“The Contradiction at the Heart of the World”:
Nietzsche, Jesus, and the Detonation of Denotation

by

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Introduction

“This is my way; where is yours?”—thus I answered those who asked me “the way.” For the way—that does not exist.¹

~ Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

The worst readers are those who proceed like plundering soldiers: they pick up a few things they can use, soil and confuse the rest, and blaspheme the whole.²

~Friedrich Nietzsche, Mixed Opinions and Maxims

Unlike the bulk of his predecessors, Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical endgame was never the creation of a stable, self-contained system. To Nietzsche, such systems represented ossified targets in need of assault. “A very popular error: having the courage of one’s convictions,” he muses in an unpublished note.³ “Rather, it is a matter of having the courage for an attack on one’s convictions.”⁴ It is this aspect of Nietzsche’s thought that has bamboozled hermeneuts from the time of his writing onwards. The standard machinery of Western philosophy seemed to strip its gears and grind to an exasperated halt when fed the writings of Nietzsche. The cause of this breakdown is simple enough—the machine had been tuned to digest the likes

³ As we set out a brief note on translation is in order. With a small handful of exceptions, this investigation will use the Kaufmann translation as its defaults. Recently, there has been much scholarly buzz concerning the superiority of other, newer translations, most specifically the Cambridge editions. However, I decided to employ the Kaufmann translations over newer, more chic options for three main reasons. First, the Kaufmann translations are ubiquitous at this point in the university setting. Therefore, using them as defaults make this investigation more accessible to an average reader in an average academic setting. Second, the academic ubiquity of the Kaufmann translations means that many individuals with only a passing familiarity with Nietzsche will be more inclined to recognize Nietzsche’s most famous lines in their Kaufmannized forms. Therefore, using the Kaufmann translations allows this investigation to resonate more readily with Nietzsche neophytes who may only know a quote or two. And third, it is my opinion that much of the criticism directed towards Kaufmann is scholarly ressentiment derived from Kaufmann’s alleged monopoly of Nietzsche scholarship (the “Kaufmann freeze”) up until his death in 1980. As an analyst, Kaufmann may be at points dubious, but his translations are lovely works.
of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant. With these thinkers, one proposition leads cleanly to the next until a chain of implications is produced, each rung consisting of a tidy little packet of discrete knowledge.

This mode of knowledge production lends itself to a certain mode of interpretation. In any interpretive venture, some aspects of a text must be selected as integral to the ‘truth’ of the text, while others must be discarded as superfluous or peripheral. Discarding the capacity to discard can result in nothing other than a perfect facsimile of the original text. In short, it is impossible.

The truth of the text in this framework is seen as hinging on the integrity of the chain. Therefore, interpretation here functions to ensure that the apparent linearity of the chain is preserved. Towards that end, stretches of many small intervening links connecting their larger and more conspicuous counterparts may be collapsed into one, and errant progressions that depart from the main branches only to terminate not long thereafter may be excised entirely. This approach represents an effort to reenact the thought process that is presumed to have produced the text. For systematic thinkers (Plato, Descartes, Kant, etc.) who conceive of thoughts as following one after another in a calculable fashion, the effort is largely successful.

Nietzsche’s philosophy, however, is predicated on a qualitatively different understanding of how thought operates. In the section from *Beyond Good and Evil* entitled “On the Prejudices of Philosophers,” Nietzsche writes, “A thought comes when ‘it’ wishes, and not when ‘I’ wish, so that it is a falsification of the facts of the
case to say that the subject ‘I’ is the condition of the predicate ‘think.’” In this way, Nietzsche invites us to question the assumption that thought progresses logically as a crisp succession of consciously willed actions. Nietzsche’s conjecture is that there is no singular sovereign self situated behind the action of thought. This absence calls into question the belief in thought as a coherent and contradiction-free product.

Therefore, the prevailing mode of philosophical interpretation runs aground on Nietzsche because it posits a ‘center’ to his works where there may not be one. Nietzsche doesn’t have a single chain that we can groom and streamline through interpretation. Rather, he keeps in tension a whole multifarious ensemble of chains at any given time. The value of Nietzsche cannot be said to exist in any one. However, in a certain sense, it cannot even be said to exist in all of them. For what gives Nietzsche’s body of work its holistic character is not the aggregate sum of all the chains’ content but the dynamic interrelations those chains foster amongst themselves.

Nietzsche’s oft-quoted metaphor of the lightning from the first essay of the *Genealogy of Morals* is instructive here. In reference to the self and action, Nietzsche writes, “There is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming.” Similarly, in a footnote to *The Case of Wagner* Nietzsche argues that Greek drama, to which he regards himself as a spiritual heir, should be understood as “not a doing but a

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happening.” These formulations correspond to Nietzsche’s conception of his corpus as well. Meaning is not to be found in any one argument, but only in the activity that results from the play of multiple arguments held in dynamic and generative tension against one another.⁸

The above point does not mesh well with common assumptions of what constitutes proper philosophical interpretation. Attempting to reduce a body of work to a singular chain of thought will not exact a heavy price when applied to thinkers such as Kant who conceive of their works as internally consistent system. However, any interpretative approach engineered towards the preservation of a central branch at the expense of peripheral progressions will inevitably end up sacrificing the vast bulk of Nietzsche’s work. Not only will such an approach produce an incomplete Nietzsche, but oftentimes a sickeningly vulgarized one. Contradictions to Nietzsche are not inconvenient byproducts to be glossed over—they are fundamental to the generative potential of his project. As Nietzsche’s satirical Jesus-based alter ego Zarathustra preaches, “one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.”⁹ Contradiction to Nietzsche thus represents not a failing but rather the fundamental generative engine behind his work.

To use the classic example, consider how Nietzsche argues both that acts of great cruelty¹⁰ and acts of great love¹¹ are necessary for driving history forward.

⁸ “I do not know any other way of associating with great tasks than play: as a sign of greatness, this is an essential presupposition” (Ecce Homo, 714).
⁹ Nietzsche, 17. Thus Spoke Zarathustra.
¹⁰ “How much blood and cruelty lie at the bottom of all ‘good things!’” (Genealogy of Morals, 498).
¹¹ “There is not enough love and kindness in this world to permit us to give any of it away to imaginary beings” (Human, All Too Human, 89).
They are wholly separate chains of logic—neither can one be derived from the other nor can both be derived from a common third principle. As a result, any method of interpretation that sets for itself the goal of attributing to a thinker a singular, internally consistent system of knowledge must necessarily erase one of these contradictory views. Such an approach is what produced the ‘Fascist Nietzsche’ and other such grotesqueries responsible for retarding Nietzsche scholarship for decades. In a similar fashion, consider the widespread myth of the ‘Nihilist Nietzsche.’ Nietzsche argues—often in the same breath, let alone the same text—both that all human knowledge is called into question because it is predicated on error and that error is to be esteemed insofar as it responsible for creating the world as an interesting and beautiful place. It is self-evident how esteeming the former while rejecting the latter would produce a reading of Nietzsche that is not only incomplete but actively antagonistic towards Nietzsche’s vision.

In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche first entertains the idea that there is no singular governing force or “superessence” constituting the core of existence.

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12 Nietzsche’s remarks on Hegel are perplexingly derisive given their mutual respect for the contradictions inherent in human thought. Regardless, it should come as no surprise that the man largely responsible for rehabilitating Nietzsche from the Nazis, Georges Bataille, was indeed a Hegel scholar.

13 “Delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation” (The Gay Science, 163).

14 “That which we now call the world is the result of a number of errors and fantasies, which came about gradually in the overall development of organic beings, fusing with one another, and now handed down to us as a collected treasure of our entire past—a treasure: for the value of our humanity rests upon it” (Human, All Too Human, 24).

15 The stringency of demanding such an untimely mode of interpretation from his reader was not lost upon Nietzsche, and his awareness of this grew more acute and urgent in his later writings. In concluding the preface to the Genealogy, he writes, “It will be some time before my writings are ‘readable’” (Genealogy of Morals, 459). In Ecce Homo, he ends the first section of the preface with the Epicurean plea, “Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else” (Ecce Homo, 674). Also of note, after describing Wagner as a “misunderstanding among Germans” later on in the same text, he casually appends the prophetic qualifier, “just as certainly I am and always shall be” (Ibid., 707).
Instead, he floats the possibility that perhaps there simply exists a nonnegotiable “contradiction at the heart of the world.” Unlike many of the views expressed in *The Birth*, this theory is never recanted by Nietzsche. In fact, it becomes more and more central to his thought with time.

Given the high premium Nietzsche puts on contradiction, it should come as little surprise that it is present in his texts on a variety of levels. Indeed, Nietzsche integrates this idea of contradiction into his works stylistically from the ground up. This use of contradiction, I will argue, is not haphazard, but rather functions as part of a tactical system that works to actively create the message of Nietzsche’s texts. By employing this style of strategic contradiction, Nietzsche creates literary situations in which the reader is invited to consider the radical possibilities and limits of thought via a kind of induced intuition. This stylistic venue of communication becomes particularly critical for Nietzsche when confronting certain ideas the very nature of which renders them systemically excluded from channels of overt communication.

Nietzsche’s portrayal of Jesus and his conquest of vengefulness epitomizes this stylistic approach to meaning-making. Here we encounter a character so heavy with contradiction that the implosion of his conceptual identity becomes inevitable under scrutiny. This profound death of conceptual representation with which the Nietzschean character of Jesus comes preprogrammed offers us a window into Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics inaccessible by other means.

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Chapter 1: *Ressentiment*

The founder of Christianity thought that there was nothing of which men suffered more than their sins. That was his error—the error of one who felt that he was without sin and who lacked firsthand experience. Thus his soul grew full of that wonderful and fantastic compassion for a misery that even among his people, who had invented sin, was rarely a very great misery. —But the Christians have found a way of vindicating their master since then and of sanctifying his error by making it “come true.”

~Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is continually ready for revenge, and we others will be his victims, if only by having to endure his ugly sight. For the sight of what is ugly makes one bad and gloomy.

~Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

**Nietzsche’s Project**

As interpreters, we cannot confront a text by confronting each of its constituent ideas independently and disinterestedly. “This alone is fitting for a philosopher,” writes Nietzsche. “We have no right to isolated acts of any kind: we may not make isolated errors or hit upon isolated truths.”

Drawing connections between the individual ideas of a text must always imply a direction. To the critical reader, this direction takes the form of a purpose attributed the text. It is thus inevitable that we approach Nietzsche with an idea of what the provisional goal of his project is. Nietzsche’s text, however, challenges us insofar as it represents a rebellion against the attribution of purpose to the text.

A “top-down” interpretation represents an attractive option in light of this rebellion. Speaking generally, Nietzsche views his project as an attempt at pushing
human values in new and interesting directions. As a corollary, he sees this project as
having a strong destructive component, as old values must be dismantled before new
one can rise to take their place. This sweeping demolition and reconstitution of
existing value systems Nietzsche terms the “revaluation of all values.” Many of the
central ideas in Nietzsche can ultimately be traced back to the revaluation. “Let the
value of all things be posited newly by you”—thus Nietzsche instructs his reader.
Such a description of Nietzsche’s project, however, does not assist in our project.
The revaluation, being a product of contradiction, lacks a clear direction. “For the
task of a revaluation of all values,” Nietzsche writes in Ecce Homo, “more capacities
may have been needed than have ever dwelt together in a single individual—above
all, even contrary capacities that had to be kept from disturbing, destroying one
another.” In this way, the revaluation of all values may represent for Nietzsche an
end goal, but it is no place to start. It pulls in too many directions simultaneously.

Here we encounter one of the inscrutable tensions common to Nietzsche’s
works. The maddening impossibility of the revaluation lies in the mandate that it be
achieved not as a simple reaction to things as they are but as a surpassing thereof, a
leaving behind, a forgetting. Put in Nietzsche’s terminology, the revaluation demands
not an overturning but an overcoming. Nietzsche thus fully acknowledges his own

20 “Whoever has gained wisdom concerning ancient origins will eventually look for wells of the future
and for new origins. O my brothers, it will not be a long time before new peoples originate and new
wells roar down into new depths. For earthquakes bury many wells and leave many languishing, but
they also bring to light inner powers and secrets. Earthquakes reveal new wells. In earthquakes that
strike ancient peoples, new wells break open” (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 211).
21 Nietzsche, 77. Thus Spoke Zarathustra.
22 Friedrich Nietzsche, 710. Ecce Homo in Basic Writings of Nietzsche. New York: Modern Library,
2000.
impotence at providing a roadmap that would deliver mankind to the revaluation.\textsuperscript{23} “I am a decadent,” he professes in *Ecce Homo*.\textsuperscript{24} With this admission, Nietzsche reveals that he counts himself amongst the “doctors and nurses who are themselves sick” he mentions in the third essay of the *Genealogy*.\textsuperscript{25} In other words, he is also afflicted by the sickness he is diagnosing. As such, he is not fit to lead his people out of the wilderness—all he can do is herald in that which he sees coming from afar and function as “a prelude to better players.”\textsuperscript{26} Therefore, as central a position as the revaluation occupies in Nietzsche, it does not represent a suitable springboard for our discussion because all it can provide is a destination, while what we need is a starting direction with which to navigate the intervening topography.

Nietzsche’s own self-reflection is helpful towards this end. In the autobiographical *Ecce Homo*, he describes his philosophy as “the fight against vengefulness and rancor” with the clarification of “the fight against Christianity as merely a special case of this.”\textsuperscript{27} This sentiment is apparent in many guises throughout his works. “For *that man be delivered from revenge,*” declares Zarathustra in an autobiographical moment, “that is for me the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms.”\textsuperscript{28} This formulation will serve as our first principle in our exploration of Nietzsche. It is a somewhat arbitrary decision, but the

\textsuperscript{23} Note that remarks of this sort often come coupled with heavily suggestive language clearly intended to paint Nietzsche himself as some manner of savior figure. A facile reading would write these instances off as the initial symptoms of a fragmented mind tearing itself apart at the seams. While this appraisal may be true in a sense, it misses what is perhaps the more interesting point—that the universe makes no effort to populate its narrative with internally consistent characters.
\textsuperscript{24} *Ibid.*, 680.
\textsuperscript{25} Nietzsche, 561. *On the Genealogy of Morals*.
\textsuperscript{26} Nietzsche, 209. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.
\textsuperscript{27} Nietzsche, 687. *Ecce Homo*.
\textsuperscript{28} Nietzsche, 99. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 
necessity of starting somewhere remains unavoidable. We will thus provisionally assume that Nietzsche’s project can be described as an attempt at understanding and overcoming the “vengefulness and rancor” within human nature. The many ways in which such an attempt can play into the ultimate end of bringing about the revaluation will become increasingly clear as we progress.

This definition as it stands, though, still remains somewhat vague. “Vengefulness and rancor” come in myriad forms. To which is Nietzsche referring? Christian sanctimoniousness? Metaphysical idealism? Common everyday pettiness? The answer is all of the above, and more. To Nietzsche, vengefulness represents one of the most intractable and deeply internalized human emotions. “The spirit of revenge,” laments Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, “has so far been the subject of man’s best reflection; and where there was suffering, one always wanted punishment too.”

Put simply, manifestations of “vengefulness and rancor” are everywhere. Nietzsche’s critique is radical, however, in that it treats all such manifestations as epiphenomena of a single deep-seated human condition, a condition he terms ressentiment.

**Different Flavors of ‘Good’**

Literally speaking, “ressentiment” is simply the French word for “resentment.” Thus, in the broadest sense, it can refer to any number of possible cocktails of vengefulness, malice, and general ill will towards the fortunate. Søren

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29 Nietzsche, 140. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.*
Kierkegaard stamped the term with its philosophical connotation of “ontologically internalized spite towards the more powerful” in his Two Ages, published in 1846.\(^\text{30}\)

Now, evidence that Nietzsche actually read Kierkegaard is lacking.\(^\text{31}\) Regardless, in one of the many synchronicitous convergences of which history is fond, the idea of *ressentiment* was set to assume a central role in Nietzsche’s philosophy forty-one years after its initial emergence in Kierkegaard. Nietzsche’s formulation of *ressentiment* was more specific and fleshed-out than its predecessor—Nietzsche scholar Yirmiyahu Yovel defines it as “that vengeful animosity toward the ‘other,’ usually a person of higher worth, which mediates the inferior person’s sense of selfhood and makes it possible.”\(^\text{32}\) This incarnation of *ressentiment* represents a strictly Nietzschean idea, and indeed constitutes a central element of his philosophy.

Why use a French word when German is renowned for its exacting linguistic specificity? The answer lies in historical context. Nietzsche was writing at a time when the afterimage of the French Revolution was still burned into the European intellectual consciousness. To Nietzsche, the Revolution was the most flagrant display of bile Europe had yet seen. It represented to him the current high-water mark for the raging of European spite—the most stunning evidence to date of *ressentiment*’s rampancy. Remaining continually aware of the pervasiveness with which this historical moment percolated through the thought of the time will prove valuable in our understanding of *ressentiment*.

Nietzsche first mentions *ressentiment* in 1887 with *On the Genealogy of Morals*. One of Nietzsche’s more systematic works, the *Genealogy* stages an interrogation into the psychological factors throughout history that have engendered our current morality. Fundamental to Nietzsche’s project is the assumption that value systems are not handed down from on high but rather represent human doings, works of art even, that are engineered to respond to the needs of specific peoples in specific times confronted with specific challenges. This assumption becomes the guiding principle of the *Genealogy*. In the first of its three essays, Nietzsche attempts to disentangle the two distinct species of morality he sees as the driving forces of human history: morality predicated on the binary of good vs. bad and morality predicated on the binary of good vs. evil.\(^{33}\)

The former, good vs. bad, represents the “noble” morality for which Nietzsche has become infamous. When Nietzsche appeals to “nobility,” he means in its most literal sense—that is to say, pertaining to kings, lords, and other such rulers of men. Thus, when Nietzsche discusses the “noble” morality, we must make a conscious effort to disentangle this loaded term from the web of connotations which we are accustomed to inferring. To Nietzsche, a noble morality is a morality that survived amongst nobility and was internalized by nobility because it offered a mechanism for confronting the world and rendering it meaningful that was well-suited to nobility.

In this value system, the “good” half of the moral binary predates the “bad” half. The noble man begins by defining a “good” based on his own self-interest and

\(^{33}\) Consider the following two quotes which I offer context-free: “I consider dialectic a symptom of decadence” (*Ecce Homo*, 679) and “I am a decadent” (*Ecce Homo*, 680). The reader is invited to make of that what she will.
then derives an epiphenomenal “bad” afterwards as that which works against what has been established to be “good.” Thus, “bad” to him is not an essential quality, but rather the mere absence of the “good.” Put in more concrete terms, the noble man appraises as “good” those actions which work towards the satisfaction of his desires, both practical (food, shelter, sex, etc.) and abstract (prestige, intellectual conquest, artistic creation, etc.). The counterideal “bad” is derived secondarily as whatever inhibits the realization of the “good.” Nietzsche sees the implication here being that the fundamental building blocks of the noble morality are rooted in qualities which the noble man either actively is or wishes to be, qualities such as “strong”, “healthy”, “capable of overcoming”, etc. It is in this sense that the noble morality can be seen as functioning through positive mechanisms. “Every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself.” In the framework of Nietzsche’s “yes-saying” philosophy, attribution of positivity amounts to a qualified privileging.

In opposition to the noble morality Nietzsche posits the similarly infamous “slave morality.” As with the noble morality, the hermeneut should proceed with reflexive caution lest the emotional response produced by such loaded language color her interpretation prematurely. Indeed, Nietzsche’s “slave morality” refers literally to the morality Nietzsche sees arising amongst the lowest strata of society. Here the progression of valuation attributed to the noble morality is flipped on its head. The

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34 The parallel between this formulation and St. Augustine’s formulation of good and evil is deserving of further of study.
36 Note that Nietzsche’s philosophy remains systematically opposed to any stable or unqualified privileging. While the noble morality does receive a slight nod in Nietzsche’s framework, it should not be read as unilaterally superior to its counterpart. Any valuations Nietzsche makes, through overt or tacit means, should be read as dynamic propositions subject to continued revaluation. This embracing of constant flux can be seen as the essence of Nietzsche’s “experimentalism.”
primary inclination from which subsidiary affects are derived is now vengefulness from those receiving the short end of the societal stick. As a result, valuation proceeds for the slave in the opposite direction as it proceeds for the noble. More specifically, the slave begins with the positing of the enemy or oppressor as “evil” and then from there reverse-engineers a conception of himself as “good.” This is the psychology of ressentiment, of spite towards one’s enemies, one’s world, and ultimately (as a being constituted from the preceding two) oneself. Though not deprivileging it unilaterally, Nietzsche in general approaches this attitude as a human blemish to be overcome.37

Christianity, the Slave Revolt, and Ressentiment in the Modern Age

Before we continue with our discussion of ressentiment, it is instructive to spend a moment contextualizing this slew of abstract ideas. In the context of late 19th Century Europe when Nietzsche was writing, actual slavery had become a rarity. Thus, it’s logical to wonder why slave morality and its associated ressentiment-based

37 Note, however, that although Nietzsche does seem to privilege the attitudes associated with the master morality over those associated with the slave morality, this privileging does not translate into a system for evaluating the relative rank of different people in the present. Nietzsche believed that in his day and age the “nobles” were frequently decadent and world-weary, while those scorned by society (European Jews, for instance) often had developed robust and life-affirming forms of self-discipline in order to survive. Consider the following passage from Beyond Good and Evil. “There are master morality and slave morality—I add immediately that in all higher and more mixed cultures there also appears attempts at mediation between these two moralities, and yet more often the interpenetration and mutual misunderstanding of both, and at times they occur directly alongside each other—even in the same human being, within a single soul” (Beyond Good and Evil, 394). In this way, Nietzsche argues that, while master morality and slave morality may represent useful genealogical ideas in describing the historical mechanisms that created the world as it is today, they do represent useful devices for categorizing people in the present. For Nietzsche, modern humans exist as the products of too many clashing influences for such an exercise to be meaningful. What is more, this inner contradiction between the two dueling moralities is not something to be mourned—Nietzsche rather sees it as a generative friction that will ultimately be responsible for sparking the revaluation.
value system remain relevant ideas to Nietzsche. Would not modernity render them outdated museum pieces? The answer lies in something Nietzsche terms the “slave revolt in morals.” To Nietzsche, the slave revolt in morals occurred when the morality tuned to the needs of the enslaved became socially and politically dominant. “The slave revolt in morals,” writes Nietzsche, begins when ressentiment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values.”38 This historical inflection point Nietzsche places in First Century Judea under the Roman occupation. How this historical moment maps onto Nietzsche’s framework of noble vs. slave is clear: here, we find the Romans representing the noble morality of the conquerors and the Jewish priestly caste representing the slave morality of the conquered.39

The problematic development for Nietzsche occurred when the Jewish priests, spiteful towards their Roman oppressors, found a vehicle to export the “priestly vengefulness” of ressentiment outside Judea to the broader world.40 This vehicle was Christianity. Nietzsche minces no words in his condemnation of Christianity. “Wherever there are walls I shall inscribe this eternal accusation against Christianity upon them,” he writes towards the end of his exceptionally vitriolic The Anti-Christ. “I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great intrinsic depravity, the one great instinct for revenge for which no expedient is sufficiently poisonous, secret, subterranean, petty – I call it the one immortal blemish of mankind . . .”41 Put simply, Nietzsche regards Christianity as “an act of the most spiritual revenge” perpetrated on

38 Ibid., 472.
39 Note the perfunctory disclaimer that Nietzsche’s derisive attitudes towards Second Temple Judaism are not to be extrapolated historically in either chronological direction—both Old Testament Judaism and contemporary European Judaism warranted great respect in his framework.
40 Ibid., 469.
Rome by Judea. For if we concede Nietzsche’s supposition that Christianity constituted a Trojan Horse for Judea to infect Rome with poisonous ideals, then the victor in this struggle is self-evident. After all, a Christian Pope sitting in Rome is as clear an indicator as is possible. It is for this reason that Nietzsche declares, “Rome has been defeated beyond all doubt.” Christianity thus represents to Nietzsche not only a virulent vector for spreading the disease of ressentiment worldwide, but also the murder weapon used against one of the most unabashedly noble nations the world had seen.

Implicated in this murder is Saint Paul of Tarsus, the self-proclaimed “Apostle to the Gentiles.” As the author of many of the later books of the New Testament, Paul was responsible for shaping Christianity from its raw materials of history into what Nietzsche sees as a religion of hatred and retribution. To Nietzsche, Christianity’s obsession with an afterlife in which Christians are exalted while the persecutors of Christians are laid low reeks of petty vengefulness. “I too was created by eternal hate,” Nietzsche suggests as a fitting inscription for the gates of Christian Heaven. This revenge-centric focus on the supernatural Nietzsche sees as Paul’s handiwork. What is more, Nietzsche also holds Paul responsible for turning Christianity into a disaster for the whole of humanity, as the movement to make Christianity a religion for Jew and Gentile alike is largely credited to him. In total, Nietzsche views Christianity as one of the most pernicious contagions to ever attack human morality, and he holds Paul responsible for both its creation and spread.

\[42\] Ibid., 470.
\[43\] Ibid., 489.
\[44\] Ibid., 485.
Untimeliness and Courage

The above addresses what ressentiment is and how it came to dominate the world in such an uncanny fashion. We have yet, though, to work through why precisely ressentiment represents a foe to be regarded with suspicion in the first place. Towards that end, we note that Nietzsche finds ressentiment problematic for two main reasons. First, ressentiment forfeits control over one’s self-construction to another. For Nietzsche, human interaction with the world is a process of appropriation through power. Such forfeiture thereby constitutes for Nietzsche the inability to take charge over the creation of one’s reality. This failure to shape the world into a reflection of one’s will is often then cleverly disguised as the absence or taming of an “evil” instinct. The slave, under the influence of ressentiment, “has conceived ‘the Evil Enemy,’ ‘the Evil One,’ and this in fact is his basic concept, from which he then evolves, as an afterthought and pendant, a ‘good one’—himself!”45 For Nietzsche, the capacity to define oneself free from the need of an antagonistic other is afforded a high premium.

This attribute he terms “untimeliness,” and it represents the closest thing possible to a Nietzschean virtue. A philosopher worthy of respect “shuns his age and its ‘day’”—capitulating to the values of one’s times for Nietzsche is equivalent with turning away from life.46 This is the nihilistic drive for which he reserves some of his most scathing remarks. And, while the third essay of the Genealogy argues that projects motivated by hatred of life still ultimately serve as “artifice for the

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45 Ibid., 475.
46 Ibid., 546.
preservation of life,” such projects nevertheless represent to Nietzsche roadblocks to life’s joyous celebration.\textsuperscript{47} In short, \textit{ressentiment} causes one to succumb to being a product of the times, and this surrender represents to Nietzsche a grave abandonment of human potential.

Second, Nietzsche views the psychology of \textit{ressentiment} as predicated on a malignant form of self-deception. While Nietzsche at no point argues for a system of stable universal ethics, he does privilege the drive to unwrap one’s motivations as integral to the advancement of the human species into new, interesting, more psychologically beautiful forms. This drive to critical introspection he terms the “intellectual conscience.”\textsuperscript{48} In his cosmology, Nietzsche esteems the intellectual conscience as a force that encourages one to drink deeply of life’s fluidity.\textsuperscript{49} “To stand in the midst of this \textit{rerum concordia discors} [discordant concord of things]\textsuperscript{50} and of this whole marvelous uncertainty and rich ambiguity of existence without questioning,” he writes in \textit{The Gay Science}, “without trembling with the craving and the rapture of such questioning… that is what I feel to be \textit{contemptible}.”\textsuperscript{51} In this way, Nietzsche treats the compulsion to question (even when questioning may yield

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid.}, 556.
\textsuperscript{48} Friedrich Nietzsche, 94-95. \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}.
\textsuperscript{49} At several instances throughout this investigation, you will encounter references to something I term Nietzsche’s “cosmology.” With this phrasing, I refer to the whole microcosmic dramatic landscape Nietzsche creates over the course of his body of work. This landscape functions much like a self-contained artificial mythology, complete with a accompanying hagiographies and demonologies, in which worldly conventions are inverted, subverted, and toyed with—often all at once. It provides the literary texture behind Nietzsche’s philosophy, and it is inhabited by a robust revolving cast of characters. We have heroes (Homer, Goethe), villains (Plato, Socrates, Paul, Kant, Wagner), and anti-heroes (Nietzsche himself/the author, Dionysos, Jesus). It even has its own prophet (Zarathustra) and holy book (\textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra}) that can be drawn on at strategic moments to substantiate outlandish claims or satirize those who substantiate their claims in such a fashion. All told, Nietzsche’s cosmology is the fleshed-out mythos on which he scaffolds his philosophy. It is the reason his works read so differently from most other philosophical tracts of his era.
\textsuperscript{50} Thanks go to Kaufmann for the providing the translation of the Hesiod.
\textsuperscript{51} Nietzsche, 76. \textit{The Gay Science}.
alarming results) as the defining attribute of what he considers courage. “How much truth does a spirit endure, how much truth does it dare? More and more that became for me the real measure of value,” writes Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*. “Error (faith in the ideal) is not blindness, error is cowardice.” We thus see that courage, concomitant with untimeliness, occupies for Nietzsche a privileged position intimately connected to an individual’s broader worth.

This same idea also occurs in different phrasing in *Beyond Good and Evil*. “The strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the ‘truth’ one could still barely endure,” Nietzsche writes. “Or to put it more clearly, to what degree one would *require* it to be thinned down, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified.” The centrality of courage to Nietzsche’s philosophy of valuation is thereby obvious, as is the danger he sees presented by *ressentiment*. For Nietzsche, the slave morality of *ressentiment* undermines this courage by conditioning the individual to run from his shortcomings, blaming them on an evil and malicious world instead of attempting to subordinate them to his will.

As the formulation of the intellectual conscience illustrates, Nietzsche views seeking knowledge as integral to relishing one’s humanness. What is more, self-knowledge to Nietzsche represents knowledge of the very rarest variety. “We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge,” begins the preface to the *Genealogy*. “We are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves.” In Nietzsche’s cosmology where “the common always has little value” and “all that is

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52 Nietzsche, 674. *Ecce Homo*.
53 Nietzsche, 239. *Beyond Good and Evil*.
rare is for the rare,” this attribution of rarity constitutes a tacit attribution of value.\textsuperscript{55} 

*Ressentiment* thus represents a caustic ideal insofar as it dissolves the courage necessary to attain the uncommon treasure of self-knowledge.

**An End to Overcoming**

Nietzsche sees this deficit of courage as having sweeping consequences. These consequences are perhaps most acute in regard to how the two moralities confront the hardships of life. Take first the noble morality. A noble morality tempered with courage does not see anything worthy of hatred in the world. As a result, the noble individual does not regard the misfortunes that befall him as the doings of a vindictive world—the world is neutral and blameless in his eyes. In such a world, one assumes the responsibility for one’s own fate. The noble individual is thereby prone to taking proactive measures to overcome obstacles set in front of him, as his nature is one of affirmation and initiative.

The man of *ressentiment*, however, conceives of the ‘evil’ world as a first principle. As a result, he automatically writes off any friction between him and the world as a result of the world’s unworthiness. While he differentiates himself from the noble individual through his compulsion to introspect, he fails to introspect in a fashion that brings him closer to improving his lot in the world. He censors the species of introspection in which he allows himself to partake. In this way, he

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\textsuperscript{55} Nietzsche, 243. *Beyond Good and Evil.*
preemptively deflects any process which would implicate as culprit in his troubles his own impotence to confront the world joyfully.

Thus, all angst induced in him by the whims of the world gets sublimated into venom towards existence instead of into the overcoming of internal weakness. “I have often laughed at the weaklings who thought themselves good because they had no claws,” Nietzsche has his Zarathustra quip. In this way, ressentiment represents an agent of stagnation: it induces one to justify one’s weaknesses instead of combating them. This treaty is really only an uneasy ceasefire, however, and not a true peace. For even though active battle against weaknesses is halted, the individual continues to derive from them vile sensations—embitterment, jealousy, anxiety, and the like. He simply has found an equilibrium state wherein he can deflect these vile sensations away from himself and onto the external world. In short, “someone must be to blame for his feeling vile.” Through this movement, he eliminates in his mind the need to attack the source of the sensations at the root.

This reflexive attack on the root causes of one’s psychological distress receives a special term in Nietzsche: “self-overcoming.” Yovel offers us the following definition:

Self-overcoming as Nietzsche conceives it is an act—or rather, a process—which penetrates and reshapes a person’s inner drives and urges, rather than merely imposing external restraints or censorship upon them. This process requires personal strength, and a kind of hard honesty toward oneself that ordinary psychology does not provide.

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56 Nietzsche, 118. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.
58 Yovel, 216.
As Yovel touches upon, it is a frightful ordeal to confront honestly one’s own weakness. *Ressentiment* offers an escape hatch for those not strong enough to muster the courage for such a harrowing internal journey. Given the exalted status of self-overcoming in Nietzsche’s cosmology, *ressentiment*’s undermining of this process represents a severe offense.

Further complicating matters, *ressentiment* in Nietzsche often comes coupled with an ascetic component.\(^{59}\) This coupling takes center stage in the third essay of the *Genealogy*. “An ascetic life,” writes Nietzsche, “is a self-contradiction: here rules a *ressentiment* without equal.”\(^ {60}\) This formulation may initially strike readers as highly paradoxical: after all, isn’t self-mortification a self-overcoming of sorts? The important idea to keep in mind here is that the psychology of *ressentiment* involves a denial of the fundamental goodness of the world, and Nietzsche views this rejection of physical reality as an act of cowardice. Attacking the body thus becomes for many a coping mechanism that justifies avoiding the *truly* scary process of attacking the mind.

In this way, *ressentiment* entices the individual into a war against his own body as a project towards the rejection of life. This project, however, is never consummated. Nietzsche is adamant that true nihilism is an impossibility—one cannot live in the world without somehow ascribing value to the world. Therefore, the man of *ressentiment* still must posit value in order to exist—he simply posits his

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\(^{59}\) The converse proposition, that asceticism often involves a component of *ressentiment*, should not necessarily be inferred here. “A certain asceticism, a severe and cheerful continence with the best will, belongs to the most favorable conditions of supreme spirituality, and is also among its most natural consequences” (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, 548).

\(^{60}\) Nietzsche, 553. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. 
value in an imaginary “otherworld.” This positing constitutes an attempt to put
distance between himself and the tangible world that he has judged defective. “In
that case, the case of the ascetic life, life counts a bridge to that other mode of
existence.”61 For Nietzsche, such a project also constitutes an attempt to punish the	tangible world through subordination to the imaginary otherworld. “We revenge
ourselves on life,” writes Nietzsche, “by means of the phantasmagoria of ‘another’, a
‘better’ life.”62 This implementarian attitude towards existences comprises an
important element of Nietzsche’s critique of ressentiment. Through recourse to a
Beyond, ressentiment engenders a condition in which tangible reality is denigrated as
simply a means to an end—not an end in and of itself.

There is a complication, though: in Nietzsche’s framework, the otherworld
can never be more than fabricated illusion. Therefore, the creation and maintenance
of the otherworld still relies on the tangible world because the latter is only the world
anyone has access to. Consequently, the ressentiment-induced campaign to achieve
separation from the tangible world will always remain firmly rooted in the tangible
world. In the ultimate tally, it will even serve to vindicate the tangible world. In order
to keep this inevitability at bay, ideologies of ressentiment must resort to monstrous,
auto-performative acts of asceticism to demonstrate through grisly spectacle the
conquest achieved over the tangible world. These ascetic rituals can come in any
number of forms, ranging from simple physical punishments such as self-
mortification and denial of sensual pleasures, to more abstract thought practices such
as the otherworldly formalism of metaphysicians and scientists.

61 Nietzsche, 553. On the Genealogy of Morals.
62 Nietzsche, 49. Twilight of the Idols.
To the man of ressentiment, victory over the earthly word, painted as ‘evil’ through his own artistry, represents the earthly triumph par excellence. “Pleasure,” writes Nietzsche, “is felt and sought in ill-constitutedness, decay, pain, mischance, ugliness, voluntary deprivation, self-mortification, self-flagellation, self-sacrifice.”

It is in this light that we view the intimate relationship between ressentiment and asceticism: ressentiment sublimates psychological energy into malice towards the world and asceticism provides the toolkit for sublimating that malice back into earthly deeds. The initial parcel of energy thus ironically comes full circle and actually reinforces life. “The ascetic ideal,” writes Nietzsche, “offered man meaning!” By warding off suicidal despair, ascetic ideals serve to sustain life—albeit now in a much gloomier fashion. Ressentiment, despite all its best efforts, similarly remains a force for life’s preservation. What it is not is a force for the joyous celebration of life, and it is this caveat that forms the impetus of Nietzsche’s critique.

**Vitalism**

It is due to this perverse aspect of preservation that Nietzsche falls short of condemning ressentiment unilaterally. Rather, he treats it not as an evil per se (this would represent an unwittingly ironic capitulation to ressentiment) but rather as the price that must be paid to set the stage for humanity’s future greatness. Describing the “bad conscience,” the psychological condition that cultivates of ressentiment, Nietzsche writes, “The bad conscience is an illness, there is no doubt about that, but

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64 *Ibid.*, 598.
In short, ressentiment represents the exorbitant cost that must be paid upfront by humanity as down payment for a “higher history.”

The current epoch cannot come to a close, however, until a new value system arrives to supplant the prevailing reign of ressentiment. “Where is the match of this closed system of will, goal, and interpretation? “ Nietzsche asks. “Why has it not found its match? — Where is the other ‘one’ goal?” The solution here cannot simply be a reversion to noble morality—ressentiment already took on noble morality and won. Instead, a new value is needed, a value that can compete against ressentiment. This competing value, espoused by Zarathustra and representing the only legitimate contest ressentiment has faced over the history of its dominion, Nietzsche terms “vitalism.”

This is all well and good. There’s only one problem. No one—not even Nietzsche himself—can say what this cure-all of “vitalism” would actually consist of. Paralleling the revaluation discussed earlier, vitalism represents a hazy presence on the metaphysical horizon, alluring but inscrutably veiled. A clear path leading to it is nowhere to be found. Classical metaphysics has been running off of ressentiment and its accompanying ascetic values for so long that conceiving of anything outside the system has become an impossibility. Any attempt to break free of the system of...

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65 Ibid., 524.
66 Ibid., 582.
67 This stumbling block represents a systemic issue more profound than a mere theoretical oversight. Nietzsche implies at several points that the adherents of vitalism, the “philosophers of the future,” would be suspicious of paths in the first place, having trained themselves to celebrate the caprice of the universe. Thus, the problem becomes one of figuring out what path will lead one away from all paths. In this sense, the problem of transitioning from existence predicated on ressentiment to existence predicated on vitalistic principles remains opaque to any degree of analytic theorizing.
ressentiment will inherently be reactive to the system, thereby rendering the new supplanting system nothing more than an “afterthought and pendant” to its predecessor. Such a “break” from ressentiment succeeds only in recapitulating ressentiment. In this way, projects engineered to free one from ressentiment are themselves endeavors of ressentiment insofar as they are retaliatory efforts against a dominant principle.

Nietzsche makes this clear in the third essay of the Genealogy—even if ressentiment is a diseased ideal, it is also the winning ideal, and its victorious status testifies to it being the strongest ideal the world has yet invented. “Why has it been allowed to flourish to this extent?” Nietzsche asks in regard to the ascetic ideal of ressentiment. “Why has it not rather been resisted?”  The preceding provides the answer—ressentiment represents the vexing metaphysical quagmire it does because resistance is capitulation.

Freedom from ressentiment could thus be conceived of as resistance to resistance itself. Only one character within Nietzsche’s cosmology is described as being psychologically elevated enough to pull off such a seemingly impossible contradiction and defeat ressentiment. In a remarkable twist of Nietzschean irony, this character is Jesus. This turn is certainly a surprising one given Christianity’s status as ressentiment’s greatest champion. Regardless, Nietzsche constructs the character of Jesus in The Anti-Christ to represent one possible solution to this seemingly intractable problem of ressentiment. Nietzsche’s Jesus does not construct his experience as a struggle in opposition to ressentiment—he simply lives with a

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68 Ibid., 582.
childish naivety that *ressentiment* cannot touch. Through rejection of struggle, Jesus rejects *ressentiment* and triumphantly affirms life. In this way, he unwittingly provides humanity through his actions with the example of a possible counterideal to *ressentiment*, a counterideal that is no mere noble atavism or reactive recapitulation. “This ‘bringer of glad tidings’ died as he lived, as he taught,” writes Nietzsche in *The Anti-Christ*, “not to ‘redeem mankind’ but to demonstrate how one ought to live. What he bequeathed to mankind is his *practice*.” Jesus thus represents to Nietzsche a vision of “superiority over every feeling of *ressentiment*,” a condition derived from his radically anti-reactionary psychology.

This quality of Nietzsche’s Jesus touches upon a central tension. The fear of being nothing more than just another reactionary is an anxiety that can be felt simmering under the surface throughout Nietzsche’s text. His answer to this fear is the weapon of style. As we will see, Nietzsche employs style alongside a very strategic construction of Jesus to entice the reader into a non-reactionary confrontation with *ressentiment*.

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69 In fact, Jesus affirms life to such a profuse degree that it kills him. If that reads as a fundamental contradiction in the character of Jesus, do not be alarmed. Quite the contrary, contradictions will be of crucial importance later on.

70 Nietzsche, 159. *The Anti-Christ*.

Chapter 2: Immaculate Conception

A spirit thus emancipated stands in the midst of the universe with a joyful and trusting fatalism, in the faith that only what is separate and individual may be rejected, that in the totality everything is redeemed and affirmed – he no longer denies. . . . But such a faith is the highest of all possible faiths.  

~Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols

Are not words and sounds rainbows and illusive bridges between things which are eternally apart?  

~Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

The Origins of Language

The overcoming of ressentiment is difficult to talk about—literally. For Nietzsche, any confrontation with ressentiment must inevitably entail a confrontation with language. The rationale for this formulation will become apparent as the chapter progresses. First, however, we must lay some groundwork concerning Nietzsche’s philosophy of language. In the posthumously published essay from 1873 “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” Nietzsche critiques the assumption that the descriptors we use to describe things, both to others and to ourselves, correspond fundamentally to the nature of the things being described. Rather, Nietzsche suggests that knowledge, as mediated through language, is constructed ad hoc in response to society’s need for a structuring agent to facilitate large-scale organization.

In the most general sense, Nietzsche’s ideas of interpretation all begin with the individual and then derive higher-order concepts such as social structures from the

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72 Nietzsche, 114. Twilight of the Idols.
73 Nietzsche, 217. Thus Spoke Zarathustra.
bottom up. As such, language to Nietzsche does not precede the interpretation of the individual. Put another way, language is not portrayed as a vessel of objective meaning that can be mined for truth. Instead, language represents a social system derived through many of the same mechanisms as morality—a wholly synthetic system manufactured to address practical concerns.

To Nietzsche, the functionality of language hinges less on its content than it does on its proper standardization. Out of necessity, he argues, “a way of designating things is invented which has the same validity and force everywhere.” Thus, in its primordial form, language represented nothing more illustrious than a practical means for enabling the development of complex social structures. This feat was accomplished by fixing interpretation, unbounded in the abstract, by pegging it onto a loose standard. This standard was based upon the experiences and interpretations of the most powerful members of the tribe. It is therefore quite fitting that Nietzsche makes such frequent use of monetary metaphors within “On Truth and Lying”—to him, both are technologies of standardization that enable society to grow beyond the upper bound imposed by personal subjectivity. Only through the deployment of some communally respected baseline of exchange—be it material or conceptual—can the venture of society proceed indefinitely and not implode back into its original state.

Recall from Economics 101, however, that a government’s currency functions not through the government’s actual ability to back it up, but rather through that

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74 This highly individualistic approach represents a sharp break with most previous ventures in metaphysics that begin with a large-scale concept (divine truth, universal moral order, etc.) and then derive the individual from the top down.

government’s perceived ability to back it up. Faith is what is important, not objective reality. Without belief in its stability, the system collapses. Nietzsche sees conceptual currency operating via a reliance on analogously a priori principles. “Synthetic judgments a priori should not ‘be possible’ at all,” he writes in Beyond Good and Evil. “In our mouths they are nothing but false judgments. Only, of course, the belief in their truth is necessary, as a foreground belief and visual evidence belonging to the perspective optics of life.”76 In this sense, the “accuracy” of linguistic representation is largely irrelevant—the common individual who deals in such currency has no means for verifying the contents of the treasury it purports to represent. What matters is communal faith that behind the locked doors of the treasury there lies something of substance. It is this linguistic reliance on faith that causes Nietzsche to muse, “I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar…”77 To foreshadow a bit, we can infer that Nietzsche’s campaign of revaluation must involve an attack on language somewhere along the way as language represents to him a Trojan Horse of theistic principles.

For similar reasons, language performs its role as a facilitator of society more smoothly if people regard it as a vessel of absolute truth and not a fallible system built up by the whims of history. Consequently, it becomes advantageous for a society to “forget” the terrestrial processes from which its language was born. “Only through forgetfulness could human beings ever entertain the illusion that they possess truth,” writes Nietzsche.78 It is through these processes that Nietzsche sees the practical

76 Nietzsche, 209. Beyond Good and Evil.
77 Nietzsche, 48. Twilight of the Idols.
invention of conceptual currency naturalizing into something taken for granted. Ultimately, it is this ossification that produces what is understood as “truth.” A common theme in Nietzsche is the necessity that “the bizarre and repellent aspects of pregnancy” inevitably “must be forgotten if one is to enjoy the child.”

This pithy aphorism holds true for Nietzsche’s construction of language as well as morality—only through ignorance of its non-ideal origins can language achieve its effects.

The Origins of Concepts

Also in "On Truth and Lying," Nietzsche argues that the processing of raw experience into concepts is predicated on a selective reading of sensual phenomena. Interpretation in this framework is “selective” in that it functions by ignoring certain sensed characteristics of an object while focusing attention disproportionately on others. The example Nietzsche offers to illustrate this process is that of leaves. In order for the vast menagerie of different objects that we designate as leaves to be classified by us as all examples of the concept "leaf," certain characteristics must be privileged over others.

“Every concept comes into being by making equivalent that which is non-equivalent,” writes Nietzsche. “Just as it is certain that no leaf is ever exactly the same as any other leaf, it is equally certain that the concept ‘leaf’ is formed by dropping these individual differences arbitrarily, by forgetting those features which

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79 Nietzsche, 537. *Beyond Good and Evil.*
differentiate one thing from another."\textsuperscript{80} Thus, in judging two newly discovered objects as both manifestations of the concept "leaf," the observation that one may be small and yellow and crinkly whereas the other is large and green and smooth will be afforded less import than the observation that both photosynthesize, both came from the extremities of trees, both exhibit vascular tissue, etc. It is in this sense that a "concept is produced by overlooking that which is individual and real."\textsuperscript{81} Never have there been two identical leaves—each has existed as a wholly unique specimen.

The concept “leaf,” however, represents a semantic bed of Procrustes that forces this plethora of unique phenomena to conform to a monolithic category. This flattening of experience is accomplished through structured disregard of the bulk of information our sense organs pull from a given object. There could be no “leaves” if all sensual attributes of leaves were given equal consideration—the infinite uniqueness of each would overwhelm any attempt at categorization. The concept “leaf” can thus exist only via the imposition of constraints on what sensual experience is and is not permitted to register in the realm of thought. Were such constraints not in place, a categorizational overload would result, and any type of discernment would be rendered impossible.

As per usual, it is worthwhile to recall that there “are no eternal facts, nor are there any absolute truths” in Nietzsche’s epistemology.\textsuperscript{82} This creation of the “leaf”, therefore, cannot be viewed simply as the discovery or rediscovery of a longstanding dormant truth. Rather, the “leaf” is invented as a tool for rendering the world sensible.

\textsuperscript{80} Nietzsche, 145. “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense”.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 145.
\textsuperscript{82} Friedrich Nietzsche, 15. Human, All Too Human. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.
by breaking it down into discrete components, and this invention occurs purely through subjective human means. Therefore, the decision of what properties to designate as privileged in the production of a concept fails to correspond to any intrinsic or natural ordering principle of the universe. It remains fully at the mercy of human caprice.

The human subject is free to choose properties a la carte, elevating some to the status of critical markers signifying the membership of a thing within a certain conceptual category, and jettisoning others as irrelevant. “How arbitrarily these borders are drawn, how one-sided the preferences for this or that property of a thing!”83 In this way, the concepts employed by the human subject to create order from the “the beautiful chaos of existence” represent products of an artistic venture. 84 A concept is formed through the rejection of some properties as meaningful to the conceptual identity of a thing, and the choice of which properties to reject in this fashion bears the mark of no eternal truth—only subjective style. By extension, the concepts that are formed from this subjective rejection thus represent artistic productions and not vessels of objective meaning. It is precisely this idea that Nietzsche intends with his famous saying, “one is much more of an artist than one knows.”85 In Nietzsche’s words, concepts function as “an aesthetic way of relating, by which I mean an allusive transference, a stammering translation into a quite different language.”86 Put simply, they are approximations crafted from rejection,

83 Nietzsche, 144. “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense”.
84 Nietzsche, 223. The Gay Science.
85 Nietzsche, 295. Beyond Good and Evil.

and it is these approximations that ultimately freeze out and form the content of formalized language.

The Origins of Reality

Nietzsche sees the stakes in this venture, however, as higher than simply determining how communication amongst individuals unfolds. The critical leap is that Nietzsche sees neither thought nor communication as discrete activities taking place in respective vacuums. He posits instead an intimate link between the two, suggesting that the construction of human thought is modeled after the construction of human communication. “Consciousness has developed only under the pressure of the need for communication,” Nietzsche writes in The Gay Science. He elaborates on this point later on in the same essay:

Man, like every living being, thinks continually without knowing it; the thinking that rises to consciousness is only the smallest part of all this—the most superficial and worst part—for only this conscious thinking takes the form of words, which is to say signs of communication, and this fact uncovers the origin of consciousness.

In this way, Nietzsche sees language as eminently important insofar as it mirrors thought and determines what classes of thoughts can be thought. So, when a concept is constructed by arbitrarily choosing to ignore certain properties of an object, the resultant product becomes more than just a convenient social tool—it becomes a building block for its creator’s reality. “The way men usually are, it takes a name to make something visible for them.”

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87 Nietzsche, 298. The Gay Science.
88 Ibid., 298-299.
89 Ibid., 218.
using the same collected substrate of concepts—i.e. language—as interpersonal communication is.

For this reason, it would not be inaccurate to conceive of thought as communication one conducts with oneself. It follows then that conscious thought, in Nietzsche’s framework, is shaped through the same mechanisms as language and contains within itself the same arbitrariness and the same social imprint. “Thoughts are the shadows of our feelings,” Nietzsche writes in a famous aphorism from *The Gay Science*, “always darker, emptier, and simpler.” Thought to Nietzsche thus does not represent a virginal expanse that can be approached *a priori* the world as it would for a Cartesian. Rather, mental movements that rise to the level of conscious thought have already been mutilated by conceptualization to the extent that they represent mere husks of their initial sensual character.

Throughout his works Nietzsche is fond of pointing out the human tendency towards confusing the metaphor for a thing with the thing itself. The arc of conceptualization offers the archetypal example of this error. Humans create concepts so as to convey approximations of sensation amongst themselves through tactical omission of certain mutually, if arbitrarily, agreed upon details. These concepts, honed for social functionality not faithfulness to experience, then are internalized into the raw material of thought because thought and communication deal in the same currency. Finally, the human subject conveniently forgets that the concepts in which his mind swims are approximations created for the purpose of translating one subject’s experience of reality into the register of another. He then

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mistakes the stylized approximation of reality for reality. “Forgetting that the original metaphors of perception were indeed metaphors, he takes them for the things themselves.”

To him, the “mathematically divided firmament of concepts” is no longer derived from reality, but rather the converse. No longer is reality simply described as a finite set of objects and phenomena—it fundamentally is a finite set of objects and phenomena. In short, concepts have become a condition of possibility for reality. Semblance has morphed into identity.

So, to summarize, reality is given substance by concepts, and concepts are created through structured disregard of certain properties of sensual experience. A powerful transitive equality is here obvious. Put simply, what we choose to reject and what we choose to keep when forming our concepts of reality determines our experience of that reality. Therefore, an understanding of the mechanism of renunciation through which an individual forms his collected reservoir of concepts offers us a profound insight into that individual’s experience of the world.

**The Redeemer**

Equipped with an understanding of Nietzsche’s philosophy of language, we can now begin to unwrap how Nietzsche sees Jesus’ unique relationship with language as enabling his victory over *ressentiment*. Nietzsche’s construction of Jesus begins with an attempt to read the historical Jesus psychologically. “What I am concerned with is the psychological type of the redeemer,” he writes in *The Anti-

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Christ. With this proclamation begins the middle third of the book, a section rendered distinct from the bulk of Nietzsche’s writing by its warm timbre and unusually laudatory tone. In it, Nietzsche offers his thoughts on who the actual figure of Jesus may have been. In crafting his own personal Jesus, Nietzsche rejects out of hand any notion of Jesus as a supernatural or miraculous personage, and instead attempts to understand him strictly as a human. The Jesus Nietzsche is concerned with is not a Jesus defined through his historical actions (a revolutionary figure, political figure, etc.) nor is it a Jesus defined through the religious ideals of which he has been made a representative. Rather, Nietzsche wants to attempt a psychological understanding of Jesus that gets at his characteristic mode of interpreting the world. Towards that end, the middle third of the book becomes an attempt by Nietzsche to view the world through Jesus’ eyes. This proto-psychoanalytic exegesis produces what I will term Nietzsche’s “psychologized” Jesus.

The most salient indication that Jesus is a figure we need to pay careful attention to occurs when Nietzsche describes him as embodying “superiority over every feeling of ressentiment.” As was discussed earlier, “the fight against vengefulness and rancor” (that is to say, against ressentiment) occupies a central position in Nietzsche’s thought. Therefore, the emergence within the text of a figure to which Nietzsche attributes the capacity for conquering ressentiment should activate an immediate arsenal of klaxons in the mind of the Nietzsche scholar.

93 Nietzsche, 152. The Anti-Christ.
94 Ibid., 165.
95 Nietzsche, 687. Ecce Homo.
We are thus faced with the obvious question: through what mechanism does Nietzsche’s psychologized Jesus defeat *ressentiment*? The answer can be found in the handful of seductive, if cryptic, references Nietzsche makes in *The Anti-Christ* to Jesus’ relationship with language, symbols, and reality.

For the sake of clarity, I will begin with the punch line. Nietzsche sees Jesus as free from the error of conceptualization detailed previously. His reality is constructed not of finite and discrete objects, but of a single, smooth continuum. He never allows the metaphor of reality to supplant reality itself. The ubiquitous inclination “to treat as equal what is merely similar” is absent within him.96 Identity never subsumes semblance.

Nietzsche dives into his stirring eulogy of Jesus with the question, “What are the glad tidings?” To this he answers, “True life, eternal life is found – it is not promised, it is here, it is *within you*: as life lived in love, in love without deduction or exclusion, without distance.”97 This powerful line can be mined for meaning on many levels. We will come back to it later. For now, we will focus on Nietzsche’s assertion that Jesus lived his life without deduction, exclusion, or distance. These assertions imply that the world Jesus constructed and inhabited was not forged out of stylistic rejection. As was discussed in the earlier, stylistic rejection operates via exclusion, and exclusion for Nietzsche’s Jesus is explicitly impossible. To Jesus, no sensual property of experience is separated as special. In this fashion, Jesus refuses to partake in the system of standardized phenomenal disregard by which Nietzsche’s theory of knowledge sees concepts as being created. Every property of every object

Jesus encounters is privileged unequivocally. “Denial is precisely what is totally impossible for him.” He is pathologically incapable of tactically ignoring certain sensual phenomena in order to break the world down into discrete digestible components.

Put more pithily, Jesus rejects rejection. This act in turn signifies his refusal to submit sensual experience to abstraction. In “On Truth and Lying,” Nietzsche suggests that individuals who have embraced abstraction “no longer tolerate being swept away by sudden impressions and sensuous perceptions; they now generalize all these impressions first, turning them into cooler, less colourful concepts.” It is precisely this state of anaesthetization to experience that is the “distance” Jesus eschews through the renunciation of abstraction.

No More Opposites

Were it married to but one tantalizing line, the above conclusion would represent an admittedly tenuous leap. Corroborating evidence, however, abounds. Further explicating the meaning of Jesus’ life, Nietzsche writes, “The ‘glad tidings’ are precisely that there are no more opposites; the kingdom of Heaven belongs to children.” Again, we see the motif of the child as a representative of freedom from

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98 Ibid., 156.
100 It is this child-like exuberance towards experience that is the key to explaining Nietzsche’s puzzling characterization of Jesus as an “occurrence of retarded puberty” (The Anti-Christ, 156). More on this later on.
101 Nietzsche, 156. The Anti-Christ.
the cold distance of abstraction. For the moment, though, consider Nietzsche’s claim that Jesus functioned as a lived abolition of opposites.

This remark should be considered in light of Nietzsche’s view that language—the aggregate reservoir of concepts—functions via strings of crude binary oppositions. In the second part of *Beyond Good and Evil*, he argues that language “will not get over its awkwardness, and will continue to talk of opposites where there are only degrees and many subtleties of gradation.” Nietzsche’s argument here is that language produces a description of an experience by assigning that experience a characteristic configuration of switches (concepts) each flicked to either a “yes” or “no” position. The middle is systematically excluded. A sensation processed through language thus exists as a unique signature of affirmed and negated properties. For this reason, Nietzsche views language and conceptualization as exercises fundamentally predicated on the construction of opposites.

The above formulation may come across as somewhat opaque. Regrettably, such linguistic contortions are a sacrifice we often must make when attempting to get behind the workings of language while still operating within the confines of language. An example could nevertheless prove illuminating. Consider the literal definition of the word with which I concluded the previous sentence. “Illuminating.” How would you describe it? Don’t worry about being comprehensive—just consider whatever functional working definition rises first to the top of your mind. Perhaps you define...

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102 This assertion is intended only to apply to Nietzsche’s views on conceptual, language-driven, conscious thought. Overall, Nietzsche is highly suspicious of dialectic, and he treats the dialectical properties of the conceptual mind as indicative of its shallow character. The bulk of the human mind—subconscious drives, pre-conscious sensual perception, aesthetic intuition—he conceives as operating non-dialectically.
103 Nietzsche, 225. *Beyond Good and Evil*.
104 An Aristotelian ghost still haunts language.
the word by invoking a synonym. “Bright.” Perhaps you make use of metaphor. “Sun-like.” Perhaps you employ a negative definition. “Not dark.” Breaking all these potential definitions down into their component parts, we see that they are all operating through the same logic. The concept “illuminating” is given its identity by drawing on other concepts that it either “is” or “is not” like. “Illuminating” is bright, is a proper descriptor of the Sun, is not dark. Extrapolating this behavior outwards, we observe how all concepts for Nietzsche are constituted through sprawling webs of binary opposition with other concepts.105

But back to the matter at hand. Assuming that opposites are the modus operandi of language and language is the sedimentation of concepts, Nietzsche’s assertion that for Jesus “there are no more opposites” amounts to a claim that Jesus rejected the use of conceptualization to build his reality. What is more, it says that Jesus rejected not merely the superficial end products of conceptualization but rather rejected the venture holistically on first principles. Going further and considering this claim in light of Nietzsche’s suggestion that “the fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is the faith in opposite values,” we see that Jesus’ rejection of conceptualization amounts to a blow against the whole venture of metaphysics.106

105 It may be instructive here to see Nietzsche’s formulation of conceptualization as analogous to Derrida’s formulation of différence insofar as both operate through an infinite deferral of that which they purport to signify.

A Shifting Metaphor

As was discussed earlier, the utility of language comes about through its ability to create approximations of reality that are specific enough to be descriptive but generic enough to translate experience intersubjectively. In order for the system to work, however, the concepts that constitute language must be stable. To revive the metaphor from before, investors need to have faith that currency has value. Therefore, language has to be kept hermetically quarantined from the wild swings of taste permitted by subjectivity. If individuals do not believe language has the power to transmit ideas in a stable, concrete fashion, the venture collapses. As a result, it is necessary to the purpose of language (and by extension conceptualization) that meaning remain largely fixed. Some drift over long spans of time is inevitable, but a concept that meant isosceles triangle one day and pork-fried rice the next would have no usefulness as a concept. It is in this fashion that the concept of the concept implies ontologically its own static nature. Ergo, when Nietzsche writes that Jesus “cares nothing for what is fixed,”107 we see here as well more evidence reinforcing the theory that Nietzsche’s psychologized Jesus is distinguished by his aconceptual nature.

Nietzsche also says of Jesus, “the whole of reality, the whole of nature, language itself, possesses for him merely the value of a sign, a metaphor.”108 Concluding this thought, he describes Jesus as “a symbolist par excellence.”109 What Nietzsche is saying here is that Jesus is immune to the error of mistaking experience’s

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107 Nietzsche, 156. *The Anti-Christ.*
109 Ibid., 157.
metaphor for experience itself. He is intimately aware that the thoughts of his that are processed to the point that they can be made conscious do not reflect the “truth” of the world. Rather, he regards all conscious thought as artistic and stylized approximation of something which is fundamentally non-essential. Identity cannot subsume semblance because there is only semblance.

The holistic result of Jesus’ profound mistrust of concepts is a worldview that treats experience as “All fundamentally one law, all consequences of one instinct.” Unwillingness to conceptualize means unwillingness to compartmentalize. Jesus doesn’t break the world down into discrete concepts. He doesn’t understand reality through categories of identity. He regards all sensual experience as wholly unique, relatable to other sensual experience exclusively through semblance. The possibilities of interpretation through semblance, however, are never-ending. With no means of quantization, reality becomes an undifferentiated stream of semblance. Here we find the route of Nietzsche’s monistic portrayal of Jesus. Jesus rejects concepts, and this rejection of the faculty for separating life into component parts induces a psychological state in which all experience blends together into a singular river of similarity and metaphor.

The Overcoming of Ressentiment

Nietzsche’s rendition of Jesus as a rejecter of conceptualization is hopefully at this point clear. The far-reaching implications of this rejection, however, are not

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111 Nietzsche’s affection for Heraclitus is conspicuous.
immediately evident. To Nietzsche, much of the significance of the rejection lies in its function in the overcoming of ressentiment within the character of Jesus. This overcoming becomes perhaps Jesus’ defining attribute within The Anti-Christ. Indeed, Nietzsche explicitly describes him as embodying “superiority over every feeling of ressentiment.”[112] Given ressentiment’s role as central antagonist in Nietzsche’s mythos, the gravitas of this statement is self-evident. “Neither by words nor in his heart,” writes Nietzsche of Jesus, “does he resist the man who does him evil.”[113] We thus see that Nietzsche’s psychologized Jesus is not simply externally placid while seething underneath. He has not been merely cowed by life. Rather, he experiences life utterly free of vengeful urges. The defeat of ressentiment permeates him to the core.

Through what mechanism does this defeat occur? The short answer is via Jesus’ amoralism—that is to say, through his rejection of stable, hierarchical rankings of action. To explore this conclusion, we begin by revisiting Jesus’ appraisal of the world as “All fundamentally one law, all consequences of one instinct.”[114] Jesus’ reality is not an aggregation of component parts. Rather, it is a single indivisible whole. Now consider the apparatus by which valuation operates. The guts of the valuation process involve the appraising of certain concepts as of greater worth than certain other concepts. This establishment of rank positions concepts on something akin to a spectrum, generally calibrated such that “good” and “bad/evil” anchor the

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[112] Ibid., 165.
[113] Ibid., 157.
[114] Ibid., 158.
poles. The concept’s value is determined by its position on the spectrum relative to other concepts. Thus the process is both hierarchical and differential.

Jesus, however, does not deal in discrete concepts. He possesses exactly one indivisible reality and nothing more. As a result, he lacks the raw materials to construct a framework of conceptual comparison. For this reason Jesus is incapable of hierarchical valuation. Now, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche defines morals as “the doctrine of the relations of supremacy under which the phenomenon ‘life’ comes to be.” Such “relations of supremacy” are impossible for Jesus, quite simply because his world is unity and relation cannot occur between a thing and itself. These relations are the building blocks of morals within Nietzsche’s model, and it for this reason that their absence within Jesus equates to an absence of morals as well. “The law was for servants,” Nietzsche has his Jesus say in *Beyond Good and Evil*. “Love God as I love him, as his son! What are morals to us sons of God!” Nietzsche’s Jesus is a profound amoralist.

As was discussed earlier, the defining attribute of *ressentiment* is a feeling of vindictiveness towards powers in life one has propped up to be “evil” antagonists. But this cannot occur in Jesus. As an amoralist who rejects discrete categories of experience, the idea of life being composed of opposing forces of “good” and “evil” is nonsense. Jesus’ world is an all or nothing proposition—to reject parts of it *a la carte* as “evil” is impossible within his ontology. Jesus erects no partitions to keep his attributions compartmentalized. Any attribution made to part of the stream of semblance will inevitably bleed into all others. Therefore, if Jesus were to reject any

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115 Nietzsche, 217. *Beyond Good and Evil.*
part of life he would be rejecting the whole venture. And, as Nietzsche discusses at length in the third essay of the *Genealogy*, for a living thing to holistically reject life is an impossibility. That leaves as Jesus’ only recourse unconditional affirmation. Life is accepted peacefully and in its totality.

**Heaven on Earth**

These two characteristics—disavowal of conceptualization and freedom from *ressentiment*—represent the two central signifiers of Jesus’ special status within Nietzsche’s cosmology. Taken collectively, the two play off and catalyze one another to define the overarching psychological state Nietzsche uses to encapsulate Jesus’ experience of life: “the Kingdom of Heaven.” To Nietzsche, the Kingdom of Heaven represents a powerful and unique mode of being, but not a supernatural one. “The ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ is a condition of the heart,” he writes. Put another way, its creation requires the intercession of no supernatural force—it is a purely subjective condition of the psyche. Indeed, this is much of the point. “True life, eternal life is found – it is not promised, it is here, it is *within you*.”¹¹⁷ The positing of the Kingdom of God within earthly reality explains why Nietzsche finds Jesus such a compelling figure despite the malignant string of events he unwittingly instigated.

Free from both the conceptual prejudice to shoehorn experience into imperfect categories and the vengeful thirst for a faraway God to play the role of hangman, Jesus is able to experience the Kingdom of Heaven as an eminent phenomenon. This

is the final and most sweeping consequence of the refusal to conceptualize. If stable, oppositional categories are to be disavowed across the board, then the binary of God and creation can be no exception. Jesus’ refusal to employ discrete, mutually exclusive concepts thereby collapses the distinction between God and the world into a single lived reality. He “denied any chasm between God and man, he lived this unity of God and man as his glad ‘tidings’.\textsuperscript{118} His gift to humanity was the demonstration of life lived with “zero qualitative distinction” separating one from God.

To Nietzsche, such a radical concatenation represents a rousing blow against the most malignant problem of metaphysics: the vesting of meaning in an empty imaginary. “If one shifts the center of gravity of life out of life into the ‘Beyond’ – into nothingness – one has deprived life as such of its centre of gravity.”\textsuperscript{119} Jesus thus overcomes the most fatal defect in philosophy and religion by creating a Paradise that is not physically or temporally removed, but rather situated squarely in the here and now. To Nietzsche, “One has deprived reality of its value, its meaning, its truthfulness, to precisely the extent to which one has mendaciously invented an ideal world.”\textsuperscript{120} Under this formulation, Jesus lived a fuller and more genuine life than anyone—for him, everyday life was an enchanted experience because the absence of conceptual walls implied an aspect of God within all experience. Jesus’ faith is “every moment its own miracle, its own reward, its own proof, its own ‘kingdom of God’.”\textsuperscript{121} This system of radical divine eminence demands the abolition of “every

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 167.
\textsuperscript{120} Nietzsche, 674. \textit{Ecce Homo}.
\textsuperscript{121} Nietzsche, 156. \textit{The Anti-Christ}. 
kind of distancing relationship between God and man.”¹²² As a result of this abolition, special procedures for reaching the divine are rendered obsolete. “He no longer required any formulas, any rites for communicating with God – not even prayer.”¹²³ The divine is everywhere—it’s synonymous with existence at every level. “Blessedness is not promised, it is not tied to any conditions: it is the only reality – the rest is signs for speaking of it…” Here we find the key to Jesus’ unique nature—he never confuses symbol and reality, and the world he inhabits teems with divine presence as a result.

Even the horror of the Cross wasn’t enough to pierce the unequivocal affirmation of life prescribed by his Kingdom of Heaven. At one point, Nietzsche recounts his version of the famous Sunday school tale of Jesus and the thief on Calvary. “‘That was verily a divine man, a child of God!’ – says the thief. ‘If thou feelest this’ – answers the redeemer – ‘thou art in Paradise, thou art a child of God.’”¹²⁴ The moral of the anecdote is obvious—Jesus’ Kingdom of Heaven represents affirmation of life to such an absolute degree that even the most monstrous tortures human ingenuity can devise are powerless to disintegrate it. Even when enmired in the grisliest throes of human agony, Jesus sees the world as a divine and fundamentally good place. A more striking antipode to ressentiment is difficult to conceive of.

¹²² Ibid., 157.
¹²³ Ibid., 158.
¹²⁴ Ibid., 160.
The Value of the Revaluator

Given all the above, what then does Nietzsche see as the utility of Jesus’ legacy? He certainly doesn’t see Jesus’ lasting worth bound up in supernatural ideas of sin and salvation as would the Church, which he describes explicitly as constructed “out of the antithesis to the Gospel.”

This attitude he attributes to the villainous Paul, whom Nietzsche holds chiefly responsible for the profaning of Jesus’ legacy. Instead, Nietzsche views Jesus as an exemplar whose practice demonstrated the possibility of freedom from language and ressentiment. He holds Jesus in high esteem as one of the tiny handful of historical figures who, in the broad sense, invented their own values. Put simply, Jesus was “untimely”—even to his own disciples a psychology of his caliber “could not exist until it had been reduced to more familiar forms.”

Nietzsche considers the untimely individuals to be those who drive history forward and keep humanity dynamic, and in Jesus he sees perhaps the most untimely individual the world had yet seen. Therefore, Jesus is held up in Nietzsche’s cosmology as the most salient example of what it means to live in defiance of one’s times.

In this way, Nietzsche sees most attempts at understanding Jesus throughout history as missing the point entirely by focusing on his death instead of his life. “This ‘bringer of glad tidings’ died as he lived, as he taught,” writes Nietzsche, “not to ‘redeem mankind’ but to demonstrate how one ought to live. What he bequeathed to

125 Ibid., 160.
126 Ibid., 155.
mankind is his practice.” On this point Nietzsche is adamant—Jesus saw Heaven not as goal for the afterlife but as a way of living in the moment. To Nietzsche, Jesus’ entire life’s work stood in opposition to the very need for afterlives. “He knows that it is through the practice of one’s life that one feels ‘divine’, ‘blessed’, ‘evangelic’, at all times a ‘child of God’.” Thus, Nietzsche argues that the Christian reading of Jesus’ message as one of otherworldliness constitutes “world-historical irony” of the highest order, for the profound value of Jesus’ teachings is found in his ability to effortlessly overcome himself without need of any Beyond. He taught that Heaven on earth is achievable by all at any moment without recourse to special prerogatives of any sort—in Nietzsche’s words, “that evangelic equal right of everyone to be a child of God.” His gift to humanity was not salvation, but rather the knowledge, communicated through his practice, that humanity doesn’t need salvation. It is this teaching that constitutes the ultimate value of Jesus in Nietzsche’s eyes.

127 Ibid., 159.
128 Ibid., 158.
129 Ibid., 160.
130 Ibid., 165.
Chapter 3: Pedagogy, Practice, and the Problem of Prescriptivity

Let us stop thinking so much about punishment, reproaching, and improving others! We rarely change an individual, and if we should succeed for once, something may also have been accomplished, unnoticed: we may have been changed by him. Let us rather see to it that our own influence on all that is yet to come balances and outweighs his influence. Let us not contend in a direct fight--and that is what all reproaching, punishing, and attempts to improve others amount to. Let us rather raise ourselves that much higher. Let us color our own example ever more brilliantly. Let our brilliance make them look dark. No, let us not become darker ourselves on their account, like all those who punish others and feel dissatisfied. Let us sooner step aside. Let us look away.\footnote{131}{Nietzsche, 254. The Gay Science.}

\textemdash Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}

What a philosopher is, that is hard to learn because it cannot be taught; one must “know” it, from experience—or one should have the pride not to know it.\footnote{132}{Nietzsche, 329. Beyond Good and Evil}

\textemdash Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}

An Impossible Exemplar

Let us now take a step back for a moment and examine where we presently find ourselves. For reasons previously touched upon, this paper chooses to characterize Nietzsche’s project as an attempt at understanding humanity’s battle with \textit{ressentiment} towards the ultimate end of overcoming \textit{ressentiment}. In this sense, it can be seen as both a descriptive and prescriptive venture. Chapter 1 discussed the impetus behind this venture—that is to say, what \textit{ressentiment} is and why Nietzsche feels the need to train his guns on it. Chapter 2 provided a descriptive analysis of how one man in Nietzsche’s cosmology managed to triumph over \textit{ressentiment}. We thus find ourselves confronting a conspicuous lacuna—the prescriptive component is lacking. The narrative of Jesus satisfies Nietzsche’s project splendidly in the
descriptive arena in that it details precisely how one historical skirmish with *ressentiment* unfolded. But at what point in this narrative do we find a jumping-off point for the overcoming to take place? Does Nietzsche see the narrative of Jesus playing a role in leading his people out of the wilderness? Or is he actually just practicing the same philosophical dilettantism on which he heaps so much scorn?

Put in scientific terms, the second possibility represents a trivial solution to our problem. Towards the end of creating a compelling interpretation, we give Nietzsche the benefit of the doubt and attribute to the Jesus narrative a purpose not merely in *ressentiment*’s description but, indeed, its overcoming as well.

The question thereby becomes one of how to bring to light the generative component of Nietzsche’s Jesus that we have inferred must be present below the surface. The simple answer would be to say that Nietzsche’s Jesus functions as a pedagogical figure that we can all attempt to emulate in order to achieve in our own lives victories over *ressentiment* analogous to the one he achieved in his. This is the “prescriptive ideal” reading. There are two grave problems, however, with the idea of a Nietzschean *imitatio Christi*.

**Zarathustra and the Dangers of Discipleship**

The first problem is the obvious friction between the idea of discipleship and Nietzsche’s radical elevation of “untimeliness.” As was discussed earlier, Nietzsche puts a high premium on the drive to put as much distance between one’s own values and the values of one’s age as is possible. This “distancing” he considers integral to
the cultivation of value systems that actually push history in interesting new directions and are not simply pale reflections and recapitulations of the times that spawned them.

This sentiment is the origin of the vertical up-down action that forms the central paradox of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It is the nature of the philosophical mind to want to communicate its ideas, but only isolation allows these ideas to grow robust and healthy. Nietzsche sees the two-way flow of communication with the rabble as a channel to “sickening fumes of inner corruption and the hidden rot of disease”—in other words, as poison to thought still in its vulnerable nascent stages.¹³³ It is for this reasons that a good Nietzschean philosopher “must be accustomed to living on mountains.”¹³⁴ Yet the desire to communicate can never be excised. Thus Zarathustra must continually descend from the mountain only to retreat back up again in flight from the noxious “bad air” of the masses. The implication here is clear—laudable values can never be those that one passively allows to osmose in from one’s surroundings. Rather, active feats of artistry are required for generative valuation, along with all the consternation and hardships such pursuits entail.

It is for this reason that Zarathustra, in one of his forays into the populous lowlands, makes it a point to reject the cult of disciples accreting onto him. “Verily, I counsel you,” he proclaims to the assembled throng, “go away from me and resist Zarathustra! And even better: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he deceived you.”¹³⁵ At work here is the same principle behind the previously discussed intellectual

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¹³⁴ Nietzsche, 125. *The Anti-Christ.*
¹³⁵ Nietzsche, 78. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.*
conscience. To Nietzsche, accepting a prepackaged value system misses the point of valuation entirely. Consider the following remarks on subjectivity from Beyond Good and Evil:

There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective “knowing”; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing, our “objectivity,” be.\(^{136}\)

The above passage restates a central tenet of Nietzsche’s philosophy of knowledge that all his philosophy should be read in light of. “Truth” is rendered such by the valuative faculties of the subject. Therefore, there is no reason to assume that what holds true for one should hold true for all.\(^{137}\) In Nietzsche’s words, “never yet has truth hung on the arm of the unconditional.”\(^{138}\) All knowledge and valuation occurs as a function of the perspective through which it is taking place. As a result, claims of absolute knowledge and universal value are absurd given the nonnegotiable heterogeneity of human perspective.

It is with this rationale that Zarathustra instructs the adoring crowd to reject him in as many ways as they can conceive of. Zarathustra’s values are those suited to Zarathustra—were the crowd to accept and internalize his values, they would be donning ill-fitting outfits not tailored with them in mind. What is more, adoption of ready-made values offered up by the external world provides for the individual a means of circumventing the more grueling but ultimately rewarding process of value creation. “Is there anything more beautiful,” Nietzsche asks in Beyond Good and

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\(^{136}\) Nietzsche, 555. On the Genealogy of Morals.

\(^{137}\) This is the meaning of the pun in the subtitle of Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All. In other words, values that claim to be for everyone—i.e. “for one and all”—are actually fit for no one.

\(^{138}\) Nietzsche, 53. Thus Spoke Zarathustra.
Evil, “than looking for one’s own virtues?”139 The answer to this rhetorical question is clear. Indeed, Nietzsche’s portrayal suggests that if any aspect of Zarathustra is worth emulating (and this is left an open question), it is the process by which he seeks values that are exclusively his.140

Nietzsche has Zarathustra continue with a spirited address. “You revere me,” chides Zarathustra, “but what if your reverence tumbles one day? Beware lest a statue slay you.”141 The implication here is that only values found within oneself will prove sturdy enough to stand up to the trials of life.142 Values lifted from the external

139 Nietzsche, 335. Beyond Good and Evil.
140 Nietzsche’s descriptions of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, one of the few individuals he held in unwaveringly high esteem, are illustrative of many of the points being discussed and offer a compelling window into what Nietzschean virtues could look like. Consider the following. “He did not sever himself from life, he placed himself within it; nothing could discourage him and he took as much as possible upon himself, above himself, within himself. What he aspired to was totality; he strove against the separation of reason, sensuality, feeling, will (—preached in the most horrible scholasticism by Kant, the antipodes of Goethe); he disciplined himself to a whole, he created himself” (Twilight of the Idols, 114).
141 Nietzsche, 78. Thus Spoke Zarathustra.
142 This idea raises a number of vexing questions. Nietzsche is unflinching in his belief that there exists no sovereign self behind the action. “There is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” (On the Genealogy of Morals, 481). If this is the case, however, then what are we to make of Nietzsche’s implication that one should look inside oneself for one’s values? Does Nietzsche mean to suggest that there exists some manner of pristine interiority in which values untainted by the exterior world can be found? If so, does this imply that Nietzsche is reinstalling a stable interior subject immune to the caprice of society and circumstance? Does this stable interior subject with whom our salvation from the woes of our birth rests amount to... something resembling a soul?

These questions touch upon one of the most central tensions in Nietzsche, and, predictably, invite no easy answers. Martin Heidegger suggests a similar critique of Nietzsche in his eponymous lectures, arguing that Nietzsche’s efforts to abolish the interior subject ultimately leave a vacuum that can only be filled by the rapacious will to power. The end result of this process he sees as a new breed of self wherein the interior subject is not abolished but rather transformed into an insatiable devouring force only capable of relating to the external world through appropriation.

Volumes could be written about this issue without exhausting the possibility for debate. However, one passage from Beyond Good and Evil may prove instructive in illuminating how Nietzsche would perhaps defend himself against a critique such as Heidegger’s. “But the way is open for new versions and refinements of the soul-hypothesis; and such conceptions as ‘mortal soul’ and ‘soul as subjective multiplicity’ and ‘soul as social structure of the drives and affects,’ want henceforth to have citizens’ rights in science” (Beyond Good and Evil, 210-211). In this way, we see that Nietzsche acknowledges the impossibility of abolishing the soul entirely, or at least all at once. We can thus see him as advocating instead a perpetual unsettling of conceptions of self. Nietzsche does not aspire to tear
world derive their authority from a substrate over which the individual has no control—and if that substrate were to falter, the bottom would fall out from the values built upon it. Accepting values from the external world thus becomes equivalent to resigning oneself to being a plaything for the capricious winds of fate. In Nietzsche’s power-centric cosmology, such a surrender of control warrants immediate suspicion if not outright condemnation.

Towards the end of the monologue, Zarathustra proclaims to his crestfallen devotees, “Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only when you have all denied me will I return to you.” This line represents a direct inversion of one of Jesus’ repeated sayings from Matthew: “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Through this tactical inversion, Zarathustra drives home the idea that self-knowledge alone can provide a bedrock firm to enough to construct values upon.

This instance is particularly noteworthy, however, for its showcasing of Nietzsche’s stylistic virtuosity in constructing the story of Zarathustra as a satire of the New Testament story of Jesus. In all four books of the Gospel, Peter (a.k.a. Simon) denies his affiliation with Jesus three times in the aftermath of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. In most Christian exegetical works, Peter’s denials are construed as his most inglorious moments, the disgrace of which are compounded by Peter’s lofty position as most favored amongst the disciples and future father of the Church.

down the whole edifice of Western selfhood—he simply desires to keep the venture destabilized enough for it to remain generative and interesting.

143 Ibid., 78.
144 Matthew 10:39, 16:25
Nietzsche flips this convention on its head. Zarathustra represents a literary analogue for Jesus, but the last thing he wants is a Church to rise up in his wake. Continuing with this inversion, denial of Zarathustra is elevated as the most glorious act of which a disciple of Zarathustra is capable.

In a certain sense, the entire narrative of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* can be read as a critique of the blunders, oversights, and assorted absurdities of the Christian tradition. Nietzsche invites this interpretation by structuring *Zarathustra* to read like a hyperbolic *hysterion proteron* of the New Testament, complete with the parables, aphoristic style, familiar figures of speech, and the analogous sage-like protagonist one would expect. For this reason, we can read *Zarathustra* as jointly descriptive of the failings of Christian thought and prescriptive of novel and interesting possibilities for their improvement.

It is thereby apparent that when Nietzsche has his Zarathustra reject discipleship, this moment can be taken as a critique of the way Jesus has been approached throughout history. In short, simple imitation, even of a genuinely great figure, will never succeed in what it sets out to accomplish. In taking up the path of another, the drive to leave one’s own unique imprint on reality is subordinated. This subordination equates to a sacrifice of one’s own potential for realization of the will.

What is more, attempts at emulation represent a frightfully contorted perversion of Jesus’ legacy. As was elaborated on in Chapter 2, Nietzsche sees Jesus’ significance dwelling in his overcoming of ressentiment, the root cause of base emotions such as envy. In the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche suggests “If only I were
someone else,” as a fitting maxim of *ressentiment*.¹⁴⁶ Permitting the desire to be like Jesus to dominate one’s life thus constitutes an utter failure to apprehend the heart of Jesus’ message. “One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil,” quips Zarathustra.¹⁴⁷ To envy a man whose every deed embodied a lived refutation of envy constitutes unwitting irony of the highest order.

The idea of willfully remaining in the larval stage of pupil offends Nietzsche’s sensibilities for another reason as well—it runs counter to what little we know of vitalism. Nebulous a formulation as it may, it is clear that Nietzsche’s vitalism is predicated heavily on notions of “overflowing power and abundance.”¹⁴⁸ Consequently, the desire to recreate the values of another instead of surpassing and exceeding those values becomes a sedative force at odds with Nietzsche’s vitalistic project. In other words, it demands a more adamantine brand of courage to be a creator than a re-creator, and only the former can be counted on to drive history. It for these reasons that discipleship represents to Nietzsche a form of self-inflicted powerless that can be seen as symptomatic of a deficit of courage. We thereby see that any attempt to reproduce Jesus’ triumph over *ressentiment* through conscious efforts to live as he lived would run counter to the most central tenets of Nietzsche’s philosophy. The utility of Jesus must lie outside of emulation.

¹⁴⁷ Nietzsche, 78. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.*
The Question of the Messenger

Untenable as discipleship is in Nietzsche’s philosophical landscape, there yet remains a direr problem with the idea of a Jesus as a paragon to be imitated. Up until this point we have tacitly treated Nietzsche’s text as a pure “thing-in-itself” to which we can assign absolute qualities. This, however, is decidedly un-Nietzschean of us. Recall the line from Beyond Good and Evil, in which Nietzsche explicitly spells out the central tenet of his perspectivalism. “There is only a perspective seeing,” he writes, “only a perspective ‘knowing.’”149 Knowledge in Nietzsche’s epistemological framework cannot be discussed apart from the perspective from which it is brought into being. Now, consider again Nietzsche’s contention that there “is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming.”150 Knowledge is not exempted from this radical reclassification of things into processes. Put another way, knowledge for Nietzsche is not a noumenal thing-in-itself capable of existing independent of a contextualizing subject.151 Rather, knowledge constitutes an act, and as an act, it requires an actor. It is for this reason that we cannot theorize in good conscience about Nietzsche’s text without explicitly drawing into consideration the reader and the act of reading.

How do such post-structuralist meanderings relate to Nietzsche’s Jesus? This next point demands a dose of acumen, so I will begin by being as explicit as possible in sketching its progression. Nietzsche’s project can be read as a campaign against

149 Nietzsche, 555. On the Genealogy of Morals.
150 Ibid., 481.
151 Indeed, this conclusion is inevitable within Nietzsche framework because the subject itself does not exist as a stable, sovereign entity capable of existing in a vacuum—rather, the subject for Nietzsche represents an artificial creation fully dependent on its environment for its construction.
 Potter. Jesus is noteworthy to Nietzsche and to us as readers of Nietzsche in that he represents one of the few historical examples of ressentiment being defeated in an unmitigated rout. Nietzsche sees Jesus as accomplishing this superhuman feat through a rejection of conceptualization. Concepts represent the building blocks of language. The details of this defeat of conceptualization come to us in the form of a book. Books function through language. Imitating the Jesus described to us through language within Nietzsche’s text thus takes on for us as readers a distinctly maddening quality.

The above construction still may yet be a touch obtuse. Consider the following brief but hopefully illustrative example. You are a monarch of some small principality. The surrounding countryside, including your own kingdom, is embroiled in warfare. All efforts to quell this unrest have so far succeeded only in enflaming the situation further. You are desperate for a solution that will restore peace and tranquility to the land. After a long stretch of time peppered with many false deliverances, a messenger arrives bearing word from the front. He clears his throat to deliver his message as you wait on tenterhooks for the possibility of a solution. “Never trust messengers,” he proclaims. “They speak nothing but lies.” With that he departs.

A collection of words describing how deliverance from ressentiment can be achieved through rejection of words offers a similarly exasperating problem. Words function through concepts by enforcing rigid approximations onto sensual reality which then get mistaken for that reality. Concepts function by positing the existence of an idealistic otherworld of forms, an otherworld whose perfected categories the
things we encounter are simply representations of. This otherworldliness is the tell-tale symptom of *ressentiment* in that it attempts to escape from a frightful terrestrial world through creation of a privileged otherworld some untraversable distance away. Given the above formulation, it would seem that we should want to unlearn our reliance on using words to structure reality in order to strike a counterblow against *ressentiment*. But to attempt to silence the incessant chattering of words by meditating on a text composed of words will merely sink us all the more intractably into the linguistic quagmire of metaphysics in which we now find ourselves.

**Silence**

For further illumination, consider as a second example the analogous problem confronted by French existentialist anti-philosopher and Nietzsche scholar, Georges Bataille. Mirroring Nietzsche’s belief that “we really ought to free ourselves from the seduction of words,”¹⁵² Bataille sought for himself “the liberation of the power of words which is mastery.”¹⁵³ Lengthy stretches of his 1954 work *Inner Experience* are spent fixated on the word “silence.”¹⁵⁴ To him, “silence” represents something akin

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¹⁵² Nietzsche, 213. *Beyond Good and Evil.*


¹⁵⁴ The quotation marks here are worth noting. Generally, quotation marks are deployed to denote that the referent is a quotation (their ostensible function). However, they are often also used to signify the author’s objection to the connotation of the referent, to signify the controversial meaning of the referent, or to signify that the commonly understood denotation of the referent differs from what the sum of the individual denotations of its parts would imply (i.e. “scare quotes” (note the scare quotes)). Here, the quotation marks are being employed to distinguish signifier from signified. Their presence (“silence”) signifies the word “silence” as it is spoken, both to other others and in the context of internal conceptual thought. Their absence (silence) signifies the idea that the word described in the previous sentence is nominally attempting to represent.
to a Zen kōan for the simple reason that “the word silence is still a sound.”\textsuperscript{155} In this way, the signifier actively brings about the destruction of that which it purports to signify. In Bataille’s estimation, the idea that the word “silence” is attempting to get at constitutes “the abolition of the sound which the word is.”\textsuperscript{156} If we consider the purpose of words to be the transmission of approximated states of experience, then “silence” is a word fated to inevitably fail at the task assigned to it. “Among all words it is the most perverse, or the most poetic” writes Bataille, “it is the token of its own death.”\textsuperscript{157} The moment “silence” is uttered, silence is rendered an impossibility.

The above represents a rephrasing of the dilemma we encountered previously of a text predicated on language advocating the demolition of language. In both cases, we have an abstract construct dictating a campaign for its own unmaking.\textsuperscript{158} The noteworthy distinction is that Bataille’s formulation invokes one word, whilst Nietzsche’s implicates all words. Therefore, we should not be hesitant to read Nietzsche’s formulation against Bataille’s, as the distinction separating the two is primarily a quantitative one.

The purpose of invoking Bataille at this juncture is to demonstrate a vexatious proposition that Western philosophy has generally been happy to ignore. Put simply, this proposition is the possibility that certain classes of thoughts may be fundamentally and nonnegotiabley unthinkable by the conscious mind. What would be the consequences of entertaining the potential existence of whole menageries of rich and beautiful thought to which the conceptually shackled conscious mind has no

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 13.  
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 16.  
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 16.  
\textsuperscript{158} The words that form Nietzsche’s text in the first case and the word “silence” in the second.
Nietzsche prefigures the arrival of this problem, often hinting at it as an ominous something looming on the metaphysical horizon—a true “dangerous ‘maybe.’” While this issue is at work behind the scenes in Nietzsche and therefore needs to be considered in our interpretation, Nietzsche seldom confronts it directly.

One of the rare instances of explicit acknowledgement occurs in *Beyond Good Evil:*

> Where there is affinity of languages, it cannot fail, owing to the common philosophy of grammar—I mean, owing to the unconscious domination and guidance of grammatical functions—that everything is prepared at the outset for a similar development and sequence of philosophical systems; just as the way seems barred against certain other possibilities of world-interpretation.

The implication here is clear. Grammatical systems and the mechanisms of conceptualization do not passively gloss reality—rather, they actively control what species of reality are thinkable in the first place.

The ramifications of this possibility cannot be overstated. If valid, such a suggestion could stand to demolish the projects of some of the most deified minds of the Western philosophical canon. Consider René Descartes. In his writings, he explicitly identifies his ontological essence with his status as a thinker of conscious thoughts. “Thought,” he writes in his *Meditations on the First Philosophy,* “this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist — that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. For it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist.”

In this way, he predicates his meditations on the assumption that conscious thought is the defining element of his personhood. The inference thus follows that it will ultimately be through conscious thought he will extricate himself from any metaphysical quagmires he gets himself into.

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159 Nietzsche, 217. *Beyond Good and Evil.*

Nietzsche, however, disavows faith in the unilaterally redemptive power of conscious thought. To him, conscious thought represented a new idol that was being erected under the auspices of philosophical decadence—albeit now veiled in several more layers of subtlety and cunning than any of its predecessors. Instead, he proposes an ontological locus of the human located outside the realm of conscious thought. In this way, Nietzsche thus invites us to consider the frightful prospect that there may be some binds that one cannot simply think one’s way out of. Put another way, he leaves a space in his philosophy for the inclusion of mercurial emotions, fleeting sensations, cryptic intuitions, and all manner of miscellaneous subconscious twinges. Within this realm, movements of the mind derive their authority from no source that can be rendered sensible through logic or discourse. They are entirely self-justified. They are governed by an internal logic all their own. For these reasons, I will refer to this specie as “aesthetic thought.”

The psychology of Nietzsche’s Jesus falls under the purview of the aesthetic—that is to say, of those thoughts which the conscious mind cannot reach. His reality was one predicated not on words but on the vast untamed expanse of aconceptual mental movements. As a result, there is simply no way to think oneself into a mindset analogous to Jesus’. This should come as no acute surprise—as was discussed in the Chapter 2, his mindset is what it is precisely because it exists cut-off from the realm of conceptual thought. Therefore, even if discipleship was not a Nietzschean faux pas, attempts at recreating Jesus’ victory over ressentiment through conscious imitation simply cannot work. A mental landscape devoid of concepts represents a domain that the mind cannot reach through manipulation of concepts.
The Kingdom of Heaven, it would seem is accessible simultaneously to all and to none.

**The Meaning of Meaning**

It would thus appear that at this point we find ourselves having run aground against an intractable problem. Are we then forced to accept that Jesus attained this stunning, revolutionary victory over *ressentiment*, and yet the fruits of this victory remain entirely unreachable by us because of the problem of language? Not necessarily. Nietzsche reserves a secret weapon for allowing us to circumvent the seemingly untenable problem of language preaching its own abolition. That weapon is style.

“*Good* is any style,” Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*, “that really communicates an inward state.”¹⁶¹ This maxim will provide the guiding principle for our inquiry into Nietzsche’s deployment of style. As he makes clear, Nietzsche sees in the idea of style far more than mere window dressing. For him, style represents not a superficial device for amplifying the reception of a text’s message, but rather a foundational and utterly indispensable constituent of that message. In this way, he actively breaks from the traditional assumption of Western philosophy that style should be separated from and subsequently subordinated to content. Kant, for instance, once wrote that it was to his credit that he had “put aside all charm and

grace of language, like a discarded garment” in the composition of his philosophy.\(^{162}\)

It is precisely this Kantian conception of writing well that Nietzsche props up as his stylistic nemesis. Put more bluntly, style for Nietzsche doesn’t deliver the message—style is the message.

Having established the elevated position Nietzsche affords style with his texts, we can start to parse out what it is that he means when he says good style “communicates an inward state.” Recall the two dueling modes of thought that began to freeze out from our discussion at the end of the preceding subchapter. We can conceive of these two modes loosely as the domain of words vs. the domain of intuition, Descartes (and the bulk of the Western tradition) vs. Nietzsche’s Jesus. The notation we will use to frame this binary will be conceptual thought vs. stylistic thought.

This formulation maps cleanly onto our investigation of style. Here, the conceptual meaning of a text is constituted from the aggregate sum of what we judge to be the connotations of all the text’s individual parts. This meaning we experience as the “objective” content of the text.\(^{163}\) Complementing the conceptual, we have the stylistic meaning elicited by the text. Here we find meaning that cannot be derived from a “breaking down” action of a sum into its component parts. In this way, no fraction of it can be said to exist in a piece of the text—be it a chapter, sentence, or word. For our immediate purposes, we can consider the stylistic meaning of a text to be generally synonymous with the constellation of non-localized impressions and


\(^{163}\) “Objective” here represents an idealized case of our reaction to the text. Needless to say, personal subjectivity remains inseparable from one’s relation to a text.
intuitions the text precipitates in the reader. These intuitions are not correspondent to specific ideas within the text, but rather are produced holistically from the fashion in which these ideas are arranged relative to one another.

Dividing meaning into these two categories allows us to shed some light on how exactly Jesus functions within Nietzsche’s text. As was previously established, Jesus is tasked with the communication of meaning corresponding to his prescriptive role in combating ressentiment. However, the meaning the character of Jesus is intended to communicate is an inherently aconceptual one because his conquest of ressentiment involved a conquest of language on a fundamental level. Channels of conceptual meaning-making are blocked with regard to the delivery of this particular message. Therefore, an aconceptual component of the text must be invoked if this rarified type of meaning is to be experienced by the reader. It is at precisely this point, where the conceptual component falls through, that the stylistic component steps in to carry the text.

An Arsenal of Contradictions

Given the impotence of conceptual discourse to communicate Jesus’ aconceptual victory over ressentiment, Nietzsche must thus invoke the stylistic element of his text as an engine of communication. It is at this instant that his literary virtuosity truly shows through. Through manipulation of the denotations that exist between concepts coupled with the juxtaposition of generatively clashing concepts, Nietzsche is able to transmit meaning in a way that reliance on pure concepts would
be powerless to approach. More specifically, Nietzsche employs a style of tactical contradiction to induce in the mind of the reader a structured collapse of the mechanisms of conceptualization. This collapse—the titular detonation of denotation—engenders in the reader a mental landscape that mirrors what Nietzsche posits to have been the psychology of Jesus, while circumventing all polluted conceptual channels along the way. This collapse is engineered via a surgical use of contradiction. The histrionics of contradiction that pervade Nietzsche’s text are not superfluous to his message—in the case of Jesus, they are absolutely indispensible.

**Problem and Solution**

This investigation has already touched upon one contradiction fundamental to Nietzsche’s construction of Jesus. This is the contradiction of problem vs. solution. In Nietzsche’s cosmology, the historical Jesus represents the cause of modernity’s woes. His death provided a flashpoint that allowed the festering hatred of Second Temple Judaism’s priestly morality to overflow the banks of Judaea and infect the broader world the memetic virus of ressentiment. In this way, Jesus is eminently responsible for life-effacing values becoming hegemonized worldwide. And yet, Jesus simultaneously represents through his radical subversion of concepts the only worthwhile opponent ressentiment has yet faced.

We can resolve this paradox analytically by splitting the character of Jesus into two separate figures—Paul’s perverse prophet of revenge vs. Nietzsche’s psychologized prophet of love. However, the above move is not a refutation of
Nietzsche’s contradiction—its necessity rather proves it. In Nietzsche’s cosmology, Jesus is simultaneously both problem and solution, Redeemer and that from which we must be redeemed. Zarathustra toys with this duality. “He whom they call the Redeemer has put them in fetters: in fetters of false values and delusive words,” he preaches. “Would that someone would yet redeem them from their Redeemer!”

The presence of these two irreconcilable ideas within the singular character of Jesus induces an obvious tension. This tension in turn functions as a lens through which the realization Nietzsche is inviting us to make begins to come into focus. For Paul’s Jesus and Nietzsche’s Jesus, fundamentally incompatible as they may be, are both constructed from highly selective and exclusionary prunings of the same text. Nietzsche’s demonstration of how a single text can produce two such diametrically opposed interpretations stylistically reflects his radically perspectival belief that the “truth” of the world “may include infinite interpretations.” It is ideas of this sort that the stylistic component of Jesus’ appearance in Nietzsche’s text suggest to us.

**Man and God**

The above, however, represents merely the tip of the contradictory iceberg that is Jesus. Not all of the contradictions that Nietzsche employs to engage with the figure of Jesus are Nietzsche’s original creations. The hypostatic union—in which Jesus is constituted from both a wholly human and a wholly divine aspect that coexist eternally with one another—represents one of the most inscrutable contradictions in

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164 Nietzsche, 91. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.*
all of theology. This contradiction comes preloaded in the figure of Jesus and dovetails with Nietzsche’s production of the psychologized Jesus. In Chapter 2, I discussed how Jesus’ rejection of conceptualization engendered a worldview in which the divine was not posited in a faraway otherworld, but rather was seen as fully eminent and pervasive of all things. This unequivocal pervasion does not stop at the boundaries of the self—indeed, it penetrates those boundaries to the point that they are depleted of power and relevance. In this way, Nietzsche’s Jesus experienced himself as both man and God. Recall Nietzsche’s description of Jesus as a man who “denied any chasm between God and man.”166 In this way, Jesus experienced God as eminent to the point of interiorization. Such a sweeping dual experience, however, dissolves the differentiation between the two. As was mentioned in Chapter 2, Nietzsche reads Jesus’ message as being, “there are no more opposites.”167 This revaluation must necessarily imply a negation of the human-God binary, as it represents one of most central oppositional pairings to the Western metaphysical tradition.

Nietzsche’s Jesus offers a profound completion of the hypostatic union. By consummating the full appropriation of both the human and the divine within himself, he abolishes the ideas of human and divine as meaningful referents. In this way, we see Nietzsche’s portrayal of Jesus structured to produce another contradiction, this one a play off the time-honored mystery of the hypostatic union. Jesus is both God and man—a contradiction in and of itself. This contradiction, however, ultimately gives way within the text to a second higher-order contradiction: Jesus is both God

166 Nietzsche, 166. *The Anti-Christ.*
and man to such an absolute degree that “God” and “man” are exhausted of their conceptual identity. Thus, Jesus is concurrently *neither* God *nor* man. This progression illustrates the manner in which Nietzsche deploys stylistic contradiction to plant the seeds for a dramatic ontological critique within the mind of the reader.

**Fool and Sage**

A third contradiction comes to us courtesy of a time-worn archetype of myths and folk stories. This is the contradiction of the fool and the sage. Nietzsche’s Jesus represents the embodiment of this type *par excellence*. Jesus receives *de facto* status as a figure of wisdom within Nietzsche’s cosmology via his identity as one of history’s few *ressentiment*-free individuals. In this way, the wisdom of Jesus is seen in Nietzsche’s text as ranking above that of Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and the like. This whole dreary pantheon of Western metaphysicians Nietzsche sees as having merely dressed *ressentiment* up in subtler and subtler guises over the years, while Jesus actually beat it. Thus, Nietzsche’s text constructs Jesus as a sage figure whose enlightened nature is evident from his ability to effortlessly dispatch a problem that had so far bested millennia’s worth of the West’s “greatest minds.”

And yet, Jesus’ triumph comes to us as the direct result of him rejecting many of the usual trappings of the intellect. His paradise is not constituted from a perfection of knowledge as it would be for a Hegelian. Rather, it is brought about through a disavowal of concepts—which effectively amounts to a disavowal of knowledge, as we commonly understand it. If we assume that “to know” in common
parlance implies at least a shade of certainty, then Jesus “knows” nothing. His world is one of similarity, not identity. “The dominant tendency to treat as equal what is merely similar” upon which “any basis for logic” is predicated is entirely absent in him.\textsuperscript{168} For this reason, Nietzsche’s Jesus is expressly \textit{not} a man of knowledge.

To drive this point home, Nietzsche deploys some descriptors in the midst his eulogy of Jesus in \textit{The Anti-Christ} that initially strikes the reader as puzzling and discordant with the tone being established by the otherwise exultant language. “To make a \textit{hero} of Jesus! – And what a worse misunderstanding is the word ‘genius’! Our whole concept, our cultural concept ‘spirit’ had no meaning whatsoever in the world Jesus lived in,” writes Nietzsche. “To speak with the precision of the physiologist a quite different word would rather be in place here: the word idiot.”\textsuperscript{169} Here Nietzsche is arguing for a fundamental distinction between Jesus’ victory over \textit{ressentiment} and the metaphysical campaigns that followed in Jesus’ wake. More specifically, Nietzsche sees the terms “hero” and “genius” as grossly inapplicable to Jesus because they imply a severe degree of conscious personal discipline being brought to bear against the self. Jesus’ victory is effortless. “The faith which here finds utterance is not a faith which has been won by struggle.”\textsuperscript{170} In short, it is a victory that comes about as the result of intuition, not rigorous intellectual exertion.

It is for this reason that Nietzsche describes his Jesus as appearing to the random onlooker more akin to a dimwitted simpleton than a man of great learnedness. Mirroring his construction of the external world—in which \textit{ressentiment} can never

\begin{footnotes}
\item[168] Nietzsche, 171. \textit{The Gay Science}.
\item[169] Nietzsche, 153. \textit{The Anti-Christ}.
\item[170] \textit{Ibid.}, 156.
\end{footnotes}
arise because there exist no oppositional forces to play off one another—Jesus finds nothing distinct or antagonistic within his own being. Jesus’ conquest of *ressentiment* comes about not through inner war and spiritual ascesis, but rather through plain childish naivety.

In this light, we can make sense of Nietzsche’s description of Jesus as an “occurrence of retarded puberty.”\(^\text{171}\) The pejorative connotation here should be assessed carefully—Jesus’ childlike demeanor is to Nietzsche not a failing but a sign of an elevated nature. Zarathustra uses the image of the child in the first of his speeches to stand for “innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred ‘Yes.’”\(^\text{172}\) Thus, the child becomes for Nietzsche a symbol of revaluation unfettered by concerns of timeliness and innocent of the boundaries it is transgressing. As a figure credited with the capacity to posit new values, the child thereby represents an embodiment of the virtue of untimeliness.\(^\text{173}\)

The pejorative associations of the phrase “retarded puberty,” however, are unavoidable. Regardless of his praiseworthy station as one of history’s few true revaluators, Nietzsche’s Jesus remains a fool strictly on account of the definition of the word “fool.” But it is precisely *through* his nature as a fool that Jesus surpasses the accomplishments of the modern sages, the philosophers, the “men of knowledge”

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\(^\text{171}\) *Ibid.*, 156.

\(^\text{172}\) Nietzsche, 27. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

\(^\text{173}\) Continuing with the parallelism touched upon earlier, it is interesting to note that Bataille also employed the figure of the child as a force of naïve value generation in his thought. “I don’t look at anyone from on high, but laughingly, like the child, at ascetics and pleasure seekers” (*Inner Experience*, 23).
held in such high esteem by society. Put another way, because Jesus is a fool, he is more sagely than the sages.

This idea represents a contradiction in the method through which we use language to ascribe meaning. “Fool” and “sage” have definitions which position them as oppositional concepts with regard to one another, both in the spheres of rigid dictionary logic and common parlance. By demonstrating that both apply quite nicely to the singular figure of Jesus, Nietzsche cunningly demonstrates the central tenet of his philosophy of language that was discussed in Chapter 2: that the binary oppositions that constitute the guts of language bear no intrinsic correspondence to an \textit{a priori} truth of reality.

\section*{Special and Common}

As the above examples illustrate, the character of Jesus is fraught with contradictions. Some of these contradictions, such as that of the hypostatic union, predate Nietzsche but still provide rich material for him to tease apart, tactically invert, and generally play with. Other contradictions such as Nietzsche’s anti-canonical reading of Jesus into history and his portrayal of Jesus as concurrently both fool and sage (another hypostatic union of sorts) come about through Nietzsche selectively reading his own philosophy into Jesus. This zoology of contradictions can be understood under a broader umbrella contradiction: that of special and common.

The repeated movement Nietzsche makes with regard to Jesus is to argue for him epitomizing simultaneously the most rarified and most base form of a particular
attribute. The different manifestations of this dual action all come about via the single attribute that Nietzsche sees as rendering Jesus a special figure worthy of our scrutiny. As discussed in Chapter 2, this attribute is Jesus’ rejection of conceptualization as a structuring principle of his reality. In this way, Nietzsche constructs a portrayal of Jesus in which Jesus’ status as an interesting topic of study is derived from his overcoming of ressentiment. This overcoming is in turn derived from Jesus’ refusal to participate in human thought’s most ossified error—that of mistaking the metaphor for the thing.

The above, however, represents a more vertiginous formulation than it may at first glance appear. For in the first essay of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche writes that it was only through infection with ressentiment “that man first became an interesting animal.” In other words, ressentiment is what catalyzes people to become fascinating beings with depth and complexity. Reading this thought into our broader understanding of how Jesus fits into Nietzsche’s framework, we observe that Jesus is regarded as interesting precisely because he lacks that which makes people interesting. A vision of Jesus’ overarching contradiction manifests from this rupture—his is simultaneously the most and least interesting human spirit. He is both the most special and the most common.

He is uniquely free from a certain pervasive strain of delusion and error—but in Nietzsche’s universe “delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation.” In this way, we see the contradiction that constitutes Jesus is further compounded. Jesus exists in superposition as most life-affirming due to his victory

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175 Nietzsche, 163. *The Gay Science.*
over ressentiment and most life-denying due to the distance that victory necessarily puts between him and what we define to be human experience. By embodying a contradiction of this caliber, Jesus is made to represent for the reader a breakdown of how value is ascribed. This breakdown of existing mechanisms of valuation primes the mind of the reader for a mini-revaluation of sorts to occur. In so doing, it epitomizes how Nietzsche’s construction of Jesus through the stylistic dimension of his text reinforces the discursive goals of that text.

**Meaning Between the Lines**

We thus return to the initial question posed at the outset of Chapter 3: through what channels does the prescriptive component of the Jesus character manifest to the reader? As is obvious by now, the answer lies in contradiction. Jesus in Nietzsche’s text represents a victory over ressentiment achieved through a disavowal of conceptualization. As was argued above, though, Nietzsche’s Jesus represents on an even more fundamental level the idea of contradiction. This contradiction represents more than merely a superficial error of appraisal. Nor does it constitute anything akin to a Hegelian straw man in which the contradiction is only posited in the first place so as to ultimately be reconciled. Rather, Jesus here hints at what Nietzsche terms “the contradiction at the heart of the world”—the idea that fundamental contradiction, impervious both to historical reconciliation and attempts at dismantling through
conscious thought, may simply be an unavoidable condition of possibility for existence.\(^\text{176}\)

Here we find a breed of contradiction whose existence would undermine the binary certitude upon which conceptual thought is grounded. In Chapter 2, I discussed how conceptual thought to Nietzsche could be broken down to a string a binary switches. The integrity of this entire framework is jeopardized if we introduce contradiction into the mix. A switch capable of registering either a “yes” or “no” for a given input \textit{and being correct in either case} would bring the calculability of the system crashing down. In this way, the introduction of nonnegotiable contradiction induces a collapse of conceptual logic in the mind of the thinker.

Through utilization of the stylistic dimensions of his text, Nietzsche creates a rendition of Jesus that invites the reader to entertain the possibility of contradiction in this fashion. This suggestion of contradiction within the text precipitates in the mind of the reader moments in which conceptual logic falls through. These momentary flashes in which the death of conceptualization is experienced offer the reader a window into what Nietzsche’s sees the mental landscape of Jesus as having been. This move allows Nietzsche to simulate in the mind of the reader the psychology of Jesus without recourse to the explicit conceptual instruction that the whole exercise is aimed to combat.

The preceding discussion has meandered its way through a number of twists and turns. Consequently, a brief summary could prove instructive. Nietzsche’s Jesus achieves a stunning victory over \textit{ressentiment} through overcoming conceptualization.

\(^{176}\) Nietzsche, 71. \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}. 
However, conceptualization happens to be the stuff of language, and therefore the conditions for recreating this victory cannot be explicitly communicated through a written text because a written text is constructed out of language. Nietzsche circumvents this issue by constructing his character of Jesus to function jointly as a distillation of ontological contradiction. Encountering such a contradictory character causes the conceptual faculties of the reader to falter, as conceptual thought is inherently antithetical to contradiction. This faltering action, where concepts break down and appear drained of meaning, offers the reader a moment of insight into the aconceptual psychology of Nietzsche’s Jesus. Through this circuitous route of style, Nietzsche communicates to the reader a hint of Jesus’ formula for overcoming *ressentiment* via stylistic channels untouchable by the conceptual logic. Thus, we see in the character of Jesus a stunning example of how Nietzsche tactically deploys the strength of style to realize a communication that conceptual writing alone would mercilessly mutilate.
Epilogue

But even in those cases in which this antithesis between chastity and sensuality really exists, there is fortunately no need for it to be a tragic antithesis. At least this holds good for all those well-constituted, joyful mortals who are far from regarding their unstable equilibrium between “animal and angel” as necessarily an argument against existence—the subtlest and brightest among them have even found in it, like Goethe and Hafiz, one more stimulus to life. It is precisely such contradictions that seduce one to existence.177

~Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals

Shouldn’t philosophers be permitted to rise above faith in grammar?178

~Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil

In Jesus, the reader of Nietzsche encounters a character too slippery to essentialize without discomfort. Attempts to systematize the figure of Jesus within Nietzsche’s thought encounter contradiction at every turn. In this way, the deployment of Jesus within Nietzsche’s text comes to represent for the reader the death of conceptual representation. We cannot say what “Jesus” means for Nietzsche—too many contradictory interpretations are bound up within that one word. The word in the abstract is powerless to represent anything—its power only comes about through the various contexts in which it is found. In this way, Nietzsche’s text operates through the same principles of perspectivalism that the text overtly endorses. Within the universe of Nietzsche’s text, the character “Jesus” comes coupled with no definitive meaning that can be decoupled from context and apprehended in a vacuum. Rather, the meaning we attribute to Jesus during each encounter hangs on the context in which he is deployed—our “perspective” within the text.

178 Nietzsche, 237. Beyond Good and Evil.
It is in this fashion that Nietzsche stylistically creates a body of text that functions as a microcosmic universe embodying his critique of metaphysics. Within this universe, Jesus represents the demolition of the concept, the detonation of denotation. However, this demolition still takes place within a text. As such, it still makes use of concepts to achieve this end. Ergo, the reader is put in the position of experiencing Jesus conceptually representing the death of conceptual representation. Here we encounter a contradiction of a yet higher order.

It is via this stylistic pull-and-tug that Nietzsche is able to employ systems of thought to critique those same systems without the two actions simply negating one another. Here we see the reason why so many post-structuralist projects are viewed as spiritual heirs to Nietzsche. Jacques Derrida, for instance, suggests in Spurs that “heterogeneity of the text” can serve as a means for a work to avoid becoming “nothing more than a clamorous declaration of the antithesis.”179 In this fashion, style for Nietzsche provides an escape hatch from simple reactivity. Put another way, the embrace of contradiction allows Nietzsche to position himself within the ill-defined liminal space between non-generative reaffirmation of old ideas and ressentiment-driven rejection of them. By not aspiring to be contradiction-free, Nietzsche grants himself the artistic license to take established conventions and play with them. “I do not know any other way of associating with great tasks than play,” confesses Nietzsche in Ecce Homo. “As a sign of greatness, this is an essential presupposition.”180 Waging war against the otherworldliness of ressentiment is indeed a great task. In confronting this great task, an explicit conceptual decrinal of

180 Nietzsche, 714. Ecce Homo.
ressentiment would inevitably fall short—the problem wells up from depths over which concepts hold no sway. Thus, Nietzsche employs a different tactic—the play of stylized contradiction.

In the preface to the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche writes that “it will be some time before my writings are ‘readable.’”181 Similarly, the foreword to *The Anti-Christ* begins by saying, “This book belongs to the very few. Perhaps none of them is even living yet.”182 As these excerpts indicate, Nietzsche was self-consciously writing with a small group of mentally agile thinkers in mind. This idea represents a common thread throughout his works—at all stages of his writing career, he regularly addresses his readership as “the few” and similar terms. What is more, not only does Nietzsche consider his readership a small elite, but he even implies that they will only exist in the first place some undefined length of time after he is dead. “Only the day after tomorrow belongs to me,” he writes. “Some are born posthumously.”183 In this way, Nietzsche views himself as embodying the virtue of untimeliness to a profound degree—much like his Jesus, he sees himself as literally incomprehensible by those of his own age.

This idea brings us to a central tension in Nietzsche’s works. He sees himself as writing for an audience of “philosophers of the future.”184 As a result, he cannot claim to offer direct advice or instruction towards the philosophical cultivation of his reader. His desired reader is one possessing historical and ideological distance to the point that any pragmatic teachings Nietzsche attempted to offer would be

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182 Nietzsche, 125. *The Anti-Christ.*
meaningless. Therefore, Nietzsche needs to avail himself to his reader in a more creative fashion. Instead of explicit conceptual instruction, Nietzsche founds the pedagogical component of his texts preferentially on their aesthetic content. In this way, he programs into his texts specific “moments” wherein different strands of thought and modes of knowledge are brought into conflict with one another. The aftermaths of these violent encounters provide lenses of sorts that, in Nietzsche’s framework, individuals of sufficient mental elevation can employ to peer within themselves and confront their own inner conflicts.

In this way, we see that the episode of Jesus provides what is perhaps the most salient example of a phenomenon that pervades Nietzsche’s text. There is no “lesson” we can take from Jesus. If anything, the lesson is to be mistrustful of those who come claiming to bear lessons. The lasting relevance of the character of Jesus comes about instead in the psychology he engenders in the reader. Through painting Jesus out of a palette of contradiction, Nietzsche creates a setup in which reading about Jesus produces in the reader a psychological moment that simulates the worldview of the character she’s reading about. In this moment, the ground falls out from under conceptualization and a void emerges in the mind of the reader in the space where conceptual meaning-making usually occurs. This engineered collapse of conceptual meaning may provide nothing more than a transient moment of frustration for the average reader. The Nietzscheanly worthy reader finds in it, though, a
moment of generative opportunity as new forms of meaning-making are given the opportunity to expand into the newly-vacated psychological space.\textsuperscript{185}

The move Nietzsche is making is akin to a father throwing a child into a swimming pool. A child with no natural talent of swimming would react to this development by splashing about unhappily for a few seconds until reaching the edge and pulling himself back up to dry land. He will emerge much as he went in, albeit perhaps now a touch disgruntled towards the father. However, the child within whom a dormant affinity for water exists will have a very different experience. After a brief flash of panic, he will realize that he is capable of existing apart from solid ground—at least for a little while. He will swim and dive and twirl about, excited at the new categories of experience now open to him.

Nietzsche’s construction of the encounter between his Jesus and the reader functions in much the same way. The reader with dormant Nietzschean “potential” will experience the moment of conceptualization’s collapse and be catalyzed towards new modes of thought and valuation. In light of Nietzsche writing his text for the stronger spirits of the future, this is approach makes perfect sense. For the father doesn’t need to know how to swim to toss the child in the pool. Similarly, Nietzsche can’t provide the reader with explicit instructions on fighting \textit{ressentiment}, because he himself has no idea what such instructions could possibly entail.

\textsuperscript{185} This formulation also sheds light on how one can ground a mystical reading of Nietzsche—he purposely pushes discursive thought to its point of shattering and then cultivates new, if indescribable, modes of thought from the wreckage of reason. In other words, he takes thought predicated on concepts as far as it can go, and then allows for a mercurial “something else” to take over. The parallels between this formulation and those suggested by mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius, are thought provoking, to say the least.
What he can do, however, is provide stylistically generated flashpoints in the text where conventional systems of thought and valuation begin to crack. Witnessing these cracks, the nimble mind will be incited to produce new systems impervious to such stresses and strains. Derrida’s decision to title his monograph on Nietzsche *Spurs* is thus quite prescient—Nietzsche employs the text to transhistorically “spur” those with the potential for generative thought onwards to realize that potential. We see this phenomenon taking shape throughout Nietzsche. It represents his answer to the question of how to do philosophy in light of subjectivity. For the problems Nietzsche raises are problems for which he cannot claim to have answers. But, by hardwiring into his texts a tactical Arsenal of moments in which the conventional apparatuses of thought break down, he can perhaps animate those eventual few capable of forging answers for themselves.
References


