

29

Life and Self-Overcoming

DANIEL W. CONWAY

1 Life as Will to Power

We find in the following passage one of Nietzsche's clearest statements of what he means by *life*:

Physiologists should think before putting down the instinct of self-preservation as the cardinal instinct [*Trieb*] of an organic being. A living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength [*Kraft*] – life itself is *will to power*; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *results*. (BGE 13)

Three elements of this account warrant further elaboration. First of all, Nietzsche presents his teaching of will to power as manifestly superior to a rival theory of life. As this comparison indicates, moreover, some of his most illuminating discussions of life unfold within the context of his (largely dismissive) consideration of popular appeals to *self-preservation* as the essence of life and the goal of evolution. Despite his well-known antipathy to the operation of reactive forces, that is, he is often at his best when reacting to the flawed views of rival theorists.¹ His dependence on competing theories to provoke the articulation of his own hypothesis of will to power thus provides us with an instructive example of the productive strife that he locates in the basic processes of life itself.

Second, we learn that Nietzsche too knows, and apparently wishes to promulgate, what Zarathustra learned when he “crawled into the very heart of life” (Z II, “On Self-Overcoming”) – namely, that life is will to power. In its most familiar formulations, the hypothesis of will to power suggests an amoral, chaotic cosmos, whose unceasing flux is organized by nothing more than the impulse of its constitutive “quanta” to reorganize themselves into transient configurations, which promise, at any given moment, the greatest possible expression of power. Although best known as a proposed contribution to physics and/or cosmology, Nietzsche's hypothesis of will to power is also meant to account for the basic processes of life itself. He thus describes life as a shifting nexus of elemental, contestatory forces, mutually engaged in overlapping struggles for domination and preponderance. Every living being, he maintains, blindly pursues the optimal circumstances under which it might express its native “strength”

and thereby achieve the desired “feeling of power.” The hypothesis of will to power thus presents life itself as essentially active, aggressive, and formative. Or, as he puts it in an oft-cited (and oft-reviled²) passage, “Life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation” (BGE 259).

Rejecting the traditional ontological distinction between animate and inanimate beings, Nietzsche distinguishes instead between organic and anorganic expressions of the will to power. Whether animate or inanimate, he insists, every being both shares in and articulates a will to express its native power. In anorganic beings, “every power draws its ultimate consequences at every moment” (BGE 22). In the case of living beings, however, the coincidence of power and the expression of its ultimate consequences is not instantaneous. In life, *laws* are needed to guide each organism to its final incarnation, via a repeatable series of regular developments. (As we shall see, Nietzsche identifies *self-overcoming* as the most basic “law of life.”)

Hence both nature and life are essentially will to power, in the sense that organic and anorganic beings strive above all else to expend their disposable power. In the case of anorganic beings, the discharge of power is instantaneous, so no reserves are stored for future expenditures. In the case of living beings, however, expenditures are mediated (and so postponed) by the various law-like developments that deliver an organism to its optimal form and its maximal discharge of strength. Over the course of these developments, some residual stores of strength are accumulated in reserve, to be expended (or “squandered”) only in the self-expression of the organism in its final incarnation.

Third, Nietzsche situates his hypothesis of will to power in the emerging deep psychological framework that informs his post-Zarathustran writings.³ This framework is intended, in part, to accommodate his claim that an organism discharges its strength by availing itself of an invisible network of unconscious drives and instincts.⁴ Nietzsche thus identifies the involuntary, instinctual discharge of strength as the uniquely organic activity of the will to power.⁵ *Kraft* is *Macht* become animate.

Whereas the involuntary discharge of strength is essential to the life of any organism, living beings are not indifferent to the qualitative nature of their expenditures. Nietzsche thus explains that

Every animal – therefore *la bête philosophe*, too – instinctively strives for an optimum of favorable conditions under which it can expend all its strength [*Kraft*] and achieve its maximal feeling of power [*Machtgefühl*]; every animal abhors, just as instinctively and with a subtlety of discernment that is “higher than all reason,” every kind of intrusion or hindrance that obstructs or could obstruct this path to the optimum (I am *not* speaking of its path to “happiness,” but its path to power, to action, to the most powerful activity, and in most cases actually its path to unhappiness). (GM III. 7)

Nietzsche’s appeal here to a subjective measure of organic activity – notoriously, one’s “feeling of power” need not correspond to one’s actual capacities or prospects for the exercise of power – thus allows him to introduce a qualitative variable into his alternative theory of life. An organism strives above all to discharge its accumulated stores of strength, but it also does so in such a way that promises to maximize its attendant “feeling of power.”

Nietzsche's stipulation concerning this qualitative variable furthermore steers his *Lebensphilosophie* into closer conformity with his more familiar characterizations of will to power. When organisms succeed in discharging their strength under "favorable conditions," they are rewarded with a "feeling of power." This means that the organism experiences its discharge of strength (*Kraft*) as if it were an anorganic expenditure of power (*Macht*). Nietzsche thus suggests that inanimate nature serves as an orienting model for the vital activity of organic beings. The "favorable conditions" of discharge sought by an organism turn out to be those that are most conducive to an experience of itself as lawless and free. In this context, it is interesting to note how often Nietzsche likens great, exemplary human beings to inanimate forces or "pieces" of anorganic nature, for example the swollen river, the bolt of lightning, the crashing boulder, the gathering storm, and so on.

Although organisms often act and react in ways that secure their self-preservation, this is not their primary aim. Organisms strive above all else to discharge their accumulated stores of strength in spontaneous outward expressions of their native vitality. Doing so often has the effect of preserving the life of the organism, but this is not always the case. Indeed, living beings often place themselves at risk precisely in order to exhaust their native vitality:

The really fundamental instinct of life [. . .] aims at *the expansion of power* and, wishing for that, frequently risks and even sacrifices self-preservation. [. . .] The struggle for existence is only an *exception*, a temporary restriction of the will to life. The great and small struggles always revolve around superiority, around growth and expansion, around power – in accordance with the will to power which is the will of life. (GS 349)

It is for this reason, in fact, that Nietzsche takes a particular interest in those organisms and species whose natural cycles of growth ultimately place them at mortal risk. Hence his fascination, for example, with the emergence of a new form of life, the butterfly, from the cocoon in which the caterpillar naturally encases itself (GM III, 10). If the primary instinct of the caterpillar were simply to preserve itself, then its successor forms, including the chrysalis, would never develop. Nietzsche's interest in mortal expenditures of strength also encompasses those human beings whose will to power is so strong that it obviously overrides the instinct for self-preservation. Whereas an appeal to self-preservation may adequately account for the behavior of most human beings, especially under conditions of pandemic decay, only the hypothesis of will to power can explain the behavior of those exemplary human beings who cannot help but "squander" themselves as they expend their native stores of strength (TI, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," 44). Nietzsche thus promotes his hypothesis of will to power not only for its superior explanatory power, but also as a hedge against the continued reduction of humankind to its lowest common denominator.

2 Nietzsche *contra* "English Darwinism"

Many of the passages cited thus far trade on an explicit contrast between Nietzsche's *Lebensphilosophie* and the conventional wisdom of his contemporaries. As we have

seen, he develops his hypothesis of will to power in response to the popular theory that life aims above all else at self-preservation.

To his ears, “self-preservation” rings suspiciously reactive, as if life timidly awaited the cues and promptings of anorganic stimuli. He takes particular exception to the position – at least as he understands it – popularly espoused by Herbert Spencer, who, he claims, defines

life itself [. . .] as a more and more efficient inner adaptation to external conditions (Herbert Spencer). Thus the essence of life, its *will to power*, is ignored; one overlooks the essential priority of the spontaneous, aggressive, expansive, form-giving forces that give new interpretations and directions, although “adaptation” follows only after this; the dominant role of the highest functionaries within the organism itself in which the will to life appears active and form-giving is denied. (GM II. 12)

How could Spencer et al. mistake a secondary expression of life – self-preservation through serial adaptation – for its very essence and primary expression? The answer, Nietzsche suspects, is that these rival theorists cannot bear the likely implications of any hypothesis that dares, like his, to locate “spontaneous, aggressive, expansive, form-giving forces” at the heart of life itself. Unable to behold life as will to power, they focus instead on “evidence” – however dubious – that allows them to emphasize more familiar and less threatening characteristics of life. He thus detects in the currency of this unscientific enthusiasm for “self-preservation” an expression of the general decline that afflicts European modernity:

The democratic idiosyncrasy [. . .] seems to me to have already taken charge of all physiology and theory of life – to the detriment of life, as goes without saying, since it has robbed it of its fundamental concept, that of *activity*. (GM II. 12)

As this passage indicates, the disagreement between Nietzsche and his rivals is not merely academic. Their theoretical deficiencies illuminate a real, practical concern that commands his attention. He believes that the currency of reactive theories of life reflects, *and perhaps even precipitates*, the ongoing extinction of active forces. As we shall see, his perception of life as vulnerable – in this case, to the vampirism of philologically suspect “theories of life” – serves as both the impetus for and the limit to his advocacy. Like Zarathustra, he promotes life only on the unstated condition that life requires his unique assistance.

Nietzsche’s explicit references here to Spencer and Huxley, as opposed to Darwin himself, enable us to specify more precisely the intended target of his criticisms.⁶ As many scholars have noted, Nietzsche’s understanding of Darwin is at best sketchy and at worst uninformed. It is not clear that he ever undertook a careful study of Darwin’s theories, and he was far more concerned in any event to combat the pernicious influence of these theories – distorted or not – on “all physiology and theory of life.”⁷ For Nietzsche, then, the status of Darwin’s actual theories and writings was largely beside the point. The real obstacle to progress in the life sciences (and, by extension, in ethics and politics) was posed by those followers of Darwin who asserted the primacy of reactive forces in the microcosm of molecular biology and in the macrocosm of European culture.

As the following passage confirms, in fact, Nietzsche means to take issue with “the whole of English Darwinism,” which, he alleges, projects onto the basic processes of life its own decadent experiences of “struggle and distress.” By way of contrast, *his* theory of life conforms more closely to nature itself, and thus honors the methods and criteria of the emerging methodology of scientific naturalism:

The wish to preserve oneself is the symptom of a condition of distress, of a limitation of the really fundamental instinct of life which aims at *the expansion of power* and, wishing for that, frequently risks and even sacrifices self-preservation. [...] The whole of English Darwinism breathes something like the musty air of English overpopulation, like the smell of the distress and overcrowding of small people. But a natural scientist should come out of his human nook; and in nature it is not conditions of distress that are *dominant* but overflow and squandering, even to the point of absurdity. The struggle for existence is only an *exception*, a temporary restriction of the will to life. (GS 349)

By opposing his unblinkered naturalism to the nookbound anthropomorphisms circulated by his rivals, Nietzsche confirms the affiliation of his theory of will to power with a particular, superior view of nature, in which conditions of “overflow and squandering” prevail. His rivals are wrong about life, he thus implies, *because they are also wrong about nature*. The better view of nature is conveyed, of course, by his own hypothesis of will to power, which he proposes to employ, as in the passage cited above, to deliver a more fully naturalized account of the basic processes of life. At least when responding to “the whole of English Darwinism,” that is, he aims to model life as closely as possible on nature, which he figures as amoral and indifferent.

As we shall see, however, his stirring exhortation to the “natural scientist” also betrays his own ambivalence about the naturalism to which he aspires. While it perhaps makes sense for a scholar to renounce the narrow, ethnocentric “nook” that is suggested by Nietzsche’s critique of English culture, abandoning the anthropocentrism of the “human nook” may turn out to be more difficult than he allows in this passage. From the standpoint of scientific naturalism, in fact, his exhortation to the “natural scientist” is potentially dangerous, especially if the “absurdity” of nature’s “squandering” proves intractable to the concepts and categories at the scientist’s disposal. In that event, even the most iconoclastic “natural scientist” would be obliged to resort, even if unwittingly, to the stock fictions of speculative metaphysics. The most obvious alternative to the anthropocentrism of the cramped “human nook,” after all, would be the kind of titanic perspective that supposedly affords one a god’s-eye view of nature. As we shall see, in fact, Nietzsche’s own case confirms the tenacity of the anthropocentric prejudices native to the “human nook” and the folly inherent in any campaign simply to refuse them.

3 Life as Self-Overcoming

In his polemics against “the whole of English Darwinism,” Nietzsche is primarily concerned to forward a more fully naturalized account of life. Toward this end, he vows to strip away the superstitions and pieties that insulate his meek rivals from an

experience of life as it is – namely, as will to power. In other contexts, however, he is primarily concerned to *distinguish* life from nature and, so, to isolate what is most unique about living beings. Since both life and nature are expressions of will to power, the putative contrast between them may shed clarifying light on the distinctive characteristics of life itself.

In a representative statement of this contrast, Nietzsche takes issue with the ethical injunction to “live according to nature.” He thus admonishes the Stoics to

Imagine a being like nature, wasteful beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without purposes and consideration, without mercy and justice, fertile and desolate and uncertain at the same time; imagine *indifference* itself as a power – how could you live according to this indifference? Living – is that not precisely wanting to be other than this nature? Is not living – estimating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different? (*BGE* 9)

Here he apparently concedes that human beings are likely to have very different experiences of life and nature, despite the common provenance of each in will to power. He goes so far – albeit in a rhetorical question – as to define “living” as “wanting to be other than this [i.e., indifferent] nature.” Living organisms, he thus implies, cannot afford the luxury of nature’s profligacy. To live is to make precisely those interested calculations and selections that are antithetical to the blind indifference of nature. (As we shall see, in fact, it is these calculations and selections that enable an organism to accumulate disposable strength and, subsequently, to overcome itself.) He consequently ridicules the Stoics’ wish to live “according to nature” as either trivially accomplished or as betraying a masked death wish.

If Nietzsche wishes to avoid the mistake he implicitly imputes to the Stoics,⁸ then he must elaborate further on the distinction suggested here between life and nature. In doing so, however, he must also avoid recourse to the kinds of unscientific vanities that mar the theories advanced by his rivals. In order to preserve the validity of his claim that “the essence of life is will to power,” that is, he must beware of fashioning life in his own, flawed image, lest he simply produce yet another de-natured account of life. As we shall see, he is not entirely successful in this endeavor.⁹

Nietzsche’s dispute with his rivals ultimately turns on his alternative account of evolution, at the center of which he places his daring hypothesis of the will to power. Although his rivals claim to endorse a fully scientific theory of evolution, they are in fact unwilling to acknowledge the amoral, aggressive forces that actually govern the basic processes of organic development. In its blind impulse to transform itself, life is neither efficient nor economical and in fact resembles nature itself:

The “evolution” [*Entwicklung*] of a thing, a custom, an organ is thus by no means its *progressus* toward a goal, even less a logical *progressus* by the shortest route and with the smallest expenditure of force – but a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subduing, plus the resistances they encounter, the attempts at transformations [*Form-Verwandlungen*] for the purpose of defense and reaction, and the results of successful counteractions. The form is fluid, but the “meaning” [*Sinn*] is even more so. (*GM* II. 12)

In light of his rejection of these popular models of (supposedly) natural teleology, we might be surprised to learn that he nevertheless detects an “actual *progressus*” at work in nature. (For that matter, we might be surprised that he would retain a word like “evolution,” even in scare quotes, which has been so conducive to the proliferation of unwarranted anthropomorphisms.) This *progressus*, he coldly observes, does not favor quantity or mass, but actually threatens to “sacrifice” large masses in order to harvest the entropic power they possess but cannot meaningfully discharge:

It is not too much to say that even a partial *diminution of utility*, an atrophying and degeneration, a loss of meaning and purposiveness – in short, death – is among the conditions of an actual *progressus*, which always appears in the shape of a will and way to *greater power* and is always carried through at the expense of numerous smaller powers. The magnitude of an “advance” can even be measured by the mass of things that had to be sacrificed to it; mankind in the mass sacrificed to the prosperity of a single *stronger* species of man – that *would* be an advance. (GM II. 12)

This *progressus* may be difficult to characterize, inasmuch as it aims at no end other than the articulation of ever greater amplifications of power. This *progressus* may also be difficult to embrace, for it offers neither solace nor redemption to those featherless bipeds who must see themselves as the pinnacle and *telos* of natural evolution. To the extent that it is discernible, however, this *progressus* bolsters Nietzsche’s contention that life overcomes itself, for this *progressus* (supposedly) expresses the non-random development of living beings toward ever greater amplifications of power.

Nietzsche’s alternative account of evolution thus hinges on the “actual *progressus*” that he discerns within the otherwise chaotic whirl of will to power. While all things, organic and inorganic, partake of the constitutive flux of the cosmos, living beings develop according to an immanent principle of self-transformation. In its unrelenting struggles with external forces and alien entities, an organism is gradually transformed into its *other*. And although these transformations may often appear random, or even whimsical, they are in fact governed by law and always strive to achieve the same goal. According to Nietzsche, an organism or species continues to progress toward ever greater amplifications of power until it arrives at the full and final expression of its native strength. The irrepressible surge of life thus legislates the continual obsolescence of formerly vital forms and the concomitant creation of new forms.

Nietzsche’s preferred term for the law-governed process of organic development is *self-overcoming* (*Selbstüberwindung*), the “necessity” of which he associates with “the law of life” (GM III. 27). Zarathustra learns about self-overcoming from Life itself, in the form of a “secret” whose truth he cannot independently verify (Z II, “On Self-Overcoming”). That Life sees fit to add this “secret” to what Zarathustra already has learned on his own indicates that the process of self-overcoming is neither identical nor reducible to will to power. Indeed, the self-overcoming of life suggests a region or disposition of the cosmos in which the unceasing, random flux of will to power is organized toward the non-random production of ever greater amplifications of power. *Self-overcoming* thus names the uniquely organic manifestation of the activity of the will to power.

Nietzsche’s decision to divulge Life’s “secret” presents us with a formidable interpretive difficulty. If life is will to power, then it belongs to the lawless, random,

unceasing flux that characterizes the natural cosmos. If life *also* overcomes itself, however, then the flux to which it belongs is organized, however subtly, to accommodate the development of ever greater (as opposed, say, to different) amplifications of power. At first glance, then, Nietzsche would appear to have it both ways: Evolution both does and does not admit of a teleological ordering principle. If he is to avoid this charge, then he would do well to explain why the “actual *progressus*” he detects in life is not liable to the same objections he levels against more popular accounts of “natural” teleology.

4 The Case of Nietzsche

For all its importance to Nietzsche’s *Lebensphilosophie*, his account of the process of self-overcoming remains disappointingly vague and underdeveloped. He spends very few sentences explaining what he actually means by “self-overcoming,” and he generally deputizes his readers to furnish the details of its operation. Much like Life in her lessons to Zarathustra, in fact, Nietzsche tends to use the term in a way that already presupposes a general context of understanding. He provides scant elaboration on the mechanism and process of self-overcoming, and he offers very little empirical evidence of its supposed activity. One might be tempted to conclude, in fact, that his preferred use of the term is more properly rhetorical than philosophical.

In any event, Nietzsche’s account of self-overcoming is unusually reliant for its elaboration on the specific examples to which he appeals. Not surprisingly, moreover, especially in light of his enduring fascination with himself, most of his specific references to self-overcoming pertain to the developmental trajectory of his own life. Virtually the whole of *Ecce Homo* celebrates his labors of self-transformation, including his plucky convalescence from a debilitating bout with Romantic pessimism. This book furthermore emphasizes his prudent attention to “the little things” that philosophers and educators typically ignore, including the vicissitudes of place, climate, nutrition, and recreation (*EH*, “Why I Am So Clever,” 3). His point here is that small, incremental changes in personal regimen (e.g., no alcohol or coffee, long walks in clear mountain air) may eventually contribute, under propitious circumstances, to qualitative evolutionary advances (e.g., the emergence of a post-ascetic mutation of the priestly type).

The philosophical upshot of Nietzsche’s self-overcomings is that he is now endowed, or so he claims, with a duplex nature and a uniquely expansive critical perspective. It is to his “*dual* series of experiences, this access to apparently separate worlds,” in fact, that he owes his copious “wisdom” (*EH*, “Why I Am So Wise,” 2). His experience with different forms of life furthermore attests to the success of his self-overcomings thus far. Although he is now “healthy,” for example, he commands ready access to the perspective of illness; although now “opposed” to Wagner, he retains an appreciation for a distinctly Wagnerian (i.e., decadent) experience of life; and so on. Nietzsche’s own case thus confirms that the process of self-overcoming does not obliterate predecessor forms of life as it sponsors the evolution of new forms. Subsumed within each successor form are vestiges and inheritances of its various predecessors. He furthermore maintains that, in his case, at least, these vestiges and inheritances are

in some sense functional, such that he may draw upon them even in his current incarnation. As his own case is meant to indicate, in fact, access to these predecessor forms endows an evolved organism with unique capabilities and growing reserves of disposable strength.

Nietzsche thus presents his struggle with Wagner as both a cause and a consequence of the amplification of disposable strength that attends his renascent health:

Interspersed with many jokes, I bring up a matter that is no joke. To turn my back on Wagner was for me a destiny [*Schicksal*]; to like anything at all again after that, a triumph. Perhaps nobody was more dangerously attached to – grown together with – Wagnerizing; nobody tried harder to resist it; nobody was happier to be rid of it. A long story! – You want a word for it? – If I were a moralist, who knows what I might call it? Perhaps *self-overcoming* [*Selbstüberwindung*]. – But the philosopher has no love for moralists. Neither does he love pretty words. (CW, preface)

Nietzsche may “love” neither “moralists” nor their “pretty words,” but he uses one such word – *Selbstüberwindung* – to describe his own evolution. In the course of explaining why he is a “destiny,” in fact, he employs this term to link his own personal triumph to the revolutionary teachings (and heroic self-overcomings) of Zarathustra:

The self-overcoming [*die Selbstüberwindung*] of morality, out of truthfulness; the self-overcoming [*die Selbstüberwindung*] of the moralist, into his opposite [*Gegensatz*] – *into me* – that is what the name of Zarathustra means in my mouth. (EH, “Why I Am a Destiny,” 3)

That this discussion occurs in the context of his attempt to reckon his own “destiny” (*Schicksal*) furthermore suggests that self-overcoming involves not merely the *recognition* of one’s “destiny,” as if determined by external forces or internal directives, but also the possibility of playing an *active* role in this process, of embracing, cooperating with – perhaps even ensuring – one’s “destiny.” As we shall see in the next section, Nietzsche’s “destiny” apparently includes his contribution to the destruction of Christian morality.

5 The Law of Life

As we have seen, Nietzsche occasionally distinguishes between life and nature on the basis of the former’s reliance on, and the latter’s independence from, law. The function of law, he maintains, is to ensure the eventual coincidence of power with its ultimate consequences (BGE 22). This understanding of the function of law apparently serves as the backdrop for his pronouncement that

All great things bring about their own destruction through an act of self-sublation [*Selbstaufhebung*]; thus the law of life [*das Gesetz des Lebens*] will have it, the law of the necessity of “self-overcoming” [*Selbstüberwindung*] in the nature of life – the lawgiver himself eventually receives the call: “*patere legem, quam ipse tulisti*” [“submit to the law which you yourself have decreed”]. (GM III. 27)

This passage presents two, presumably coeval, formulations of the “law of life.” The first formulation decrees that all “great things” will bring about their own destruction. The cited example of “great things,” that of Christian morality, indicates that Nietzsche has in mind the grand structures, institutions, and movements that have dominated the course of European history. The second formulation is already familiar to us from Life’s secret to Zarathustra (Z II, “On Self-Overcoming”): the “necessity of ‘self-overcoming’ in the nature of life,” as evidenced by the lawgiver’s receipt of the call to submit to his own commands. The “law of life” thus ordains submission in all things, great and small. Every great thing must destroy itself through an act of *Selbstaufhebung*, and every small thing must overcome itself and thereby surrender its current incarnation.

This passage also forwards the intriguing suggestion that in certain instances, the self-overcoming required of all living organisms may actually contribute to the inevitable destruction of something great (through an act of *Selbstaufhebung*). On the strength of this suggestion, we see that Nietzsche’s envisioned “destiny” involves him in a personal regimen of self-overcoming that will catalyze the destruction of Christian morality. That this destruction is *necessary* apparently does not detract from his enthusiasm for it and for playing a decisive role in it. The tantalizing possibility of a convergence of *Selbstüberwindung* and *Selbstaufhebung* may also account for his distinctly approbative use of the term *self-overcoming*. While all living things must overcome themselves, not all do so in a way that also, and so obviously, contributes to transformations on a world-historical scale.

Nietzsche thus envisions his own labors of self-overcoming as contributing to the historical extinction of Christian morality. Just as surely as Christian morality banished Christian dogma, so, he predicts, Christian truthfulness will – and indeed *must* – destroy Christian morality (GM III. 27). He hopes to expedite the arrival of this anticipated moment of destruction by offering himself as the vessel or site of *Selbstaufhebung*. This means that Nietzsche, the self-styled “immoralist” and “Antichrist,” will represent “Christian truthfulness” in its finest hour, bodying forth a mortal challenge to the continued viability of “Christian morality.” Through *his* efforts and urgings, he thus implies, Christian truthfulness will be compelled to draw its “*most striking inference*,” which he identifies as “its inference against itself” (GM III. 27). In *him*, that is, the “will to truth” will finally become “conscious of itself as a *problem*” (GM III. 27). As it does so, Christian morality “will gradually *perish*” (GM III. 27). “This great spectacle,” he prophesies, will occupy Europeans “for the next two centuries” (GM III. 27).

What is perhaps most fascinating about Nietzsche’s account of his envisioned role in this process is his confidence in the impending convergence of his own regimen of self-overcoming with the world-historical self-sublation of Christian morality. By dint of his otherwise unremarkable efforts at self-overcoming, that is, he will insert himself into the larger historical processes now under way and thereby fulfill his “destiny.” Regardless of what we may think of it, his anticipation of the impending convergence enables us to appreciate the urgency he attaches to his otherwise pedestrian efforts to overcome himself. Although his self-overcomings are neither heroic nor grand, his timing, by virtue of which he arrives at the center of world-historical change, is indeed fortuitous. He lives, writes, and overcomes himself at what he elsewhere calls the “right time,” the time of “the *kairos*” (BGE 274).

As it turns out, however, Nietzsche is not quite prepared to make good his offer to host the destruction of Christian morality. On his own, he is not yet a suitable vessel or site for *Selbstaufhebung*. Before he can become what he is, he must resign his vaunted individuality and immerse himself in a collective consciousness or agency. He has told us that he must find “scholarly, bold, and industrious comrades” (GM, preface, 7), and now we understand why this is so: his final, consummatory act of self-overcoming must be accomplished by a “we.” No “I” on its own terms is equal to the task of inaugurating the destruction of Christian morality. Dutifully shifting his preferred form of self-identification, he thus acknowledges that “his problem” is in fact “our problem, my *unknown* friends” (GM III. 27). He goes on to acknowledge that the “meaning” (*Sinn*) to be derived from participating in this world-historical event is to be reaped and held collectively, by the “we” to which he hopes soon to belong. Once gained, this meaning would be the possession of “*our whole being [unser ganzes Sein]*” (GM III. 27).

Embedding himself in this unknown “we” is the final step toward the purported convergence of his own private labors of self-overcoming with the larger processes of historical transformation. As he elsewhere elaborates,

In us [viz. we immoralists, we godless men of today] there is accomplished – supposing you want a formula – the *self-overcoming of morality* [*die Selbstaufhebung der Moral*]. (D, preface, 4)

This passage is similar to the one cited above (from EH, “Why I Am a Destiny,” 3), but with several important differences. There the agency was singular – Nietzsche’s own – and the activity described as that of *Selbstüberwindung*. Here the agency is plural and the activity is described as that of *Selbstaufhebung*. The mysterious, as yet unformed “we” is furthermore named: “we immoralists, we godless men of today.” His final self-overcoming, which coincides with that of the “we” to which he does not yet belong, will catalyze the (eventual) destruction of Christian morality. He, they, and it will perish in the process, only to be taken up and carried forward in the incarnation of the as yet unknown other of Christian morality. In that event, the post-moral future that Nietzsche envisions would bear his stamp, perhaps even his name, such that he might someday be hailed for initiating the demise of Christian morality. In that event, his wish would be granted and he would be “born posthumously” (A, foreword).

6 Concluding Critical Remarks

Zarathustra begins his life lessons by seeking out “the living” and listening to their “speeches” (Z II, “On Self-Overcoming”). Boasting that he has “crawled into the very heart of life and into the very roots of its heart” (Z II, “On Self-Overcoming”), he subsequently dispenses his teaching of will to power. So far, so good. Zarathustra presents his teaching of will to power as a general empirical claim pertaining to all living beings, which is observable in principle by anyone who undertakes a similarly intrepid investigation of life and “the living.”

Despite the success of this investigation, however, Zarathustra aspires to go further. He longs to hear directly and privately from life itself, which he ultimately cannot help

but personify and place in dialogic juxtaposition to himself (Z II, "The Dancing Song"). He thus shifts the focus of his attention from life to Life, whom Nietzsche personifies, engenders, and eroticizes as a dispenser of unverifiable "secrets." It is from Life that Zarathustra learns what his empirical investigation of "the living" did not (and could not) disclose – namely, that life is "*that which must always overcome itself [was sich immer selber überwinden muss]*" (Z II, "On Self-Overcoming"). Having received the favor of this "secret," moreover, he cannot resist the further temptation to imagine Life as his exclusive possession, as a lover perfectly complementary only to *him*. His wish to discern the basic processes of life is thus displaced by his need to be the only one to do so, as determined by Life herself.

In the end, however, he cannot bear the vulnerability that necessarily accompanies his asymmetrical dependence on Life. No longer content simply to receive Life's secrets, Zarathustra dares to whisper into Life's ear something that, according to Life, "nobody knows" (Z III, "The Other Dancing Song," 2).¹⁰ Of course, he gathers the courage to do so only after deciding to pursue a less vulnerable relationship. He promptly jilts Life to woo a more constant lover, known to him as Eternity (Z III, "The Seven Seals").¹¹

The progression of Zarathustra's life lessons may also describe the development of Nietzsche's *Lebensphilosophie*. Nietzsche too teaches that life is will to power, which he similarly presents as an empirically verifiable claim about all living beings.¹² He furthermore teaches that life is "*that which must always overcome itself,*" but, again like Zarathustra, he treats this teaching as if it were an unverifiable, incommunicable "secret," for which he provides no credible account. As we have seen, however, this teaching is no good to Zarathustra and Nietzsche if it remains a "secret." It must be disseminated to others and incorporated into the defining practices of the emerging life sciences.

The problem, however, is that neither Zarathustra nor Nietzsche is able to divulge this "secret" without resorting to the kinds of anthropomorphisms they otherwise seek to avoid. As "*that which must always overcome itself,*" life becomes for Zarathustra an unreliable, non-reciprocating lover, while for Nietzsche life becomes a suspiciously transcendent agency possessed of "interests" that it mysteriously fails to protect. In their zeal to hear life's intimate "secret," that is, and thereby distinguish themselves from all other advocates of life, Zarathustra and Nietzsche stray from their naturalism and eventually join their supposed rivals in the ancient game of dueling anthropomorphisms. Owing to their need to know something about life that no one else knows, they end up promulgating something that "nobody knows" (Z III, "The Other Dancing Song," 2).

As this Zarathustran parallel suggests, the unsecured teaching of self-overcoming strains Nietzsche's naturalism and licenses his metaphysical transgressions. This is not to say, of course, that something like a doctrine of self-overcoming cannot be squared with Nietzsche's commitment to the emerging paradigm of scientific naturalism. Nor is it to say that his teaching of self-overcoming is therefore false, irrecoverably speculative, or otherwise incompatible with the findings of evolutionary biology. It is simply to acknowledge that neither Zarathustra nor Nietzsche proves equal to the "secret" dispensed by Life. Simply put, neither of them fully believes that life overcomes itself in its unrelenting pursuit of ever greater amplifications of power. They wish and hope that this were true, but their experience, especially of declining forms of life, suggests

otherwise. Life's "secret" thus remains a secret even to them. They may go through the motions of sharing this "secret" with us, but they cannot divulge what they do not sincerely believe to be true.

Here we might gain even greater precision. While Zarathustra and Nietzsche may believe that life overcomes itself, they are not convinced that it does so in such a way that will accommodate *their* allegiance to health, growth, and vitality. As far as they are concerned, life tarries far too long with degenerate organisms and declining species. In particular, life displays a galling indifference to protracted periods of decay, which it subsequently allows to postpone the renascence of growth that is, supposedly, its *raison d'être*. As it turns out, in fact, life is surprisingly neglectful of its own "highest interest" (TI, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," 36). (Which may lead us to wonder in what sense it qualifies as an *interest* at all.) In this respect, life is too much like nature, with which it shares a common provenance in the will to power.

Zarathustra and Nietzsche are anxious for the trajectory of decadence to complete its descensional arc, so that the trajectory of growth might renew its familiar, ascendant arc. It is not enough for them that life overcomes itself, recuperating death and decay as conditions of future life and growth. Life should furthermore adapt its overcomings to accommodate their timetable, as determined by their mortality. Decadent epochs like late modernity should disintegrate more quickly and efficiently, so that the few noble souls stranded therein may witness – and not merely foretell – the renascence of health. This is why Zarathustra and Nietzsche arrogate to themselves the task of protecting the "highest interest" of life, vowing to save life from its own lapses into indifference. While their biological clocks wind down, however, life sets its leisurely tempo to the glacial creep of geological time. Of such frightening disparities metaphysical systems are born.

In this light, we might wonder how Zarathustra and Nietzsche came to discern, much less to champion, the "highest interest" of life. As we have seen, Nietzsche points proudly to his success thus far in overcoming himself. He claims to speak for life not by means of an acrobatic leap of transcendence, but by dint of immersing himself in its organized flux, regarding it from opposing perspectives, and participating eagerly in its self-overcomings. He appeals so confidently to the "highest interest" of life, that is, because this interest has gradually, painfully, become his own. As we have seen, his regimen of self-overcoming has steered him into happy compliance with the "law of life" and willing submission to his own decrees. Having managed "not merely [to] bear what is necessary, much less conceal it [. . .] but [to] *love* it," he thus exemplifies *amor fati*, which he proposes as his "formula for greatness in a human being" (EH, "Why I Am So Clever," 10). He has become one with life and has affirmed himself in the world-historical convergence that awaits the "we" to which he hopes soon to belong.

Nietzsche's account of his radical immersion in the well of life may be stirring, but it is not entirely persuasive. He certainly flatters himself if he means to present *his* modest portfolio of experiences as somehow representative of the full plenum of life. Even if we restrict our focus to the range of *human* life, further granting him the heroic terms he prefers for his gritty "convalescence," we are not likely to find the breadth and variety of his experiences particularly impressive. Despite possessing, perhaps, "a soul that craves to have experienced the whole range of values and desiderata to date" (GS 382), he is certainly no Faust. While it is true that he displays a preternatural

appreciation (and capacity) for the myriad modes of human suffering, he is not so intimately acquainted with life's triumphs, apotheoses, peaks, and overcomings. Well versed in disappointment, illness, and despair, he knows their counterpart conditions largely by negation and analogy. In his occasional efforts to articulate his vision of growth, health, plenitude, and ascendancy, for example, he tends to favor Romantic idealizations that depart from the naturalism to which he otherwise aspires. His exaggerated valorization of the ideal of the "great health" provides sufficient evidence of his relative lack of familiarity with the "ascending line" of life (cf. *EH*, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," 2; GS 382).

Nietzsche's lack of familiarity with life in its plenitude is perhaps most evident in his self-serving presumption that life *needs* a spokesman or advocate. Does life not pursue its own "highest interest" and assert its own claims, independent of what its host organisms (including Nietzsche and Zarathustra) think of it? Nietzsche's full-throated affirmation of life may be exhilarating for him to express, but what could it possibly add to life itself? It is not as if life is an underachieving side that would benefit from timely cheerleading, or a shy maiden who might profit from the attention to be sparked by inventive matchmaking. If life is "that which must always overcome itself" then it requires no external or internal assistance to sustain itself in its abiding dynamism. In truth, life as Nietzsche longs to affirm it has no need for Nietzsche, Zarathustra, or any other of its fickle advocates. Life made this perfectly, painfully, clear to Zarathustra (Z III, "The Other Dancing Song," 2), which is why, I believe, he eventually jilts her for Eternity (Z III, "The Seven Seals").

But if life neither requests nor requires Nietzsche's intervention on its behalf, then the specific need addressed by his affirmations of life must ultimately reside in him. He is able to affirm life, it would seem, only in the event that life somehow requires, or at least acknowledges, his exertions on its behalf. He thus needs life to reciprocate in some capacity and, ideally, to need him in return. Like Zarathustra, perhaps, he needs life to need an avenging hero, *and* he needs to be known as that hero. In contriving for himself a role as advocate for the "highest interest" of life, even if this role is restricted to exhorting others not to apportion productive social resources to degenerate organisms and species (Z I, "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man," 33), Nietzsche in fact reveals the limits of his advocacy. As it turns out, he cannot promote life as will to power and self-overcoming if doing so obliges him to fold himself unceremoniously into the anonymous flux.

Like Zarathustra, Nietzsche is keen to promote the amoral dynamism of life only so long as *other* organisms are used and discarded as conduits of self-overcoming. When it comes to *him*, however, he requires that his otherwise unmemorable labors of self-overcoming converge wondrously with the world-historical *Selbstaufhebung* of Christian morality. As we have seen, he also needs to postpone his final act of self-overcoming until such time as he is firmly embedded in the appropriate "we." In light of his pathological recoil from actual communities and collectivities, this further condition on his final *Untergang* may buy him quite a bit of time.

Here, however, he runs the risk of echoing the pet anthropomorphisms of his supposed rivals, the "English Darwinists." Just as they project onto life their own conditions of "distress" (GS 349), so he diagnoses life as beset by a species of distress that only he can remedy. According to Nietzsche, life needs him to champion its cause, to

protect it from unguarded lapses into indifference, and to legislate against attenuated periods of unnecessary decay. It is difficult to see, moreover, why it would be preferable for Nietzsche to depict life as needing his assistance than for Spencer et al. to figure life as primarily adaptive. Life is anthropomorphized (that is, cheapened and demeaned) in either event. And even if Nietzsche's caricature of life is in some sense preferable to theirs, he is nevertheless presumptuous to believe that his advocacy might provide life with the completion, redemption, wholeness, or finality that, supposedly, it otherwise lacks. In short, the life that would require the succor of his advocacy would not be the life that he attempts to honor in his teachings of will to power and self-overcoming.

See also 8 "Nietzsche's Philosophy and True Religion"; 26 "Nietzsche on Geophilosophy and Geoaesthetics"

Notes

- 1 Here I follow the suggestive interpretation of Ansell Pearson 1997: 97–101.
- 2 For a representative criticism of the political views ostensibly expressed in *BGE* 259, see Warren 1988: 207–11.
- 3 My understanding of Nietzsche's depth psychology, and the related discussion that informs this essay, are indebted to Parkes 1994, especially chapters 8 and 9.
- 4 Clark maintains that this restricted, psychological interpretation of the will to power, as what she calls "a second-order drive that [Nietzsche] recognizes is dependent for its existence on other drives," is all that he may "claim knowledge of" (1990: 227). The extensions and applications of this account, especially into the realms of metaphysics and cosmology, may be more famous and influential, but they amount to unwarranted "generalizations" of his basic psychological thesis (1990: 227).
- 5 See Parkes 1994: 313–18.
- 6 Nietzsche's interpretation of Spencer and Huxley are treated at length in Ansell Pearson 1997: 86–92.
- 7 See e.g. the excellent discussion in Ansell Pearson 1997: ch. 4, "Nietzsche contra Darwin."
- 8 Clark points out that Nietzsche's own account of philosophizing indicates that he cannot avoid "want[ing] nature to live only after his own image, as an eternal generalization and glorification of what he finds valuable" (1990: 224).
- 9 For an account of Nietzsche's failure to avoid anthropomorphisms of life and nature, see Ansell-Pearson 1997: 105–6; Clark 1990: 223–5.
- 10 Lampert (1986: 238–9), Clark (1990: 263–4), and Gooding-Williams (2001: 262–7) all reasonably conclude that Zarathustra's whisper has something to do with his love of life, as expressed in his affirmative embrace of the teaching of eternal recurrence. In doing so, however, these commentators diminish the import of Life's response – namely, that "nobody [including, I would add, Zarathustra] knows" what his whisper is meant to convey. In contrast to these commentators, I take quite seriously the literal interpretation of Life's response to Zarathustra: she both contradicts his claim to knowledge and admonishes him that he has dared to tell her something that she knows to be either demonstrably false or indemonstrably speculative.
- 11 Lampert's suggestion – that "in marrying Eternity [Zarathustra] marries Life, but in the act of marrying bestows upon her a new name" (1986: 240) – either denies or ignores what I take to be Zarathustra's obvious recoil and flight from Life, which, I believe, furnishes the

dominant dramatic structure of Part III and requires the later addition of Part IV (here I follow Staten 1990: 174–8).

- 12 For a persuasive statement of the objection that Nietzsche already goes astray in presenting life as will to power, see Clark 1990: 218–27.

Editions of Nietzsche Used

Beyond Good and Evil, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966; repr. 1989).
The Birth of Tragedy and *The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

Ecce Homo, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967; repr. 1989).

The Gay Science, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

On the Genealogy of Morals, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967; repr. 1989).

The Portable Nietzsche, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1954; pbk. edn. 1959; repr. 1982).

Sämtliche Briefe: Kritische Studienausgabe Briefe, 8 vols., ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter; Munich: dtv, 1986).

References

Ansell Pearson, Keith (1997). *Viroid Life: Perspectives on Nietzsche and the Transhuman Condition* (London: Routledge).

Clark, Maudemarie (1990). *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

Gooding-Williams, Robert (2001). *Zarathustra's Dionysian Modernism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).

Lampert, Laurence (1986). *Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of "Thus Spoke Zarathustra"* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).

Parkes, Graham (1994). *Composing the Soul: Reaches of Nietzsche's Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Staten, Henry (1990). *Nietzsche's Voice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

Warren, Mark (1988). *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

A Companion to Nietzsche

Edited by
Keith Ansell Pearson

© 2006 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

BLACKWELL PUBLISHING

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

The right of Keith Ansell Pearson to be identified as the Author of the Editorial Material in this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

First published 2006 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2006

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A companion to Nietzsche / edited by Keith Ansell Pearson.

p. cm. — (Blackwell companions to philosophy ; 33)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-1622-0 (hardcover)

ISBN-10: 1-4051-1622-6 (hardcover)

1. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, 1844–1900. I. Ansell Pearson, Keith, 1960– II. Series.

B3317.C619 2006

193—dc22

2005024906

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/12.5pt Photina

by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom

by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

For further information on

Blackwell Publishing, visit our website:

www.blackwellpublishing.com