A Project for Nietzsche’s Self-Affirmation, an Invitation for Our Self-Creation

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In this thesis, I rely solely on the works of Friedrich Nietzsche. The editions of the texts I used are below. Some of the books I used contain many of Nietzsche’s writings, and in citing them in footnotes I use Nietzsche’s individual titles rather than the title of the collection.


Works used in *The Portable Nietzsche*
- *Twilight of the Idols* (TI)
- *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Z)
- *The Gay Science* (GS)

Works used in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*
- *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE)
- *Ecce Homo* (EH)
Abstract

In this thesis, I seek to answer questions that are fundamental for a comprehensive understanding of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Nietzsche’s approach to philosophy is unique, and his corpus of writings presents a challenge for those seeking a unified conception of his thought. His texts are an amalgamation of varying styles and themes, and at times more closely resemble works of art or fiction than philosophical texts. The lack of any immediately accessible internal order within his thought makes it difficult to understand his intended meaning, thus many of his ideas can initially seem at odds with each other. I start this thesis by presenting an apparent conflict between elements of Nietzsche’s philosophy, namely his ideas on creating a self and his fatalist ideas. To answer this question, I propose an interpretation of Nietzsche’s project that sheds light on another important issue, namely the significance of Nietzsche’s philosophy for the reader. The issues addressed in this thesis can be reduced to two of Nietzsche’s aphorisms that serve as subtitles for his works: “How One Becomes what One is;” and “A Book for All and None.”

The elements of Nietzsche’s philosophy interweave so tightly that they cannot be fully understood apart from each other. The significance of each element is fully understood only with respect to the whole. As a result, this thesis will treat the elements of Nietzsche’s philosophy as pieces of a larger puzzle. In the first part of this thesis I introduce the pieces, and in the second part I propose a way of putting them together. Part I is dedicated to introducing interpretations of the self

\footnote{Ecce Homo and Thus Spoke Zarathustra, respectively.}
that Nietzsche is rebelling against. In it I address Nietzsche’s use for genealogy, his interpretation of anti-natural morality, the-will-to-power, and the void of values to which his project is a response, which he terms the death of god. The purpose of this section is to make clear Nietzsche’s interpretations of the self, truth, and meaning. The ideas discussed in Part I serve as the tools for answering the initial question of this thesis.

In Part II, I suggest a way of assembling Nietzsche’s thought around the distinction between a practical stance and a theoretical stance. After explaining what these stances entail, I show how this interpretation of Nietzsche’s project helps make sense of the discord between his ideas on self-creation and his fatalist ideas.

The interpretation I propose, however, contains questions of circularity that would threaten the integrity of Nietzsche’s philosophy. In dispelling these possible objections, the question of Nietzsche’s significance for the reader is seen in a new light.

To start to assemble the puzzle of Nietzsche’s thought, let us take a glimpse at the picture on the box, so to speak. The interpretation I propose understands Nietzsche’s philosophy as project of his self-affirmation. His writings are performative of his philosophy, in that he creates himself through them. In this sense, Nietzsche is not writing for us. That is not to say that his work can have no bearing on our lives, rather that the meaning he gives the world is for no other purpose than his own. Nietzsche provides us with an example of a life that gives
itself meaning and fulfills its created values. His example presents an invitation for us to create ourselves on our own terms.

**Introduction**

Throughout his philosophy, Nietzsche describes the activity of creating the self. He writes about freeing oneself from established valuations in order to discover who one is. By clearing the path for new values, Nietzsche believes we can impose our own meaning on the world. “But do you want to go the way of your affliction, which is the way to yourself? Then show me your right and your strength to do so. Are you a new strength and a new right? A first movement? A self-propelled wheel? Can you compel the very stars to revolve around you?”

This picture of freedom for creation becomes tangled when seen next to Nietzsche’s ideas that express a fatalist understanding of the self. He frequently refutes the notion of mental causality, and subjects all activity to the instincts. In so doing, he reduces the causal relations of the world to his notion of the will-to-power.

Through this lens, all activity in the world is a result of the struggle among interweaving forces competing for dominance. From this view, our instinctual drives determine the meaning we impose on the world, and our individual activity cannot be separated from the entangled whole. “None is responsible for man’s being there at all, for his being such-and-such, or for his being in the circumstances or in this environment. The fatality of his essence is not to be disentangled from all

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2 Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 175
that has been and will be.” What does it mean to be “a first movement, a self-propelled wheel” in light of “the fatality of one’s essence?” How does one have the freedom for self-creation if one’s essence is determined by external forces and circumstances?

To untangle this confusing knot, I will propose an interpretation of Nietzsche’s project that is harmonious to the project of Kant. Just as Kant distinguishes between a practical and a theoretical stance towards the self, I see Nietzsche as taking a practical and theoretical stance towards the self. Yet these approaches look very different with regards to both their purposes and their foundations. Kant believes human action can be explained through the lens of natural laws as well as through the lens of reason. He takes human beings to be unique in their ability to act based on principles, and holds our standing as rational animals to be the grounds for a universal morality. Kant understands reason to be a priori, and he believes that human action can be considered “action” only when it is governed by principles. When we act on a whim, we are acting in accord with the laws of nature, which Kant equates with being pushed and pulled by causal forces. What makes humans unique, he believes, is our ability to subject our activity to a will that rationally determines laws (the categorical imperative). Thus, morality for Kant is a universal ideal that can be determined a priori through the use of reason.

The practical stance towards the self involves seeing the self as having a will and reason, and takes the self as not reducible to the laws of nature. The theoretical

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3 Twilight of the Idols, 500
stance towards the self sees the self as part of the world of nature, in line with causal
determination. For Kant, these two lenses are compatible, and both are used to
explain action. As with Kant, I see the practical stance Nietzsche takes to be from
the perspective of a living self, in the midst of doing, and the theoretical stance to be
from outside of the present. Nietzsche, however, does not believe that reason
comes a priori, and that universal morality is achievable or desirable. Thus, the
purpose of the practical stance is not to establish a grounding for rational action or
morality, and the purpose of the theoretical stance is not to explain fundamental
laws of nature.

I will argue that Nietzsche’s practical stance is a response to what he terms
“the death of god.” Nietzsche believes that philosophy has erred in its
understanding of the world as being, and that a more honest approach to
philosophy would understand the world as becoming. His views rest on the his
disregard for the distinction between a “true world” and an “apparent world,” a
distinction that has guided the approaches of philosophers since Socrates.
Nietzsche advocates for an interpretation of the world as becoming, claiming that
change, death, instability, and overpowering are the natural processes of the world,
and that any belief in stable things-in-themselves with being is anti-natural. He
reduces the true world to the apparent world, arguing that the world of becoming is
all there is. He sees the activity of life as giving value or imposing meaning on the
world, such that one can either impose meaning or be imposed upon by external

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4 This is not to say that Nietzsche believed we could look objectively at life from outside the
present, but that this stance is from a theoretical perspective outside of the self.
Nietzsche’s concepts of the will-to-power, amor fati, and the eternal recurrence are treated as part of his theoretical stance towards the self and the world. I understand these created meanings of Nietzsche’s to be affirming the values he gives to himself in the practical stance.

In the practical stance, Nietzsche views the meaning of the past as always yet-to-be-determined, as changing value with respect to one’s activity in the present. His project of creating the self is one of unifying the self through time, such that one can identify as the author of all one’s deeds. Whereas anti-natural morality treats the past as being and determined, Nietzsche understands the past as connected to one’s future, and argues that one can affirm one’s past through the activity in the present. The notion of life-affirmation, of being future orientated towards the project of unifying the self, gets support from Nietzsche’s theoretical stance towards the self. In this sense, Nietzsche’s theoretical stance is a performative fulfilling of his value of life-affirmation. In this thesis, I will start by examining how Nietzsche interprets the becoming of anti-natural morality and how it interprets the concepts of the soul, morality, and causality. It is useful to examine how Nietzsche views the interpretations he is overcoming in understanding the meaning he gives to these concepts. To answer the question of what the significance of Nietzsche’s philosophy is for the reader, one must cohesively piece together the various components of his thought.
PART I

I Genealogy; Meaning as Situated; Being and Becoming

In this section, I will address the importance of genealogy for Nietzsche’s project, and its relation to meaning. Nietzsche’s genealogical understanding of the world relies on his distinction between being and becoming. He understands the world to be continually developing, such that valuations gain new significance and meaning over time. Thus, Nietzsche spends no time looking for eternal truths or ideal meaning, which depend upon the notion of being. Instead, he aims to uncover the becoming of concepts and values, such that he can understand the various perspectives behind their meaning. For Nietzsche, meaning is always situated in particular historical contexts. Concepts are not clearly definable, and have intertwining interpretations. They have histories of competing valuations that need to be sorted out to get a clear conception of the development of the meaning of them.

“Now as for that other element in punishment – that which is fluid, its “meaning” – in a very late state of culture (for example in present-day Europe), the concept “punishment” in fact no longer represents a single meaning at all but rather an entire synthesis of “meanings”: the previous history of punishment in general, the history of its exploitation for most diverse purposes, finally crystallizes into a kind of unity that is difficult to dissolve, difficult to analyze, and – one must emphasize – is completely and utterly undefinable. (Today it is impossible to say for sure why we actually punish: all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically summarized elude definition; only that which has no history is definable.)”

5 Genealogy of Morality, 53
Nietzsche puts quotation marks around “meaning” to indicate his dislike for the understanding of meaning as a property of an existing thing. There is not an independent concept “punishment” that possesses a history of changing “meanings,” rather there is a history of different uses for the word “punishment” that express variations in what one meant in using the word. Nietzsche understands “meaning” as a verb, an act of bestowing value on the world. Thus, the genealogical approach that attempts to understand the development of the concepts of morality, the soul, and causality involves exploring the various perspectives of those responsible for the various valuations of the world.

Critical for Nietzsche is this distinction between being and becoming, which underlies the genealogical approach. He believes that for too long philosophers have interpreted reality by looking for being (i.e. for stable meaning).

“When these honorable idolators of concepts worship something, they kill it and stuff it; they threaten the life of everything they worship. Death, change, old age, as well as procreation and growth, are to their minds objections–even refutations. Whatever has being does not become; whatever becomes does not have being.”

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Nietzsche argues that death, change, procreation and growth are all natural aspects of life, and that to approach concepts looking for being is a fruitless effort; there is no being, only becoming. Later I will address the historical conditions and the role language plays for this metaphysical mix-up, but for now let’s look at its effects.

Meaning is always situated in time, and Nietzsche sees any attempt to try and establish unconditional values as anti-natural, in that it imposes the notion of being

6 TI 480
on life’s natural *becoming*. Part of Nietzsche’s motivation is to demonstrate the self-contradictory nature of anti-natural interpretations of the world. Starting with Socrates, such interpretations have relied on a belief in the ideal, as something definable and with *being*. Because their perspective is set to find stability and *being*, the advocates of anti-natural interpret the natural aspects of the world’s *becoming* (that they inevitably encounter) as indicators that they’ve been deceived. This unstable world that their senses (correctly) perceive is interpreted as “apparent” because of their faith in *being*, and thus they posit the notion of a “true world” that lies behind what is attainable through sensory perception. This separation of reality between “the true world” and an apparent world has affected philosophy all the way through the development of Christianity, in which Nietzsche sees the logic behind the ideal taken to the extreme. Rather than impose this opposition, Nietzsche would have us rid of the search for *being*, and adopt the lens of *becoming*. The chapter that follows will explore Nietzsche’s interpretation of the historical conditions behind such faith *being* and its outgrowth into anti-natural morality.

Nietzsche provides a genealogical account of the historical conditions that affected the development of these concepts, as well as interpretations of the psychology behind their development (i.e. analysis of why certain modes of valuation remain dominant). Nietzsche understands human lives as historically situated as well, such that the possibilities for living a life are subject to the becoming of the world. Part of the purpose of his project is to overcome anti-natural
interpretations of the self that he sees as psychologically damaging for living a healthy life. In highlighting the development of what he regards as anti-natural morality, Nietzsche shows the self-contradictory nature of such a world-view and argues that it is pernicious and life-denying. He spends considerable effort aiming to show the hypocrisy and the psychologically destructive effects of anti-natural interpretations of the world. Critical to this condemnation, however, is that Nietzsche is also affirming anti-natural morality as the necessary condition for who he is. Nietzsche is placing anti-natural morality as a step on the staircase of his psychological becoming, such that it is necessary, along with its overcoming. Nietzsche’s philosophy represents the next step of his becoming, and as such serves to both diagnose and directly overcome the dangerous effects of anti-natural morality.

II  The Will to Power

Nietzsche’s philosophy is put in terms of his lens of the will-to-power, through which he interprets the world’s becoming. From this perspective, all activity in the world is determined by the drives for power, growth, and domination, “life simply is will to power.”7 Human activity and valuing are products of the competition among the drives of life, such that the will-to-power is the causal lens through which Nietzsche views life. This interpretation that Nietzsche imposes on the becoming of the world serves multiple purposes for his project. Through the

7 Beyond Good and Evil, 259
lens of the will-to-power, Nietzsche explains the origin of anti-natural morality, diagnoses its psychologically damaging effects, and exposes its self-contradictory nature. Along with this, the will-to-power reinforces Nietzsche’s fatalist interpretation the self, helping to alleviate the sickening effects of guilt and bad conscience. In the sections that follow, I show how the will-to-power reinforces Nietzsche’s understanding of the world’s becoming, and how it serves as the lens through which he diagnoses the psychologically damaging effects of anti-natural morality.

The will-to-power harmonizes with Nietzsche’s interpretation of the world as becoming, in that it understands concepts and values as having histories of meanings. The meaning of a concept is unstable, and subject to the struggle of dominance between competing interpretations.

“That something extant, something that has somehow or other come into being, is again and again interpreted according to new views, monopolized in a new way, transformed and rearranged for a new use by a power superior to it; that all happening in the organic world is an overpowering, a becoming-lord-over; and that, in turn, all overpowering and becoming-lord-over is a new interpreting, an arranging by means of which the previous “meaning” and “purpose” must of necessity become obscured or entirely extinguished.”

The imposing of meaning and value on the world is fundamental activity of humans, and Nietzsche understands one’s valuing to be determined by the will-to-power. Thus, anti-natural morality (as well as Nietzsche’s philosophy) is understood to be a product of life’s competing drives. “Life itself forces us to posit values; life

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8 GM, 51
itself values through us when we posit values.” As such, value judgments are expressive of the life behind their meaning. Nietzsche sees anti-natural morality to be symptomatic of a “declining, weakened, weary, condemned life.” Before explaining why Nietzsche believes this, it will be useful to understand how the will-to-power gives meaning to the self.

a. The Self as Multiplicity of Drives

The fundamental point Nietzsche makes by interpreting human activity through the lens of the will-to-power regards the distinction identified earlier between being and becoming. Most philosophers have presumed some sort of stable identity (be it a soul, ego, or consciousness) that remains continuous throughout one’s life, and is responsible for determining one’s action. Nietzsche argues that there is no such subject, rather there is only the acting.

“But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind the doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is simply fabricated into the doing – the doing is everything.”

From the standpoint of the will-to-power, Nietzsche interprets the self as determined by the causal forces that result from competing instinctual drives. One is not a determined entity that exists apart from one’s deeds, rather one’s continued action and doing constantly redefines who one is. The self, like everything else in the world, is engaged in a process of becoming. The competition of the forces that

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9 TI, 490
10 TI, 490
11 GM, 25
motivate one’s doing constantly redefine and give new meaning to the self. Thus, the will-to-power refutes interpretations of the self that posit the notion of an indivisible “I” responsible for one’s actions. Nietzsche interprets conscious thinking and the “I” that we feel in undergoing an action to be the dominant drive expressing its will to be master.

“Every one of [the drives] would like only too well to represent just itself as the ultimate purpose of existence and the legitimate master of all the other drives. For every drive wants to be master – and it attempts to philosophize in that spirit.”

Thus, conscious thinking (i.e. reasoning) takes a backseat in Nietzsche’s interpretation of human action. The will-to-power makes no room for mental causes or free will. Nietzsche believes language plays a significant role in reinforcing faulty conceptions of the world. Words posit stability, reinforcing the metaphysics of being.

“We enter a realm of crude fetishism when we summon before consciousness the basic presuppositions of the metaphysics of language, in plain talk, the presuppositions of reason. Everywhere it sees a doer and a doing; it believes in will as the cause; it believes in the ego, in the ego as being, in the ego as substance, and it projects this faith in the ego-substance upon all things – only thereby does it first create the concept of ‘thing.’”

Language supports the notion of a neutral subject that is separate from its activity in the world. In so doing, it projects this understanding of the self as substance onto the world, creating the notion of stable things-in-themselves with inherent meaning. This understanding of things and concepts abstracts an ideal meaning out of their particular meanings, which are taken to be incomplete manifestations of the ideal.

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12 BGE, 203
13 TI, 483
Nietzsche believes this faith in the *being* of things gets it backwards, and obscures an honest understanding of reality.

“And even your atom, my dear mechanists and physicists – how much error, how much rudimentary psychology is still residual in your atom! Not to mention the ‘thing-in-itself,’ the *horrendum pudendum* of the metaphysicians! The error of the spirit [ideal] as cause mistaken for reality! And made the very measure of reality! And called God!”

In abstracting ideal meaning out of particular meanings, those who interpret the world as *being* invert the relationship, and take the ideal meaning as the cause. This understanding reinforces the notion of a true or ideal world that lies behind the accessible apparent world. Later, I will illustrate how Nietzsche undermines this distinction, and why he sees it as psychologically damaging. In the section that follows, I will show how Nietzsche interprets the understanding of an indivisible ego or soul to be a product of the socialization of human beings (out of which language is developed). Though Nietzsche sees this process of joining society as giving birth to psychologically damaging effects, he also interprets it as presenting a hopeful opportunity. Thus, the anti-natural interpretation of the self is an essential element in the development of different possibilities for living a life.

### b. Active and Reactive Morality

In *The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche present a genealogical account of the development of values. One of the purposes of his account is to demonstrate the life-denying effects he sees stemming from anti-natural morality. Nietzsche sees

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14 TI, 495
theses life-denying effects as marking key turning points in human history. Though anti-natural morality has psychologically destructive effects, it also presents a point of hope for Nietzsche as a possible bridge to the übermensch. Nietzsche sees the emergence and development of human lives as a work in progress, and chronicles human development out of the beastly form of life and into new patterns of social life. Out of the development of civilized society, anti-natural morality forged in humans the notion of a soul, of an indivisible and continuous “I.” Though Nietzsche rejects this interpretation, it opens the door for new conceptions of the self and for new possibilities of living.

In this account of the development of morality, Nietzsche separates the drives that shape human lives into active forces and reactive forces. He believes that science and philosophy have been permeated by reactive forces. Nietzsche, on the other hand, favors the creative, active forces, that impose form on the world (to which the reactive forces respond.)

“indeed it appears to me already to have become lord over the whole physiology and the doctrine of life – to its detriment, as goes without saying – by removing through sleight of hand one of its basic concepts, that of true activity. Under the pressure of that idiosyncrasy one instead places ‘adaptation’ in the foreground, that is to say an activity of second rank, a mere reactivity; indeed life itself is defined as an ever more purposive inner adaptation to external circumstances (Herbert Spencer). In so doing, however, one mistakes the essence of life, its will to power; in so doing one overlooks the essential pre-eminence of the spontaneous, attacking, infringing, reinterpreting, reordering, and formative forces, upon whose effect the ‘adaptation’ first follows; in so doing one denies the lordly role of the highest functionaries in the organism itself, in which the will of life appears active and form-giving.”

15 GM, 52
Nietzsche sees the origin of active morality (valuations such as “good and bad”) in the noble, strong, form-giving humans. The noble create the value “good” from themselves, they are good (i.e. their *doing* is good.) It is out of their created value “good” that they arrive at the value “bad:” whatever is not like them, not good, is bad.

“Rather it was ‘the good’ themselves, that is the noble, powerful, higher-ranking, and high-minded who felt and ranked themselves and their doings as good, which is to say, as of first rank, in contrast to everything base, low-minded, common, and vulgar. Out of this *pathos of distance* they first took for themselves the right to create values, to coin names for values: what did they care about usefulness!”

The weak by nature, however, form a different set of valuations derivatively from the values of the strong. Being oppressed by the strong, they reactively create the value “evil” out of the qualities of their oppressors. Their “good” is a derivative of that: whatever is not evil is good, *they* are good. In this way, their morality stems from their ressentiment. Nietzsche claims that this morality of ressentiment gives birth to anti-natural effects, such as the separation of the subject from the doing. As Nietzsche puts it, they take pride in their inability to exert strength, in their weakness.

“To demand of strength that it not express itself as strength, that it *not* be a desire to overwhelm, a desire to cast down, a desire to become lord, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs, is just as nonsensical as to demand of weakness that it express itself as strength...For just as common people separate the lightning from its flash and take the latter as a *doing*, as an effect of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength as if there were behind the strong an indifferent substratum that is free to express strength – or not to...Small wonder if the suppressed, hiddenly glowing affects of revenge and hate exploit this belief and

\[16\] GM, 10
basically even uphold no other belief more ardently than this one, that the strong is free to be weak, and the bird of prey to be a lamb; they thereby gain for themselves the right to hold the bird of prey accountable for being a bird of prey.”

The weak by nature do not resign to their weakness and accept their poor lot in life. The will-to-power guides their morality, and their interpretations serve themselves. Thus, they hold the strong by nature accountable for their strength, and interpret their weakness to be an act of choice. In their positing of weakness as a merit, they hold all those who exert their strength responsible for their expressions of power. It is out of this that the belief in a neutral subject grows, one that is free to either express or withhold strength.

“This kind of human needs the belief in a neutral ‘subject’ with free choice, out of an instinct of self-preservation, self-affirmation, in which every lie tends to hallow itself. It is perhaps for this reason that the subject (or, to speak more popularly, the soul) has until now been the best article of faith on earth, because it made possible for the majority of mortals, the weak and oppressed of every kind, that sublime self-deception of interpreting weakness itself as freedom, of interpreting their being-such-and-such as a merit.”

The will-to-power guides this reactive morality that holds the doer responsible for the deed. Since the weak cannot exert their dominance in the natural world because of their lack of strength, they are forced to invent the world of moral responsibility and accountability to discharge their power. Their valuations are a out of a desire to give meaning to their suffering.

“What actually arouses indignation against suffering is not the suffering in itself, but rather the senselessness of suffering; but neither for the Christian, who has interpreted into suffering an entire secret salvation machinery, nor for

17 GM, 25
18 GM, 25
Out of a desire to make life tolerable, the weak by nature gave meaning to their suffering. Their expressive will-to-power is at work in their valuations. Though anti-natural morality preaches against the expressions of power and domination, it is motivated by the very same instincts of life. It denounces manifestations of the will-to-power, yet is itself a product of the will-to-power. This is the sense in which Nietzsche believes anti-natural morality to be dishonest. Not only is it dishonest, anti-natural morality also has sickening effects that Nietzsche sees as psychologically damaging for the development of life: guilt and bad conscience. Nietzsche explains these ill-effects in terms of his will-to-power in order to undermine the legitimacy of anti-natural morality and alleviate its sickening effects.

c. **Internalization of the Drives**

As beasts in the animal kingdom, human beings had a sort of freedom that is impossible in a civilized social world. Their instincts were “their old leaders, the regulating drives that unconsciously guided them safely.” (GM 56) These drives were free to exert their will-to-power externally, and human beings acted in accordance with natural laws. This freedom, however, is not conducive to living in settled social relations and institutions.

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19 GM, 44
20 This is not to say that morality as a phenomenon is unnatural, just that there were no moral pretenses that saw acting in accordance with instinct as wrong.
In exchange for the benefits of society, humanity had to learn to refrain from acting upon the instinctual drives that compromise these new forms of social living. The socially situated human cannot discharge its strength freely, it must learn to restrain itself and refrain from unconsciously following its instincts.

“Just as water animals must have fared when they were forced either to become land animals or to perish, so fared these half animals who were happily adapted to wilderness, war, roaming about, adventure – all at once all of their instincts were devalued and ‘disconnected.’ From now on they were to go on foot and ‘carry themselves’ where they had previously been carried by the water: a horrible heaviness lay upon them.”

Nietzsche argues that these instincts and drives that were previously free to be acted upon had to transform as humans entered society. Rather than just disappearing, the newly forbidden instincts found new avenues to exert their dominance and will-to-power. Instead of discharging themselves externally, however, they were forced to discharge inwardly.

“and yet those old instincts had not all at once ceased to make their demands! It’s just that it was difficult and seldom possible to yield to them: for the most part they had to seek new and as it were subterranean gratifications. All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly turn themselves inwards – this is what I call the internalizing of man: thus first grows in man which he later calls his ‘soul.’ The entire inner world, originally thin as if inserted between two skins, has spread and unfolded, has taken on depth, breadth, height to the same extent that man’s outward discharging has been obstructed. Those terrible bulwarks with which the organization of the state protects itself against the old instincts of freedom – punishments belong above all else to these bulwarks – brought it about that all those instincts of the wild free human turned themselves backwards against man himself. Hostility, cruelty, pleasure in persecution, in assault, in change, in destruction – all that turning itself against the possessors of such instincts: that is the origin of ‘bad conscience’... the suffering of man from man, from himself.”

21 GM, 56
22 GM, 57
In civilized society, one is made to feel responsible for one’s deeds. This feeling of responsibility guides one’s actions, causing one to repress any outward expressiveness that would not be conducive to social living. Previously indifferent to the cruelty that may have resulted from one’s actions, civilized human beings are taught to feel responsibility for their “hostility, cruelty, pleasure in persecution.” Nietzsche argues that this repressed outward expressiveness transforms into the internal expressions of guilt and bad conscience. The creative aspects of the will-to-power are restrained, and the competing drives that struggle for dominance turn the conflict inwards, exerting their creative force in the forming of a responsible self.

“This secret self-violation, this artists’ cruelty, this pleasure in giving oneself - as heavy resisting suffering matter - a form, in burning into oneself a will, a critique, a contradiction, a contempt, a ‘no’; this uncanny and horrifying-pleasurable work of a soul compliant-conflicted with itself, that makes itself suffer out of pleasure in making-suffer, this entire active ‘bad conscience,’...”

Bad conscience results from the conflicting feeling of wanting to exert one’s will-to-power, but refraining from it out of a sense of responsibility. Nietzsche sees this internal war among the suppressed instincts and the responsible self as harmful to the development of healthy life. In its separation between the self and the instinctual drives, anti-natural morality reinforces the notion of a stable and unchanging self that is responsible for his actions. Nietzsche criticizes these understandings for their attempt to freeze the processes of life that constantly redefine the self. Particularly damaging is their attitude towards the past. In understanding the world as being, anti-natural morality interprets the past as determined and unchanging, and teaches

23 GM, 59
one to feel responsible for the history of one’s deeds. In the curtailing of the
instinctual drives, it preaches how humans ought to live, in compliance with a
“moral world-order.”

But, the will-to-power understands this attempt to repress the drives of life to be in vain.

“The single human being is a piece of *fatum* from the front and from the rear,
one law more, one necessity more for all that is yet to come and to be. To say to him, ‘Change yourself!’ is to demand that everything be changed, even retroactively.”

In Nietzsche’s picture, morality is a product (rather than a factor) of one’s instinctual drives. In imposing a moral code on human activity, a conflict is created between one’s necessary activity and these moral valuations. When one’s actions don’t line up with the imposed moral order, an unhealthy attitude towards the past can develop, leading to bad conscience and guilt. These effects involve the notion of feeling regret towards one’s past, and Nietzsche sees this attitude as imposing a heavy burden on the self. In light of the will-to-power, this burden seems unnecessary. For Nietzsche, the past, as with everything else, is subject to the process of becoming what it is, and thus is always yet to be determined. Activity in the present and the future gives new meaning and significance to the past. For this reason, Nietzsche adopts an new attitude towards the past in which he seeks to affirm all that has been through what he becomes. I will explain this attitude of being future-oriented in more detail when I explicate the practical stance. First, I

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24 TI, 500
25 TI, 491
will elaborate on what Nietzsche calls the death of god, to which the practical stance is a response.

III The Death of God

Part of the purpose of Nietzsche’s genealogical account of morality is to articulate what he terms “the death of god.” Nietzsche believes the death of god to be an historically situated event, yet he argues that its ramifications have yet to be fully realized. The death of god incorporates Nietzsche’s views on meaning, truth, and interpretation, and serves as the prompt for Nietzsche’s practical stance towards the self. “‘Dead are all gods; now we want the overman to live.”26 The death of god basically refers to the recognition of the impossibility of the notion of a “true world.” The relation between truth and meaning in Nietzsche’s is important in understanding what is going on. Truth is not a matter of correctness with regard to an external parameter such as “the true world.” The concepts in an assertion do not exist independently in the world, thus truth is not a matter of correct reflection of a world with pre-established entities and meaning. Instead, Nietzsche understands truth to refer to the accuracy and integrity of one’s meaning. Meaning is an activity of imposing one’s valuations on the world, and the truth of what one means in valuing depends on its coherence with respect to the whole. Thus, even though there is no outside parameter that determines whether something is true,

26 Z, 191
one can still get things wrong. This is the sense in which Nietzsche understands anti-natural morality to be dishonest.

Nietzsche demonstrates the manner in which all established values have been ungrounded, such that we are left in a void of meaning.

“Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? And backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?”

Previously, the notions of the ideal, the true world, and God served to make life tolerable for the weak by nature, such that they gave meaning to their suffering.

Thus, Nietzsche believes that the realization of the death of god is not for everyone, and that some need the alleviation of suffering provided by notions such as the ideal or truth. Furthermore, some would react to the death of god with a plunge into nihilism, and would take despair in their failed pursuit of looking for stable meaning. For those capable, however, the collapse of these values provides an opportunity for the creation of new meaning. By eliminating the distinction between the true world and an apparent world, Nietzsche redefines the understanding of the nature of reality such that this path to nihilism is cut off.

Though the world is inherently meaningless, Nietzsche’s understanding of meaning, truth, and interpretation remove the need to see this “infinite nothing” as a sign of

27 *The Gay Science*, 125
despair. In this section, I will address the distinction between the apparent world
and the true world, the ungrounding of meaning, and perspectival truth.

As was seen above, Nietzsche argues that faith in the true world is a result of
faith in anti-natural being. From this perspective, there is an ideal, true world of
being that is not accessible for humans in the natural world. The senses, which
detect only becoming, are taken to be clumsy receptors that are incapable of getting
the world “as it really is.” Thus, a distinction between an apparent world and a true
world is erected. The death of god refers to the elimination of this distinction (of
the faith in being), and Nietzsche prompts us to embrace the apparent world as the
only world there is. The sense in which it is “apparent,” however, needs to be
reworked. “The true world – we have abolished. What would has remained? The
apparent one perhaps? But no! With the true world we have also abolished the
apparent one.” 28 Nietzsche is illustrating the necessity in which the concepts of
truth, meaning, and interpretation need to be reinterpreted, since they are all based
on the notion of being. “The reasons for which ‘this’ world has been characterized
as ‘apparent’ are the very reasons which indicate its reality; any other kind of reality
is absolutely indemonstrable.” 29 The world exhibits only becoming, and concepts
that rely on the notion of being (such as the thing-in-itself, the true world, the ideal
as causa prima) need to be reworked. Thus, Nietzsche rejects any notion of
objective truth, and believes in the ungrounding of all meaning.

28 TI, 486
29 TI, 484
Nietzsche takes the primary activity of life to be imposing meaning and value on the world. He rejects the notion of the world as consisting of thing-in-themselves with inherent meaning, thus there is no “true” meaning of a concept. All meaning is situated and from a perspective, and Nietzsche argues that any attempt to provide an objective account of the world is in vain.

“For let us guard ourselves better from now on, gentlemen philosophers, against the dangerous old conceptual fabrication that posited a ‘pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge’; let us guard ourselves against the tentacles of such contradictory concepts as ‘pure reason,’ ‘absolute spirituality,’ ‘knowledge in itself’: here it is always demanded that we think an eye that cannot possibly be thought, an eye that must not have any direction, in which the active and interpretive forces through which seeing first becomes seeing-something are to be shut off, are to be absent; thus, what is demanded here is always an absurdity and a non-concept of an eye.”

The meaning of concepts cannot be abstracted from their origin and their subsequent uses, which is what happens when one attempts to understand the world looking for being. As was articulated above, such anti-natural interpretations believe in the existence of independent things-in-themselves, and hold that these things possess stable, inherent meanings. Nietzsche argues that this interpretation ignores the creative forces that bestow meaning on the world, out of which concepts and things originate.

“Let us still give special consideration to the formation of concepts. Every word immediately becomes a concept, inasmuch as it is not intended to serve as a reminder of the unique and wholly individualized original experience to which it owes its birth, but must at the same time fit innumerable, more or less similar cases – which means, strictly speaking, never equal – in other words, a lot of unequal cases. Every concept originates through our equating what is unequal. No leaf ever wholly equals another, and the concept ‘leaf’ is formed

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30 GM, 85
through an arbitrary abstraction from these individual differences, through
forgetting the distinctions; and now it gives rise to the idea that in nature there
might be something besides the leaves which would be ‘leaf’ – some kind of
original form after which all leaves have been woven, marked, copied, colored,
curled, and painted, but by unskilled hands, so that no copy turned out to be a
correct, reliable, and faithful image of the original form. We call a person
‘honest.’ Why did he act so honestly today? we ask. Our answer usually
sounds like this: because of his honesty. Honesty! That is to say again: the
leaf is the cause of the leaves. After all, we know nothing of an essence-like
quality named ‘honesty’; we know only numerous individualized, and thus
unequal actions, which we equate by omitting the unequal and by then calling
them honest actions. In the end, we distill from them a *qualitas occulta* with
the name of ‘honest’... What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors,
metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations,
which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and
rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a
people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they
are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which
have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.”

Nietzsche argues that we have forgotten that we are the originators of concepts, and
that in the search for stable meaning we have created the notion of the ideal.

Nietzsche wants us to rid of our faith in the ideal, and to see it for the illusion it is.

The concept of a “leaf” is nothing other than a created word that comes from
comparing many similar yet unequal things in the world; the ideal is a product of
reality. Nietzsche is rebelling against the tradition in philosophy that takes the ideal
to be *causa prima*, as the source of the particulars. Nietzsche sees this view as
nonsense, in that it takes the invented concepts that arise from reality as more
fundamental than the reality that gave birth to them, such that they become “the
very measure of reality.”

Concepts and things do not exist independently from the

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31 The Portable Nietzsche, 46
32 TI, 495
form-giving interpreting of the human perspective.\textsuperscript{33} For this reason, Nietzsche believes there is no inherent truth or meaning of concepts and things. In this sense, truth is subjugated to meaning. Since there is no true meaning, Nietzsche sees the activity of putting the world in one’s own terms as more important than the validity of one’s interpretation.

Nietzsche advocates instead for the notion of a perspectival truth, in which the various perspectives that give meaning are examined in their own right.

“There is only a perspectival seeing, only a ‘perspectival knowing’; and the more affects we allow to speak about a matter, the more eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter, that much more complete will our ‘concept’ of this matter, our ‘objectivity’ be. But to eliminate the will altogether, to disconnect the affects one and all, supposing that we were capable of this: what? would that not be to castrate the intellect?...”\textsuperscript{34}

“Seeing” is an active force for Nietzsche, and one’s perspective is determined by one’s will-to-power. The competition among life’s drives guides how one interprets the world, such that one is an interested party in positing values. Because one can not step out of one’s position in life, there can be no objective “seeing.” Without any objective perspective with which to judge the validity of individual perspectives, truth for Nietzsche needs a new understanding. Rather than a matter of correct reflection, truth becomes a matter of honesty in interpreting. Anti-natural morality preaches against the instincts of life, yet morality is a product of the instincts of life,

\textsuperscript{33} This is not to say that without humans there would be no things in the world. A book would still exist as a physical object in the world without humans (or other valuing creatures), but it would not be a book in the sense that we understand the word. It is through human activity and use that the book gets meaning and becomes a thing (rather than a physical object).
\textsuperscript{34} GM, 85
thus Nietzsche considers it dishonest. A major purpose of his genealogy of morality is to highlight the way in which anti-natural morality is no longer a viable understanding of the world. By explaining anti-morality through his lens of the will-to-power, Nietzsche undermines the dishonest search for being in the world of becoming. Free will, the indivisible soul, and the true world all lose their grounding as viable interpretations of reality when put in Nietzsche’s terms.

### Part II

From the interpretation above, it seems that Nietzsche believes one’s morality to be a product of the will-to-power. If this is the case, then Nietzsche’s own philosophy would have to be interpreted as a product of his instinctual drives. His notion of creating the self would resemble an activity that certain people (such as Nietzsche) must necessarily undertake. But this fatalist interpretation of morality fails to do justice to important elements of Nietzsche’s philosophy. What could Nietzsche mean by “being a self-propelled wheel” if all of one’s activity is propelled by the interweaving forces of the world? It would seem that the freedom necessary for giving style to one’s character does not exist from this interpretation. I think we gain important insight on this question from Nietzsche’s understanding of the use of history, and his description of the gift-giving virtue.

In his essay *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, Nietzsche describes various approaches to understanding the past. The argument he puts forth relies on his understanding of the world as becoming, and he stands against
interpretations that see the past as dead and determined. In a brief chronicling of the development of social and civilized human beings, Nietzsche characterizes the main difference between beastly man and social man as being his attitude towards the past. For the beastly human, life consists of existence in the present. This life is determined by the instinctual drives, and doesn’t concern itself with a connection to past activity. After developing a sense of responsibility for one’s actions, the social human has an awareness of the continuity of his actions, and thus makes a connection with the past and future.

“For it learns to understand the expression “It was,” that password with which struggle, suffering, and weariness come over human beings, so as to remind him what his existence basically is—a past tense that is never over and done with.”

It is only with this connection to the past that human beings develop a sense of identity, a self that continually develops. This historical understanding, however, presents a psychological danger for the developing human. As was addressed above, Nietzsche believes that the attitude towards the past of the social human is infected with the anti-natural interpretation of the world as being. By attempting to impose stability on the incessant flux of the world, one surrenders oneself to despair at the impossibility of the task.

“Imagine the most extreme example, a person who did not possess the power of forgetting at all, who would be condemned to see everywhere a coming into being. Such a person no longer believes in his own being, no longer believes in himself, sees everything in moving points flowing out of each other, and loses himself in this stream of becoming.”

35 On the Use and Abuse of History For Life
36 Ibid
Any attempt to subject the *becoming* of the world into dead concepts and items of knowledge will necessarily fail. Thus, Nietzsche believed the declining faith in Christian morality would lead to nihilism if faith in *being* still remained. Despite the impossibility of capturing the “true world,” many would still rely on the lens of *being*, and, finding only *becoming*, would conclude that reality is meaningless. As such, Nietzsche would describe this understanding of the past as an “abuse of history,” one that allows for psychologically damaging effects.

Despite these dangerous effects of the historical lens, Nietzsche does not advocate for a return to the beastly state of man, in which existence in the present does not bother itself with transforming the world into items of knowledge. Activity in the present, however, is of the highest important for Nietzsche.

> “Anyone who cannot set himself down on the crest of the moment, forgetting everything from the past, who is not capable of standing on a single point, like a goddess of victory, without dizziness and fear, will never know what happiness is, and, even worse, he will never do anything to make other people happy.”  

Nietzsche certainly praises the ability to live in the midst of things, the “unhistorical” attitude that can forget all that was. Yet a human without any historical capacity would fail to be able to create a self, and thus would live a life without meaning. 

> “This is the specific principle which the reader is invited to consider: that for the health of a single individual, a people, and a culture the unhistorical and the historical are equally essential.”

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37 Ibid  
38 This is meant to indicate that they would lack the ability to give meaning to the world, rather than a moral judgment on the worth of their existence. 
39 Ibid
Thus, Nietzsche believes that there can be a healthy attitude towards the past that would avoid the harmful psychological effects of interpreting the world as *being*.

Nietzsche believes that the historical lens must be adjusted to the account for the becoming of the world. The meaning of all that happens in the world is continually redefined with the activity of the future. Rather than seeing the past as a determined “it was,” Nietzsche envisions a human who would subject the meaning of the past to the service of the present.

“And if we were to imagine the most powerful and most immense nature, then we would recognize there that for it there would be no frontier at all over which the historical sense would be able to grow or cause damage. Everything in the past, in its own and in the most alien, this nature would draw upon, take it into itself, and, as it were, transform into blood. What such a nature does not subjugate it knows how to forget. It is there no more. The horizon is closed and complete, and nothing can recall that there still are men, passions, doctrines, and purposes beyond it.”

The human described would be capable of actively forming the past so as to form a fruitful horizon for the present. Whatever cannot be interpreted in the service of the present is forgotten, such that the past is useful only in the forging of a future. This is a picture of a fluid interpretation of one’s past, in which one transforms its meaning according to the needs of the present.

“Insofar as history stands in the service of life, it stands in the service of an unhistorical power and will therefore, in this subordinate position, never be able to (and should never be able to) become pure science, the way mathematics is, for example.”

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40 Ibid
41 Ibid
Interpreting the past involves judging its value, such that one is judging life.

Nietzsche argues that any judgment of value concerning life is always from a particular perspective, from an interested party, and thus can never reach the level of truth. Valuing is in the service of life, and as such, history (valuing the past) must be in the service of life. Nietzsche calls this attitude that gives meaning to the past in order to support the unhistorical present the “super-historical.”

“By the word ‘unhistorical’ I mean the power, the art of forgetting, and of drawing a limited horizon round one’s self. I call the power ‘super-historical’ which turn the eyes from the process of becoming to that which gives existence an eternal and stable character, to art and religion.”

Though the super-historical gives existence a stable character, it is not understanding meaning in the world as stable. The meaning the super-historical imposes is continually given new meaning as history progresses. I take this separation between unhistorical activity in the present and the super-historical valuing of the past to be part of Nietzsche’s practical stance towards the self. From the practical stance, the self is both acting in the present and imposing meaning and values on one’s life. I understand the theoretical stance towards the self to be this imposed meaning from the super-historical. Below, I will develop in further detail what the stances entail.

The question, in essence, is what value the attitude towards the past has.

“Why have knowledge at all?” As stated above, Nietzsche believes that the value

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42 Ibid
43 BGE, 352
of the past is in its contribution to the present and future. Thus, the meaning that Nietzsche gives to the world from the theoretical stance serves the values he creates from the practical stance. In the sections that follow, I will illustrate how the theoretical stance affirms Nietzsche’s values of life-affirmation and the gift-giving virtue.

I  The Practical Stance

Nietzsche’s practical stance towards the self understands the self as a process of becoming what it is. One’s future gives new meaning to the past, thus the self is never determined. To avoid the sickening effects that result from looking for a stable past, Nietzsche believes one’s activity in the present should be future-oriented, such that the past is affirmed by the future.

“I taught them all my creating and striving, to create and carry together into One what in man is fragment and riddle and dreadful accidents, I taught them to work on the future and to redeem with their creation all that has been. To redeem what is past in man and to re-create all ‘it was’ until the will say, “Thus I willed it! Thus I shall will it’ – this I called redemption and this alone I taught them to call redemption.”

Nietzsche wants to avoid having regret for the past, and to instead affirm all that has been with one’s activity in the present. Rather than seeing the past as determined, Nietzsche advocates learning to change one’s perspective in order to reinterpret the past continually with respect to one’s attitude towards the future. The activity of the present involves an attitude towards both the past and the future, and in interpreting

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44 Z, 310
one’s past in line with one’s future one forms a conception of who one is. But this conception is fluid and fragile, and one is constantly overcoming oneself.

“There is wisdom in this, that there is much in the world that smells foul: nausea itself creates wings and water-divining powers. Even in the best there is still something that nauseates; and even the best is something that must be overcome.”

Nietzsche praises the conflict within the self, and never wants to see the self as complete. From this stance it makes no sense to feel guilt or regret the past, since one continually gives new meaning to the past through one’s activity and interpreting. The stakes for all three are up for grabs, such that the self is always yet to be determined. Creating a self involves interpreting one’s past, present, and future as a cohesive whole, or unifying the self in time. As one’s becoming unfolds, new interpretations are needed to reconcile the past with the present and the future.

Nietzsche responds to this activity of giving meaning to one’s self with an attitude of life-affirmation. One affirms life (and one’s past) in unifying one’s reinterpretation of the self with one’s activity in the present and the future. The value of the attitude towards the past is in how it contributes to the present. Thus, we must examine the meaning Nietzsche imposes from the theoretical stance in its relation to his concerns of the present. A major purpose of his project is to overcome the faith in being, including the psychologically damaging effects that come from anti-natural morality. I take the theoretical stance that interprets the world as subject to the will-to-power to refute the faith in being. I understand the fatalist notions from the theoretical stance as serving to counteract the legitimacy of

45 Z, 317
bad conscience and guilt. In this sense, Nietzsche is creating a theoretical environment that grounds his value of life-affirmation.

**II The Theoretical Stance**

Nietzsche’s theoretical stance puts the world in terms of his will-to-power. It is a theoretical perspective from outside of the present that gives existence a unified character. This stance is “super-historical,” in that gives it meaning to all that has been in order to serve the present. The great majority of Nietzsche’s philosophy is from the theoretical stance (I will later address a potential problem of circularity that arises from this interpretation.) In this way, his entire philosophy serves to affirm the values he gives himself in the practical stance.⁴⁶

Part of the created meaning Nietzsche gives to the world involves the fatalist notions that prompted the initial question of this thesis. The purpose of these ideas (amor fati, the eternal recurrence) is to alleviate the sickening effects inherited from anti-natural morality, namely revenge against the past. As was discussed above, interpreting the world looking for being leads to dishonest conceptions of the self and the world, which understand the past as determined. The advocates of anti-natural morality preach against the instincts of life (the will-to-power), yet this morality is an expression of their will-to-power. One is taught to suppress the instinctual drives that inevitably determine one’s actions. Because of this contradiction, the drives turn perniciously inwards. The internalization of the

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⁴⁶ I have only addressed the first of these values: life-affirmation. I will address the second, the gift-giving virtue, in its relevance to resolving the question of circularity.
instincts leads to the development of bad conscience and guilt, which involve one feeling regret towards the past. The meaning Nietzsche imposes from the theoretical stance serves to overcome these sentiments of revenge against the past. “For that man be delivered from revenge, that is for me the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms.” In the section that follows I address how Nietzsche’s notions of the eternal recurrence, amor fati, and the will-to-power express fatalist conceptions of the world that serve to undermine the effects of bad conscience and guilt.

Nietzsche poses a thought experiment in various texts called the eternal recurrence. In this experiment, Nietzsche proposes that the world continually repeats all that has been.

“How, if some day or night a demon were to sneak after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you, ‘This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you – all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over and over, and you with it, a dust grain of dust.’ Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or did you once experience a tremendous moment when you would have answered him, ‘You are a god, and never have I heard anything more godly.’”

Nietzsche prompts us to ponder whether the thought of repeating one’s life in its entirety would leave us in despair or joy. This thought experiment dramatically increases the significance of one’s everyday activity. The thought of continually repeating every deed forces one to approach all aspects of one’s life in a new light.

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47 Z, 211
48 GS, 102
As opposed to anti-natural moralities that impose the notion of the afterworldly, the eternal recurrence stresses the notion that this life is all we get. One of the responses to this thought experiment (that I believe Nietzsche intended) is to understand one’s life as an end-in-itself.

“Man is not the effect of some special purpose, of a will, and end; nor is he the object of an attempt to attain an ‘ideal of humanity’ or an ‘ideal of happiness’ or an ‘ideal of morality.’ It is absurd to wish to devolve one’s essence on some end or other. We have invented the concept of ‘end’: in reality there is no end.”

There are no inherent purposes in life, the only purpose one has in what he gives himself. One could use the eternal recurrence as a sort of test (reminiscent of the categorical imperative) to determine what it is one wants to live for, such that the ultimate purpose of existence is in affirming one’s self.

“This question in each and every thing, ‘Do you want this once more and innumerable times more?’ would weight upon your actions as the greatest stress. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?”

Nietzsche believes that it is not possible for some to will this eternal recurrence, namely the weak and downtrodden, and that for them the thought of repeating their lives would be a great stress. Indeed, there is a question of whether Nietzsche believes anyone to be capable of adopting this attitude in every situation. In this sense, willing the eternal recurrence is a goal to be strived for. What would it take to want the entirety of one’s life, including all the suffering, to recur (what does it

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49 TI, 500
50 GS, 102
mean to be well disposed to yourself and to life)? This question provides a backdrop for Nietzsche’s ideas on self-creation and the übermensch, and harmonizes with his notion of life-affirmation. The eternal recurrence removes any outside parameters from which to judge one’s life (for reasons identified above), and places life itself as the only standard.

Though it by no means is meant to be a metaphysical claim about the nature of the world, the eternal recurrence carries with it some fatalist implications that do work in Nietzsche’s project. Part of the way Nietzsche alleviates revenge against the past is by interpreting the past as the necessary condition for the present. Nietzsche interprets all activity in the world to be intertwined so tightly that to want to change anything (in the past) would be to want to change everything.

“No one is responsible for man’s being there at all, for his being such-and-such, or for his being in these circumstances or in this environment. The fatality of his essence is not to be disentangled from the fatality of all that has been and will be.”

(TI 500)

Nietzsche wants to counters the regret towards the past that results from bad conscience by freeing man of the feeling of responsibility for the past. From this stance, it seems ridiculous for one to feel responsible for (and thus regret) a past that is “knotted together so firmly.” (Z 270) Nietzsche wants to understand the past as the necessary condition for the present. In this sense, if one can say “yea” to anything one must say “yea” to all of it. The eternal recurrence is a recipe for life-affirmation.

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51 TI, 500
Working in conjunction with this thought experiment is Nietzsche’s notion of amor fati. In interpreting fatality of all that is as necessary, one is left with the option of either embracing or rejecting one’s fate.

“My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it – all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary – but love it.”

Amor fati involves more than simply accepting the past as necessary. It requires an art of interpretation in which one transforms all that is necessary into the condition for who one is. “And verily, this is no command for today and tomorrow, to learn to love oneself. Rather, it is of all arts the subtlest, the most cunning, the ultimate, and the most patient.” In understanding the fate of the world as the necessary condition of one’s self, one is forced to embrace who one is. Bad conscience and guilt have no room here. Any regret towards the past involves regret towards all that is, such that one is left with accepting either the entirety of existence or nothing at all.

As was discussed in Part I, the will-to-power also serves to undermine psychologically damaging attitudes towards the past. It argues against the notion of a continuous self that is responsible for actions in a determined past. This lens through which Nietzsche views the becoming of the world reinforces the fatalist understanding of existence: life’s causality is subject to the will-to-power. Meaning

52 EH, 714
53 Z, 305
and activity are determined by the competition among life’s instinctual drives, and “every moment draws its ultimate consequences at every moment.”  

In an important passage, Nietzsche illustrates how the will-to-power is not an attempt to describe the true nature of reality.

“An interpreter who would picture the unexceptional and unconditional aspects of all ‘will to power’ so vividly that every word, even the word ‘tyranny’ itself, would eventually seem unsuitable, or a weakening and attenuating metaphor – being too human – but he might, nevertheless, end by asserting the same about this world as you do, namely, that it has a ‘necessary’ and ‘calculable’ course, not because laws obtain in it, but because they are absolutely lacking, and every moment draws its ultimate consequences at every moment. Supposing that this also is only interpretation – and you will be eager enough to make this objection? – well, so much the better.”

The will-to-power is put forth as an interpretation (in Nietzsche’s sense of the word.) For Nietzsche, there are no facts, there are only interpretations. As a part of Nietzsche’s theoretical stance, these claims about the causal forces of life should be understood as serving the purposes of Nietzsche’s life. The will-to-power is a “super-historical” understanding of the world, and with it Nietzsche gives meaning to his life in the present.

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In this section I will seek to answer a question that comes from this proposed interpretation. Nietzsche uses the will-to-power to explain the inconsistency between the motivations behind those who promote anti-natural moralities and the meaning they impose upon the world: They preach against the

\[ 54 \text{ BGE, 220} \]
\[ 55 \text{ BGE, 221} \]
\[ 56 \text{ As discussed in Part I, there are no true facts about the world, only perspectival interpretations.} \]
instincts, the thirst for power, and the necessity of change and destruction. But through the lens of the will-to-power, their imposition of anti-natural morality is spurred by their instinctual desire to alleviate their suffering; their imposition of meaning is part of incessant struggle for power between competing valuations; and through their interpreting, old meaning had to die and give way to their newly created values. The puzzle is how Nietzsche’s argument holds in light of the will-to-power not being a metaphysical claim of truth. In other words, what if the will-to-power is an incorrect interpretation and there is no inconsistency between the actions and values of those behind anti-natural moralities?

In addition, the tools that would be most useful in addressing these issues, namely Nietzsche’s conceptions of truth and interpretation, are also put in terms of the will-to-power. At first glance, it may seem that all of the death of god is grounded in the will-to-power, making Nietzsche’s project quite circular. If the death of god (void of meaning) grounds the practical stance (life as imposing meaning), if the practical stance grounds the theoretical stance (will-to-power), and if the theoretical stance grounds the death of god, then Nietzsche’s project would seem to be an independent circle of thought, no more connected to reality than a work of fiction. This might leave one with the impression that Nietzsche’s project has minimal significance within the realm of philosophy, and that his writings are no more than a good read. In the next section, however, I argue that Nietzsche does make claims about reality, namely the distinction between being and becoming.

The question is whether, and to what extent, the death of god relies on the will-to-
power, and I propose an answer to this question that also sheds light on the significance of Nietzsche’s project for the reader.

III  The Gift-Giving Virtue

I see Nietzsche as providing an answer to this question in a section in Thus Spoke Zarathustra called “the gift-giving virtue.” The passage describes the highest virtue Nietzsche creates for himself, of serving no other purpose than his own.

“The tell me: how did gold attain the highest value? Because it is uncommon and useless and gleaming and gentle in its splendor; it always gives itself. Only as the image of the highest virtue did gold attain the highest value...Uncommon is the highest virtue and useless; it is gleaming and gentle in its splendor: a gift-giving virtue is the highest virtue.”

The only use Nietzsche wants his life to serve is his own, the only end he aims for is in creating his self. I think this is the key to escaping the circle of Nietzsche’s thought: Nietzsche always gives himself. The primary purpose his philosophy serves is to be the platform for his own self-creation, and because of this the entirety of his project is a projection of his imposed meaning. Every idea is put in his own terms, and each element serves to reinforce the rest. In this sense, Nietzsche’s philosophy is performative rather than circular. He is fulfilling the highest virtue he gives to himself by serving no other use than his own.

This is not to say, however, that Nietzsche’s philosophy is strictly personal and has no bearing on the reader.

57 Z, 186 (Italics mine)
“Verily, I have found you out, my disciples: you strive, as I do, for the gift-giving virtue...Insatiably your soul strives for treasures and gems, because your virtue is insatiably in wanting to give. You force all things to and into yourself that they may flow back out of your well as the gifts of your love. Verily, such a gift-giving love must approach all values as a robber; but whole and holy I call this selfishness.”

Nietzsche would have us appreciate his writings as we would gold, for nothing other than its self-serving beauty. His corpus of works should be thoroughly enjoyed as a comprehensive piece of art, despite his varying stylistic tendencies. Yet this piece of art provides us with a picture of a human life who is engaged in the process of self-creation.

Each part of his philosophy is put in terms of his will-to-power because his philosophy is meant to serve himself, and Nietzsche does not want us to find grounding in his created meaning. “I am a railing by the torrent: let those who can, grasp me! Your crutch, however, I am not.” Nietzsche’s philosophy is an example of how one can give meaning to the world and create one’s self. But the meaning Nietzsche imposes is intended for his self-affirmation, and is not intended to be the grounds for someone else’s project of self-creation. It is helpful to think of Nietzsche’s project as three separate steps.

1. Nietzsche recognizes the dishonesty in interpreting the world as being, and instead adopts the lens of becoming. In so doing, he rejects the notion of a determined self, the true world, and anti-natural morality.

2. Nietzsche responds to the open space of becoming with the practical stance. This stance understands the self as engaged in a process of

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58 Z, 187
59 Z, 152
60 Hence the subtitle to **Thus Spoke Zarathustra**: A book for all and none.
becoming what it is, and the activity of life to be valuing. The virtues that
guide his imposed meaning are life-affirmation and the gift-giving virtue.

3. Nietzsche imposes meaning on the world from the theoretical stance. In
light of the virtues he gives himself, he interprets the world with his notions
of the will-to-power, amor fati, and the eternal recurrence.

In his writing, all of the steps are put in terms of his created meaning from the
theoretical stance. Thus, the distinction between being and becoming (step one)
gets put in terms of the will-to-power. Nietzsche grounds his project in himself, thus
fulfilling his gift-giving virtue. Through his imposed meaning he creates himself,
and the entirety of his philosophy serves to affirm who he is. The question that
follows from this is what the reader is left with in light of the self-serving nature of
this project.

IV  An Invitation for Self-Creation

After imparting the gift-giving virtue on his disciples, Zarathustra bids them
to depart from him. “Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only when
you have all denied me will I return to you.”\footnote{Z, 190} Nietzsche’s created meaning is not
meant for us to use, rather it serves as a guide for how to approach living a
meaningful life. “This is my way; where is yours?” – thus I answered those who
asked me ‘the way.’ For the way – that does not exist.”\footnote{Z, 307} His philosophy is one of
self-affirmation, that gives itself through its offering of an invitation for those willing
to embrace the opportunity of giving new meaning to themselves.
“The ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have what was and is repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably de capo – not only to himself but to the whole play and spectacle, and not only to a spectacle but at bottom to him who needs precisely this spectacle – and who makes it necessary because again and again he needs himself – and makes himself necessary – What? And wouldn’t this be – circulus vitiosus duas?est

Nietzsche makes himself necessary in the meaning he imposes from the theoretical stance. His meaning serves to affirm himself, and the terms he puts the world in are from his particular perspective. This passage hints that Nietzsche is conscious of the circular nature of his created meaning: circulus vitiosus duas translates to viscous circle as god. And this is precisely the point. We are each our own god, in that we each provide the grounding for our own existence. As value-giving humans living in a void of values, Nietzsche finds the “value” of imposing meaning in its ability to affirm a living life. But Nietzsche’s virtues are not meant to be ours, and for us the void remains. What Nietzsche leaves the reader is an argument against the faith in being. His views on the becoming of the world remain despite being put in terms of the imposed meaning of his theoretical stance. The significance of his views on becoming extend to notions of the self, and his attitude towards the past is one to learn from. In this sense, Nietzsche leaves us the opportunity to create ourselves, and provides us with an example of his unified self.

63 BGE, 258
Conclusion

The argument put forth in this thesis is intended to shed light on the significance of Nietzsche’s philosophy for those who read him. In it, I have argued that his project is largely one of his self-affirmation. Through his writing, Nietzsche puts the world in his own terms, imposing his own meaning in response to the void of values. The meaning he imposes from his theoretical stance is meant to fulfill the values he creates for himself in the practical stance. As such, much of his philosophy is not meant for us. This is not to say that we cannot gain insight from notions such as the will-to-power, but that the meaning he imposes from the theoretical stance is for his own self-creation, not ours. I think the real lessons that overflow from Nietzsche’s project of self-affirmation come from the practical stance towards the self. His claims on the becoming of the world hold over once we clear away his imposed meaning, as well as his attitude towards the usefulness of the past. If we consider these prompts for self-creation to be central to Nietzsche’s project, then the rest of his philosophy would be subservient to the creating of his self. I think the clues we get from Nietzsche’s discussion of the use of history and his gift-giving virtue make a solid foundation for this interpretation. It gains further support from Nietzsche’s conceptions of truth, meaning, and interpretation, along with Zarathustra’s commands to dispel his pronouncements and to find one’s own self. In light of this, Nietzsche’s writings should be read for their entertaining style, and his philosophy should be viewed as a piece of art. What Nietzsche leaves us is an opportunity to embrace our own lives and to give meaning to the world. Thus, his philosophy is both a project of his self-affirmation, and an invitation for our self-creation.