

NIETZSCHE: A RELIGIOUS THINKER

by

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Abstract

In this thesis, I attempt to demonstrate that Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) can be legitimately regarded as a religious thinker. In doing so, I present specific criteria that designate the meaning of the term "religious thinker," and attempt to reveal the extent to which Nietzsche meets these requirements. I assert that he overwhelmingly satisfies the criteria I present, and I make the further claim that if we approach Nietzsche's work in terms of his religious inclination and intentions, the overall coherence of his many perspectives and assertions is greatly strengthened.

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Introduction

I first encountered the work of Friedrich Nietzsche in 1990. I took a course on existentialism at Queen's University, and we studied "Zarathustra's Prologue," as well as various sections of *The Will To Power*. My response to Nietzsche was one of great enthusiasm. This was not the result of anything like a thorough, intellectual grasp of the few elements we touched upon in class. Instead, my response was rather like that of a bee to a flower, or an iron filing to a magnet – it was spontaneous, irresistible and intoxicating. Nietzsche had an appeal that I associate with religion. His thought was all-absorbing, enigmatic, moving, uplifting. I had the exciting sense that there was something really significant here, something that could produce transformations in thinking and living, something that was both inspiring and true.

In the years since that introductory course, I have studied Nietzsche's work with diligence and care. In doing so, I have become familiar with many of the strands and aspects of his thought. What a labyrinth of insights and assertions! The youthful enthusiasm of my initial response has been tempered and enriched by an increasingly sober consideration of the content of Nietzsche's ideas and visions, as well as the interpretations of many scholars. I have been drawn into the debate over whether Nietzsche is a coherent thinker whose work constitutes a single whole, or whether, on the contrary, he was an experimental observer and psychologist - an eclectic genius whose countless observations and narratives rarely overlap and frequently contradict one another. This thesis is the fruit of these investigations, spurred on by these questions. In the final analysis, I favor the holistic interpretation of Nietzsche's work. My position can

be traced back to my initial response to his writings, for my thesis, stated as bluntly as possible, is that *Nietzsche is a religious thinker*, and I assert that when so understood, the organic synthesis of his many ideas comes to light.

The suggestion that anyone is a religious thinker requires the presentation of criteria that designate the meaning of the term. In this study, I will suggest that a religious thinker is one who: a) has an insight into the total character of reality; b) outlines and refutes false conceptions of truth; c) is concerned primarily with meaning and purpose in human existence; d) suggests that such meaning and purpose is maximized when individuals or groups live in accordance with the recognized truth; e) offers recommendations for how the meaningful life can be lived, often through the medium of myths, parables and allegories that represent the trials, tribulations and triumphs of the religious seeker; and f) attempts to demonstrate the value and validity of a specific teaching through the medium of his or her own life. I will suggest that Nietzsche satisfies all these requirements.

Nietzsche's great insight – criterion a) - is a synthesis of complete atheism and the universality of becoming. Reality, according to Nietzsche, consists of change, impermanence, transition and temporality. In the whole cosmos, there is *nothing but* these elements of becoming. This idea unites Nietzsche with previous thinkers such as Heraclitus and Hegel, but there is a distinction in that Nietzsche's universe is not informed by any *telos*; it has no intrinsic value, intelligence or justice, and it contains absolutely no *a priori* meaning or purpose. Thus, Nietzsche's universe is totally dynamic and completely "de-deified."

The above position, which I call “absolute becoming,” necessitates the conclusion that all notions of being, permanence or discrete thing-hood represent falsifications. This radical rejection of being is the main source of Nietzsche’s long-standing polemic – a polemic that more than satisfies criterion b) - against traditional religion and metaphysics, as well as the related suggestion that reason, morality or ordinary language constitute effective purveyors of truth. These things are all servants of the being-illusion, and are therefore undecisive in the quest for truth.

Nietzsche’s pre-eminent concern with meaning and purpose - criterion c) - is revealed mainly through his preoccupation with the problem of nihilism, which culminates in his extreme anti-nihilistic position of *amor fati*, or love of fate. Indeed, the term “nihilism” indicates precisely the existential condition that accompanies the *loss* of the sense of meaning and purpose. Nietzsche’s primary task is to demonstrate how this feeling can be overcome, without, at the same time, betraying one’s “intellectual conscience,” which demands the affirmation of absolute becoming. Nietzsche’s task, in other words, is to *unite the true and the good*, where the latter indicates those human aims, perspectives, feelings and values that serve to render existence valuable and meaningful. I regard this desire to unite the true and the good as a hallmark of the religious thinker.

Nietzsche’s desire to overcome nihilism, which is the initial effect of the recognition of absolute becoming, leads to his vision of the “overman,” the creation of which becomes the primary locus for a meaningful existence, and to his suggestion that we must begin a “revaluation of all values.” In the light of absolute becoming, all things and all values must be re-examined and re-adjusted. A revaluation, however, is not the

same as a *devaluation*, or a rejection. This is crucial when considering Nietzsche as a religious thinker. In his re-appraisal of all things, Nietzsche holds to many concepts that are central to religion: redemption, transfiguration and pity, amongst others, are altered and changed, but not rejected. Similarly, Nietzsche promotes religious practices, such as asceticism, while placing them on a new foundation. In short, he employs religious categories and notions, but he “sublimates” or “spiritualizes” these in the light of his new, “higher” perspective.

Absolute becoming and the problem of nihilism also lead Nietzsche to his theory of will to power, which equates life with dynamic striving, or expansive becoming, and eternal recurrence, which sees all things as caught in a never-ending cycle of identical, recurring changes. These notions appeal to Nietzsche for three main reasons. First, they synchronize with the thesis of absolute becoming; second, they are relevant to the existential and intellectual stance of the overman; and third, they can be immediately incorporated into the quest for meaning and purpose, which culminates in *amor fati*, or a complete embrace of existence. The person who can face eternal recurrence and still say “yes” to life has demonstrated the complete defeat of nihilism, and he or she has done so in the absence of any false but comforting assumptions. This requires a super-abundance of strength, a divine sense of power, and this feeling is itself the highest good. All this constitutes Nietzsche’s satisfaction of criterion d).

If, finally, we examine Nietzsche’s tale of Zarathustra, which embodies the typically religious desire to present a poetical and mythical blueprint of the spiritual life - criterion e), and his sense of being driven or destined to live and demonstrate his teaching - criterion f), the picture of Nietzsche as a religious thinker is complete.

At this point, I should acknowledge that my theory of Nietzsche as a religious thinker will strike many as odd. Religion, a critic might say, is almost always connected with precisely the elements of “being”, *apriorism*, intrinsic sacredness and theism – whether poly or mono - that Nietzsche rejects. Religions always contain what Ray Billington calls “the spiritual dimension”¹, and which he equates with the “metaphysical”, or that which is “beyond (or after) the physical.”² This spiritual dimension allows for “a belief in a purpose established by some kind of almighty being who created and sustains the universe.”³ Billington’s view is supported by Willard Oxtoby, who insists that religions must include “a sense of power beyond the human.”⁴ Nietzsche’s cosmos, however, does not include the transcendent, the sacred or the holy; it is devoid of immortality, and it contains no element of justice. It lacks any ethical content, so there is no agent – be it god or *karma* - whose primary function is the enforcement of universal laws. And, if there is no *a priori* justice and no eternal enforcer of justice, then there is no human “faculty” – such as conscience, intuition or reason - that is the “voice of universal justice”, or “the voice of the soul.” Finally, there is certainly no heaven or hell to which the “eternal soul” of the good and the evil will respectively be sent. In short, Nietzsche rejects all the things to which religion points, so how can he be labeled a religious thinker?

In responding to these understandable queries, I would suggest that while religious thinkers, in satisfying my criteria, have *tended* to affirm the existence of super-

¹ Billington, Ray, *Understanding Eastern Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p.7.

² *Ibid.*, pp.6-7.

³ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁴ Willard G. Oxtoby, “The Nature of Religion,” in *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*, W. Oxtoby ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.493.

mundane spheres and beings, as well as the presence of *a priori* moral laws, there is no *necessity* which says they must do so. The decisive element is the preoccupation with meaning and purpose, based on an insight into the total character of reality⁵, and not the specific prescriptions that emerge from this concern.⁶ Therefore, the fact that religion has traditionally included elements that Nietzsche rejects does not necessitate the conclusion that the one qualifies as religion and the other does not. Such a position would be tantamount to the absurd suggestion that since Plato and Kripke have different views on language, we can only count one of them as a philosopher in that field. Any area of human concern is capable of producing a wide range of perspectives and prescriptions. The relationship between Nietzsche and previous religions is a case in point.

Further, it should be noted that Nietzsche does not eliminate “the spiritual dimension.” True, he denies the existence of an “almighty being” who is the source of meaning and purpose, but, at the same time, his project involves *the self-deification of humanity*, such that we can fulfill these critical functions. Humans, in other words, are the mighty, if not almighty, beings, who constitute the source of meaning and purpose in a godless universe. What is more, I would suggest that the earth, for Nietzsche, is “the

⁵ The inclusion of the insight is crucial. It centers attention on the fact that I am discussing criteria for a religious *thinker*, as opposed to a religious institution or even a religious “believer.” These are all contained under the umbrella of “the religious”, but there are critical differences. The believer, for instance, is one who embraces a version of meaning and purpose in the absence of an actual insight into reality. Or, to take another important distinction, the religious thinker is not always the direct founder of an organized religion – consider Plato, Lau Tzu, or even Jesus of Nazareth.

⁶ Billington expresses concern with Ninian Smart’s criteria for religion (listed in *Eastern Philosophy*, p.1), which, according to the former, spreads the net too wide, allowing for virtually any enthusiasm, be it for a sports team or the stock market, to qualify as religion. I would suggest that if the individual consciously regards this activity as the locus of meaning in their life, then it can, in fact, be called their religion. Indeed, the behavior of many sports fans and profit-seekers shows all the signs of the unthinking, fanatical “believer.” The fact that these are rather shallow and microcosmic seats of meaning is beside the point. The need for meaning and purpose is a strong, perhaps even universal human trait, and, in an age where the ‘spiritual’ and “metaphysical” have been wrenched from the popular consciousness, people embrace whatever still remains. Such people are a far cry, however, from the religious thinker, who, by his or her insight, designates the parameters of the true and the conceivable content of the good.

sacred”, if we define the term as that which is worthy, due to its intrinsic character, of deep reverence, respect and appreciation.⁷ And, finally, I would add that the universe, for Nietzsche, as understood in the context of will to power and eternal recurrence, contains aspects that make it worthy of a kind of religious devotion. The universe is not a subjective entity, with goals, moral imperatives, rewards and punishments, but its total character is beautiful and mysterious. The person of great joy and strength “stands amid the cosmos with a joyous and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that... all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole.”⁸ In other words, the universe, as it is, without any metaphysical padding, is worthy of reverence. The person who has an insight into its total character will arrive, or at least can arrive, at *amor fati*, or total life affirmation, and the production of this feeling that Truth reveals the value of existence is what religion is all about.⁹

Thus, we can accept Billington’s insistence on spirituality, while dismissing his “metaphysical” requirement, along with Oxtoby’s “beyond,” as prejudices and/or commonplaces, but not absolute criteria. Nietzsche negates the *content* of traditional religion, but he is nevertheless animated by similar or identical concerns, and the style and substance of his work, as well as his personal life, confirm his stature as a religious individual. His project, in the final analysis, is to create a religious ethos that coincides with the truth of absolute becoming. He believes, ultimately, that a physicalistic naturalism forms a sufficient basis for the meaning and purpose that previous religions have constructed only after creating fictitious beings and supermundane dimensions. His

⁷ See, for instance, Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York: Penguin, 1966), p.13: “I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth...to sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing.”

⁸ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Twilight of the Idols*, para.49, this translation cited in Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ*, 3rd ed. (New York: Random House, Vintage, 1968), p.281.

⁹ See, for instance, the ecstatic “Drunken Song” in *Zarathustra*, where the protagonist proclaims his love for eternity, and the notion of eternal recurrence (pp.317-324).

philosophy, in sum, is an experimental attempt to discover whether the goals and categories of religion can be applied in a new and different way. Hence, he is a religious *innovator*, and it is a mistake to think that he rejects religion altogether.

The subtle distinction between one who innovates in the field of religion (by altering the content of religious thought while holding to religious motivations and categories) and one who rejects religion completely is something that Nietzsche himself failed to note, and this may explain why previous scholars have failed to emphasize the striking religiosity of Nietzsche's preoccupations and projects. Nietzsche regards himself as frankly irreligious.¹⁰ This, however, is the result of conflating religion with theism and moral *a priorism*. If Nietzsche had felt, as I do, that these are only typical manifestations of a deeper and more general urge to discover, affirm and, if necessary, create a sense of meaning and purpose in existence, he may not have been so hostile to the designation offered in this study. At any rate, it is my hope that the realization of the religious character of Nietzsche's thought will shed light on the meaning and significance of his life and work.

The organization of this study will roughly parallel the criteria that form the framework of my thesis. Chapter One will examine Nietzsche's thesis of absolute becoming, along with its polemic against everything relating to "being." Chapter Two will establish Nietzsche's general preoccupation with meaning and purpose. This will involve a discussion on nihilism. Chapter Three will examine the crucial doctrines of *amor fati*, will to power and eternal recurrence. Chapter Four will explore Nietzsche's vision of the overman, and Chapter Five will discuss Nietzsche's prescriptions for the

¹⁰ See, for instance, *Ecce Homo*, C.Fadi.man, trans., in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: Random House, Modern Library Series), p.923.

historical emergence of the overman, chief amongst which are a revaluation of all values and “discipline and breeding.” In this chapter, I will make special reference to the way in which Nietzsche changes but does not reject typically religious notions and ideals.

Finally, the concluding chapter will discuss Nietzsche as myth-maker and exemplar.

The character of this study is largely exegetical, but I think the religious aspect puts a new twist on everything Nietzsche wrote. It re-iterates what he said, to be sure, but also why he said it and what he hoped to accomplish as a result. It also reveals, I think, the overall coherence of Nietzsche’s many ideas and assertions, almost all of which find their proper place and proportion within the religious task that forms the umbrella, so to speak, for his work.

Chapter One: Absolute Becoming

This chapter deals with the first two criteria for the religious thinker – their insight into the total character of the world, and their effort to refute false notions of truth.

The religious thinker is moved by two fundamental drives, and these are distinct but inseparable. The first is to offer descriptions and prescriptions relating to “the good life.” This involves an exploration of meaning and purpose in existence, a vision of human excellence, and proposed adjustments in human values, perspectives, institutions and practices, such that they fall into alignment with the requirements of the good. The second is a strong desire to “know the truth.” The religious thinker sees and experiences these two enterprises of establishing the good and discovering the true as intimately connected. Specifically, the former requires the latter, since the good life is the one lived “in the light of reality.” The religious thinker, in other words, wants to *unite* the true and the good.¹¹

Nietzsche insightfully suggests that the fervent desire to know is based on the presumption, the faith, that truth is preferable to error;¹² it presumes that the discovery of the good is ultimately connected with knowledge of the true. Nietzsche is willing, as we

¹¹ That Nietzsche’s goal is to produce such a unification is supported by Peter Berkowitz in his *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist* (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1995). He characterizes Nietzsche’s efforts as an attempt to establish “right making” on the foundation of “right knowing” (see, for example, p.14) This amounts to precisely the same thing I am suggesting here. It could also be noted that the word “religion” stems from a Latin term meaning “to unite”, or bind together. A secular interpretation of this etymology might stress the social unity produced by religion, but what I am suggesting may perhaps be forwarded as an alternative perspective.

¹² Thus, for instance, it is ignorance of the Law, or the Dharma, that is the primary source of suffering, according to the Buddhists; and many classical thinkers, such as Socrates and Plato, made a direct connection between ignorance and unhappiness.

shall see, to question this presumption,¹³ but he simultaneously admits that he is moved by an inexorable, inscrutable desire to know, and he recognizes the fundamentally religious character of this urge. Thus, he says:

But you will have gathered what I am driving at, namely, that it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests – that even we seekers after knowledge today, we godless anti-metaphysicians still take our fire, too, from the flame lit by a faith that is thousands of years old, that Christian faith which was also the faith of Plato, that God is the truth, that truth is divine.¹⁴

This is an astonishing and significant admission. It places Nietzsche squarely within the broad spectrum of religion. It also prefigures the tension in his work between the true and the good, for what Nietzsche discovers, much to his initial distress, is that the true, far from affirming the desirable or good, is actually devoid of any normative content. Nevertheless, he makes it his task to see whether human beings can construct a vision of the good that respects the character of the true; he wants, in short, to translate nature into the language and practice of human normativity and subjectivity. This preoccupation is itself the hallmark of the religious thinker.

The typical effect of the quest for truth is that the output of the religious thinker includes some fundamental insight into the total character of reality. The word “total” is very important here. The religious thinker wants to know if there are any universal, fundamental truths about the world and, by extension, its human inhabitants. They seek

¹³ Indeed, he blatantly rejects the idea that the truth is *inherently* relevant to the good, since nature is value-neutral, but he nevertheless makes it his task to willfully bring the true and the good together, by affirming the power of man to overcome nihilism and create values. His vision of the overman is precisely that of one who has the strength to live “in the light of the truth”, even when the truth is strange and potentially depressing.

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York: Random House, 1974), p.282. The name of this segment – “How we, too, are still pious” - is also suggestive of Nietzsche’s acknowledged religiosity.

what Nietzsche calls “a comprehensive look”;¹⁵ they gravitate towards a basic principle that explains the diverse phenomena of nature, or which serves as a foundation for such explanations.¹⁶ For Lao Tzu, it was the all-pervasive presence of the *Tao*, for Hegel it was the dialectical character of all natural processes, for Gotama Buddha it was the truth of interdependent origination, and for Nietzsche it was the universality of becoming.¹⁷

i. Nietzsche's Thesis

Nietzsche's radical affirmation of change and impermanence needs to be seen within the context of the perennial debate over being and becoming. The term “being” usually designates that which is unchanging, permanent, eternal, discrete, self-sufficient, unconditioned. Becoming, on the other hand, signifies just the reverse – that is, it designates that which is changing, impermanent, relative, conditioned and temporal.

The question of the ontological and existential status of these two great categories has formed the core of a great deal of religious and philosophical thought. Many thinkers have taught that Being represents the true, the good and the beautiful, while becoming is illusory, secondary, or inferior. Perhaps the most extreme example is provided by Parmenides, the great pre-Socratic thinker, who taught that Being was the sole reality, and that change was actually impossible, and hence a pure illusion when perceived.¹⁸ Plato, who suggested that the world of time was an imperfect copy of an eternal pattern,

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York: Random House, 1966), p.124.

¹⁶ Modern science falls within this definition, especially amongst Darwinists who seek to explain everything on the basis of “natural selection”, and also Newtonian physics, though it seems to rest content with laws, plural, as opposed to a single, explanatory principle.

¹⁷ One could also point to Nietzsche's doctrines of will to power and eternal recurrence as manifestations of this totalizing tendency. Indeed, both teachings are inseparable from Nietzsche's conception of dynamic, absolute becoming.

¹⁸ See J.V. Luce, *An Introduction to Greek Philosophy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), pp.50-55. Change is “impossible” because Parmenides is a pure rationalist, and he asserts that change, which involves intervals of non-being, is unthinkable (since we can only think of that which is), and hence non-existent. See esp. p.52.

and that the philosopher-king was the one who could glimpse the realm of Forms, would also qualify.¹⁹ Amongst the world religions, Hinduism teaches that the manifested cosmos is *maya*, or illusion, and the perfect sage is the one who lives in the light of *Atman*, the eternal Self, which is inseparable from *Brahman*, the macrocosmic Truth, beyond the conditioning of time and space.²⁰ And, finally, there is Christianity, which exhorts its followers to disregard worldly pleasures, and to concentrate strictly on the destiny of their immortal souls. The earthly realm of change is strictly a means to the attainment of an eternal, heavenly state that is infinitely more valuable and beautiful than the sinful world of transient pleasures and fleeting treasures.²¹

All these thinkers and traditions of thought, and many more besides, are proponents of being. Nietzsche is their antithesis. His position on this crucial question of being and becoming is explicitly stated in several places. In *Twilight of the Idols*, for instance, Nietzsche states that “being is an empty fiction,”²² and he suggests that “insofar as the senses show becoming, passing away, change, they do not lie.”²³ The Dionysian philosopher, a type of which Nietzsche, in his own view, is the foremost example,²⁴ is able “to realize in oneself the eternal joy of becoming.”²⁵ This, in turn, involves

¹⁹ See F.M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (New York: Humanities Press, 1937), and Plato. *Republic*. G. Grube, trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), esp. Book VII.

²⁰ This position is most succinctly put forward in *The Upanishads* (See J. Mascaro, trans. New York: Penguin, 1965), and is summarized in the famous phrase, “Thou art That.”

²¹ For example: “lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and dust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal, But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven...” (Matthew 6:19-20).

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, R.J. Hollingdale, trans. (New York: Penguin, 1968), p.36.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.36.

²⁴ Those who accuse Nietzsche of inconsistency or randomness may wish to note that the theme of the preeminent importance of the “Dionysian”, as well as the celebration of the view of life called “tragic”, never vary in his work. This is noteworthy, especially when we consider that the ideas initially appeared in Nietzsche's very first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), while quotations such as those that follow were written sixteen years later (e.g. *Twilight of the Idols* – 1888).

²⁵ *Twilight*, p.110.

saying Yes to the flux and destruction, the decisive element in the Dionysian philosophy, saying Yes to contradiction and strife, *becoming*, together with the radical rejection of even the concept “*being*.”²⁶

These passages define Nietzsche’s self-proclaimed task as a philosopher, and the debate over being and becoming is at the center of this task. Becoming, as he says, is “the decisive element” in his overall position, and when Nietzsche proclaims, “it is of time and becoming that the best parables should speak: let them be a praise and a justification of all impermanence,”²⁷ he reveals the sum and the cornerstone of his efforts. Becoming, for Nietzsche, is the true, and his mission is to work out the implications of this thesis, with the ultimate aim of constructing a vision of the good that respects the absolute character of becoming.

Nietzsche was not the first thinker to adopt a stance of absolute becoming. In the East, Gotama Buddha proposed a dynamic version of reality in which movement and change were the fundamental realities;²⁸ and in the West, thinkers such as Heraclitus and Hegel did the same.²⁹ Nietzsche was aware of these traditions. Indeed, he acknowledges his respect for both Buddha³⁰ and Heraclitus,³¹ but he also recognizes, rightly, that his view is ultimately quite different from those of his predecessors. This is so because nature, for Nietzsche, is completely value-neutral. Nietzsche’s predecessors insist that becoming is imbued with moral and/or teleological elements. Buddha combines

²⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ecce Homo*. W. Kaufmann trans. (New York: Random House, 1967), p.65.

²⁷ *Zarathustra*, p.87.

²⁸ As revealed through the fundamental Buddhist teachings of *anatman*, or no-self, and impermanence, the former destroying the idea of discrete thing-hood, and the latter performing the same function in relation to the idea that anything is changeless. See R. Robinson and W. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth), 1997. One could also include the Taoism of Lau Tzu in this category of philosophy-religions that stress becoming.

²⁹ For Heraclitus, see Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* (New York: Penguin, 1987), Ch.8; and for Hegel, see *Phenomenology of Spirit*. A. Miller, trans. (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1977).

³⁰ “With my condemnation of Christianity. I should not like to have wronged a kindred religion...*Buddhism*” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, R.J. Hollingdale, trans. (New York: Penguin, 1968), p.129.

becoming with laws of *karma*, Heraclitus says that nature tends to justice, or harmony, and Hegel proclaims that history is the movement of the World Spirit towards an inevitable outcome. Nietzsche rejects these suggestions of immanent morality and purpose. Becoming, for him, is completely “innocent.” Nature is value-neutral, and it is only humans who perform the task of imbuing life with moral and purposive elements. These ideas of “the innocence of becoming”³² and the god-like ability of humans to create values are crucial for Nietzsche’s over-all religion of human self-deification, and they will be discussed at length in upcoming chapters. For now, we need only note that Nietzsche affirms absolute becoming, and that that becoming takes place in a completely value-free or “godless” setting.

ii. Being as a Problem

It is often the case that the insights of the religious thinker, and the teachings that flow from these insights, contradict the conclusions to which “common sense” would seem to lead. Appearances are deceiving: we seem to die, but the Hindus and others say we do not; we seem to be separate entities, but the Buddhists and Native Americans³³ assure us that all things are connected; history seems to be meaningless and random, but Hegel insists that it is guided by Reason. Thus, the religious thinker is privy to a perspective that radically alters our view of reality, and a significant feature of their work involves the employment of their insight in an effort to repudiate false notions of truth and, subsequently, false notions of the good.

³¹ “I set apart with high reverence the name of *Heraclitus*” (*Twilight*, p.36).

³² This is a crucial idea, and can be found in almost all of Nietzsche’s later books. See, for instance, *The Will To Power*, Walter Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale, trans. (New York: Random House, 1968) p.402.

³³ For instance, Chief Seattle says: “All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth.” See *Native American Wisdom*, K. Nerburn ed. (San Rafael, Ca: New World Library, audio edition).

Nietzsche's position, like those mentioned above, is radical. It runs contrary to what many people perceive and think. The thesis of absolute becoming amounts to the suggestion that the category of being bears no relation to the actual character of the world – nothing is discrete, and nothing is unchanging. This assertion is clear, but deeply problematic, for a great deal of human activity is based on a presumption in favor of being. Indeed, a substantial portion of Nietzsche's work is dedicated to revealing how logic, religion, philosophy, psychology and science, as well as many of our day-to-day operations of thinking, calculating, perceiving and communicating, proceed on the basis of being as an acceptable, reliable standard. We see things as stable and discrete when they are in fact volatile and inter-connected; in short, we falsify the truth. Nietzsche's mission, as he saw it, was to reveal the origins of our prejudice in favor of being, while also exploring the possibility of changing our conceptions in accordance with the recognized sovereignty of becoming. This is perfectly concomitant with the general pattern of the religious thinker.

Nietzsche's affirmation of becoming as an absolute category does not rest easily with his recognition of the ubiquity of being. It leads to the obvious question – why being? Why do notions of being permeate our activities as human beings, and, indeed, our very perceptions? Nietzsche responds to this question largely through acts of speculative history. He proposes that the presumption of being was necessary for human survival and flourishing:

Over immense periods of time the intellect produced nothing but errors. A few of these proved to be useful and helped to preserve the species: those who hit upon or inherited these had better luck in their struggle for themselves and their progeny. Such erroneous articles of faith, which were continually inherited, until they became almost part of the basic endowment of the species, include the following: that there are enduring

things; that there are equal things; that there are things, bodies, substances; that a thing is what it appears to be.³⁴

The beings that did not see so precisely had an advantage over those that saw everything "in flux."³⁵

...no living beings would have survived if the... tendency... to err and *make up* things rather than wait, to assent rather than negate, to pass judgment rather than to be just – had not been bred to the point where it became extraordinarily strong.³⁶

Because we have to be stable in our beliefs if we are to prosper, we have made the "real" world a world not of change and becoming, but one of being.³⁷

Thus, Nietzsche explains the presence of notions congenial to being by referring to an evolutionary theory, based on survival and utility, coupled with largely Lamarckian ideas about inherited, transmitted characteristics.³⁸ He implies that the recognition of becoming, which he associates with skepticism, patience, and great caution in making judgments, would have been deleterious to the quick adaptability required for survival in an environment that was presumably war-like and hostile. The implication, then, is that primeval humans could not afford the luxury of philosophy and science. In the struggle for survival, the useful was far more important than the true.³⁹

At this stage it is crucial to note that humans, for Nietzsche, are active participants in the creation of their environment, as opposed to passive receptacles of "objective" truth. The way we perceive the world, our perspective, determines, to a large extent, what

³⁴ *Gay Science*, p.169

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.171. This passage is particularly indicative of Nietzsche's view that there is an unusual or "esoteric" perspective that reveals the true to a much greater extent than that of the normal mode of seeing and comprehending.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.172.

³⁷ *Will to Power*, p.276.

³⁸ Lamarck taught that characteristics are transmitted from one generation to the next, thereby opening up a major field of scientific investigation. See, for instance, Alpheus Packard, *Lamarck, The Founder of Evolution* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1901).

³⁹ The Darwinian overtones of such a position are abundantly obvious, and Nietzsche's relationship to Darwin will be discussed in Chapter Four of this study.

we believe the world is actually like.⁴⁰ What the previous passages reveal is that a world of being is far more manageable and “knowable” than a world of incessant flux, instability and change; a world of being is a world over which we can assert control, and this has been crucial for human flourishing. Hence, faced with the *need* for “being”, the human organism evolved organs of perception and modes of thought that served, in effect, to produce a perspective that made it so.⁴¹

Nietzsche’s assertion that the true has been synonymous with the useful, coupled with his “perspectivism”, makes his view of truth, or his epistemological stance, appear pragmatic, as opposed to “objectivist” or “cognitivist.” Indeed, Nietzsche definitely denies the ability of any human to obtain a “god’s-eye” view, or a view of reality from *outside* or *beyond* the sphere of that reality. Our view of truth is necessarily a human view, a view from *within* reality. However, at the same time, Nietzsche does *not* adopt an unambiguously pragmatist, non-cognitivist view of truth; in the final analysis, usefulness or utility is not his criterion of epistemological validity, nor does he rely strictly on the intrinsic coherency of a position when seeking to test its veracity. On the contrary, his overall position is, as John Wilcox suggests,⁴² one in which cognitivism is dominant,⁴³ and he associates the recognition of truth with the courage that seeks to grasp reality, notwithstanding its potential *disutility*.⁴⁴ Nietzsche’s philosophy is based on his

⁴⁰ In his later works, Nietzsche placed a fairly heavy emphasis on his doctrine of perspectivism, which emphasizes the falsity of the notion of passive “objectivity.” See *Will to Power*, pp.272-276.

⁴¹ This is itself an astonishing idea. It is central to the Nietzschean notion that we can deify ourselves by recognizing the god-like power we possess to actually create the world in which we will subsequently live.

⁴² John Wilcox, *Truth and Value in Nietzsche* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1974). My position on Nietzsche’s epistemology is drawn largely from this insightful study.

⁴³ The phrase “cognitivism is dominant” was borrowed from *ibid.*, p.98.

⁴⁴ Thus, for instance, Nietzsche, who associates the rise of science with the rise of truth, says: “...faith in science...must have originated *in spite of* the fact that the disutility and dangerousness of ‘the will to truth,’ of ‘truth at any price’ is proved to it constantly” (*Gay Science*, p.281). It is “dangerous” because it forces us to recant our comforting metaphysical illusions, and this is especially painful for someone like Nietzsche, who is religious in temperament.

conviction that he has grasped *the* truth,⁴⁵ and he consistently asserts that the positions he attacks are actually false.

Thus, Nietzsche rejects both traditional objectivism and non-cognitive pragmatism. In the end, he adopts a paradoxical position that I will call humanistic cognitivism. Nietzsche thinks that we can start from within reality, and nevertheless effectively and accurately assess various conceptions of truth. His standard for this evaluative enterprise is *intellectual honesty*,⁴⁶ and this, in turn, is a quotient of *strength*. According to Nietzsche, a strong, honest individual will clearly see the truth of absolute becoming. It will be the conclusion to which a comprehensive human perspective will inexorably lead. This is so because becoming is what the individual - as an actual, physical, sensory being - will observe and experience, to the exclusion of anything else. The *cumulative* effect of these observations will validate absolute becoming as an “objective” thesis, where objectivity implies a perspective that is warranted by experience and careful observation over a significant period of time and in varying contexts:

There is only a seeing from a perspective, only a “knowing” from a perspective, and the *more* emotions we express over a thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we train on the same thing, the more complete will be our “idea” of that thing, our “objectivity.”⁴⁷

It is simply a matter of experience that change never ceases.⁴⁸

Thus, the strong person will trust his or her physical senses, which “do not lie,” and “work out the consequences” of their testimony. These consequences are summarized in the notion of absolute becoming. The weak individual, on the other hand, will

⁴⁵ The fact that Nietzsche believed this to be so is greatly stressed and effectively argued in Berkowitz’s *Nietzsche*. See especially pp.5-8

⁴⁶ Sometimes referred to by Nietzsche as “intellectual conscience.” The reference to this attribute is prominent in all of Nietzsche’s later works. See, for instance, *Gay Science*, pp. 265 and 266.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On The Genealogy of Morals*. H.B. Samuel, trans., in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: Random House, New World Library Series), p.745.

⁴⁸ *Will to Power*, p.367.

inevitably falsify truth. An *inability* to survive and flourish in the light of truth produces a *need* to falsify, and, as a result, the false *becomes* the useful, since the false perspective allows for survival and a sense of happiness *in spite of* physiological and psychological disadvantages. Hence, pragmatic considerations, far from being a legitimate standard of truth, are normally associated with the production of falsehoods. The great falsifiers of reality, chief amongst whom are the mystical, romantic and idealistic philosophers of the past, build grand metaphysical structures; they read into Nature their desires and their will to power, but these structures are only reflections of their own needs and impulses.⁴⁹ They are manifestations of dishonesty; they are false. Thus Nietzsche, to repeat, rejects both pragmatism and passive or “god’s eye” objectivism. He offers instead an active cognitivism, which is “objective”, but only within a strictly human or perspectival context.

This discussion of Nietzschean epistemology has been cursory and is perforce incomplete. It omits many of the subtleties of Nietzsche’s position, as well as the many difficulties and objections that can be raised in response to it.⁵⁰ Given the scope of the present study, this brevity has been necessary, but the primary point has been made, and that is that Nietzsche does not dispense with the notion of truth, and he does not reduce truth to a function of pragmatic, utilitarian considerations. That the world is characterized by absolute becoming is true for Nietzsche, for there is no other position that is warranted by an honest examination of nature. Nietzsche promotes his version of truth with as much passion and certainty as any religious thinker: he defends it against attack, he mocks and

⁴⁹ See *Beyond Good and Evil*, Part One, “On The Prejudices of Philosophers”, pp.9-32.

⁵⁰ Difficulties that are discussed in many books, including those of Wilcox and Berkowitz.

unseats its competitors, and he strives to construct a vision of the good that will respect and reflect his macrocosmic insight.

If we return now to the discussion on “being as a problem”, we see an element of the Nietzschean gulf between the true and the good. Being, in all its guises, is an error, but it is the kind of error without which humans can scarcely get along. Hence, the true and the good, far from being coextensive, are actually in opposition:

without these articles of faith nobody now could endure life. But that does not prove them. Life is no argument. The conditions of life might include error.⁵¹

... basically and from time immemorial we are – *accustomed to lying*. Or to put it more virtuously and hypocritically, in short, more pleasantly: one is much more of an artist than one knows.⁵²

This tension between the knower and the creator, or the artist, or between the true and the good, runs throughout Nietzsche’s philosophy. Their union in a single psyche is his holy grail, his great vision of the “overman”, his highest hope.

iii. The Error of Our Ways

Having put forward his radical assertion - i.e. that being is an empty but useful fiction - Nietzsche proceeds to discuss the many manifestations of “error” in human thinking.⁵³ These errors make their presence felt whenever humans assume that anything is simple, discrete or unchanging. This occurs, as we shall see, in almost every branch of human activity.

⁵¹ *Gay Science*, p.177. It is important that this statement not be taken as an absolute negation of the possibility that some people, *in the future*, might be able to live without error. Indeed, this hope is the basis for Nietzsche’s vision of the overman.

⁵² *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.105.

⁵³ The wording of this section makes it sound as though Nietzsche approached these questions in a systematic, chronological way. This, however, is not the case. His insights and positions are all blended together, and this is one of the sources of difficulty when attempting to work out his meaning. I have approached the problem in this linear manner for purposes of clarity and simplicity.

The most obvious and perhaps most impressive manifestations of the being-hypothesis emerge in the realm of *religion and metaphysics*. It is here that we a) find the whole cosmos explained in terms of the Power and Goodness of a perfect, complete, timeless Deity; b) encounter the idea of an immortal, indivisible soul; c) are told of timeless realms of Being that stand above, beyond, or behind the realm of change and life and death; d) are introduced to the notion of eternal heavens and hells to which we will be sent after the earthly existence is complete; and e) find mystics speaking of transcending time and space while achieving union with the Father, or the One, or the Deity.

Nietzsche, of course, rejects all such religious teachings. He sees in them intellectual naivete,⁵⁴ dishonesty, world-weariness and a spirit of revenge.⁵⁵ These factors are inter-connected and are stressed to varying degrees, depending on the thinker or the tradition in question,⁵⁶ but they are all bound up with the thesis of absolute becoming. The religious mind-set, as Nietzsche understands it, is escapist. It finds life wearisome and depressing, it resents the constant flux of existence, it is tired of willing and creating, so it makes up imaginary realms of being where all such activity ceases, or where

⁵⁴ See, for instance, *Ecce Homo*: "‘God’, ‘the immortality of the soul’, ‘salvation’, a ‘beyond’ – these are mere notions, to which I paid no attention, on which I never wasted any time, even as a child – though perhaps I was never enough of a child for that... God is such an obvious and crass solution; a solution which is sheer indelicacy to us thinkers" (p.834).

⁵⁵ See, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Random House, Modern Library Series), p.742: "...the earth was the especially *ascetic planet*, a den of discontented, arrogant, and repulsive creatures, who never got rid of a deep disgust of themselves, of the world, of all life, and did themselves as much hurt as possible..."; or again where Nietzsche explains the origins of Jewish and, subsequently, Christian thought in terms of "resentment becoming creative and giving birth to values – a resentment experienced by creatures who, deprived as they are of the proper outlet of action, are forced to find their compensation in an imaginary revenge" (p.647).

⁵⁶ Thus, for instance, Nietzsche applauds Buddhism for its honesty and lack of naivete, since it affirms becoming and is flatly atheistic, and therefore "a hundred times more realistic than Christianity" (*Anti-Christ*, p.129), but he sees in the teaching of Nirvana an excessive world-weariness that actually wills and seeks self-annihilation, and he naturally rejects the idea of karma, which robs becoming of its innocence by suggesting that humans are under the sway of *a priori* moral imperatives. Nietzsche reserves his greatest

supermundane forces take on human responsibilities: “a poor ignorant weariness that does not want to want anymore: this created all gods and afterworlds.”⁵⁷ Here we see clearly that Nietzsche regards religio-metaphysical hypotheses as emanating from an existential condition, weariness or weakness, which creates a tendency to falsify reality. This falsification leads away from the earthly, temporal realm – i.e. away from the real or actual world - and towards a fictitious kingdom of being.⁵⁸ In this way, the world of becoming is diminished in terms of its perceived value, and this harmful, defamatory effect of the being-hypothesis, combined with its ontological falsity, explains Nietzsche’s vehement opposition to it:

One must admit nothing that has being – because then becoming would lose its value and actually appear meaningless and superfluous... this hypothesis of being is the source of all world-defamation.⁵⁹

Thus, Nietzsche rejects all notions of God, as well as any suggestion that the cosmos includes a realm or realms of being which accompany, overshadow or inform the temporal world of incessant becoming. God and the immortal, indivisible soul are intellectually naïve and existentially harmful conjectures; they contradict becoming, thereby falsifying and devaluing truth. The strong man, the man who is free from resentment against life, the man of “intellectual conscience”, the “devotee of knowledge”, will have nothing to do with them.

The above reflections may seem to lead to the conclusion that Nietzsche is *absolutely* opposed to everything that has been called religion. This, however, is not the

scorn for Christianity, because it demonstrates all of the distasteful factors mentioned, and this to an inordinate degree.

⁵⁷ *Zarathustra*, p.31.

⁵⁸ Or, in the case of non-transcendentalist teachings, such as those of the Buddha, Lau Tzu, Hegel and Heraclitus, it imbues the world of becoming with moral imperatives and/or trans-human necessities (such as the march of the World Spirit towards self-realization), thereby destroying the “innocence of becoming” and deifying nature, which, according to Nietzsche, is actually value-neutral.

case. In the first place, Nietzsche recognizes that religion has performed many valuable functions over the course of history. “Until now”, says Nietzsche, “there has been no more potent means for beautifying man himself than piety.”⁶⁰ Religion has spawned discipline, it has “domesticated” or civilized people, and

to ordinary human beings...religion gives an inestimable contentment with their situation and type, manifold peace of heart, an ennobling of obedience...something transfiguring and beautifying...⁶¹

Thus, in the final analysis, Nietzsche himself negates the thesis that religion, with all its being-hypotheses, *necessarily* involves a hatred of life. On the contrary, such theories may provide the impetus to life-affirmation. This is something that Nietzsche, in his vitriolic outbursts against such truly world-decrying doctrines as “the sinfulness of the body” and “the evil of the passions”, sometimes fails to recall. This failure leads me to question his idea that those who put forth theories of being are not only weak, but also vengeful. If a religious teaching produces life-affirmation, if it is “something transfiguring and beautifying,” then how can it represent a form of revenge against earthly, temporal existence?

Nietzsche’s actual, overall position seems to be based on considerations of *relative strength*. Those who can only affirm life after falsifying reality are weaker and less noble than those who can proceed joyfully without such crutches. Nietzsche’s philosophy is aimed mainly at the latter, but even here he recognizes that traditional religion is a valuable tool, and perhaps a necessary stage in the development of these extraordinary types:

⁵⁹ *Will To Power*, p.377.

⁶⁰ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.71.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.73.

Those slowly ascending classes...receive enough nudges and temptations from religion to walk the paths of higher spirituality, to test the feelings of great self-overcoming, of silence and solitude. Asceticism and Puritanism are almost indispensable means for educating and ennobling a race that wishes to become masters...⁶²

This clearly demonstrates that while Nietzsche challenges the ontological validity of religious being-doctrines, and while he suggests that life-affirmation on the basis of false teachings is a sign of weakness, he does not reject traditional religion altogether. On the contrary, his “masters” are proponents and demonstrations of a “higher spirituality”, and this is a sublimation, not a rejection, of the religions of the past, based on the new truth of absolute becoming in a value-neutral setting. In this way, Nietzsche praises the relative value of religion, even as he affirms a doctrine that completely negates its traditional philosophical foundations.

In relation to religion, there is one other thing that should be noted, and that is that Nietzsche wants to retain the notion of “soul.” He dismisses the Cartesian “I” as the fruit of a superficial philosopher⁶³ who naively suggests that wherever there is a thought there must be a thinker, and who moves from this false assumption to the affirmation of an indivisible soul, whose function is thought.⁶⁴ However, at the same time, Nietzsche refers to the soul as “an ancient and venerable hypothesis”,⁶⁵ and he says that

it is not at all necessary to get rid of “the soul”...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.⁶⁶

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., p.104: “Descartes was superficial.”

⁶⁴ Nietzsche refers to the famous *cogito* argument, which asserts the existence of an indivisible “I” whose substance or essence is thought (see Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, D. Cress, trans. 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), especially Meditation Two: “Concerning the Nature of the Human Mind: That it is Better Known than the Body”). For Nietzsche’s argument, see *Will to Power*, p.268. where he explodes the notion that the *occurrence* of thought validates the conclusion that they emanate from an indivisible thinker.

⁶⁵ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.20.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp.20-21.

What this amounts to is the suggestion that one can employ the concept of soul within the context of absolute becoming. The term “soul” can be re-evaluated and re-defined, rather than dismissed. Nietzsche’s only objection is to the notion that the unseen sources of human activity are themselves singular, simple or unchanging, and that they therefore occupy a realm that is distinct from the world of change and becoming. Nietzsche counters this with a version of soul in which it seen as an incessant movement in and through which various drives battle for supremacy.⁶⁷ Thus, once again, the thesis of absolute becoming reveals itself as the root-source of Nietzsche’s philosophical stance.

We should also note the connection between Nietzsche’s desire to retain the soul hypothesis and his status as a religious thinker. Nietzsche does not want to negate the typically religious-spiritual notion that human activity springs from secret or “inner” sources. Unlike behaviorists and “clumsy naturalists”,⁶⁸ who regard the soul as simply a religious superstition, and who emphasize external conditioning to an extraordinary extent,⁶⁹ Nietzsche affirms and emphasizes the depth and mystery of the world in its hidden or “inner” aspects.⁷⁰ Thus, his instincts are broadly “esoteric”,⁷¹ or, what amounts to virtually the same thing - religious, and that, I think, helps to explain why he wants to retain the term “soul”, despite its traditional connection with the faulty notion of being.

⁶⁷ See *Will To Power*, pp.270-71.

⁶⁸ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.20.

⁶⁹ See, for instance, Nietzsche’s criticism of Darwin, who “forgot the mind” (*Twilight*, p.76): “The influence of “external circumstances” is overestimated by Darwin to a ridiculous extent” (*Will To Power*, p.344).

⁷⁰ See, for instance, *Zarathustra*, p.321: “the world is deep, deeper than the day had been aware.” It is also worth noting that Nietzsche’s teaching of will to power is itself very mysterious. Life is a creative striving that seeks increase of power, but how can this be? What made or makes *that* possible? The mind boggles at the phenomenon!

⁷¹ In *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.42, Nietzsche explicitly defines himself as an esoteric, as opposed to exoteric, thinker. This distinction and its importance in relation to Nietzsche will be more fully discussed in Chapter Five of this study.

The fact that Nietzsche finds and rejects the being hypothesis in the realm of religion and metaphysics is not surprising. After all, it is in these areas that the notion of being has been most openly espoused and glorified. However, Nietzsche finds a strong presumption in favor of being in other, less obvious places. Thus, for instance, he carries out a sustained polemic against the ontological validity of *logic*, which “can be carried through only after a fundamental *falsification* of all events is assumed.”⁷² Logic proceeds on the basis that anything is what it is, and not something else, but radical becoming means that nothing “is” at all – there is no such thing as a discrete “thing.” All is in constant motion, constantly transforming and changing into something else. Hence, the foundational notion of logic is shaken by the affirmation of absolute becoming, and a philosophical faith in logic is revealed as a chimera:

If one is a philosopher as men have always been philosophers, one cannot see what has been and becomes – one sees only what *is*. But since nothing *is*, all that was left to the philosopher as his “world” was the imaginary.⁷³

Further, logic posits the possibility of things being equal, but this, according to Nietzsche, is a purely human construct, which bears no relation to the real world, in which all things are singular and unique: “The dominant tendency, however, to treat as equal what is merely similar – an illogical tendency, for nothing is really equal – is what first created any basis for logic.”⁷⁴

Thus, logic, however useful it may be in terms of calculation and the organization of data - a usefulness that Nietzsche repeatedly recognizes and affirms - is useless as a

⁷² *Will to Power*, p.277.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.307.

⁷⁴ *Gay Science*, p.171.

guide to discovering the nature or structure of the world.⁷⁵ The whole tendency of logic is to reduce the dynamic to the static, and the dissimilar to the equal, but this suggests the presence of a human need, not a criterion for truth: “Trust in reason and its categories, in dialectic, therefore the valuation of logic, proves only their usefulness for life, proved by experience – *not* that something is true.”⁷⁶ The crucial thing to note, again, is that logic serves human interests, or the human good, but these are not identical with truth. On the contrary, *human interest proceeds at the expense of truth.*

Closely related to the problem of logic is the problem of *language*. Here, again, what we see, according to Nietzsche, is a fundamental falsification of truth, via the categories of being. Communication between humans originated, in Nietzsche’s view, out of a need. Humans, as he sees it, were “the most endangered animals”, so “he *needed* help and protection, he needed his peers.”⁷⁷ This need to cooperate was inseparable from the need to communicate, and that is the source of language, as well as consciousness in general.⁷⁸ The role of language is to reduce complex ideas and unique, ever-changing affects to relatively simple signs that can be effectively taught and quickly conveyed. This explains Nietzsche’s memorable suggestion that “we set up a word at the point

⁷⁵ This, of course, is a major blow against the whole tradition of rationalism in western thought, which asserts a correspondence between the rational or logical and the true. Nietzsche’s position on logic explains, to a large extent, his opposition to thinkers such as Hegel and Descartes, as well as elements in Socrates and Plato, etc. If Nietzsche’s position is correct, these thinkers not only made an unwarranted assumption, but actually a false one, since becoming, for Nietzsche, is the actual, ontological truth, and in a world of becoming all things are relative and conditioned, and hence not discrete, as logic generally suggests.

⁷⁶ *Will To Power*, p.276.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.298.

⁷⁸ See *Ibid.*: “the subtlety and strength of consciousness always were proportionate to a man’s...*capacity for communication*, and as if this capacity were in turn proportionate to the *need for communication*.” It is clear that for Nietzsche logic and language, as well as reason and rationality, are all intimately connected. They all grew up in a social setting (see *ibid.*, p.299), and they all evolved out of the need to cooperate and adapt smoothly in an ever-changing, often dangerous environment.

where our ignorance begins.”⁷⁹ A world of becoming is so complex that even the most basic phenomena reveal themselves as very intricate and conditioned by many factors.⁸⁰ Language negates this complexity by offering words that are supposed to summarize a whole chain of connections. Hence, language, like logic, involves a falsification and simplification of reality, in the name of utility. It makes things static and discrete, whereas, in reality, they are dynamic and interconnected:

Linguistic means of expression are useless for expressing “becoming”; it accords with our inevitable need to preserve ourselves to posit a crude world of stability, of “things”, etc.⁸¹

Thus, the whole structure of human thought, which is inseparable from language, logic and reason, “depends on the most naïve prejudices,”⁸² yet these prejudices, these errors, these negations of the truth of absolute becoming, are and have been absolutely necessary for humankind.

If we turn now to Nietzsche’s treatment of *morality*, we find that his views are again founded largely on his position vis-à-vis being and becoming. Moral thinkers sometimes suggest that specific ethical directives are absolute or “categorical” in their authority.⁸³ This view is usually supported by the idea that the imperatives of morality are based on the eternal, *a priori* structure of the universe (what Nietzsche often refers to as the “moral world order”), or demanded by the Will of God. These ideas are an affront to Nietzsche, who sees everything as relative, conditioned and changing. Morality, as far as he is concerned, has to do with human flourishing and power, not the will to truth:

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.276.

⁸⁰ The complex and largely “unknowable” character of events is a steady theme in Nietzsche’s work. For example: “Between two thoughts all kinds of affects play their game: but their motions are too fast, therefore we fail to recognize them...”. (*ibid.*, p.264).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.380.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.283.

“A tablet of the good hangs over every people. Behold, it is the tablet of their overcoming; behold it is the voice of their will to power.”⁸⁴

“Verily, men gave themselves all their good and evil. Verily they did not take it, they did not find it, nor did it come to them as a voice from heaven. Only man placed values in things to preserve himself – he alone created a meaning for things, a human meaning.”⁸⁵

Thus, Nietzsche’s commitment to becoming, combined with his atheism, leads him to historicize morality, thereby bringing it into the realm of time and change and circumstance. This endeavor makes him the living antithesis of moral absolutism.

Finally, Nietzsche applies his analysis of being and becoming to *science*. He is, as we shall see, a great proponent of modern science, but he still sees traces of the old being-prejudice “in places where no one suspects it.”⁸⁶ Thus, for instance, he warns against the presence of “the atomistic need.”⁸⁷ Here Nietzsche refers to the notion that discrete, indestructible atoms constitute the “building blocks” of nature. This theory represents another denial of absolute becoming, since the atoms would be exempt from change and impermanence. Hence, atomism is unacceptable for Nietzsche, because it involves a subtle affirmation of the being-hypothesis.⁸⁸

Nietzsche also decries the notion of “the laws of nature.” Science, he suggests, can *describe* phenomena,⁸⁹ and can speak in terms of succession, regularity and necessity, but to suggest that becoming is informed by unalterable laws smacks of the kind of *apriorism* that Nietzsche roundly rejects. In a world of becoming, where there is

⁸³ The most obvious example, and the source of the term “categorical”, is Immanuel Kant. See *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. J. Ellington, trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981).

⁸⁴ *Zarathustra*, p.58.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.59.

⁸⁶ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.20.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ “Causal unities are invented, ‘things’ (atoms) whose effect remains constant (-transference of the false concept of subject to the concept of the atom)” (*Will To Power*, p.339).

no being and no source of being – no transcendent law-giver and no absolute norms -

how could the “laws of nature” originate? -

Let us beware of saying that there are laws in nature. There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses.⁹⁰

The astral order in which we live is an exception...the total character of the world, however, is in all eternity chaos – in the sense not of a lack of necessity, but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our anthropomorphisms.⁹¹

iv. Summary

In this chapter I have sought to show that the notion of absolute becoming represents the core idea in Nietzsche’s philosophy. This affirmation of becoming as truth leads to the assertion that there is a giant breach between what is useful for human beings – i.e. being, and its associated forms of thinking, communicating and behaving - and what is actually true. Nietzsche’s mission, as we shall see, is to discover whether these two elements of the “the true” and “the good” can be united.

⁸⁹ See, for instance, *Will To Power*, p.332, para. #618: “...one has lost the belief in being able to explain at all, and admits with a wry expression that description and not explanation is all that is possible.”

⁹⁰ *Gay Science*, p. 168.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Chapter Two: The Quest for Meaning and Purpose

This chapter focuses on the third criterion for the religious thinker, which is a preoccupation with meaning and purpose in life. In Chapter One I attempted to establish Nietzsche's consistent commitment to the notion of absolute becoming. This constitutes his fundamental insight into the total character of reality. Such an insight is necessary, *but not sufficient*, if a thinker is to warrant the adjective "religious." This designation can only be applied if we see a simultaneous desire to examine the recognized truth in relation to human existence, and, more specifically, the human good. Actually, the desire is to *unite* these two elements by spelling out those human perspectives, values and modes of conduct that represent accurate instantiations of truth. This criterion is amply satisfied by Nietzsche. The reality of becoming and the falsity of being is a thread that runs throughout his work. The idea that the value of all things relates ultimately to the enhancement of life is another such thread, and Nietzsche's task was to weave these two threads together. Indeed, when he states that "the ultimate question" is "to what extent can truth endure incorporation?"⁹² he reveals himself as a person whose concern is fundamentally religious.

i. The Primacy of Life and the Task of the Philosopher

The religious thinker can never rest content with theories that are abstract or whose merit consists primarily in theoretical explanation; their treatment of any notion is never limited to its scholarly value. On the contrary, every perspective must be wedded to some fundamentally human issue or issues, such as excellence, happiness, or redemption. What these notions share in common is a purely existential and largely normative

dimension. Nietzsche is explicit in his insistence that great problems demand this existential, passionate approach:

All great problems demand *great* love.... It makes the most telling difference whether a thinker has a personal relationship to his problems and finds in them his destiny, his distress, and his greatest happiness, or an "impersonal" one, meaning that he can do no better than to touch them and grasp them with the antennae of cold, curious thought. In the latter case nothing will come of it....⁹³

Sentiments such as these run all the way through Nietzsche's works. Even if we return to his earliest writings, we see that the notion of life-enhancement as a standard measure is fully operational. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, for instance, Nietzsche questions the value of the "theoretical man",⁹⁴ and he emphasizes the importance of the "Dionysian" aspect of life-affirmation and celebration. Or, to take another example, even the title of Nietzsche's essay "On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life" amply reveals his preoccupation with assessing forms of activity in terms of the extent to which they contribute to the growth and development of human beings, as human beings. The content of the essay makes this emphasis explicit. Nietzsche distinguishes himself from "the idler in the garden of knowledge,"⁹⁵ and he states that:

We need history, certainly, but we need it... for the sake of life and action, not so as to turn comfortably away from life and action... we want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life.⁹⁶

This emphasis on life-enhancement is crucial for Nietzsche's conception of the philosopher. He expresses a deep dislike for conceptions of philosophy that reduce it to a merely intellectual or scholarly pastime. Thus, for instance, he mocks the idea of

⁹² Ibid., p.171.

⁹³ Ibid., p.283.

⁹⁴ For the reference to the theoretical man see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. C. Fadiman, trans., in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: Random House, Modern Library Series), pp.1028-29.

⁹⁵ The essay is found in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, R.J. Hollingdale, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.59-123. For the quotation, see p.59.

⁹⁶ Ibid.,

“philosophy reduced to ‘theory of knowledge’,”⁹⁷ and he warns against the possibility that a philosopher might become a mere specialist – a scholar who finds for himself a little nook of research and knowledge, such that “he never attains his proper level.”⁹⁸

These outbursts against intellectuality should not be taken as absolute. On the contrary, Nietzsche respects and applauds the spirit of “objectivity” and the ethos of scholarly and philological labor, all of which he associates with the rise of modern science. Indeed, he refers to “the objective person...in whom the scientific instinct, after thousands of total and semi-failures, for once blossoms and blooms to the end” as “one of the most precious instruments there are,”⁹⁹ but he sees in philosophy a role that goes beyond these impersonal, detached pursuits. The philosopher, on Nietzsche’s view, is the person who creates values. He or she designates the good, and demonstrates the *will* to infuse life with meaning and purpose. Nietzsche refers to such philosophers as “the Caesarian cultivator and cultural dynamo,”¹⁰⁰ and he says their role is to “tie the knot and constraint that forces the will of millennia upon *new* tracks.”¹⁰¹ Scholars, who believe in “knowledge for the sake of knowledge”, perform no such functions, and their work, when compared with the great task of the philosopher, is sterile and empty.¹⁰² The philosopher, in sum, transcends the realm of simple intellectuality, and fulfills the religious function of pointing the way to modes of evaluation that guide human notions of excellence, value, happiness and greatness.

⁹⁷ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.123.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.124.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.126.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.128.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.117.

¹⁰² See *ibid.*, p.130, where Nietzsche speaks of the inordinate glorification of the scientific spirit, and its most dreadful effect, the “paralysis of the will.”

Guided by his simultaneous admiration for science and creative willing, Nietzsche arrives at his vision of “the philosopher of the future.” This person is a grand synthesis of mind and spirit, or objectivity and will. The future philosopher exemplifies “a bold and exuberant spirituality that runs *presto* and a dialectical severity and necessity that takes no false step.”¹⁰³ His or her tendency to unite the true and the good is so complete that the two aspects of the activity constitute a completely organic, seamless movement. Of such thinkers, Nietzsche affirms that “their knowing is creating.”¹⁰⁴ In the context of Nietzsche’s philosophy, this amounts to the suggestion that the philosopher of the future will demonstrate the uncanny ability to unite the truth of absolute becoming with notions of human flourishing. This necessitates, first of all, the ability to transcend the nihilism that emerges with the acknowledgment that “God is dead!”¹⁰⁵

ii. Nihilism

The previous section established Nietzsche’s general concern with the relationship between knowledge and life. This concern becomes acute when we reach the problem of nihilism. It is here that the general notion of life-enhancement becomes explicitly attached to the broad question of meaning and purpose in existence. Indeed, the term “nihilism” designates an existential condition whose content is synonymous with the feelings of emptiness and pessimism that accompany the *loss* of this sense of meaning and purpose: “What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.139.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.136.

¹⁰⁵ *Zarathustra*, p.12.

¹⁰⁶ *Will to Power*, p.9.

Nietzsche places the proliferation of nihilism in an historical context. He sees the widespread emergence of the phenomenon as the destiny of the immediate future.¹⁰⁷ It emerges with the decline of the notion that the universe, in and of itself, has a meaning, a purpose, a *telos*, or any moral-ethical content whatsoever. It is the result, in short, of scientific knowledge, whose most significant existential and intellectual effect is the recognition that “God is dead!” The universe of modern science contains none of the spiritual elements that the religious and metaphysical thinkers of the past have constructed. Religious notions are exposed as anthropomorphisms – the projection of human desires onto the entire cosmos. Humans have conflated *their* good, their conditions of survival and growth, with universal, ontological truths, but it turns out that God was created in the image of man, not vice-versa. This de-deification of the world produces nihilism:

Skepticism regarding morality is what is decisive. The end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction... leads to nihilism. “Everything lacks meaning” (the untenability of one interpretation of the world, upon which a tremendous amount of energy has been lavished, awakens the suspicion that *all* interpretations of the world are false).¹⁰⁸

These realizations contain an element of irony, since, according to Nietzsche, it is precisely the Christian virtue of honesty, sublimated until it emerges as the modern ethos of skepticism and careful inquiry, that is the cause of the downfall of the broadly Christian perspective:

The end of Christianity – at the hands of its own morality (which cannot be replaced), which turns against the Christian God (the sense of truthfulness, developed highly by Christianity, is nauseated by the falseness and mendaciousness of all Christian

¹⁰⁷ See *ibid.*, p.3: “What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism.*”

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

interpretations of the world and of history; rebound from “God is truth” to the fanatical “All is false...”) ¹⁰⁹

Thus, nihilism is a psychological condition that is being spawned by specific social and scientific developments.

At this stage, it is crucial to note that Nietzsche does not see the death of God as unequivocally “a good thing.” Nihilism is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is an historical fact that indicates a growing respect for science and truth, and it contains, as we shall see, great potential for transformation along life-enhancing lines. However, on the other hand, growing nihilism can produce a trivialization of life, escapism ¹¹⁰ and, as the following passage reveals, violence: “Nihilism does not only contemplate the “in vain!” nor is it merely the belief that everything deserves to perish: one helps to destroy.” ¹¹¹

Nietzsche’s ambivalence on this subject of the death of God and nihilism is dramatically revealed in his parable of “the madman.” The man is mad because he recognizes the extent to which the death of God leaves man adrift in the cosmos:

“How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving?... Are we not plunging continually?... Is there any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?” ¹¹²

This passage clearly reveals the extent to which Nietzsche felt the death of God as an earth-shaking, potentially calamitous event. I suggest that this indicates the basic religiosity of Nietzsche’s temperament. In the parable, the people think the speaker is

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.7.

¹¹⁰ For example, see *ibid.*, p.20: “*The ways of self-narcotization. – Deep down: not knowing whither. Emptiness. Attempt to get over it by intoxication...*”. What follows is a list of more or less inane involvements that constitute evasions of the central issue of nihilism. The list, incidentally, reads like a brief catalogue of twentieth-century culture!

¹¹¹ Ibid., p.18.

mad. Why? Nietzsche indicates that they do not yet recognize that God is dead – i.e. that the notion of God has lost its authority to rule and guide the affairs of humanity.¹¹³

However, it seems plausible that a crowd such as those to whom the madman speaks might recognize what he is saying, yet accuse him of over-reacting to the situation! Only the religious individual feels the significance of God for life; only such a person feels the distress of growing unbelief, and only the religious individual will do as Nietzsche does, and try to find alternative ways to infuse life with meaning and purpose.

The fact that Nietzsche is concerned with providing meaning and purpose in a godless environment is revealed at the end of the parable of the madman. The madman knows that if human life is to flourish in the absence of god, humans must move to the center of the stage and perform the tasks that were previously delegated to God. This, in turn, requires that we *deify ourselves*.¹¹⁴ Hence, he says, “How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? ... Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?”¹¹⁵ This is a crucial notion. Humans must have meaning and purpose, but now it is they, themselves, who will assign the purpose and determine the meaning; humans must *create values* by which they can live.

Thus, nihilism, understood as a negative reaction to the conceptual de-deification of the universe, must be overcome. This act of overcoming is an historical necessity, and it paves the way for a complete celebration of human existence and human power. The quest for meaning and purpose will reach a high-water mark of achievement through the death of god and the subsequent arrival and defeat of nihilism. Until now, humans have

¹¹² *Gay Science*, p.181.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p.182: “I have come too early...this tremendous event is still on its way...it has not yet reached the ears of men.”

regarded themselves as subject to laws that stood over and above them. Under these circumstances, our primary task, as we understood it, was to obey. Now, we approach the time when humans will recognize themselves as commanders, thereby glorifying their existence and affirming their capacity for great responsibility. The person who exemplifies this existential condition will represent a “higher type” of humanity, and the emergence of such “higher men” is the summit of Nietzsche’s religious vision.

iii. Summary

In this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate that Nietzsche is greatly concerned with the need for meaning and purpose in human existence. In the context of the present historical situation, this requires that we address the problem of nihilism. The latter is an emerging phenomenon, based on the decline and death of the traditionally religious and moral interpretation of the world. It is, in one sense, a sign of growing human strength, expressed via the “intellectual conscience”, whose great symbol and champion is modern science. Religious superstition, whose philosophical equivalent is the notion of being in all its guises, is on the decline. Or, to put it differently, the illusion that the true and the good naturally coincide has been utterly shattered. This leads to a kind of emptiness in existence: one thing has ceased, but what will thereby commence? Will the world be engulfed by a self-destructive feeling of pessimism and resentment? Or will it, on the contrary, commence “a higher history than all history hitherto”?¹¹⁶ That is the great question posed by nihilism, and Nietzsche is a warrior on the side of the latter alternative.

¹¹⁴ The centrality of the notion of self-deification in Nietzsche’s work is ably revealed and greatly emphasized in Berkowitz’s *Nietzsche*.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

The occurrence of the “higher history” that Nietzsche envisions requires the development of a “higher type” of human, one who embodies the reverse of nihilism – that is, one who recognizes the fact of absolute becoming in a godless setting, but who nevertheless utters a complete “yes” to existence. The philosopher of the future aids in this project by creating values that are concomitant with the truth of absolute becoming in a godless setting, thereby uniting or synthesizing the true and the good. The death of god, according to Nietzsche, is a necessary stage in this overall development, since an unconditional “yes” to human, earthly life requires the negation of everything relating to “the beyond.” Nihilism, in this scheme, is but an ante-chamber, a transitional condition between a quasi-“yes” based on the illusion of being, and an unconditional “yes” based on the truth of becoming.

Chapter Three: Nietzsche's Doctrines

This chapter deals with elements from criteria a-e for the religious thinker. It especially focuses on criterion d), which stresses that meaning and purpose are maximized when life is lived "in the light of reality."

I have suggested that a religious thinker is one who begins with a fundamental insight into the nature of reality, and who, moved by this insight into the true, offers a vision of the good. This vision of the good serves the function of affirming the value of existence, primarily by infusing life with meaning and purpose. This infusion is the fundamental, motivating impulse for the religious thinker. Meaning and purpose reach their crescendo when the true and the good are united. Nietzsche, in my view, is an example of these impulses, ideas and endeavors.

The insight of the religious thinker becomes the scaffolding, so to speak, on which specific doctrines are constructed; it guides and constrains our explanations of the world, as well as our conception of what the good life can or should be. In the universe of the Christian mystic, union with the Godhead is the highest good, whereas in an atheistic setting of absolute becoming, this conception is not an option, and other ideas, such as human strength and the creation of values, take center stage.

Nietzsche's philosophy contains three crucial doctrines. These are *amor fati*, will to power and eternal recurrence. The first of these constitutes Nietzsche's vision of life affirmation, and the latter two are theses that he adopted due to their sympathy with the notion of absolute becoming and their provocative implications within the setting of *amor fati*.

i. Amor Fati

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche suggests that “a philosopher... demands of himself a judgment, a Yes or No, not about the sciences but about life and the value of life.”¹¹⁷ He could just as easily have said “the religious thinker” makes such a demand, for the preoccupation with meaning and purpose, which is the distinguishing feature of such a thinker, is ultimately an inquiry into the value of existence. The religious thinker questions the value of life, but is invariably appeased by the discovery that it is or can be deeply meaningful and purposive. The teaching of *amor fati* is Nietzsche’s response to this demand for an overall statement about existence. It is, I think, the lynchpin, the soul, of his religious philosophy.

Amor fati means “love of fate.” It is Nietzsche’s formula for an *unconditional* “yes” to existence, and, as such, it constitutes the goal, the outcome, of the Nietzschean philosophy. *Amor fati* is the effect of the complete defeat of nihilism – that is, the complete defeat of the feeling of resentment against existence. It involves a total acceptance of life, in all its factual relations and circumstances. The *totality* of this acceptance is a crucial point, for whereas previous thinkers could only affirm life after negating and/or vilifying the truth of temporal becoming, thereby dividing the world into good and evil, or valuable and worthless portions, Nietzsche sees the possibility of being strictly truthful, and affirming *all* of life, without addition or subtraction.

¹¹⁷ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.124.

Nietzsche associates *amor fati* with strength and greatness, and he leaves no doubt as to the centrality of this notion in relation to his personal experience and his overall philosophy:

My formula for greatness in man is *amor fati*: that a man should wish to have nothing altered, either in the future, the past, or for all eternity. Not only must he endure necessity, and on no account conceal it... he must *love* it.¹¹⁸

Amor fati is the essence of my nature.¹¹⁹

I want more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer.¹²⁰

These passages indicate that Nietzsche's primary concern is the value of existence. What distinguishes him from many thinkers, in his own view and in mine, is that he sees the greatest value in existence only after all typically religious and metaphysical notions have been stripped away. He wants to restore the "innocence of becoming" by removing all notions that the universe contains moral imperatives or *a priori* purposes of any kind. The latter allow for the notion that human beings can be *judged* by an authority outside themselves, and found wanting. This, in turn, produces the feeling that we are *guilty* of not measuring up to some exterior or objective standard. All of this robs life of its innocent joy. It makes humans feel inferior and dirty; it makes us think that our highest task is to obey, rather than command and create. To all of this, Nietzsche vehemently objects:

We halcyonians especially are trying with all our might to withdraw, banish, and extinguish the concepts of guilt and punishment from the world...our most serious endeavor is to purify psychology, morality, history, nature, social institutions and

¹¹⁸ *Ecce Homo*, p.853.

¹¹⁹ *Ecce Homo*, p.922.

¹²⁰ *Gay Science*, p.223.

sanctions, even God of this filth...we... desire to restore the innocence to becoming... to be the missionaries of a cleaner idea: that no one has given man his qualities... that no one is to *blame* for him.¹²¹

Thus, when compared with the religious and metaphysical teachings of the past, Nietzsche's view of reality is quite austere, insofar as it excludes many of the things they included. However, to say "yes" to life under these conditions is, he thinks, the greatest feat of strength imaginable, and this very affirmation of strength paves the way for a celebration of human creativity and earthly existence such as we have never yet seen. In a meaningless universe of absolute becoming, humans are completely responsible for assigning normative standards to and for themselves. Humans, in other words, can affirm themselves as fulfilling these "divine" functions, which were previously said to reside with God. And if we glorified God because of his power to assign standards of conduct - if that is the basis for esteeming an agent - then perhaps, after the death of God, we can glorify humans, and human existence, to the same extent.

Thus, there is a great irony in the Nietzschean perspective: the religious thinkers of the past loaded the world up with metaphysical baggage in order to make life bearable, in order to facilitate a "yes" to existence. They lacked the strength to pronounce this affirmation in the absence of such falsifications. Now, today, Nietzsche reveals that the yes-saying impulse can only be maximized when all that baggage is unloaded. The value of existence can be completely affirmed within the setting of atheistic becoming; the good, which, in the broadest sense, is precisely the feeling that life is valuable, does not require the falsification of the true. This synthesis of "yes-saying" and intellectual

¹²¹ *Will To Power*, p.402. It is interesting that Nietzsche employs the word "missionary" in relation to his message. He simply cannot avoid the feeling that his teachings have a religious significance, and that the dissemination of his thought will have as significant an impact as the religious teachings of the past.

honesty is the self-proclaimed essence of Nietzsche's nature. It is also the essence of his philosophy.

ii. Amor Fati, Dionysius and Tragic Wisdom

Nietzsche's doctrine of *amor fati* is organically connected with several of his most prominent themes and teachings. For instance, Nietzsche always maintained a fascination with the notion of tragedy and "tragic wisdom." This, in turn, is intimately connected with his celebration of what he called the Dionysian element.

In the Ancient Greek pantheon, Dionysius was the god of wine. He was connected with the harvest, and the recognition of Dionysius was synonymous with a general celebration of life, *qua* life. Dionysius, in short, is the god of life-affirmation, and the ultimate Dionysian attitude is *amor fati*, since it represents an affirmation of life in all its aspects, without revision or qualification. Thus, Nietzsche refers to himself as "the last disciple of Dionysius",¹²² and he summarizes his overall position in the cryptic phrase, "Dionysius versus the 'Crucified'"¹²³ – that is, the spirit of life-affirmation versus the Christian spirit of resentment and revenge against life.

To understand the connection between *amor fati*, Dionysius and "tragic wisdom", we must turn once again to Nietzsche's atheistic teaching of absolute becoming, and to the thesis that Nietzsche is of an essentially religious temperament. Nietzsche refers to his wisdom as "tragic" because his life-affirmation is not buttressed by false images of grandeur. The religious thinkers and philosophers of the past imbued the universe with inherent meaning, purpose and justice. Hence, for them, the realization of reality was glorious – existence, *qua* existence, contained moral and/or rational aspects that made life

¹²² *Twilight of the Idols*, p.111.

valuable and meaningful. But this, on Nietzsche's view, was illusion. Truth, far from being "glorious" in this religious-moral sense, is "terrible."¹²⁴ Life is absolute becoming, with no *a priori* justification whatsoever. What could be more tragic *for someone like Nietzsche*, who pines after meaning and purpose, and who senses the mystery and grandeur of existence; someone, in other words, who is essentially a religious individual, and a religious thinker. Nietzsche's perspective represents the crushing *defeat* of all aspirations that try to secure meaning and purpose in human existence by placing humanity within a meaningful or purposive cosmos. If such a religious aspiration was lacking from the beginning, then Nietzsche's insight would not be "terrible"; it would simply be an insight. However, if, like Nietzsche, one does begin with religious instincts, the revelation of absolute becoming is certainly a bitter-sweet wisdom. It demands an alternative mode of securing the sense of purpose, lest one should be swept away by feelings of nihilism and pessimism.

It follows from the above that the glory of Nietzsche's Dionysian-ism, which, to repeat, reaches its absolute crescendo in *amor fati*, is that it maintains its pro-life fervor *despite* the insight into the "terrible" nature of the world. This affirmation in the face of the absurdity of existence is "tragic wisdom." The Greeks, according to Nietzsche, possessed and demonstrated this wisdom.¹²⁵ They maintained their cheerfulness and energy in spite of their Silenic knowledge¹²⁶ about the futility of life, qua life.¹²⁷

¹²³ *Will to Power*, p.542; also *Ecce Homo*, p.933.

¹²⁴ For one of Nietzsche's many allusions to the unseemly character of reality, see *Birth of Tragedy*, p.984. Also see Peter Berkowitz's discussion on "The Ethics of Art", in *Nietzsche*, pp.44-66, s.7, and Nietzsche's *Will to Power*, p.325: "truth is ugly."

¹²⁵ Nietzsche's fascination with, and general admiration of, the Greeks runs throughout his career. For a summary, see *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, G. Clive ed. (New York: Penguin/Meridian, 1996), Ch.III. "The Greeks", pp.152-191.

¹²⁶ In *The Birth of Tragedy*, p.961-62, s.3, Nietzsche relates the story of Silenus, who is said to have advised King Midas that he would be better off not knowing the truth about the character of reality.

Nietzsche thinks that the art form of Attic tragedy was an expression of this essentially heroic position.

It is in this context that we can understand Nietzsche's ambivalent attitude towards Socrates.¹²⁸ On the one hand, Socrates is an outstanding demonstration of "dialectical severity." He illustrates the human ability, or power, to *interpret* phenomena in terms of reason, order and logic. On the other hand, Socrates lacked both the strength and the honesty to admit that this is a purely human function, which serves strictly human needs. He equated reason with both the true and the good – the true was the rational, and the rational was the good,¹²⁹ but reality, as Nietzsche sees it, is neither intrinsically rational nor inherently good. On the contrary, tragic wisdom knows that reality is completely devoid of any such normative features. Thus, Socrates, in the final analysis, negates the synthesis of knowledge and creative power that is the basis of tragedy. As Peter Berkowitz says, Nietzsche:

implies that the superiority of the tragic myths stems from the fact that through them the Greeks bravely faced the ugly truth about existence, whereas Socrates' theoretical reason or science represented a cowardly ruse for evading and suppressing the terrifying truth about the human condition.¹³⁰

Silenus' view is the epitome of the "life as meaningless and futile" position. It is crucial for understanding Nietzsche's positions viz. the "terrible" and existentially dangerous nature of reality, and the benefits of error or falsification.

¹²⁷ See Berkowitz, *Nietzsche*, p.51: "Nietzsche asks how an infectious optimism, an overbrimming cheerfulness, a manly healthiness, epitomized by the Greeks' savage and sensual myths, could emerge in full awareness of man's inherently miserable lot."

¹²⁸ It was Walter Kaufmann who first countered the view (spawned, in all likelihood, by a one-sided emphasis on Nietzsche's critical commentary in *The Birth of Tragedy*) that Nietzsche was unequivocally negative in his appraisal of Socrates. See *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ*, 3rd ed. (New York: Random House, 1968), Ch. 13 – "Nietzsche's Admiration for Socrates", pp.391-411. For a sustained discussion on the subject of Socrates by Nietzsche, see *Twilight*, pp.29-34, "The Problem of Socrates."

¹²⁹ See *Twilight*, p.31: "I seek to understand out of what idiosyncrasy that Socratic equation reason=virtue=happiness derives: that bizarrest of equations and one which had in particular all the instincts of the older Hellenes against it."

¹³⁰ Berkowitz, *Nietzsche*, p.47.

Socrates, in other words, introduced, or perhaps re-introduced, the need to falsify reality before affirming life. Hence, his “yes” to existence is both impure and incomplete, because it proceeds on the basis of lies and deceptions. A person who can only say “yes” to life after having said “no” to truth is far inferior, in Nietzsche’s view, to one who can look reality, in all its emptiness, in the eye, and nevertheless arrive at *amor fati*. The ancient Greeks, prior to the rise of the Socratic perspective, demonstrated something akin to this ability. They had the strength to recognize the metaphysical emptiness of the universe, and the further strength to get on with justifying, redeeming, celebrating and shaping life, their tragic insight notwithstanding. Hence, they were beacons of tragic wisdom, which combines absolute honesty with creative power. Nietzsche’s philosophy is the re-instatement of this approach to life, taken to a point of completion or perfection. *Amor fati*, within the context of absolute, atheistic becoming, is the ultimate Dionysian-tragic position.

The above analysis makes it clear that tragic wisdom, as Nietzsche understands it, is devoid of the sadness and despair that many people associate with the word “tragedy.” In fact, Nietzsche suggests that his understanding of tragedy, “far from providing evidence for pessimism... has to be considered the decisive repudiation of that idea and the *counter-verdict* to it.”¹³¹ Tragic wisdom, in other words, is the reverse of pessimism and nihilism. The man of strength defeats what Nietzsche refers to as “the spirit of gravity”, which is synonymous with the somber, self-absorbed, solemn seriousness of the nihilist, who is depressed at the character of existence. This depression is soundly

¹³¹ *Twilight*, p. 110.

defeated in the strong, wise spirit, and they end by “pronouncing laughter holy,”¹³² because laughter expresses the strength of the person who can see the truth, and nevertheless revel in life.¹³³

Nietzsche, in his own view, is “the first *tragic philosopher*.”¹³⁴ That is, he is the first philosopher to conceptualize the true in a fully “tragic” manner, and to work out the Dionysian implications of this tragic wisdom as it relates to the good. This philosophical approach culminates in *amor fati*, which is total life-affirmation, without any metaphysical padding. Nietzsche could face the truth of absolute becoming, with all that that implies, and still affirm life in all its aspects. That makes him the last living disciple of Dionysius. It also makes him a religious figure, for Nietzsche’s *goal* is the same as that of the religious and metaphysical thinkers of all ages – namely, to provide a perspective that facilitates an overall sense of the value and validity of existence. The only difference, a crucial difference, is that he believes this can be done without falsifying reality, as he thinks previous thinkers have been wont to do. Hence, it is his *basis* for life-affirmation that differs from the thinkers of the past, but not his basic desire or intent. This is a point that Nietzsche himself tended to forget, or deny. In his zeal to condemn what he saw as the weakness and naivete of the past, he overlooks or under-emphasizes¹³⁵ the extent to which previous thinkers were engaged in the same enterprise as his own. Such thinkers, if

¹³² This is a paraphrase of *Zarathustra*, p.294: “I myself have pronounced laughter holy.” Note the typically religious desire to deem specific attitudes and actions holy, or sacred.

¹³³ For further illustrations of this relation between gravity, or somber, dark solemnity, and laughter, see *Zarathustra*, pp.40–41, and also *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.232, where Nietzsche says “I actually risk an order of rank among philosophers depending on the rank of their laughter – all the way up to those capable of *golden laughter*.” What “golden laughter” would be like is difficult to say, but the general idea of cheerfulness as a critical attribute is undeniably clear.

¹³⁴ *Ecce Homo*, p.868 (“Why I Write Such Excellent Books, The Birth of Tragedy”, s.3).

¹³⁵ I add this proviso because Nietzsche does not always overlook this point. Indeed, his more sober moments, he acknowledges the *relative* value of religion in terms of its value for life. See Chapter One, where I discuss this point.

we accept Nietzsche's views, were weak and instinctively dishonest, but this does not mean they sought something other than truth, nor does it mean they only wished to take revenge against life. It simply means that they lacked the purity, the intellectual conscience and the power to unite the good with the factually true.

iii. Will to Power

The ability to say "yes" to life, even when life is seen as the inherently senseless and meaningless thing it is, leads immediately to Nietzsche's crucial teachings of will to power and eternal recurrence.

Will to power is Nietzsche's catch-all phrase for the energy and action of life itself. Life, according to Nietzsche, is "that which must ever surpass itself."¹³⁶ Life, in other words, is a constant motion, an incessant becoming, but that motion is not blind. On the contrary, all living things strive for power. This means that they inherently wish to be greater, or stronger; they wish to command more, to contain more, to be more.¹³⁷ This applies as much to a flower as to a human being.¹³⁸ It is a completely universal propensity, and its validity as an explanatory principle is confirmed, according to Nietzsche, by empirical observation of anything and everything in nature, including human beings.¹³⁹ "This world" says Nietzsche, "is the will to power – and nothing

¹³⁶ *Zarathustra* (New York: Random House, Modern Library Series edition), p. 125 ("On Self-Surpassing").

¹³⁷ Nietzsche's doctrine of will to power comes dangerously close to abrogating his disavowal of all *apriorism* in the universe. True, will to power is not moralistic in its implications, where "moral" indicates other-regarding tendencies and kindness (since the will to power is essentially an urge to overwhelm and assimilate), nor is it rationalistic, but it does suggest that there is something *inherent* about the structure of natural processes, and this always leads to the tantalizing question – from where or from what does the will to power come? How, in other words, is *it* possible?

¹³⁸ See *Will to Power*, p. 374: "In order to understand what 'life' is, what kind of striving and tension life is, the formula must apply as well to trees and plants as to animals."

¹³⁹ Thus, Nietzsche suggests that he has "crawled into the very heart of life", and his method of doing so is explained when he says "I pursued the living; I walked the widest and the narrowest paths that I might know its nature. With a hundredfold mirror I... caught its glance" (*Zarathustra*, p. 114). These are poetical and metaphorical ways of suggesting that Nietzsche observed nature with great care, and saw there "will to power – and nothing besides!"

besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power – and nothing besides!”¹⁴⁰ The will to power, in the words, is the universal, *explanatory correlate* of absolute becoming. It explains how change becomes ordered or necessary change, as opposed to strictly random, senseless sequences. The growth of a flower does not fit in with or confirm an ultimate, universal, teleological order or purpose, but its sequential, consistent, predictable operations are rendered intelligible if we see them as manifestations of the will to power.

At this stage, I would venture to suggest that the theory of will to power was attractive to Nietzsche for three main reasons. First, it corresponds nicely with the desire of the religious thinker, already mentioned in relation to the notion of absolute becoming, to totalize, or to explain reality *as a whole*. This desire usually leads to the affirmation of an ontological monism, and the powers associated with the monistic or singular entity, energy, or principle, are always deeply esoteric, and quite astounding. Indeed, the will to power is an extraordinary thing! How, we may ask, is it possible for life to contain an “urge”, or a “wish”? How is *that* possible? This comes dangerously close to contradicting Nietzsche’s thesis that life is completely value-neutral. True, his will to power is devoid of moral imperatives, and it does not aim at a final, teleological condition, but this does not alter the fact that life as will to power does aim at *something* – i.e. power, and when Nietzsche makes strength his criterion of the good, he seems to feel that he is establishing values on the basis of something like “natural law.” Further, we may ask how the “urge” of will to power is allied with the selective intelligence that allows its “wish” to be fulfilled? The religious thinkers of the past attached elements of Purpose and Intelligence to the cosmos, thereby explaining the cycles and activities of nature. Hegel’s World

¹⁴⁰ *Will to Power*, p.550.

Spirit, the *Tao* of Lau Tzu, the “spirits” of the animistic religions, Plato’s realm of Forms, these conceptions share a common purpose and a common power – namely, they explain the ordered changes that we observe in the natural world.¹⁴¹ Nietzsche, however, cannot help himself to such overtly “spiritual” explanations, since his thesis of absolute becoming is allied with a naturalism that seeks precisely to eliminate the idea that a specifically spiritual power lies above, beyond, or even within the world of change. Nietzsche tries to address this by suggesting that will to power *is* becoming, as opposed to something that accompanies change as a “within” that emanates from a “beyond”, but this solution is ineffective. In the final analysis, will to power is a deeply mysterious, esoteric phenomenon; it is the “intelligible” form of nature.¹⁴² As a teaching, will to power dances at the edge of the typically religious monism, while being denied the further assertions that render the latter coherent, if sometimes incredible. Thus, Nietzsche’s will to power, like his philosophy as a whole, gravitates towards religion.

Second, the notion of will to power fits perfectly with the general thesis of absolute becoming. Will to power is a dynamic principle. Power relations are constantly shifting, constantly being established, stabilized, changed, re-established, etc. Thus, if the will to power is a valid hypothesis, then the nature and activity of all living things can be explained or understood in a way that coincides with the doctrine of absolute becoming.

¹⁴¹ To this list we may also add Henri Bergson, whose *elan vital* or “life force” is virtually synonymous with the organizing, creative power of God. See *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, T.E. Hulme, trans. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Library of Liberal Arts, 1955). Also, Wallace, co-founder, with Darwin, of the theory of evolution via natural selection, felt that a further principle was required to explain how the processes they described could occur (they eventually split over this issue), and, of course, the Buddhists explain ordered change via *karma*, while the Creationists do so on the basis of a more-or-less anthropomorphic Deity.

¹⁴² See *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.48: “The world viewed from inside, the world defined and determined according to its ‘intelligible character’ – it would be ‘will to power’ and nothing else.” Nietzsche places the word intelligible in quotation marks so as to avoid the connotation that the will to power stands outside or above reality, as something to be cognized by intuition or rational thought alone, but this does nothing to

The human soul, for instance, need no longer be seen as a simple, unchanging “I.” Instead, it is the name we give to a configuration, temporary and changeable, of various drives and instincts, which together form the constitution and govern the behavior of a specific organism.¹⁴³ Thus, to repeat, will to power harmonizes with becoming, and acts as an explanatory tool in that context.

Third, it can be observed that the theory of will to power bolsters the magnificence of *amor fati*. Here is how this works: the will to power, when applied to valuations of good and bad, great and mediocre, produces a cult of strength. The best, most outstanding exponents or demonstrations of life, which is synonymous with will to power, will be the strongest; they will be those in whom the will to power is so abundant that they are capable of overcoming the greatest obstacles in the quest to expand and flourish. The effect of this definition of greatness is that it sanctions or validates resistance, opposition, conflict:

It is *not* the satisfaction of the will that causes pleasure...but rather the will’s forward thrust and again and again becoming master over that which stands in its way. The feeling of pleasure lies precisely in the dissatisfaction of the will, in the fact that the will is never satisfied unless it has opponents and resistance.¹⁴⁴

Everything decisive arises as the result of opposition.¹⁴⁵

The will to power can manifest itself only against resistances; therefore it seeks that which resists it.¹⁴⁶

If we now apply the notion that greatness can be assigned on the basis of the extent to which opposition is successfully surmounted – i.e., on the basis of strength - we begin to

curb the esoteric and mysterious character of the principle, and the fact remains that he is forced to admit the “inner” character of his great principle.

¹⁴³ See, for instance, *Will to Power*, p.270: “my hypotheses: the subject as multiplicity”, or again: “The sphere of a subject constantly growing or decreasing, the center of the system constantly shifting...”. Examples such as these could be multiplied many times over.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.370.

¹⁴⁵ *Ecce Homo*, p.894 (“Why I Write Such Excellent Books, Zarathustra”, s.1).

understand why Nietzsche's Dionysian teaching of *amor fati* represents such a tremendous spiritual feat. The death of God, as we have seen, produces nihilism, and nihilism is the anti-life position *par excellence*. Thus, when Nietzsche overcomes nihilism, he overcomes the greatest existential obstacle any person can encounter - namely, the obstacle of the idea that life is itself worthless, or not worth living. Only a supreme will to power, an abundant expression of life, could face the death of God and subsequently embrace existence in an atmosphere of absolute becoming. Most people would retreat back to some modified being-hypothesis,¹⁴⁷ or else become confirmed pessimists,¹⁴⁸ but Nietzsche, as a forerunner of the philosopher of the future and the overman, will neither retreat nor stagnate. On the contrary, he will go forward, past even this greatest of all illnesses, the greatest dis-ease - nihilism - and he will eventually go so far as to become its living antithesis. Nihilism is a "no" to life, but Nietzsche's goal is to be "only a yes-sayer."¹⁴⁹

Thus, in the joy of his spiritual strength, Nietzsche can find no objection to life. The things to which people often refer when questioning or condemning life, such as conflict or illness, are not actually objectionable. They are part of the mechanism of will

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p.346.

¹⁴⁷ For example, Immanuel Kant, who, according to Nietzsche, "crept stealthily...back to "God"...like a fox who loses his way and goes astray back into his cage. Yet it had been *his* strength and cleverness that had broken open the cage!" *Gay Science*, p.264.

¹⁴⁸ Schopenhaur, whom Nietzsche initially adored and later rejected, springs to mind. The later Nietzsche maintains his admiration for Schopenhaur's staunch atheism, but after that Nietzsche's philosophy represents the antithesis, in all the crucial respects, of his predecessor.

¹⁴⁹ This discussion on Nietzsche's praise of resistance or "conflict" may help to eliminate the false notion that he was a war-monger, or a proponent of violence. True, Nietzsche, if forced to choose, would no doubt favor war-like conditions over the "wretched contentment" of the "last man", but his notion of the significance of "war" is ultimately very subtle and highly philosophical. Indeed, he makes a distinction between the soldier and the warrior (see *Zarathustra*, p.47), he declares that he finds "the notion of 'retaliation'...incomprehensible" (*Ecce Homo*, p.825), and he regards the need to demonstrate power by violence and oppression as signs of relative weakness (see Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, p.252). Indeed, he even has strict rules as to when it is permissible to voice destructive criticisms against ideas, values or creeds (*Ecce Homo*, pp.828-29). Self-mastery is what Nietzsche really values, and the "war" that he promotes is a

to power. They are manifestations of the *need* for resistance and opposition if life is to flourish and grow.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, Nietzsche suggests that his philosophy of life-affirmation grew out of his encounters with illness, which, to be sure, were distressingly frequent and serious:

...to an intrinsically sound nature, illness may even act as a powerful stimulus to life, to an abundance of life. It is thus that I now regard my long period of illness: it seemed then as if I had discovered life afresh... Out of my will to Health and Life I made my philosophy.¹⁵¹

Hence, there is nothing against which to feel resentment, and this means that the impulse to escape is defeated; the man of great strength is free to embrace *amor fati*.

iv. Eternal Recurrence

The concept of eternal recurrence is the final and most dramatic element in Nietzsche's yes-saying project. Its importance in Nietzsche's overall scheme is a result of the fact that it, like will to power, is a thesis that conforms entirely with the theory of absolute becoming, and, again like will to power, it supports the ultimate goal of Dionysian *amor fati*.

The doctrine of eternal recurrence states that all things will repeat themselves in an endless but unchanging circuit of becoming. The intellectual presuppositions that lead to this view are simple but bold. Nietzsche presumes that the universe is a bound space, which contains a finite amount of energy in motion. The structure of the universe, at any given time, represents a temporary configuration of all this energy (energy which, of

constant effort whose theme is self-surpassing. Thus, Nietzsche's terminology needs always to be seen in the light of his "sublimated" perspectives.

¹⁵⁰ "But", an objector might say, "conflict and illness actually kill things, thereby destroying life. Surely that is objectionable." It is here that Nietzsche's philosophy takes on a tone of ruthlessness, for the fact that weak organisms perish is of no ultimate concern. "The goal", says Nietzsche, is "life at its highest potency" (*Will to Power*, p.340), and the fact that nature's experimental attempts to reach this end involve what humans call tragedy, waste and injustice is simply part of the "terrible" truth about reality.

¹⁵¹ *Ecce Homo*, p.820.

course, is animated by will to power). Now, given an infinite amount of time, and given the finitude of the space and the energy, coupled with the series of necessities that would be constantly produced by each successive state, it seems logical to think that all things would recur, and do, in fact, eternally recur! Nietzsche summarizes this position, as well as indicating its relation to will to power and the Dionysian/*amor fati* perspective, in the following passage, which I will quote at length:

And do you know what “the world” is to me?... This world: a monster of energy, without beginning, without end; a firm, iron magnitude of force that does not grow bigger or smaller, that does not expend itself but only transforms itself; as a whole, of unalterable size, a household without expenses or losses, but likewise without increase or income; enclosed by “nothingness” as by a boundary; not something blurry or wasted, not something endlessly extended, but set in a definite space as a definite force, and not a space that might be “empty” here or there, but rather as force throughout, as a play of forces and waves of forces... a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back, with tremendous years of recurrence... still affirming itself in this uniformity of its courses and years, blessing itself as that which must return eternally, as a becoming that knows no satiety, no disgust, no weariness; this, my *Dionysian* world... without goal... without will... do you want a *name* for this world? A *solution* for all its riddles?... *this world is will to power – and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power – and nothing besides!¹⁵²

The fact that eternal recurrence dovetails perfectly with the thesis of absolute becoming, as well as with atheism, is perfectly clear. The universe is “becoming that knows no satiety.” It never stops, there is no realm of being within or outside its boundaries, and it contains no discrete “things” at all; there is no being, no source of being, no laws, no justice – there is only becoming, which is life, which is will to power.

The relationship between eternal recurrence and *amor fati* is the thing, in my view, that most excited Nietzsche.¹⁵³ We have seen that the will to power seeks obstacles

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p.550.

¹⁵³ The fact that Nietzsche was attached primarily to the normative, as opposed to the empirical, aspects of eternal recurrence is supported by Bernd Magnus in his *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). Magnus also reveals the seemingly insuperable difficulties of eternal recurrence as an empirical doctrine. See Chs.3 and 4.

to its continued expansion. The greater the abundance of life, the greater the obstacle required and discovered. Nihilism, as we saw, is the depression of life that accompanies the loss of the sense of meaning and purpose in the universe. Eternal recurrence, if added to this feeling of the worthlessness of existence, is like a crushing blow. Imagine, this tedious, meaningless, pathetic existence – over and over again without cessation! To overcome a nihilism that is saddled with this thought would be the *ultimate* act of self-surpassing:

If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. 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?¹⁵⁴

Thus, the thought of eternal recurrence multiplies the crisis of nihilism many times over, thereby demanding a phenomenal strength, a phenomenal Dionysian-ism, a super-abundance of tragic wisdom, if the crisis is to be surmounted. He who can recognize the truth of absolute becoming, to the point of eternal recurrence, and still maintain a philosophy of *amor fati*, a divine cheerfulness and vitality, is practically a god on earth. Such a person redeems all existence by embracing it without embellishment or falsification. He or she is the strongest version, the greatest accomplishment, of the human species. He or she is the “overman”, able to overcome all objections to existence, and every bit of pessimism or resentment against the actual, the true, which is life, which is will to power.

v. *Summary*

In this chapter, I have sought to elucidate Nietzsche’s most critical doctrines, and to clarify their relationship to his ultimate, religious goal of affirming the value of

existence. Nietzsche is a thinker who is caught between a version of the universe that renders it meaningless and purposeless, and the great need to affirm life as precisely meaningful and purposeful. His primary concern, as I see it, is to unite the truth of absolute becoming and the need to feel that life is valuable, and hence worthy of affirmation. *That*, in my view, is the basic tension of Nietzsche's work. He, like every religious philosopher before him, ends by asserting that the highest happiness, the greatest good, occurs when a human lives "in the light of reality." However, Nietzsche, unlike many, does not make the true and the good *synonymous*. On the contrary, the revelation of absolute becoming is initially horrifying and nauseating; it produces nihilism: the rudder is gone; the individual is at sea in a vast ocean with no compass, no landmarks, no comfort. But perhaps the recognition of absolute becoming was actually the stirring of an incomparable strength; perhaps the will to power is ready for its ultimate test, its ultimate obstacle; perhaps one has the power, the strength, to *pull* the true and the good together through the medium of *amor fati*, and perhaps this will to power will be so utterly triumphant that even the thought, or perhaps the revelation,¹⁵⁵ of eternal recurrence will be insufficient to stifle the voice of life-affirmation. Humans, in the end, will deify themselves. The spirit of revenge and the impulse of nihilism will suffer a total defeat, and a Dionysian god of complete affirmation, total cheerfulness, will walk the earth. This Dionysian man-deity will be the redeemer, the justifier of all existence. That is Nietzsche's vision, his highest hope, the end for which he labors and

¹⁵⁴ *Gay Science*, p.274.

¹⁵⁵ I add this proviso because Nietzsche may very well have believed that eternal recurrence was actually true – an empirical reality – and not strictly an existential challenge. See, for instance, Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative*, where he insightfully suggests that Nietzsche "was very much interested in finding

works, and all of this makes Nietzsche a religious thinker.

empirical confirmation, but apparently for a doctrine which he had embraced for reasons other than empirical cogency” (p.88).

Chapter Four: The Overman

This chapter deals primarily with criteria c-e for the religious thinker, and is hence a continuation of the predominant themes of the previous chapter - that is, the concern with meaning and purpose, and the maximization of the good via the effort to live in the light of the true.

In the preceding chapter, I attempted to establish that the goal of Nietzsche's philosophy is an unconditional embrace of existence, or *amor fati*, in the absence of any metaphysical illusions. His vision is that of a person who lives joyously in the light of reality, or truth. This, however, is difficult, because reality or truth is "terrible", and it takes great strength to overcome the compulsion, inherited through long centuries of human history, to falsify reality before affirming life. This strength, however, is itself the highest good, so the best form of human existence, the "good life", is discovered precisely via Nietzsche's experience of recognizing truth, overcoming nihilism and arriving at *amor fati*, even in the face of such bizarre propositions as that of eternal recurrence.

The stage is now set for a discussion on the crucial issue of meaning and purpose. This is inseparable from the preceding discussion on the Nietzschean goal of life-affirmation. Life is embraced when it is seen as valuable, and its value is maximized when it is imbued with a grand or macrocosmic sense of meaning and purpose. This, in my view, is what makes religious teachings so attractive to so many people. In the absence of a broad conception of what life is all about, the religious temperament feels that the whole enterprise is petty, absurd, and perhaps not worth the effort, anxiety and concern. Thus, the religious individual requires meaning and purpose on a broad scale,

and the religious *thinker*, such as Nietzsche, requires that his enterprise be based on cosmic insights, such as absolute becoming, coupled with deeply significant undertakings, such as the creation of “the overman.”

i. The Overman as Locus of Meaning and Purpose

If the idea of absolute becoming and the goal of *amor fati* are to be connected (and that is Nietzsche’s goal), then we require a medium of meaning and purpose. It is in this context that we must approach his teaching of the overman. Nietzsche makes this connection between the overman and meaning explicit when he says “behold, I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of the earth”,¹⁵⁶ and, elsewhere: “Human existence is uncanny and still without meaning.... I will teach men the meaning of their existence – the overman, the lightning out of the dark cloud of man.”¹⁵⁷

Who or what is the overman? Nietzsche could not say with a high degree of precision. The overman is his dim vision of the culmination or perfection of a certain “type” of human being. That type is, in a word, “great”, and Nietzsche enticingly suggests that his ideal would be “the Roman Caesar with Christ’s soul.”¹⁵⁸ This is an astonishing image of the overman. It is a death-blow to the naïve suggestion that Nietzsche was unambiguously hostile to the figure of Jesus Christ and, by extension, to everything connected with religion. True, he titled one of his books *The Anti-Christ*, and he offers the formula “Dionysius versus the Crucified” as a sound-bite summary of his overall position, but, at the same time, he repeatedly states his admiration for Christ – he

¹⁵⁶ *Zarathustra*, p.13.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.20.

¹⁵⁸ *Will To Power*, p.513.

even refers to him as “the noblest man,”¹⁵⁹ and now we find that the higher type of human will have “Christ’s soul.” Thus, as always, Nietzsche’s views, if taken in isolation, tend to suggest *absolute* negation or affirmation, but, on closer examination, we find that his final position is actually *relative* to a specific context of discussion.

Nietzsche’s admiration for Christ is based primarily on his feeling that he successfully experienced and portrayed “the innocence of becoming.” In his teachings, “the concept guilt and punishment is lacking,”¹⁶⁰ and in his life he demonstrates “the superiority *over every feeling of ressentiment*.”¹⁶¹ As a result of these factors, Christ validates human existence. His “kingdom of heaven” is not something that comes only after death, or at a future period in history. On the contrary, it is here and now; it is “a condition of the heart.”¹⁶² All of this makes Christ very attractive to Nietzsche. He also respects his courage and dignity at the time of his death, as well as the fact that “what he bequeathed to mankind is his *practice*,”¹⁶³ as opposed to a set of beliefs, rituals or customs. Christ offered to the world “a new way of living, *not a new belief*”;¹⁶⁴ he does away with ecclesiastical (and political) authority, as well as the medium of these powers – the priest and theologian, and replaces them with direct, immediate experience of innocent, “blessed” existence.

Thus, according to Nietzsche, Christ exemplifies the feelings and actions that are concomitant with greatness. His scorn is reserved primarily for the priests and theologians, such as St. Paul and St. Augustine, who distorted and subsequently used the

¹⁵⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*. R.J. Hollingdale, trans. Volume 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1986), p. 175.

¹⁶⁰ *Anti-Christ*, p. 145.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

life and teachings of Christ to promote their own project of priestly power, and to satisfy their overwhelming feelings of resentment against existence.¹⁶⁵ Thus, Nietzsche makes a strong distinction between the person of Christ and the organized religion called Christianity. Indeed, he regards the term “Christianity” as intrinsically misleading, for “there was one Christian, and he died on the cross,”¹⁶⁶ and the great irony of Christianity is that it *inverts* or reverses the sentiments of its founder.¹⁶⁷ The doctrines that came *after* Christ, particularly those that emphasized sin, guilt and punishment, and which buttressed these emphases with a metaphysics and theology that fail to “come into contact with reality at any point,”¹⁶⁸ have little or nothing to do with the man who is falsely said to be their originator. Christianity degrades, falsifies and vilifies life; Christ, on the other hand, affirmed and transfigured it.

Thus, Nietzsche’s overman will resemble Christ in that his basic instinct will be to affirm, bless and sanctify actual existence. He will feel himself above all feelings of resentment, and his way of life will be a demonstration of freedom from enmity, hatred and the spirit of revenge. However, while Nietzsche unreservedly applauds the position at which Christ arrived, he questions the psychological premises or conditions that facilitated the position. He suggests that Christ’s freedom from enmity, for instance, was the result of weakness, rather than strength. Christ demonstrates “the *inability* for enmity”

¹⁶⁵ See, for instance, *ibid.*, pp. 154-55, where Nietzsche vents his hatred of St. Paul, or p. 166, where Nietzsche equates the notion of sin, which reaches its apotheosis with St. Augustine, with the desire for priestly power; finally, see p. 119, where Nietzsche defines the theologian as “the antithesis” of the type he represents.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁶⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 148, where Nietzsche refers to the “world-historical irony” of Christianity, and also *Will To Power*, p. 116, where Nietzsche suggests that Christ made a mistake when he directed his teachings to “the lowest class of Jewish society and intelligence”, who “conceived him in the spirit they understood”, and therefore mutilated his teachings beyond recognition.

¹⁶⁸ *Anti-Christ*, p. 125.

and a general “incapacity for resistance.”¹⁶⁹ Hence, the existential condition of Christ is not that of someone who is filled with strength, but who has the creative ability to sublimate baser impulses and reverse values; on the contrary, the possibility of doing harm is not present. Therefore, the fact that no harm is done cannot be called a genuine achievement.

Thus, “Christ’s soul” is necessary but not sufficient for the overman. This soul must inhere in a person who resembles “the Roman Caesar.” That is, a person of great vitality, great strength; one who is animated by an instinct to command, and also by a sense of distance from the common, average, mediocre person.¹⁷⁰ Christ did not demonstrate these critical traits of nobility, but the overman will. He will be a great synthesis; he will demonstrate graciousness, tenderness, tolerance, reverence, humanity, and many of the other qualities associated with moral and spiritual achievement, but he will do so from a position of strength, or power, as opposed to one of weakness and impotence.¹⁷¹

These reflections bring us back to Nietzsche’s overall project as a religious thinker. He wants to affirm meaning and purpose in a godless setting of absolute becoming. This requires that *human strength* be revered, celebrated, or, in a word that

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p.141.

¹⁷⁰ See *Beyond Good and Evil*, Part Nine. “What is Noble?”. pp.201-239 for a discussion of these and other traits of the “higher type.” See also Chapter Five of the current study.

¹⁷¹ This is a crucial point, which will be discussed further in Chapter Five. Nietzsche’s references to these and other qualities that we normally associate with the kind, just, good human being – the human being that religious morality always encourages, even if the history of organized religion frequently demonstrates their negation, are scattered throughout his works. See, for instance, *ibid.*, p.222, where Nietzsche speaks of “the characteristic *graciousness*” of the higher man “towards his fellow men”; or page 233, where he associates graciousness with “sweet spirituality.” See also *Anti-Christ*, p.179, where Nietzsche says that “an exceptional human being handles the mediocre more gently than he does himself.” Finally, see *Gay Science*, p.267, entitled the “humaneness” of the future.” The term is in quotations, not because Nietzsche rejects the quality, but because it springs from a different source in his philosophy, and needs therefore to be studied and experienced in a new way. This, however, does not mean that it will not look very much the same as it has always done. Tolerance will be discussed in the next chapter.

captures the true religiosity of this project, deified. Nietzsche's admiration for Christ reveals that his relationship to this religious figure, like his relationship to religion as a whole, is subtle and relative. His desire is to adopt the spirituality and nobility of Christ, but to place it on a new foundation. Just as Christ came, not to destroy the law but to fulfill it,¹⁷² Nietzsche wants to adopt the noble features of Christ, but to perfect and complete them by placing his existential achievement within a setting of absolute becoming and spiritualized will to power.

Thus, the overman is a vision of human nobility and power. The specific constituents of this greatness will be discussed in the next chapter. For the moment, the crucial thing is to note that the *will* to contribute to the emergence of the overman is Nietzsche's primary locus for meaning and purpose in existence. "Man", says Nietzsche's Zarathustra, "is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?"¹⁷³ This is the essence of Nietzsche's prescription for meaning and purpose in existence. Life is meaningful insofar as humans consciously strive to *create* that which is better, more glorious, more powerful than what has thus far been. This synchronizes perfectly with Nietzsche's rejection of any *a priori* or *inherent* purpose in the universe, since the overman does not and cannot exist apart from human striving, and with his related notion that man must deify himself by recognizing his responsibility for imbuing life with depth and meaning. Through the effort to create the overman, or at least an environment suitable for the emergence of the overman, humans will arrive at a vision of meaning and purpose that is completely free from the spiritual fictions of the past. These sentiments are made vivid when Nietzsche's Zarathustra says:

¹⁷² Matthew 5:17.

¹⁷³ Zarathustra, p.12.

“God is a conjecture; but I desire that your conjectures should not reach beyond your creative will. Could you *create* a god? Then do not speak to me of any gods. But you could well create the overman.”¹⁷⁴

These words capture Nietzsche’s vision for meaning and purpose in a godless setting of absolute becoming.

ii. The Function of the Overman: Redemption

Thus far in this study, I have attempted to reveal a broadly religious pattern in Nietzsche’s work: he has major insights into the nature of reality, and his primary objective is to establish meaning, purpose and value on the basis of these insights. These motives and activities place Nietzsche in a religious orbit, so to speak. However, his affiliation with religion is not limited to these general considerations. On the contrary, a close study of Nietzsche’s work reveals the extraordinary extent to which he is committed to categories and notions that are normally affiliated with religion. The idea of redemption is a striking case in point, and is crucial when considering the function of the overman as the locus of meaning and purpose in human existence.

The concept of redemption as it relates to the overman works simply as follows: the man of greatness, the overman, is the penultimate achievement of history, and *this achievement redeems or justifies all existence*. The overman, in other words, allows for a great reconciliation with life, which is a synonym for time, change and history; or, in a single phrase, absolute becoming. When a person recognizes the inherent meaninglessness of life, and the related fact that history, thus far, has been nothing more than “fragment...riddle...and dreadful accident,”¹⁷⁵ he or she is struck by a feeling of resentment. But with the emergence of the overman, the will is able to affirm all that has

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p.85.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p.141.

gone before. Indeed, it can even say, in effect, that it *willed* that history should have been just as it was, because only *that* history made the overman possible: “To redeem those who lived in the past and to re-create all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’ – that alone should I call redemption.”¹⁷⁶

Thus, the great act of justification that occurs with the overman includes in its scope the entirety of human history, in all its details. This is so because Nietzsche sees all things as utterly interdependent, so that we cannot have one occurrence without having all the occurrences that preceded it.¹⁷⁷ This premise of interdependence leads to the conclusion that the overman, the man who proclaims *and lives amor fati*, even in the light of absolute becoming and the prospect of eternal recurrence, is the result, the outcome, of a long series of events and a whole chain of circumstances, all of which were *necessary* for his emergence. And the effect of this insight, in turn, is that the overman makes possible the *celebration* of the *totality* of all events and circumstances. He is the agent that allows us “not only to endure necessity... but to *love* it.” The overman, in other words, is the living instantiation, the justifier, the proof, if you will, of *amor fati*. By his greatness, by his ability to “incorporate” truth into a strong, healthy, cheerful, creative mode of existence – that is, to unite the true and the good - he redeems history, or human life.

This joyous affirmation of all life is Nietzsche’s new version of the critical idea of redemption. It is another element in the impressive, organic synthesis that is his vision

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p.139.

¹⁷⁷ The idea of radical interdependence is a crucial theme in Nietzsche’s work. It is a necessary correlate of his suggestion that being is “an empty fiction”, because in a world where nothing is separate or discrete, all things *must* be connected. Interdependence is also crucial to the teaching of Eternal Recurrence, in its empirical, but also, and most critically, in its existential aspect. In particular, if all things are connected, then the desire to have *one* joy repeated entails that *all* things must likewise be repeated. See *ibid.*, p.323.

and his teaching. Nietzsche's version of redemption is his re-configuration of a traditionally religious notion, such that it will prove applicable in a godless setting of absolute becoming, where the Dionysian attitude, which culminates in *amor fati*, is the highest good.

iii. Nietzsche's Modified Darwinism

The teaching of the overman needs to be seen in relation to what I will call Nietzsche's modified Darwinism. Nietzsche accepts that the emergence of humanity can be traced back to a process that has led – albeit not directly or teleologically - from simple to increasingly complex and increasingly conscious forms of life. Hence, he says, “you have made your way from worm to man.”¹⁷⁸ The overman, in his view, would be a consciously willed continuation of this historical movement; or, what might be more accurate, a specialized off-shoot. Hence, Nietzsche beseeches his listeners to consider whether they are content with their present humanity, or whether, on the contrary, they should strive to overcome their present state:

All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man? What is the ape to man? A laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment.¹⁷⁹

Nietzsche's views differ from those of the typical Darwinist because where the latter suggest that evolution favors the strong, Nietzsche thinks the reverse is true. Natural history, as he sees it, proceeds on the basis of a great leveling effect, through which the singular and the rare, which he associates with the strong and the good, find themselves opposed and all-too-often defeated. Human “evolution”, in other words, tends

which emphasizes this point, and which includes the statement that “all things are entangled, ensnared, enamored.” In other words – totally interconnected and interdependent. See also *Will To Power*, p.532.

¹⁷⁸ *Zarathustra*, p.12.

to the creation of “the herd”, a social conglomeration that concerns itself primarily with survival, and which therefore stresses the value of qualities such as “foresight, patience, dissimulation, great self-control, and all that is mimicry.”¹⁸⁰ These emphases are sublimated forms¹⁸¹ of the curious mixture of caution and clever opportunism, coupled, in the case of weaker animals such as humans, with the need to combine and establish strength in numbers (as well as efficiency in communication and uniformity of custom), that are required for survival in a hostile environment. They make one common, “normal”, predictable, thereby working in opposition to the great human being, who is singular and exceptional. Hence, the gravitational pull, so to speak, of the majority is the greatest danger to the emergence of the higher type:

Species do *not* grow more perfect: the weaker dominate the strong again and again – the reason being they are the great majority, and they are also *cleverer*.¹⁸²

Strange though it may sound, one always has to defend the strong against the weak; the fortunate against the unfortunate; the healthy against those degenerating and afflicted with hereditary taints.¹⁸³

Thus, Nietzsche accepts Darwinian notions about the animal and even pre-animal origins of man, as well as the centrality of survival and utility in the selective processes of nature, but he negates, and, in fact, reverses the idea that Darwinian evolution represents a form of qualitative progress. The “evolution” of man is in fact a degenerative movement, and no process of “natural selection” will suffice for the emergence of the overman. On the contrary, the inertia of the movement called “evolution” must be

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ *Twilight*, p.76.

¹⁸¹ The importance of the idea of sublimation in Nietzsche’s philosophy was stressed and explained by Walter Kaufmann (see *Nietzsche*, Chs.8 and 9), and is relevant in relation to my thesis. Nietzsche, on this view, does not negate religion, but rather sublimates it in accordance with new insights, and from a perspective that Nietzsche, in another enormous concession to traditionally religious categories, refers to as his esoteric knowledge (see *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.42).

¹⁸² *Twilight*, p.76.

countered by the conscious effort to create the overman. In the absence of such efforts, the drift of “evolution” will continue unabated, and the result will be a general weakening of the human species; the tendency towards mediocrity and conformity will emerge totally triumphant.¹⁸⁴ This tendency culminates in the ugly specter of “the last man”, the man of “wretched contentment” and weakness of the will, the man who “makes everything small”, the man who is no longer concerned with grand, macrocosmic meaning and purpose in human existence, and who, by my reckoning, is therefore irreligious.¹⁸⁵ The last man is the final result of the evolutionary urge to survive, but Nietzsche wants humans to propagate themselves “upward”, as opposed to merely “onward.”¹⁸⁶

Nietzsche’s stance on evolution clarifies his constant emphasis on the importance of the human *will*. The overman, to repeat, will not emerge by means of “evolution” or “natural selection,”¹⁸⁷ unless we understand evolution in the new sense of that which is

¹⁸³ *Will To Power*, p.264.

¹⁸⁴ Indeed, Nietzsche suggests that if humanity does not take action relatively soon, they will no longer have it in their power to undertake the work of creating the overman: “The time has come for man to plant the seed of his highest hope. His soil is still rich enough. But one day this soil will be poor and domesticated, and no tall tree will be able to grow in it. Alas, the time is coming when man will no longer shoot the arrow of his longing beyond man, and the string of his bow will have forgotten how to whirl!” (*Zarathustra*, p.17). See also *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.118: “this animalization of man into the dwarf animal of equal rights and claims, is possible, there is no doubt of it.” This prospect was horrifying to Nietzsche, and was the source of the urgent tone of much of his work: “Anyone who has once thought through this possibility to the end knows one kind of nausea that other men don’t know – but perhaps also a new task!” (ibid., p.118)

¹⁸⁵ For Nietzsche’s discussion on the “last man,” including the references made to it above, see *Zarathustra*, p.17

¹⁸⁶ *Zarathustra* (Modern Library ed.), p.73.

¹⁸⁷ Indeed, he might not emerge at all, even if humanity does will his existence. Thus, Nietzsche agonizes over what he sees as the growing obstacles to the emergence of the higher type, and he makes it clear that the future of his vision depends upon a combination of human will and chance that may or may not gel in the right way, to the right extent, at the right time. Hence, he says “If only we *could* foresee the most favorable conditions under which creatures of the highest value arise! It is a thousand times too complicated and the probability of failure is very great: so it is not inspiring to look for them!.... On the other hand, we can increase courage, insight, hardness, independence, and the feeling of responsibility; we

willed and created by humankind itself. In the course of history, greatness has been the product of a confluence of influences and circumstances that were not specifically designed to evoke its emergence. Now, today, when honest people are recognizing the truth of absolute becoming in a godless setting, Nietzsche thinks we have the opportunity to take on the creation of the overman as a distinctively human task, as opposed to a divine or evolutionary decree. Hence, he says

That which partly necessity, partly chance has achieved here and there, the conditions for the production of a stronger type, we are now able to comprehend and consciously *will*: we are able to create conditions under which such an elevation is possible.¹⁸⁸

Thus, it is critical that individuals join with Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who says "let your will say: the overman *shall be* the meaning of the earth!"¹⁸⁹ History, until now, has been a horribly random and meaningless thing; it has been a "gruesome dominion of nonsense and accident."¹⁹⁰ This meaninglessness of the past, the "it was", must be redeemed; it must be infused with meaning, and this redemptive act can only be undertaken by human beings, because we are the only agents of meaning in the world; there is no God on which to rely – there is only the human will.

All this makes it clear that Nietzsche's vision of the overman is part of his patently religious project, whose object is the self-deification of man. Humans, operating in the context of a modified Darwinism, will take on the responsibility for the creation of that which was previously assigned to "God" or "Nature", and this will make human life deeper, more meaningful and purposive, than it has ever yet been. Nietzsche's goal, then,

can make the scales more delicate and hope for the assistance of favorable accidents" (*Will To Power*, p.480).

¹⁸⁸ *Will To Power*, p.477.

¹⁸⁹ *Zarathustra* (Kaufmann ed.), p.13.

¹⁹⁰ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.117.

is not to negate the categories and tasks of religion, but to shift the locus of religiosity from God to man, and to explore the implications of this shift as they relate to critical notions, such as redemption.

iv. Overman and Amor Fati

The great danger of the Nietzschean perspective on natural history is that it can produce feelings of resentment or “disgust” against “the herd”, the mortal enemies of greatness.¹⁹¹ Such resentment would constitute the defeat of the unconditional “yes to life” that is Nietzsche’s goal, so he must seek a way to overcome it. Indeed, the success of his vision of total affirmation depends on the dissolution of this feeling of hatred for the great mass of humanity, or what Nietzsche sometimes called “the many-too-many.” In the end, it is precisely an aspect of the *amor fati* perspective, coupled with the will to power, that allows this overcoming of resentment to occur.

The ethical and existential function of *amor fati* is to transform the “is” into the “ought.” That is why Nietzsche says that we must “not only endure necessity... but *love* it.” In other words, we must see how the totality of the power relations that constitute reality provide the opportunity for the will to power to perform its function of simultaneously creating and overcoming obstacles. The increase of strength, or power, is the good, the “ought”, so if reality is configured in such a way that this good is facilitated, then reality, the actual, is good. Hence, we must:

... attain a height and bird’s eye view, so one grasps how everything actually happens as it ought to happen; how every kind of “imperfection” and the suffering to which it gives rise are part of the highest desirability¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Book II of *Zarathustra* deals especially with this problem. See especially, “On the Rabble”, pp.96-99.

¹⁹² *Will to Power*, p.520. In this way, Nietzsche arrives at something very close to Leibniz’s “best of all possible worlds” hypothesis, and also to the sentiment of Alexander Pope, who suggested that “whatever is, is right.” Nietzsche’s philosophy is, of course, *very* different from that of Leibniz, but the fact remains that he often arrives at conclusions that resemble those of others, even when those conclusions are very

The implication of this statement, along with Nietzsche's periodic references to the "economy" of the whole, imply that *amor fati* is more than just a creative or imaginative act. Saying "yes" to the actual is not merely a manifestation of the *will* to conceptualize reality as acceptable; it is also based on an actual insight into the total character of the world. Thus, Nietzsche's doctrine of *amor fati*, like that of absolute becoming, represents a synthesis of creative and cognitive elements.¹⁹³ The will to affirm life reveals that life is actually worthy of such an affirmation; and, conversely, the insight strengthens the will.

Amazingly, Nietzsche regards this empirical element of *amor fati* as the basis for a new and higher *faith*. Thus, he says that the person who realizes *amor fati* "has become free," and

Stands amid the cosmos with a joyous and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only the particular is loathsome, and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole – *he does not negate any more*. Such a faith, however, is the highest of all possible faiths; I have baptized it with the name of *Dionysius*.¹⁹⁴

In this way, Nietzsche once again demonstrates that he is committed to the categories of religion. Faith, that pre-eminently religious notion, is applicable within the context of a naturalism whose basis is absolute becoming, conjoined with will to power.

Nietzsche applies his notion of overall economy to the problem of the overman and his relationship to "the herd." The latter, as we have seen, opposes the overman, and Nietzsche sees the present age as one in which the values of the herd are increasingly in the ascendant. Christian morality, along with its secular counterparts – democracy and

"spiritual" in their implications. What is unique about Nietzsche are the presuppositions that lead him to those conclusions.

¹⁹³ For a discussion on the epistemological premises of such a view, see my discussion on Nietzsche's "humanistic cognitivism" in Chapter One of the present study.

socialism¹⁹⁵ – supports the leveling, the mediocritization, of humanity. It speaks of the equality of man, whether before god or the law, promotes universal human rights, seeks political security, economic comfort, and a brand of tolerance that succeeds by eliminating all difference, all sense for an “order of rank” between individuals and “types.” A perfect world, on this model, would be one in which the value of individuality would reach an all-time low, and the complete absence of friction would completely eliminate the dissatisfaction that produces striving and creativity. This is the world of “the last man”, the man who asks “What is love? What is creation? What is longing?...and...blinks.”¹⁹⁶ The world of the last man is the complete triumph of the herd instinct.

Now, in the context of the overman, the crucial point is this: the ascendancy of the herd produces precisely those conditions that allow, demand, and even evoke the development of a higher type:

The increasing dwarfing of man is precisely the driving force that brings to mind the breeding of a stronger race – a race that would be excessive precisely where the dwarfed species was weak and growing weaker... the homogenizing of European man is the great process that cannot be obstructed: one should even hasten it. The necessity to create a gulf, distance, order of rank, is given *eo ipso* – *not* the necessity to retard this process. As soon as it is established, this homogenizing species requires a justification: it lies in serving a higher sovereign species that stands upon the former and can raise itself to its task only by doing this.¹⁹⁷

The dwarfing of man must for a long time count as the only goal; because a broad foundation has first to be created so that a stronger species of man can stand upon it.¹⁹⁸

A high culture can stand only upon a broad base, upon a strong and healthy consolidated mediocrity.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁴ This translation is taken from Kaufmann’s *Nietzsche*, p.281. It can also be found in Hollingdale’s translation of *Twilight*, p.103, but I prefer Kaufmann’s version.

¹⁹⁵ Nietzsche’s connections between these three are very frequent in his writings. For instance, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he says, “the *democratic* movement is the heir to the Christian movement” (p.116).

¹⁹⁶ *Zarathustra*, p.17.

¹⁹⁷ *Will To Power*, pp.477-78.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.475.

These quotations raise many questions. For instance, would the masses support the development of the overman, or would there be an animosity between the two groups? Nietzsche often implies and *supports* an antagonistic relationship,²⁰⁰ and he suggests that this is actually necessary, since the higher types must recognize themselves as separate from, or “above,” the concerns and activities of the common type. However, at the same time, when he says “the homogenizing species requires a justification”, it seems to imply that the higher types would serve the purpose of allowing the “homogenizing species” to feel that they are supporting something above and beyond their own sphere. Further, we must ask from where the breeding stock, so to speak, would come, if humanity is increasingly “dwarfing” itself? And, similarly, how would candidates for the overman, if there were any such thing, be chosen, and who would do the choosing? Nietzsche rejects the crude notion that superficial, racial characteristics are definitive in this regard, and this leads to the critical idea that “all men might have to be treated with respect as potentially ‘truly human beings.’”²⁰¹ Thus, the ethical implications of the overman project are far-reaching. They can be easily misinterpreted, as the Nazi experience amply demonstrates, and Nietzsche could be accused of failing to sufficiently address these practical concerns. However, in the present context, the crucial thing to note is this: the ascendancy of the herd need not constitute a threat to the *amor fati* position. On the contrary, this general ascendancy is necessary, and must not only be allowed, but actually supported!

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p.462.

²⁰⁰ See, for instance, *ibid.*, p.473: “Viewed from a height, both are necessary; their antagonism is also necessary....”

²⁰¹ Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, pp.285-86. Chapter Ten of this book, “The Master Race”, pp.284-306, convincingly displays Nietzsche’s contempt for racist views. The overman earns that title because of the

The presence of the herd performs several functions that are indispensable for the emergence of the overman. First, it creates the *need* for a group of people who justify an overall scheme of human existence that would otherwise be completely devoid of grandeur. We must remember that the will to power requires obstacles, and the preponderance of herd values may act as precisely such a stimulus. Amongst those with sufficient latent strength, the widespread presence of mediocrity will inspire a potent desire to reject and *surpass* present norms and valuations. Second, at a more mundane level, the growth of the “herd animal” creates a stable economic base, and Nietzsche regards this as necessary for the emergence of a type that is above and beyond such mundane, material considerations:

The need to show that as the consumption of man and mankind becomes more and more economical and the “machinery” of interests and services is integrated ever more intricately, a counter-movement is inevitable. I designate this as the secretion of a luxury-surplus of mankind: it aims to bring to light a stronger species, a higher type... my concept, my metaphor for this type is, as one knows, the word “overman.”²⁰²

Once we possess that common economic management of the earth that will soon be inevitable, mankind will be able to find its best meaning as a machine in the service of this economy – as a tremendous clockwork, composed of ever-smaller, ever more subtly adapted “gears... in opposition to this dwarfing and adaptation of man to a specialized utility, a reverse movement is needed – the production of a synthetic, summarizing, justifying man for whose existence the transformation of mankind into a machine is a precondition, as a base on which he can invent his *higher form of being*.²⁰³

These reflections reveal that Nietzsche’s vision is not dissimilar to the forms of social organization that allow for the Brahmins in India, the priestly class of ancient cultures such as Egypt, the ruling house of China, or the aristocracies of Europe. In all these cases, what we see is a small group of people that are connected to, and in some

quality of his “inner” life, and this applies notwithstanding Nietzsche’s endorsement of hereditary as a crucial source of personal characteristics.

²⁰² Ibid., p.463.

²⁰³ Ibid., pp.463-64.

senses even dependent upon, the great mass of people, but who nevertheless lead lives that are basically separate and in many respects secret. They are regarded, both by themselves and by the general populace,²⁰⁴ as rightfully privileged, and as performing a function that is necessary in terms of the overall glory of the civilization.

This broadly aristocratic structure is openly favored by Nietzsche,²⁰⁵ as it was by thinkers such as Plato. Indeed, what is the overman, if not a version of the Platonic philosopher-king? The authority of the overmen, like that of the philosopher-king, is ultimately based on their ability to live joyously in the light of reality. Their *primary* function is not to rule and act as shepherds for the masses, for it is what they *are* that matters most, not what they do,²⁰⁶ but they will nevertheless form the highest rung on the hierarchical structure of society, and it will be part of their task to rule and govern a global civilization and culture.²⁰⁷ Nietzsche's overmen, in other words, are none other than the "knowers" who have been the spiritual bedrock of every ancient civilization, and this makes his vision a curious synthesis of traditionalistic and futuristic elements. What he desires, in short, is an aristocratic structure, based on the insight of absolute becoming and the self-deifying powers of man within the context of his modified Darwinism. The

²⁰⁴ This, in my view, is the only adequate solution to the previously raised question about the attitude of the masses to the smaller, privileged group, and vice-versa. The relationship must be one of respect and, to some extent at least, reciprocity. Once the masses lose their sense of awe, or at least their feeling that the oligarchs of any society perform an invaluable service (a loss which comes precisely when the latter begin mistreating the people, and taking their loyalty too much for granted), they rebel against it, and ultimately destroy it. The fate of the Western monarchies and aristocracies is, I think, an irrefutable case in point.

²⁰⁵ For a compilation-style cross-section of Nietzsche's "Aristocratic Radicalism", see *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (Clive ed.), Ch.IX.

²⁰⁶ Thus, for instance: "the "higher nature" of the great man lies in being different, in incommunicability, in distance of rank, not in an effect of any kind – even if he made the whole world tremble." (*Will To Power*, p.468). This aspect of "being versus doing" bears a certain resemblance to the debate over "faith and works" in Christianity. Nietzsche clearly dislikes the notion that the value of an individual should be gauged on the basis of what they do, or of how "useful" they are to others. Indeed, this forms an important part of the basis for his frequent polemics against "selflessness" and "neighbor-love."

present scenario, the “dwarfing” of man, which includes the horrible specter of the “last man”, are parts of this development, and are, to repeat, no cause for resentment, or for the diminution of the *amor fati* position. Nietzsche’s goal of total life affirmation cannot be undone by the feelings of contempt, pessimism and disgust that threaten the apostle of greatness, and that are so bitterly evoked by the resistance of the ever-growing herd. The philosopher of the future can ignore or “pass by” the ugliness of the present and get on with contemplating and building the potential beauty of the future.²⁰⁸

v. *Summary*

In this chapter, I have sought to reveal that Nietzsche’s vision of the overman constitutes his locus for meaning and purpose in a godless setting of absolute becoming. The enunciation of a standard for such meaning and purpose is the motivating impulse of the religious thinker. The distinguishing feature of Nietzsche’s vision is that it focuses on human potential as the key to what makes life meaningful. The highest good and the greatest purpose does not lie in the success or happiness of the average type, but rather in the possibility of a super-normal type, which justifies and redeems existence to an extraordinary extent.

This emphasis on the redemptive role of individuals, as opposed to “society,” is not uncommon amongst religious thinkers, who frequently suggest, and apparently demonstrate, that a complete transfiguration of human nature, based on cosmic insights

²⁰⁷ Thus, for instance, in the context of a discussion on the higher men of the future, Nietzsche asks, “how shall the earth as a whole be governed?” (*Will To Power*, p.501). This seems to imply that the “masters of the earth” would not be completely separate from the governance of the earth.

²⁰⁸ See *Zarathustra*, Book Three, Ch.7, “On Passing By”, as well as *Gay Science*, p.223, where Nietzsche, in one of his most heart-felt passages, disavows the practice of complaining about or fighting against that which one finds ugly, and proposes, instead, a complete preoccupation with perceiving and creating beauty. “I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse....*Looking away* shall be my only negation.”

and deep existential transformations, is what life is ultimately about.²⁰⁹ The sage, the adept, the master, these are the prototypes of Nietzsche's vision, and this applies notwithstanding his belief that the metaphysical teachings which are often said to form the basis for the achievements of these types are, in his own view, illusory and ultimately harmful.²¹⁰ The sage stands over and above the mundane concerns of the average person, yet they also justify the existence of these average ones, and are, at several levels, inseparable from them. Thus, Nietzsche, once again, falls into line with the broadly religious approach to meaning and purpose in life.

²⁰⁹ Buddhism and Hinduism are the most prominent examples here, though the more distinctly esoteric and mystic aspects of other religions, such as Christianity (via the mystics, and sects such as the Gnostics) and Islam (via the Sufis) are also significant. If we include broadly religious philosophies, such as that of Plato, the list gets much longer.

²¹⁰ Indeed, Nietzsche himself refers to "The sage" as "The highest man" (*Will To Power*, p.515).

Chapter Five: The Way to the Overman

This chapter focuses almost exclusively on criterion e) for the religious thinker, which deals with elucidating the content of “the good life,” and suggesting how it can be attained. The religious thinker points to the possibility of meaning and purpose in life. However, they also offer *prescriptions* for the attainment of such meaning. Gotama Buddha gave the world his eight-fold path,²¹¹ Jesus offered the Sermon on the Mount,²¹² Patanjali wrote the Yoga Sutras,²¹³ and Chuang Tzu indicated the Way of the *Tao* through instructive aphorisms and stories.²¹⁴ I have suggested that Nietzsche’s prescription for meaning and purpose involves the vision of the overman, and that this “higher type” must be actively willed by human beings. But to what does this amount? How, in fact, is the overman to be produced? I will suggest that Nietzsche indicates two primary preconditions for his, or its, emergence. These are a revaluation of all values, and “discipline and breeding.”

i. The Revaluation of all Values

The phrase “revaluation of all values” is Nietzsche’s formula for the creation of an environment that is suitable to the overman. Values, in Nietzsche’s view, are the Archimedean lever of human affairs, and the truly significant events in human history always concern the creation of new values. Thus, Nietzsche says:

²¹¹ See Helena Roerich, *Foundations of Buddhism* (New York: Agni Yoga Society, 1971), p.37.

²¹² Matthew 5-8.

²¹³ *The Light of the Soul: The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, Alice A. Bailey, trans. and commentary (New York: Lucis Publishing Co., 1955).

²¹⁴ *Chuang Tzu: Inner Chapters*, G.F. Feng and J. English, trans. (New York: Vintage, Random House, 1974).

Believe me... the greatest events – they are not our loudest but our stillest hours. Not around the inventors of new noise, but around the inventors of new values does the world revolve; it revolves *inaudibly*.²¹⁵

and he poetically suggests that “thoughts that come on doves’ feet guide the world.”²¹⁶

The implication here is that the actions and reactions of human beings are determined by their values, so that whoever determines values also determines, in effect, the course of history. Thus, the emergence of the overman depends *primarily*, though of course not exclusively, on the activity of philosophers – those who create values - and not on economic or political circumstances, manipulations, or adjustments.

The creation of values requires a standard of assessment, or evaluation. Any attitude or action is gauged against this standard, and its relative worth, or value, is thereby determined. Nietzsche’s standard is that of greatness. Or, to state it differently, all things will be evaluated according to the extent to which they contribute to the emergence of the overman, which is a metaphor for the healthiest, purest, noblest, most truthful, most life-affirming, most individualized and vigorous form of life imaginable.

It is worth noting that in his attempt to clarify the difference between his standard of value and those of other thinkers, Nietzsche employs the distinctly religious notion of “esoteric” and “exoteric” perspectives.²¹⁷ His explanation of the difference between the two depends upon his persistent use of a height metaphor to distinguish between various

²¹⁵ *Zarathustra*, p. 131.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

²¹⁷ H.P. Blavatsky, founder of modern Theosophy, makes much of this division, suggesting that the esoteric teachings of every religion are essentially One, while conflictual diversity arises strictly from exoteric, ignorant interpretations and dogmas. See *The Key to Theosophy* (Pasadena: Theosophical Publishing House, 1972), especially Section I, pp. 4–8, “The Wisdom-Religion Esoteric in all Ages.” More generally, the terms “esoteric” and “exoteric” designate something like “inner” and “outer.” Orthodox religions tend to be proponents of the latter, insofar as they stress outer behavior, obedience and ritual, while the more mystical sects, whether emphasizing devotion or understanding, tend to focus on the esoteric dimension. Nietzsche recognizes the latter division, though his definition of the terms are adjusted in accordance with his specific outlook.

classes of persons and perspectives.²¹⁸ The esoteric view is synonymous with that of the liberated, “free spirit”, who “looks *down from above*.”²¹⁹ Nietzsche, of course, sees himself as an example of this perspective. He is a true philosopher – one who has attained a “comprehensive look” at life, and who therefore sees things and evaluates them in accordance with a view that is far less superficial and partial than the norm. His vision of the good, and, by extension, the valuable, is based on his insight into the total character of reality, and this makes his assessments more compelling than those of the exoteric thinker, who “sees things from below.”²²⁰ Nietzsche’s task was to re-evaluate everything from the standpoint of his higher or more esoteric perspective, thereby inaugurating “the higher man, the higher duty, the higher responsibility.”²²¹ In adopting this stance, Nietzsche knowingly affiliates himself with a tradition that is patently religious,²²² and this once again reveals that he is by no means straight forwardly opposed to a religious conception of what philosophy, and life, are all about.

In the context of the present historical situation, and in the light of Nietzsche’s envisioned standard of value, the need for a revaluation of values is particularly acute. This is so because the moral standards of the modern era, Nietzsche’s era, are those of Christianity, and the latter, according to Nietzsche, represents a world-view that opposes greatness, and, by extension, the higher type of human, to an unparalleled extent.

²¹⁸ Another typically religious device. The religious thinker has “been to the mountain-top” (Martin Luther King Jr.); he or she leaves the valley of pain and sorrow, they “mount up with wings, as eagles” (Isaiah 40:31) and attain the heights of union with the true and the good. Nietzsche also routinely employs the metaphor of crossing a river, which is prominent, especially in Buddhism. See *Zarathustra*, p.14, where the protagonist speaks of “arrows of longing for the other shore.”

²¹⁹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.42.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p.139.

²²² Specifically, Nietzsche expresses his kinship with and admiration for “the Indians..., Greeks, Persians and Muslims,” all of whom “believed in an order of rank, and *not* in equality and equal rights” (*ibid.*, p.42). This, however, may not be absolutely correct. The Hindu mystics, for instance, seemed to recognize the

The Christian world-view and Christian morality were born, in Nietzsche's view, out of a spirit of revenge. It began with the Jews, the oppressed and enslaved people who, unable to affirm a reality that found them so underprivileged, conceived a "slave revolt in morals."²²³ They proposed the pernicious notion that "all men are created equal," and created a world-view and a standard of evaluation that favored people such as themselves, the oppressed and suffering, while condemning those who flourished in this life. This was a major reversal of standards. It gave a whole new twist on what was considered good and what was considered bad; it was a revaluation of all values.²²⁴

The moral code that issued from this revaluation represented "*resentment* becoming creative and giving birth to values."²²⁵ These values are in every case the *negation* of the aristocratic sense that glories in life, and which creates a standard of value based on human strength and courage. Christian morality counters these sentiments by devaluing the real world - the world of becoming, the world of the senses and the body, the world of human passion, human will and human strength. In place of these, it sets up an illusory, imaginary, metaphysical structure – including the immortal soul, heaven and hell, original sin, God, etc. This structure serves, in effect, to make the body the site of sin and the passions a synonym for evil, thereby devaluing and in fact demonizing the actual world of becoming.²²⁶ Christian morality, in short, makes one suspicious of life and the world. It seeks to instill a bad conscience in the face of every natural inclination, every manifestation of the will to power, and it suggests that the foremost examples of

essential equality of all as Atman-Brahman, even as they distinguished between degrees or levels of realization.

²²³ See *Genealogy of Morals*, p.647.

²²⁴ For Nietzsche's discussion on this point, see *ibid.*, First Essay, as well as *Anti-Christ*, pp.125-128.

²²⁵ *Genealogy*, p.647.

this naturalness - i.e. the great, powerful, strong human beings - will be subject to the judgments of an all-powerful God. This God, they say, will inflict eternal torture and damnation on those who follow their most natural inclinations, while rewarding those who extirpate the passions. In this way, Christianity acts as the mortal enemy of life itself, and the ascendancy of the Christian ethos is inseparable from the defeat of the quest for greatness.

Thus, Nietzsche sees a great need for a revaluation of all values, based on a standard of greatness, and this standard is inseparable from the acceptance and affirmation of what, for him, is the true, real or natural world – the world of absolute becoming. The Judeo-Christian world-view must be overturned, and we must move towards something that resembles the aristocratic sensibilities of the pre-Christian era. But how does this revaluation actually work? What is its content? The answer to these crucial questions requires that we look to specific examples. Indeed, we have already seen how Nietzsche re-evaluates the concepts of “soul,” “redemption,” and “faith,” such that they harmonize with his thesis of absolute becoming and his goal of *amor fati*. These are nothing other than instances of the Nietzschean deconstruction and revaluation of all things in the light of his insights and projects. But let us look, for the sake of clarity, at Nietzsche’s treatment of two crucial issues – pity and morality. His perspective in relation to these things reveals the inner workings of his revaluation of all values, as well

²²⁶ For an instance of this pervasive Nietzschean theme, see *Anti-Christ*, p.125: “Once the concept ‘nature’ had been devised as the concept antithetical to ‘God’, ‘natural’ had to be the word for ‘reprehensible’ – the entire fictional world has its roots in *hatred* of the natural...”.

as the extent to which he radically re-configures typically religious notions,²²⁷ while never rejecting them altogether.

Nietzsche is vehemently opposed to the common, Christian treatment of the idea of pity. He objects to it on two inter-related grounds. First, the Christian notion of pity stresses the need to support and comfort the downtrodden, the sick, the under-privileged, the wretched and the unhappy. This, however, thwarts the general tendency of life/will to power, which favors an experimental attempt at producing greatness, where the latter is synonymous with the *opposite* conditions – namely, great healthiness, great strength, great joy. As Nietzsche says:

Pity on the whole thwarts the law of evolution, which is the law of *selection*. It preserves what is ripe for destruction; it defends life's disinherited and condemned; through the abundance of the ill-constituted of all kinds which it *retains* in life it gives life itself a gloomy and questionable aspect.²²⁸

Thus, while Christian equality actively encourages the sovereignty of the mediocre, Christian pity goes one step further and suggests the need to further the interests of the degenerate! This, combined with Christianity's *active* hatred for and opposition to natural, life-affirming, great individuals, makes it utterly contemptible to Nietzsche.

²²⁷ Every religious teaching discusses conduct in the light of the true and the good, and the significance of pity, or compassion, or mercy, runs like a thread throughout the major religious traditions. This, however, does not mean that these subjects cannot be discussed, explained and endorsed in non-religious contexts and ways. That is why I say they are *typically* religious, as opposed to suggesting that wherever they are mentioned, a religious thinker must be at work. Still, even a strictly neurological account of moral feelings and behavior, if combined with prescriptions of any kind, would be making a statement about the good, based on a peculiar conception of the true, and would therefore be akin to a religious teaching. Perhaps this explains the widespread and general vehemence of those who oppose "super-natural" explanations in any field – they defend their views with religious zeal, demonstrating the hostility of the fundamentalist fanatic. The attitude of many modern medical practitioners towards traditional methods of healing is one example amongst many.

²²⁸ *Anti-Christ*, p. 118. How a human being or group of human beings can thwart the laws of life, especially when they *are* that life and that law, "and nothing besides", presents us with a conundrum. It would be more accurate, perhaps, to suggest that Christianity supports a *type* of selection that favors a form of will to power that Nietzsche finds distasteful and ultimately counter-productive. This, I think, is a necessary refinement of the above statement, but it does not alter Nietzsche's basic position on the question of Christian pity.

The second aspect of Christian pity to which Nietzsche objects is its *intrusive* character. The Christian is trained to react to suffering with an instant attempt to help, to alleviate, to make the sufferer more comfortable. This, however, is misguided, because suffering, or distress, is an absolutely necessary element in the process of growth that is life; suffering, in other words, pertains to greatness, and an obsessive preoccupation with the alleviation of distress and the attainment of comfort is ignorant and misguided:

When people try to benefit someone in distress, the intellectual frivolity with which those moved by pity assume the role of fate is... outrageous.... The whole economy of my soul and the balance effected by "distress", the way new springs and needs break open, the way in which old wounds are healing, the way whole periods of the past are shed – all such things that may be involved in distress are of no concern to our dear pitying friends; they wish to *help* and have no thought of the personal necessity of distress....²²⁹

The discipline of suffering, of *great* suffering – do you not know that only *this* discipline has created all enhancements of man so far?²³⁰

Thus, Nietzsche's objections to pity are premised, as always, on his conception of the true, which is absolute becoming in the context of a modified Darwinism, and the good, which is greatness. He feels that insofar as the term "pity" implies the impulse to effect the immediate alleviation of suffering and the rapid removal of distress, it must be restrained, or at least constrained, in the name of broader, more far-sighted considerations. We must recognize that distress, dissatisfaction and suffering are crucial and indispensable ingredients in the cultivation of greatness; they are the harbingers of movement, change and growth, and, as such, they are infinitely preferable to the "wretched contentment" that the man of pity seeks to produce through his short-sighted and intrusive actions. The person who cares about the emergence of the overman will cultivate what Nietzsche often refers to as "hardness" in relation to their excessively

²²⁹ *Gay Science*, p.269.

tender or sentimental impulses. Pity, on Nietzsche's view, is a kind of temptation, and temptations must be overcome, as Christianity itself teaches.²³¹

The vehemence with which Nietzsche attacks Christian pity, and the frequency of these attacks, can lead one to the conclusion that he simply *devalues* the attribute, as opposed to *revaluing* it. This, however, would be erroneous, for Nietzsche offers an alternative form of pity, one that coalesces with the broad aim of greatness. Our pity, our concern, should lie primarily with those whose potential is thwarted by the Christian interpretation of pity. We must take sides with those who suffer precisely from the mediocrity and degeneration that Christianity breeds: "Our pity is a higher and more farsighted pity; we see how *man* makes himself smaller, how *you* make him smaller... Thus it is pity *versus* pity."²³²

Nietzsche, then, does not reject pity, *qua* pity; he merely reformulates the notion. He offers an *alternative form* of pity, and this is absolutely crucial if we are to comprehend the religious character of his work. Nietzsche's task is not to eliminate the categories and concerns of religion, amongst which are pity, or compassion, or mercy, or love. He seeks only to re-shape and re-define them in a way that harmonizes with his peculiar insights and his particular conception of meaning and purpose, which centers on

²³⁰ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.154.

²³¹ Thus, in his translator's notes. Walter Kaufmann explains that the fourth section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is concerned largely with "the final trial" of the protagonist, which is precisely pity (see *Zarathustra*, p.232). In this connection, it is interesting to note that Nietzsche, far from being innately opposed to the "tender feelings" such as pity, is actually often filled with them, and feels the need to do battle with what he sees as short-sighted and sentimental reactions. This is revealed not only through the story of Zarathustra (see, for instance, p.90: "it is difficult to live with people because it is difficult to be silent..."), which relates closely to Nietzsche's own experiences, but also in his personal writings: "Badly mistrustful of myself, I took sides... against myself" (*Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, W. Kaufmann, trans. [New York: Viking, 1954], p.676). Indeed, Nietzsche was infinitely more tender than most people think, and his overman, as I shall assert in the final chapter of this study, is a paragon of refinement and gentility. These recognitions are crucial if we are to counter the crude interpretation of Nietzsche, adopted by the Nazi's and still prevalent in a lot of discourse to which I have been privy, that paints him as a lover of violence.

the notion of greatness. Indeed, *Nietzsche's philosophy is actually a religion of love* – love of life, love of creativity and strength, love of the potential of humans, who can build beyond themselves. However, the love of the individual who locates meaning and purpose in the quest to create the overman must demonstrate “a height that is above their pitying,”²³³ for “thus speaks all great love: it overcomes even forgiveness and pity.”²³⁴ Those who are in distress, those who suffer from life, must be allowed to *overcome* their distress, rather than having it simply alleviated. “If you have a suffering friend”, says Nietzsche, “be a resting place for his suffering, but a hard bed as it were, a field cot: thus will you profit him best.”²³⁵ This, to be sure, is a very non-sentimental conception of love, but it is by no means its negation.²³⁶

ii. *Individuality and Immoralism*

If we turn to Nietzsche's treatment of morality, we see again that while he heaps scorn on those elements and interpretations with which he disagrees, thereby giving the impression of *absolute* antagonism, his opposition is in fact only relative. What he really seeks is the inauguration of new perspectives and new practices that will *transform* the meaning and function of morality. His goal, in other words, is not to abolish morality, but to alter it in accordance with his “esoteric” understanding of life.

²³² *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 153-54.

²³³ *Zarathustra*, “On The Pitying”, p. 90.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

²³⁶ Indeed, Nietzsche does not even suggest that the typical form of pity need be completely rejected. Zarathustra, for instance, admits that he has “done this and that for sufferers” (*Zarathustra*, p. 88), but he prefers complete anonymity in such actions, for he feels it an affront to the pride and dignity of the sufferer that someone prods and interferes with his or her life. Thus, Nietzsche objects mainly to the *cult* of pity, and to the suggestion that this sentimental form of pity is the highest good. He admits the need to help people in certain circumstances, but he would much rather focus on joy, strength and beauty, which are far more useful than a morbid preoccupation with suffering, and a vicarious, egoistic delight in demonstrating one's ability to save or “help” another.

The emergence of the overman, as we have seen, requires a reevaluation of all values. Morality, as Nietzsche understands it, is the primary obstacle to such an undertaking, insofar as the term signifies obedience to customary modes of assessment. Hence, he says:

...the *chief proposition*: morality is nothing other...than obedience to customs, of whatever kind they may be; customs, however, are the *traditional* ways of behaving and evaluating. In things in which no tradition commands, there is no morality.²³⁷

This, then, is the key to Nietzsche's professed rejection of morality, which culminates when he proclaims himself "the first immoralist." The world requires *new* values, but these can never be formulated or proclaimed by those whose life and thought represents the desire to continue traditional or customary modes of conduct. Hence, morality, insofar as it signifies precisely such continuity, must be overcome.

This anti-moral element is inextricably bound up with Nietzsche's celebration of individuality. Morality, as he sees it, is the prerogative of "the herd." It is the means by which the gregarious yet cunning herd animal facilitates smooth, predictable interactions with his or her peers. Hence, the judgments and actions of the typical person will be invariably conservative and traditional. Any action that is new, unpredicted, unknown, will be seen by them as suspicious, immoral, and even evil.²³⁸ The result of this scenario is that the philosophers, creators of new values, must break free from the herd. Indeed, they must become their antithesis, which means – they must become genuine

²³⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, R.J. Hollingdale, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1997), p.10.

²³⁸ This is the key to Nietzsche's frequent praise of "evil", as well as his idea that the future requires "new barbarians." Both notions are to be taken in a purely philosophical and sublimated sense. Nietzsche does *not* have in mind what we normally associate with these words – namely, brute force, delight in the suffering of others, and other such unsavory things. He merely means that traditional modes of evaluation and conduct need to be questioned and revalued, and this requires the emergence of people who will not rest content with tradition.

individuals.²³⁹ The philosopher of the future must be “*determined to depend upon himself and not a tradition.*”²⁴⁰ The sense of individuality, the sense of being a self-legislating, sovereign being, a “self-propelled wheel,”²⁴¹ must be *stronger* than the instinct that drives one to be merely acceptable, prudent and conventional. This is not an easy task, for the herd instincts have been cultivated and perfected over many millennia, while “the individual is something quite new,”²⁴² but the fact remains that the future, if it is to correspond in any way with Nietzsche’s vision of a new and higher type, requires a reevaluation of all values, and this, in turn, requires the emergence of genuine individuals.

Thus, Nietzsche’s rejection of morality is founded on his idea that morality is the same as obedience to custom. This, however, is problematic, for it is directly contradicted when Nietzsche suggests that “*higher* moralities are, or ought to be, possible,”²⁴³ and also by his insistence that “I am not a moral bugbear, a moral monster.”²⁴⁴ These phrases indicate that morality needs to be redefined, not abolished or absolutely overcome. This conclusion is further supported by the evidence, most of which will be disclosed in the next section, that Nietzsche advocated extremely rigorous standards of personal conduct. Nietzsche, to be sure, is neither an anarchist nor a hedonist. Thus, we are faced with a conundrum.

The solution, in my view, involves the recognition, often overlooked by Nietzsche in moments of anti-moral zeal, that he only objects to morality *insofar as* it a) represents

²³⁹ The “herd animal”, according to Nietzsche, is not an individual or “personality.” Instead, herd animals are “bearers, tools of transmission” (*Will to Power*, p.472). They are, in other words, mere instruments of tradition, while the genuine personality is “an isolated fact” (*ibid.*) – i.e. someone who feels precisely *separate* from this stream of continuity.

²⁴⁰ *Daybreak*, p. 10.

²⁴¹ *Zarathustra*, p.27.

²⁴² *Will To Power*, p.403.

²⁴³ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 115.

²⁴⁴ *Ecce Homo*, p.811.

blind, herd-like obedience to custom, b) suggests that specific modes of evaluation and conduct are sanctioned by the *a priori* structure of the universe, or c) promotes the values of the herd to such an extent that the emergence of higher types is actively thwarted. If, on the other hand, standards of conduct issue forth from the individual, then Nietzsche's attitude is totally different. Indeed, this is precisely the "higher morality" that he envisions and endorses.

"The sage", says an ancient proverb, "is free to do anything, but does very few things." This captures the Nietzschean understanding of morality, which is subtle and paradoxical, as opposed to crudely abolitionist. The person of strength is a self-legislating being, a genuine individual, a "self-propelled wheel." Hence, the discipline and consistency of their conduct issues from *within*, and the greater their strength, the more astonishing is their ability to harness the energy of their passions to the requirements of self-appointed aims. They have the power to create order and harmony out of the initial chaos and discord of their instincts, thereby producing a transfigured *physis*,²⁴⁵ or nature (transfiguration is another religious concept that Nietzsche fervently adopts and revalues), and they do this by imposing standards upon themselves. They do this, in other words, by individualistic morality.

We should also note that the *kind* of conduct that issues from the individual of great strength and joy is utterly harmless. Immoral or violent actions, in Nietzsche's view, are mainly the result of resentment and suffering. The sufferer vents his frustrations on the world, and the result is a love of doing harm. But when we learn "better to feel joy,

²⁴⁵ This aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy is greatly emphasized in Kaufmann's *Nietzsche*. See, for example, p.316.

we learn best not to hurt others or to plan hurts for them.”²⁴⁶ Thus, while the person of greatness will reject morality insofar as it connotes unthinking, Pavlovian obedience to custom, he or she will demonstrate a gentility and harmlessness that issues forth as an *effect* of their inward condition.

Thus, while the production of the overman requires the rejection of morality as custom, it also entails the *embrace* of morality as the means to self-initiated greatness. Nietzsche’s moral code issues from *a different source* than the norm. It comes from the individual instead of the group, and it aims at strength and greatness instead of survival and mediocrity. This, however, does not mean that he rejects morality, qua morality, any more than his radical re-working of pity entails an absolute rejection of the idea. Nietzsche is a thinker who says “yes” and “no” at the same time, and this makes him difficult to comprehend. In the case of morality, he summarizes this dual project when he says, “she told me herself that she had no morality – and I thought she had, like myself, a more severe morality than anybody.”²⁴⁷ This is an accurate depiction of Nietzsche’s total, paradoxical stance on morality.

My solution to the apparent contradictions in Nietzsche’s stance on morality involves the modification of extreme statements, such as the one quoted earlier where Nietzsche says that morality *is* obedience to custom. However, I think such a revision is warranted by the over-all evidence. Nietzsche, despite his extreme and often bombastic rhetoric, is a subtle thinker. He sees in terms of gradations of depth and height, not absolute convictions or conclusions. His goal is to re-evaluate everything in the light of his insights and objectives, and this applies to our conception of morality as much as it

²⁴⁶ *Zarathustra*, p.88.

does to notions such as “soul”, “redemption”, or “pity.” It is only such an interpretation that allows us to include Nietzsche’s many statements on morality as facets of a single view-point, as opposed to the contradictory ramblings of an undisciplined thinker.

Before concluding this discussion on Nietzschean morality, it may be worth noting that the idea of the inferiority of traditional morality, or conventional modes of conduct, combined with the ability and the *right* of the “higher type” to transgress against these norms in the name of a greater truth and a higher task, is very common in religion. The old Zen Masters, to take only one example, were famous for their bizarre and unconventional conduct.²⁴⁸ They behaved in unique and purely individual ways, because they recognized a truth beyond all human conventions, and they consistently demonstrated how they had broken free from the morality of custom. Conventional morality, as understood by most religions, is a useful and enervating thing for the great majority, but it is not the highest good, and, for the sage or initiate in training, it constitutes a probationary stage, at best.²⁴⁹ All this dovetails very nicely with Nietzsche’s conception of morality as it relates to the higher types, and adds further weight to my assertion that he is best understood as an essentially religious thinker.

iii. “Discipline and Breeding”

The second aspect of Nietzsche’s “way” to the overman is a curious synthesis of educational and hereditary elements. The overman is not something that anyone can

²⁴⁷ Draft of a letter to Paul Ree, cited in *The Portable Nietzsche*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York: Viking Press, 1954), p. 102.

²⁴⁸ See, for example, *Zen and Zen Classics: Selections from R.H. Blyth*, F. Franck, ed. (New York: Random House, Vintage, 1978), Ch. XIV, “The Great Masters”, pp. 188-289.

²⁴⁹ This will not apply to the “orthodox” elements of most religions, which tend to stress obedience to behavioral and ritualistic codes. However, it is a commonplace amongst the mystical, esoteric sects that “good behavior” is necessary but not sufficient if one is to enter the Mysteries of Nature and Existence. See, for instance, Helena Roerich’s *Leaves of Morya’s Garden*, Vol. I (New York: Agni Yoga Society,

become, simply by "deciding" that they would like to do so. On the contrary, they must be "born for it", so to speak. "At the bottom of us", says Nietzsche, "really 'deep down,' there is, of course, something unteachable, some granite of spiritual *fatum*, of predetermined decision and answer to preselected questions."²⁵⁰ Here Nietzsche endorses an innatist point of view, and this innatism is founded largely upon his belief that physical and psychological traits are passed on from generation to generation, thereby determining, to some extent at least, the characteristics and inclinations of every individual. I say "largely" and "to some extent" because Nietzsche's overall position is not unambiguously biological.²⁵¹ Indeed, it seems very doubtful that he would explain the origin of his "great task" of revaluing all values by referring strictly to his lineage, even if we accept the questionable notion that he descended from Polish nobility. Nietzsche sees himself as "a piece of fate" within the whole, and while a certain biological inheritance is necessary for this destiny to be fulfilled, it is certainly not sufficient.

Based on this belief that one is born with a specific set of capacities, Nietzsche suggests that the task of the philosopher and, presumably, the overman, is to "become what you are."²⁵² This is an extraordinarily paradoxical suggestion. It seems to represent a blatant contradiction, for how can one not be what one is? The solution seems to lie in Nietzsche's feeling that the philosopher-overman is a *latent potency*. The seeds of

1953). p.93: "You already know that neither goodness nor intellect alone lead to Us, but the evidence of spirituality is needed."

²⁵⁰ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.162. In relation to his own experience, Nietzsche refers to this "granite" as the "organizing idea" that was "destined to mastery" (*Ecce Homo*, p.850). The selective and directional abilities that he associates with this organizational power are truly amazing: "it begins to command, it leads you slowly back from your deviations and aberrations, it makes ready individual qualities and capacities... gradually it cultivates all the serviceable faculties before it ever whispers a word concerning the dominant task, the "goal," the "purpose," the "meaning" (*ibid.*). This "organizing idea" is at least as mysterious and spiritually significant as any "soul" or "Self" that the traditional religions have proposed!

²⁵¹ A point that is admirably revealed and stress in Kaufmann's *Nietzsche*, Ch.10, pp.284-306, "The Master Race."

²⁵² See, for instance, *Ecce Homo*, p.849.

greatness lie “deep down”, and whether or not they actually come to fruition and blossom is based on many considerations, amongst which are historical and environmental circumstances:

It requires strokes of luck and much that is incalculable if a higher man in whom the solution of a problem lies dormant is to get around to action in time – to “eruption”, one might say. In the average case it does *not* happen. ...²⁵³

Thus, Nietzsche simultaneously endorses innatist and environmental perspectives, and he ultimately suggests that the emergence of the higher man is a synthesis of innate predisposition and external circumstance. This view strikes me as balanced and realistic. There are times when Nietzsche seems to endorse one or the other side of this “nature versus nurture” debate to the *exclusion* of the other, but a close reading of his many references to the subject reveals an overall stance that is basically moderate.²⁵⁴

In the context of the self-conscious attempt to create the overman, the above presuppositions indicate the need for a sustained effort, undertaken over many generations, to bring about the “higher type.” Hence, Nietzsche says

How do men attain great strength and a great task? All the virtues and efficiency of body and soul are acquired laboriously and little by little, through much industry, self-constraint, through... faithful repetition of the same labors, the same renunciations; but there are men who are the heirs and masters of this slowly-acquired manifold treasure of virtue and efficiency.... The acquired and stored-up energies of many generations have not been squandered and dispersed but linked together by a firm ring and by will. In the end there appears a man, a monster of energy who demands a monster of a task.²⁵⁵

²⁵³ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.222. In this same paragraph, Nietzsche refers to “the call that awakens” the individual to their true task, thereby employing yet another religious notion - i.e. “the calling.”

²⁵⁴ Also, we should note how Nietzsche’s conception of relative strength impacts his discussions on this theme in various contexts. The person of great strength, with an abundance of will to power, will be “a self-propelled wheel”, and it will be very difficult for outer circumstances of any kind to hinder their development. Thus, in speaking of himself, Nietzsche says “I am today sufficiently powerful to turn even the most dubious and dangerous things to my own advantage, and thus to grow more powerful” (*Ecce Homo*, p.846). The weaker person will demonstrate no such strength, and their life will be determined by outer circumstances to a far greater extent.

²⁵⁵ *Will To Power*, p.518.

Thus, those who wish to contribute to the emergence of the overman must undertake the dual task of cultivating virtues and passing them on through familial association. The creation of the overman, in other words, requires “discipline and breeding.”

And what are the virtues that need to be cultivated? Nietzsche’s books and writings sing the praises of many qualities, but in *Beyond Good and Evil* he reduces it to four – namely, “courage, insight, sympathy and solitude.”²⁵⁶ Other qualities that Nietzsche repeatedly stresses are honesty, tolerance and a sense of responsibility. Nietzsche offers a distinctive interpretation of each of these virtues. In every case, what makes the quality a virtue is its relationship to Nietzsche’s ultimate criteria of the true, which is absolute becoming, and the good, which is strength. Honesty, for instance, is intimately connected with the recognition of absolute becoming, and courage is related largely to the determination, the strength, to live in accordance with that insight. Similarly, there is a tolerance that issues from strength and one that issues from weakness. The latter occurs when an individual holds false notions of equality. This breeds a tolerance that negates difference, distance and “order of rank.” The former, on the other hand, is based on the comprehensive view of one who sees the necessity of all things within whole, and who “knows how to employ to his advantage what would destroy an average nature.”²⁵⁷ This view of tolerance may also relate to Nietzsche’s inclusion of sympathy as a fundamental virtue, an inclusion that speaks volumes against those who would characterize Nietzsche as a thinker who negates and defiles every “decent feeling” the human soul can experience or express.²⁵⁸ Nietzsche’s view of responsibility revolves around the sensed

²⁵⁶ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.226.

²⁵⁷ *Twilight*, p.103.

²⁵⁸ This charge was leveled against Nietzsche’s philosophy by the editor of the “Bund”, a Swiss publication. Nietzsche refers to it in *ibid.*, p.89.

need to create those values and undertake those activities that will guide the activity of humanity in the future. He has in mind “men of the future who in the present tie the knot and constraint that forces the will of millennia upon *new* tracks”, and who are willing to undertake those “tests that would enable a soul to grow to such a height and force that it would feel the *compulsion* for such tasks.”²⁵⁹ Finally, there is the critical value of solitude. The idea of solitude as a virtue is a bit odd, since we normally think of solitude as an empirical fact, not a normative quality, but Nietzsche associates solitude with the strength to affirm oneself as an individual by separating from “the herd.”²⁶⁰ The man of strength is characterized by an innate purity or cleanliness,²⁶¹ but this is sullied by the noise of the city, the clamor of the market-place and the basic pettiness of the common people.²⁶² Hence, the creator of values must escape from these belittling forces, retiring to the solitude in which one returns to oneself, and becomes what one is.²⁶³ Solitude, for the genuine individual, is an *existential* reality – since what binds most people together is of little concern to him, and the ability to accept this difference and meet its requirements is a positive virtue. The ability to separate from society and live as one’s own authority, one’s own resource, takes strength and courage, guided by a sense of responsibility.

Thus, Nietzsche is certainly not “a moral bugbear.” He embraces many of the values and virtues that religious thinkers and teachers have always promoted, but he reconfigures or re-evaluates them in the light of absolute becoming, and in the name of

²⁵⁹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.117.

²⁶⁰ For an interesting discussion on Nietzsche’s conception of solitude, and its spiritual overtones and connotations, see Peter H. Van Ness, “Nietzsche on Solitude: The Spiritual Discipline of the Godless”, in *Philosophy Today* (Winter, 1988), pp.346-357.

²⁶¹ Thus, in speaking of himself, Nietzsche says that he is “gifted with an utterly uncanny instinct of cleanliness”, and this explains “why social intercourse is no small trial to my patience.” Faced with this “rigid attitude of cleanliness”, which “is the first condition of my existence,” Nietzsche concludes that “I need solitude” (*Ecce Homo*, p.830).

²⁶² See *Zarathustra*, “On the Flies in the Marketplace”, pp.51-54.

greatness. Indeed, while it is true that Nietzsche thinks “high spirituality is incomparable with any kind of solidity and respectability of a merely moral man”, it is also true that:

high spirituality itself exists only as the ultimate product of moral qualities... it is a synthesis of all those states which are attributed to “merely moral” men, after they have been acquired singly through long discipline and exercise, perhaps through whole chains of generations... high spirituality is the spiritualization of justice and of that gracious severity which knows that it is its mission to maintain the *order of rank* in the world, among things themselves, and not only among men.²⁶⁴

This passage draws the curtain back still further on the religious character of Nietzsche’s ideas and goals. Spirituality is his goal, a spirituality that is inseparable from a foundation of strict virtue, and which culminates in individuals of such power that they perform the divine task of maintaining the order of the world, in accordance with specific insights about the total character of reality.²⁶⁵

Thus, the discipline that will produce the overman and justify history revolves around virtue. And if we turn to the activities that Nietzsche recommends as useful in the cultivation of these virtues, we find a direct appropriation of religious practices. Hence, for instance, he says “I want to make asceticism natural again,”²⁶⁶ and he also wishes to reinstate the validity of fasting, monasticism and festival feasts.²⁶⁷ This, in my view, solidifies the religiosity of Nietzsche’s inclinations and ideas to the point of virtual irrefutability. The overman, in the final analysis, or at least the person who wishes to contribute to the creation of the overman, is one who renounces the worldly, while embracing the earthly. He dissociates himself from politics and economics, he is utterly

²⁶³ “solitude – that is, recovery, return to myself...” (*Ecce Homo*, p.830).

²⁶⁴ *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp.147–48.

²⁶⁵ Here, again, we see shades of Nietzsche’s humanistic cognitivism. Great individuals do not merely create an order of rank; instead, they “maintain” it, which implies that they have cognized that such a rank undeniably exists, if we look from a strictly human but totally honest perspective.

²⁶⁶ *Will to Power*, p.483.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.484.

unconcerned with “fame, riches or women,”²⁶⁸ and, having renounced these concerns, he retires to a life of solitude and strict discipline, punctuated by feasts and festivals through which the sanctity of life in a godless setting of absolute becoming is affirmed and celebrated. What could be more patently religious?

The overmen and his forebears – the philosopher of the future, the higher man, and Nietzsche himself – are, in the final analysis, incredibly austere, gentle, gracious figures. They are persons of great sensitivity (easily moved to tears by beautiful music, for instance²⁶⁹), and subtle complexity. It is best if they are “defended” or “protected,”²⁷⁰ for they live in a world of heightened sensitivity, and while this enhances their ability to recognize, appreciate and create beauty, it also renders them susceptible to great pain and suffering.²⁷¹ Still, these protective measures are worthwhile, for the effect of the higher individual on others is quite marvelous. The overman expresses:

the genius of the heart from whose touch everyone walks away richer, not having received grace and surprised, not as blessed and oppressed by alien goods, but richer in himself, newer to himself than before, blown at and sounded out by a thawing wind...²⁷²

The overman is the person who has overcome nihilism, and the result is that such a person represents and demonstrates “one elevated feeling...a single great mood incarnate.”²⁷³ He is the disciple of Dionysius, and the latter is the God of life-affirmation, which culminates in *amor fati*, and which requires no illusions. This, to be sure, is a far-cry from the misguided interpretation that regards Nietzsche’s vision as little more than

²⁶⁸ *Ecce Homo*, p.851.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.847. Nietzsche makes the comment in speaking of himself, but his relationship to the overman is so close – Nietzsche is his harbinger and prophet, like John the Baptist to Jesus - that I think the connection is warranted.

²⁷⁰ See *Will to Power*, p.264.

²⁷¹ *Gay Science*, pp.302-303, “The Danger of the Happiest”, as well as p.251, “Prophetic Human Beings.” In both cases, Nietzsche expressly states that the ability to experience the greatest joys is inseparable from an ability to experience the greatest distress.

²⁷² *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp.233-34.

the bombastic ravings of an egotistical, racist, irreligious lover of violence.²⁷⁴ Nietzsche, like all religious thinkers, is deeply, passionately concerned with the question of meaning and purpose in existence. His idea was to elevate our conception of ourselves in our own eyes – “the noble soul has reverence for itself”²⁷⁵ – so that we would embrace existence. In the final analysis, I think that Nietzsche, if pressed for an explanation of the source of his work, could answer, with his Zarathustra, “I love mankind.”²⁷⁶ These, I think, are important points to emphasize, for no one is more “used and abused” than the religious thinker, and just as we may feel inclined to emphasize that the teachings of Christ and the actions undertaken in his name, such as the Inquisition, do not coincide, so too must we work to rescue Nietzsche from crude, shallow, or incomplete interpretations.

iv. *Summary*

In this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate that Nietzsche offers prescriptions relating to the emergence of the overman. His greatest concern is that people should take up the task of creating this “higher type,” thereby filling their lives with a sense of meaning and purpose. A revaluation of all values, plus a strict regimen of discipline and breeding, will provide the atmosphere and the impetus for the emergence of a type that can live joyously and powerfully in the light of truth, thereby redeeming all the past and giving direction to the future. The religious categories, notions and practices of the past

²⁷³ *Gay Science*, p.288.

²⁷⁴ This, for example, is the position adopted by Paul Roubiczek in his *The Misinterpretation of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1947), Ch. VI, pp.108-137. Meanwhile, Nietzsche declared himself “badly made for enmity”, and suggested that the higher man cannot understand vanity (*Beyond Good and Evil*, p.208). My view is also very different from those who study Nietzsche mainly as an epistemologist – a deconstructionist scholar who developed some interesting theories. Nietzsche is all of that, to be sure, but he is also much more, and I think he would resent being pigeon-holed as an “intellectual”, as opposed to an inspired thinker who dealt in the realm of meaning and purpose. In support of this view, I would offer the section entitled “We Scholars” in *Beyond Good and Evil* (pp.121-141).

²⁷⁵ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.228.

²⁷⁶ *Zarathustra*, p.11.

will not be forsaken. Instead, they will be purified and placed on a new foundation. They will work in the service of the true; they will be the fire that forges a *new* religion, whose reverence is reserved for the earth, whose faith is in the beauty of the whole, and whose emphasis is human strength, creativity and potential.

Conclusion: Nietzsche as Myth-Maker and Exemplar

This chapter deals with criteria e) and f) for the religious thinker: prescriptions or blue-prints of the good life, and the reflection of the teachings in the personal life.

In concluding this study, I would like to emphasize two final factors that qualify Nietzsche as a religious thinker. First, there is his role as myth-maker. All religious thinkers present to the world a portrait, or a blueprint, of the spiritual life. They do this, as we shall see, through the medium of their own lives, but they also employ verbal and written narratives - stories, allegories, poems and parables.²⁷⁷ The primary function of the latter is to convey the trials, tribulations and triumphs of the seeker after the true and the good.²⁷⁸ These instructional devices take many forms: they can be largely visual and metaphorical, such as Plato's allegory of the cave;²⁷⁹ they can be based on the life of specific persons, such as Jesus, Prince Siddhartha, or Arjuna, whose experiences are transformed into spiritual legends;²⁸⁰ or they can take the form of fictional characters, such as John Bunyan's Christian,²⁸¹ whose experiences summarize the quest of actual, human seekers, and the things they discover. A myth, in other words, condenses the

²⁷⁷ Indeed, much of our most colorful, inspired and inspiring writing comes from the religious thinkers of the world, or from people who were moved by such thinkers. Religious thinkers are passionately concerned with meaning and purpose in life, and their powers of communication and expression seem to be imbued with an intuitive, artistic sense which allows them to convey their findings and their teachings in beautiful, evocative forms and terms. Whether it be the poetry of Basho, the aphorisms of Lao Tzu, the dialogues of Plato, the parables of Jesus, or the colorful myths of the ancient civilizations, one is always struck by their vivid simplicity and captivating poignancy.

²⁷⁸ Joseph Campbell divides myths into the "cosmogonic" and the "heroic." In this study, I am discussing only the heroic. I would add a third category, that of the "cosmological," which explains the post-cosmogonic workings of the cosmos. The heroic myth inevitably relates to the others, since the ultimate triumph of the hero, such as Nietzsche's Zarathustra, lies in his or her ability to live in the light of cosmic truths. For Campbell's views, see *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Princeton University Press, Bollingen, 1972).

²⁷⁹ *Republic*, pp. 186-189, Book VII, 514-517b.

²⁸⁰ i.e. the legend of Christ, the legend of Buddha, and the legend of Krishna as contained in *The Bhagavad Gita* (see Juan Mascaro, trans. [New York: Penguin, 1962]).

realizations of the religious thinker, and communicates them in a captivating, metaphorical way.

Nietzsche, in my view, continues this myth-making tradition through the story of Zarathustra, which contains all the hallmarks of the great mythological tale. The protagonist is on a mission of great significance for himself and humanity. His task is to instruct humankind and redeem human existence. On the way, he commits follies,²⁸² travels far and wide,²⁸³ has bizarre dreams and visions which are variously illuminating and terrifying,²⁸⁴ encounters strange entities,²⁸⁵ overcomes great obstacles,²⁸⁶ and, ultimately, emerges victorious in his quest for the true and the good. The story of Zarathustra is couched in vivid imagery and is rife with metaphorical allusions and poetic reveries. The plot, its episodes and narratives, conceal a veritable host of ontological, epistemological and ethical assertions. All this means that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a myth in the grand, classical tradition. It places Nietzsche's teachings of absolute becoming, nihilism, eternal recurrence, will to power and *amor fati*, coupled with his goal of strictly human greatness, in a narrative form, thereby capturing the imagination, as well as the intellect. That is the function of the myth.

One of the most interesting features of Nietzsche's myth is that it roughly parallels the life of Christ as portrayed in the New Testament. Zarathustra appears on the scene as a grown man, aged thirty. Of his past we know virtually nothing, except that he

²⁸¹ See *Pilgrim's Progress*. (New York: New American Library, Signet, 1964).

²⁸² E.g. Zarathustra's abortive attempt to instruct the masses (*Zarathustra*, pp.12-25).

²⁸³ E.g. the Blessed Isles (pp.85-88), the Mount of Olives (pp.172-78), which is another direct reference to the Gospel story (see Matthew 26:30) and the town called "the Pied Cow" (pp.175-78).

²⁸⁴ E.g. "The Child with the Mirror", pp.83-85.

²⁸⁵ E.g. "The Spirit of Gravity" (see "The Vision and the Riddle", pp.155-160).

²⁸⁶ For Zarathustra, the greatest obstacles are Christian pity and nausea. E.g. with regard to the former: "For this is what is hardest: to close the open hand because one loves, and to keep a sense of shame as a giver" (p.83).

has lived for some time as a hermit in the mountains, and, in that time, he has amassed a great body of wisdom. Driven by a desire to share this wisdom, Zarathustra forsakes his solitude and descends into the valley wherein dwell the people. Upon arrival in the nearest town, he offers a sermon whose form is clearly inspired by the beatitudes. Zarathustra presents a series of statements, prefaced by a common introductory phrase – “I love him who...”²⁸⁷ - that serve to summarize his total outlook and his existential/ethical prescriptions. These statements are succinct, picturesque and enigmatic. The masses, however, do not comprehend their inner meaning or their positive significance, and Zarathustra resolves to teach only a small group of disciples.²⁸⁸ Eventually, the protagonist feels the need to leave the latter, and he tells them he will only return after they have denied him and his teachings.²⁸⁹ In the meantime, Zarathustra undergoes deeply significant experiences. He overcomes temptations,²⁹⁰ finds the strength, after a great struggle with self-doubt,²⁹¹ to fulfill his destined utterance of the creed of eternal recurrence, and defeats his arch-enemy, the spirit of gravity.²⁹² In the end, after an event referred to as “The Last Supper,”²⁹³ Zarathustra undergoes a transfiguration and becomes a living example of human potential.²⁹⁴

These incidents all find their correlates in the Gospels. Christ, like Zarathustra, appears as a full-grown man with great insight into the character of the true and the good;

²⁸⁷ *Zarathustra*, pp. 15-16.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.23.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.78.

²⁹⁰ I.e. pity and “nausea.” The latter pertains both to the “herd” and to the teaching of eternal recurrence, which is initially quite difficult to bear..

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, “The stillest Hour”, pp. 145-147.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 157-160.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 284-286.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 324-327: “Thus spoke Zarathustra, and he left his cave, glowing and strong as a morning sun that comes out of dark mountains.”

he immediately offers his “Sermon on the Mount”;²⁹⁵ he gathers a small group of disciples; he overcomes temptations (i.e. Satan in the Desert); he questions his destiny, but ultimately finds the strength to go ahead and fulfill his mission,²⁹⁶ he tells his disciples that he must leave them,²⁹⁷ that they will deny him,²⁹⁸ and that he will return,²⁹⁹ he undergoes a transfiguration and becomes the redeemer of humankind.

These parallels between the story of Zarathustra and that of Jesus Christ are significant when considering Nietzsche as a religious thinker.³⁰⁰ In the first place, they reveal that Nietzsche was greatly preoccupied with the figure of Christ. We have already seen that Nietzsche greatly admired Christ, though he was deeply troubled by what he saw as his shortcomings and failures. These include his desire to direct his teachings at the masses,³⁰¹ and his misguided promulgation of pity. The story of Zarathustra mirrors this relative affirmation of Christ; it retains the basic essence and structure of the Christ myth, while altering it in a way that was concomitant with Nietzsche’s peculiar wisdom. *Zarathustra*, then, is an imaginative re-construction of the Christ-figure and the Christ story, such that it coincides with Nietzsche’s understanding of the true and the good, thereby proving itself pleasing to Nietzsche, rather than distressing or repulsive. Indeed,

²⁹⁵ Matthew 5-7.

²⁹⁶ Matthew 26:39-42 (the Garden of Gethsemane).

²⁹⁷ Matthew 26:24.

²⁹⁸ Matthew 26:34.

²⁹⁹ Matthew 20:18.

³⁰⁰ A critic may suggest that Nietzsche’s employment of New Testament references is strictly ironic, and serves only to highlight the radical differences between his philosophy and that which we find in the Gospels. In responding to this charge, I would suggest that while it cannot be doubted that Nietzsche, when dealing with specific points or doctrines with which he strongly disagrees, uses caricature and mockery as philosophical devices, his connection to Christ and the Christ myth cannot be summarized with reference to such ironic mockery. Nietzsche’s positions are almost always relative, as opposed to absolute. He applies irony insofar as he disagrees, but this does not stop him from indicating and affirming critical points of agreement. This is revealed through his relationship to Christ, which, if am correct, is predominantly positive.

Nietzsche felt that Christ would have been receptive to his wisdom, and may even have discovered it for himself, had he prolonged his life by choosing solitude instead of political activism and religious reform.³⁰² Christ was a “higher man”, but he could have become an overman.

Thus, Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* is a microcosmic expression, or summary, of his entire philosophical method. He is greatly attracted to religious notions, categories and projects, but he feels the need to reconfigure these on the basis of absolute becoming and its many correlates, such as will to power, eternal recurrence and *amor fati*. Nietzsche’s goal is to provide the world with a teaching and a mythology that will be as inspiring as any in the past, but without the “other-worldly” elements that previous religions have always imported, and which he regards as both false and ultimately harmful. His project is to revalue all values, but this is very different from devaluing values. In the course of his revaluation, Nietzsche feels the need to say “no” to many aspects of the typically religious experience and perspective, but he ultimately says “yes” to the broadly religious project, which seeks to affirm meaning and purpose through the effort to unite the true and the good. Nietzsche wants to redeem existence, and, in pursuing this goal, he looks to the life of Christ as a basic, if flawed, model. Thus, unlike many atheistic philosophers, who intend to break with all things religious, Nietzsche connects himself inseparably to the religious figures and traditions of the past, thereby revealing himself as an essentially religious thinker.

³⁰¹ See, for example, *Will to Power*, p.116: “The founder of Christianity had to pay for having directed himself to the lowest class of Jewish society and intelligence. They conceived him in the spirit they understood – it is a real disgrace....”

³⁰² See *Zarathustra*, p.73.

I come now to the final requirement if one is to qualify as a religious thinker. That is, the sensed need to demonstrate one's insights regarding the true and the good through the medium of one's daily life. In Chapter Two of this study, I emphasized Nietzsche's conviction that the genuine philosopher is not content with the production and/or examination of ideas strictly in terms of intellectual or logical coherence; he or she is not "an idler in the garden of knowledge."³⁰³ On the contrary, the Nietzschean philosopher is concerned primarily with life, or existence, and all concepts must ultimately be evaluated against this functional standard: if something enhances life, then it shall be embraced; if it injures, threatens, or degrades life, then it must be relinquished. Nietzsche's great question was whether the truth of absolute becoming could pass this test of utility; he wanted to know "to what extent can truth endure incorporation?"³⁰⁴ What he discovered, much to his delight, was that a positive correlation could in fact be made between the true and the good. Indeed, the person who can live in the light of truth is the strongest, healthiest person, according to Nietzsche, and since the strong is the good, the good life is maximized precisely insofar as one is able to recognize and embrace the truth.

But how did Nietzsche discover that the truth could endure incorporation? It is here that we see how Nietzsche, like all religious thinkers, applies the notion that philosophy must be inseparable from lived experience, for he made his very existence the site of his experiment concerning the incorporation of truth. He unreservedly admits that his philosophy has flowed from his experience, and vice-versa.³⁰⁵ Thus, the large questions of philosophy became personal, passionate problems, as opposed to cold, impersonal, detached observations and/or calculations. Nietzsche regarded himself as "a

³⁰³ *Untimely Meditations*, p.59.

³⁰⁴ *Gay Science*, p.171.

piece of fate;” his “granite of spiritual *fatum*”³⁰⁶ demanded that he pronounce the truth of absolute becoming and experience its implications, including nihilism. Thus, he says, “he that speaks here... has even now lived through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself.”³⁰⁷ Hence, Nietzsche’s philosophy of life-affirmation in a godless setting of absolute becoming is vouchsafed by his personal experience, and not merely by a set of logical inferences. He *experienced* the death of God, nihilism and *amor fati*, and he therefore knew that all three were humanly possible. His philosophy is immediate - what we might call existentially empirical - as opposed to speculative or idealistic. This does not mean that Nietzsche’s thought is completely devoid of speculation and idealism, for this would be a patently false assertion - what is eternal recurrence if not a speculative theory? What is the overman if not an ideal? – but these aspects are themselves grounded in experience. Eternal recurrence is a correlate of absolute becoming, which, according to Nietzsche, is grounded in actual, sensory experience; and the overman is an extension of the life-affirming qualities that Nietzsche identified in certain humans, especially himself. Both, in the final analysis, can be traced back to what Nietzsche himself experienced, which was absolute becoming, nihilism, and, ultimately, *amor fati*.

These reflections clarify the connection between the religious thinker and his or her philosophy, or vision of the true and the good, but the relationship runs even deeper than this. True, the religious thinker uses personal experience as a legitimate foundation for philosophical discussion, but he or she also feels the need to demonstrate

³⁰⁵ See, for example, *Ecce Homo*, p.820.

³⁰⁶ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.162.

³⁰⁷ *Will to Power*, p.3.

understanding through the medium of daily existence. For the religious thinker, life informs philosophy, but philosophy also informs life.

Nietzsche certainly satisfies this criterion, and the personal implications of his philosophy offer strong evidence in favor of its basic religiosity. Nietzsche, in his own words, lives “almost like a complete saint”³⁰⁸ - that is, largely in solitude, and with practically no material possessions. Nietzsche had little or no interest in the machinations of political life or the entertainments of the bazaar. He was poor, yet “never troubled himself about honors, women, or money.”³⁰⁹ He found his greatest delight in the revelry of inspired reflection, as expressed through the written word,³¹⁰ and preferred to be out in nature, as opposed to the big cities. Being thus free from ambition and greed, he lived an exemplary life at the ethical level; he was outwardly harmless, though he associated his ideas and their potential impact with “dynamite.”³¹¹ Nietzsche, in other words, was, as Walter Kaufmann says, an ascetic³¹², a self-proclaimed hermit who embraced the earthly while rejecting the “worldly” with as much finality as any of the sages of history.

This ascetical mode of existence was both a cause and an effect of Nietzsche’s philosophy. The religious thinker is synthetic in their approach to the questions and problems of existence. There is no clear boundary between the personal and the general, between ideas about life and actual experience, between the perception of the true and the manifestation of the good. The religious thinker is the living instantiation of a perspective, and the perspective is the guiding force in his or her existence. Philosophy, for such an individual, is, above all, a practical necessity. Life must have meaning and

³⁰⁸ Letter of January 22, 1879, to Peter Gast. Cited from *Gay Science*, p.110 (footnote).

³⁰⁹ *Ecce Homo*, p.851.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.896-897.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.923.

purpose, not theoretically, but actually, and the religious thinker must discover and express this meaning and purpose in and through his or her own thoughts, words and deeds. This practical union of the true and the good is the integrity of the religious thinker, and is perhaps the essence of the legacy that he or she bequeaths to humanity.

³¹² *Gay Science*, p.258 (footnote).

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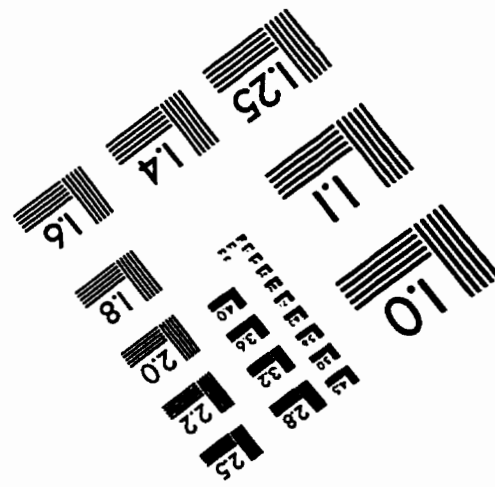
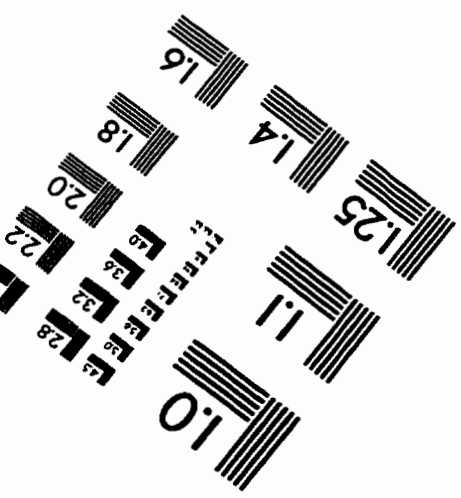
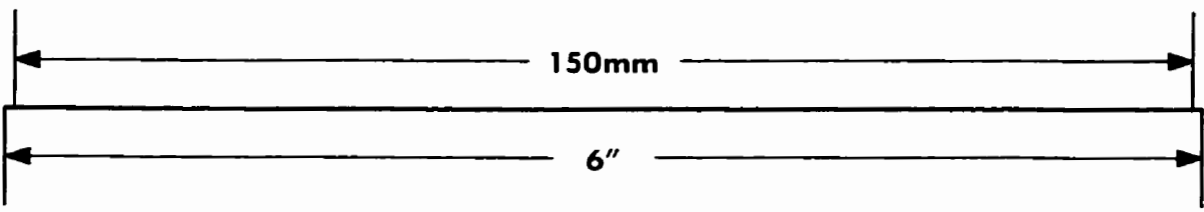
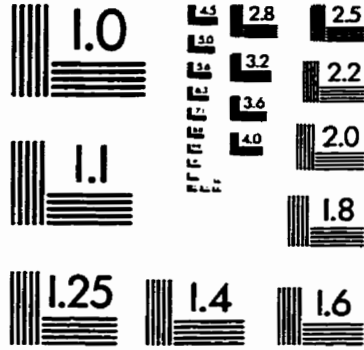
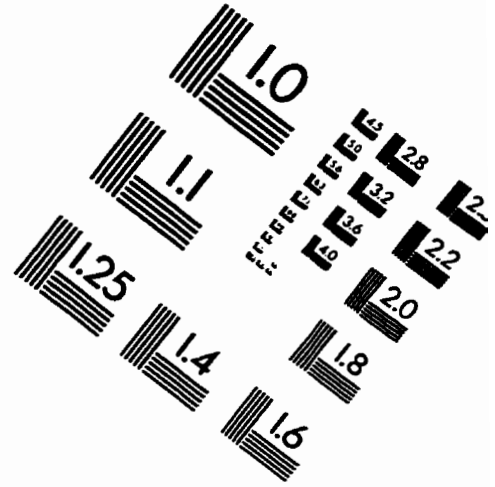
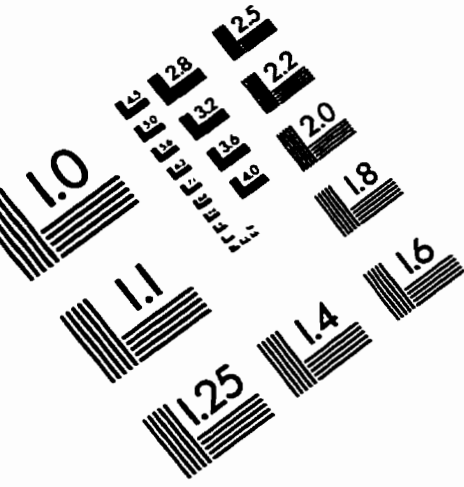
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