysics. According to Nietzsche, "the fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is *the faith in opposite values*" (*BGE* 2). The Western religious and philosophical tradition has operated by dividing reality into a set of binary opposites, such as constancy and change, eternity and time, reason and passion, good and evil, truth and appearance – opposites that can be organized around the concepts of being and becoming. The motivation behind such divisional thinking is as follows: Becoming names the negative and unstable conditions of existence that undermine our interest in grasping, controlling, and preserving life (because of the pervasive force of uncertainty, variability, destruction, and death). Being, as *opposite* to becoming, permits the governance or exclusion of negative conditions and the attainment of various forms of stability untainted by their fluid contraries.

Nietzsche wants to challenge the priority of being in the tradition, so much so that he is often read as simply reversing this scheme by extolling sheer becoming and all its correlates. This is not the case, even though Nietzsche will often celebrate negative terms rhetorically

¹ Much of this chapter is drawn from Chapter 1 of my *Nietzsche's Life Sentence: Coming to Terms with Eternal Recurrence* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

to unsettle convictions and open up space for new meanings. In fact, Nietzsche exchanges oppositional exclusion for a sense of *crossing*, where the differing conditions in question are not exclusive of each other, but rather reciprocally related.² Nietzsche suggests that “what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things” (*BGE* 2). Rather than fixed contraries, Nietzsche prefers “differences of degree” and “transitions” (*WS* 67). Even the idea of sheer becoming cannot be maintained, according to Nietzsche. Discernment of such becoming can only arise once an imaginary counter-world of being is placed against it (*KSA* 9, pp. 503–504). As we will see shortly, Nietzsche rejects the strict delineation of opposite conditions, but not the oppositional *force* between these conditions. He grants that circumstances of struggle breed in opponents a tendency to “imagine” the other side as an “antithesis,” for the purpose of exaggerated self-esteem and the courage to fight the “good cause” against deviancy (*WP* 348). Yet this tendency breeds the danger of oppositional exclusion and its implicit denial of becoming’s “medial” structure, a structure based on an *inclusive* tension with opposing forces in any particular position. A theme that will recur again and again in this study is that Nietzsche will exchange binary clarity for a sense of *ambiguity*, because a proper understanding of any philosophical topic will have to reflect an irresolvable mix of tensions: “Above all, one should not want to divest existence of its *rich ambiguity*” (*GS* 373).

In restoring legitimacy to conditions of becoming, Nietzsche advances what I call an *existential naturalism*. The finite, unstable dynamic of earthly existence – and its meaningfulness – becomes the measure of thought, to counter various attempts in philosophy and religion to “reform” lived experience by way of a rational, spiritual, or moral “transcendence” that purports to rectify an originally flawed condition (*GS* 109; *TI* 3, 16). In turning to “the basic text of *homo natura*” (*BGE* 230), Nietzsche is not restricting his philosophy to what we would call scientific naturalism, which in many ways locates itself on the “being” side of the ledger. For

² I borrow the term “crossing” from John Sallis’ *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

Nietzsche, nature is more unstable and disruptive than science would allow; it includes forces, instincts, passions, and powers that are not reducible to objective, scientific categories. Stressing a darker sense of "nature red in tooth and claw," Nietzsche claims that "the terrible (*schreckliche*) basic text of nature must again be recognized" (*BGE* 230). Nietzsche's naturalism is consonant with scientific naturalism in rejecting "supernatural" beliefs, but the source of these beliefs, for Nietzsche, stems not from a lack or refusal of scientific thinking, but from an aversion to overwhelming and disintegrating forces in nature that science too suppresses and wants to overcome. Indeed, Nietzsche identifies nature with chaos, as indicated in his alteration of Spinoza's famous equation: "*chaos sive natura*" (*KSA* 9, p. 519).³ At the same time, Nietzsche also rejects a romantic naturalism, which spurns science or reason and calls for a return to an original condition of innocence and harmony with nature (*GS* 370). Naturalism, for Nietzsche, amounts to a kind of philosophical methodology, in that natural forces of becoming will be deployed to redescribe and account for all aspects of life, including cultural formations, even the emergence of seemingly anti-natural constructions of "being." The focus for this deployment can be located in Nietzsche's concept of will to power, to be discussed shortly. First, however, we must locate the historical focus for Nietzsche's naturalistic turn, namely the death of God.

THE DEATH OF GOD

Nietzsche advances the death of God through the figure of a madman (*GS* 125), whose audience is not religious believers, but nonbelievers who are chastised for not facing the consequences of God's demise. Since God is the ultimate symbol of transcendence and foundations, his death is to be praised, but its impact reaches far beyond religion. In the modern world God is no longer the mandated centerpiece of intellectual and cultural life. But historically the notion of God had been the warrant for all sorts of cultural constructs in moral,

³ See Babette Babich, "A Note on *Chaos Sive Natura*: On Theogony, Genesis, and Playing Stars," *New Nietzsche Studies* 5, 3/4 and 6, 1/2 (Winter 2003/Spring 2004), 48–70. For an insightful treatment of Nietzsche's naturalism, see Christoph Cox, *Nietzsche: Naturalism and Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

political, philosophical, even scientific domains – so the death of God is different from atheism, since divinity had been “living” as a powerful productive force. From Plato through to the Enlightenment, a divine mind had been the ultimate reference point for origins and truth. With the eclipse of God, any and all inferences from theological grounds must come undone as well (*TI* 9, 5). The death of God therefore announces the demise of substantive truth, or at least that “the will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a *problem*” (*GM* III, 27). Even though divinity is no longer an intellectual prerequisite, we still have confidence in the “shadows” of God (*GS* 108), in supposedly secular truths that have nonetheless lost their pedigree and intellectual warrant. This matter is especially significant with respect to modern moral and political constructs.

The consequences of God's death are enormous because of the specter of nihilism, the loss of meaning and intelligibility. The secular sophistication of the modern world has unwittingly “unchained this earth from its sun,” so that we are “straying as through an infinite nothing” (*GS* 125). The course of Western thought has led it to turn away from its historical origins, but the unsuspected result has been that “the highest values devalue themselves” (*WP* 2). So we are faced with a stark choice: either we collapse into nihilism or we rethink the world in naturalistic terms freed from the reverence for being-constructs. “Either abolish your reverences or – *yourselves!* The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be – nihilism? – This is *our* question mark” (*GS* 346).

For Nietzsche, the threat of nihilism – the denial of any truth, meaning, or value in the world – is in fact parasitic on the Western tradition, which has judged conditions of becoming in life to be deficient and has “nullified” these conditions in favor of rational, spiritual, or moral corrections. If, in the wake of the death of God, the loss of these corrections is experienced as nihilistic, it is because the traditional models are still presumed to be the only measures of truth, meaning, and value – and thus the world seems empty without them (*WP* 12A). For Nietzsche, philosophers can embrace the death of God with gratitude and excitement, not despair, because of the opening of new horizons for thought (*GS* 343). Various motifs in Nietzsche's texts can be read as counter-nihilistic attempts to rethink truth, meaning, and value in naturalistic terms, in a manner consistent

with conditions of becoming. A central motif in this regard is will to power.

WILL TO POWER

"The world viewed from inside . . . would be 'will to power' and nothing else" (*BGE* 36). A world of becoming, for Nietzsche, cannot simply be understood as a world of change. Movements are always *related* to other movements and the relational structure is not expressive simply of differences, but also resistances and tensional conflicts (*WP* 568). "Will to power" names in dynamic terms the idea that any affirmation is also a negation, that any condition or assertion of meaning must overcome some "Other," some obstacle or counterforce.⁴ In this regard, Nietzsche proclaims something quite important that will figure in our investigation: "will to power can manifest itself *only* against resistances; therefore it *seeks* that which resists it" (*WP* 656; my emphasis). A similar formation is declared in *Ecce Homo* in reference to a warlike nature: "It needs objects of resistance; hence it *looks for* what resists" (*EH* I, 7; emphasis in text). We must notice the following implication: Since power can *only* involve resistance, then one's power to overcome is essentially related to a counter-power; if resistance were eliminated, if one's counter-power were destroyed or even neutralized by sheer domination, one's power would evaporate, it would no longer *be* power. Power is *overcoming* something, not annihilating it: "there is no annihilation in the sphere of spirit" (*WP* 588). Power is more a "potency" than a full actuality because it retains its tensional relation with its Other. Accordingly, Nietzsche's phrase *Wille zur Macht* could be translated as "will *toward* power," which would indicate something other than a full "possession."

Will to power, therefore, cannot be understood in terms of individual states alone, even successful states, because it names a tensional force-field, *within which* individual states shape themselves by seeking to overcome other sites of power. Power cannot be construed

⁴ See John Richardson, "Nietzsche's Power Ontology," in *Nietzsche*, eds. John Richardson and Brian Leiter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 150–185, which does well in showing how will to power is a comprehensive concept, rather than limited in scope, as some scholars maintain.

as “instrumental” for any resultant state, whether it be knowledge, pleasure, purpose, even survival, since such conditions are epiphenomena of power, of a drive to overcome something (*GM* II, 12, 18). For this reason, Nietzsche depicts life as “that which must always overcome itself” (*Z* II, 12). This accounts for Nietzsche’s objections to measuring life by “happiness,” because the structure of will to power shows that *dissatisfaction* and *displeasure* are intrinsic to movements of overcoming (*WP* 696, 704), and so conditions of sheer satisfaction and completion would dry up the energies of life.

According to Nietzsche, any doctrine that would reject will to power in his sense would undermine the conditions of its own historical emergence as a contention with conflicting forces. All scientific, religious, moral, and intellectual developments began as elements of dissatisfaction and impulses to overcome something, whether it be ignorance, worldliness, brutality, confusion, or competing cultural models. Even pacifism – understood as an impulse to overcome human violence and an exalted way of life taken as an advance over our brutish nature – can thus be understood as an instance of will to power.

AGONISTICS

A prefiguration of will to power and Nietzsche’s naturalism can be found in an early text, *Homer’s Contest* (*KSA* I, pp. 783–792).⁵ Arguing against the idea that “culture” is something antithetical to brutal forces of “nature,” Nietzsche spotlights the pervasiveness in ancient Greece of the *agōn*, or contest for excellence, which operated in all cultural pursuits (in athletics, the arts, oratory, politics, and philosophy). The *agōn* can be seen as a ritualized expression of a world-view expressed in so much of Greek myth, poetry, and philosophy: the world as an arena for the struggle of opposing (but related) forces. Agonistic relations are depicted in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Homer’s *Iliad*, Greek tragedy, and philosophers such as Anaximander and Heraclitus.⁶ In *Homer’s Contest*, Nietzsche argues that the *agōn*

⁵ A translation is contained in the Cambridge University Press *Genealogy* edition, pp. 174–181.

⁶ See my discussion in *Myth and Philosophy: A Contest of Truths* (Chicago: Open Court, 1990), Chs. 2–6.

emerged as a *cultivation* of more brutal natural drives in not striving for the annihilation of the Other, but arranging contests that would test skill and performance in a competition. Accordingly, agonistic strife produced excellence, not obliteration, since talent unfolded in a struggle with competitors. In this way, the Greeks did not succumb to a false ideal of sheer harmony, and so they insured a proliferation of excellence by preventing stagnation and uniform control. The *agōn* expressed the general resistance of the Greeks to “unified domination” (*Alleinherrschaft*) and the danger of unchallenged or unchallengeable power – hence the practice of ostracizing someone too powerful, someone who would ruin the reciprocal structure of agonistic competition.

The Greek *agōn* is a historical source for what Nietzsche later generalized into the reciprocal structure of will to power. And it is important to recognize that such a structure undermines the idea that power could or should run unchecked, either in the sense of sheer domination or chaotic indeterminacy. Will to power implies a certain “measure” of oppositional limits, even though such a measure could not imply an overarching order or a stable principle of balance. Nevertheless there *is* a capacity for measure in agonistic power relations. Nietzsche tells us (*KSA* 8, p. 79) that Greek institutions were healthy in not separating culture from nature in the manner of a good–evil scheme. Yet they overcame sheer natural energies of destruction by selectively ordering them in their practices, cults, and festival days. The Greek “freedom of mind” (*Freisinnigkeit*) was a “measured release” of natural forces, not their negation. Accordingly, Nietzsche’s concept of agonistic will to power should be construed not as a measureless threat to culture but as a naturalistic redescription of cultural measures. The reciprocal structure of agonistic relations means that competing life forces productively delimit each other and thus generate dynamic formations rather than sheer form or sheer indeterminacy.⁷

⁷ For important discussions of this idea, see two articles in the *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 24 (Fall 2002): Paul van Tongeren, “Nietzsche’s Greek Measure,” 5–24, and H. W. Siemens, “Agonal Communities of Taste: Law and Community in Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Transvaluation,” 83–112. See also Christa Davis Acampora, “Of Dangerous Games and Dastardly Deeds: A Typology of Nietzsche’s Contests,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 34/3 (Fall 2002), 135–151.

PSYCHOLOGY AND PERSPECTIVISM IN PHILOSOPHY

A central feature of Nietzsche's naturalism is that his diagnosis of the philosophical tradition goes beyond a conceptual critique of beliefs and theories: "the path to fundamental problems" is to be found in psychology (*BGE* 23), which is not to be confused with a mere "science of the mind." Nietzsche maintains that the origins of problematic constructs of "being" are not based merely in mistaken beliefs but in psychological weakness in the face of a finite world, an *aversion* to the negative conditions of life, which he describes as "decadence, a symptom of the *decline of life*" (*TI* 3, 6). Thus a certain kind of psychological strength is needed to affirm life and rethink it in ways that are more appropriate to its natural conditions of becoming. What follows is that Nietzschean psychology does not suggest a universal human nature, but a delineation of *types* along the lines of weakness and strength – hence Nietzsche's notorious objections to human equality⁸ and his promotion of a hierarchical arrangement of types: "My philosophy aims at an ordering of rank" (*WP* 287).

In general terms Nietzsche maintains that no form of thought is "value-free." Elements of desire and interest are always operating in human thinking – what we think about has to *matter* to us. Even principles of "disinterest" or "objectivity" serve certain values. When we are asked not to act out of personal interests, the principle itself is animated by values and interests: "The 'disinterested' action is an *exceedingly* interesting and interested action" (*BGE* 220).

With Nietzsche's insistence that philosophy cannot be separated from personal interests and meaning-formation, his turn to psychology means that knowledge cannot be based in an absolute, fixed, objective standard, but in a pluralized perspectivism: "There is *only* a perspective seeing, only a perspective 'knowing'" (*GM* III, 12). There are many possible takes on the world, and none could count as exclusively correct. A plurality of perspectives exhibits not only different, but also differing interpretations, so that even the coexistence of conflicting positions can no longer be ruled out of play. Nietzsche expresses his outlook as follows: "Profound aversion to resting once

⁸ See my discussion in *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy: An Experiment in Postmodern Politics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), Ch. 2.

and for all in any one total view of the world. Enchantment (*Zauber*) of the opposing point of view" (*WP* 470). This matter is relevant to the charge that Nietzsche's writing exhibits contradictory positions across different texts (even within texts). Assuming, however, that Nietzsche knew what he was doing, we can say that such incidents portray his warning against oppositional thinking by deliberately disturbing a fixed position through the insertion of a counter-position. Moreover, his hyperbolic attacks can be seen as a rhetorical strategy to unsettle thinking and reveal possibilities otherwise concealed by commonplace assumptions.

One other methodological implication of Nietzsche's naturalism is worth mentioning. I call it a *presumption of immanence*. We can only think in terms of how we are *already* existing in the midst of forces not of our choosing and not imaginable as stemming from, or implying, some "other" realm beyond the lived world. Such forces are "native" to our lives, we are "born" into them, and it should be noted that this sense of nativity is a non-scientific connotation of "nature" in both the Latin *natura* and the Greek *physis*. Nativistic immanence mandates that we accept as *given* all forces that we can honestly recognize at work in our lives, from instinct to reason, from war to peace, from nature to culture, and so on (see *BGE* 36). This includes the abiding *contest* between such forces, which undermines traditional projects of "eliminative" opposition (which can arise in any sphere, from religion to science). For Nietzsche, all evident native forces play a role in cultural life, and a failure to embrace the whole package betrays weakness and the seeds of life-denial.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

In a certain sense Nietzsche's philosophy, in all its elements, is focused on the question of the meaning of life – not in the sense of finding a decisive answer to "Why are we here?" but rather the *problem* of finding meaning in a world that ultimately blocks our natural interest in happiness, preservation, knowledge, and purpose. To be precise, the question is not "What is the meaning of life?" but "Can there be meaning in life?" So the question that preoccupies Nietzsche's investigations runs: Is life as we have it meaningful, worthwhile,

affirmable *on its own terms*? No culture, no form of thought has ever denied (how could it?) that our "first world," immediate existence, is constituted by negative constraints – change, suffering, loss, and death – that limit all positive possibilities in life. In the end one must confess that life as we first have it is tragic, measured against our highest aspirations.

Nietzsche's diagnosis of the Western tradition is that, in one form or another, the answer to this question of meaning in natural life has been: No. "Concerning life, the wisest men of all ages have judged alike: *it is no good*" (TI 2, 1). Whether in scientific, rationalistic, religious, or moralistic terms, initial conditions of existence have been judged to be deficient, confused, fallen, alien, or base, and thus in need of correction or transcendence altogether. Nietzsche judges all such judgments as implicitly nihilistic, and sees as his task the aim for an affirmative revaluation of a necessarily tragic existence: "I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth . . . And all in all and on the whole some day I wish only to be a Yes-sayer" (GS 276).

It is important to establish that life-affirmation – in response to the *question* of meaning in life and the danger of nihilism after the death of God – is the core issue in Nietzsche's thought; it lies behind and animates all of his supposed "doctrines," such as will to power, perspectivism, and especially eternal recurrence.⁹ Accordingly, Nietzsche's texts cannot be reduced to doctrines or positions that call for assessment as philosophical "propositions," measured by conceptual, empirical, or logical criteria.¹⁰ Nietzsche's philosophical work always bears on the existential *task* of coming to terms with the meaning and value of life, in one way or another. In the wake of the death of God, the problem of meaning turns on the choice between a looming nihilism or a revaluation of life. Nietzsche's own philosophy aims to join two notions that had previously been held apart: *becoming* and *the value of existence*, which he claims to have brought

⁹ See Bernard Reginster, "Nihilism and the Affirmation of Life," *International Studies in Philosophy* 34/3 (2002), 55–68. On eternal recurrence, see my *Nietzsche's Life Sentence*.

¹⁰ See Ivan Soll, "Attitudes Toward Life: Nietzsche's Existentialist Project," *International Studies in Philosophy* 34/3 (Fall 2002), 69–81. Reading Nietzsche is more like being "propositioned" by a seducer. He even says that philosophy is more seduction than argument (D 330).

together "in a *decisive* way" (WP 1058). His guiding concern, contrary to the tradition, is to find meaning and value *in* becoming.

TRAGEDY AND MORALITY

Nietzsche's interest in tragedy is exposed in his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*. This book planted the seeds for every issue that Nietzsche subsequently undertook, especially the critique of morality. Nietzsche calls *The Birth of Tragedy* "my first revaluation of all values," and the "soil" for his later teachings (TI 10, 5). The text sets up the historical character of Nietzsche's engagement with the Western tradition, in the way in which he calls for a retrieval of something within Greek culture that has been lost or suppressed.¹¹

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche focuses on the Greek deities Apollo and Dionysus in order to understand the meaning of tragic drama. Tragedy, for Nietzsche, was far more than a literary form; it reflected and consummated an early Greek world-view that was more faithful to the finite conditions of life than subsequent developments in philosophy, especially in Socrates and Plato. Early Greek myth and religion were quite different from religions that promote transcendence of earthly existence in favor of eternal conditions and salvation from suffering. Greek mythopoetic works and various cults expressed a religious outlook that sacralized all the conditions of concrete life, celebrating all its forces, both benign and terrible, constructive and destructive.¹² Early Greek religion was (1) pluralistic, in not being organized around, or reduced to, a single form or deity, (2) agonistic, in that its sacred stories exhibit a tension between opposing forces, and (3) fatalistic, in that mortality and loss are indigenous to human existence, not to be repaired, reformed, or transcended. Human beings must always confront a negative fate that limits their power and ultimately brings death. Nietzsche understands tragedy as the culmination of this early Greek world-view, and the figures of Apollo and Dionysus can be understood as paradigmatic of the dualities and tensions of Greek religious experience, displayed together

¹¹ In addition to Sallis' book *Crossings*, an excellent source is M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹² See my extensive discussion in *Myth and Philosophy*, Ch. 2. See also Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

on the same stage in tragic drama. With the narrative portrayal of a noble hero experiencing an inevitable downfall, tragedy expresses the unfolding of a meaningful but finite life limited by a negative fate.¹³

Dionysus was a deity of earth forces and his mythos expressed the natural cycle of birth, death, and rebirth: in various versions the god suffers a cruel death and dismemberment, but is restored to life again. The god's devotees would experience both wild erotic feasts and dark rites of animal sacrifice, in order to experience a cathartic communion with forces of life and death. In this way Dionysian worship promoted ecstatic self-transcendence, where the boundaries between self and nature are dissolved. To lose oneself in the amorphous surgings and shatterings of the life cycle is to gain a kind of peace and union with what is ordinarily "other" to the self.

Apollo was an Olympian god representing light, beauty, measure, prophecy, poetry, and plastic arts. For Nietzsche, Apollo expresses the "principle of individuation" (*BT* 1), meant to counteract the dissolving flux of Dionysus by setting boundaries of form, the measured shaping of individual entities and selves. But because of the primal power of Dionysus that animates tragedy, the forming power of Apollo is only temporary and it must yield to the negative force of Dionysian flux. In abstract terms, the confluence of Apollo and Dionysus represents a finite flux of forming and deforming that never rests or aims for a finished state or preserved condition.

Although the Dionysian has a certain primacy in Nietzsche's interpretation of tragedy (in that forms must always yield to formlessness), nevertheless the Apollonian is of equal importance; tragedy is not a purely Dionysian phenomenon. As a sophisticated art form, the Apollonian forces of poetry and plastic imagery are essential to the meaning and significance of tragedy. Tragic drama, with its Apollonian artistic constructions, transforms amorphous Dionysian experience into an articulated cultural world. In *BT* 21, Nietzsche calls tragedy a mediating mixture of the Dionysian and the Apollonian: tragedy presents a negative limit, but "without denial of individual existence." Pure Dionysian experience would preclude the awareness and comprehension of cultural production, and so the formative and educative

¹³ See my *Myth and Philosophy*, Ch. 5.

capacity of mythical symbols “would remain totally ineffective and unnoticed.” With the force of sensuous imagery, intelligible ideas, and sympathetic emotions, the Apollonian prevents a collapse into the “orgiastic self-annihilation” of sheer Dionysian abandon. The Dionysian, by itself, entails the *danger* of nihilism and pessimism, voiced by the “Wisdom of Silenus”: It is best “not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is – to die soon” (*BT* 3). It is the *pain* of individuated states (intrinsically subject to dissolution) that prompts an interest in dissolution as a *deliverance* from pain. Thus, the force of Apollonian individuation is a deliverance not from pain but from the danger of life-denial (*BT* 7). Nietzsche sees the artistic Apollonian elements in tragedy as essential to the life-affirming spirit of the Greeks. Apollonian art shaped a world of meaning in which the Greeks could dwell, and through which they could bear the terrible truth of Dionysian deformation, thus avoiding the danger of self-abnegation.

Tragic myth preceded the advent of philosophy in the Greek world. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, philosophy is embodied by Socrates, the third important voice in that text. Socrates sought logical consistency, precise definition, and conceptual universals secured in the conscious mind. With such powers of rational thought, humans could overcome confusion, mystery, and limits, and thus come to “know” the true nature of things. Now meaning is no longer placed in mythical images associated with a negative force, but in universal, fixed ideas that ground knowledge and supersede the life-world. Such a transformation is clinched in Plato’s designation of eternal Forms as the ground of “being” that transcends negative conditions of “becoming.” Plato’s seemingly transcendent aims brought him to critique tragic art precisely because of the characteristics that Nietzsche considered life-affirming. In Books II, III, and X of the *Republic*, Plato attacks tragic poetry because it falsely portrays the divine as unstable, dark, immoral, and unjust; and the sensuous pleasures of artistic works prompt the passions and seduce us to the attractions of bodily life, which block the higher possibilities of intellectual and spiritual transcendence. Although the *Republic* is a complex text susceptible to a wide array of readings, it is plausible to say that the entire dialogue is a confrontation with the Greek tragic tradition, a notion that will be developed in Chapter 6.