

Nietzsche's thought is a concern with the overall health of humanity, as expressed in his concept of "life-affirmation" – a concept which he crystallized into various manifestations, depending on whether he was reflecting on the universe as a whole, life as a whole, human beings in general, or the individual person. Watching from the shadows of Nietzsche's thought is also the nihilistic fear that his message would never be heard, and that his "untimely" life would never find its proper contemporaries.

## Dissolving the shadows of God

### Truth as a paralyzing Medusa

When the phrase "God is dead" occurs for the first time in Nietzsche's writings (*The Gay Science*, §108), we find Nietzsche directing our attention to the "shadows of God" that still, and which he expects will continue to, linger in Western society, long after the concept of "God" has faded from people's minds:

*New struggles*. – After Buddha was dead, his shadow still appeared in a cave for hundreds of years – a monstrous, bloodcurdling shadow. God is dead: but given how people are, it might be that there will be caves in which his shadow appears for another thousand years. And we – we must also conquer his shadow.<sup>75</sup>

What are these "shadows of God"? Since God is regarded as the absolute foundation of things, the shadows of God include concepts that purport to be the timeless, unchanging, thoroughly reliable structures of what is. These assume different forms, depending on the religion, philosophy, science, or general belief system under consideration, but they share the characteristic of being supposedly invariant and unshakable. Among such "shadows," Nietzsche includes philosophical ideas such as "eternally enduring substances," "matter," and "Platonic Forms." One can

# Chapter Four

further include the laws of nature and definitions of human nature that set limits upon (and for some theorists, falsely imprison us within a definite formulation of) our human condition. An implication of eliminating the conception of an absolutely foundational God, then, is that all kinds of eternal constancies are brought into question for the sake of opening up more wide-ranging human possibilities.

Nietzsche also described the “shadows of God” in another way, assuming that the universe as a whole has no human-like qualities. His view is that “God” is a concept that derives from the projection and amplification of certain human interests related to “knowledge,” “goodness,” “power,” “freedom,” and “intelligence” (God is all-knowing, all-good, all-powerful, is creative and self-determining, and is a planner or designer). Nietzsche believes that “God” is therefore an embodiment of strictly human concerns and qualities. This idea was not Nietzsche’s own; it was expressed by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) and David Hume (1711–76), among others. Nietzsche observed that even Xenophanes (570–475 BC) asserted that if horses and oxen could paint, they would paint their gods as horses and oxen. Nietzsche applied the same point to humans. Humans are often said to be made in God’s image; here, it is God who is said to be made in the image of the human being.

Since Nietzsche believed that most of the human being’s conceptual constructions function primarily to serve the interests of the human being *per se*, he hesitated to advance theories of the cosmos that involve superimpositions of human qualities onto the universe as a whole. Like Xenophanes, he resisted anthropomorphic interpretations of the world, especially when they are used to reflect some absolute, definitive truth. Such anthropomorphic interpretations, upon becoming absolute and accepted as eternally true, become the “shadows of God” in the first sense described above. Nietzsche accentuated how self-centered human beings actually are, and how illusory some of their ideas can become:

*The human being, the Thespian of the world. – ... Perhaps the ant in the forest imagines that it is the goal and purpose of the forest’s existence, just as strongly as we, in our fantasy, take the final point of*

humanity to be the final point of the earth: indeed, we are being modest if we stop at that, and do not recognize at the funeral rites of the one-that-is-finished, a twilight of the gods and twilight of the world.<sup>76</sup>

Nietzsche was entertained by the fact that humans continue to locate themselves at the meaning-center of the universe, just as they once believed that the sun, planets, and stars all revolved around the earth. As questionable as this self-centered orientation towards the universe might be, though, it does not imply that humans do not partake in, and are not a respectable part of, the cosmos as a whole. Moreover, whether one can entirely distance oneself from all anthropomorphic ascriptions to the universe, and whether the very enterprise of making such ascriptions is illegitimate, are debatable proposals. Since human beings are themselves part of the universe, and grow out of it, it stands to reason that some aspects of the human being must also be qualities of the whole.

Nietzsche’s belief that no distinctively human qualities can be legitimately projected on to the universe as a whole, then, reflects a worldview within which humans are not fundamentally at home in the universe from which they were formed. His view resonates with those versions of Christianity that recognize a strong division between the spirit and the flesh, and between mind and matter. Although he wanted to advance a view where people are realistically integrated into and are considered to be an intrinsic part of the world, Nietzsche did not want to attribute any anthropomorphic qualities to the world as it is in itself. This generated a tension within his view in terms of understanding the human being’s place in the universe: people are to be integrated into the world, but the world into which they are to be integrated is regarded as an inhuman one. Nietzsche urged that people work to find themselves finally at home in the world, although the home in which they must dwell contains intractably alien aspects. The situation is comparable to someone who wants to love his or her parents unconditionally, even though they have been mentally dislocated by the fact that their parents have been mind-numbingly cruel if not criminal, at times, just as Mother Nature can be cruel and immoral.

Nietzsche thus intended to avoid anthropomorphizing the universe as much as is possible, and in light of this desire, he stated that the world is fundamentally a chaos, or a realm ruled by chance:

The overall character of the world is, to the contrary, in all eternity chaos – not in the sense of any necessity that is missing, but an absence of order, structuring, form, beauty, wisdom, and everything else named by our aesthetic, human constructions.<sup>77</sup>

Nature, considered artistically, is no model. It exaggerates, it distorts, it leaves holes. Nature is *chance*.<sup>78</sup>

And it is not always purpose, that is referred to as such, and even less is everything will, that is called will! And, if you want to conclude: “There is therefore only one realm, that of accidents and stupidity?”

– so one should add: yes, perhaps there is only one realm, perhaps there is neither will nor purposes, and we have only imagined it all. Those iron hands of necessity which shake the dice-box of chance, play their game forever: so some throws *must* come out of that, which appear to be similar, in each degree, to purposiveness and rationality.<sup>79</sup>

As opposed to a global environment ruled securely by rigid constancies and predictabilities – constancies that Nietzsche associated with the shadows of God and with stagnation – his interpretation of the world as a fiery chaos more effectively expresses a life-affirming outlook, owing to its consistency with change and creativity. Since some of the central characteristics Nietzsche associated with “life” are growth, creativity, change, metamorphosis, expansion, and destruction, the interpretation of the universe as continually flickering and fluctuating is more consistent with these values than is a completely rigid, deterministic, thoroughly rule-governed definition, where freedom and the development of new possibilities are set at a relative minimum, or set within a kind of conceptual cage. Since there is a perpetual uncertainty about what the nature of the universe happens to be, Nietzsche advocated that we adopt the interpretation that best serves the interests of life, whether or not it is provably true. He consequently celebrated change, instability, danger, destruction, and challenge, to match his accentuation of life and creativity.

Such an interpretation of the universe might present itself as far more joyously thrilling than frightening, given Nietzsche’s emphasis on play, creativity, unpredictability, enticing and daring danger, growth, and dance. But there is a hard and icy side to this vision – one that can turn a soft, sentimental, and rationality-seeking person into stone, as can happen when a person looks squarely into an embittering moral abyss. For Nietzsche’s vision recognizes no eternal justice at all. The criminals who get away with their crimes simply get away with their crimes. His universe is not concerned with such matters.

### The nature of life: beyond good and evil

Nietzsche, at one point, referred to himself as an “experimental biologist,” intending to express his interest in interpreting human experience through the perspective of life. This emphasis on the concept of life was a common feature of his era: at the end of the eighteenth century, the prevailing conception of the natural order as a giant clockwork became frustratingly uninspiring, and it was soon replaced in the early nineteenth century by models that were grounded on principles that were more fluid, open, and in accordance with the world of human beings than with the workings of inanimate matter. During the nineteenth century, many philosophers began to formulate views more in accordance with “life,” “growth,” “development,” and “creativity,” and Nietzsche was among them, although his particular view of life can be seen as noticeably tough-minded.<sup>80</sup>

With an attitude somewhat more scrutinizing than his early nineteenth-century predecessors, Nietzsche realized that if one were to philosophize in accordance with the concept of life, then one must accept a hard fact: life appears to be impossible without some measure of pain and violence. A thoroughly peaceful and painless world, or a thoroughly heavenly world – one which was, in fact, the ideal of much socialist, utilitarian, and Christian thought of the time – he saw as contradicting the nature of life. In such a non-violent world, for instance, neither plants nor animals could be killed for food. In terms of general belief-systems, phrases such as

“all for one and one for all,” or the “I” that is ‘we’ and the ‘we’ that is ‘I’” reveal themselves to be unrealistic, life-denying, ideals. Strongly opposing such outlooks, Nietzsche asked that we “be honest with ourselves,” and admit squarely that “life is something immoral.”<sup>81</sup> Which is to say that insofar as we are alive and breathing, what we self-righteously call “immorality” is an unavoidable part of our own living fabric.<sup>82</sup> To condemn something as “immoral,” is, at a certain level of abstraction, the same as condemning oneself as a living being. It seems that we are all perpetrators:<sup>83</sup>

One must give some real thought to the foundations here, resisting all sentimental weakness: life itself is *essentially* appropriation, wounding, taking over what is alien and weaker; oppression, harshness, forcing of one’s own forms upon other beings, annexation, and at least, at its mildest, exploitation – but why should one always use such words, which for the longest time have been stamped with a slanderous intent?<sup>84</sup>

Life operates *essentially*, namely, in its basic functions, with injury, violation, exploitation, destruction, and cannot at all be conceived without this character. One must stand by an even further thought: that, from the highest biological standpoint, legal conditions can only be *anomalous conditions*, as partial restrictions upon the actual life-will, which is a will for power.<sup>85</sup>

Nietzsche believed that if we consider the nature of life, and survey our daily experience through the lens of life, then we will find that the moral principles of refraining from hurting others, refraining from lying, refraining from treating people with injustice, refraining from exploiting and using people for one’s own selfish ends, are to a significant degree inconsistent with our biology and with our living nature. If one is to flourish, one must live in a manner beyond good and evil.<sup>86</sup> This reflection led Nietzsche to associate traditional morality with weakness, decay, and death, for such traditional moral values, he believed, express the weakening of life and health.

In addition to being a philosopher of freedom, Nietzsche was a philosopher of health, and he regarded himself as a spiritual healer. He was nauseated by sickness as much as he was inspired by health.

If there is any fatal flaw in Nietzsche’s thought, it is that his hatred for sickness frequently overwhelmed him. He encapsulated his views on traditional morality in the following remark:

Life itself requires us to produce values, and when we produce values, life values through us . . . From this it follows that even the morality that goes against nature, which considers God as the opposing-concept and judgment against life, is only another value judgment of life itself – but which life? which type of life? – Well, I’ve already given the answer: that of the downward-going, weakened, tired and convicted life.<sup>87</sup>

### The tougher facts of life: the will to power

As Nietzsche examined the nature of life more probingly, he searched for a principle whose expression could explain all of life’s manifestations, and could explain them neutrally, scientifically, and without any distorting moral sentimentality or bias. Inspired by Schopenhauer’s position that the essence of reality is “will,” Nietzsche developed his views on the nature of life by adapting and modifying Schopenhauer’s ideas to his own philosophical interests. He was also inspired by early Greek philosophy, and in particular by the earliest Greek philosopher, Thales (624–547 BC). At the beginnings of Western philosophy, there was a search for a single principle of the cosmos – a single kind of substance – whose transformation could explain the multitude of things we experience. Thales understood the entire cosmos to be transformations of water. Nietzsche, writing many centuries later, hypothesized that the cosmos could be understood as transformations of the expansion of power, or as the “will to power”:

Now listen to my word, those of you wisest ones! Seriously examine whether I have crawled into the very heart of life, right into the roots of its heart!

Where I found the living, there I found will to power; and even in the will of the subservients, I found the will to be ruler.

That the weaker should serve the stronger – his own will convinces him of this, such that he wants to be ruler over even weaker ones: this

pleasure alone he has no desire to renounce. And as the smaller gives itself up to the greater, so that it can have pleasure and power over the smallest, so does the greater give itself up as it risks its life for more power. That is the sacrifice of the greatest – it is a risk and danger, and a dice-throw towards death.<sup>88, 89</sup>

Physiologists should think twice before positing the instinct of self-preservation as an organic being's cardinal instinct. Above all, a living thing wants to *vent* its power – life itself is will to power: self-preservation is only its indirect and most frequent consequence.<sup>90</sup>

To me, life itself is an instinct for growth, for endurance, for an amassment of forces, for power: where the will to power is deficient, there is decline. My claim is that this will is deficient in all of the highest values of humanity – that under the holiest names, values typical of decline,  *nihilistic*  values, have been leading the way.<sup>91</sup>

To explain human behavior, Nietzsche suggested that we think in terms of our behavior as being driven, owing to its living nature, by a desire for power of one kind or another. For him, the will to power is not a drive to reach a finally reconciled, steady-state, relatively happy and contented condition; it is a never-ending, insatiable push towards ever-expanding horizons, greater and greater control, and stronger and stronger constitutions. In his strong sense of purpose and self-discipline, and despite his artistic sophistication and culture, Nietzsche possessed a battle-friendly mentality – one that celebrated traditional warrior-values and people who are not afraid to engage in dangerous conflicts and expansive enterprises. He believed that extending one's horizons, even if by force, and even if it spells one's death, is a part of life and is an expression of health.

A strong will to power can be expressed in various ways, however, and Nietzsche reserved his greatest respect for those who express the will to power at the more refined levels of character-strength, dedication to a goal, consistency of will, and eagerness to overcome oneself, to "outdo" oneself, and to liberate oneself from external and internal limitations. Brutality, cruelty, and outrageous violence, although not absolutely dismissed, are not typically highlighted within Nietzsche's conception of the strongest-willed

people. Consider his characterization of Socrates: "When the physiognomist had revealed to Socrates who he was – a cave of bad desires – the great ironist let out an additional word that gave the key to his character. 'This is true,' he said, 'but I became master over them all.'"<sup>92</sup>

There is an undeniable theme of "might makes right" – or rather, "health makes right" – that attends Nietzsche's celebration of life, but there is also the more amenable idea of standing primarily in competition with oneself, and not with others. Nietzschean health has much to do with being able to change, to adapt, and ultimately to transcend oneself – to revalue all of one's own personal values, and thereby metamorphose into a stronger and more enhanced being, much as does a caterpillar when it changes into a butterfly. "Death" and "resurrection" are acknowledged here, but Nietzsche acknowledges them as happening on earth, in practical, real-life terms. That is, a person of strong will-to-power is in a self-liberating position to revise completely his or her fundamental life project, and thereby become a person who is "reborn."

Nietzsche speculated that the idea of power, as an interpretive principle, could be extended beyond biological phenomena, and could be used to understand the entire cosmos. This brought him full circle to the point where Schopenhauer began his philosophy. Nietzsche did not imitate his philosophy, as did Schopenhauer, from a core metaphysical theory from which one could develop explanations of biological behavior by implication. Rather, he started from observations of how people and life operate, and generalized these to develop a vision of the universe. His resulting view did intersect with Schopenhauer's, since both regarded the universe as the manifestation of "will" in one form or another. Schopenhauer definitively and literally considered the world to be such; Nietzsche considered the world to be "will" more tentatively and interpretively. In the following excerpt from Nietzsche's notebooks, we encounter an interpretation of the world in terms of the will to power – one inspired by Schopenhauer, in conjunction with Nietzsche's studies of early Greek cosmologies. It describes what the world was for Nietzsche, as opposed to describing with rock-solid certitude how the world definitively is for us all, or how the world is in itself:

Do you know what "the world" is to me? Shall I show it to you in my mirror? This world: a monster of energy, without beginning, without end, a solid, iron measure of force, which becomes neither more nor less, that does not use itself up, but only transforms; as a whole, of unchanging size, a household without costs and losses, but also without growth, without revenues; surrounded by "nothingness," as by a boundary ...: this, my *Dionysian* world of the eternally self-creating, of the eternally self-destroying, this *mystery-world* of dual-sensuality, this, my "beyond good and evil" – without purpose, unless there is a purpose in the joy of the circle, without will, unless a ring has good will towards itself. Do you want a *name* for this world? A *solution* for all of its riddles? A *light* also for you, you most-hidden, strongest, most courageous, most midnightly ones? *This world is the will to power – and nothing besides!* And you too, are this will to power yourselves – and nothing besides!<sup>93</sup>

The neutral and uncaring nature of Nietzsche's universe is striking, as it continually recycles, and goes essentially nowhere. This universe is mostly devoid of human qualities, and Nietzsche calmly gazes down on its turbulence as if he could see it from a distance, even as he, Friedrich Nietzsche, remained thoroughly intertwined within its meaningless twists of dice-throwing fate. The coolness and the psychological distance exhibited here is not unlike the standpoint he took towards the earth and human beings twelve years earlier, in the opening lines of his essay, "On Truth and Lie in a Morally-Disengaged Sense":

In some isolated corner of the cosmos, poured out shimmeringly into uncountable solar systems, there was once a star upon which clever animals invented knowledge. It was the most arrogant and hypocritical minute of "world history": but it was only a minute. After nature drew a few breaths, the star grew stiff with cold, and the clever animals had to die.<sup>94</sup>

Nietzsche often surveyed the human condition from the perspective of geological and astronomical time, where in the larger scheme of things, the human species has been in existence for less than the blink of an eye, and where the length of an individual's lifetime is so short as to approach the infinitesimal. As we extend our imagination in both directions, into the infinite past and future, human

existence shrinks to a point, just as the earth shrinks to a point as one regards it from greater and greater spatial distances. Rather than marvelling at how such infinite and infinitesimal magnitudes can be imagined and experienced at all by those consciously-animated human specks of dust that crawl, apparently meaninglessly, on the earth – and such an intellectual feat seems almost miraculous – Nietzsche was usually content to look down on the human condition, as he pondered the significance of life within an emotionally cold universe that does not seem to care. Nietzsche's preoccupation was to determine the extent of human significance when objectively speaking, from the standpoint of an infinite time and space, it seems to have virtually none.<sup>95</sup>

Considerations of this imaginative magnitude introduce the problem of evil in another guise, if we follow Nietzsche in assuming that there is no God and no moral balance to be hoped for, either in this world or in an afterlife. From this atheistic angle, the problem of evil is no longer the problem of how God can allow evil to happen; it is the more frightening problem of how to say "yes" to a world where there is no God to work against evil, and where there is no justice. In both formulations, we are forced to come to terms with evil, and it is in the face of such supposed realities that Nietzsche nonetheless aims to say "yes" to the world.

Nietzsche wanted to consider the most abysmal thought, the most dangerous thought, the most psychologically-threatening thought, the most personally disintegrating thought, and then, under this deathly, "worst-case scenario" perspective on the world – a perspective where, objectively speaking, we are all alone in an uncaring universe ruled by nothing more than meaningless chance – test his strength to see whether he could still *dancingly, joyfully, and thrillingly* say "yes" to existence under such unpromising and uncompromising conditions. Such a thought experiment would be perverse, if it were not possible that the universe is intrinsically meaningless. Nietzsche thus wanted to test himself, to see whether his constitution was strong enough to have a perfectly good life while living permanently and finally in nothing less than pandemonium. Anyone who can do this would earn the title of being super-healthy.

When formulated in the above manner, it might be thought that the kind of being who would have an enjoyable time in pandemonium would be a naturally rebellious, defiant, Satanic being, and that in order to say “yes” to life, one would need to become unreflectively and unconscionably devilish and immoral. Nietzsche asserts that life is immoral, so if one intends to live in accord with what life dictates, then it would appear that one should act immorally and enjoy it.<sup>96</sup> This seems logically straightforward, but it cannot be the end-all expression of Nietzsche’s prescription. If the goal is to interpret the world pandemonically as a way to test one’s strength, then there will only be a test if one is a fundamentally moral being to begin with. For instance, a more demanding test of strength, and the greater tension within the soul, would be found in the saint who has been condemned to hell, or condemned to prison, rather than in the satanic being or true criminal. For the latter types, living in hell or in prison is less of a challenge, since they are at home there.

The more pressing problem for Nietzsche is how sensitive human beings can turn out well and live flourishingly in an inhuman universe, and not how sadists and masochists can flourish in a world of torture. Less dramatically, the problem is how a person who loves his or her parents can break away from them, live independently, and find themselves and their freedom; it is not the problem of how someone who is completely alienated from their parents can set out on his or her own.

The above situation of the sadists, masochists, and alienated ones – albeit reversed – is reminiscent of the view (sometimes ascribed to Kant) that a person who enjoys helping people by nature, and who is motivated only by those feelings of enjoyment, deserves less moral credit for his or her actions than someone who helps people out of a respect for reason, despite their having a predominantly inconsiderate and selfish character. The selfish person who does the right thing because it is required by duty deserves more moral credit, mainly because he or she does the right thing for the right reason. But it is also thought that this person deserves some extra moral credit, for he or she has done the right thing for the right reason as a consequence of an inner struggle which triumphed over selfishness. Using a

similar logic in Nietzsche’s case, the sadist or masochist, for example, who says “yes” to life, despite its pains, does not exemplify a person of great strength or power, for such a person is disposed to enjoy pain by nature.

What makes the difference, in terms of testing one’s strength, is that the hellish environment – the daily world of suffering – is regarded as a difficult place in which to live, while it remains a place within which one can possibly thrive. This suggests that Nietzsche’s philosophy is designed more for caring and cultivated, yet potentially very strong-willed people, as opposed to those who are insensitive, coarse, and brutal, if only because the latter are more easily adaptable, and suffer less, under cruel, inhuman conditions.

Since brutal people have less to overcome in brutal contexts, they are like their mirror-opposite described in the Kantian example above, namely, the person who is helpful by nature, who experiences no struggle to do the right thing. Within this logic, neither deserves much credit for their actions, because they simply act as they are naturally disposed to act. Such people who are naturally akin to their environments have less to overcome, and are deprived of many spiritual trials that would allow them to grow. If one becomes too friendly with pain, or if one becomes desensitized to it, then the pain can no longer act as an obstacle. On this view, the most healthy people – those who have the highest expressions of the will-to-power – are, to the contrary, beautiful, yet hearty:

And through what, fundamentally, does one recognize the condition of having turned out well? That a turned-out-well person does well for our senses: that he is cut from wood that is hard, delicate, and smells good at the same time. His taste is only for what is beneficial for him; his pleasure and his joy cease, when he oversteps that measure of what is beneficial. He guesses the cures for harmful things, he uses bad luck to his advantage; what does not kill him, makes him stronger.<sup>97</sup>

### The religion of life: the eternal recurrence

The idea of “eternal recurrence” – the endless recycling of all that is, with the recognition of nothing beyond this recycling – issued from

one of Nietzsche's major epiphanies, and he referred to it as the "highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable."<sup>98</sup> For him, if one is able to believe in eternal recurrence – and believe it quite independently of whether it happens to be provably true – then one will embody a healthy attitude towards life and existence. Nietzsche's belief in eternal recurrence reflects his unconditional faith in life and existence itself.

What, then, would be healthy according to this doctrine? The healthiest attitude would be to enthusiastically affirm even the worst that life can offer, simply because this is a part of life. It would be to acknowledge pain, sickness, old age, lamentation, grief, despair, and imperfection, all to the point where the imperfect becomes perfect, because what in fact is, is accepted as what ought to be. It would be to love life and existence so much, that no matter what life or existence happened to do, one would love that fate unconditionally, just as one unconditionally loves one's own child, or just as God, as traditionally understood, unconditionally loves all of his creation. The attitude is one of complete and positive acceptance, and it is not merely the joyful wallowing in an abstract feeling of "life itself," but an emotionally-complicated acceptance and immersion into the concrete reality of life in every infinitesimal detail:

*The heaviest weight.* – What if, some day or night, a demon were to crawl after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life, just as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live again, and innumerable times once more; and there will be nothing new in it, but rather every pain and every pleasure and every thought and sigh, and everything unspeakably small or great within it, must come back to you, and everything in the same order and succession – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, forever – and you along with it, speck of dust!"

Would you not throw yourself down, gnash your teeth, and curse the demon who spoke in this way? Or have you once experienced a colossal moment, where you would have answered him: "You are a god and I have never heard anything more godlike!" If this thought were to take control of you, it would transform you as you are, or perhaps chew you to bits. The question in each and every thing:

"Do you want this again, and even countless times again?" would lay upon your actions as the heaviest weight! Or how positive must one's attitude be towards oneself and towards life in order to want *nothing more* than this final, eternal confirmation and seal?<sup>99</sup>

Two centuries before Nietzsche lived, René Descartes (1596–1650) grounded his philosophy on a thought-experiment comparable to the one above.<sup>100</sup> Like Nietzsche, Descartes postulated an "evil demon" – one who was so powerful that he could make Descartes unsure of almost every thought he had, including apparent indubitabilities such as "2+2=4." With some further reflection on Descartes's part, the demon soon dissolved and transformed. For Descartes encountered in his mind the idea of a benevolent God that had been waiting to be discovered, like the stamp of an artisan upon his product.

Both Descartes's and Nietzsche's philosophies locate us initially in the realm of the demonic, and they eventually bring us into contact with the divine. Both philosophers move their readers from Hell to Heaven – from the dark night of the soul to a vision of the divine – although their respective conceptions of these opposing realms radically differ. Descartes believed that a divine realm exists beyond the world we live in; Nietzsche believed that "hell" and "heaven" are alternative interpretations of our ever-present world, depending upon whether one is weak-minded or strong-minded.

Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence is an existentialist doctrine – it is a doctrine which, if affirmed, intends to bring a person's attitude down to earth and render it more realistic. It can be regarded also as a direct attack on the belief in an otherworldly God – a belief which allegedly directs a person's significance towards a world beyond the present one, and which focuses one's attention and ultimate meaning in a world more perfect, moral, and tranquil than the one we happen to have. For Nietzsche, the belief in such an otherworld is a life-sapping illusion that leads us quickly to forget that we are at this very moment alive, and he prescribes the most this-worldly view he can imagine as a psychological countermeasure.

In his later years, Nietzsche spoke disparagingly of those who lacked the attitude appropriate to the affirmation of eternal

recurrence – those whom he perceived everywhere around him – referring to them as “failures-from-the-start,” and ascribing to them an array of distasteful sentiments:

Where does one not meet that covered-up look which burdens one with a deep sadness, that turned-inward look of the failure-from-the-start, which betrays how much a person talks to himself – a look, which is a sigh! “If only I could be someone else!” so sighs this look: “But there is no hope. I am who I am: how could I ever get free from myself? And indeed – *I am fed up with myself!*”

It is upon such a ground of self-contempt, on such marshy ground, that every weed, every poisonous plant grows, and always so small, so hidden, so dishonest, so sickly sweet. Here wriggle the many worms of bitter resentment; here the air reeks of secrecy and guilty concealment; here is spun continually the web of the most malignant conspiracy – the conspiracy of the suffering against the well-turned-out and victorious; here, the aspect of the victorious is *hated*.<sup>101</sup>

Nietzsche’s task was to discover and adopt a healthy interpretation of the world – one that would dissolve one’s anger with the constraints of time and frustrations of past experience – and the doctrine of eternal recurrence was his final choice and concluding faith. The provable truth of this doctrine remains of secondary importance. What Nietzsche offered as something to “live for” – something he believed is expressed well by the doctrine of eternal recurrence – is the idea of living for life itself. The meaning of life is nothing beyond the experience of life as lived right now; it is a meaning that resides in the drama of life, and in nothing more. Just as a children’s game has no other point outside the drama and fun of the game, Nietzsche believed that life has no other point outside of the game, outside of the stage, outside of the theater, of life.

Sometimes Nietzsche formulated this position with a focus on our own lives, here and now; sometimes he spoke abstractly, prophetically, and ideally about a general state of being – a kind of super-health – that is embodied by the *Übermensch* or “superhuman being”.<sup>102</sup> Since life is best conceived of as child’s play, insofar as life is art, and art is a kind of play, “being alive,” “being playful,” and “being theatrical” all coalesce for Nietzsche. To be “superhuman” is to be able to affirm the belief in eternal recurrence, insofar as this is a

doctrine of superlative health. It is also to carry oneself with the innocence of a child, with the many roles and perspectives of an actor, with the creativity of an artist, and yet with willpower as strong and as set as a rock.

### The ideal of life: being in superhuman health

As we have seen, “life” is a foundational concept in Nietzsche’s thought, and his philosophizing revolves around what are essentially medical and therapeutic issues concerning sickness and health. Although it may be melodramatic to say so, it would not be an exaggeration to note that Nietzsche conceives of his social project in the same general sphere as that of Buddha and Jesus. All three can be seen as cultural physicians who attempted to diagnose society’s ills and to prescribe ways to become more spiritually healthy. All three, interestingly enough – and Nietzsche sometimes overlooked this point – are associated with conceptions of the divine as being located here on earth: the Buddha claimed to be nothing more than an ordinary human being; Jesus was in fact a human being considered to be the earthly embodiment or “son” of the divine; Nietzsche presented his *Übermensch* as a being that has a this-worldly existence, if it is to have any. Despite their differences, there is something down-to-earth and existentially-centered about them all, even though Jesus, on the face of things, represented the idea that there is another dimension beyond the present world where the absolute truth awaits.

Nietzsche’s understanding of life as an immoral phenomenon, however, places his *Übermensch* in a philosophic region quite antagonistic to both Buddhist and Christian expressions of spiritual health:

Whoever has taken the trouble, as I have, to think deeply about pessimism with some puzzling desire, and to release it from the half-Christian, half-German narrowness and simple-mindedness with which it has been represented in this century, namely, in the figure of Schopenhauer’s philosophy; whoever has, with an Asiatic and super-Asiatic eye, looked into and down into the most world-negating of all possible ways of thinking – beyond good and evil, and did so no

longer, like Buddha and Schopenhauer, under the spell and delusion of morality – such a person may, without even wanting to, have awakened to the opposite ideal: the ideal of the most exuberant, life-filled, world-affirming person, who has not only learned to make peace with, and to tolerate, what was and is, but who wants moreover to have repeated throughout all eternity, just *how it was and is*, insatiably calling out “*da capo*,” not only to himself, but to the entire performance and show.<sup>103</sup>

Since Nietzsche's vision aims toward revivification in all of its forms, he is not concerned with the human being *per se*, and he is unlike philosophers who centered their reflections upon the human being's supposed essence (often understood to be rationality or self-consciousness) and who then developed their philosophies on that anthropomorphic foundation. Nietzsche, as the unconditional worshipper of “life,” is less concerned with the human being than with life in general. If the form of the human being needs to be modified, or even completely transcended, in order to enhance the expression of life energies on earth, then Nietzsche is content with that prospect. His descriptions of the superhuman state of being only sometimes refer to the human being's potentials, and in other instances, they refer to a being that will replace humans altogether.

Nietzsche's focus on “life itself” also explains why many of his remarks appear to be hard-hearted. The existence of each and every individual human being was not his main interest. He was concerned with life on earth, and if certain individuals do not exist in the service of this life, then his attitude towards them was unsympathetic. When, alternatively, he encountered particular individuals whom he believed to embody life itself, he tended to glorify them without much reservation. Nietzsche's god is life itself, and he loved all beings that are the children of life, some of which are found among the human species.

Some religious attitudes mirror Nietzsche's concerns about life, but they speak instead of “God” where Nietzsche speaks of “life,” and speak of the “son of God,” where Nietzsche speaks instead of “superhuman health.” Since some say that “God is life,” the affinity between the two concepts – “life” and “God” – reveals a structural kinship among these views. Nietzsche worshipped life in the unconditional

way that some people worship God; he submitted his will entirely to life, just as some people submit their wills entirely to God. Nietzsche conceived of himself as both the servant to life and as the master of life. Some religious devotees conceive of themselves as the absolute servants to God, and as the pure embodiments of God's (or Heaven's, or Allah's, etc.) will thereby.

One could say, for instance, “Words that do not give the light of God increase the darkness,”<sup>104</sup> and formulate the related Nietzschean version, “Words that do not give the light of life increase the darkness,” where the light of life is equivalent to health, and the darkness is equivalent to sickness. The two mentalities are akin, for they share an “all-or-nothing,” “those who are not with me are against me,” uncompromising, polarized style of thinking. A strong advocate of God might consider all non-God-supportive views as inherently “against” God, and as essentially benighted and spiritually lost; a strong advocate of life itself might consider all non-flourishing-supportive views as inherently “life-negating,” and as essentially benighted and spiritually lost. The logic and psychology is much the same.

There are nonetheless irreconcilable differences between Nietzscheanism and Christianity, or much more specifically, between Nietzsche and Schopenhauer (whom Nietzsche regarded as a voice of Christian morals). But it should not be overlooked how Nietzsche's philosophy accentuates the presence on earth of “God-as-life-itself” in the form of the superhumanly healthy state of being, and how the idea of “life itself” assumes a quasi-transcendent, or unconditional, status within Nietzsche's *Welthanschung* under the title of what is “Dionysian.” If there is any absolute, or categorical, or unconditional, imperative in Nietzsche's philosophy, it is: “Be healthy, whatever the moral cost!” or more familiarly, “Say ‘yes’ to life!” The superhuman being lives according to, and exemplifies, such an imperative of health. To look into the face of a superhuman being is to look into the eyes of life itself. To be a Nietzschean superhuman is to be life itself.

To appreciate further Nietzsche's oppositional relationship to Christianity, we can consider, by analogy, two different kinds of visual relationships. The first is the relationship between a

photograph and its negative; the second is the relationship between two photographs of different, unrelated subjects. The first pair – the photograph and its negative – are strongly “opposite,” and yet they remain isomorphic in structure; the second pair – two photographs of different things – are “opposite,” insofar as they are of different things, and yet their opposition is less intense. Nietzsche’s relationship to Christianity is analogously closer to the first, positive-negative image. He contradicts Christianity more than he runs merely contrary to it. For him, Christianity (more specifically, belief in the otherworldly Christian God), is not just another religious view among several hundred possibilities; it is the unhealthiest and most debilitating view.

Nietzsche, accordingly, formulated a distinctly anti-Christian view that aimed to be at the opposite end of the spectrum of world-views. His thought remained very closely connected to Christian thought, if only by being so directly opposed to some of Christianity’s central tenets. He is a thinker who was hardly indifferent to Christianity, and he never ignored it. In this respect, Nietzsche never fully overcame Christianity insofar as he defined himself so squarely against it. From one perspective, one could say that without Christianity, there could be no Friedrich Nietzsche; from another perspective, one could say that without Christianity, there would be no need for Nietzsche. One can also wonder, though, what would be left of Nietzsche’s philosophy, if we were to dissolve the Christian backdrop, or dissolve the shadows of God, against which it so sharply defines itself.

This close, but oppositional, relationship to Christianity that Nietzsche’s views bear is expressed in the very last lines of *Ecce Homo*, his autobiographical work written during his last year of clear intellectual awareness:

Have I been understood? – *Dionysus versus the Crucified*.<sup>105</sup>

In his notebooks of the same year, he elaborated on his meaning:

*The two types: Dionysus and the Crucified.* – To ascertain: whether the typical religious person is a form of decadence (the great innovators are, as a lot, diseased and epileptic); but are we not here leaving out one type of religious person, the pagan? Isn’t the pagan cult a form of

thanksgiving and affirmation of life? Mustn’t its highest representation be an apology and deification of life? The type of a well-turned out and delightfully overflowing spirit! The type of spirit that assimilates whatever is contradictory and questionable in existence, and *redeems* it!

Here I put the *Dionysus* of the Greeks: the religious affirmation of life, the whole of life, with nothing denied or separated off; (typical – that the sex act arouses profundity, mystery, reverence).

Dionysus versus the “crucified”: there you have the contrast. It is *not* a difference with respect to martyrdom – it is only that the martyrdom has a different sense. Life itself – its eternal overflowing and return – produces agony, destruction and the will towards extermination. In the other case, suffering – the “crucified as the guiltless one” – counts as an objection to this life, as the formula for its condemnation.

One can guess: the problem is about the meaning of suffering, whether it has a Christian sense or a tragic sense. In the former case, it is intended to be the way to a holy being; in the latter case, *being is counted as holy enough*, to justify even a tremendous amount of suffering. The tragic person affirms even the most severe suffering: he is strong, full, and defying enough for it; the Christian negates even the happiest lot on earth: he is sufficiently weak, poor, disinherited, to suffer from life in every form of it he encounters. The god on the cross is a curse against life, an indication to be redeemed from it;

– Dionysus broken into pieces, though, is a promise of life: it will be eternally reborn and will return home from destruction.<sup>106</sup>

Nietzsche was not so thoroughly dependent upon Christianity as to mechanically invert, in an act of defiance and negation, traditional Christian doctrines and values in a crude way, saying “yes” whenever Christianity said “no.” He probably would have chuckled at those who practice a certain form of witchcraft, and rebel against Christianity by reading the Mass backwards and by engaging in sexual activity on the altar. This amounts to a kitschy and sophomoric version of Nietzscheanism. Rather, Nietzsche, having a more sophisticated intellect and more refined aesthetic sensibility, developed an anti-Christian vision largely derived from early Greek philosophy, and exemplified the nineteenth-century longing for a revivification of the then-prevailing Christianity. Nietzsche’s alternative to Christianity was more aristocratic, discriminating, and in

company with the likes of playwrights such as Friedrich Schiller, and the German Romantic poets.

To achieve his super-ironoclastic end, Nietzsche devoted much of his writing to invalidating the dictatorial authority of God, comparable to the way in which Martin Luther (1483–1546) initiated the Protestant Reformation by invalidating the interpretive authority of the priests. Both sought to free people from the yoke of oppressive religious dictation. Nietzsche, who was a more radical thinker, offered what he believed to be a liberating interpretation of the world as being ruled not by an otherworldly and absolutely determining moral judge, but by sheer accident. And in tune with this interpretation, he advanced a view of the cosmos as ever-circulating and recycling – one reminiscent of the early Greek philosopher, Anaxagoras, who hypothesized that the world rotates and recycles eternally – that allowed for a more down-to-earth, existential awareness, free of determination from another mysterious and unknowable source beyond our ken.

Nietzsche's *Übermensch* has been regarded by interpreters alternately and mutually inconsistently, as an unrealizable ideal, as an actually coming reality, as a being completely indeterminate, as a being very specifically defined, as a being brutal and cruel, and as a being benevolent and enlightened. This variation in interpretation notwithstanding, one thing is clear: Nietzsche's superhuman being is the epitome of extraordinary health, and it stands as a heroic inspiration for the strong.

Across his career, Nietzsche upheld a variety of heroes, which included Schopenhauer and Wagner, and each directed the themes of his philosophizing at the time. When Nietzsche's idealization of Schopenhauer and Wagner faded in the late 1870s, he sculpted his own heroes on paper, in theory and in principle, and his eventually-arising *Übermensch* stands as the culmination of that effort to create his own super-person. In the following description, written during Nietzsche's final year of activity, the superhuman is described as embodying the healthy ideal of being perfectly "well-turned-out," although the superhuman is not to be confused with the "saint" or the "genius":

The word "superhuman," as typically marking the highest level of being well-turned-out, in contrast to "modern" people, to "good" people, to Christians and other nihilists – a word, that in the mouth of Zarathustra, the extermiator of morality, becomes a very deep-thinking one – has with complete innocence, been understood almost everywhere in reference to those very values whose opposite the figure of Zarathustra was intended to offer: that is, as an "idealistic" type of a higher kind of person, half "saint," half "genius."<sup>107</sup>

Nietzsche's idea of the *Übermensch* does not appear explicitly in his writings until 1883, with the composition of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>108</sup> But his idea did not arise out of the blue. Several years before *Zarathustra*, he was engaged in formulating an ideal type which would serve the purpose of being the beacon of his philosophical outlook. Given how Nietzsche sometimes portrayed the *Übermensch* in opposition to Christianity, one might also believe that his conception of the superhuman is expressive of a completely secular, anti-Christian outlook, which is not sympathetically related to traditional religious imagery. As late as 1879, though, Nietzsche was still thinking positively of the churches as the setting for his philosophic-cultural vision, as can be seen in the following remarkable quote:

A vision. – Hours of teaching and reflection for adults, for the mature and most mature, and these daily, without pressure, but attended by everyone as a rule of custom: the churches as the most worthy and most memory-filled places for this: a festival every day, so to speak, of the achieved and achievable dignity of human reason: a new and fuller blossoming of the ideal of the teacher, in which the minister, the artist and the doctor, the person of knowledge and the person of wisdom are all melted together, such that their individual virtues are amalgamated into a single, total virtue, to be expressed in their teaching, their presentations, and their methods – this is my vision, which always returns to me, and which I firmly believe lifts a corner of the veil of the future.<sup>109</sup>

After 1879, Nietzsche began his wanderings through southern Europe, and brought his conception of the ideal culture more in line with his ever-deepening understanding of life – one that he soon

recognized as necessarily involving pain, violence, exploitation, aggression, hostility, and many other qualities deemed “immoral” by society at large and by the traditionally-prevailing moralities. So in 1880, Nietzsche’s “war on morality” properly began, and he subsequently developed a pronounced antagonism towards Christianity, losing more and more respect for the established Church as time went on.<sup>10</sup> As the above excerpt also indicates, though, Nietzsche’s interest in improving the cultural situation – one expressed as early as 1872 in *The Birth of Tragedy* – carried religious and festival-related overtones, and it is mainly due to the evolution in his conception of life, as continually inspired by his studies of ancient Greek culture, that his perspective drew further away from the Lutheran outlook which had been the soul and substance of his forefathers.

As Nietzsche arrived at the distinct conclusion that “God” and “life” were opposed, he developed a position whose aim was to lead people out from the “shadows of God” into what he considered to be the noonday sunlight, just as Plato tried to lead people out of the dark cave of flickering shadows within which he believed we are all naturally chained in illusion. What Plato saw as illusion – the spatio-temporal, earthly world of fiery flux and day-to-day transformation – was, however, Nietzsche’s core reality; and what Plato saw as reality – the world of unchanging, absolutely stable ideas – was Nietzsche’s realm of predominant illusion, which he associated with the dream-world of Apollo. In their respective pursuits for enlightenment, Nietzsche and Plato walked in opposite directions, and as he condemned Christianity as “Platonism for the people,” Nietzsche looked away from that religious perspective as well. Nietzsche’s truth was revealed as a matter of concrete perception, willpower, and “being honest” about what the world presents in daily experience; Plato’s truth was revealed as a matter of intelligible conception and reflection, and as a matter of seeing idealistically and perfectly past the changing appearances to a flawless world beyond.

As time passed, nothing impressed Nietzsche more than the transcendence of our daily world, along with its apparently senseless suffering. To this extent, he and Buddha would have made good friends. But Nietzsche wanted to live with the flame of suffering

rather than extinguish it; and to this end, he interpreted the world as will-to-power, and advanced the doctrine of eternal recurrence. He set forth an ideal of superhuman health which, if realized, would allow a person to affirm life’s suffering rather than seek refuge from it by means of either hopeful fantasy, or by means of meditational inner retreat. Nietzsche regarded such sanctuaries as spiritual anaesthetics, and the way of the anaesthetic was not his healthy way.

To understand the psychology of the Nietzschean superhuman personality, we can recall one of the most basic themes in Nietzsche’s thought, namely, the question of whether or not life is worth living. Nietzsche’s resounding “yes” to this question is formulated in a battling reaction to the acknowledged tragedy of life, and this Nietzschean problematic can be traced, in part, to his reflections on the tragedy of Oedipus. Specifically, Nietzsche notes in *The Birth of Tragedy* (§3), that in Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus* (lines 1224ff.), the Greek god, Silenus, presents King Midas with a statement of nihilism: it is best for people not to be born; the second best is for them to die soon, presumably because the world is too hellish and disappointing to make the effort worthwhile. In his crusade against nihilism, Nietzsche can be seen as an aspiring King Midas, or as a medieval alchemist, who tries to turn into gold even the lead-weight of a depressingly miserable existence.

Speaking generally, then, at one negative extreme is a particular kind of self-destructive, self-defeating, fundamentally suicidal, personality; at the opposite extreme is the superhuman, perpetually self-overcoming, personality. One can imagine a type of suicidal person who, whenever a standard “positive” event happened to him or her – a new job opportunity, a monetary benefit, a happy turn of events, a release from a previous difficulty – would interpret the event in an invalidating and defeatist light, such as to “make bad” out of what could be seen as positive, and to end up, ultimately, undermining his or her life altogether.

As an inverted mirror-image to the above type of suicidal, or defeatist, personality, one can imagine a fundamentally victorious person who, whenever a standard “negative” event happened to him or her, would immediately see the bright side, and interpret the event in a validating and conquering way, so as to “make good” out

of what might ordinarily be seen as a crushing blow. Such a person would be excessively life-affirming and strong – as strongly positive as the suicidal person is negative. Such a life-affirming person would not do everything “in moderation,” or worse yet, be lazy, sluggish, or thoroughly disinclined to hard work.<sup>111</sup> Simply put, the superhuman type is a “self-overcomer” who can make a healthy and heroic productive comeback from every personal disaster, even if this entails the complete restylization and consequent renunciation of his or her former self. Self-reconstruction requires self-destruction.

This is Nietzsche’s imagined way to be, and it is why he says of the well-turned-out person, that “what does not kill him makes him stronger.”<sup>112</sup> He wrote, quintessentially, a philosophy of fortitude, heroism, and victory – a philosophy which, if implemented, would help populate the world’s stage with more dramatically meaningful and classically tragic characters. To achieve this, Nietzsche wrote a philosophy designed to overthrow those outworn, defeatist values that inevitably weigh heavy on people’s minds; he wrote a philosophy aimed to cultivate more heroic characters for the universal theatre.

Nietzsche’s superhuman being, in effect, appears in his screenplay as the lead theatrical player for an anticipated world performance, just as Dionysus once stood at center stage in classical Greek tragedy. Nietzsche’s more modern performance is a bit more unnerving; however, for he locates it within a cosmic auditorium where only a single seat is set far back in the impenetrable shadows, to define the audience’s place. In this seat, an unknowable God was once believed to have sat as the witness, spectator, and judge. In the anticipated performances of Nietzsche’s heroic play, the seat is soon believed to be unoccupied. And finally, with a hollow laugh, the world-play is performed as if there had never been any hidden seat, witness, or all-seeing audience of one.<sup>113</sup>

## Nietzsche’s seduction of truth

### Ravaging knowledge

Many believe that Nietzsche harbored antagonistic sentiments towards women, and a sufficient number of his remarks support this judgment. He did not, however, regard women in a uniformly negative light. It would be more accurate to observe that Nietzsche’s attitude – as it was towards many subjects – was multi-aspected and context-variable. Moreover, some of his more well-known, and supposedly disparaging, remarks about women can be interpreted affirmatively, as sympathetic expressions of woman-associated forces that personify his own perspective. Nietzsche philosophized from the “perspective of life,” and he claimed in the prime of his career that “life is a woman,”<sup>114</sup> so he can be said to have philosophized significantly from the perspective of woman. If we recall that Nietzsche believed that “life is immoral,” and that he advanced this view as a more healthy and enlightened outlook, then some of his apparently negative comments about women – those which associate women with morally offensive qualities – reveal themselves to be supportive remarks, at least with respect to his own preferred values.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche distilled the creative energies of Greek culture into two complementary and contending tendencies, the beautiful “Apollonian” and the

# Chapter Five