

# Who Wrote Nietzsche's Autobiography?\*

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In contemporary discussions of practical reasoning and moral theory, unity of agency receives, at any rate within the analytic tradition, a worshipful deference that ought to be uncharacteristic of philosophy. For instance, it is argued that whenever there is a choice to be made, a unified agent must be on hand, and so arguments about practical reasoning may treat unity of agency as a starting point; or again, a properly assembled agent is unified, and so unity is something that you can demand of an agent in something like the way you can demand of a house that it have no holes in the roof; or yet again, freedom of the will has been analyzed as a form of practical unity, making agential unity an indispensable precondition for what is thought to

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be an indispensable good. And these are gestures at just a few of the more prominent discussions in which unified agency figures these days.<sup>1</sup>

But we can find in Nietzsche's writings a line of criticism that is strong enough to motivate rethinking this cluster of received views about the unified agent—or so I would like to persuade you. I will commence by reconstructing a Nietzschean anthropic argument for his version of unity of agency.<sup>2</sup> I call the argument “Nietzschean” as opposed to “Nietzsche's” for more than one reason; since we will have to get to the deeper one only in due course, here is a stopgap: his writings present Nietzsche himself as a decisive objection to the Nietzschean anthropic argument. After presenting the problem for the argument that Nietzsche saw his own psychology to constitute, I will consider what could serve a disunified agent as a surrogate for practical reasons. I will conclude by suggesting that Nietzsche's surrogate reasons can be seen as an objection to the broadly shared preference for unified over disunified agency.

## 1

Let's begin with Nietzsche's portrait of agential unity and psychological health. To reconstruct it, and the Nietzschean anthropic argument that we will use to trace its contours, I will need first to gloss two related senses of the expression “will to power.”<sup>3</sup> Without now doing textual footwork to substantiate my explication, I suggest that we think about will to power as

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<sup>1</sup>Under the first and second headings, Christine Korsgaard has assembled an ambitious argument to the effect that being a unified agent means being a Kantian practical reasoner, with pieces of the argument distributed throughout Korsgaard, 2008, and Korsgaard, 2009. Frankfurt, 1988, develops a well-known version of the third move, and Bratman, 2006, works up similarly motivated analyses of full-fledged action attribution and of self-government.

<sup>2</sup>The ‘anthropic’ part of the label is meant to highlight structural similarities to the anthropic arguments deployed in cosmology and elsewhere. See Smart, 1987, Barrow and Tipler, 1986, pp. 18, 251ff, and Millgram, 2009, sec. 4.5, for examples; for framing discussion, see Roush, 2003.

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., WP 46/KSA 13:394; AC 14/KSA 6:181. References preceded by KSA are to volume and page of the *Kritische Studienausgabe* (1988), and where possible I also give book and section, using the standard North American Nietzsche Society conventions, to be found on its web site. (So, the first citation above is to *Will to Power*, sec. 46, which appears at KSA vol. 13, p. 394.) Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are those of Walter Kaufmann (1954; 2000; 1974) and R. J. Hollingdale (1996; 1997; 1982), or the both of them jointly (1968).

follows.

*Control* is a concept whose literal use does not nowadays require persons on either end of the relation; let me mention a couple of its more obvious features. (N.B.: I'm not going to try to list necessary and sufficient conditions for its application.) First, control provides a basis for explanation of facts about what is subject to control. For instance, if I control the temperature of the room, you can explain the temperature's being such-and-such, and not otherwise, by adducing my control. Control involves the ability to effect change, and entails at least that there are true contrary-to-fact conditionals about such change being effected. Second, control implies monitoring, and monitoring, in all but the simplest feedback loops, requires memory. If you exercise control over someone by giving him orders, you have to be able to check on whether your orders have been carried out, and to do that, you have to remember what you told him to do.<sup>4</sup>

When you look around the world, you often see what it's convenient to describe as *patterns of control*. I will take as my example the administrative structure of a university, because it is philosophically unmysterious and it will be familiar to many readers. In a university, the office of the president exercises control over the different colleges and schools; the dean of a college exerts control over its departments, centers, and programs; a department's director of undergraduate studies partially controls what courses of study the undergraduate majors adopt. Sometimes these patterns are relatively stable (as is often the case in an institution like a university), and sometimes they are not (as is also often the case with universities). When the pattern of control is reasonably extensive and relatively persistent, we can call it an *organization*.

Sometimes organizations are self-maintaining and self-perpetuating. A university maintains itself by pursuing and appropriating resources: soliciting money from donors and funding agencies, recruiting students, faculty, and so on. It also checks on whether its employees and subsidiary administrative units are executing the policies of the university, monitoring the performance of units within the university by conducting reviews. When an organization is in this way self-maintaining, we will say that it is *homeostatic*.

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<sup>4</sup>Etymologically, the word is derived from a special case of such monitoring: verification by duplicate register (Onions *et al.*, 1966). Clark and Dudrick, 2009, notice that what I am calling control is not just a matter of what *does* happen, but in part of what is *supposed* to happen: in an older vocabulary, that the notion straddles the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive.

Sometimes such an organization does not merely maintain itself as it is, but rather grows; here also universities provide familiar examples. Homeostatic and expanding organizations are a form taken by will to power that is of great interest to Nietzsche; the class of such centers of will to power would include, on his view, not just universities, states, companies, NGOs and the like, but individual human beings and (at least some of) their sub-personal parts, as well as other organisms.

Sometimes organizations are governed by priorities; that is, these priorities determine their choices. Nietzsche himself talks about “values,” and, for reasons we’ll come to, I mean “priority” to be somewhat thinner than “value”: “priority,” understood as a functional-role concept, is exhausted by its role in determining choice. For instance, the priorities of a dean’s office might include controlling the budget by reducing overall FTE—a priority, because it could serve as input to a decision, say, to attrit the faculty by ten percent. Call such centers of will to power *priority-guided*.

Now suppose that you are a priority-guided organization, and you stop and ask what your priorities are. Just as this may be something we cannot find out by asking you, it may be something you cannot find out by asking yourself. There is, so far, no reason to suppose that you yourself know what your priorities really are: when we introduced the notion of a priority-guided center of will to power, we said that the priorities direct the choices, but we did not say *how* they do that, and in particular we did not say that awareness of the priorities is a necessary part of the pathway.

Let me use “will to power,” now as the name of a priority rather than for generic patterns of control, to mean this: the importance of maintaining and extending the very priority-guided pattern of control of which it is a priority. Then the first conclusion of the argument we are assembling is that the will to power is your highest priority. That is a dramatic and surprising claim, because on the face of it, different people and more generally different organizations differ in what matters to them and what they pursue, and their own will to power is not often advertised as the most important priority. University mission statements, to stick with our example, typically emphasize teaching, research and service to the community, and while there is a good deal of variation, you will have to look far and wide to find a university (or a competent university administrator) proclaiming its most important mission to be: getting bigger.

But now suppose that your top priority is *not* your own will to power. Then some other priority is—or perhaps your priorities fluctuate in such a

way that we would be disinclined to say that you have a top priority at all. A pattern of control complex enough to be guided by priorities is a very complicated and consequently easily disrupted thing, and its maintenance is highly demanding. (This means that if you are a priority-guided organization, you must also be homeostatic or expanding.) Over the relatively lengthy period you have existed, situations almost inevitably will have arisen in which your priorities were in competition with one another, and in particular, in which the will-to-power priority dictated one decision, and your hypothetical alternative priority dictated another. But since what will to power dictates is just maintaining and extending the pattern of control that constitutes *yourself*, and since by hypothesis will to power is not your highest priority, you must have been making decisions that disrupted and eroded that pattern of control.

The cumulative effect of such decisions must have been the disintegration of the pattern of control that constitutes yourself. But in that case, you cannot now be asking what your priorities are. If you are now well enough organized to ask yourself that question, it will turn out (your most sincere protests notwithstanding) that your top priority is in fact will to power. Nietzsche famously emphasizes anthropic bias for a special case: “*the value of life cannot be estimated. Not by the living, for they are an interested party...not by the dead, for a different reason*” (TI 2.2/KSA 6:68). But the point is more general, as becomes clear when we return to our example. Sometimes universities have to choose between opportunities for expansion and their official self-conception. America’s Ivy Leagues, in the early part of the twentieth century, understood themselves roughly as finishing schools for the offspring of the WASP elite. During and after World War II, enrollment growth and federal research money gave these universities an opportunity to expand rapidly, and faced them with just such a choice. The Ivy League schools responded by changing their self-conceptions so as to allow them to exploit the new opportunities for growth, and, to make a long story short, you can be assured that if a university is here, healthy, and flourishing, then it has a well-entrenched corporate culture which makes such choices in only one way.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Four points need to be registered before proceeding. Firstly, will to power, as a guiding priority, runs together the homeostatic and expansionist attitudes towards the organization that has it, and it might be thought that the argument only establishes that a priority-guided center of will to power must prioritize self-maintenance, but not that it must also be trying to expand. However, there are two things to be said in favor of keeping

There is a way of seeing a university as really *just* being a self-perpetuating pattern of control of the kind we have been discussing, and Nietzsche experiments with the idea that you could see *everything* this way—even what we think of as inanimate physical objects. (This last is a suggestion that has not gotten much uptake, probably for good reason.) I want to indicate how

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both aspects of will to power together. Organizations of this level of complexity do not come into being full-blown, like Athene from the head of Zeus, but bootstrap themselves from smaller and more modest kernels; if augmenting, rather than merely maintaining, the scope of the pattern of control were not part of the organization's highest priority, it would not have come into existence in the first place. Moreover, it is very unusual that merely attempting to maintain a steady state succeeds in doing even that; normally, trying to grow is necessary even to so much as stay as you are. (It's interesting to speculate as to why this is so: perhaps, since downs are inevitable now and then, you need to be aiming for the ups that will even them out; perhaps it is that the steady state is a much narrower target than growth, and so harder to hit. And perhaps it is that control is in many circumstances a positional good.) Nietzsche often complains about supposing that life aims at self-preservation rather than will to power (Richardson, 2004, pp. 18 and esp. n 26, lists relevant passages), and I expect that we have just put part of an explanation for the complaint in place.

Secondly, it is important not to confuse this argument with an appeal to natural selection. The argument operates at the level of the individual organization; Darwinian selection requires replicators. The argument does not invoke anything like populations that reproduce themselves, or the evolutionary history of organisms (or organizations) of a given kind, though it is of course compatible with explanations that turn on natural selection. Here I am disagreeing with Richardson, 2004, as to what is at the bottom of Nietzsche's views: *pace* his "no other way" remark at p. 51, not all selection is Darwinian selection, and in particular anthropic selection is not.

Third, notice incidentally that, in the case of a human being, we should not assume that the pattern of control that constitutes it is coterminous with its body. An expanding human being, in this sense, is not the character in David Foster Wallace's *The Broom of the System*, who intends literally to incorporate the universe, by eating it; accordingly, it is possible in special cases for human beings to augment their will to power by sacrificing their lives. When Nietzsche's prophet recommends "free death," we should read him with that in mind (Z I:21/KSA 4:93; Battin, 1992, reminds us that the expression does not yet have a satisfactory English equivalent).

Finally for now, you might think that priority-guided organizations are likely to persist because they have top priorities that are not will to power, but whose pursuit requires continued existence as a means. However, we can now see that if, realistically, one often achieves continued existence only by prioritizing will to power, and if will to power typically trades off at the margin with most other priorities, the apparent counterexamples we are now considering will tend to be ineffective over the long run, and will tend not to endure. Aiming merely at continued existence, rather than at will to power, is only too likely to put one in the position of being able to manage neither the continued existence, nor the further priority to which it was a means.

the argument we have just given can be pushed one step further in order to solve a persistent problem in Nietzsche exegesis: that on the one hand Nietzsche seems to endorse a metaphysics of will to power, while on the other he presents himself as a thoroughgoing perspectivist. There are indefinitely many ways to parse the world, and a perspective that renders its contents as patterns of control is no more than one of them.

Perspectives are (among other things) ways of simplifying what one takes the world to be like in a way that makes representation cognitively tractable.<sup>6</sup> Assume that you will be able to address your priorities more effectively if you see your world in terms of those priorities: someone who is trying to add to his butterfly collection will do better at it if the concept *butterfly* is part of his conceptual apparatus, if he is able to recognize butterflies, and if what he notices, when there are butterflies present, are the butterflies, rather than anything else. Then, given that your highest priority is will to power, you will do better to have a will-to-power rendering of your world. Such a rendering might be a will-to-power *metaphysics* (as in: “*This world is will to power—and nothing besides!*” [WP 1067/KSA 11:611]), or it might be somewhat less dramatic than that: A dean will do better at growing his piece of the university if he sees departments as repositories of lines, alumni as potential donors, changes in academic fashion as opportunities for starting up new programs. . . and all of these as features of or ways to change what I understand is now called the org chart.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, Nietzsche does not think

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<sup>6</sup>See, e.g., BGE 11, 21/KSA 5:24f, 35f (on the synthetic a priori and the concepts of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’), GS 111f, 121/KSA 3:471f, 477f (on logic, the geometrical perception of space, etc., as such cognitive optimizations—but see Poellner, 1995, pp. 193–195, for incredulity about the extent to which Nietzsche takes such simplifications to be responsible for the world as we encounter it). This gives us a quick way of resisting the mistaken but very common assimilation of perspectivism to garden-variety relativism. A relativism marks claims as true-in-\_\_\_\_, or true-for-\_\_\_\_, whereas Nietzsche thinks of the drastic simplifications that go to make up a perspective as *falsehoods*. Moreover, there is no self-contradiction in advancing, as an approximation or oversimplification, the claim that we think using approximations and oversimplifications. Consequently, the concern as to whether his alleged relativism is self-refuting, which appears repeatedly in the Nietzsche literature, should be treated as a symptom of inattentiveness to the text.

<sup>7</sup>Obviously, the program of maintaining and extending the pattern of control that constitutes oneself does not actually amount to a guiding aim or a directive unless one can also tell what would count as a continuation or extension of the relevant pattern of control. (Compare Richardson, 1996, p. 39; during the twentieth century, Goodman, 1979, and related work, heightened philosophical awareness of the problems that come with the notion of “same pattern,” but Nietzsche himself was likely to have been less edgy

that the assumption I just asked you for is always, or even nearly always, true. Christian ascetics, he holds, have will to power as their highest priority, but they cannot afford to be aware of this, and they cannot afford to see the world from the will-to-power perspective. But when it is true, the will-to-power perspective will generally be, while not more than a perspective, nonetheless the perspective of choice.<sup>8</sup>

To reiterate, I want to attribute the argument I have just outlined to Nietzsche in only the thinnest sense. It is assembled out of Nietzschean materials, and I am fairly certain that the argument occurred to him. But I am about to claim that he did not endorse it, because he himself had to live through one of its biggest bugs.<sup>9</sup>

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about this family of concerns.) So there must be additional content to the conception of will to power that guides an organization. One sample such conception—just so that we have a sense of what these patterns can come to in practice—is the view attributed to Nietzsche by Nehamas (1985; 1988), on which a self is roughly the protagonist in a narrative, archetypally, the central character of a nineteenth-century novel. To maintain a self of this sort is to stay in character, that is, to act (but not just to act, because not everything that constitutes a character is an action) in a way that is consistent with one’s character. Notice that staying in character does not necessarily mean taking the character for granted, as opposed to exploring it, deepening it, and bringing out hitherto unexpected aspects of it; thus this notion of *same pattern* has some flexibility to it, which for this application is a desideratum. However, below I will briefly explain why we should not follow Nehamas in treating the implicit protagonist of Nietzsche’s own texts as a highly coherent and highly consistent character of this sort.

<sup>8</sup>The point gives us a low-key explanation for what might seem like an implausible Nietzschean doctrine, that a thing is the “sum of its effects” (WP 551/KSA 13:275). It is implausible if it is construed, with Nehamas (1985, ch. 3), as committing Nietzsche to a modally flat understanding of our world; when we cannot distinguish, roughly, essential from accidental properties, we lose the wherewithal to talk about change, and that is an intellectual competence that neither we nor Nietzsche are equipped to bypass. However, the imposition or construction of a perspective is in large part a matter of what one pays attention to, and what one ignores. Control exhibits itself in effects, and so if you are interested solely in control, when you think about an object, you are thinking pretty much solely about achieving effects. So if you are occupying the privileged will to power perspective, any feature of an object that is not exhausted by its effects is cognitively irrelevant to you, and can be ignored. To revert to our ongoing example: perhaps there are features of scholarship—exquisiteness of treatment, say—that don’t make a difference to measures of academic productivity (such as rates of publication, or citation indexes), that don’t affect the national ranking of the author’s department, that don’t make a difference to enrollments, and so on—i.e., features that have, as far as an administrator is concerned, no effects. Then a dean doesn’t need to concern himself with such features as exquisiteness of treatment, and in fact he would be better off simply disregarding them.

<sup>9</sup>Since the argument I have sketched has a number of points of contact with the reading



## 2

The alert reader will have had a complaint pending against the Nietzschean anthropic argument for some time now. Suppose it is true that you would not have come to be the complex and delicate priority-guided organization that you are if (some variant of) will to power had not been your top priority. That does not show that will to power is still your top priority, because priorities shift. While the argument provides a reason—and let’s just allow for now that it’s a convincing reason—to think that a shift away from that priority will eventually prove your undoing, ‘eventually’ can be a long way away. A while back, Yale started making expensive decisions that put its version of intellectual integrity ahead of will to power. But while Yale also went through its share of financial difficulties, it stayed with us; it takes a while to burn through that much accumulated institutional capital. (I understand that Yale is once again aggressively pursuing expansion-oriented policies, and, as far as prioritizing will to power goes, is back on track.) So the argument does not show that your top priority is will to power, because you could be someone who (or some organization which) has abandoned that priority, but has not yet fallen apart.

Now there are many ways to fail to have will to power as your top priority: you could have a different top priority; or you could have various priorities, none of which was ranked first; or you could fall short of having anything that

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in Richardson, 1996, this is a good place to register disagreements. Anthropocentric arguments are naturalized transcendental arguments; Richardson’s own view is that Nietzsche does not adopt his positions on the basis of transcendental arguments (pp. 288f). Richardson and I agree that the will-to-power metaphysics and perspectivism can be understood as compatible by taking each in a suitably modest sense (pp. 288–90); what he means by that, however, differs substantively from the modest renderings I have just sketched. In particular, Richardson holds that “Nietzsche replaces the bivalent notion of truth with a graded hierarchy of perspectives,” where the privileged “epistemic rank” of the will-to-power perspective is a matter of the perspective being, in the first place, “strong [i.e.,] (honest and courageous).” On the reading I have just given, the perspective’s privilege is a matter of serving to advance the priorities one inevitably has. (Richardson, 2004, e.g., pp. 68, 105, 107, 115, 124f, raises the related question of how Nietzsche can think a value privileged, and attributes to him a variant of contemporary informed-desire theory: “these values have their status (‘higher’) from his making them in knowledge of the facts, since this is making them freely”; this seems to me anachronistic, and is not entailed by the argument I have just reconstructed.) Finally, Richardson reads the metaphysics of will to power through the lens of what used to be called process ontology, whereas my own view is that almost none of the arguments depend on this aspect of Nietzsche’s thought.

amounted to *priorities* at all. The label for the way Nietzsche understands himself not to have will to power as a dominant priority is *decadence*, and to introduce the notion I will quote a much quoted passage yet once more:

What is the mark of every *literary decadence*? That life no longer dwells in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, and the page gains life at the expense of the whole—the whole is no longer a whole. But this is the simile of every style of *decadence*: every time, the anarchy of atoms, disintegration of the will. . .<sup>10</sup>

The notion of a priority was introduced in terms of its guiding function within the organization; priorities control the organization's choices, which entails control of the organization's constituent parts. The decadent is someone whose parts (which Nietzsche thinks of as drives) are not effectively controlled; so the decadent is someone who has no priorities because the control structures that priorities presuppose are no longer in place.<sup>11</sup>

Since I mean to treat Nietzsche himself as the most important problem facing the Nietzschean anthropic argument, I propose to use *Ecce Homo* as our point of entry into his complicated and difficult texts. As its title suggests, it is one of Nietzsche's exercises in self-presentation, and his riff on the genre of autobiography; he uses it as a retrospective frame for his other published works.<sup>12</sup> What *Ecce Homo* does is not just *tell* you about

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<sup>10</sup>CW 7/KSA 6:27. Nietzsche gives a number of different characterizations of the term; for instance, an organism can also be described as decadent when it “chooses [which implies that it is capable of choice]. . . what is disadvantageous for it” (AC 6/KSA 6:172). Experiment shows that most of these characterizations of decadence are interderivable, given plausible auxiliary premises, but here our own interest is only in this one version of it.

<sup>11</sup>P. F. Strawson once argued that the notion of a disembodied soul was parasitic on the notion of an embodied soul (1971, pp. 115f), and likewise we may be able to identify decadents only by understanding them as continuations of (or more generally deviations from) priority-guided homeostatic patterns of control—hence the “no longer.”

Nietzsche seems to think of control structures as exhibiting top-down architecture, but notice that this stretch of argument goes through even in the face of models of unified agency which employ distributed control mechanisms. (Thanks to Diane Proudfoot for pressing me on this point.)

<sup>12</sup>The phrase is of course an allusion to John 19:5. I have found that the genre does not always strike readers as obvious; recall, however, that its full range includes not just straight birth-to-death narratives, but such classics as Cardano, 2002.

Nietzsche, but put him on *display*. And that means that what it says cannot simply be taken at face value; we will have to look at what it is showing us as well.<sup>13</sup>

Now Nietzsche does not do anything as straightforward as tell us that he is a decadent. On the contrary, we are given a flurry of pronouncements on the subject which include a number of direct and indirect denials. Let's make a start on a pretty characteristic declaration: "Apart from the fact that I am a decadent, I am also the opposite." (He glosses the remark almost immediately: "As *summa summarum*, I was healthy; as an angle, as a specialty, I was a decadent.")<sup>14</sup> We need to stop and think about how to take assertions of this sort. After all, Nietzsche could be giving us a clear-headed and nuanced assessment of his state; but we would also expect a personality descending into chaos to give us mixed signals which would sound very much like this.

Nietzsche follows this claim with a brief argument that he is the opposite of a decadent; one of his reasons is that he knows how to forget. Given his diagnosis of *ressentiment* as a type of sickness, that might mean merely that he does not hold a grudge. But it also might mean a good deal more than that: the second Essay of the *Genealogy* describes how proto-human animals became full-fledgedly human by coming to have a memory. So the question

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<sup>13</sup>We could treat "Nietzsche" as the name of a literary artifact: the character depicted by *Ecce Homo*, along with the other writings that are, as one says in legalese, incorporated by reference. (This is Nehamas's preferred method of reading.) Or we could identify this character with the flesh-and-blood author, Nietzsche, and treat the presentation as being about and of the once living, breathing individual. Later on I will argue for one of these over the other, but until that point I will develop the argument in a way that does not presuppose either.

<sup>14</sup>EH 1.2/KSA 6:266. A quick sampling of the flurry: In the course of discussing his early essay, "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth," he tells us that "in *all* psychologically decisive places I alone am discussed—and one need not hesitate to put down my name or the word 'Zarathustra' where the text has the word 'Wagner'" (EH BT 4/KSA 6:314; for discussion, see Liébert, 2004, pp. 95–100). In that essay we are given the picture of a character who vividly conforms to the will-to-power characterization we have already seen, and are introduced to "the *ruling idea* of [Wagner's] life—the idea that an incomparable amount of influence, the greatest influence of all in the arts, could be exercised through the theatre." (We are also given his response to it: "Influence, incomparable influence—how? over whom?—that was from now on the question and quest that ceaselessly occupied his head and heart. He wanted to conquer and rule as no artist had done before;" UM 3.8/KSA 1:475.) Elsewhere he takes Wagner to task for being, precisely, a decadent, and admits to his reader at the outset that he is "no less than Wagner, a child of this time; that is, a decadent" (CW P/KSA 6:11).

is what function forgetting has here, and conveniently enough, Nietzsche repeatedly shows us. Let's pick a representative passage; I apologize in advance for its length, but a stretch of text that will allow its author to exhibit an ability to forget will have to be longer than the standard-size quote.<sup>15</sup>

At this point, a large reflection is necessary. One will ask me why on earth I've been relating all these small things which are generally considered matters of complete indifference: I only harm myself, the more so if I am destined to represent great tasks. Answer: these small things—nutrition, place, climate, recreation, the whole casuistry of selfishness—are inconceivably more important than everything one has taken to be important so far. Precisely here one must begin to *relearn*. What mankind has so far considered seriously have not even been realities but mere imaginings—more strictly speaking, *lies* prompted by the bad instincts of sick natures that were harmful in the most profound sense—all these concepts, “God,” “soul,” “virtue,” “sin,” “beyond,” “truth,” “eternal life.”—But the greatness of human nature, its “divinity,” was sought in them. . . All the problems of politics, of social organization, and of education have been falsified through and through because one mistook the most harmful men for great men—because one learned to despise “little” things, which means the basic concerns of life itself. . . Our present culture is ambiguous in the highest degree. . . The German emperor making a pact with the pope, as if the pope were not the representative of deadly hostility to life! . . . What is being built today will no longer stand in three years. — When I measure myself against my *ability*, not to speak of what will come after me, a collapse, a construction without equal, then I more than any other mortal have a claim to the epithet of greatness. When I compare myself with the men who have so far been honored as the *first*, the difference is palpable. I do not even count these so

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<sup>15</sup>EH 2:10/KSA 6:295f; I'm using Kaufmann's translation, with a handful of emendations. Kaufmann leaves a sentence off the beginning, which I've restored. As per usual, he introduces paragraph breaks into the English, but in this case it's important to see that the flow of the passage is not broken up in this way; accordingly, ellipses are Nietzsche's, and do not indicate that I am abridging his text. Finally, and most important, a short passage originally deleted by his sister is reproduced in a footnote, and I have returned it to the position it occupies in the original (and the currently standard German text).

called “first” men among men in general, —for me they are the refuse of humanity, monsters of sickness and vengeful instincts: they are inhuman, disastrous, at bottom incurable, and revenge themselves on life. . . I want to be their opposite: it is my privilege to have the subtlest sensitivity for all signs of healthy instincts. There is no pathological trait in me; even in periods of severe sickness I never became pathological; in vain would one seek for a trait of fanaticism in my character. There is not a moment in my life to which one could point to convict me of a presumptuous and pathetic posture.

To recap the progress of this stretch of Nietzsche’s prose: He starts out in a low key, evenly modulated tone, explaining that his longish discussion of the little things in life has had a philosophical point; those little things are what matters, not the delusory ideas that we associate with religion, or with what Peter Viereck once called metapolitics (1965). Then, with the most minimal transition, we get a brief outburst of *Stammtisch* metapolitics, in a register that is best described as fanatic raving. Then there is a moment of posturing—Nietzsche comparing himself to other ‘first men’—that is both presumptuous and a bit pathetic. And then he tells us, almost immediately, that he never exhibits fanaticism, presumptuousness, or a pathetic posture. No wonder Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche felt that she had to excise the middle of this block of text.

Control, we pointed out, requires memory; here Nietzsche’s capacity for forgetting is exercising itself moment-to-moment, and functioning to paper over blatant inconsistency (both at the level of opinion, and at the level of tone of voice and character). There are many other passages that behave similarly, and one of the puzzles posed by Nietzsche’s writing is that they are so rarely noticed—that he induces the same moment-to-moment lapses of memory in most of his readers.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>*Ecce Homo* was written very near to Nietzsche’s collapse, and one might be tempted to dismiss the erratic tone and so on as a symptom of his illness, thus, not necessarily philosophically important signposting. However, the *Genealogy of Morals* similarly develops an equally elaborate and obviously contrived display of its author’s capacity to forget (for discussion, see Millgram, 2007), and the *Genealogy* is widely, and in my view correctly, regarded as a masterpiece. If sudden swerves like these are a reason to dismiss *Ecce Homo*, they are a reason to dismiss the *Genealogy*, one of the canonical texts of moral philosophy, as well; moreover, recall that it is not all that long since *all* of Nietzsche’s work was dismissed as the product of dementia. So I do not recommend writing off *Ecce Homo*

Why is inconsistency being papered over, rather than rectified? By the time we see the longish passage I have just quoted, Nietzsche has given us an answer: his discussion of climate, reading and eating is organized by the thought that one has to husband a scarce resource: the energy one spends in coping with an unsuitable climate, heavy food and so on. And there is a further type of activity that is just as much, or even more of a drain on the resource in such short supply:

an instinct of self-defense... commands us... *to say No as rarely as possible*. The reason in this is that when defensive expenditures, be they ever so small, become the rule and habit, they entail an extraordinary and entirely superfluous impoverishment. Our *great* expenses are composed of the most frequent small ones. (EH 2.8/KSA 6:291f)

The exercise of control, the effort of maintaining a pattern of control involving consistency of character and of doctrine, is to a great extent the effort of saying *No* to elements that won't fit into a consistent pattern. And that effort is simply too great for Nietzsche (who has just finished telling us that he can handle only one cup of tea in the morning) to make.<sup>17</sup>

At the end of the section from which we extracted our illustration of forgetfulness at work, Nietzsche tells us that his “formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati* [love of fate or destiny]: that one wants nothing to be different” (EH 2.10/KSA 6:297). If we take it that this is what we have just had explained and displayed to us, we can now see that we need to distinguish two very different evaluative foci of Nietzsche's thinking. The will to power, which we have already seen, is a *priority*, by which I mean to say that it guides action and choice, requiring an agent to take steps to maintain and extend the pattern of control that he is, by, in fact, exercising control: by forcing things to fit the pattern, which is to say, by not accepting them as they are. *Amor fati*, accepting things as they are, is a mode of acquiescence, and so is precisely *not* part of the exercise of control, which means that it is not in this sense a priority at all, and not compatible with the demands of

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on these grounds.

<sup>17</sup>Compare Nietzsche on the “strength to discard” (EH 1.2/KSA 6:267)—a strength he claims while taking pains to exhibit his inability to do so. To be sure, there are other reasons for not noticing discontinuities in our personalities, or for that matter our perceptual fields; see, e.g., Dennett, 1991, pp. 355f.

will to power.<sup>18</sup>

A number of influential readings allow the ambiguity present in Nietzsche's notion of 'interpretation' to mask the tension between will to power and *amor fati*.<sup>19</sup> But this is a mistake. One way of doing interpretation—call it *active* interpretation—is an exercise of will to power; recall his gesture at barbarian conquerors imposing social structure on a vanquished mass of humanity at GM 2:17/KSA 5:325. The other—call it *passive* interpretation—is precisely not such an exercise. Actual interpretations are inevitably mixtures of active and passive, but the difference between them is real, and of great practical importance. When an administrator announces a “Faster, Cheaper, Better,” initiative (the slogan adopted by a former NASA head), this could have the effect of changing what the departments, centers, and so on actually *do*—or it could merely mean that the bureaucrats start describing whatever they were doing already as “Faster, Cheaper, Better,” while changing nothing. Decadence is the state in which the exercise of control over one's constitution is no longer possible, and *amor fati* is an evaluative attitude that belongs to decadence: “Accepting oneself as if fated, not wishing oneself ‘different’—that is in such cases [of “Russian fatalism,” the desperate exhaustion of a soldier who finally just lies down in the snow] *great reason* itself” (EH 1.6/KSA 6:272f).

Nietzsche apparently *is* a decadent, and the confusing pronouncements are the way he papers over what as a decadent he is no longer able to render unconfused. The Nietzschean anthropic argument claims that if a priority-guided organization asks what its top priority is, it will turn out that the organization is guided by will to power. Nietzsche is not exactly a counterexample to *that* claim (although we have seen in passing how to come up with what would be an exact counterexample). Rather, he illustrates a related objection: that you might turn out not to be *addressed* by the argument, because you could be asking the question even if you were not guided by

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<sup>18</sup>Formally, the contrast with will to power is striking: *amor fati* is all spin doctoring, all aspect, all desirability characterization, and no guidance. The dramatic contrast between the function and content of these evaluative notions is part of a pattern; Müller-Lauter, 1999, documents a number of similar contrasts, and argues that they are characteristic of Nietzsche's work. That said, there is this connection between will to power and *amor fati*: effective action on the basis of priorities does require that one understand and accept the facts that form the basis for one's judgments of effectiveness.

<sup>19</sup>Probably the most important of these in the analytic tradition is Nehamas, 1985, but in my own view Foucauldian readings of Nietzsche do so as well.

priorities at all. Instead of priorities, Nietzsche has (and let's introduce his own term at this point) a "value," *amor fati*. (Warning: don't let the sound of Nietzsche's word, 'value,' tempt you to import your understanding of the word in other popular or philosophical contexts. This is a technical term, one which we'll be able to explain shortly.) But since *amor fati* does not control behavior in the way that a priority does, what is it doing there? We evidently need to investigate the function of such an attitude in the decadent personality.<sup>20</sup>

### 3

Why go on? Why not commit suicide? Why not just *let go*, let your grip relax, and allow yourself to slide into a slacker's life?

Questions like these have not received a great deal of attention from philosophers in the analytic tradition, but a recent discussion exhibits the approach that comes to it most naturally. Christine Korsgaard has argued

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<sup>20</sup>Anderson, 2009, distinguishes two modes of interpretation that might be deployed in the service of Nietzsche's famous demand, that one will that one's life, and the world as a whole, eternally to recur. On the Compensation Model, you judge that your life is worth reliving, on balance, because the good parts outweigh the bad parts. On the Transfiguration Model, the bad parts are 'transfigured' by your reinterpretation of them, and you judge that your life is worth reliving because each part of it is worth reliving—as when you come to see an excruciatingly embarrassing experience as, in retrospect, hysterically funny. (The example is due to Joseph Jarone.) Anderson argues for attributing the Transfiguration Model to Nietzsche.

We are now in a position to ask when these models can be expected to *work*. Who can decide to live with an ugly, painful, humiliating experience now, in order to have a pleasant or beautiful or sidesplitting experience later? The Compensation Model evidently requires a unified agent, someone who can command his psychic parts to take the hit, and take it because he says so: the drive sentenced to the painful experience (perhaps by being prevented from producing its characteristic mode of activity) is going to have to cooperate. And who can contemplate painful past experiences without being derailed by the responses of the drives that found them most frustrating? Once again, it is the unified will-to-power agent that is able to suppress the unruly drive's reaction to unpleasant memories. Decadent agents, however, must have recourse to the Transfiguration Model: when they decide to go ahead with ugly, painful experiences, those experiences must be rewarding for the drives that undergo them, at the time they undergo them, because if the drive isn't satisfying its aim, it won't chip in, and the agent as a whole can't *make* the drive cooperate. And because decadent agents cannot suppress a drive's reaction to what for the drive counts as past frustration, transfiguration is the only way for such an agent to avoid *ressentiment*.



that action and agency are one's *plight*; you act because *need* to pull yourself together and do one thing or another.<sup>21</sup> Normally I am committed to ongoing courses of action in whose service I must mobilize myself, when the occasion arises: maybe I can't afford to slack off because I'm in the middle of writing an essay on Nietzsche, my cat has to be fed, the laundry has to get done, the exams graded, and vegan chicken soup brought over to a laid-up friend—although Korsgaard herself argues that one's commitment to one's ongoing agency does not depend merely on this sort of contingent commitment to particular objectives.<sup>22</sup> Unity of agency is consequently *reunity* of agency. In something like the way that an animal remains alive in virtue of activities

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<sup>21</sup>As a Kantian moral philosopher who hopes to use the inescapability of agency as an anchor for the moral duties, I imagine that Korsgaard counts it as auspicious that 'plight' and 'Pflicht' are etymological relatives. I reproduce here a few remarks that display the tenor of her view. She reminds us of "the things we say to people when it is time for them to stop dithering and bring deliberation to an end: *Make up your mind*, or even better, *Pull yourself together*." characterizing failure to constitute oneself: "If you have a particularistic will, you are not one person, but a series, a *mere heap*, of unrelated impulses." Motivating the specifically Kantian turn to principle: "a formal principle for balancing our various ends and reasons must be a principle for unifying our agency, since that is so exactly why we need it: so that we are not always tripping over ourselves when we pursue our various projects, so that our agency is not incoherent" (Korsgaard, 2009, pp. 58, 76, 126).

<sup>22</sup>Korsgaard's argument is anchored by the claim that there are no alternatives to unified agency, and there has been some back and forth as to whether she is in a position to rule putative alternatives out (Millgram, 2005, Enoch, 2006, Ferrero, 2009 and Tubert, 2010). The present essay is meant in part as an intervention in this debate; Nietzsche, as he presents himself, is all-too-obviously such an alternative. However, in fairness to Korsgaard, participants in this discussion too often misconstrue her point as turning on the metaphysics of agency, and as bottoming out in a series of interlocking definitions. (Quickly: only agents act; so if you're deciding what to do, you're an agent; so anything that is true of agents must be true of someone who is making a choice.) The objections to her view are right about this much: a series of interlocking definitions, purporting to show that you have no alternative to acting—because nothing you *choose* will *count* as an alternative to action—don't give anyone a reason not to live like a slacker. But the discussion is misconstruing Korsgaard's position, which construes the necessity that sustains an agential constitution as *practical* rather than *metaphysical*.

The apparently entailed regress—every instance of agency is reconstituted from a prior instance of agency—in turn means that Korsgaard still owes an account of how agency originates, which will presumably be a story about bootstrapping. For preliminary ground-clearing by a former student, see Schapiro, 1999. For a critical reconstruction of Korsgaard's argument that your commitment to your agency is not contingent, see Millgram, 2011.

like eating and sleeping, activities which reconstitute it, from day to day, as a living creature, synchronic unity of agency is a product of—is the advancing wavefront of—diachronic unity of agency. That is, when a representative and mainstream analytic philosopher tries to explain your stake in your unified agency, the answers she finds it most natural to offer to questions like “Why go on?” assume that you are *already* an agent.

Now, if you are an agent, the answer to this question will be a *reason*—a practical reason, since this is what agents consume in the course of making decisions, and so with content of a sort that you could express as a sentence.<sup>23</sup> And whatever the merits of Korsgaard’s insistence that your stake in your own agency is not contingent, if the Nietzschean anthropic argument is on the mark, someone who has his act together will not find the question particularly urgent: remember, whatever the actual answer, your top priority already *is* going on. (And this seems to be the grain of truth in what strikes her readers as the wildly implausible claim that an agent *cannot* choose its own disintegration and collapse.)

For the decadent, however, “Why go on?” *is* an urgent question: he is, after all, in the process of falling apart.<sup>24</sup> A useful answer to this question cannot be a traditional practical reason, that is, a reason for a decision addressed to the agent, for the decadent does not have a centralized command post, as it were, that makes effective decisions. The decadent does not exercise much by way of control over his parts, and so an effective answer to the question, one that will keep the components flying in more or less their former configuration, will have to be addressed to the parts severally.

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<sup>23</sup>But not necessarily a proposition, since we don’t know that the sentence would be assertoric: it might be, as Richard Hare thought, an imperative; or it might be something (like an expression of desire or intent) that looks like an assertoric sentence on the surface, but has, as Austin would have pointed out, another function entirely.

<sup>24</sup>Klossowski, 1997, gives such an obscurely continental rendering of Nietzsche’s own sense of the urgency that I’m not sure I’ll be fairly representing it, but as I understand it, it does seem plausible enough. Nietzsche had symptoms that were either syphilis or would have been diagnosed that way, and so Nietzsche knew (or believed) that the spirochetes were eating his mind away from the inside. One day, the thought of the Eternal Return came to him, as an *epiphany*. The obvious explanation for the revelation must have immediately occurred to him: that he was finally going mad. On Klossowski’s view, Nietzsche’s sketches for a cosmological proof of the Eternal Return, along with his abortive plans to go back to school and get a science degree, were driven by the need to convince himself that the Eternal Return might be real science, and not just a symptom of oncoming insanity.

If the parts of a decadent are themselves person-like agents—as they would be, say, in a university bureaucracy—then the answer (or answers, because we should not assume that the same answer will do for each component) might still take the form of a traditional practical reason. But when the parts are not themselves agents, as the parts of human beings ordinarily are not, then a suitable answer must take a form that appropriate parts can consume. Since Nietzsche thinks of himself as made up primarily of drives, we should not assume that the answer he seeks is necessarily to be identified with a well-defined sentence-like content at all. Rather, it will be a *stimulus* to which the drives respond.

Nietzsche’s interest and background in music need to be emphasized at this point. An amateur composer, he published several books on primarily musical subjects, and his other works contain much discussion of musical matters.<sup>25</sup> So it is not surprising that, time and again, we find Nietzsche thinking his way through some problem or other using musical analogies, and now that we have seen that what one offers to the drives by way of a response to the question, “Why go on?” might as well be *music*, we should ask what kind of music would do.

Early engagements with a philosophical problem can be telling precursors to more mature attempts on it, and so a good place to take this query would be Nietzsche’s first book, where he argued that *tragedy* functioned as the ancient Greek answer to “Why go on?”<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, in thinking about available responses to this question, we should expect to find him using tragedy as a model, and in fact, towards the end of the book, Nietzsche considered how one would achieve, in music, the experience produced by tragedy, that “of having to see at the same time that [one] also long[s] to transcend all seeing”:

Quite generally, only music, placed beside the world, can give

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<sup>25</sup>His best known composition is the *Hymn to Life*; for its early publication history, see Schaberg, 1995, pp. 140–149. The books are of course *The Case of Wagner*, *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* (which consists of selections from previous works), *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* (now usually folded into the *Untimely Meditations*, but originally printed as a separate volume), and the *Birth of Tragedy*, whose 1872 title continues: *Out of the Spirit of Music*. His doctrine of the Eternal Return clearly has a musical model; Nietzsche sums it up with a “*da capo*,” i.e., with a bit of musical notation. For general discussion, see Liébert, 2004; see also Perrakis, 2011.

<sup>26</sup>See, e.g., the story of Midas and Silenus at BT 3/KSA 1:35, and the remarks about “metaphysical comfort” at BT 7/KSA 1:56.

us an idea of what is meant by the justification of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. The joy aroused by the tragic myth has the same origin as the joyous sensation of dissonance in music. . . we desire to hear and at the same time long to get beyond all hearing. (BT 24/KSA 1:150, 152)

Nietzsche never abandoned this idea, and dissonance ended up being his way of thinking about one kind of stimulus that would effectively coax his drives forward, once they could no longer be coerced. Shortly after the comparison of tragedy to dissonance, *The Birth of Tragedy* entertains the notion that we could “imagine dissonance become man”. It might not be immediately obvious that this is something we *could* imagine, but *Ecce Homo* unpacks the metaphor, and does its best to show how to do more than just imagine it. The drives—out of which the decadent personality is, to help myself to a nearby pun, composed—are lured onward by the very incoherence that, conveniently enough, is the immediate effect of decadence.<sup>27</sup> The exercise of highlighting and contemplating these inconsistencies of tone, character and doctrine—and of exaggerating them for artistic effect—is a self-conscious contribution that Nietzsche is able to make to his own continued psychological existence.

Identifying this strategy confirms our answer to the question of whether Nietzsche himself was really a decadent: it would make no sense to avail oneself of such devices if one were not. As a decadent, he is riddled through and through with inconsistencies of all sorts, inconsistencies which he is too depleted to eradicate. His interest in his own continued existence—if you like, his will to power—expresses itself in the construction and contemplation of a representation of that very decadence, which turns out, rather neatly, to be one of the very things that will keep his drives in some semblance of order.<sup>28</sup>

Here is the phrase I just quoted, with a bit more of its context:

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<sup>27</sup>We can find Nietzsche expressing related views elsewhere also; he says, for instance, of the opposing demands of sensuality and chastity that “it is precisely such ‘contradictions’ that seduce one to existence” (GM 3.2 [=NCW 7.2]/KSA 5:341).

Perrakis, 2011, p. 53, 143, takes the intended dissonance to have to do with the clash between Dionysian and Apollonian artistic sensibilities, which seems to me to be a reach; but he does go on to attribute to Nietzsche a view that has points of contact with the reading I am developing: that insofar as man is dissonance incarnate, the human animal is infinitely interpretable.

<sup>28</sup>Since drives can have, as far as I can see, arbitrary foci, the decadent’s will to power might be the focus of one of numerous drives—in the terminology recently reappropriated from Freud for discussion of Nietzsche (Katsafanas, forthcoming), its ‘aim.’ Indeed, John

If we could imagine dissonance become man—and what else is man?—this dissonance, to be able to live, would need a splendid illusion that would cover dissonance with a veil of beauty. (BT 25/KSA 1:155)

*Amor fati* shares with dissonance the function of “values” in the psychological economy of decadence—that is, to elicit a response from the drives.<sup>29</sup> (We can now explain the contrast between the two functional concepts we have been developing. Priorities *guide decisions*. Values are *personality glue*.) Dissonance needs to be cut with harmony if it is not just going to be out-and-out discord; the requisite effect, remember, is that one *both* desire to hear, and not to. *Amor fati* is the veil of beauty thrown over the dissonance (or anyway, the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down).

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Dewey argued that this does sometimes happen, attempted to characterize the conditions in which the will to power emerges as the aim of a distinct drive, and suggested that, when it does, it is normally a guise taken by *ressentiment*. (Dewey, 1988, pp. 97–99; the criticism which Dewey is making of Nietzsche is that he has the explanatory order backwards; instead of explaining *ressentiment* as an expression of will to power, he ought to be explaining will to power as an expression of *ressentiment*.)

However, we do not have to assume that the agent does have such a drive. Earlier, I introduced the will-to-power perspective as the metaphysics of the org chart. Now, recall that Nietzsche devotes much of the early stretches of *Beyond Good and Evil* to arguing against atomism, which is in part a matter of treating the items in one’s ontology as lacking internal structure: in the will-to-power metaphysics, when you click on a box in the org chart, it opens up to reveal yet another org chart. . . presumably, all the way down. (BGE 19/KSA 5:31–34 gives us a first-pass sense of what that looks like, when we are considering volition in particular.)

Thus if Nietzsche’s psychological ontology includes drives, we can ask what we see when we look inside a drive, and what holds the drive together; when we do, we recapitulate a variant of the Nietzschean anthropic argument. Drives are extremely complex patterns of control; so complex, indeed, that a recurring scholarly worry has been that drives look too much like intentional agents to be philosophically kosher. If drives themselves have something like governing priorities, those priorities must be centered on or include will to power: here, the priority of extending the scope of control of the drive. So we can also understand the decadent’s interest in his own existence as the expression of one or another of his drives’ will to power. (I’m grateful to Margaret Bowman for helping me out with this point; the view I now think is correct is quite close to that of Richardson, 1996, p. 26.)

<sup>29</sup>Nietzsche objects to the ascetic priest’s insistence on prescribing the same medicine to everyone, so we do not need to suppose that dissonance will work for us, too. His treatment was tailored to his own “physiology”—not all that successfully, since he collapsed while completing and revising *Ecce Homo* itself. (For a description of the collapse, see Hollingdale, 1999, pp. 237–239.)

## 4

The reader will by this point have another objection: doesn't the evidence I have adduced for this interpretation in fact undercut it? Allow that Nietzsche is displaying himself as a decadent. Still, his presentation of his own incoherent character is so artful, so masterful, and so controlled as to belie the overt content of the display. A decadent is someone who cannot control the parts that make him up, but Nietzsche's show of lack of control is so visibly intentional as to amount to precisely the presentation of a character that is in full control. And there is an additional objection that is best considered together with this one. On Nehamas's reading, the Nietzsche we are being presented with is not the 'writer,' the lonely man desperately scribbling away in Swiss and Italian *pensions*, but the 'postulated author': more or less, a character projected by the body of texts, on a par with the narrators of works of fiction. As a matter of method, to read a literary text is to reconstruct the text's postulated author, which means in turn to reconstruct that author's intention in producing such a text.<sup>30</sup> The exercise of reconstruction requires that the implicit author, Nietzsche in this case, be practically coherent and consistent; making the text out to be the product of a coherent intention is delineating a unified agent coordinate with that intention. So to take the Nietzsche presented by his texts to be a decadent, that is, a disunified agent, is on Nehamas's view a methodological blunder.

However, Nietzsche distinguishes the "driving force" of an action from its "directing force:" as when, on a large ship, the engine and current propel the vessel forward, while the helmsman can make only small adjustments in direction (and sometimes, Nietzsche suggests, none at all; GS 360/KSA 3:607f). On the Nietzschean model of the workings of the mind, a decadent's drives may express themselves in bursts of activity, whose occurrence or even general shape the agent as a whole cannot control. The agent's purposes

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<sup>30</sup>Nehamas, 1981, Nehamas, 1987. The primary motivation for the distinction between 'writer' and 'author' seems to have been the desire to avoid committing the so-called Intentional Fallacy (introduced in Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954). The alleged Fallacy comes in two versions: the more obviously mistaken is that of taking what an author meant to say to be what he *did* say; the less obviously mistaken is that of taking biographical considerations of pretty much any kind to be relevant to the interpretation of an author's texts. Because Nehamas's postulated author is a 'regulative ideal,' its intentions do not count as biography, and this allowed Nehamas to sidestep one of the academic McCarthysms of his day. We will shortly consider whether these motivations are in place in a reading of Nietzsche.

or goals, which Nietzsche analogizes to the helmsman, can however make minor adjustments to activities like these, and here it is worth remembering that writing, for Nietzsche, was at least a two-pass activity: his published works are by and large lightly revised selections of raw material produced as journal entries.<sup>31</sup> If I am reading this passage correctly, it tells us how writing produced by a decadent could come to exhibit the distinctive artifice and booby-trapping that we find in Nietzsche's mature works (I mean, the sort of textual construction we saw in the lengthy excerpt from *Ecce Homo*).<sup>32</sup> The appearance of control is managed by layering minor adjustments onto what amounts to an extended blurt, one emitted with hardly any control at all. Evidently, and *pace* the first objection, one does not have to be master of oneself to write masterfully, and one does not have to be in control of oneself to write in a controlled style.

Nietzsche concludes the passage we have just introduced with the pronouncement that “we still need a critique of the concept of ‘purpose’” — which in context amounts to a rejection of the widely shared and roughly Anscombian model of intentional action, on which actions are constructed by selecting subsidiary or component actions on the basis of their suitability for effecting a designated end.<sup>33</sup> Nehamas's postulated author is the agent projected by understanding a text as an Anscombian intentional action. Thus Nehamas's exegetical methodology takes for granted a theory of action that Nietzsche is criticizing. But if Nietzsche's philosophical views are interesting and important enough to justify the effort of interpreting him, we should not proceed by interpreting him in a way that presupposes that those views can

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<sup>31</sup>I'm grateful to Ian Anthony for reminding me of this.

<sup>32</sup>I am borrowing Bernard Williams's remark that Nietzsche's writing is often booby-trapped “not only against recovering theory from it, but, in many cases, against any systematic exegesis that assimilates it to theory” (2006, p. 300). However, if I am right, Williams seems not to have noticed a good many of the traps himself. For instance, when he characterizes Nietzsche as committed to a form of naturalism, he runs roughshod over Nietzsche's Emerson-inflected objections to naturalism as a personal and ethical failing.

<sup>33</sup>Vogler, 2002, is a recent and sophisticated exposition of this sort of view.

be dismissed.<sup>34,35</sup>

Let's proceed, then, to take the Nietzsche we are discussing actually to be the living person that the portrait is *of*, rather than merely a literary artifact. (Again: the literary-artifact Nietzsche does not *need* the delicately drawn, self-undermining portrait of an incoherent personality; it is only in light of its living author's need for it that the elaborate construction makes sense.<sup>36</sup>) Bear in mind, however, that we do not have to suppose that the representation is faithful. Nietzsche was probably not someone whose mental health could be kept up by doses of dissonance; remember, the therapy didn't actually work. Although he is not best thought of as built up out of inadequately regimented drives, when he represents himself that way, he is representing *himself*.

Because the commitments involved in belief and in authorial action require mental unity of various sorts, we can now see that if the representation of Nietzsche we have extracted from his texts is anything like substantively correct, attributing opinions and textual strategies to him is more problematic than I let on at the outset. That means that I need to bracket my earlier attributions retroactively, and raises the difficult question of whether they

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<sup>34</sup>I mentioned above, in note 30, that Nehamas's insistence on the distinction between 'writer' and 'author' is motivated by the need to avoid the Intentional Fallacy. So this is an occasion to make two related points about that motivation.

First, recall that one of Nietzsche's characteristic moves is to interpret religious, moral and other doctrines as symptoms of underlying sickness—that is, to read texts through the biographies of their producers, and often, through their unavowed intentions. Consequently, if you are convinced that the Intentional Fallacy really *is* a fallacy, you should find Nietzsche so thoroughly and persistently wrong-headed as not to be worth your exegetical time and attention. Conversely, if you find that Nietzsche is worth careful and close reading, you had better proceed on the working assumption that the Intentional Fallacy is not a fallacy after all. (I'm very grateful to Carolina Allen for this observation.)

Second, notice that the techniques used for generating a Nehamasian postulated author are parasitic upon the methods used to interpret flesh-and-blood 'writers', and that—as Grice once pointed out (1989)—these methods rely heavily on the intentions of the person producing the text or utterance being interpreted. So interpretive appeals to intentions of actual persons must make sense and be legitimate if the more exotic techniques modelled on them likewise make sense. It is hard to see what grounds—other than a fetishizing of 'literary texts'—could support ruling out the former in favor of the latter.

<sup>35</sup>Scholars have for the most part tried to understand Nietzsche's drives, and Nietzschean valuing, teleologically (as, e.g., Richardson, 2004, pp. 37, 129). If I am right, we need to think of drives as Nietzsche's attempt at an *alternative* to end-directed forms of explanation, rather than an implementation of end-directedness.

<sup>36</sup>For a related point, see Millgram, 2002, p. 177.



have been dispensible shorthand or structural elements of an argument that cannot be reconstructed without them.<sup>37</sup> The question can only be fully addressed once we have worked our way through a great deal more of Nietzsche's writing than it will be possible to be do here, and in the interim, I want only to register a consequence of the view I am advancing for my own exposition. A reader familiar with contemporary Nietzsche scholarship is likely to have the sense that I am underquoting: the norm today is to support exegetical claims with a great deal of indiscriminately cited chapter and verse.<sup>38</sup> If I am right, however, it is normally necessary to determine the role of a passage in its framing text before one can deploy it, and this is normally possible only once one has an account of how that text in particular demands to be read. (A bit of shorthand for this point: in reading Nietzsche, rather as in reading Wittgenstein, you always have to ask *who*—or what—is speaking.) With occasional exceptions that I think are safe, I am appealing to texts about whose circumstances of utterance I also have something to say.

## 5

Let us now return to my initial complaint about the use of the unified agent in contemporary philosophy. The new orthodoxy in moral philosophy is that if you are not a unified agent, then, from a practical point of view, you are not really *there*. (So there is not really anything for an anthropic or transcendental or other action-directing argument to be applied *to*, when we are considering the decadent.<sup>39</sup>) Nietzsche's exercise in autobiography

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<sup>37</sup>For thoughtful discussion of the problem, see MacIntyre, 1990, ch. 2.

<sup>38</sup>Scholars typically acknowledge that Nietzsche's stylistic choices ought to complicate the use of his texts, but then go on to write as though those complications could be postponed until after Nietzsche's position has been assembled, and assembled from such indiscriminately cited passages. The announcement, by Reginster, 2006, at pp. 4f, that the book "is confined to an exploration of the substance of Nietzsche's philosophy," is a representative case, not least in that it assumes it to be possible to determine what that substance is *before* resolving the problems posed by Nietzsche's 'style'. (Reginster gestures at his take on those problems: the style is "a deliberate form of esotericism, an effort to conceal the truths [Nietzsche] reveals from those not worthy of them. . . who are not 'entitled' to his insights" (19), but the supporting passages he adduces are produced by authorial personae that do not allow them to be taken at face value.)

<sup>39</sup>I am embarrassed to admit that I once made this move myself (1997, p. 175). It now rings hollow.

convincingly shows this rejoinder to be callous, practically irrelevant and unbelievable. It is callous in that people who are coming apart at the seams often end up on the street; when passersby step over street people as they enter the subway, they treat the street people as though they didn't exist; the rejoinder amounts to ideology that underwrites this kind of shoddy behavior: from the 'practical point of view,' the street people really *don't* exist.<sup>40</sup> But, second, it's no use to tell Nietzsche that since he isn't, properly speaking, an agent, he doesn't, from a practical point of view, exist. That won't make his very difficult, very immediate, and very personal problems any less pressing for him. Finally, the sheer sustained ingenuity of the Nietzsche corpus makes it impossible simply to dismiss its author in the way this rejoinder would like; if he's 'not there,' who wrote all those books?

Nietzsche, the patron saint and poster child of disunity, was not in a position to overlook the fact that disunified agency, disunified apperception, and disunified minds are, for some people, what it is like to be them. Now, a great deal of philosophizing treats the unified self as a dialectical starting point: here you *are*, doing the philosophizing, so we can begin the argument with your transcendental unity of apperception, or with your unified agency, or whatever. But Nietzsche couldn't start with the assumption that he was a unified agent, because he just wasn't one. One lesson to learn from our reconstruction of Nietzsche's predicament, and of his response to it, is that it's time to rethink the idea that the unity of the self is an Archimedean point in philosophy.

Still, Nietzsche pined, loudly and frequently, for the unattainable attractions of unity.<sup>41</sup> Will to power successfully asserting itself struck him as

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<sup>40</sup>And what could be a more definitive condemnation of Kantian moral theory? So Korsgaard attempts a reply: the disunified agent is a defective agent (but still an agent), in something like the way a house with holes in the roof is a defective house, but a house nonetheless (2008, pp. 112f). So far Nietzsche agrees; the decadent is *sick*. But she concludes that the standards we apply to the nondefective item apply to the defective item also. The problem with this strategy is not just that it's obsolete metaphysics: that in the twenty-first century, nothing has a medieval essence determining it to be really a house, rather than, say, a gazebo. It's that if the standards aren't something you can use to guide your behavior, then they're practically irrelevant. There's no point in telling a decadent to buck up, pull himself together, and conform to the standards we apply to fully-functioning agents: he *can't*.

<sup>41</sup>Once we have contrasted the attitudes involved in *amor fati* with those of the will-to-power agent, we can see Nietzsche's preferences on display in the self-mocking attitude he takes towards the former. The posture of *amor fati* has its ridiculous side, which

*health*, and more than anyone else he glorified that rendition of agency, with the yearning of those who have never actually tasted the object of their desire, and so with a passion that has inspired his more callow readers ever since. And here he is still in line with the received attitudes; even when it is allowed that we can fall short of unity, it is taken for granted that this is a bad thing for the agent, that the agent is falling short of the standards to which he should be held, and that this is a defect to be remedied as expeditiously as possible.

But a second lesson to take away from our discussion is that unity of agency is overhyped. There is something it is like to occupy a perspective (in the sense that Nagel famously pointed out there is something it is like to be a bat), but during our brief encounter with the will-to-power perspective, we didn't pause to get a sense of what it *is* like.<sup>42</sup> To help remedy that, here is David Wiggins musing over a representation of the perspective in question.

Two or three years ago, when I went to see some film at the Academy Cinema, the second feature of the evening was a documentary film about creatures fathoms down on the ocean-bottom. When it was over, I turned to my companion and asked, 'What is it about these films that makes one feel so utterly desolate?' Her reply was: 'apart from the fact that so much of the film was about sea monsters eating one another, the unnerving thing was that nothing down there ever seemed to *rest*.' As for play, disinterested curiosity, or merely contemplating, she could have added, these seemed inconceivable.

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Nietzsche goes out of his way to emphasize. He tells us that his painful eye problems, his severe (and he anticipates terminal) illness, his very disintegration (i.e., his decadence) were each, as we would colloquially put it, the best thing that ever happened to him (EH HTH.4/KSA 6:326; EH 1.1/KSA 6:265f). He evidently toyed with insisting that Christianity itself (formerly condemned as nearly two millennia of contemptible lies, self-mortification, and on and on) was justified as a necessary precondition of . . . himself (2000, p. 799/KSA 13:641). And in a section that he did end up trying to replace with a vitriolic diatribe against his closest relatives, he implied that he had chosen the date of his own birth. (The former can be found as Kaufmann's rendering of EH 1.3; the latter in the KSA version of the same section.) Nietzsche had a wonderful ear for style, and it is implausible that he was unaware of just how comic this sounded.

<sup>42</sup>Nagel, 1991. You might think that that there's no need to wonder about it: if Nietzsche is right, this *here* is what it's like to occupy the will-to-power perspective. But that is to assume that one is the sort of creature for whom the Nietzschean anthropic argument goes through, and we have just seen that that assumption is not always allowable.

And the thought the film leads to is this. If we can project upon a form of life nothing but the pursuit of life itself, if we find there. . . no interest in the world considered as lasting longer than the animal in question will need the world to last in order to sustain the animal's own life; then the form of life must be to some considerable extent alien to us.<sup>43</sup>

The world as will to power is a disheartening and uninviting vision, and it is nihilistic: all priorities, and no values. It is not a coincidence that there is more to be said for and about the values that Nietzsche invented as psychological prostheses; just because they are meant to coax the drives onward, they are *attractive*. My own hypothesis is that a number of further famous Nietzschean notions—in particular, the Eternal Return (or Eternal Recurrence) and the Overman—are to be understood as having been produced to occupy the cognitive role of values. I am not going to argue for that now, but on the supposition that the suggestion is correct, I am going to help myself to a recent B movie in order to draw one last conclusion for our exegetical practice.

The protagonist of *Bubba Ho-tep* (Coscarelli, 2004) is a senior citizen who thinks that he is Elvis Presley. We see him marking time in his old age home, living an undignified, passive and disintegrated life. When he comes to believe that he's the only thing standing between the other residents of the old age home and Bubba Ho-tep—the eponymous redneck mummy, returned from the dead to inflict on them a fate too tacky to mention in mixed company—he mobilizes himself. Or rather, he is mobilized by the emotional content of his value, and transformed from a disunified agent into an agent capable of making effective decisions, and of course he defeats the mummy and saves the old-age home.

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<sup>43</sup>Wiggins, 1991, p. 102. The sea monsters seem to be a kind of icon for the world as will to power; here is Michael Walzer, quoting Edmund Wilson's related picture of the international arena: "I think that it is a serious deficiency on the part of historians. . . that they so rarely interest themselves in biological and zoological phenomena. In a recent. . . film showing life at the bottom of the sea, a primitive organism called a sea slug is seen gobbling up small organisms through a large orifice at one end of its body; confronted with another sea slug of only slightly lesser size, it ingurgitates that, too. Now the wars fought by human beings are stimulated as a rule. . . by the same instincts as the voracity of the sea slug" (Walzer, 1992, p. 60). Walzer comments: "There are no doubt wars to which that image might fit, though it is not a terribly useful image with which to approach the Civil War. Nor does it account for our ordinary experience of international society."

The point I want to extract from my summary of this plot line is that, since what a value does is stimulate the drives, it is not necessarily required to be intellectually respectable. The idea that a redneck Egyptian mummy has come back from the dead is just plain silly (indeed, it is there precisely to provide the film with a comic dimension), but as long as it holds someone together as an agent, its suitability for that role is not impugned by its silliness. Neither is it impugned by its untruth: the movie happens to suggest that the character may really be who he thinks he is, and in addition that the mummy is real, but none of this matters for whether defeating the mummy can operate as a value for the person we are being shown. Psychological effectiveness as a value is one thing; other intellectual merits are another.

Within Nietzsche scholarship, the Overman and the Eternal Return have been consistently treated as philosophical *doctrines*. Unsurprisingly, interpreters have worked to reconstruct them by producing one after another highly-articulated theoretical rendering, each fine-tuned to meet objections raised to earlier treatments.<sup>44</sup> (Unsurprisingly: this is what historians of philosophy are after all trained to do, and the approach does work well enough when the figure in question is, say, Immanuel Kant.) However, a person's relatively simpler and relatively unintellectual psychic parts are more likely to be successfully addressed by values that are in soft focus. Values have to be, more or less, inspiring; when there's too much theoretical articulation, they stop being inspiring. If the cognitive function of values is to mobilize the elements of a personality, and if the Overman and the Eternal Return are meant to function as values, then the traditional exegetical approach to these Nietzschean ideas is no doubt a mistake.

## 6

Returning to the problem with which we started, we can see the will-to-power agent and the highly fragmented decadent as the two near-extremes of a spectrum.<sup>45</sup> Because we have a place in our lives both for priorities and for values, most of us probably fall somewhere in the middle of it, and I imagine that

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<sup>44</sup>For treatments of the Eternal Return, see, just for instance, Danto, 1965, p. 212, Clark, 1991, ch. 8, Nehamas, 1985, ch. 5, Reginster, 2006, ch. 5, Hussain, 2007. Older interpretations include Zuboff, 1980, and Soll, 1980.

<sup>45</sup>My own guess is that the extremes can be approached, perhaps quite closely, but not actually occupied. This is obvious enough at the fragmented end of the spectrum, but I think it is also, albeit less obviously, true at the will-to-power end. Imagine an agent that is

that is where most of us want to—or ought to want to—remain. Nonetheless, we should not allow ourselves to be dismissive of personalities positioned towards the fragmented end of the spectrum. Recall that Nietzsche proposes that the right response to nihilism is to invent new values. Although this is a task he officially assigns to “philosophers of the future,” I have just been suggesting that the Eternal Return, the Overman, and *amor fati* are demos; and while they were meant in the first place for Nietzsche’s own consumption, they have proven inspiring to the psyches (and presumably to whatever is the actual counterpart of the Nietzschean drives) of generations of his readers as well. Nietzsche is showing you how it’s done, and he doesn’t do too badly at it. If his own example suggests that inspiring values are best invented by decadents, doesn’t that count, all on its own, as a weighty recommendation for the disunified self?

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fully governed by a dominant drive. When we open up the drive—in our earlier metaphor, when we click on that box in the org chart—we will either find structure that is in turn fully governed by one of its components, or we will find disorganization and disunity. If we find the latter, we must expect the control of the drive to lapse sooner rather than later, and in any case, we have identified a residuum of decadence that prevents us from assigning this agent to the endpoint of the spectrum. But if we find the former, we can open up that governing component as well. . . and now it is obvious that we are embarked on a downward regress.

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