

“HOW ONE BECOMES WHAT ONE IS”\*

Alexander Nehamas

People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void, of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past.

Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

**B**eing and becoming, according to Nietzsche, are not at all related as we commonly suppose. “Becoming,” he writes, “must be explained without recourse to final intentions. . . . Becoming does not aim at a final state, does not flow into ‘being’.”<sup>1</sup> One of his many criticisms of philosophers (“humans have always been philosophers”) is that they have turned away from what changes and have only tried to understand what is: “But since nothing *is*, all that was left to the philosopher as his ‘world’ was the imaginary.”<sup>2</sup> His thinking is informed by his opposition to the very idea of a distinction between appearance and reality.<sup>3</sup> In

---

\*An early version of this essay was prepared for the Chapel Hill Philosophy Colloquium in October, 1981. Richard Schacht's comments on that occasion, along with those of other friends and colleagues at other institutions, led to numerous improvements. The assistance of the readers of *The Philosophical Review* was also very valuable.

<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (KGW), ed. by Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967 onward), VIII 2, p. 277. English translation in *The Will to Power* (WP), by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Press, 1968), sec. 708.

<sup>2</sup>KGW, VIII 2, p. 252; WP, sec. 570.

<sup>3</sup>It does not, however, reach as far back as *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT), where Nietzsche writes that “the contrast between this real truth of nature and the lie of culture that poses as if it were the only reality is similar to that between the eternal core of things, the thing-in-itself, and the whole world of appearances” (sec. 19; KGW, III 1, pp. 54–55). English translation by Walter Kaufmann in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 61. I am not yet convinced by the otherwise brilliant attempt of Paul de Man to show that the book's rhetoric undermines the distinction its content sets up; cf. *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 79–102.

“How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable,” one of his most widely read passages, he concludes: “The true world—we have abolished. What world remains? The apparent one perhaps? But no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.”<sup>4</sup> The contrast itself is not sensible: “The apparent world and the world invented by a lie—this is the antithesis”; and the pointlessness of the antithesis implies that “no shadow of a right remains to speak here of appearance.”<sup>5</sup>

Nietzsche does not simply attack the distinction between reality or things in themselves on the one hand and appearance or phenomena on the other. He also claims that this distinction is nothing but a projection onto the external world of our unjustified belief that the self is a substance, somehow set over and above its thoughts, desires and actions. Language, he writes,

everywhere . . . sees a doer and doing; it believes in will as *the* cause; it believes in the ego, in the ego as being, in the ego as substance, and it projects this faith in the ego-substance upon all things—only thereby does it first *create* the concept of a “thing” . . . the concept of being follows, and is a derivative of, the concept of ego.<sup>6</sup>

This is, to say the least, a very obscure view. Why should we suppose that a particular construction of the self precedes, and is projected onto, our construction of the external world? Nietzsche should be particularly concerned with this question since he consistently insists on the social nature of consciousness and therefore appears committed to the idea that the concepts of self and object develop in parallel to each other. In *The Gay Science*, for example, Nietzsche offers what for his time may indeed have been “the perhaps extravagant surmise . . . that consciousness has developed only under the pressure of the need for communication” and con-

---

<sup>4</sup>KGW, VI 3, p. 75. English translation, *The Twilight of the Idols (TI)* by Walter Kaufmann in *The Viking Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1954), p. 486.

<sup>5</sup>KGW, VIII 3, p. 111; WP, sec. 461. Cf. KGW, VIII 3, p. 163; WP, sec. 567. Cp., “The antithesis of the apparent world and the true world is reduced to the antithesis ‘world’ and ‘nothing’” (ibid.).

<sup>6</sup>KGW, VI 3, p. 71; TI, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy,” p. 483. Some relevant passages are KGW, VII 1, p. 193; VIII 2, p. 131; VIII 1, pp. 321–322; VIII 2, pp. 47–50; WP, secs. 473, 485, 519, 552.

nects this development with the evolution of language.<sup>7</sup> In *The Will to Power*, to cite just one other instance, he writes that consciousness

is only a means of communication: it is evolved through social intercourse and with the view to the interests of social intercourse—"Inter-course" here understood to include the influences of the outer world and the reactions they compel on our side; also our effect upon the outer world.<sup>8</sup>

What concerns me on this occasion, however, is not Nietzsche's problematic "psychological derivation of the belief in things" itself. Rather, I want to focus on the close analogy he finds to hold between what is true of the world in general and what is true of the self in particular, independently of the question of which is modelled upon which. We have already seen him write that "Becoming . . . does not flow into 'being'." But if this is so, how are we to account for that most haunting of his many haunting philosophical aphorisms, the phrase "How one becomes what one is" (*Wie man wird, was man ist*), which constitutes the subtitle of *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche's intellectual autobiography and, with ironic appropriateness, the last book he ever was to write?<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>KGW, V2, pp. 272–273. English translation by Walter Kaufmann in *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage Press, 1974), sec. 374 (GS).

<sup>8</sup>KGW, VIII 2, pp. 309–310; WP, sec. 524. It might be objected on Nietzsche's behalf that one should take into account his view that only a small part of our thinking is conscious; cf. GS, sec. 354 and KGW, VI 2, pp. 11 (English translation by Walter Kaufmann, *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE), sec. 3, collected in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*). Accordingly, the objection would continue, though *consciousness* develops along with our concepts of the external world, our belief in the ego as "substance" may already be part of our unconscious, "instinctive" thinking. But Nietzsche, it seems to me, thinks of instinctive thinking and acting (which he often considers to be goals to be achieved) as modes which specifically preclude our conscious differentiation between subject and object, doer and deed; cf., for example, KGW, VIII 3, p. 119; WP, sec. 423. Such instinctive action, with its attendant identification of agent and effect, is what Zarathustra has in mind when he urges his disciples to become such "that your self be in your deed as the mother is in her child," KGW, VI 1, p. 119; English translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Z) by Walter Kaufmann in *The Viking Portable Nietzsche*, II 5. The same point is suggested by the important section 213 of BGE, KGW VI 2, pp. 151–152.

<sup>9</sup>Nietzsche began writing *Ecce Homo* (EH) on his forty-fourth birthday, October 15, 1888, and finished it on November 4 of that year. During that

## I

It could be, of course, that the phrase “How one becomes what one is” was simply a very clever piece of language that happened to catch (as well it might have) Nietzsche’s passing fancy. But this is not true. The idea appears elsewhere in *Ecce Homo*,<sup>10</sup> and we can find it present in all the stages of his philosophical career. It appears as early as *Schopenhauer as Educator*, the third of Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*: “The man who would not belong to the mass needs only to cease being comfortable with himself; he should follow his conscience which shouts at him: ‘Be yourself [*sei du selbst*]; you are not really all that which you do, think, and desire now’.”<sup>11</sup> The formulation is simplified to an aphorism in *The Gay Science*: “What does your conscience say?—You must become who you are.”<sup>12</sup> In the same book Nietzsche claims that, in contrast to “moralists,” he and the sort of people with whom he belongs “want to become those we are.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, in the late works, we find Zarathustra saying of himself: “*That is what I am through and through: reeling, reeling in, raising up, raising, a raiser, cultivator, and disciplinarian, who once counseled himself, not for nothing:*

---

time, and before his collapse in January, 1889, he also managed to put together *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* and his *Dionysos-Dithyramben*, but both works consisted of pieces already published elsewhere and involved no new writing.

<sup>10</sup>KGW, VI 3, pp. 291, 317–319. See Walter Kaufmann’s translation in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, pp. 709–710, 737–738. R. J. Hollingdale gives some background material in his introduction to his own translation of the work (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 14–15.

<sup>11</sup>KGW, III 1, p. 334. Quoted from Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, fourth edition, 1974), p. 158. Nietzsche had been fascinated by this idea since at least 1867, as a letter of his to Rhode indicates. He derived it from Pindar’s Second Pythian Ode, line 73: *genoï’hoios essi mathōn*, having dropped, along with the last word, Pindar’s reference to learning and knowledge, and his probable reference to the art of kingship. For a recent discussion of this crucial and difficult passage see Erich Thummer, “Die Zweite Pythische Ode Pindars,” *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, 115 (1972), pp. 293–307.

<sup>12</sup>KGW, V 2, p. 197; GS, sec. 270. Kaufmann’s translation, “You shall become the person you are,” misses the imperative force of the German “*Du sollst der werden, der du bist*.” One might also try to use the Biblical “Thou shalt,” which is more appropriate in this context.

<sup>13</sup>KGW V 2, p. 243; GS, sec. 335.

Become who you are! [*werde, der du bist!*]"<sup>14</sup> In short, and as I shall try to show, this aphorism leads us if not to the center at least through the bulk of Nietzsche's thought.

As a consequence, in tracing its significance, we shall have to raise many more questions than we can answer. In addition, we shall be often confronted by the obstacles that commonly face such explorations of Nietzsche: on many occasions we shall find our path blocked by ideas that are at least seemingly inconsistent with our aphorism; and, just as we manage to interpret them appropriately, we shall find him denying them in directions that take us even farther afield.

We have already remarked on the problem posed for our aphorism by Nietzsche's view of the relation between becoming and being. But the interpretation of the phrase "Become who you are" is also made difficult by Nietzsche's vehement conviction that the very idea of the self as subject is itself an invention, that there is no such thing as the self. As he writes, for example, in *On the Genealogy of Morals*,

there is no such substratum; there is no "being" behind doing, effecting, becoming; "the doer" is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything. The popular mind in fact doubles the deed; when it sees the lightning flash, it is the deed of a deed: it posits the same event first as cause and then a second time as its effect.<sup>15</sup>

In reducing the agent self to the totality of its actions, Nietzsche is applying his doctrine of the will to power, part of which consists in a general identification of every object in the world with the sum of its effects on every other thing.<sup>16</sup> This immediately raises the question of how we can determine which actions to group together as

---

<sup>14</sup>KGW VI 1, p. 293; Z IV 1.

<sup>15</sup>KGW VI 2, p. 293. English translation by Walter Kaufmann in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, I. 13. This idea informs *The Twilight of the Idols*, and appears in many of the notes collected in *The Will to Power*, where it is often discussed in connection with the image of the lightning; cf. secs. 481–492, 531, 548–549, 551–552, 631–634.

<sup>16</sup>Cf., for example, WP, secs. 553–569, most notes dating between 1885 and 1888. I have discussed this issue (though much remains to be said about it still) in "The Eternal Recurrence," *Philosophical Review* 89 (1980), pp. 331–356.

belonging to one self, the question of *whose* deed is the deed that is “everything.” But even before we can turn to that, we are stopped by the following passage from *The Will to Power*:

The “spirit,” something that thinks—this conception is a second derivative of that false introspection which believes in “thinking”: first an act is imagined which simply does not occur, “thinking,” and secondly a subject-substratum in which every act of thinking, and nothing else, has its origin: that is to say, *both the deed and the doer are fictions*.<sup>17</sup>

Let us leave this further twist for later consideration. What we must do now is to see Nietzsche’s original reduction of each subject to a set of actions in the context of his denial of the distinction between appearance and underlying reality: “What is appearance to me now?” he asks in *The Gay Science*; “Certainly not the opposite of some essence: what could I say about any essence except to name the attributes of its appearance!”<sup>18</sup> For this connection immediately blocks an obvious interpretation of the aphorism.

Such an interpretation would proceed along Freudian lines. We could try to identify the self that one is and that one must become with that set of thoughts and desires which, for whatever reason, have been repressed and remain hidden and which constitute the reality of which one’s current self is the appearance. Such a view would allow for the reinterpretation of one’s thoughts and desires as a means to realizing who one is. To that extent, I think, it would be congenial to Nietzsche, who wrote in *The Gay Science*: “There is no trick which enables us to turn a poor virtue into a rich and overflowing one; but we can reinterpret its poverty into a necessity so that it no longer offends us when we see it and we no longer sulk at fate on its account.”<sup>19</sup> This passage raises questions about self-deception which we must also leave aside until later. The point I want to make now is that despite this parallel, the common or “vulgar” Freudian idea that the core of one’s self is always there,

<sup>17</sup>KGW, VIII 2, p. 296; WP, sec. 477. A similar point is made in connection with willing in KGW, VIII 2, p. 296; WP, sec. 668. A further complication is introduced in KGW, VIII 3, pp. 286–287; WP, sec. 675.

<sup>18</sup>KGW, V 2, p. 91; GS, sec. 54. The passage suggests that the distinction between appearance and reality often is motivated by an unwillingness to acknowledge the inconsistency of the object of one’s inquiry.

<sup>19</sup>KGW, V 2, p. 63; GS, sec. 17.

formed to a great extent early on in life and waiting for some sort of liberation, is incompatible not only with Nietzsche's view of the self as fiction, but also with his attitude toward the question of the discovery of truth:

“Truth” is . . . not something there, that might be found or discovered—but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end—introducing truth, as a *processus in infinitum*, an active determining—not a becoming conscious of something that is in itself firm and determined.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup>KGW, VIII 2, p. 49; WP, sec. 552. Nietzsche's approach also disposes of the following objection, raised by J. P. Stern, *A Study of Nietzsche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 116. Stern quotes the statement, “Your true self . . . lies immeasurably above that which you usually take to be your self” from the first paragraph of *Schopenhauer as Educator* (KGW, III 1, p. 334). He then identifies the “usual” self with “the social . . . and therefore inauthentic self” and asks: “But is it not equally possible that ‘your true self’ may lie immeasurably below ‘your usual self’, and that society, its conventions and laws, may mercifully prevent its realization?” But we have seen that Nietzsche does not believe that an asocial self or a self independent of relations to other selves exists and that therefore such a self (depending on one's sympathies) should or should not be repressed. For Nietzsche, there is nothing there to be either repressed or liberated. Cf. Richard Rorty, who, in “Beyond Nietzsche and Marx,” *London Review of Books*, vol. 3, 19/2–4/3 1981, p. 6, writes of “the pre-Nietzschean assumption that man has a true self which ought *not* to be repressed, something which exists *prior* to being shaped by power.”

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I. 4, “On the Despisers of the Body” (KGW VI 1, pp. 35–37), needs to be discussed in this context. Zarathustra here distinguishes between the body, which he identifies with the self (*das Selbst*), and sense and spirit, which he identifies with consciousness (*das Ich*), that which says “I.” He then argues that the body uses consciousness for its own purposes and that even those who turn against their bodies are really following the desires of their own (unconscious) selves. This appears at first sight to recall the Freudian model discussed above. But the similarity does not seem to me to go much further. For though Nietzsche, as he often does, envisages a distinction between consciousness and the unconscious, he associates a stable self precisely with these “despisers of the body”: “Even in your folly and contempt . . . you serve your self . . . your self itself wants to die and turns away from life” exactly because it “is no longer capable of what it would do above all else: to *create beyond itself* . . .” (my italics). Thus the tendency of both the conscious and the unconscious self is, unless it is resisted for the many reasons that Nietzsche discusses in his later writings, to be in a continuous process of change and development.

In fact, Nietzsche goes so far as to write that he wants to “transform the belief ‘it is thus and thus’ into the will ‘it shall become thus and thus’.”<sup>21</sup> In general, he vastly prefers to speak of creating rather than of discovering truth, and exactly the same holds of his attitude toward the self. We have seen him praise, in *The Gay Science*, those who want to become those they are: they are, he continues, “human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who *create* themselves.” Both the hero of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and his disciples are constantly described as “creators”; and the book revolves around the idea of creating one’s own self or (what comes to the same thing) the *Übermensch*. Goethe was one of Nietzsche’s few true heroes; and Nietzsche paid him his highest compliment when he wrote of him that “he created himself.”<sup>22</sup>

Yet, again, we have the inevitable doubling. Despite his attack on the notion that there are antecedently existing things and truths, waiting to be discovered, despite his almost inordinate emphasis on the importance of “creating,” Zarathustra at one point enigmatically says, “Some souls one will never discover, unless one invents them first,”<sup>23</sup> and expresses the same equivocal view when he tells his disciples that “you still want to create the world before which you can kneel.”<sup>24</sup> And though Nietzsche writes that “the axioms of logic . . . are . . . a means for us to *create* reality,” it still remains the case that “rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme that we cannot throw off.”<sup>25</sup> Making and finding, creating and discovering, imposing laws and being constrained by them are involved in a complicated, almost compromising relationship.<sup>26</sup> It

---

<sup>21</sup>KGW VIII 1, p. 36; WP, sec. 593. I discuss some aspects of Nietzsche’s view of truth in “Immanent and Transcendent Perspectivism in Nietzsche,” *Nietzsche-Studien*, 12 (1983), pp. 473–490.

<sup>22</sup>KGW VI 3, p. 145; TI, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” p. 554.

<sup>23</sup>KGW VI 1, p. 47; Z. I. 8.

<sup>24</sup>KGW VI 1, p. 106; Z. II. 2.

<sup>25</sup>KGW VIII 2, p. 53, VIII 1, p. 108; WP, secs. 516, 522.

<sup>26</sup>This ambivalence is reflected in a number of passages of Harold Alderman’s *Nietzsche’s Gift* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1977). For example, Alderman writes that “the Overman is the meaning of the earth . . . and yet we must also *will* that he shall be that meaning . . . [Zarathustra’s “Prologue”] says, in effect, both that something is the case and that we ought to *will* it to be so . . .” (p. 26). Elsewhere, he



seems then that the self, even if it is to be discovered, must first be created. We are therefore faced with the question how that self can be what one is before it comes into being itself, before it is itself something that is. How could (and why should) that be one's proper self, and not some (or any) other? Why not, in particular, one's current self, which at least has over all others the advantage of existing?

Let us stop for a moment to notice that, however equivocal, Nietzsche's emphasis on the self's creation blocks another obvious interpretation of his aphorism. This interpretation would hold that to become what one is would be to actualize all the capacities for which one is inherently suited; it might be inaccurate but not positively misleading to call such an interpretation "Aristotelian."<sup>27</sup> Appealing to actuality and potentiality may account for some of the logical peculiarities of Nietzsche's phrase, since one (actually) is not what one (potentially) is. But this view faces two difficulties. The first is that if one actualizes one's capacities, one *has* become what one is; becoming has now ceased, it has "flowed into being" just in the sense that we have seen Nietzsche deny that this is possible. The second is that construing becoming as realizing inherent capacities makes the creation of the self be more like the uncovering of what is already there. Yet Nietzsche seems to be trying to undermine precisely the idea that there are antecedently existing possibilities grounded in the nature of things, even though (as on the view we are considering) we may not know in advance what they are. The problem therefore remains of explaining how a self that truly must be created and that does not appear in any way to exist can be considered as that which an individual is. Nietzsche's view, to which we keep returning, that becoming does not aim at a final state,

---

describes the section "On the Three Metamorphoses" as "Nietzsche's statement of the conditions under which we may create—which is to say encounter—ourselves . . ." (p. 35). Alderman does not discuss this problem explicitly, though at one point he writes that "to be oneself one must know one's limits; only thereby can one grow to meet—one's limits" (p. 126), which, in my opinion, places too much emphasis on the discovery-side of the distinction Nietzsche may be trying to undermine. Cf. KGW VII 2, p. 134; WP, sec. 495; and EH, pp. 709–710.

<sup>27</sup>Such an interpretation, along more individualistic lines, is implicitly accepted by Alderman in the last of the quotations in the preceding footnote.

constitutes yet another obstacle on our way. He holds that constant change characterizes the world at large: "If the motion of the world aimed at a final state, that state would have been reached. The sole fundamental fact, however, is that it does not aim at a final state. . . ." <sup>28</sup>And he holds that the same is also true of each individual. In *The Gay Science*, for example, he praises brief habits, which he describes as "an inestimable means for getting to know *many* things and states." <sup>29</sup> Later on in the same book he uses a magnificent simile involving will and wave, expressing his faith in the inevitability (and the ultimate value) of continual change and renewal:

How greedily this wave approaches, as if it were after something! How it crawls with terrifying haste into the inmost nooks of this labyrinthine cliff! It seems that something of value, high value, must be hidden there.—And now it comes back, a little more slowly but still quite white with excitement; is it disappointed? Has it found what it looked for? Does it pretend to be disappointed?—But already another wave is approaching, still more greedily and savagely than the first, and its soul, too, seems to be full of secrets and the last to dig up treasures. Thus live waves—thus live we who will—more I shall not say. <sup>30</sup>

The idea of constant change is one of the central conceptions of *This Spoke Zarathustra*, where Nietzsche writes:

All the permanent—that is only a parable. And the poets lie too much. . . . It is of time and becoming that the best parables should speak: let them be a praise and a justification of all impermanence . . . there must be much bitter dying in your life, you creators. Thus are you advocates and justifiers of all impermanence. To be the child who is newly born, the creator must also want to be the mother who gives birth. . . . <sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup>KGW, VIII 2, p. 277; WP, sec. 708. This idea appears again and again in Nietzsche's notes: cf., among many others, KGW, VIII 2, p. 201; WP, sec. 639: "That the world is not striving toward a stable condition is the only thing that has been proved."

<sup>29</sup>KGW, V 2, p. 215; GS, sec. 295.

<sup>30</sup>KGW, V 2, p. 226; GS, sec. 310.

<sup>31</sup>KGW, VI 1, pp. 106–107; Z. II. 2.

But if Nietzsche, as such passages suggest, advocates continual and interminable change, if, indeed, there is only becoming, what possible relation can there be between becoming and being? The most promising way to reach an answer to this question is to turn to an examination of his notion of being. Our hope will be that what Nietzsche understands by “being” may be unusual enough to avoid this apparent contradiction without, at the same time, lapsing into total eccentricity.

## II

The first glimmer of an answer to the questions that have stopped us so far may appear through the final obstacle with which we have to contend. We have already seen that Nietzsche is convinced that the ego, construed as a metaphysical abiding subject, is a fiction. But also, as by now we might expect, he does not believe in the most elementary unity of the person as agent. Paradoxically, however, I think that his shocking and obscure breakdown of the assumed unity of the human personality may be the key to the solution of our problems. It may also be one of Nietzsche’s great contributions to our understanding of the self and to our self-understanding.

Consider the breakdown first. As early as the second volume of *Human, All-Too-Human*, Nietzsche writes that the student of history is “happy, unlike the metaphysicians, to have in himself not one immortal soul but many mortal ones.”<sup>32</sup> *The Gay Science* denies that consciousness constitutes “the unity of the organism.”<sup>33</sup> The hypothesis that Nietzsche is merely denying the abiding of the self over time, as a number of modern philosophers have done, is disproved by the following radical and, for our purposes, crucial statement from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

. . . the belief that regards the soul as something indestructible, eternal, indivisible, as a monad, as an *atomon*: this belief ought to be expelled from science! Between ourselves, it is not at all necessary to

---

<sup>32</sup>KGW, IV 3, p. 22; *Mixed Opinions and Maxims*, sec. 17; my translation.

<sup>33</sup>KGW, V 2, p. 57; GS, sec. 11.

get rid of “the soul” at the same time. . . . But the way is open for new versions and refinements of the soul-hypothesis; and such conceptions as “mortal soul”, and “soul as subjective multiplicity”, and “soul as social structure of the drives and affects” want henceforth to have citizens’ rights in science.<sup>34</sup>

The idea of “the subject as multiplicity” is constantly discussed in *The Will to Power* where, among others, we find the following statement:

The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary; perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects, whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general? A kind of aristocracy of “cells” in which dominion resides? To be sure, an aristocracy of equals, used to ruling jointly and understanding how to command?<sup>35</sup>

This political metaphor for the self (which, despite Nietzsche’s reputation, is at least more egalitarian than Plato’s) can set us in the right direction for understanding the aphorism that concerns us. Nietzsche believes that we are not warranted in assuming *a priori* the unity of every thinking subject: unity in general is an idea of which he is deeply suspicious.<sup>36</sup> As Zarathustra says, “Evil I call it, and misanthropic—all this teaching of the One and the Plenum and the Unmoved and the Sated and the Permanent.”<sup>37</sup> And yet

---

<sup>34</sup>KGW, VI 2, p. 21; BGE, sec. 12. In connection with our earlier discussion, it is important to notice that Nietzsche goes on to say of “the new psychologist,” who accepts such hypotheses, that “precisely thereby he . . . condemns himself to *invention*—and—who knows?—perhaps to discovery.”

<sup>35</sup>KGW, VII 3, p. 382; WP, sec. 490. The passage continues to list as one of Nietzsche’s “hypotheses” a view of “The subject as multiplicity.” In section 561 of *The Will to Power* (KGW, VIII 1, p. 102). Nietzsche writes that all “unity is unity only as organization and cooperation,” and opposes this conception to belief in the “thing,” which, he claims, “was only invented as a foundation for the various attributes.” Unity thus is achieved when the elements of a system are directed toward a common goal, as the political metaphor we are discussing would lead us to expect.

<sup>36</sup>Nietzsche’s attack on the concept of unity, and on other traditional concepts in western philosophy, is well documented by Eugen Fink, *Nietzsches Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960).

<sup>37</sup>KGW, VI 1, p. 106; Z. II. 2.

(need we by now be surprised?) it is also Zarathustra who claims that “this is all my creating and striving, that I create and carry together into One what is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident” and that what he has taught his disciples is “*my* creating and striving, to create and carry together into One what in man is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident.”<sup>38</sup>

Nietzsche’s denial of the unity of the self follows, in my opinion, from his view that the acts of thinking and desiring (to take these as representative of the rest) are indissolubly connected with their contents, which are in turn essentially connected to other thoughts, desires and actions.<sup>39</sup> He holds, first, that the separation of the act from its content is illegitimate: “There is no such thing as ‘willing’,” he writes, “but only a willing *something*: one must not remove the aim from the total condition—as epistemologists do. ‘Willing’ as they understand it is as little a reality as ‘thinking’ is: it is pure fiction.”<sup>40</sup> It is this view, I think, which, in the face of his tremendous and ever-present emphasis on willing, also allows him to make the shockingly but only apparently incompatible statement that “there is no such thing as will.”<sup>41</sup> His position on the nature of thinking is strictly parallel: “‘Thinking’, as epistemologists conceive it, simply does not occur: it is a quite arbitrary fiction, arrived at by selecting one element from the process and eliminating all the rest, an artificial arrangement for the purposes of intelligibility.”<sup>42</sup>

The considerations underlying Nietzsche’s view must have been something like the following. We tend first to isolate the content of each thought and desire from that of all others; each mental act is supposed to intend a distinct mental content, whose nature is independent of the content of all other such acts. My thought that such-and-such is the case is *there* and remains what it is whatever I may come to think in the future: though it may turn out to be false, its significance is given and determined. Having isolated the contents

<sup>38</sup>KGW, VI 1, pp. 165, 244; Z. II. 21, III. 12.

<sup>39</sup>Cf. “The Eternal Recurrence,” pp. 345–348, for some comments relevant to this assertion. Cf. also KGW, VIII 3, pp. 128–130, VIII 1, p. 291; WP, secs. 584, 672.

<sup>40</sup>KGW, VIII 2, p. 296; WP, sec. 668.

<sup>41</sup>KGW, VIII 2, pp. 55–56; WP, sec. 488.

<sup>42</sup>KGW, VIII 2, p. 296; WP, sec. 477; cf. KGW, VIII 3, pp. 252–254; VIII 2, p. 131; VIII 2, pp. 55–56; WP, secs. 479, 485, 488.

of our mental acts from one another, we then separate the content of each act from the act that intends it. My thinking that such-and-such is the case is an episode which is taken to be distinct from what it is about. Having performed those two “abstractions,” we are confronted with a set of similar entities, thoughts, that we then attribute to a subject which, since it performs all these qualitatively identical acts, we can safely assume to be unified.<sup>43</sup>

It seems to me that it is this view that underwrites Nietzsche’s conviction that the deed is a fiction and the doer, “a second derivative.” He appears to believe that we are tempted to take the self, without further thought, as one because we commonly fail to take the contents of our mental acts into account. But for him each “thing” is nothing more, and nothing less, than the sum of all its effects or features. Since it is nothing more than that sum, it is not clear that conflicting sets of features are capable of generating a single thing. But since it is nothing less, when we come to the case of the self, what we must attribute to each subject (what we must use to generate it) is not simply the sum of its mental acts considered in isolation.<sup>44</sup> Rather, we must attribute to it the sum of its acts along with their contents: each subject is constituted not simply by the fact *that* it thinks, wants and acts but also by *what* it thinks, wants and does. And once we admit contents, we also admit conflicts. What we think, want and do is seldom, if ever, a coherent set. Our thoughts contradict one another and contrast with our desires, which are themselves inconsistent and are belied, in turn, by our actions. Thus the unity of the self, which Nietzsche identifies with this set, is seriously undermined. Its unity, he seems to believe, is to be found (if it is to be found at all) in the unity and coherence of the contents of the acts performed by an organism. It is the unity of these effects that gives rise to the unity of the self, and not the other way around.

An immediate difficulty for this view seems to be caused by the

---

<sup>43</sup>*Akrasia* or weakness of will may still be considered as a threat to this assumption even at this point, however.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. KGW, VIII 2, p. 131; WP, sec. 485: “‘The subject’ is the fiction that many similar states in us are the effect of one substratum: but it is we who first created the ‘similarity’ of these states; our adjusting them and making them similar is the fact, not their similarity (—which ought rather to be denied—).”

fact that Nietzsche does not distinguish clearly between unity as coherence on the one hand and unity as numerical identity on the other. For it can be argued that even if the self is not coherent in an appropriate manner, it is still a single thing; in fact, it is only because the self is a single thing that it is at all sensible to be concerned with its unity. Even the idea that we are faced with conflicting, rather than merely with disparate, sets of thoughts and desires seems to depend on the assumption that these are the thoughts and desires of a single person.

We might think that we could avoid this difficulty if we argued that Nietzsche is in fact concerned with coherence and not with identity. But his identification of every thing with a set of effects results precisely in blurring this distinction, and prevents us from giving this answer. For since there is nothing above (or “behind”) such sets of effects, it is not clear that Nietzsche can consistently hold that there is anything to the identity of each object above the unity of a set of effects. We have already seen him write that the subject is a multiplicity: but what is it that enables us to group some multiplicities together to form a subject and to distinguish them from others that constitute a different one?

At this point, the political metaphor for the self to which we have already appealed becomes important. On a very basic level, the identity that is necessary but not sufficient for the unity of the self is provided by the unity of the body. Nietzsche, we should notice, is consistent in holding that, like all unity, the unity of the body is not an absolute fact: “The evidence of the body reveals a tremendous multiplicity.”<sup>45</sup> But this multiplicity is, in most circumstances, organized coherently; the needs and goals of the body are usually not in conflict with one another:

The body and physiology the starting point: why?—we gain the correct idea of the nature of our subject-unity, namely as regents at the head of a communality (not as “souls” or “life forces”), also of the dependence of these regents upon the ruled and of an order of rank and division of labor as the conditions that make possible the whole and its parts.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup>KGW, VIII 1, p. 104; WP, sec. 518.

<sup>46</sup>KGW, VII 3, pp. 370–371; WP, sec. 492.

Zarathustra, I think, makes the same point when he says of the body that it is “a plurality with one sense, a war and a peace, a herd and a shepherd.”<sup>47</sup> Thus the coherence of the body’s organization provides the common ground that allows conflicting mental states to be grouped together as belonging to a single subject. Particular thoughts, desires, actions, and their patterns, that is, character-traits, move the body in different directions, place it in different contexts, and can even be said to vie for its control. Dominant habits and character-traits, while they are dominant, assume the role of the subject; in terms of our metaphor, they assume the role of the leadership. It is such traits that speak with the voice of the self when they are manifested in action. Their own unity is what allows them to become the subject that, at least for a time, says “I.” In the situation we are discussing, however, the leadership is not stable. Since different and often incompatible character-traits coexist in one body, different patterns assume the “regent’s” role at different times. Thus we identify ourselves differently over time; and though the “I” always seems to refer to the same thing, the content of what it refers to does not remain the same, and may constantly be in the process of developing, sometimes toward greater unity.

Such unity, however, which is at best something to be hoped for, certainly cannot be presupposed; phenomena like *akrasia* and self-deception, not to mention everyday inconsistency, raise serious questions about it. In a recent discussion of these phenomena, Amélie Rorty, too, finds a political metaphor for the self illuminating. She urges that we think of the self as a medieval city, with many semi-independent neighborhoods and no strong central administration. She suggests that “we can regard the agent self as a loose configuration of habits, habits of thought and perception and motivation and action, acquired at different stages, in the service of different ends.”<sup>48</sup> The unity of the self, which thus also constitutes

---

<sup>47</sup>KGW, VI 1, pp. 35–37; Z I. 4. A similar point may be made at KGW, VII 2, p. 280; WP, sec. 966: “In contrast to animals, man has cultivated an abundance of *contrary* drives and impulses within himself. . . .”

<sup>48</sup>Amélie Rorty, “Self-Deception, Akrasia and Irrationality,” *Social Science Information*, 19 (1980), p. 920. On a more abstract basis, Robert Nozick tries to account for the self as a “self-synthesizing” entity in his *Philosophical Explanations*, (Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 71–114.



its identity, is not something given, but something acquired; not a beginning, but a goal. And of such unity, which is essentially a matter of degree and which comes close to constituting a regulative principle, Nietzsche is not at all suspicious. It lies behind his earlier positive comments on “the One” and he actively wants to promote it. It is precisely its absence that he deplores when he writes of his contemporaries that “with the characters of the past written all over you, and these characters in turn painted over with new characters: thus have you concealed yourselves perfectly from all interpreters of characters.”<sup>49</sup>

Nietzsche’s view, after all, bears remarkable similarities to Plato’s division of the soul in the *Republic*, which also faces difficulties in locating the agent. Nietzsche, of course, envisages a much more complicated division than Plato’s and does not accept Plato’s view that ultimately there are three (and only three) independent sources of human motivation. In addition, Nietzsche would deny Plato’s preference of reason as the dominant source: what habits and character-traits are to rule is for him an open question, which

---

<sup>49</sup>KGW, VI 1, p. 149; Z. II. 15, a very important section in this connection. Cf. KGW, VI 2, p. 158; BGE, sec. 215, with its allusion to Kant: just as some planets are illuminated by many suns, and of different colors, “so we modern men are determined, thanks to the complicated mechanics of our ‘starry sky’, by different moralities; our actions shine alternately in different colors, they are rarely univocal—and there are cases enough in which we perform actions of *many colors*.”

The passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, with its painterly and literary vocabulary (*vollschreiben, überpinseln, Zeichendeuter*—the last word being more closely connected to the astronomical and astrological imagery of the sentence than Kaufmann’s translation suggests), should be very congenial to deconstructive readers of Nietzsche, who find in his writings an insistence on the total absence of any “originary unity.” A classic statement of the general position can be found in Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), pp. 247–264; but the view has now become very prevalent. It is clear that Nietzsche would agree that the unity in question is not given, and that it cannot be uncovered once all the “coats of paint” are removed: nothing would remain over if that were done. But this agreement need not, and does not, prevent him from wanting to *construct* a unity out of this “motley” (*bunt*) material. I discuss such issues in relation to literary criticism in “The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal,” *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981), pp. 133–149.

does not necessarily receive an answer dictated by moral considerations.

Now the dominant traits can completely disregard their competitors and refuse even to acknowledge their existence: this constitutes a case of self-deception. Or they can acknowledge them, try to bring them in line with their own evaluations, and fail: this constitutes a case of *akrasia*. Or again they could try and manage in some way to incorporate them, changing both their opponents and themselves in the process and thus taking one step toward the integration of the personality which, in the ideal case, constitutes the unity we are pursuing:

No subject “atoms.” The sphere of a subject constantly growing or decreasing, the center of the system constantly shifting: in cases where it cannot organize the appropriate mass, it breaks into two parts. On the other hand, it can transform a weaker subject into its functionary without destroying it, and to a certain extent form a new unity with it. No “substance,” rather something that in itself strives after greater strength, and that wants to “preserve” itself only indirectly (it wants to *surpass* itself—).<sup>50</sup>

This passage makes it clear that at least in some cases where Nietzsche speaks of mastery and power, he is concerned with mastery and power over oneself, with habits and character-traits competing for the domination of a single person. This is one of the reasons why I think that at least the primary (though not necessarily the only) object of the will to power is one’s own self.<sup>51</sup> But

---

<sup>50</sup>KGW, VIII 2, pp. 55–56; WP, sec. 488. Cf. KGW, VIII 1, pp. 320–321; WP, sec. 617.

<sup>51</sup>Contrast Stern, *A Study of Nietzsche*, ch. 7, esp. p. 122 with n. 1. We should remark that such a construal of the will to power, as well as the version of the eternal recurrence presented in this essay, may seem to imply that ultimately no clear distinction can be drawn between the experience of an individual (especially of a sufficiently powerful individual) and the outside world. For the world may appear to be the product of such people’s will to power. Such a solipsist view is also suggested by Nietzsche when he writes, as we have already seen, that Zarathustra’s disciples “want to create the world before which [they] can kneel.” However, as I shall try to show below, Nietzsche also holds that the process of “surpassing” involved here can have no end: there is no such thing as the total transformation of another subject, and there are always more subjects to be (at best partially) transformed. Thus the distinction between one’s experience and

more importantly, in this passage we find the suggestion that, as our metaphor has led us to expect, what says “I” is not the same at all times. We also see that the process of dominating (or, notice, of creating) the individual, the unity that concerns us, is a matter of incorporating more and more character-traits under a constantly expanding and, in the process, evolving rubric. It begins to appear that the distinction between being and becoming may be not quite as absolute as we originally feared.

Nietzsche often criticized the educational practices of his time. In his view, they encouraged people to want to develop in all directions instead of showing them how to fashion themselves, even by eliminating some beliefs and desires, into true individuals.<sup>52</sup> The project of becoming an individual with a unified set of features requires (a favorite term with him) hardness toward oneself: its contrary, “tolerance toward oneself, permits several convictions, and they get along with each other: they are careful, like all the rest of the world, not to compromise themselves.”<sup>53</sup> But though Nietzsche envisages that certain character-traits may have to be eliminated if one is to achieve unity, he does not in any way consider that they are to be disowned. This is a crucial point, for it shows that the unity we are looking for is not a final stage which follows upon others, but the total organization of everything that one thinks, wants and does.

---

the world can always be in principle maintained. In addition, it is not clear that Nietzsche’s specific views on the unity of the self involve a commitment to such possible solipsist consequences of the will to power. They do, however, seem to me to depend on a refusal to identify the world with something like “unconceptualized reality.” The world is given to us only under a description or, as Nietzsche would prefer, an interpretation. Recent expressions of such a view can be found in, among others, Nelson Goodman, “The Way the World Is,” *Problems and Projects* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1972), pp. 24–32, and Hilary Putnam, “Reflections on Goodman’s *Ways of Worldmaking*,” *Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1979), pp. 603–618, esp. 611–612.

<sup>52</sup>KGW, VI 3, pp. 136–137; TI, “Skirmishes,” pp. 545–546.

<sup>53</sup>KGW, VI 3, p. 116; TI, “Skirmishes,” p. 525. The passage continues: “How does one compromise oneself today? If one is consistent. If one proceeds in a straight line. If one is not ambiguous enough to permit five conflicting interpretations. If one is genuine.” Cp. KGW, VI 3, p. 60; TI, “Maxims and Arrows,” p. 473: “The formula of my happiness: a Yes, a No, a straight line, a *goal*.”

It is, in fact, one of Nietzsche's most strongly held views that everything one does is equally essential to who one is. This is another consequence of his reduction of all objects to the sum-total of their effects on the world. He believes that everything that I have ever done has been instrumental to my being who I am today. And even if today there are actions I would not ever repeat, even if there are character-traits I am grateful to have left behind, I would not have my current preferences had I not had those other preferences at an earlier time: "The most recent history of an action relates to this action: but further back lies a pre-history which covers a wider field: the individual action is at the same time a part of a much more extensive, later fact. The briefer and the more extensive processes are not separated."<sup>54</sup>

It begins to seem, then, that Nietzsche has in mind not a final state of being which follows upon and replaces an earlier process of becoming. Rather, he is thinking of a continual process of greater integration of one's character-traits, habits and patterns of interaction with the world. This process can, in a sense, also reach backward and integrate into the personality even a discarded characteristic by showing its necessity for one's later development. The complexity of this process is exhibited in the following passage, which I will have to quote at length:

*One thing is needful.*—To "give style" to one's character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed—both times through long practice and daily work at it. Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime. Much that is vague and resisted shaping has been saved and exploited for distant views; it is meant to beckon toward the far and immeasurable. In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed

---

<sup>54</sup>KGW, VIII 1, p. 285; WP, sec. 672. Cf. KGW, VIII 3, pp. 128–130; WP, sec. 584; and KGW, VI 3, p. 54; TI, "Maxims and Arrows," p. 467: "Not to perpetrate cowardice toward one's own acts! Not to leave them in the lurch afterward! The bite of conscience is indecent!" I discuss these issues in detail in "The Eternal Recurrence."

HOW ONE BECOMES WHAT ONE IS

everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!<sup>55</sup>

Such a conception of personal unity faces a number of difficulties. Foremost among these, as we have already remarked, is the problem of self-deception. For one way to “give style” to one’s character, to constrain it by a single taste, is simply to deny the existence, force, or significance of antithetical tastes and traits, and to consider only part of oneself as the whole. Nietzsche seems to me to be aware of this problem, as is shown by his distinction between the two sorts of people who have faith in themselves. Some, he writes, have it precisely because they refuse to look: “What would they behold if they could see to the bottom of themselves!”; the others have to acquire it, and are faced with it as a problem: “Everything good, fine, or great they do is first of all an argument against the skeptic inside them.”<sup>56</sup> The possibility of self-deception is always there; unity can always be achieved simply by refusing to acknowledge an existing multiplicity.

To be accurate, however, we should not say that unity can be achieved in this way: only the feeling of unity can be secured by this process. One can think that one has completed the arduous task described by the passage we are discussing without having actually succeeded. The distinction can be made because, after all, the notions of style and of character are essentially public. Nietzsche, of course, emphasizes the importance of each individual’s evaluating itself by its own standards. Nevertheless, especially since he does not believe that self-knowledge is in any way privileged, such questions are finally decided from the outside. This outside may consist of a very select public (including oneself), of an audience which perhaps does not yet exist, but the distinction between the feeling and the fact of unity is to be pressed and maintained. Zarathustra taunts the sun when he asks what its happiness would be were it not for those for whom it shines.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, it takes observers for the unity to be manifest and therefore there. At the end of this essay

---

<sup>55</sup>KGW, V 2, p. 210; GS, sec. 290.

<sup>56</sup>KGW, V 2, p. 207; GS, sec. 284, cf. sec. 283; also KGW, VI 1, pp. 173–178; Z. II. 21.

<sup>57</sup>KGW, VI 1, p. 5; Z. “Prologue,” sec. 1.

we will see that these observers may have to be readers—and qualified readers at that.

A clear sign that unity is lacking is what has been called “weakness of will,” *akrasia*, the inability to act on one’s preferred judgement; this is an indication that competing habits, patterns of valuation and modes of perception are at work within the same individual, if one wants to use this term at all at such a stage. Nietzsche, of course, is notorious for his attacks on the notion of the freedom of the will; but he is no less opposed, naturally, to the notion of the compelled or unfree will, which he characterizes as “mythology.” “In real life,” he continues, “it is only a matter of strong and weak wills.”<sup>58</sup> Yet at the same time, as we might also by now expect, Zarathustra can mention and praise occasions “where necessity was freedom itself.”<sup>59</sup> And in *The Twilight of the Idols* we read that “peace of soul” can be either a mind becalmed, an empty self-satisfaction, or, on the contrary, “the expression of maturity and mastery in the midst of doing, creating, working, and willing—calm breathing, *attained* ‘freedom of the will’.”<sup>60</sup>

Freedom of the will so construed is the state in which there is no internal division in a person’s preference-schemes, where desire follows thought and action follows desire with no effort and no struggle, where the distinction between constraint and choice might be thought to disappear. This state, which Nietzsche of course envisages as an almost impossible ideal, is remarkably similar to the condition in which Socrates, in Plato’s early dialogues, thought every single agent actually to be and which thus led him to deny the very possibility of *akrasia*. Unfortunately, I cannot pursue here the connection between this suggestive analogy of attitude and Nietzsche’s deeply ambivalent feelings toward Socrates. I must return instead to the subject at hand and point out that, again, the feeling that one is in this state can be produced by self-deception and that the problems this raises cannot be avoided. But Nietzsche is clear on the extraordinary difficulty with which such states can be

---

<sup>58</sup>KGW, VI 2, p. 30; BGE, sec. 21; cf. KGW, VI 2, pp. 25–28, 50–51; BGE, secs. 19, 36; KGW, VI 3, pp. 88–89; TI, “The Error of Free Will,” pp. 499–500.

<sup>59</sup>KGW, VI 1, p. 244; Z. III. 12.

<sup>60</sup>KGW, VI 3, p. 79; TI, “Morality as Anti–Nature,” p. 489.

reached. Success can again be described in the terms of our political metaphor: “*L’effet c’est moi*: what happens here is what happens in every well-constructed and happy commonwealth; namely, the governing class identifies itself with the success of the commonwealth.”<sup>61</sup> What this involves is a maximization of diversity and a minimization of discord. The passage on character from *The Gay Science* suggests this point and so does the following note from *The Will to Power*: “The highest man would have the highest multiplicity of drives, in the relatively greater strength that can be endured. Indeed, where the plant ‘man’ shows himself strongest one finds instincts that conflict powerfully . . . but are controlled.”<sup>62</sup> It is just because of this controlled multiplicity that Goethe, who according to Nietzsche bore all the conflicting tendencies of his century within him, became his great hero: “What he wanted was totality . . . he disciplined himself to wholeness, he *created* himself.”<sup>63</sup>

This self-creation thus appears to be the creation, or imposition, of a higher-order accord among one’s lower-order thoughts, desires and actions. It is the development of the ability or the willingness to accept responsibility for everything that one has done and to admit what is in fact the case, that everything that one has done actually constitutes who one is.

From one point of view, this willingness is a new character-trait, a new state of development that is reached at some time and that replaces a previous state, during which one would have been un-

---

<sup>61</sup>KGW, VI 2, p. 27; BGE, sec. 19. Notice that nothing in the metaphor prevents the governing class from including all the members of the commonwealth.

<sup>62</sup>KGW, VII 2, p. 289; WP, sec. 966; cf. KGW, VII 2, pp. 179–180, VIII 2, pp. 395–396; WP, secs. 259, 928.

<sup>63</sup>KGW, VI 3, p. 145; TI, “Skirmishes,” pp. 553–554. Nietzsche’s remarks on persons as hierarchical structures of desires and character-traits interestingly prefigure the view discussed by Harry Frankfurt in “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 68 (1971), pp. 5–20. Where Nietzsche does not consider that every agent has a self, Frankfurt writes (p. 11) that not every human being need be a person: only agents who have certain desires about what their will is to be are persons for him. Further, just as Nietzsche considers that freedom of the will is not something presupposed by, but attained through, agency, Frankfurt writes: “The enjoyment of freedom comes easily to some. Others must struggle to achieve it.” (p. 17). Though in no way as fine-grained as his, the discussion that follows is indebted to Frankfurt.

willing to acknowledge all one's doings as one's own. From another point of view, however, to reach such a state is not at all like what occurs when one specific character-trait replaces another, when courage replaces cowardice, or magnificence, miserliness. The self-creation Nietzsche has in mind involves the acceptance of everything one has done and, in the ideal case, its harmonization in a coherent whole. Becoming courageous involves avoiding all the cowardly sorts of actions in which one may have previously engaged and pursuing a new sort instead. Yet no specific pattern of behavior needs to be abandoned, or pursued, simply because one realizes that all one's actions are one's own. What, if anything, changes depends on what patterns or coherence already exist and what new ones one might want to establish. But because further change is always possible, Nietzsche's conception of self-creation must also be contrasted to the realization, or decision, of many of us that our character has actually developed enough and that it is neither necessary nor desirable to change in any further respects. As such, it shows itself not to constitute a static episode, a final goal which, once attained, forecloses the possibility of further change and development.

For one thing, it is not clear that such an "episode" can actually occur, that it does not represent, as we have said, a regulative principle. If there were a clear sense in which our thoughts, desires, actions and their patterns could be counted, then we might be able to succeed in fitting "all" of them together. Yet how our mental acts actually fit with one another clearly has a bearing on how they are counted. And this is also suggested by Nietzsche's own view that the contents of our mental acts are indissolubly connected together. For to reinterpret a thought or an action and thus to construe it, for example, as only part of a longer, "more extensive" process, as only part of a single mental act after all, has exactly the same consequence.

More importantly, however, the fact is that as long as one is alive one always encounters unforeseen situations and one keeps performing new actions and having new thoughts and desires. The occurrence of such mental acts can always impose the need to reinterpret, to reorganize, or even to abandon earlier ones in their light. Nevertheless, the exhortation of *The Will to Power* "to revolve



about oneself; no desire to become 'better' or in any way other"<sup>64</sup> is, I think, quite compatible with the continuous development that we have been discussing. To desire to remain oneself in this context is not so much to want one's specific character-traits to remain constant: the same passage speaks of "multiplicity of character considered and exploited as an advantage." Rather, it is to desire to appropriate and to reorganize as one's own all that one has (or at least knows to have) done and to engage in organizing it into a single unified whole. It is to be able to accept all such things, good or evil, as things one has done. It is not to cultivate stable character-traits that may make one's range of reactions predictable and, in new situations, unsurprising. Rather, it is to develop the flexibility to be able to use whatever one has done, does, or will do as elements in a constantly changing, never completed whole. Since such a whole is always in the process of incorporating new material and since the success of this incorporation may always involve the reinterpretation of older material, none of its elements need remain unchanged. Zarathustra's distrust of unity—his exhortations to avoid goals or stability—is his aversion to the stability of specific character-traits, parallel to the praise of "brief habits" we found in *The Gay Science*. By contrast, his proud description of his own teaching as carrying "into One what in man is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident" refers to the continual, never-ending integration, and reinterpretation, of such brief habits.

The final mark of this integration, its limiting case, is provided by the test involved in the thought of the eternal recurrence. This mark is the desire to do exactly what one has already done in this life if one were to live again: "'Was *that* life?' I want to say to death," Zarathustra is made to exclaim, "'Well then! Once more!'"<sup>65</sup> Since

---

<sup>64</sup>KGW, VIII 2, p. 369; WP, sec. 425; cf. KGW, VI 1, pp. 391–400; Z. IV. 19.

<sup>65</sup>KGW, 1, p. 392; Z. IV. 19. Cf. KGW, VII 3, pp. 171–172; WP, sec. 962. Gregory Vlastos has objected that, on such an interpretation of the eternal recurrence, Nietzsche is committed to the very strong view that if I were to desire my life again, I would have to want every totally insignificant thing to remain the same. But even if it is Nietzsche's theory, the objection continues, that everything I do is equally essential to who I am, surely, for example, the precise minute I happened to wake up on a

Nietzsche considers the subject as the sum of its interrelated effects, the opportunity to live again would necessarily involve the exact repetition of the very same events; otherwise, there would be no reason to suppose that it was the same subject that was living again. Thus the question is not whether one would or would not do the same things again; in this matter, there is no room for choice. The question is only whether one would *want* to do the same things all over again and thus be willing to acknowledge all one's doings as one's own.<sup>66</sup>

### III

It may finally begin to appear that becoming and being are related in a way that does not make nonsense of Nietzsche's imperative to "Become who you are." To be who one is, on the view we have been developing, is to be engaged in the constantly continuing and continually broadening process of appropriation we have been discussing, to enlarge one's capacity for responsibility for oneself which Nietzsche calls "freedom."<sup>67</sup> He describes as the greatest will to power the desire "to impose upon becoming the character of being" and considers the idea "that everything recurs [as] the closest approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being. . . ."<sup>68</sup> And the eternal recurrence, as we have taken it, is

---

particular morning could not possibly have an effect on my person. Nietzsche's point, I reply, is that one wants to repeat just those actions which *are* significant to one's being the person one is—those, in fact, are the very *actions* one wants to acknowledge as one's own. Insignificant details (unless one can interpret them so as to make them significant) make no significant difference to who one is. I discuss this point in detail in "The Eternal Recurrence," pp. 346–347.

<sup>66</sup>This point is presented and discussed in detail in "The Eternal Recurrence."

<sup>67</sup>KGW, VI 3, pp. 133–134; TI, "Skirmishes," p. 542. I shall try to suggest below how some of the excessive statements of this passage can be tempered in the light of other texts.

<sup>68</sup>KGW, VIII 1, p. 320; WP, sec. 617. Nietzsche also writes here: "Becoming as invention, willing, self-denial, overcoming of oneself: no subject but an action, a positing, creative, no 'causes and effects' . . . . Instead of 'cause and effect' the mutual struggle of that which becomes, often with the absorption of one's opponent; the number of becoming elements not constant."

HOW ONE BECOMES WHAT ONE IS

compatible with continued development. Its significance consists in one's ability to want at some point, and in the ideal case at every point, to go through once again and "innumerable times more" what one has gone through already. Such a desire presupposes, in the limiting case, that what one has done has been assembled into a whole so unified that nothing can be subtracted without that whole's coming down along with it. Being, for Nietzsche, is that which one does not *want* to be otherwise.

What one is then, is just what one becomes. Nietzsche's aphorism is an injunction to want to become what one becomes, not to want anything about it, about oneself, to be different. To become what one is, therefore, is not to reach a specific new state—it is not, as I have tried to argue, to reach a state at all. It is to identify oneself with all of one's actions, to see that everything one does (becomes) is what one is. In the ideal case, it is also to fit all this into a *coherent* whole, and to want to be everything that one is: it is to give style to one's character; to be, if you will allow me, becoming.

The idea of giving style to one's character brings us back to Nietzsche's view in section 290 of *The Gay Science* that to have a single character ("taste") may be more important than the question whether this character is good or bad. This idea, in turn, which is quite common in Nietzsche, raises the notorious problem of his "immoralism," his virulent contempt for traditional moral virtue and his alleged praise of cruelty and of the exploitation of the "weak" by the "strong." I can only make two brief sets of comments about this very complex issue on this occasion; the second set will bring me to the concluding part of this essay.

We should notice first that despite his glorification of selfishness, Nietzsche once again is equally serious in denying the very antithesis between egoism and altruism. He dreams, in a perhaps utopian manner, of "some future, when, owing to continual adaptation, egoism will at the same time be altruism," when love and respect for others may just be love and respect for oneself: "Finally, one grasps that altruistic actions are only a species of egoistic actions—and that the degree to which one loves, spends oneself, proves the degree of individual power and personality."<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, the

---

<sup>69</sup>KGW, VIII 2, pp. 155–156; WP, sec. 786. Cf. KGW, VII 2, pp. 94–95; WP, sec. 964.

crude idea that Nietzsche's immoralism and the doctrine of the will to power are simply licenses to mindless cruelty is undermined by his view that such cruelty, though it has certainly been practiced by people on one another and will continue to be practiced in the future, is only the coarsest expression of what he has in mind. In fact, he thinks that its net effect may be the opposite of its intent:

Every living thing reaches out as far from itself with its force as it can, and overwhelms what is weaker: thus it takes pleasure in itself. The increasing "humanizing" of this tendency consists in this, that there is an ever subtler sense of how hard it is really to incorporate another: while a crude injury done him certainly demonstrates our power over him, it at the same time estranges his will from us even more—and thus makes him less easy to subjugate.<sup>70</sup>

We have already seen that such "subjugation" can result in a new alliance, a new unity, even a new self.<sup>71</sup> Since the self is not an abiding substance, its incorporating a new entity "without destroying it" can well result in a change of both the incorporated object and the incorporating subject. Nietzsche's ominous metaphors can, in the final analysis, be applied even to the behavior of a powerful and influential teacher.

I now want to suggest that what Nietzsche says about the importance of character in itself, independently of whether it is the character of a good or a bad person, should not be dismissed out of hand. I am not sure of the proper word in this context, and I use this one with some misgivings, but it seems to me that there is something admirable in the very fact that one has character, that one has style. This does not imply that merely having character overrides all other considerations and justifies any sort of behavior; this is neither true, nor is it asserted by the passage we are discussing. But the point does introduce into our evaluation of agents a more formal quality than simply the content of their actions. It introduces, as one consideration, the question whether their actions, whatever their content, make up a personality. This seems to

---

<sup>70</sup>KGW, VII 1, pp. 533–534; WP, sec. 769, where its correct date should be Fall 1883.

<sup>71</sup>KGW, VIII 2, p. 56; WP, sec. 488; cf. pp. 14–18 above, and KGW VIII 3, pp. 165–166; WP, sec. 636.

HOW ONE BECOMES WHAT ONE IS

me a sensible consideration and one, moreover, to which we often appeal in our everyday dealings with each other.

It is not clear to me that a consistently and irredeemably vicious person does in fact have a character; the sort of agent Aristotle calls “bestial” probably does not.<sup>72</sup> In some way there is something inherently praiseworthy in having character or style that does prevent extreme cases of vice from being praised even in the formal sense we have discussed. Perhaps this is simply due to the fact that the viciousness of such agents totally overwhelms whatever praise we might otherwise be disposed to give them. Probably, however, the matter is more complicated. The existence of character may not be quite as independent of the quality of the actions of which it constitutes the pattern: consistency may not in itself be a condition sufficient for its presence. Perhaps, to appeal to another Aristotelian idea, some sort of moderation in action (though not necessarily the exact mean necessary for virtue) may be in the long run necessary for the possession of character. Nietzsche, in any case, would attribute character to all sorts of agents and would praise them on its account even if their quality were seriously objectionable from a moral point of view.

If now we ask ourselves when it is that we feel absolutely free to admire characters who are (or who, in the nature of the case, would be if they existed) awful people, the answer is clear: we do so in the case of literature. Though we sometimes may find an actual immoral agent worthy of admiration on account of some other quality that may overshadow that agent’s objectionable features, our admiration is bound to be most often mixed. The best argument for Nietzsche’s view of the importance of character is provided by the great literary villains, characters like Richard III (in Shakespeare’s version), Fagin, Fyodor Karamazov, Charlus. In their cases, we can place our moral scruples in the background. Our main object of concern with them becomes their overall manner of what they do, the very structure of their minds, and not primarily the contents of their actions. Here, we can admire without reservations.

Why did Nietzsche take this formalist approach to character? As a historical hypothesis, I offer the view that he developed his atti-

---

<sup>72</sup>*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI. 1, 6.

tude toward character and the self in general, as he did in many other cases as well, by considering literature as his primary model and generalizing from it.<sup>73</sup> What is essential to literary characters is their organization; the quality of their actions is secondary. In the ideal case, absolutely everything a character does is equally essential to it; characters are supposed to be constructed so that their every feature supports and is supported by every other one. In the limiting case of the perfect character, no change is possible without corresponding changes, in order to preserve coherence, in every other feature; and the net result is, necessarily, a different character. In connection with literary characters and with the works to which they belong, the more so the better they are; taking one part away may always result in the destruction of the whole. This, we have seen, is presupposed by the thought of the eternal recurrence as a test for the ideal life. My suggestion is that Nietzsche came to hold this view at least partly because his thinking so often concerned literary models.

It could be argued that our admiration of villainous or even inconsistent characters, who *can* be consistently depicted, is not directed at those characters themselves, but at the authors who have constructed them, and that the generalization from literature to life is quite illegitimate. But we should notice that when it comes to life, the “character” and the “author” are one and the same, and admiring the one cannot be distinguished from admiring the other. This is also the reason, I suspect, that though inconsistent characters *can* be admired in literature, they cannot be admired in life. In life, we want to say, there is no room for the distinction between the creator and the creature.<sup>74</sup> Though not perhaps in the

---

<sup>73</sup>I have given arguments to that effect both in “The Eternal Recurrence,” and in “Immanent and Transcendent Perspectivism in Nietzsche.”

<sup>74</sup>If this hypothesis is right, Nietzsche, in seeing life as a work of art written by each individual as it goes along (an idea which can be found reflected in Sartre), can be considered as part of the great tradition working out the metaphor of the *theatrum mundi*, and giving a secular turn to this view of the world as a stage on which a play observed by heaven is acted out. There is some irony in this, once again, for, as Ernest Curtius remarks, this tradition can also be traced originally to Plato (*Laws* 644de, 804c). See Curtius’s discussion of this metaphor in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953; first published, 1948), pp. 138–144.

manner this objection suggested, the parallel between literature and life is far from perfect.

Nietzsche, however, always depended on artistic and literary models for understanding the world and this accounts, in my opinion, for some of the most original and some of the most peculiar features of his thought. As early as *The Birth of Tragedy* he sees Dionysus reborn in the person of Wagner and in the new artwork by means of a process which is the exact opposite of what he took as the dissolution of classical antiquity.<sup>75</sup> But as Paul de Man has written, “Passages of this kind are valueless as arguments, since they assume that the actual events in history are founded in formal symmetries easy enough to achieve in pictorial, musical, or poetic fictions, but that can never predict the occurrence of a historical event.”<sup>76</sup> Ronald Hayman has shown that Nietzsche, a compulsive letter-writer, preferred what in his time still was a literary genre in its own right to conversation and personal contact as a means of communication even with his close friends.<sup>77</sup> Often enough, we find Nietzsche urging that we fashion our lives in the way artists fashion their works: “. . . we should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them this subtle power [of arranging things and of making them beautiful] usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life—first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters.”<sup>78</sup> Similarly, he finds the peace of soul which we have seen him call “attained freedom of will” primarily in artists, who “seem to have more sensitive noses in these matters, knowing only too well that precisely when they no longer do something ‘voluntarily’ but do everything of necessity, their feeling of freedom, subtlety, full power, of creative placing, disposing and forming reaches its peak—in short, that necessity and ‘freedom of will’ then become one in them.”<sup>79</sup>

How does then one achieve the perfect unity which we have seen

---

<sup>75</sup>KGW, III 1, pp. 116–125; BT, sec. 19.

<sup>76</sup>Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 84.

<sup>77</sup>Ronald Hayman, *Nietzsche: A Critical Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 119 *et passim*.

<sup>78</sup>KGW, V 2, p. 218; GS, sec. 299. The analogy is also made in section 301.

<sup>79</sup>KGW, VI 2, p. 152; BGE, sec. 213.

Nietzsche urge throughout this essay, the unity which is primarily possessed by perfect literary characters? How does one become both a literary character who, unlike either Charlus or Alyosha Karamazov, really exists, and also that character's very author?

One way of trying to achieve this perhaps impossible goal, I think, is to write a great number of good books that exhibit great apparent inconsistency but that also can be seen as deeply continuous with one another when they are studied carefully. At the end of this enterprise, one can even write a book about those books that shows how they fit together, how a single figure emerges out of them, how even the most damaging inconsistencies are finally necessary for that figure, or character or author or person (the word almost does not matter in this context) to emerge fully through them. Earlier, Zarathustra had claimed, "What returns, what finally comes home to me, is my own self and what of myself has long been in strange lands and scattered among all things and accidents."<sup>80</sup> Now Nietzsche writes of his *Untimely Meditations*, three of which concern important historical figures and one, history itself: ". . . at bottom they speak only of me. . . . *Wagner in Bayreuth* is a vision of my future, while in *Schopenhauer as Educator* my innermost history, my *becoming*, is inscribed."<sup>81</sup> In *The Gay Science* we had read that "now something that you formerly loved . . . strikes you as an error. . . . But perhaps this error was as necessary for you then, when you were still a different person—you are always a different person—as all your present 'truth'. . . ." <sup>82</sup> Now Nietzsche writes of *Schopenhauer as Educator*:

Considering that in those days I practiced the scholar's craft, and perhaps *knew* something about this craft, the harsh psychology of the scholar that suddenly emerges in this essay is of some significance: it expresses the *feeling of distance*, the profound assurance about what could be my task and what could only be means, *entr'acte* and minor works. It shows my prudence that I was many things and in many places in order to be able to become one thing—to be able to attain one thing. I *had* to be a scholar, too, for some time.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup>KGW, VI 1, p. 189; Z. III. 1.

<sup>81</sup>KGW, VI 3, p. 318; EH, p. 737.

<sup>82</sup>KGW, V 2, pp. 224–225; GS, sec. 307. Cp., among many other passages, KGW, VI 2, pp. 56–58; BGE, sec. 44.

<sup>83</sup>KGW, VI 3, p. 318; EH, pp. 737–738.



HOW ONE BECOMES WHAT ONE IS

One way then to become one thing, one's own character, or what one is, is to write *Ecce Homo* and even to subtitle it "How One Becomes What One Is." It is to write this self-referential work, in which Nietzsche can be said to invent or perhaps to discover himself, and in which the character who speaks to us is the author who has created him and who is in turn a character created by or implicit in all the books written by the author who is writing this one.

Could this ever be a successful enterprise? No one has managed to bring literature closer to life than Nietzsche, yet the two refuse to become one, and thus his own ideal of unity may ultimately fail. Even if one insisted that more than any other philosopher Nietzsche can be identified with his texts, his texts may be all there is to him as a philosopher, but not as a person. To insist on that identification would be to do just what he so passionately argued against, to take part of him as essential and part of him as accidental. The unity he is after shows itself once more to be impossible to capture in reality. *Ecce Homo* leaves great parts of his life undiscussed and, unfortunately for him, his life did not end with it, but twelve miserable years later. To make a unified character out of all one has done, as Nietzsche wanted, would involve us in the vicious enterprise of writing our autobiographies as we lived our lives, and writing about that, and writing about writing about that. . . . And at some point, we would inevitably have to end. But, as he had written long before his own end, "Not every end is a goal. A melody's end is not its goal; nevertheless, so long as the melody has not reached its end, it also has not reached its goal. A parable."<sup>84</sup> This comes as close to explicating the aphorism which has occupied us and to expressing Nietzsche's attitude toward the relationship between art and the world as anything he ever wrote. But the doubt remains whether any melody, however complicated, could ever be a model a life (which is not to say a biography) can imitate.

*University of Pittsburgh*

---

<sup>84</sup>KGW, IV 3, p. 280; *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, sec. 204; my translation.