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## How to Overcome Oneself: Nietzsche on Freedom

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### I

Does it matter to Nietzsche whether individuals are free in any of the manifold senses that have been so important throughout the philosophical tradition (self-knowledge, voluntarist “spontaneity,” self-realization, autonomy, freedom from external constraint, morality, rational agency, authenticity, “non-alienated” identification with one’s deeds, power to do what one desires)? And if persons are or can become in any of these or any other sense free, *how* important is it to him that all or some or a small few should be able to attain such a state or to exercise such a capacity?

Even given the great variety of interpretations of Nietzsche and the variety of positions attributed to him, the problem of freedom, whether as a metaphysical issue or as a possible human aspiration in any of the above senses, does not seem to be one of Nietzsche’s central concerns. He often gives the impression that he thinks discussions of such topics are pointless and are motivated in self-deceit. However, it would appear that there is a sense of freedom, one at least somewhat still connected to much of our intuitive and everyday understanding of freedom, that is quite important to Nietzsche. It is the topic he discusses under the label: “self-overcoming.” Or so I want to argue here.

But to get to that issue one should note first some of the details of his impatience with the “problem of free will” and with assessments of the “value of freedom,” especially as those have been understood in Christian apologetics and in Western metaphysics from Augustine to Kant and Schopenhauer. Perhaps it would be better to say that his only interest in such questions is in dissolving the problems, not resolving them. In a much cited discussion of the metaphysical issue of the *causa sui* in section 21 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, he not only dismisses the voluntarist or incompatibilist commitment to such a *causa sui* (which he calls “a type of logical rape [*Notzucht*] and abomination [actually

just ‘*Unnatur*’ in the original]”),<sup>1</sup> he goes on to be equally severe about what would appear to be its metaphysical contrary, the “unfree will” or the position of determinism. Both positions are said to be mere “mythologies”; and he encourages us to see that the real problem (the problem as it is manifested in “real life”) is the distinction and contestation between “strong” and “weak” wills. Even this will not be easy to understand since in BGE 19 Nietzsche had already effectively dismantled and rejected what would seem to be all the elements necessary for claiming that there is any faculty of the will, distinct from thought and desire. He reinterprets what had been taken as “the will” as in reality a “complex of feeling and thinking” which can produce a distinct sort of affect and pleasure (in commanding). It is this affect that is mistakenly interpreted as “the will.”<sup>2</sup>

## II

In passages like these, we can at least see what *does* interest Nietzsche about this and all other traditional philosophical positions: an etiology and often genealogy of the psychological type to whom one or the other of these positions would appeal. As in many other cases, philosophical positions are treated as psychological symptoms, and so an invitation to speculate on the need one type or another would have in order to believe either in a self-causing spontaneity or in what Nietzsche calls the “dominant mechanistic stupidity” of causal necessity. In this case he speculates on the stake a sort or type or “race”—“the vain race”—would have in taking absolute credit for their deeds, and the stake in those motivated by self-contempt and so an interest in “shifting the blame” from their contemptible selves. They (the determinists) disguise this “personal” need when they write books, Nietzsche says, and adopt “their most attractive disguise . . . socialist pity.”<sup>3</sup>

This same psychological inflection is apparent in his treatment of the political aspiration to achieve a free life, a life wherein one would be able to develop one’s capacities and/or pursue one’s preferences with minimal external constraint by others. In BGE 260, at the end of his concise summary of the difference between master and slave morality, he applies this psychological typology and suggests that a desire for freedom from external constraint is typical of the slavish, while by contrast “artistry and enthusiasm in respect and devotion” characterize the noble type.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> BGE 21, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> BGE 19, p18–19; KSA, v. 31–4. Cf. also D 103.

<sup>3</sup> BGE 21, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Z 63: “Free *from* what? As if that mattered to Zarathustra! But your eyes should tell me brightly: free *for* what?”

This psychological dimension—in effect the lens through which Nietzsche considers “the problem” of freedom, including the issue of “self-overcoming”—immediately introduces the most fundamental issue in interpreting Nietzsche. Although Nietzsche is capable of stating his basic interests and overall approach in a variety of not always consistent ways, there does indeed seem to be good evidence, like the passages just discussed, that his stated insistence on the priority of “psychology” in both explanation and evaluation is genuine, not another mere “mask.” I mean such sweeping claims as in BGE 23, where Nietzsche encourages us to “clench our teeth,” “open our eyes,” and “keep our hand firm on the helm.” We are to make a voyage that will entitle us to demand that

... psychology be recognized again as the queen of the sciences, for whose service and preparation the other sciences exist. For psychology is now again the path to the fundamental problems.<sup>5</sup>

This does not appear to be an empirical psychology (Nietzsche presents the results of no studies), nor is it the kind of inference from a broad claim about “human nature” that we might expect from a philosophical anthropology. There are, though, some general characteristics of such a Nietzschean psychology with which most Nietzsche commentators would agree. First, he is primarily interested in what we need to say “psychologically” in order to understand what happens when we act on the basis of some value claim, or express in some way a commitment to a value. (One way of interpreting Nietzsche on the “priority” of psychology is already visible: he clearly believes that *any* activity, whether theoretical or practical, already involves such a value commitment (for example, to the “value of truth”) and so the place of value and its psychological conditions in the economy of the soul must be “fundamental” for an account of any other activity).<sup>6</sup>

Second, it is often said that Nietzschean psychology must be “naturalist” and third, that it is therefore largely deflationary. At a minimum, the naturalism requirement amounts to an insistence that, when trying to account for the

<sup>5</sup> BGE 23.

<sup>6</sup> Some (and I think Nietzsche would be one of them, were he not to object so much to this abstract language) would claim that even the most basic form of intentionality requires the play of normative commitments. (To be conscious of X is to claim or judge that X, and so to undertake these commitments and be prepared to justify them if challenged.) It is in this sense that the primordially issue in Nietzsche has to do with value, and in this case this means something like the basic authority of the constraints and requirements I undertake to accept, impose on myself and *hold to*. To assert, or to pledge to do, or to claim to know, are thus *au fond* kinds of promises, and such promises are not explicable as merely natural events. The constraints we undertake are not physical impossibilities. They require my future commitments and my holding to them, sustaining them (under some understanding of, and commitment to, why I ought to), in order to be the promises—the assertions and expressions of intention—that they are. These sorts of commitments are thus basic or constitutive for the very possibility of thought, belief, action, all intentionality. And like many, Nietzsche would like to understand the source of this normative authority, why and in what sense we are bound as we are. Cf. GS 335.

human capacities required when persons direct their actions on the basis of norms, we should appeal to capacities also discoverable in non-moral or non-ethical contexts, and those capacities must be consistent with our being nothing but organic material bodies located in space and time. If we can only explain normative constraints and a set of practices by appealing to a capacity uniquely required by a particular view of value (such as a free will, an uncaused cause, or a unified subject independent of and directing its deeds), especially if that capacity is supernatural, the odds are high, at the very least, that we are dealing with a kind of philosophical fantasy.<sup>7</sup>

This enterprise turns out to be critical and deflationary, especially with regard to the set of values and practices that Nietzsche designates as “morality”—the Christian and post-Christian values of universal equality, absolute individual responsibility, and guilt. The way the psyche works in commitment to and pursuit of moral values is in reality<sup>8</sup> far different than the self-descriptions of moral agents. (*That psychology is the sort of fantasy just described.*)<sup>9</sup>

Finally though, if the Nietzschean enterprise is deflationary, it is not reductionist (or, we might say today, physicalist). One of the things natural organic beings can do, must do, is to create all sorts of different institutions under varying circumstances, train themselves to observe certain constraints and not others, and there is no reason to believe that exclusive attention to the biological or physical properties of these organisms best explains (or could explain at all) why they create one sort rather than another, and no way a purely natural science account could explain what these institutions actually mean to the participants, what they take themselves to be doing. (It *would* be right to say that *if* a reductionist naturalism were true, what it would be to be the subject of one's deeds would be to be, in effect, a spectator of the clashes and pulls and pushes of various contesting drives and passions.<sup>10</sup> But we cannot assume such a stance in leading or living a life; there is no first-person point of view which could embody such a perspective. We cannot “wait” to see which drive wins, but rather

<sup>7</sup> This is how Williams (1994) encourages us to understand what he calls Nietzsche's “minimalist psychology.”

<sup>8</sup> I mean in *historical* reality. The “real” roles of *ressentiment*, hatred, and revenge are not instances of any general law about the psyche, but aspects of a “slavish” institution at a time. To deny that this restriction to historical time could be a possible explanation (because linked to something historically unique) is like saying we cannot discuss why Emma Bovary had an affair with Leon unless we see it as an instance of a general law about bored provincial housewives.

<sup>9</sup> This is a minimalist ascription of naturalism to Nietzsche, but it is, I think the only sort justified. The topic is a complex one, though, and Nietzsche has different things to say about it in different contexts. For example, the famous “translate humanity back into nature passage” in BGE 230, and yet the attack on the Stoics, on the idea that one could actually live “according to nature,” (given that nature is mere “indifference”) in BGE 9. I agree with many of Christopher Janaway's objections to more than minimal naturalist reading of Nietzsche in his ‘Naturalism and Genealogy’ (2006).

<sup>10</sup> See the description in Velleman (1992: 461) and the discussion of this and the general problem of “fatalism” in Nietzsche in Leiter (2001: 221–54).

must act, and Nietzsche has both already dismissed the determinist version of a naturalist position, and in II 12 of *On the Genealogy of Morality* had insisted that a “*Grundbegriff*” for his own notion of “life” is “*Aktivität*.”<sup>11</sup>

### III

These are all quite contestable claims, and the status of a Nietzschean psychology is easily a book-length topic.<sup>12</sup> But since *so* much depends on how Nietzsche understands a psychological treatment of the nature and value of freedom, we should also keep in mind that Nietzsche himself gives us a model to think of when we are interested in his notion of psychology, and this model will be important in assessing how he wants us to think about the issue. I mean the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French moral psychologists, whom Nietzsche cited with such great enthusiasm, especially and above all, Montaigne (about whom he had almost nothing critical to say in the forty-eight references to him), but also, in a more qualified, yet still enthusiastic way, Pascal and La Rochefoucauld. (Pascal’s “*l’homme honnête*” is the clear model for the Nietzschean “*freie Geist*” from the 1876 *Nachlass* written in preparation for *Human All Too Human*, and thereafter.<sup>13</sup> I think that there are two things that interest Nietzsche about this model.

What intrigues Nietzsche in “essays” or “maxims” or “pensées” is that they are presented without, and with no hidden reliance on, any putative deeper philosophical theory of being, or of human nature or of reason or of anything else, and it is clearly an assumption in all three (and by Nietzsche) that this is not a limitation undertaken out of modesty but unavoidable if one is to write “honestly” about human beings as they are, as they live, and so this assumed priority of a psychological perspective counts as a virtue. (The BGE passage had claimed that psychology was to be *first* philosophy, not an enterprise that rested on metaphysics or a substantive theory of nature.) And it is also no accident that the three moralists Nietzsche admired the most wrote in such unusual, original forms, quite foreign to any notion of systematic thought or metaphysical or epistemological foundations.

Not that it is easy to imagine what psychology as first philosophy might look like, how the issue of what is at stake psychologically in posing a question or holding a belief could be understood such that it would *not* itself have to rest

<sup>11</sup> GM p. 52. (Not that it is entirely clear what Nietzsche takes “*Aktivität*” to commit him to.)

<sup>12</sup> See Pippin (2006a). The following discussion of the French is a summary of some of the themes of this book.

<sup>13</sup> Vivetta Vivarelli (1994) has, I think, established this convincingly in ‘Montaigne und der freie Geist.’ Cf. also *Human All Too Human* 50 for Nietzsche and La Rochefoucauld on pity. For criticisms of La Rochefoucauld as still bound to essentially Christian categories of evaluation, see in the *Nachlass*, (1880–1), KSA, v. ix., p. 295 and (1881–2) KSA, v. ix, p. 441.

on some view of being or nature or mind and so forth, some view of how what Nietzsche claims about psychology is *possible*. Even if Nietzsche does not mean *that* very strong or logical notion of priority, and means only to signal something weaker—say, that he thinks these psychological questions are just more interesting, have too long been neglected and have led to self-deceit, or are in some way more important, and so forth—we will still need to hear about this scale of interest or importance. All of this remains mostly implicit. But he at least issues a number of clear warnings about what will happen if we get his focus wrong. The most interesting is in Part Two of HAH, in the ‘Assorted Opinions and Maxims’ and describes what Nietzsche calls “An original sin (*Erbsünde*) of philosophers.” It is important enough to quote at length.

Philosophers have at all times appropriated the propositions of the examiners of men (moralists) (*Menschenprüfer*) and *ruined* them, inasmuch as they have taken them for *unqualified* propositions and sought to demonstrate the absolute validity of what these moralists intended merely as approximate signposts or even as no more than truths possessing tenancy only for a decade—and through doing so thought to elevate themselves above the latter . . . Even the word ‘will’, which Schopenhauer remoulded as a common designation for many different human states and inserted into a gap in the language—greatly to his advantage insofar as he was a moralist, since he was now at liberty to speak of the ‘will’ as Pascal had spoken of it—even Schopenhauer’s ‘will’ has, in the hands of its originator through the philosopher’s rage for generalization turned out to be a disaster for science . . . finally so that it (Schopenhauer’s ‘will’) can be pressed into the service of all kinds of mystical mischief it has been misemployed towards a false reification . . .<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, what Nietzsche seemed to get from this reading of *les moralistes*, especially in the late 1870s, is a way to formulate one of his most important questions: while, according to Nietzsche, La Rochefoucauld’s tendency to see petty egoism everywhere, while a mark of great honesty, finally belittles man unfairly, and while Pascal’s noble and honest and eventually despairing soul was crushed by Christianity or the Christian understanding of the weakness and depravity of man, by contrast the Nietzschean question is at its clearest with Montaigne. *How*, he wants to know above all, did Montaigne manage to exhibit such a thorough-going skepticism and clarity about human frailty and failings (the virtue of *Redlichkeit* so often praised by Nietzsche) *without* Pascal’s despair and eventual surrender<sup>15</sup>, or La Rochefoucauld’s icy contempt for the “human all too human”?<sup>16</sup> Instead Montaigne ended up a thoughtful, ferociously honest, cheerful free spirit, someone who had succeeded at what seems a supreme

<sup>14</sup> HAH 215–16.

<sup>15</sup> BGE 62 enlists Pascal in Nietzsche’s own view of Christian degeneracy; and there are pensées that could have been written by Nietzsche. See the famous “Le moi est haïssable” paragraph; §597, and Pascal’s remarks about the two qualities of the self (Pascal: 2000, ii. 584).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. HAH 36.

Nietzschean goal, the task, “to make oneself at home on the earth” (“... sich auf der Erde heimisch zu machen.”).<sup>17</sup>

So what would avoiding such a “false reification” and achieving something in the spirit of the French moralists look like? It is at least clear that Nietzsche believes that views of the soul and its capacities vary with views about norms; normative commitments are subject to radical historical change and vary among different types in any epoch; and so what counts as soul or psyche or mind also changes. (So no reification; moralists deal in truths that are time-indexed, holding for perhaps only “a decade.”) “The soul” is merely the name for a collective historical achievement of one sort or another, what we have made ourselves into at one point or other in the service of some ideal or other. When we describe to each other what we think the soul is, we express thereby a view about determinate ideals and their psychic functioning; we often are thereby oriented in our explanations from something like psychic health. Hence also the deep interconnection or inseparability between psychology and (an evaluative often deflationary) genealogy.<sup>18</sup>

#### IV

But all this is by way of setting the context, of beginning to understand how Nietzsche wants to raise the question of freedom. Let us say that he seems primarily interested in freedom as a value or aspiration, has his own views about the nature of genuine freedom, and he is especially interested in the psychology and psychological typology that would help explain genuine freedom (the “psychology of freedom” one might say), and the psychology behind differing understandings of freedom, what is at stake in the appeal of one or another aspiration, all presumably with the hope that we might eventually see what sorts of ideals and aspirations might be admirable and which not (although again the connection between diagnosis and evaluation, here as elsewhere in Nietzsche, is not obvious). Finally, whatever this psychological treatment is, it is

<sup>17</sup> ‘Schopenhauer as Educator,’ in UM p. 135. KSA, i, 348. See also HAH 36 on Le Rochefoucauld and the “danger” that Montaigne avoided.). Also, D 31, p. 46. *Doubt about doubt*. — ‘What a good pillow doubt is for a well-constructed head!’ — This saying of Montaigne’s always provoked Pascal, for no one longed for a good pillow as much as he did. Whatever was wrong?

<sup>18</sup> Cf. GS 335 for one of Nietzsche’s most interesting reflections on the relation between a claim like “this is right” and the question “what impels me to listen to it?” As Zarathustra says, living is leading or directing a life and so living essentially *is* esteeming (*schätzen*) or valuing. So the priority of psychology looks very like Nietzsche’s occasional suggestion that all human phenomena, including knowledge claims, be looked at “from the perspective of life,” that is, as valuing. Psychology, that is, will make manifest what is involved, what we are committed to, in understanding “living” in this sense. As has already been noted, from the time of the second *Untimely Meditation* on, Nietzsche claimed that modern philosophy and science and religion and even art had lost any connection with life in this sense, and insofar as any of these enterprises had a living presence in modern culture, they were actively life-denying presences.

neither an empirical psychology, nor a philosophical psychology modeled either after Aristotle or Hume, and seems modeled after the older French sense of a *moraliste*.

Some aspects of what results from this approach to freedom are of course well known. If herd morality, conformism and sheep-like timidity are to be held in contempt, then some contrary notion seems suggested, some ideal of *social independence* and a kind of *self-rule* or *self-reliance*. A Stoic like emphasis on self-rule is particularly prominent in later works, *Twilight of the Idols* especially. There in section 38 of the ‘Expeditions of an untimely man’ (*Streitzüge eines Unzeitgemässen*) section, called ‘My conception of freedom,’ Nietzsche offers an encomium to a wide-ranging set of psychological dimensions of freedom.

That one has the will to self-responsibility. That one preserves the distance that divides us. That one has become more indifferent to hardship, toil, privation, even to life. The man who has become free . . . spurns the contemptible sort of well-being dreamed of by shopkeepers, Christians, cows, women, Englishmen and other democrats. The free man is a warrior.<sup>19</sup>

The passage goes on like this, praising danger, risk and strength, but, as he tries to characterize what he calls “psychologically true” [*psychologisch wahr*] about freedom, Nietzsche adds something that is easy to overlook.

How is freedom measured, individuals as in nations? By the resistance which has to be overcome, by the effort it costs to stay aloft. One would have to seek the highest type of free man where the greatest resistance is *constantly being overcome*.<sup>20</sup>

Nietzsche here is most interested in a sort of psychological self-relation as constitutive of freedom, (a self-relation that would immediately define of itself acceptable and unacceptable relations to others) and he clearly thinks of this psychological state as an achievement along a spectrum of possibilities, not an *either-one-has-it-or-one-doesn't* kind of capacity, as among the voluntarists, an achievement that he also treats in a sort of soul-writ-large way, ascribing this achievable state to possible nations as well.<sup>21</sup> And he notes that whatever the resistance that has to be overcome, there results no settled state, the resistance must be constantly (*beständig*) overcome (*überwunden*). (He notes that he understands freedom as the Romans and Venetians did, as “something one has and does not have, something one wants, something one conquers . . .”<sup>22</sup>) Earlier in TI,

<sup>19</sup> TI p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, my emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> On this account, freedom for Nietzsche involves achieving a certain sort of relation to oneself that only a few are capable of, and, it would appear, which cannot be the product of any sort of direct intention by an individual. The conditions for its achievement depend on far more than individual “will power.” This means such a notion of freedom does not rely at all on a libertarian or “could have unconditionally done otherwise” conception of freedom. See the valuable discussion by Ken Gemes (2009), especially his case for this “achievement” sense of freedom and Nietzsche’s compatibilism. See also my discussion in Pippin (2006a).

<sup>22</sup> TI p. 93.

in section 3 of 'Morality as Anti-Nature,' he had stressed both this notion of achievement and also characterized it as an odd sort of calm amidst unsettled endeavors.

Or the expression of ripeness and mastery in the midst of action, creation, endeavor, volition and a quiet breathing, 'freedom of the will' attained [*die erreichte Freiheit des Willens*] . . . *Götzendämmerung*: who knows? Perhaps this too is only a kind of 'peace of soul' [*Frieden der Seele*] . . .<sup>23</sup>

## V

But what *is* this sort of self-relation? What counts as self-mastery in this sense? Two elements have been suggested in recent discussions. One is inspired by passages in GS, echoed elsewhere, about what appears to be a kind of literary self-creation as the "greatest will to power," the desire "to impose upon becoming the character of being."<sup>24</sup> On this view freedom for Nietzsche has elements both of a self-realization theory ("become *what* you are," the subtitle of *Ecce Homo*, i.e., become, own up to being, the kind of creature who must fashion his own character and personality) and an authenticity theory (as in passages in 'Schopenhauer as Educator' and GS which insist that one ought to become who one individually is—"be yourself" (*sei du selbst*) in the former, and "You should become who you are" (*Du sollst der werden, der du bist*) in the latter.)<sup>25</sup> And according to these interpretations, these injunctions can be fulfilled if one creates oneself as if a "literary character" in a novel, "gives style" to one's character, finds a way to identify oneself with all one's actions, to see that no aspect of one's character and deeds can be what it is without literally every other aspect of one's character and deeds. This would be one way of attaining what appears to be the second necessary aspect of "*erreichte Freiheit*," "achieved freedom," a complete and hierarchical *unity* among states of one's soul, memories, desires, aversions, and so forth. We would thus have fulfilled what appears to be the ideal suggested by GS to become "the poets of our own lives," or the call to "become those who we are," human beings who, Nietzsche says, "create themselves."<sup>26</sup> We would not be what circumstances or others have made us, not be pulled or pushed about by whatever inclination or aversion we happen to be feeling, would be who we really, ontologically and individually, are, self-creating and individually self-created, hierarchically unified beings, and in that sense would have "reached" freedom.

There are several problems with this approach. In the first place, the formulation attributes to us a distinct power or capacity which seems to cry out for a further, deeper metaphysical account, something, I have suggested, inconsistent

<sup>23</sup> TI p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> WP 617.

<sup>25</sup> UM p.127; GS p. 219.

<sup>26</sup> GS 299, p. 335.

with Nietzsche's claim about the priority of psychology and too traditional to match his intentions. Why are we entitled to believe that we *can* assume such a possible independence between a creator or ruler self and a created object and "commonwealth"?<sup>27</sup> It seems just as implausible that one *could* assume such a detached, artist-like creator position as that, for any deed, one could have done otherwise.

Secondly, some aspects of the position seem wildly implausible. *Why* is it a condition of this literary unity that I must be able to understand *every* single deed of mine as necessary for another? That my getting a divorce or resigning my professorship is to be somehow understood as linked together with which tie I choose to wear or what I had for breakfast?

Third, the self-creation view often imports a notion of what *creation* is that is foreign to Nietzsche, whose sympathies here are not with the hyper-modernist, ironic, insubstantial position of Rameau's nephew or Proust, but remain essentially romantic. From the beginning of his publishing career to near the end, the creative state is always understood as Dionysean, a dissolution of boundaries and not their Apollonian establishment, a state of reverie and intoxication (*Rausch*).<sup>28</sup> In the 'Zarathustra' chapter of EH he goes to great lengths to describe precisely the involuntariness and necessity of this creative state, insisting that he, as author, has virtually *vanished*,<sup>29</sup> and his account of artists in BGE, those for whom necessity and "freedom of the will" (cited with the usual sneer quotes by Nietzsche) are the same, makes the same point even more clearly.<sup>30</sup> Even in the GS 335 self-creation passage, Nietzsche goes on to say that such creation requires that we learn "everything that is lawful and necessary in the world," that to become creators we have to become physicists.<sup>31</sup> (In the discussion of the "way of the creator" in *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's account does not sound like aesthetic self creation: "With my tears go into your loneliness, my brother. I love him who wants to create over and beyond himself and thus perishes."<sup>32</sup>

Finally, and most important, the concept of creating oneself as if the author of one's life is inherently unstable, potentially incoherent. In literary terms, the character creating the unity of character in the story of one's life is obviously also a character himself *in* the story he is narrating. For *that* character to form a unity with the character being created, one will always require, in an obvious iteration, another creator-character who could bring the creator and created characters together, and so on. There are literary attempts to write the story of a character who finally becomes the author of the story of this becoming that

<sup>27</sup> Cf. BGE 225. "In human beings creature and creator are combined . . .", p. 117.

<sup>28</sup> TI p. 71. Nietzsche can speak out of both sides of his mouth on this, praising *both* irony and whole-heartedness. Cf. BGE 40, 284, 289, and contrast TI 44. As we shall see, the tension created by such passages is not an oversight by Nietzsche. He very deliberately wants to claim both aspects as essential in "the achievement of freedom."

<sup>29</sup> EH p. 300.

<sup>30</sup> BGE 213.

<sup>31</sup> GS p. 266.

<sup>32</sup> Z p. 65.

we have just read. Proust is the obvious example. But the mere existence of that novel simply raises its own version of this problem, a legendary one for readers: how to understand the relation between the Marcel who is the object of the story, the older Marcel who appears to be narrating and writing the story, and the absent Ur-narrator, Proust himself. If anything, the briefest contemplation of the details of this issue in Proust make much more unlikely the possibility of construing freedom as the self-creation of a unified character. And all of this is not yet to mention that this account leaves unclear how we are to put together the idea of an author/creator of one's own character with the requirement of some whole-hearted identification with one's creation, something far more passionate and unqualified than any picture of a *Rameau*-like independence.

## VI

We move in a more promising direction, I want now to suggest, if we pay attention to another dimension central to Nietzsche's picture of agency, something already alluded to in several passages cited above. That is the fact that for Nietzsche one does not count as an agent, the true subject of one's deeds, just by in effect "showing up." One has to *achieve* something—and I am suggesting that this is a distinct sort of psychological self-relation, both attitudinal and dispositional—in order to be capable of any *real* practical intentionality or real agency. (I say here "one has to achieve . . ." but as we shall see shortly it is important to note that there is no reason to think that Nietzsche must mean an individual achievement, the *result* of an individual's "resolve" and efforts. It could be, perhaps exclusively, a civilizational or social achievement, or even an "achievement" of fate that is responsible for one's being in such a self-relational state.) The state is described in any number of ways, but all them have something to do with a kind of self-dissatisfaction, a generally "negative" as well as positive stance towards some current set of standing attitudes, commitments, and ideals. By and large, Nietzsche describes this condition when he wants to talk about, as he calls it, freedom of the *highest* sort, the *true* or paradigmatic instance of independence from others and a kind of self-direction, not humdrum or ordinary cases of such intentionality, like pumping water, or turning on the light switch, and so forth. All action involves a negation of a sort, an alteration of what would have remained the same without one's intervention, but Nietzsche appears particularly interested in a kind of inward-looking self-negation, a transformation of what had been the subject's restraints, or commitments, basic desires or passions, all in a way that makes possible a new kind of outward-looking relation to the world. In those paradigmatic cases (where, especially the direction and course of one's whole life is at stake) he often focuses our attention on what he calls a "tension of the spirit" that allows a genuine "self-overcoming."

One initial, still quite crude summary of what he is getting at in these passages would simply be that achieved freedom involves achieving a capacity both to sustain a whole-hearted commitment to an ideal (an ideal worth sacrificing for, that provides the basis for a certain hierarchical unity among one's interests and passions), and what appears at first glance to be a capacity in some tension with such whole-heartedness—a willingness to overcome or abandon such a commitment in altered circumstances or as a result of some development. To be unable to endure the irresolvable dynamic of what Nietzsche calls an ideal's or a goal's or a value's constant self-overcoming, to remain dogmatically attached to an already overcome form of life (as with the Christians described in *The Anti-Christ* who, as a result of the "self-overcoming of the intellect" know that prior terms of belief can no longer be invoked in the same way but do so anyway, "Everyone knows this: *and everyone nonetheless remains unchanged*")<sup>33</sup>. Or to concede such mutability but with a cynical relativism that prohibits any wholehearted identification with a new ideal (as the "last men," like those who so casually respond to the "God is dead" news in GS 125), or to slide into a complacent, lazy identification with whatever is conventionally valued (as Nietzsche says in the second *Untimely Meditation* of the Germans of his own day, who have let themselves go and "elect for ease and comfort and the smallest possible degree of self-overcoming"),<sup>34</sup> all these are treated as forms of unfreedom. To be sure, freedom is not the term Nietzsche prefers, although as we have seen, despite its dangerous associations, it is one he uses.<sup>35</sup> He more often speaks of satisfying the conditions of life, leading a life, truly living, recognizing one's life as one's own. The Nietzschean "theory of agency" is couched in such elusive formulations as: "I wish your self were in the deed like the mother is in the child; let that be your word on virtue" from *Zarathustra*.<sup>36</sup> But the agency issues seem to me clearly present. This is so even though neither Nietzsche nor Zarathustra ever simply encourages us to "overcome yourselves." (The issue seems to be the proper acknowledgement and endurance of the self-overcoming character of life, an orientation that itself, as we shall see, has several social and historical conditions for its possibility.)

The achieved state of mind that Nietzsche promotes in these passages is not easy to make out. In the first place, underlying it appears to be a much broader theory about the historical fragility of all human norms, the inevitability not just of a kind of organic growth and death, but of a self-undermining process that sometimes sounds positively Hegelian. It is this historical fate for norms that *requires* the kind of acknowledgement and endurance that Nietzsche praises

<sup>33</sup> A 38, p. 150.

<sup>34</sup> UM, p. 80.

<sup>35</sup> The well-known discussion of the "sovereign individual" in the second essay of GM II is another case in point, as is his discussion of the "right" to make promises (GM II 1). See my discussion of the general issue raised by such claims about promising in the second chapter of my *Nietzsche, moraliste français*.

<sup>36</sup> Z p. 96.

when he discusses self-overcoming. Indeed some of the references translated as self-overcoming are actually to the famously Hegelian term “*Selbstaufhebung*” and its cognates, as in GM when Nietzsche claims that “every good thing on earth” eventually overcomes [“sublates”] itself, or later in GM when Nietzsche proclaims what he calls the “law of life,” “the law of the necessity of self-overcoming in the nature of life” where he uses both *Selbstaufhebung* and *Selbstüberwindung*.<sup>37</sup> Morality’s commitment to an ethic of truthfulness about intentions is his chief example of this self-undermining and self-overcoming, but as stated it is presented as simply a law of life itself. (The death of Attic tragedy, which Nietzsche calls a suicide, a *Selbstmord*, might be another example of this law. So might truthfulness about the value of truth.)<sup>38</sup>

Secondly, the state itself, the proper responsiveness to the self-overcoming character of life, is itself quite complicated, full of dialectical, affirmation/negation flourishes, all of which evoke Nietzsche’s characterization of freedom in TI 38, that it is something one “has and has not.” When Zarathustra discusses the “way of the lover,” he characterizes it as “yourself you love and therefore you despise yourself, as only lovers despise. What does he know of love who does not have to despise precisely what he loved.”<sup>39</sup> As in HAH, Nietzsche will frequently pronounce himself in favor of a morality “as a continual self-command and self-overcoming practiced in great things and in smallest,”<sup>40</sup> but his more detailed accounts of such a self-relational, self-overcoming state are even more figurative and more difficult to summarize. A typical passage is from his account of *Zarathustra* in EH.

The psychological problem in the type of Zarathustra is how he that says No and *does* No to an unheard of degree, to everything to which one has so far said Yes, can nevertheless be the opposite of a No-saying spirit . . . how he that has the hardest, most terrible insight into reality, that has thought the ‘most abysmal idea’, nevertheless does not consider it an objection to existence, not even to its eternal recurrence—but rather one reason more for being himself the eternal yes to all things . . .<sup>41</sup>

The language of a negation that is also an affirmation is sometimes transposed into a more familiar Nietzschean trope and one more familiar in compatibilist accounts of freedom, the simultaneity, in the experience of true freedom, of both freedom (the capacity to negate, free oneself from, some state or other)

<sup>37</sup> GM III, p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> In Hegel there is an elaborate speculative theory about why commitment to a certain norm or to any principle would, in the process of becoming a more articulated or self-conscious commitment, render continued allegiance more and more problematic until the original position was “negated” even while preserved and “raised up,” or *aufgehoben*. There is no such theory in Nietzsche although there are indications that he thinks that commitments require a certain sort of selective attentiveness, perhaps even a sort of self-delusion which is inevitably rendered more difficult with time. Cf. his summary of this “process” in EH: “The self-overcoming of morality, out of truthfulness; the self-overcoming of the moralist into his opposite—into me—that is what the name of Zarathustra means in my mouth,” p. 328.

<sup>39</sup> Z p. 65.

<sup>40</sup> HAH p. 322.

<sup>41</sup> EH p. 306.

and necessity (the affirmation of a cycle of necessity). In the 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth' section of UM, Nietzsche claims that in listening to Wagner, one does not have the usual aesthetic experiences of enjoyment or interest,

... only feels only the necessity of it all. What severity and uniformity of purpose he imposed upon his will, what self-overcoming the artist had need of in the years of his development so as at last in his maturity to do with joyful freedom what was necessary at every moment of creation, no one will ever be able to calculate: it is enough if we sense in individual cases how, with a certain cruelty of decision, his music subordinates itself to the course of the drama, which is as inexorable as fate, while the fiery soul of this art thirsts to roam about for once unchecked in the freedom of the wilderness.<sup>42</sup>

The two sorts of formulations, necessity and freedom, affirmation and negation, are brought together in a still highly figurative passage in GS 276.

... I, too, shall say what it is that I wish from myself today, and what was the first thought to run across my heart this year—what thought shall be for me the reason, warranty and sweetness of my life henceforth. I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who makes things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth. I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation. And all in all, and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a yes-sayer.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, there is a last set of images that appear to treat as a condition for such a self-overcoming, that is, self-negating and yet self-identifying and self-affirming, state. These images continue the unusual emphasis of the passage just cited, where the achievement of freedom seems much more the achievement of an intellectual (i.e. "to learn more and more") and erotic attitude (as in the references to his heart and what he hopes for his "love"). This is consistent with the intellectualist account of freedom in Socraticism, Stoicism, and Spinoza, a notion which Nietzsche expressed admiration for. For Nietzsche too there *is* a kind of knowledge that will set one free, but it is not knowledge of the human good and not, or at least not wholly, the Spinozist knowledge of necessity. It appears to be a psychological realization of the ineliminable need for self-overcoming. The image is also consistent with the fact that, despite what can seem the hortatory character of Nietzsche's rhetoric, many of the passages we have looked at do not really directly encourage readers to *do* anything, as if simply to resolve to become free, to attain freedom. One cannot, as an act of will traditionally understood, will oneself into a state of knowledge or to desire something. The conditions for the attainment of freedom—the proper relation of attachment and detachment—seem largely prevoluntary and extend in scope beyond what individuals can do. Likewise, while Nietzsche is not encouraging

<sup>42</sup> UM p. 244. It is interesting that, when describing his own most difficult "self-overcoming," his break with Wagner, Nietzsche describes it both as a difficult act of self-overcoming, but as also his fate (*Schicksal*). *The Case of Wagner*, p. 155.

<sup>43</sup> GS p. 223.

anyone to “overcome himself,” but rather writes about bearing or enduring a fate in a certain way, he is *also* still not encouraging one not to flee that fate, as if that too were a matter of simple resolve, but describing what it would like for that fate to be borne or endured and affirmed, what else would have to be “in place” for that to happen, and what it would be like.<sup>44</sup> Thus the following images that suggest these necessary conditions.

For example, in the Preface to BGE, he notes that our long struggle with and often opposition to and dissatisfaction with our own moral tradition, European Christianity, has created a “magnificent tension (*Spannung*) of the spirit in Europe, the likes of which the earth has never known: with such a tension in our bow we can now shoot at the furthest goals.” But, he goes on, the “democratic Enlightenment” also sought to “unbend” such a bow, “make sure that spirit does not experience itself so readily as ‘need.’”<sup>45</sup> This latter formulation coincides with a lapidary expression in GS. In discussing “the millions of Europeans who cannot endure their boredom and themselves,” he notes that they would even welcome “a craving to suffer” and so “to find in their suffering a probable reason for action, for deeds.” In sum: “neediness is needed!” (*Not ist nötig.*)<sup>46</sup> In Z, the point is formulated in a similar way.

Beware! The time approaches when humans no longer launch the arrow of their longing beyond the human, and the string of their bow will have forgotten how to whirl! . . .

Beware! The time approaches when human beings will no longer give birth to a dancing star. Beware! The time of the most contemptible human is coming, the one who can no longer have contempt for himself.<sup>47</sup>

There is no suggestion in any of these passages that “neediness” can be created by an act of individual will and the conditions described as necessary for self-dissatisfaction and so self-overcoming (in Nietzsche’s somewhat purple prose, “self-contempt” and “self-despising”) are clearly here historical (dependent on one’s time) and social (dependent in some way on the state of a shared social world).

There is a kind of culmination of this sort of language in the section, ‘On Self-Overcoming’ in Z. In this section we hear again many of the themes sounded about self-overcoming. “Life” reveals to Zarathustra its “secret”—“I am that which must always overcome itself.”<sup>48</sup> Any good and evil presumed not transitory

<sup>44</sup> This dimension obviously has many resonances in the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit*. Two are the clearest: Heidegger’s description of authenticity as a “readiness” for anxiety, and so the stance of “anticipatory resoluteness” for a being that is always “ahead of itself”; and the fact that Heidegger does not think of the forgetfulness of the everyday as a “failure” of Dasein that we should be encouraged to avoid. Rather such forgetfulness is as constitutive of what it is to be Dasein as authenticity. There is something of this in Nietzsche’s discussion of the “clouds of illusion”: necessary for the creation and affirmation in life.

<sup>45</sup> BGE p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> GS 56, p. 117.

<sup>47</sup> Z p. 17, (translation altered). See also ‘On Unwilling Bliss’ in the third part, where Zarathustra speaks of the “desire for love.”

<sup>48</sup> Z p. 115.

are said “not to exist.” “Driven on by themselves, they must overcome themselves again and again.”<sup>49</sup> But now something else, apparently momentous, is added. We also learn that it is *this* feature of life—and Nietzsche seems to mean here this feature of the historical life of values, the feature of having to overcome itself—that is somehow equivalent to the claim that “all life is will to power.”<sup>50</sup>

We have heard this link before, as in the HAH remark about “continual self-command and self-overcoming practiced in great things and in smallest.” But the conjunction of topics is puzzling. One set of images deals with the necessity of mastery and servitude in existence, the omnipresence of commanders and obeyers and such maxims as “Whatever lives, obeys,” and “. . . he who cannot obey himself is commanded.” The second deals with images of the transitoriness of any fixed, settled value and suggests the great difficulty of acknowledging, accepting, or “living out” in some way this perpetually self-undermining dynamic. Both, this unavoidable struggle for mastery and this ability to acknowledge the transitoriness of that in the name of which one claims mastery, seem related to Nietzsche’s view of freedom.

The link between the will to power and self-overcoming appears to be related to the unusual way Nietzsche understands power, or more precisely what he is willing to count as the realization of any will to power. For Nietzsche sometimes concedes that the most essential element in a contestation over power has to be the interpretive question of what *counts* as having achieved mastery. (“. . . all events in the organic world are a subduing, a becoming master, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.”)<sup>51</sup> The ability to bully and tyrannize someone into cooperation is one thing, the ability to inspire true service another; self-command is one thing, self-overcoming is another; being unimpeded in the satisfaction of one’s desires is one thing; being able to order one’s desires in a “hierarchy of rank” is another; commanding is one thing, being “strong” enough to “yield” command is another.

“Yield” (*hingeben*) is Nietzsche’s word in the passage that link the themes of mastery and self-overcoming.

And as the smaller yields to the greater that it may have pleasure and power over the smallest, thus even the greatest still yields, and for the sake of power risks life. That is the yielding (*Hingebung*) of the greatest; it is hazard and danger and casting dice for death.<sup>52</sup>

The upshot of these obscure allusions seems to be that *nothing* really counts in some probative way as “*the*” establishment of mastery. There are of course wider, more apparently metaphysical dimensions of the will to power notion in

<sup>49</sup> Z p. 116.

<sup>50</sup> I discuss the place and function of this ideal in Z as a whole in my ‘Introduction’ to the new Adrian del Caro translation of Z (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.)

<sup>51</sup> GM II 12, p. 77.

<sup>52</sup> Z p. 115.

Nietzsche's work, but in the most intuitively obvious instance—dominating and being dominated in the human sphere—these passages suggest that it is a mistake to understand the meaning of mastery in such a human dimension without taking into account the unsettled and precarious interpretation of mastery upon which the claim of having-mastered will always actually rest. These “interpretations” are mutable, of a time and place, and so true masters must be prepared to “yield” as well as to seize “command.” To be capable of this is to have achieved freedom; to become, in Nietzsche's earlier invocation of freedom, a *freier Geist*, a free spirit.<sup>53</sup> And all of this is apparently connected with the uniquely historical situation in which Nietzsche believes we must evaluate and act, the first epoch in which we must admit that we do not know, in the traditional objectivist or religious sense, what is worth wanting or aspiring to, where the danger of “nihilism” (on this reading, not a failure of knowledge or of will, but of desire) is always threatening. The prospect of a constantly “self-overcoming” structure of valuation is what obviously provokes this danger, and Nietzsche's aspiration is that such an age might also allow human beings who are prepared to be *constantly* “over” or beyond themselves—“*Übermenschen*,” they might be called. He sums up such a stance in just this way in GS 347.

... one could conceive of such a pleasure and power of determination, such a freedom of the will that the spirit would take leave of every faith and every wish for certainty, being practiced in maintaining himself on insubstantial ropes and possibilities and dancing even near abysses. Such a spirit would be the free spirit par excellence.<sup>54</sup>

This is a tangle of themes, any one of which would require much more discussion. I have suggested that we should follow Nietzsche's lead in considering the “problem of freedom” to be a “psychological” problem in his sense of the term. That is, Nietzsche clearly considers freedom to consist in some sort of affirmative psychological relation to one's own deeds, a relation of identification, finding oneself in one's deeds, experiencing them as genuinely one's own. He also considers this state of being an achievement, rather than the exercise of an inherent capacity. The achieved state in question requires an unusual intentional self-relation, in particular an intentional relation to one's own commitments. The relation involves both a kind of whole-hearted identification and affirmation, as well as the potential for great self-dissatisfaction. It is a state of great “tension.” One is neither as passionately identified with one's projects as Goethe's Werther, nor as ironically detached from them as Diderot's Rameau's nephew. To be in such a state of tension is to be capable of self-overcoming, genuine freedom, or

<sup>53</sup> Cf. the discussion in GM II 10 where, in his genealogy of punishment, Nietzsche notes that “as its power increases, a community ceases to take the individual transgressions so seriously . . .” and that in the development of justice it all “. . . ends by winking and letting those incapable of discharging their debt go free; it ends as does every good thing on earth by overcoming itself,” pp. 72–3.

<sup>54</sup> GS pp. 289–90.

one might better say, to be capable of bearing the burden of such self-overcoming and of affirming under its condition. Yet the conditions for the possibility of such an achievement extend far beyond what an individual alone can be called on to achieve. These conditions are partly social and historical, and Nietzsche's basic psychology does not appear to include an addressee for any call to simple resolve or strength of will. (Even if it did, a will cannot resolve to be strong unless it already is.) Whatever the nature of the perspective achieved by Montaigne that Nietzsche so much admired, it was not achieved (cannot be achieved) by force of will or as the consequence of practical reasoning. All of this is in partial explanation of Nietzsche's unusual rhetoric, a mixture of so many different styles, tropes, and voices, as he tries, in effect, to create a picture that can get some grip or hold on his readers. This is especially true of Zarathustra who, readers inclined to the blood-thirsty-blond-beast Nietzsche rarely notice, is quite an unusual hero; often perplexed, confused, disappointed in his comrades and followers, at times bombastic and self-important, at times tender-hearted and resigned to his fate; a figure as much of parody as of tragedy, a fact and paradox Nietzsche was himself eager to point out. All of which raises the question that, in Nietzsche's terms, arises within the perspective of "life"—what would it be to live out both bearing the burden of the finitude and temporal fragility of one's ideals and yet to be capable of "self-overcoming"?

These questions can be pursued in any number of ways. My point here has only been to suggest if the topic is freedom and self-rule according to Nietzsche, any investigation of that issue will have to lead to yet another unusual paradox in Nietzsche's account. There is, in other words, an analogue here to the famous maxim of Pascal's that Nietzsche must have relished: "*La vraie philosophie se moque de la philosophie.*" True philosophy ridicules, has nothing to do with, "philosophy." The Nietzschean turn of that screw would be: the true realization of the will to power has nothing to do with gaining and holding power as traditionally understood, except as an indifference to power in this sense. The implication from the passages we have reviewed would seem to be: the true realization of the will to power, genuine freedom, has rather to do with self-overcoming.

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# Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy

Edited by  
KEN GEMES AND SIMON MAY

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
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New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

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Published in the United States  
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

© Ken Gemes and Simon May 2009

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First published 2009

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Nietzsche on freedom and autonomy / edited by Ken Gemes and Simon May.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-923156-0

1. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, 1844-1900. 2. Liberty. 3. Autonomy (Philosophy)

I. Gemes, Ken. II. May, Simon.

B3318.L43N55 2009

193—dc22

2008054977

Typeset by Laserwords Private Limited, Chennai, India

Printed in Great Britain

on acid-free paper by

Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

ISBN 978-0-19-923156-0

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2