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Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality

A Critical Guide

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*The role of life in the Genealogy*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Nietzsche is quite clear that at least one central purpose of *On the Genealogy of Morality* is to help us assess the value of the values, the value judgments, of morality:<sup>1</sup>

[U]nder what conditions did man invent the value judgments good and evil? *and what value do they themselves have?* Have they up to now obstructed or promoted human flourishing [*Gedeihen*]? Are they a sign of distress, poverty and the degeneration of life? Or, on the contrary, do they reveal the fullness, strength and will of life, its courage, its confidence, its future? (*GM*, Preface, 3)

Later in the same preface he writes:

[W]e need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values should itself, for once, be examined* . . . People have taken the *value* of these “values” as given, as factual, as beyond all questioning; up till now, nobody has had the remotest doubt or hesitation in placing higher value on the “good man” than on “the evil,” higher value in the sense of advancement, benefit and prosperity [*Gedeihlichkeit*] for man in general (and this includes man’s future). What if the opposite were true? . . . So that morality itself were to blame if man, as species, [*des Typus Mensch*] never reached his *highest potential power and splendour?* (*GM*, Preface, 6)

One kind of assessment being made is relatively clear. We are to assess the values of morality instrumentally: do they promote human flourishing? What is less clear is precisely what is meant by human flourishing.

<sup>1</sup> The translations used for *On the Genealogy of Morality* and *Daybreak* are the Cambridge translations. Other translations are as follows: *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. W. Kaufmann ([1872] 1967a); *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann ([1882–87] 1974); *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. W. Kaufmann ([1883–85] 1966b); *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann ([1886] 1966a); *Twilight of the Idols in The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann ([1888] 1968d); *The Antichrist in The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann ([1888] 1968a); *Ecce Homo*, trans. W. Kaufmann ([1888] 1989); *The Case of Wagner*, trans. W. Kaufmann ([1888] 1967b); and *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale ([1901–11] 1968).

Obviously it has something to do with power and splendor but without further elaboration one would worry that the circle of concepts might be too tight for comfort. Flourishing also seems to be connected to something called “life” where life is being conceived of as something that can be stronger or weaker, degenerating or growing, confident or in distress. Consider the focus in *GM*, Preface, 3, on the values of morality as symptoms of the condition of life. Again, it is not obvious what to make of this.

But perhaps the most fundamental puzzle is that these apparent values of flourishing, power, or splendor are themselves never critiqued or questioned. Why would precisely the genealogy of these very values not be an obvious, and crucial, task to take up? It is not as though Nietzsche promises to carry out this task elsewhere, and it does not look as though any such critique or genealogy is carried out in *GM* itself. How could someone with Nietzsche’s endless suspicions, with his fine sense for psychological blind spots, with his intense self-reflective curiosity, *not* have taken up precisely the question of where these values come from, what *their* origin is? After all we are talking of someone who wrote:

Every philosophy is a foreground philosophy – that is a hermit’s judgment: “There is something arbitrary in his stopping *here* to look back and look around, in his not digging deeper *here* but laying his spade aside; there is also something suspicious about it.” (*BGE*, 289)

Indeed, the very phrase, repeated in various forms by Nietzsche, “the *value* of these ‘values,’” cries out for the repeated application of the question.<sup>2</sup>

One can miss this fundamental puzzle if one focuses on the almost analytic connections between, at least, the cluster of notions surrounding “flourishing” and some central notions of “good”; the claim that it is good to promote human flourishing can sound almost tautological. But, of course, despite whatever conceptual connections may lurk here, there are crucial differences between valuing my own flourishing at the cost of others, valuing everyone’s flourishing equally, and valuing the flourishing, say, of a particular type of person. Indeed, as we shall see, there is even a difference between this and valuing flourishing in the sense of valuing the creation and

<sup>2</sup> Note how Brian Leiter’s suggestion that for Nietzsche it is, in some sense, merely a matter of “evaluative taste” and that Nietzsche does not think that his evaluative perspective enjoys any kind of “metaphysical or epistemic privilege over its target,” morality, does not address the puzzle (Leiter 2000: 290–91). How could Nietzsche not wonder about the origin of his values, his evaluative taste? What is the value of this evaluative taste? Cf. *GS*, 335: “Your judgment, ‘this is right’ has a prehistory in your instincts, likes, dislikes, experiences, and lack of experiences; ‘How did it originate there?’ you must ask, and then also: ‘What is it that impels me to listen to it?’”

existence of exemplary persons even if at the cost of the flourishing, in some other sense, of others.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche is well aware of this:

The question: what is this or that table of values and “morals” [*Moral*] *worth?* needs to be asked from different angles; in particular, the question “value for *what?*” cannot be examined too finely. Something, for example, which obviously had value with regard to the longest possible life-span of a race (or to the improvement of its abilities to adapt to a particular climate, or to maintaining the greatest number) would not have anything like the same value if it was a question of developing a stronger type. The good of the majority and the good of the minority are conflicting moral standpoints [*Werth-Gesichtspunkte*]: we leave it to the naïvety of English biologists to view the first as higher in value as *such* [*an sich*]. (*GM*, I, 17, “Note”)

As we shall see below, flourishing, and the related notions Nietzsche uses to express his evaluative standpoint, are also given fairly substantive content. This ensures that there are also other potential conflicts: for example, the conflict between having humans of a certain type and having, say, art of a certain type. All of this, again, merely highlights the puzzle: he is picking a particular evaluative standpoint and so why does it seem not to occur to him to do a critique and genealogy of his standpoint? Why is the spade laid aside?

I will argue that the answer to this puzzle lies in the special role that the notion of “life” plays in Nietzsche’s account.

## 2 . P O W E R

Before we can solve our puzzle, we need to have a somewhat better grasp on what flourishing for Nietzsche comes to and what the relationship is with notions such as splendor, power, life, and so on. I will begin, however, by making an important concession: I cannot provide anything like a full account of the dimensions along which Nietzsche assesses possible humans, higher men, or superhumans, in order to determine whether the values of

<sup>3</sup> The difference, that is, between defining a type first, say everyone in a particular geographical area or the possessors of some kind of native endowment, and then valuing their flourishing as opposed to taking flourishing, perhaps of humanity as a whole, to just be the emergence of a certain exemplary type of person. Valuing flourishing in the second way just is to value the emergence of a particular type of person. It is clear then what one values in valuing flourishing even if one has not, explicitly or implicitly, answered the question of whose flourishing it is. I will take Nietzsche to, in general, use flourishing in the second way – particularly in contexts of expressing the fundamental values that he uses for assessing the value of morality.

As a result, some of what I will say about Nietzsche will end up being in tension with parts of Leiter’s interpretation in his *Nietzsche on Morality* which ascribes a relativized notion of flourishing, where a person’s flourishing is what is prudentially good for that person (cf. 2002: 105–12). For reasons of space, I will not directly try to lay out the differences in detail.

morality are helping or hindering their emergence and flourishing.<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche often talks of higher men but besides the systematically positive evaluation he gives of them, there is little that identifies them substantively. Often where properties of such men are mentioned, they seem like symptoms or signs for what really makes them higher men, rather than defining characteristics of such men. However, I shall point to the kind of passages that I think do let us pick up on the fundamental dimensions of assessment that identify humans that are flourishing – passages where Nietzsche either seems to come closer to describing the essential properties of the kind of human he clearly values or the many more passages where he depicts the kind of person that morality produces, the kind of person then that is not an exemplar of the highest power and splendor possible to man. In addition to the ones we have already seen, consider the following sampling of what he regards positively. I start with *GM*:

But from time to time grant me . . . a glimpse, grant me just one glimpse of something perfect, completely finished, happy, powerful, triumphant, that still leaves something to fear! (*GM*, I, 12)

Nietzsche claims that “the plant ‘man’ has so far grown most vigorously to a height” not in the absence of suffering but in the “opposite conditions”:

his power of invention and simulation (his “spirit”) had to develop under prolonged pressure and constraint into refinement and audacity, his life-will had to be enhanced into an unconditional power-will. (*BGE*, 44)

Or here is another passage from *BGE* that, precisely because it focuses on compassion (*Mitleid*), an attitude that normally comes under withering criticism for the danger it poses to the development of humans, seems to give us insight into the kind of person that has succeeded in achieving splendor and power:

A man who says, “I like this, I take this for my own and want to protect it and defend it against anybody”; a man who is able to manage something, to carry out a

<sup>4</sup> See Leiter 2002: 115–22, for a more ambitious attempt. I find his list a curious mixture of what seem to me to be more essential features of the kind of humans Nietzsche values and features that are more contingent in the sense that these humans have to have them, given the natural features of the world they find themselves in, for the purpose of having their essential features. Consider, for example, Leiter’s claim that the “higher type is solitary” (116). This strikes me as not essential for Nietzsche but something he would regard as a frequent result of the fact that being powerful, creative, brilliant, capable of independence, and knowledgeable of what maintaining those features requires will often lead, in a world where the majority are not that way, to a certain distance, psychological and sometimes more, from others (*WP*, 885). It is a feature but not in any way even a partially definitive one. It is true though that Nietzsche’s own lists seem to have this feature of being a curious mixture of what is essential to greatness and what seem to be means or symptoms.

resolution, to remain faithful to a thought, to hold a woman, to punish and prostrate one who presumed too much; a man who has his wrath and his sword and to whom the weak, the suffering, the hard pressed, and the animals, too, like to come and belong by nature [*gern zufallen und von Natur zugehören*], in short a man who is by nature a *master* – when such a man has pity, well, *this* pity has value. (*BGE*, 293)

We should also consider his condemnations of Christianity as a conspiracy “against health, beauty, whatever has turned out well, courage, spirit, *graciousness* of the soul” (*A*, 62). The “true Christian” opposes “the beautiful, the splendid, the rich, the proud, the self-reliant, the knowledgeable, the powerful – in summa, the whole of culture” (*WP*, 250).<sup>5</sup>

One can worry about how much of a substantive ideal emerges. After all, often the right-hand side, so to speak, moves within the same worryingly small cluster of concepts. The sustained discussions of all the ways of being that Nietzsche finds bad are perhaps more helpful. Those negative comments can raise the worry one has with “negative theology” – is there really a way of being that avoids all those criticisms? Nonetheless, I think that as long as we work hard to put aside our temptations to defang Nietzsche on the behalf of morality, we can, so to speak, go on: we can, that is, tell what Nietzsche would take to be instances of human power and splendor and, with some confidence, to rank these instances.<sup>6</sup> (Think of an instance, a whole character, a psychological episode, and – forgive me the joke – ask yourself, “What would Nietzsche think?”)

Part of what comes through in the above passages, I suggest, is that for Nietzsche the cluster of evaluations in terms of power, vigor, self-reliance, health, creativity, intelligence, a strong will, and so on, hang together. We must understand why he thought that even if we eventually conclude that in fact they do not hang together in the way Nietzsche thinks they do. One traditional way of seeing the unity in such lists is to think of “power” as the umbrella notion. After all, health, creativity, intelligence, a strong will, and so on, can be seen as part of what it would take for a human to have power over himself and his environment. This is the kind of reading that gets support from passages such as these:

What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself.

What is bad? Everything that is born of weakness. (*A*, 2)

<sup>5</sup> See also *D*, 201; *GM*, I, 7; *WP*, 873, 943, 936, 949.

<sup>6</sup> This is not, it should go without saying, to endorse the Nietzschean ranking.

Or from the *Nachlaß*:

What is the objective measure of value? Solely the quantum of enhanced and organized power. (*WP*, 674)<sup>7</sup>

Without countervailing arguments that draw on other textual material, these claims can be read as pointing to what the central good-making feature in the world is: it is in virtue of power, or the lack thereof, that things are better or worse, good or bad.<sup>8</sup> That power is the fundamental value or standard that Nietzsche uses for the purposes of assessing the values of morality has been a widely held view.<sup>9</sup>

However, even if we are confident that this is the best way to express his evaluative standpoint, the puzzle remains as to why Nietzsche thinks this is the appropriate standard for assessing the value of moral value judgments of good and evil. And why this value is not itself apparently being subjected to a genealogy.

Once the fundamental measure is put in terms of power, however, it is tempting to think that some argument lurks in claims like the following:

There is nothing to life that has value, except the degree of power – assuming that life itself is the will to power. (*WP*, 55)

Nietzsche, furthermore, does at least at times accept this assumption. Indeed, he seems to commit himself to an even stronger doctrine of the will to power:

Physiologists should think before putting down the instinct of self-preservation as the cardinal instinct of an organic being. A living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength – life itself is *will to power*; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *results*. (*BGE*, 13)

Or, most dramatically:

*This world is the will to power – and nothing besides!* (*WP*, 1067)<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See also *WP*, 858.

<sup>8</sup> In contrast to a more metaethical reading that would like to read these as property identifications. See Leiter 2000 and Hussain 2007 for further discussion.

<sup>9</sup> “Power, then, is the standard of value which Nietzsche affirms with all the eloquence at his command” (Morgan [1941] 1965: 118). The “quantitative degree of power is the measure of value” (Kaufmann 1974: 200). There is “one standard about which Nietzsche does not take a relativist position. He evaluates the worth of persons on the basis of a single standard: the degree to which they have attained what he calls power” (Hunt 1991: 131). “Nietzsche’s advice: maximize power” (Richardson 1996: 148). See also Wilcox 1974: 194–96, Schacht 1983: 349, 398, and May 1999: 15.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *BGE*, 22, 36.

All of life, or perhaps everything, is always striving for power. Once power appears as the central evaluative *and* ontological term, then it can hardly appear to be a coincidence that everything aims at power and that power also turns out to be what is good.<sup>11</sup> Surely, the thought goes, Nietzsche thinks power is valuable in part because everything aims at power. The hard part is figuring out what precisely Nietzsche thought the connection here might be.

### 3. LEITER'S MILLIAN MODEL

Brian Leiter, noting the widespread ascription of such an evaluative standard to Nietzsche, asks: "But what exactly is the *argument* here? When pressed, commentators are never able to say" (Leiter 2002: 138). He suggests an interpretation of the argument on the behalf of commentators attracted to this line of interpretation before proceeding to criticize this interpretation both for the quality of the argument it ascribes to Nietzsche and the textual evidence to which it appeals. A careful look at these criticisms, however, shows, as I will argue below, that there is a related interpretation that can quite plausibly be ascribed to Nietzsche even if, as I shall grant, the arguments ascribed to Nietzsche are not ones that we might philosophically endorse.

Leiter claims that what he calls the "Millian Model seems the most charitable reconstruction of what the commentators do say, and of Nietzsche's few scattered remarks on the subject" (2000: 282 n. 19). The Millian model derives its name from John Stuart Mill's "proof" for the principle of utility. On Leiter's reconstruction, this proof rests on a crucial pattern of inference:

to show that something is desirable (i.e., valuable), show that it is desired. (2000: 282)<sup>12</sup>

Into this schema we then, on the behalf of Nietzsche, "plug in . . . the doctrine, roughly, that all persons intrinsically 'desire' only power" (282). If this form of argument is generally valid, we could then conclude that power is valuable. We would have our bridge from the premise that everything aims at power to the conclusion that power is valuable, that power is what is good.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. May 1999: 16.

<sup>12</sup> "No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness" (Mill 2003: 210).



The fundamental philosophical problem with such an argument, as Leiter points out, is that “from the fact that only happiness *is* desired, nothing at all follows about what *ought* to be desired” (Leiter 2002: 139). The version that replaces happiness with power seems to suffer from the same problem.

Leiter considers a version of the argument that appeals to an “Internalist Constraint”:

(IC) Something cannot be valuable for a person unless the person is capable of caring about (desiring) it. (Leiter 2000: 283)

Assuming nihilism is false, then, if “it is only power that persons ever aim for or desire” (284), we can conclude that power, and only power, is valuable.

Leiter grants that such an argument would be valid, but thinks that it is clear that Nietzsche did not accept the descriptive doctrine of the will to power in the strong form required for it – the form in which power is the *only* thing desired.<sup>13</sup> He provides evidence of varying degrees of strength. After putting aside some of his evidence that seems to me of less significance, I focus on the more interesting evidence that does indeed, I will agree, mitigate against ascribing the above strong form of the doctrine of will to power to Nietzsche.

Leiter points to passages where Nietzsche talks of the will to power “declining” (*A*, 17) or being undermined (*TI*, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” 38) (Leiter 2002: 141). These passages could be read as merely suggesting that the strength of the motivation towards power decreases. Such passages are, by themselves, consistent with the claim that power is still the only thing desired or aimed for. The more interesting passages are therefore those in which the will to power is placed alongside, and apparently at the same level as, what seem to be other motivational elements (Leiter 2002: 142). Thus in *EH*, “Why I Am a Destiny,” 4, Nietzsche writes: “In the great economy of the whole, the terrible aspects of reality (in affects, in desires, in the will to power) are to an incalculable degree more necessary than that form of happiness which people call ‘goodness’.” This passage, read alongside perhaps the many others that ascribe all kinds of desires to people besides a desire for power, does indeed suggest that some particular motivational, psychological state in favor of power is not somehow always at the bottom of every instance of desiring. This in turn makes ascribing a strong form of the descriptive will to power thesis in terms of a desire for

<sup>13</sup> He is willing to grant for the purposes of argument that Nietzsche accepts IC, since if with it we could ascribe to Nietzsche an argument that led from the premise that everything strives for power to the conclusion that power is a fundamental standard of value, then we would *ipso facto* have good reason to ascribe it to Nietzsche (Leiter 2000: 284).

power – the one needed by Leiter’s reconstruction of the will to power argument – quite difficult.

Perhaps even more importantly, Leiter writes:

Indeed, if, as the defenders of the strong doctrine of will to power believe, “his fundamental principle is the ‘will to power’” (Jaspers 1965: 287), then it is hard to understand why he says almost nothing about will to power – and nothing at all to suggest it is his “fundamental principle” – in the two major self-reflective moments in the Nietzschean corpus: his last major work, *Ecce Homo*, where he reviews and assesses his life and writings, including specifically all his prior books [*EH*, “Why I Write Such Good Books”]; and the series of new prefaces he wrote for *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Human, All-too-Human*, *Daybreak*, and *The Gay Science* in 1886, in which he revisits his major themes. (Leiter 2002: 142; see the bibliography for Jaspers 1965)

It does seem important that neither the explicit monistic descriptive claim (everything, or even every living thing, is a will to power and nothing else) nor the explicit monistic evaluative claim (being better is a matter of more power) play the kind of central role in these writings that one would expect them to. It is true that *The Antichrist*, where the value monism gets its above strong expression, is from after the time when these prefaces were written, but the point about *Ecce Homo* remains. This evidence does then militate against ascribing to Nietzsche some commitment to a fundamental evaluative claim expressed in terms of the will to power or to the claim that the only thing people care about or desire is power. Ascribing to him the argument for the value of power that goes through IC then does seem implausible.

#### 4. LIFE

I do think, though, that there is a version, or close relative, of the traditional will to power interpretive line that avoids the textual problems Leiter highlights. Indeed, this alternative interpretation is suggested by one of the main targets of Leiter’s above criticisms, Richard Schacht. Schacht writes that Nietzsche “takes ‘life’ in this world to be the sole locus of value, and its preservation, flourishing, and above all its enhancement to be ultimately decisive for determinations of value” (Schacht 1983: 359). “In the last analysis, value can only be ‘value for life’, and can only be understood in terms of what life essentially involves” (367). Of course, for Schacht, “Life, as [Nietzsche] construes it, is ‘will to power’ in various forms – an array of processes all of which are ‘developments and ramifications’ of this basic tendency” (367).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Schacht 1983: 396.

The heart of this alternative interpretation rests on taking the notion of “life” as central to Nietzsche’s revaluative project. This should come as no particular surprise since, as we saw above, the notion of “life” seems to stand in some special relationship to the question of the value of value judgments of good and evil in *GM*. And not only in *GM*:

In the . . . sphere of so-called moral values one cannot find a greater contrast than that between a *master* morality and the morality of *Christian* value concepts: the latter developed on soil that was morbid through and through . . . , master morality (“Roman,” “pagan,” “classical,” “Renaissance”) is, conversely, the sign language of what has turned out well, of *ascending* life, of the will to power as the principle of life. (*CW*, Epilogue)<sup>15</sup>

I am going to accept that it does not make sense to ascribe to Nietzsche a view on which there is always some particular mental state, a desire or a caring, that has power as its aim. However, to grant this is not yet to grant the implausibility of ascribing a more amorphous version of the will to power doctrine. As Nietzsche says, “life itself” is “the instinct for growth, for durability, for an accumulation of forces, for *power*” (*A*, 6). Or as he puts it in the *Genealogy*:

The democratic idiosyncrasy of being against everything that dominates and wants to dominate . . . has already become master of the whole of physiology and biology, to their detriment, naturally, by spiriting away their basic concept, that of actual *activity*. On the other hand, the pressure of this idiosyncrasy forces “adaptation” into the foreground, which is a second-rate activity, just a reactivity, indeed life itself has been defined as an increasingly efficient inner adaptation to external circumstances (Herbert Spencer). But this is to misunderstand the essence of life, its *will to power*, we overlook the prime importance that the spontaneous, aggressive, expansive, re-interpreting, re-directing and formative forces have, which “adaptation” follows only when they have had their effect; in the organism itself, the dominant role of these highest functionaries, in whom the life-will is active and manifests itself, is denied. (*GM*, II, 12)

What is crucial to see here is that the goal of power is not being ascribed to some particular psychological state. Rather talk of the will to power is clearly meant as shorthand, as a statement of the fundamental tendency, a tendency that is essential to life, towards expansion, domination, growth, accumulation of force, and power.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Though, not surprisingly, he points back to *GM*: “The opposition between ‘noble morality’ and ‘Christian morality’ was first explained in my *Genealogy of Morals*” (*CW*, Epilogue, “Note”).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. “Every animal . . . instinctively strives for an optimum of favourable conditions in which to fully release his power and achieve his maximum of power-sensation; every animal abhors equally

The contrast being drawn in this passage is with some form of a theory of evolution being ascribed to Spencer that gives “adaptation” a central role. But perhaps for us the contrast would be better drawn with contemporary evolutionary theories. Consider the following unexceptional quote from a contemporary textbook:

“Life” is difficult to define at the border of the nonliving. (In isolation from their hosts, for example, viruses lack many of the features of more “typical” life forms.) Undoubtedly the salient feature of living things is their ability to replicate themselves, thereby increasing in number and producing copies of variant forms. (Futuyma 1998: 166)

Of course, the author does not mean by “ability” merely that it is *possible* for living things to replicate themselves. Rather what he means is that living things are the kind of things that *do* replicate themselves. That is their fundamental tendency. In individual cases they will fail to do so. And of course someone could easily be tempted to make stronger claims: life is a tendency to replicate in ways that ensure the copies will survive and spread. Neither this immodest version nor the modest alternative requires ascribing to the creature a particular motivational state with replication as part of its content.

The same holds for Nietzsche, I suggest, though in his case the fundamental tendency that defines, or is at least essential to, life is a tendency towards expansion, domination, growth, overcoming resistances, increasing strength – in shorthand: power. Again, no particular individual mental state needs to be ascribed to the organism. This comes out very clearly in an 1888, thus relatively late, note from the *Nachlaß* (here the contrast is drawn with hedonism rather than adaptationism):

Der Wille zur Macht als *Leben*

Der Mensch sucht *nicht* die Lust and vermeidet *nicht* die Unlust: man versteht, welchem berühmten Vorurtheile ich hiermit widerspreche. Lust und Unlust sind bloße Folge, bloße Begleiterscheinung, – was der Mensch will, was jeder kleinste Theil eines lebendes Organismus will, das ist ein plus von Macht. Im Streben danach folgt sowohl Lust als Unlust . . . Nehmen wir den einfachsten Fall, den der

instinctively . . . any kind of disturbance and hindrance that blocks or could block his path to the optimum (– it is *not* his path to ‘happiness’ I am talking about, but the path to power, action, the mightiest deeds, and in most cases, actually, his path to misery)” (*GM*, III, 7). “[W]hat was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all ‘truth’ but something else – let us say, health, future, growth, power, life” (*GS*, Preface, 2). Cf. *BGE*, 259: “life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation . . . life simply *is* will to power. . . . ‘Exploitation’ . . . belongs to the *essence* of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will of life.”

primitiven Ernährung: das Protoplasma streckt seine Pseudopodien aus, um nach etwas zu suchen, was ihm widersteht – nicht aus Hunger, sondern aus Willen zur Macht. Darauf macht es den Versuch, dasselbe zu überwinden, sich anzueignen, sich einzuverleiben: – das, was man “Ernährung” nennt, ist bloß eine Folge-Erscheinung, eine Nutzenanwendung jenes ursprünglichen Willens, *stärker* zu werden. (KSA, 13:14[174])

We cannot sensibly ascribe to Nietzsche the view that even an amoeba has a psychological state like a desire aimed at power. Again, the view is clearly that the tendency towards power is a disposition or tendency of the creature as a living thing. At least part of what it is for it to be alive is for it to be so disposed.

The real will to power doctrine, I propose therefore, is actually a doctrine about what is essential to life. To be alive is, in part, at least, to have a tendency towards expansion, growth, domination, overcoming of resistances, increasing strength, and so on. Talking of a will to power is a shorthand for this just as talking of a will to replicate would be a shorthand for a more contemporary, more plausible (but still no doubt inaccurate) understanding of what is essential to life. It is this picture of life – and some crucially related evaluative notions I will come to in a moment – that is of central importance to Nietzsche. And it is this picture of life, I suggest, that is present even where Nietzsche does not use the reductive-sounding locution of the will to power.<sup>17</sup>

Once we shift to focusing on the role that the notion of “life” plays, while remembering how talk of the tendency to the accumulation of power is a shorthand for a tendency to expand, grow, dominate, and so on, then we see that Leiter’s claim that “it is hard to understand why [Nietzsche] says almost nothing about will to power” in his *Ecce Homo* or in the series of new prefaces of 1886 seems no longer to have the force that it did against interpretations that did take explicit talk of the will to power to be essential to stating Nietzsche’s position. When we turn to *Ecce Homo* and those prefaces, “life” does play the role one would expect of a fundamental evaluative standard.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> I suggest that the passages from the *Nachlass* and *BGE* that are often quoted to ascribe to Nietzsche a very strong form of the will to power doctrine should be interpreted as signs that Nietzsche was indeed occasionally tempted to a more reductive and extreme doctrine. The use, though, of the notion of life as involving some fundamental tendency towards growth, exploitation, domination, increase of strength, is far more widespread, as the rest of the passages quoted throughout this chapter show.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *TI*, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” 33.

Let us start with *Ecce Homo*. After a long discussion of various qualities, experiences, and so on, that he possesses in the sections entitled “Why I Am So Wise” and “Why I Am So Clever,” Nietzsche notes:

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 . . . 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. (*EH*, “Why I Am So Clever,” 10)

When he turns to his assessment of his own books, the centrality of the evaluative standard of life comes out clearly. He claims that one of the two “decisive innovations” of *The Birth of Tragedy* is

the understanding of Socratism: Socrates is recognized for the first time as an instrument of Greek disintegration, as a typical decadent. “Rationality” *against* instinct. “Rationality” at any price as a dangerous force that undermines life. (*EH*, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 1)<sup>19</sup>

The other decisive innovation has to do with the recognition of “the Dionysian phenomenon” as involving “the ultimate limit of affirmation” – an affirmation of life:

Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems; the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibility even in the sacrifice of its highest types – that is what I called Dionysian. (*EH*, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 3)<sup>20</sup>

The fundamental question of whether in individuals or cultures there are instincts that are undermining life, turning against it, leading to lives that are less powerful, or whether there is an affirmation and rejoicing of life – and thus a sign that the tendency to growth and domination is strong and successful – is the question that Nietzsche takes himself to have been the first to highlight:

<sup>19</sup> “Every kind of contempt for sex . . . is the crime *par excellence* against life – is the real sin against the holy spirit of life” (*EH*, “Why I Write Such Good Books,” 5).

<sup>20</sup> He is quoting himself from *TI*.

I was the first to see the real opposition: the degenerating instinct that turns against life with subterranean vengefulness (Christianity, the philosophy of Schopenhauer, in a certain sense already the philosophy of Plato, and all of idealism . . .) versus a formula for the highest affirmation, born of fullness, of overfullness. (*EH*, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 2)

These passages bring to the fore the centrality of the notion of “decadence” and “degeneration.” “Decadence” I suggest is closely connected to the notion of “life” Nietzsche is deploying: decadence is a matter of declining life. And thus mentions of decadence, and the assignment of a negative value to it, are also a deployment of a fundamental evaluative standard having to do with “life.” And it is precisely the task of assessing morality, taken up in detail in the *Genealogy*, in relation to the question of decadence – to its role in turning against life – that Nietzsche claims in *Ecce Homo* is his singular innovation:

seeing morality itself as a symptom of decadence is an innovation and singularity of the first rank in the history of knowledge. (*EH*, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 2)

Nietzsche claims that the ultimate task, namely that of revaluing our values so that the morality of good and evil is undermined and new values are created that now serve life rather than undermine it, was already foreshadowed in *BT*:

A tremendous hope speaks out of this essay. . . . let us suppose that my attempt to assassinate two millennia of antinature and desecration of man were to succeed. That new party of life which would tackle the greatest of all tasks, the attempt to raise humanity higher, including the relentless destruction of everything that was degenerating and parasitical, would again make possible that excess of life on earth from which the Dionysian state, too, would have to awaken again. (*EH*, “The Birth of Tragedy,” 4)

The fundamental task of revaluing the values of morality for the sake of life gets repeated again and again through the rest of *Ecce Homo*. Of *Dawn*, he writes, “[w]ith this book my campaign against morality begins.” He seeks new “dawns” in “a *revaluation of all values*” (*EH*, “Dawn,” 1). Thus: “The question concerning the origin of moral values is for me a question of the very first rank because it is crucial for the future of humanity” (*EH*, “Dawn,” 2). The role of the priest in this story – the story that gets much elaboration, obviously, in the *Genealogy* – shows clearly the standard Nietzsche is using to assess morality:

But the priest desires precisely the degeneration of the whole, of humanity: for that reason he *conserves* what degenerates – at this price he rules. When seriousness is deflected from the self-preservation and the enhancement of the strength of the

body – *that is, of life* – when anemia is construed as an ideal, and contempt for the body as “salvation of the soul” – what else is this if not a *recipe* for decadence? (*EH*, “Dawn,” 2; emphasis in original)

The centrality of “life” as the standard for the revaluation of values reaches a crescendo in the final section of *Ecce Homo*, “Why I Am a Destiny.” As he emphasizes: “*Revaluation of all values*: that is my formula for an act of supreme self-examination on the part of humanity”:

Blindness to Christianity is the crime *par excellence* – the crime against life. . . . Christian morality . . . that which *corrupted* humanity . . . it is the utterly gruesome fact that *antinature* itself received the highest honors as morality . . . To blunder to such an extent, not as individuals, not as a people, but as humanity! – That one taught men to despise the very first instincts of life . . . What? Is humanity itself decadent? Was it always? – What is certain is that it has been *taught* only decadence values as supreme values. The morality that would un-self man is the morality of decadence *par excellence* – the fact “I am declining,” transposed into the imperative, “all of you *ought* to decline” – and not only into the imperative. – This the only morality that has been taught so far . . . reveals a will to the end; fundamentally, it negates life. (*EH*, “Why I Am a Destiny,” 7)

As Nietzsche emphasizes, this is compatible with what he claims is his particular insight, namely, that it is not humanity that is “degenerating” but rather only a particular type of man exemplified by the priest which found “in Christian morality the means to come to *power*.” These individuals were “decadents: *hence* the revaluation of all values into hostility to life, *hence* morality – *Definition of morality*: Morality – the idiosyncrasy of decadents, with the ulterior motive of revenging oneself against life – successfully” (*EH*, “Why I Am a Destiny,” 7):

Finally – this is what is most terrible of all – the concept of the *good* man signifies that one sides with all that is weak, sick, failure, suffering of itself – all that ought to perish: the principle of selection is crossed – an ideal is fabricated from the contradiction against the proud and well-turned-out human being who says Yes . . . and he is now called *evil*. (*EH*, “Why I Am a Destiny,” 8)

And Nietzsche then ends *Ecce Homo*: “Have I been understood? – *Dionysus versus the Crucified*. –” (*EH*, “Why I Am a Destiny,” 8).

In other words, the fundamental contrast is between those who side with what is weak, sick, and so on, and those who side with, who affirm, what is essential to life: the tendency to strength, health, domination, and so on. As these passages make clear, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche does have a fundamental standard: it is the standard of life. Life itself strives towards growth, domination, expansion, strength – in short power. To affirm life is to affirm



this fundamental tendency. The fundamental task is to assess evaluative systems according to whether they help the fundamental instincts of life or hinder them. Nietzsche takes one of his fundamental insights to be that morality is a product of life that is declining in strength. The result is a set of values that reject and condemn the fundamental tendencies of life to strength, domination, growth, and power and instead support weakness of all kinds. The institution of these values actually succeeds in weakening life, in weakening the tendency to growth and domination. The “decadents” thus revenge themselves “against life – successfully” (*EH*, “Why I Am a Destiny,” 7). Nietzsche, on the other hand, is going to side with the “new party of life,” with Dionysus against the Crucified.

When we turn to the above-mentioned prefaces of 1886, the concept of “life” plays the same central role. The preface to *BT* claims that this book tackles the following problem for the first time: “to look at science in the perspective [unter der Optik] of the artist, but at art in that of life” (*BT*, Preface, 2). And to the “whole cluster of grave questions with which this book burdened itself” he “add[s] the gravest question of all. What, seen in the perspective of life [unter der Optik des Lebens], is the significance of morality?” (*BT*, Preface, 4). Again he emphasizes how he sensed behind morality a “hostility to life”: “life *must* continually and inevitably be in the wrong, because life *is* something essentially amoral . . . might not morality be ‘a will to negate life’ . . . the beginning of the end? Hence, the danger of dangers?” (*BT*, Preface, 5). One could continue with quotations from the remaining prefaces mentioned, but the same themes of the proposed interpretation get sounded again and again.<sup>21</sup>

The above discussion succeeds in showing that the textual evidence deployed against a strong form of the will to power doctrine does not work against the interpretation that takes the notion of “life” as essential to articulating Nietzsche’s fundamental evaluative standard and as expressing a fundamental descriptive claim about, at least, a central part of reality. Life itself is a tendency to grow, dominate, accumulate strength, in short, increase power. But it also provides Nietzsche’s standard for evaluating value systems: we have to ask whether evaluative systems help growth, domination, and the accumulation of strength or whether they undermine it.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *HAA*, Preface, 1, 6; *GS*, Preface, 2. The way in which the preface of *Daybreak* fits with my interpretation will become clearer, I hope, once the rest of it is laid out below.

<sup>22</sup> Let me deal briefly with two objections. First, the interpretation that takes life as fundamentally a tendency to power should not be read as ascribing the kind of teleological view to Nietzsche that he would disapprove of. Indeed, he clearly contrasts precisely this view with a teleological view. He

## 5. THE BENTHAMITE MODEL

As I said analogously about the interpretation that focuses on articulating Nietzsche's position in terms of the will to power, it is hard to think that there is no connection between the descriptive claims about what is essential to life and the use of life as a fundamental standard for evaluating values. And Nietzsche's texts certainly seem to claim the existence of some connection:

Every naturalism in morality – that is, every healthy morality – is dominated by an instinct of life; some commandment of life is fulfilled by a determinate canon of “shalt” and “shalt not”; some inhibition and hostile element on the path of life is thus removed. *Anti-natural* morality – that is, almost every morality which has so far been taught, revered, and preached – turns, conversely, *against* the instincts of life: it is *condemnation* of these instincts, now secret, now outspoken and impudent. (*TI*, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” 4)

A naturalist morality is one that goes along with life's fundamental tendency to dominate. It affirms this tendency and looks for “shalts” and “shalt nots” that help life achieve these goals. Unlike the anti-natural morality it does not fight, it does not revolt against, the fundamental instincts of life by condemning them. Nietzsche continues:

Once one has comprehended the outrage of such a revolt against life as has become almost sacrosanct in Christian morality, one has, fortunately, also comprehended something else: the futility, apparentness, absurdity, and *mendaciousness* of such a revolt. A condemnation of life by the living remains in the end a mere symptom of a certain kind of life: the question whether it is justified or unjustified is not even raised thereby. One would require a position *outside* of life, and yet have to know it as well as one, as many, as all who have lived it, in order to be permitted even to touch the problem of the *value* of life: reasons enough to comprehend that this problem is for us an unapproachable problem. When we speak of values, we speak with the inspiration, with the way of looking at things, which is part of life [*unter*

writes: “[L]ife itself is *will to power*; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *results*. In short, here as everywhere else, let us beware of *superfluous* teleological principles – one of which is the instinct of self-preservation . . . Thus method, which must be essentially economy of principles, demands it” (*BGE*, 13). There are two ways of making sense of Nietzsche's view here. One is to interpret him as thinking of the claim that life is the will to power as teleological but not as a *superfluous* teleological claim. The second option, the one I prefer, is to ascribe to him the view that a general tendency to growth, domination, expansion, increase of strength, and so on, is simply too diffuse to count as having a *telos* in the relevant sense. Compare, again, the kind of claim about life that a contemporary biologist might make.

The second objection involves *BGE*, 9, where Nietzsche mocks the Stoics for the imperative “live according to life.” As Nietzsche says, “how could you *not* do that? Why make a principle of what you yourselves are and must be?” As I hope my discussion of the Benthamite model below will show, this in fact can be read as supportive of my eventual interpretation rather than undermining it.

*der Optik des Lebens*]: life itself forces us to posit values; life itself values through us when we posit values. From this it follows that even that anti-natural morality which conceives of God as the counter-concept and condemnation of life is only a value judgment of life – but of what life? of what kind of life? I have already given the answer: of declining, weakened, weary, condemned life. (*TI*, “Morality as Anti-nature,” 5)

I suggest that implicit in these Nietzschean texts is a kind of naturalism about values that was quite widespread among late nineteenth-century thinkers working in the wake of, as Nietzsche would put it, the “death of God.” Mill is an example, but only one example. And perhaps Mill is not as good an example as Bentham. The Benthamite model, as I am tempted to call it, focuses on the *inescapability* of certain fundamental tendencies or dispositions. Once we really see ourselves as natural creatures – once, to use Nietzsche’s language, we “translate man back into nature” (*BGE*, 230) – then we have to look for direction from nature. Where else could one look? And nature has constituted us, so the understandable thought goes, in certain ways. One would have reason to act against our natural constitution only on the basis of some set of commands or injunctions from beyond nature and that is precisely what we give up in our attempts not to place God at the center of things. Instead we affirm, rather than deny, what is essential to life.

Bentham writes:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The *principle of utility* recognises this subjection. (Bentham 2003: 17)

Now one can try, as one can try with Mill, to find a valid argument here. Certainly for using the relevant stretches of Bentham or Mill for purely philosophical purposes one would have to determine whether or not there was a valid argument. However, for the purposes of the history of philosophy – for the purpose of figuring out the probability that an interpretation reflects what the philosopher was thinking – what is more important, at least here, is the widespread tendency to think along such lines.

In addition to Mill and Bentham, I would classify Marx as another example:

The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer.

They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes. The abolition of existing property relations is not at all a distinctive feature of Communism. (Marx [1848] 1978c: 484)

Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence. (Marx [1845–46] 1978b: 162)

The working class . . . have no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realise, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant. (Marx [1871] 1978a: 635–36)

Such quotes can be multiplied without end and the point comes across even more strongly in Engels' writings. The thrust is that somehow fundamental historical tendencies settle, or make irrelevant, certain fundamental evaluative questions. And reading the evaluative off of these natural tendencies is precisely what one does when one rejects the traditional non-scientific, metaphysical, religious groundings for morality. There were neo-Kantians who worried about precisely this kind of materialism in Marx and others, but there were also defenders of what came to be regarded as the orthodox Marxist line. Karl Kautsky, "the embodiment of Marxist orthodoxy" as Kolakowski put it, responded to the neo-Kantian worries as one might expect:<sup>23</sup>

[If] the sceptic aimed to be correctly informed about marxist ethics, he would recognise . . . that ethics are not a matter of convention, nor something which the individual chooses at will, but are determined by powers which are stronger than the individual, which stand over him. How can scepticism arise out of the recognition of necessity?<sup>24</sup>

[It is] the materialist conception of history which has first completely deposed the moral ideal as the directing factor of social evolution, and has taught us to deduce our social aims solely from the knowledge of the material foundations.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The quoted phrase about Kautsky is from Kolakowski 1978: II, 31.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Lukes 1985: 16–17. <sup>25</sup> Quoted in Lukes 1985: 18.

This line, famously, was picked up by Lenin and Trotsky. As Trotsky wrote, the “morality of the proletariat . . . deduces a rule of conduct from the laws of development of society, thus primarily from the class struggle, this law of all laws.”<sup>26</sup>

Much of the appeal of the various different strands in social Darwinism, whether more individualistic or not, also clearly lay in a similar line of thought: nature, rather than something outside of nature, must give us direction. The nineteenth century is thus replete with this line of thought. Indeed, the intuition that something like this has to be right lies behind many contemporary forms of naturalism – those that focus, in one way or another, on articulating what we “really” want – and, I would suggest, contemporary “constitutivist” theories that attempt to deduce how we ought to behave from the rules that we already supposedly inevitably follow, at some level, when we act.<sup>27</sup>

The point is not at all that such arguments work. Indeed, I have argued that even the arguments by the most sophisticated of contemporary defenders of such views do not work.<sup>28</sup> The point is rather that the temptation towards some such view, that people find some such line of thought intuitive, is understandable even if the various attempts to work out the details turn out to fail. In all these cases, cases that share a rejection of the non-natural, the metaphysical in some pejorative sense, it makes sense to ascribe to the philosopher a strongly held belief or intuition to the effect that what we are naturally disposed to go for in our lives at the most fundamental level somehow settles what we should go for – or, at least, makes that question somehow irrelevant.

Leiter, recall, used Schacht as the example of someone committed to a strong form of the doctrine of will to power and suggested that the “Millian Model seems the most charitable reconstruction of what the commentators do say, and of Nietzsche’s few scattered remarks on the subjection” (2000: 282 n. 19); however, I suggest, the above interpretation fits what Schacht does say much better. Here is Schacht ascribing what should now look like a very similar argument to Nietzsche:

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Lukes 1985: 24.

<sup>27</sup> For naturalisms of the former kind, see the work of Peter Railton. For prominent contemporary forms of constitutivist views see the work of Christine Korsgaard and J. David Velleman. For an attempt to provide a detailed, philosophically defensible interpretation of Nietzsche along contemporary constitutivist lines, see Katsafanas 2011a. Cf. Schacht 1983: 367: “As a constitutive principle [will to power] is the ultimate basis of all value.”

<sup>28</sup> Hussain 2004 and 2008.

Human life, for Nietzsche, is ultimately a part of a kind of a vast game in which reality generally consists, the basic rules of which allow of innumerable variations but are unalterable in their general outlines. It is so to speak, the only game in town. Once its nature is discerned, and the impossibility of getting outside of it is recognized, its affirmation presents itself as the only alternative to a rejection leading nowhere but to nihilism. . . . The nature of the game, he holds, establishes a standard for the evaluation of everything falling within its compass. (Schacht 1983: 398)

Some such thought of inescapability, I suggest, lies behind the connection Nietzsche clearly sees between the fact that life is essentially a tendency to grow, dominate, and so on, and the use of life as a standard by which to assess values, to assess whether they promote growth, domination, and power or undermine it. We should read these passages as involving implicitly the above line of thought that was widespread among turn-of-the-century materialists – or naturalists in some broad sense. Life is a tendency towards domination, growth, expansion, overcoming resistances, and so on – power, in short. This is, to use Bentham’s phrase, our “subjection.” To reject this subjection, to question the value of pursuing domination, growth, and so on – to question the value of life – is fundamentally pointless. It inevitably involves a commitment to something beyond nature. “For a philosopher to see a problem in the value of life is thus an objection to him, a question mark concerning his wisdom, an un-wisdom” (*TI*, “The Problem of Socrates,” 2).<sup>29</sup>

Again none of this is to claim that I have a reconstruction of a valid argument that we can ascribe to Nietzsche – an argument that would show how the fact that life does have this fundamental tendency towards power does indeed entail either that we should value power or, at least, that it does not make sense for us to ask whether or not we should go along with our

<sup>29</sup> I am willing to grant that it is not exactly clear what Nietzsche’s complaint is, either here or in some other passages we will consider below. But this reflects the problems of the general strategy. I think it is quite unclear in all the cases we considered – Bentham, Mill, Marx, Darwinism, contemporary naturalists and constitutivists – why a certain kind of normative question is supposed to be closed off. Nietzsche has company – whether one takes it as good or bad company is another matter.

See also *WP*, 675: “To have purposes, aims, intentions, *willing* in general, is the same thing as willing to be stronger, willing to grow – and, in addition, willing the means to do this. The most universal and basic instinct in all doing and willing has for precisely this reason remained the least known and most hidden, because *in praxi* we always follow its commandments, because we *are* this commandment –. All valuations are only consequences and narrow perspectives in the service of this one will: valuation itself is only this will to power. A critique of being from the point of view of any one of these values is something absurd and erroneous. Even supposing that a process of decline begins in this way, this process still stands in the service of this will. To appraise being itself! But this appraisal itself is still this being! – and if we say no, we still do what we *are*. One must comprehend the absurdity of this posture of judging existence, and then try to understand what is really involved in it. It is symptomatic.” See also *WP*, 706; *CW*, Epilogue.

tendency to pursue power. But given the historical context of the nineteenth century – indeed, given contemporary tendencies in those who reject non-naturalism – philosophical charity does not force us to avoid the ascription of the above Benthamite argument. The text, as I hope to have shown, warrants just such an ascription.

I have ignored so far one passage that Leiter appeals to in rejecting some strong form of the will to power doctrine. The question is whether the passage also provides evidence against the interpretation of Nietzsche in terms of the notion of “life” that I have been defending. I will argue that it does not but that seeing why will eventually show us why and how *On the Genealogy of Morality* is absolutely essential to Nietzsche’s overall project.

Leiter quotes the following passage from *The Antichrist*:

Life itself is to my mind the instinct for growth, for durability, for an accumulation of forces, for *power*: where the will to power is lacking there is decline. It is my contention that all the supreme values of mankind *lack* this will. (A, 6)

Leiter focuses on the claim that the “will to power is lacking” as textual evidence that undermines the strong form of the will to power doctrine. As he puts it, “But if all actions manifested this *will*, then this *will* could never be found lacking” (Leiter 2002: 141). Now, so far, there is an obvious response to be made. It is, recall, the “values” that “*lack* this will” and it seems perfectly fine to read this as just the claim that the values are values that reject power, that condemn power. For my purposes what is crucial is that it does not follow, yet, that life itself isn’t a tendency to power and growth. Indeed, since Nietzsche explicitly claims, right here, that “[l]ife itself is . . . the instinct for growth, for durability, for an accumulation of forces, for *power*,” he would apparently be contradicting himself in the space of the same sentence if he granted that there could be life that doesn’t involve a tendency for growth and power. On pain of ascribing this contradiction, we need to see Nietzsche as claiming that *values* can be lacking the will to power – I suggest in the sense of condemning power – but that life always involves striving for power.

This does, however, raise a puzzle: Why would living creatures that, *qua* living, embody a fundamental tendency to dominate and grow come nonetheless to have values that do not assign positive value to domination, growth, power, and so on? The answer that Nietzsche almost has to give, and that has been suggested in many of the passages we have already considered, is that it is the fundamental tendency to dominate and grow that *itself* generates value judgments that are hostile to life. This is precisely the kind of claim Nietzsche needs to make in order to use what I have called

the Benthamite model of inescapability or subjection. Thus its repeated presence in the texts we have considered is further evidence that he is committed to the Benthamite model.<sup>30</sup>

## 6. THE GENEALOGY OF MORALITY

However, if this interpretation is right, then we should see Nietzsche defending this claim. After all, it is one thing to assert this and another to provide evidence. Here is where we come to see the centrality of *On the Genealogy of Morality* in Nietzsche's overall project. One of the crucial tasks that the *Genealogy* carries out is precisely such a defense. What it shows is that even the occurrence of value judgments that condemn life, that condemn life precisely by condemning tendencies to dominate, subjugate, grow, and so on, is to be explained by appealing to the fundamental tendency that is life, to grow, to dominate, and so on. The *Genealogy* is an extended study of how this essential tendency of life, when it is in life forms that are relatively weak, that cannot directly dominate their environments, that are declining in strength – in short, to use one of Nietzsche's favorite words from later in the passage, in cases of decadence – this tendency of life itself generates value judgments according to which striving for power, dominating, expanding, and so on, are condemned. The *Genealogy* thus shows that the tendency towards power is, even in these extreme cases, inescapable. At the same time it shows that the values of morality serve the relatively weak, declining forms of life.

A brief tour of the *Genealogy* should suffice to make this point. In *GM*, I, 7, Nietzsche claims that part of the aristocracy was a “*priestly* caste.” A caste that was, at least relative to the warrior knights, powerless. The suggestion seems to be that this is in part because of a fundamental unhealthiness among this group (*GM*, I, 6).<sup>31</sup> “Out of their powerlessness their hate grows into something enormous and uncanny” (*GM*, I, 6). The only way for them to gain power over the natural ruling classes is through “an act of *spiritual revenge*” which involves “a radical revaluation of their values.”

It was the Jews who in opposition to the aristocratic value equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of God) dared its inversion, . . . namely: “the miserable alone are the good; the poor, powerless, lowly alone are the good . . .

<sup>30</sup> Consider again *TI*, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” 5. Or *WP*, 675 again.

<sup>31</sup> I take the appeal of Nietzsche to contingent, but, as far he seems to think, common occurrences to be part of his denial that his arguments appeal to any fundamental teleological conception of reality.



whereas you, you noble and powerful ones . . . you will eternally be the wretched, accursed, and damned!" (*GM*, I, 7)

What is crucial for Nietzsche is that this "*slave revolt in morality* . . . has been victorious" (*GM*, I, 7). In other words, the strategy of insisting on this inversion, "with fear-inspiring consistency, and held . . . fast with teeth of the most unfathomable hate (the hate of powerlessness)," has indeed been successful in replacing the traditional aristocratic value equation and succeeded in giving those who were powerless a way to increase their power in society. But what this has allowed is the continued existence, indeed dominance, of "mediocre and uninspiring" creatures. The reversal of values prevents the emergence of more powerful humans, of those who are "completely formed, happy, powerful, triumphant, in which there is still something to fear!" (*GM*, I, 12). The tendency to accumulate power has thus driven those who were relatively powerless to invent morality, a set of values that condemns this basic tendency to domination and power that is life. In turn the widespread acceptance of morality has undermined, so far, the emergence of even more powerful individuals. It prevents the development of a "stronger type" (*GM*, I, 17).<sup>32</sup>

The second essay focuses on the emergence of guilt and bad conscience, both essential to the functioning of morality.<sup>33</sup> They give the values of morality their bite, their sting, and thus get individuals not to consciously pursue their own growth and development. The story of the emergence of guilt and bad conscience is again a story in which it is the fundamental tendency to dominate, overpower, and expand that explains their emergence. A "race of conquerors and lords . . . lays its terrible paws on a population enormously superior in number perhaps, but still formless, still roaming about" (*GM*, II, 17). These lords are the "state" that "as a

<sup>32</sup> How could the powerful lose out against the relatively powerless? Doesn't this just show that they aren't relatively more powerful? There is no denying that there are deep tensions in Nietzsche's view here – tensions that are actually reflected in analogous tensions in the other forms of naturalism and constitutivism I pointed to earlier. For reasons of space, I cannot say much about this here. We would need to work through a plausible range of different senses of power and address questions of the power of collectives of individuals. Consider simply physical power and some everyday notion of intelligence. Imagine the practically brilliant warrior who is both smarter and more physically powerful than I am in general. I contend that it would be acceptable shorthand to say that this person is just more powerful than I am. I could still succeed in managing to outwit him on some particular occasion for contingent reasons that do not count against the general claim that he is smarter and more physically powerful than I am. I just happen to know that this stream I am leading him to is contaminated. Or, now the point about groups, I gang up on him with others. Our everyday notions allow us to say, apparently sensibly, that the weak can defeat the powerful. Cf. *A*, 58.

<sup>33</sup> For my purposes here, and for reasons of space, I am going to ignore the many complexities surrounding the relations between conscience, bad conscience, and guilt.

terrible tyranny, as a crushing and ruthless machinery . . . continued to work until finally such a raw material of people and half-animals was not only thoroughly kneaded and pliable but also *formed*" (*GM*, II, 17). They enclose this population "once and for all within the sway of society and peace" (*GM*, II, 16). In turn:

Those terrible bulwarks with which the organization of the state protects itself against the old instincts of freedom . . . brought it about that all those instincts of the wild free roaming human turned themselves backwards *against man himself*. . . *that* is the origin of "bad conscience." (*GM*, II, 16)

As Nietzsche emphasizes:

Fundamentally, it is the same active force as the one that is at work on a grand scale in those artists of violence and organizers, and that builds states, which here, internally, and on a smaller, pettier scale, turned backwards, in the "labyrinth of the breast" . . . creates bad conscience for itself, and builds negative ideals, it is that very *instinct for freedom* (put into my language: the will to power). (*GM*, II, 17)

The full story here is inevitably more complicated, and for reasons of space I cannot do it justice, but this suffices to show that again it is life, the tendency to power itself, that lies behind the emergence of morality and its condemnation of life.<sup>34</sup>

The third essay makes the same kind of argument though here it is the emergence of the ascetic ideal that is being explained. The ascetic ideal is "anti-nature" (*GM*, III, 3) in the sense that it rejects the fundamental tendencies of life, rejects this life in favor of a supposed "other existence" (*GM*, III, 11).<sup>35</sup> Even this dramatic rejection of life is to be explained by the fundamental tendency that is life, namely, the will to power. And again it is the priest that plays a crucial role: the "ascetic priest has not only his faith in that ideal but also his will, his power, his interest." The ascetic priest "does not belong to any single race; he flourishes everywhere; he grows forth from every social rank" (*GM*, III, 11): "It must be a necessity of the first rank that makes this species that is *hostile to life* grow and prosper again and again – it must be in the *interest of life itself* that this type of self-contradiction not die out" (*GM*, III, 11).

Nietzsche is clear about what this necessity is:

<sup>34</sup> Part of what is crucial to the story is the role of the priest (*GM*, III, 20).

<sup>35</sup> "One knows the three great pomp words of the ascetic ideal: poverty, humility, chastity" (*GM*, III, 8). For a forceful statement of the ways in which the ascetic ideal is anti-life see the very end of *GM*, III, 28. There is a kind of asceticism that Nietzsche clearly approves of, but I will not attempt to untangle those knots here (cf. *A*, 57).

*the ascetic ideal springs from the protective and healing instincts of a degenerating life* that seeks with every means to hold its ground and is fighting for its existence; it points to a partial physiological hindrance and tiredness against which the deepest instincts of life, which have remained intact, fight incessantly with new means and inventions. (*GM*, III, 13)

The ways in which, according to Nietzsche, the ascetic ideal, in the hands of the priest, succeeds as such a means are quite complicated and we do not need to rehearse them here.<sup>36</sup> What is crucial for my purposes is the fact that Nietzsche goes to such lengths to show how the emergence of even the most extreme form of an ideal that is hostile to life is to be explained by appealing to the fundamental tendencies that constitute life.

The *Genealogy* thus plays an essential role in defending in detail the crucial premise of the Benthamite model, namely, that these are the fundamental tendencies of life to which we are inescapably subjected.

The final twist to the story emerges when we ask ourselves how Nietzsche's own attempt to revalue values is to be explained. If indeed life needs morality – needs values that reject life – then what chance does Nietzsche's attempt at a revaluation have? If indeed we are all degenerate in the way Nietzsche supposes, then how can we give up the hostility to life expressed by the ascetic ideal? Here is where the discussion of science and philosophy in the third essay plays a central role.

After describing in some detail how the ascetic ideal “has ruined the health of the soul” (*GM*, III, 22), Nietzsche asks “*where* is the opposing will in which an *opposing ideal* expresses itself?” (*GM*, III, 23). Most of science he thinks does not at all provide such opposition. There are some rare cases though where science and philosophy do involve “passion, love, ardor, suffering” (*GM*, III, 23); however, such exceptions do not present an alternative, rather – and this is Nietzsche's crucial move – they are the ascetic ideal's “*most recent and noblest form*” (*GM*, III, 23) because “*they still believe in truth*” (*GM*, III, 24): “What *compels* one to this, however, this unconditional will to truth, is the *belief in the ascetic ideal itself*. . . it is the belief in a *metaphysical value*” (*GM*, III, 24). But this final, purest form of the ascetic ideal, this will to truth and truthfulness, finally “forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God*.” Indeed this will to truth finally leads to the self-destruction of morality and the ascetic ideal: “In this manner Christianity *as dogma* perished of its own morality; in this manner Christianity *as morality* must now also perish” (*GM*, III, 27).

But this perishing creates a tremendous opportunity, indeed a necessity:

<sup>36</sup> See Leiter 2002: 260–63, for one interpretation.

If one disregards the ascetic ideal: man, the *animal* man, has until now had no meaning. His existence on earth contained no goal; “to what end man at all?” – was a question without answer . . . behind every great human destiny a still greater “for nothing!” resounded as refrain. Precisely *this* is what the ascetic ideal means: . . . an enormous *void* surrounded man – he did not know how to justify, to explain, to affirm himself; he *suffered* from the problem of his meaning. (*GM*, III, 28)

If the ascetic ideal destroys itself, then life itself will now generate a new ideal. Once it gives up the “concept of the ‘beyond’, the ‘true world’ invented in order to devaluate the only world there is” (*EH*, “Why I Am a Destiny,” 8), then it will have to affirm this world and that is to affirm life itself, the tendency, the will, to power. This is why the immoralists, those on the side of life, do stand a chance of revaluing values for the sake of life. The “economy in the law of life . . . finds an advantage even in the disgusting species of . . . the priests. *What* advantage? But we ourselves, we immoralists, are the answer” (*TI*, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” 5).<sup>37</sup>

#### 7. CONCLUSION

We began with certain puzzles about Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Why did Nietzsche assume that morality was to be assessed in terms of its ability to help or hinder man from reaching his “*highest potential power and splendour*” (*GM*, Preface, 6)? We also wondered why there seemed to be a close connection between this standard and the emphasis on either the degeneration or increasing strength of “life.” Why is it so crucial, as he puts it elsewhere, to assess the “significance of morality” from “the perspective of life” (*BT*, Preface, 4)? Finally, we wondered why the value of the values of *morality* were to be assessed in the light of a genealogy of these values, but no similar task seemed to be taken up for the standards, the apparent values, that Nietzsche *himself* was clearly using to assess the values of morality? Why was not the value of these in turn to be questioned?

With the above, extended discussion in place, we can finally sum up the answer to these puzzles. Life itself essentially involves a tendency to expansion, growth, domination, power, and splendor. We are always under the “subjection” of this tendency. The natural, Benthamite thought to have is that once one has rejected any appeal to anything other-worldly, anything non-natural, anything beyond this life, then nothing makes sense but to affirm this “subjection.” As I granted, I do not think we can philosophically defend this inference, but its widespread appeal prevents the principle of

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *GS*, I.

charity from undermining the ascription of this inference to Nietzsche. The puzzle, then, is why we do ever value anything else. As we have just seen, one crucial role of the *Genealogy* is to show that even when our values are hostile to life, these very valuations emerge from the fundamental tendency to power and domination that is life. The *Genealogy* shows that even in such cases this tendency is inescapable. The *Genealogy* itself shows that there is no similar genealogy to be done for this fundamental tendency. It is simply essential to what it is to be a living creature.

Or, if you prefer, the *Genealogy* is a genealogy of both the tendency towards power, and Nietzsche's affirmation of it. The genealogy gives us vivid evidence of how the tendency to dominate, to grow, and so on, is there even in the cases in which it might seem clear that it is not, for example, in the ascetic ideal. Finally, it is this ascetic ideal itself that is leading to its own destruction. And, as Nietzsche hints above, the fundamental tendency to grow and expand that is life must find another solution to the problem of the meaning of human life. Since "man has become a fantastic animal that has to fulfill one more condition of existence than any other animal" (*GS*, 1), that needs a justification of life, a purpose for life. The solution is to affirm this life rather than hopelessly look outside of this life. And this life is in essence a tendency to dominate, to expand, to exploit, in short to accumulate power. Affirming this life is affirming this pursuit of power. Life itself needs this affirmation. Life itself needs the immoralist. As Nietzsche writes:

Consequently –. Consequently. Consequently. O, do you understand me, my brothers? Do you understand this new law of ebb and flood? There is time for us too! (*GS*, 1)