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A Modern Polytheism? Nietzsche and James

Abstract: Richard Rorty has argued that Friedrich Nietzsche and William James are both polytheists in the deflationary sense that they are both pluralists about human value. I argue that there is a more philosophically significant sense in which Nietzsche and James might be called polytheists: both advocate a life of openness and receptivity to multiple and potentially incommensurable sources of inspiration outside of our conscious control. The value of these sources is accessed in experiences in which one feels that one is given something in an experience that one could not have obtained through conscious effort. I argue that this moment of passivity plays a crucial role in both James' treatment of religious experience in his *Varieties* and Nietzsche's account of the state of inspiration he experienced while composing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and that their deep similarity on this point suggests that Nietzsche is closer to Jamesian religion than he is to Rortyan secularism.

Keywords: Polytheism; Pluralism; Phenomenology; Religious Experience; Inspiration

1. Introduction

Polytheism is a strange view to hold in modernity. Connected as it is in the popular imagination with archaic, animistic, magical, pre-scientific systems of thought, we don't hesitate much before casting it into the dustbin of history. Even if we are not monotheists, we are likely to think of monotheism as the obviously more plausible position. The traditional arguments for the existence of God, which have been enormously influential in Western philosophy of religion, do not necessarily rule out polytheism, but they are clearly formulated with monotheism in mind. While there could be multiple first causes, intelligent designers, or beings than which nothing greater can be conceived, the simplest and most natural conclusion to draw if one finds these

arguments persuasive is that they all point to a single divine being.¹ If part of what it means to be divine is to carry some authority in the realm of what ought to be done, polytheism faces the potential problem of divine disagreement, while monotheism provides the unchallenged authority of one deity, whose guidance provides the one right answer to our questions of what we ought to do.² Presumably, arguments like these played an important role in the shift in prominence, especially but not only in the West, away from polytheistic religions and toward monotheistic ones, a shift that can seem to us as all but inevitable in retrospect.

Despite this, the two most original philosophers of religion of the late 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche and William James, both found cause to praise polytheism, and call for its retrieval. Nietzsche, in a crucial passage in *The Gay Science*, lauded polytheism as “the wonderful art and power of creating gods,” and as “the drive to have one’s own ideal,” and derided monotheism as “the greatest danger to humanity so far” (GS 143). William James, in the “Postscript” to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, suggested that the conclusions of his psychological investigations into religious experience might lead to a new kind of polytheism, and that polytheism in fact “has always been the real religion of common people, and is so still to-day” (VRE, 468).³ These claims have usually been ignored by commentators, and neither’s pronouncements about polytheism are taken particularly seriously.⁴

What I want to argue here is that there is a more than metaphorical sense in which we can attribute a sincere polytheism to James and Nietzsche, and that the polytheistic theme in fact serves as a surprisingly direct and illuminating route to some of their most basic philosophical insights. There is, it turns out, a deep existential core to those insights that the two philosophers share in common – a vision of human life as openness to sources of inspiration, regeneration, and vitality

that exist outside the person's conscious control. It is the commitment to the *value* and *externality* to *control* of these sources that makes that vision religious, and it is the rejection of a requirement that such sources be brought into any kind of systematic unity that makes the religious view poly- rather than monotheistic.

I proceed as follows. In section 2, I lay out and discuss some key features of the central polytheistic passages in both Nietzsche and James (i.e., GS 143 and the "Postscript" to VRE, respectively), and place them in the context of the two thinkers' overall projects. In section 3, I turn to Richard Rorty's attempt to develop a thoroughly secularized conception of polytheism as pluralism about human value; on this conception, Nietzsche and James are both polytheists because they are both value pluralists. While this conception locates an agreement between Nietzsche and James on an important philosophical question, it does so at the cost of explaining away a crucial feature of Jamesian religious experience. This feature – roughly, the feeling that one is *given* something in an experience that one could not have obtained through conscious effort, and thus that one is called to maintain a kind of openness and receptivity to such experiences – is necessary to ground James' judgment that religious experience has real value. While insisting on this point might seem to push James and the stalwart atheist Nietzsche even farther apart, I argue in section 4 that it actually reveals a much deeper similarity between the two. Nietzsche's accounts of the value creation of new philosophers, and of the inspiration he felt in his own attempt at the creation of value (i.e., the composition of his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) also foreground the necessity of an openness to sources of insight and vitality that are not ourselves. I conclude with some suggestions about how this deep similarity might cast new light on some of the more confounding aspects of Nietzsche's deeply ambivalent views on the value of religion.

2. Polytheism Passages: GS 143 and the *Varieties* “Postscript”

It will be best to begin by taking a bit closer look at the two key passages, first GS 143 and then the “Postscript” to the *Varieties*. The Nietzsche passage runs as follows:

The greatest advantage of polytheism. – For an individual to posit his *own* ideal and to derive from it his own law, joys and rights – that may well have been considered hitherto to be the most outrageous of human aberrations and idolatry itself; indeed, the few who dared it always felt the need to apologize to themselves, usually as follows: ‘Not I! Not I! But a *god* through me!’ The wonderful art and power of creating gods – polytheism – was that through which this drive could discharge itself, purify, perfect and ennoble itself; for originally it was a base and undistinguished drive, related to stubbornness, disobedience, and envy. To be *hostile* to this drive to have one’s own ideal: that was formerly the law of every morality. There was only one norm: ‘*the human being*’ – and every people believed itself to *have* this one and ultimate norm. But above and outside oneself, in a distant overworld, one got to see a *plurality of norms*: one god was not the denial of or anathema to another god! Here for the first time one allowed oneself individuals; here one first honored the rights of individuals . . . Monotheism, in contrast, this rigid consequence of the teachings of a normal human type – that is, the belief in a normal god next to whom there are only false pseudo-gods – was perhaps the greatest danger to humanity so far: it threatened us with that premature stagnation which, as far as we can tell, most other species have long reached; for all of them believe in one normal type and ideal for their species and have translated the morality of custom (*Sittlichkeit der Sitte*) definitively into flesh and blood. In polytheism the free-spiritedness and many-spiritedness of humanity received preliminary form – the power to create for ourselves our own new eyes and ever again new eyes that are ever more our own – so that for humans alone among the animals there are no eternal horizons and perspectives.

The most striking feature of the passage is that it appears to be assimilating religious belief to what we might broadly call “moral” issues. Both polytheism and monotheism as religious positions are, for Nietzsche, consequences of rather than presuppositions for basic moral positions: for polytheism, the position that there are a plurality of possible ideals or norms for human behavior,

not necessarily in conflict with one another; for monotheism (which Nietzsche elsewhere jokingly calls “monotono-theism”⁵), the position that there is one normal human type and thus one human “norm” in the fullest sense of the term.⁶ Such a reversal is certainly typical of Nietzsche – he claimed famously in *Beyond Good and Evil* that “the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constitute the true living seed from which the whole plant has always grown” (BGE 6), and it is a common trope in his writing to explain theoretical beliefs by reference to ethical motivations. Here, we have an application of that idea to religious belief – belief in one God is not really motivated by rational demonstration, but by an ethical commitment to there being just one way that humans ought to be. Belief in polytheism, which Nietzsche obviously prefers, isn’t motivated by rational demonstration either, but rather by a need for self-assertion, often for emancipation from the stifling feeling of being held to an external standard.

It’s natural at this point, I think, to deny that there’s anything especially *religious* about the position Nietzsche expresses here. Polytheism seemed to provide a kind of helpful cover for the Greeks (and others, of course) to develop their own unique ideas of how a human life should be led. Nietzsche’s “polytheism,” such as it is, is nothing more than a commitment to individualism in ethics, or to a denial of the idea that there is or ought to be one “normal” human type. I want to challenge this below, but for now let’s leave ourselves with the impression and move on to James.

James tells us that he wrote the “Postscript” to the *Varieties* because his final lecture, presenting the “conclusions” of his study of religious experience, gave only a “scant” statement of his “general philosophic position” (VRE, 464). James’ study is fairly well-known, so I will merely state briefly and baldly what I take to be the most central of those conclusions:

- (i) The basic ground of religious belief in humans is not rational argument or communal practices and rituals, but the religious experiences of individuals.
- (ii) Such experiences present themselves to us as the appearance of an “unseen” or “spiritual” order, separate from the visible, mundane, everyday one, and outstripping it in significance.
- (iii) Humans experience the unseen not as a projection or creation of their own, but as something external to and “greater” than them, which has the potential to bring about real effects in their lives if they are properly receptive and “surrender” to it.
- (iv) Being receptive to such experiences provides the only solution to a central human problem – existential despair. People who “accept” these experiences really do recover from such despair. They experience a conversion – they are inspired to see life as worth living instead of not worth living.
- (v) The validity of this “acceptance” cannot be justified by an account of the original source of the experience, but by the display of the “real work” that the experience has done in the believer’s life – if she has really been “saved,” it will reveal itself in a more significant, inspired life for her.⁷

Throughout the lectures, James keeps a safe distance from more theological concerns, and especially from the question: what is the nature of the being(s) from whom these “saving” experiences come? He seems open to a wide variety of possible answers.⁸ In the “Postscript,” James calls himself a supernaturalist, due to his belief that religious experience is a “communion with the Ideal,” through which “new force comes into the world, and new departures are made here below” (VRE, 465). Though he admits that most who have undergone religious experiences have seen “the

Ideal” as a single and infinite entity, he sees no evidence in their descriptions of their experience for this belief. All that is needed for the saving power of religious experience to do its work is that there be something larger than us and “friendly” to our concerns and ideals; there is thus no need for that something to be the traditional omnimax deity of monotheism:

It need not be infinite, it need not be solitary. It might conceivably even be only a larger and more godlike self, of which the present self would then be but the mutilated expression, and the universe might conceivably be a collection of such selves, of different degrees of inclusiveness, with no absolute unity realized in it at all. Thus would a sort of polytheism return upon us . . . ” (ibid., 468)

Thus, James’ view⁹ is polytheistic in the following sense – it is a *theism*, because it insists on the existence of something (“the Ideal”) that outstrips the mundane, natural world, and which is the site of what is most significant, what matters most to us existentially; and it is a *polytheism* because James rejects what he takes to be the overly philosophical, intellectualized impulse to singularize that something. What is most significant for your life may not be identical with what is most significant for my life; what “saves” you from existential despair, and gives your life new purpose and zest, might be something entirely different from and incommensurable with what does that for me. If we call what does that to a person “god,” and are properly respectful of the religious experiences of others and don’t seek either to discount them or reduce them to ours, we are led to the straightforwardly polytheistic claim that there are many gods.¹⁰

3. Rorty’s Deflationary Polytheism

At first glance, James’ position certainly has more of a right to be called “religious” than Nietzsche’s in GS 143. But his reticence on theological matters leaves the door open to a relatively deflationary interpretation of the supernatural. It might be that what James calls “the Ideal” might

not really mean much more than ideals of behavior, projected by humans themselves. It outstrips the natural world in the sense that human ideals are not given to us in sense experience, but that needn't lead us to believe in supernatural persons. And if that's right, Jamesian polytheism starts looking quite a bit like Nietzschean polytheism. Such, at least, is the contention of Richard Rorty, in an article entitled "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism." For Rorty,

You are a polytheist if you think that there is no actual or possible object of knowledge that would permit you to commensurate and rank all human needs . . . To be a polytheist in this sense you do not have to believe that there are nonhuman persons with power to intervene in human affairs. All you need do is to abandon the idea that we should try to find a way of making everything hang together, which will tell all human beings what to do with their lives, and tell all of them the same thing. (Rorty 1998, 23–4)

James and Nietzsche both agree on an important (negative) point: there is not one all-encompassing ideal for humanity, not one highest or "normative" way that human beings ought to be or behave. "Polytheism" is simply pluralism about the values in human life.¹¹ Though that is certainly not as exotic a position as the name "polytheism" suggests, it is at least a highly contentious position in the history of philosophy – many (perhaps most) of the greats (Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, the German idealists) have denied it.

But however contentious a position it is philosophically, it is hardly a religious position. Rorty is happy to call his polytheism "secularized" (ibid., 24), and one need not mention religion in order to explain the position, except to suggest that it did something worthwhile for us that other things (especially poetry) might now do better. Rorty is certainly aware that his position and James' are not identical. He quotes with admiration James' use of the psychologist of religion James Leuba's claim that "*God is not known, he is not understood, he is used*" (Leuba 1901, 571–2),¹² but then laments that James follows it up with the claim that religious experience also has a "positive content" which is "*literally and objectively true so far as it goes,*" namely, that "*the conscious*

person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come” (VRE, 460). On Rorty’s view, James was (or could have been) more of a religious innovator than he realized: if he had gotten over the basically unpragmatic idea that religious experience was true in some sense (whether “literal” or “objective”) over and above its usefulness, he could have stopped worrying about whether religious experience was actually revelatory of anything. “Brave and exuberant” as he was, James’ position in the *Varieties* is ultimately confused, and Rorty suggests that a little more sobriety and consistency could have led him to arrive already in 1902 at the position Dewey developed, in his “rather unambitious and half-hearted” but much clearer way, in *A Common Faith* in 1934 (Rorty 1998, 29).¹³

But let us return, first, to the quotation from Leuba, in full and in its original wording:

. . . when God, conjured up by [the religious person’s] needs, appears before him, his hands stretch forth in request for power or mercy, not in adoration. And, preposterous as it may seem, it is yet true that he cares very little who God is, or even whether He is at all. But *he uses Him*, instinctively, from habit if not from a rational conviction in His existence, for the satisfaction of his better desires, and this he does ordinarily with the directness and the bluntness of the aggressive child of a domineering century, well-nigh stranger to the emotions of fear, of awe, and of reverence. **The truth of the matter may be put this way: *God is not known, He is not understood; He is used* – used a good deal and with an admirable disregard of logical consistency, *sometimes as meat purveyor, sometimes as moral support, sometimes as friend, sometimes as an object of love. If He proves himself useful*, His right to remain in the service of man is thereby vindicated. **The religious consciousness asks for no more than that**, it does not embarrass itself with further questions: **does God really exist? how does He exist? what is He?** etc., are to it as so many **irrelevant questions**, or, if one prefers to turn the matter otherwise, they are questions which for the time being transform the religious into a philosophic consciousness. **Not God but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is in last analysis the end of religion. The love of life at any and every level of development**, or, to use another phraseology, the instinct for preservation and increase, **is the religious impulse**. It would appear, then, that there is at bottom no specifically “religious ” impulse; the preservation and increase of life is the moving impulse as well of religious as of secular activity. (Leuba 1901, 571–2; bold emphasis mine)**

In the passage, I have bolded the sections that James includes in his quotation in VRE. The context of the lines James quotes makes it abundantly clear that Leuba's overall position is not one with which James is in sympathy. In saying that God is "used" by religious believers rather than known or understood, Leuba means to suggest that their relationship to God is largely petty and transactional – they seek not to worship but to get something from him. This must be so because Leuba makes clear, in a bit of the quotation toward the end that is omitted by James, that the needs believers seek to satisfy through religion are thoroughly secular needs. The goals of the "religious" impulse are just the goals of life, broadly speaking. James quotes Leuba as identifying the "religious impulse" with the romantic phrase "the love of life at any and every development," but then omits the more crudely utilitarian identification of this with "the instinct for preservation and increase."¹⁴ He leaves out as well the claim, occurring earlier in the quotation, that the emotions of fear, awe and reverence are not typically part of the believer's experience. Leuba, like Rorty, sees religion as such as expendable – the needs it seeks to satisfy can be understood and addressed entirely independently of religious life as such.

In endorsing Leuba's claim that God is "used," James is engaged in a difficult balancing act. He is drawn in by Leuba's critique of intellectualism about religious experience; he emphatically agrees with the principal thesis of Leuba's article, which is that what is central to religious experience is that it calls to action, rather than transmitting some intellectual content to be taken up cognitively. Because of this, James himself will sometimes speak in the same stark, instrumentalist terms. In the lecture on "Saintliness," James says that "[t]he gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and one another." He goes on to critique the ideal of saintliness by "human

standards,” so as “to help us decide how far the religious life commends itself as an ideal kind of human activity,” adding that the suggestions of religious forms of life must be tested against the “vital needs” of humans (VRE, 303).

But he is also committed to the idea that the kind of call to action religious experience gives us is unique – religion responds to a “vital need” that nothing else responds to, does a kind of “work” in our lives that nothing else can, and it is precisely the unique value of that work that justifies us in taking that experience as revelatory of the divine rather than dismissing it as merely pathological (see point (v) above). This work crucially involves the more religious emotions Leuba lists – fear, awe, reverence. If one wanted to begin to triangulate James’ sometimes slippery position on the value of religious experience, one could do far worse than to begin by asking what it would mean for such emotions to prove “useful” in the broader sense of serving as valuable motivations for action. And what is typical of these emotions, and the experiences that involve them, is that in a fundamental phenomenological sense they are quite distinct from the attitudes of calculation of interest, determinations of usefulness. Their usefulness is, it turns out, proven not in situations where we confidently use them as tools, but precisely in situations in which that confidence breaks down, and we no longer know what we want, and thus *a fortiori* don’t know what would be “useful” for us.

Rorty’s deflationary move with respect to Jamesian polytheism has some plausibility because James’ philosophy of religion has such serious revisionary ambitions. James’s polytheism is not really an alternative response to the question that traditional monotheism thought it was answering (something like: “what is the ultimate explanation for why things are as they are?”); it is an answer to an entirely different question, an existential rather than an explanatory one. It is

tempting to simplify that existential question in the way that Rorty does, to understand it according to a question that makes perfect sense independently of the religious context: is there only one best or most significant thing humans ought to pursue, or are there multiple such things? But that is not the question to which James' polytheism is the answer. James assumes that the only way to do justice to the accounts of religious experience he collects in *Varieties* (i.e., to approach them without the *assumption* that they are illusory or merely pathological) is to take those who undergo those experiences at their word that there is something "larger" than and "friendly" to them that inspires them in that moment. It is the fact that these friendly external sources are (or could be) irreducibly multiple that leads James to call his resulting view polytheistic.

It would be too simple to say that the difference between Rorty's polytheism and James' is that James' posits gods, and Rorty's does not. If it were, then Rorty's complaint against James would be just – after all, the point of James' revision of philosophy of religion in the pragmatist direction was precisely to demote theological issues to second class status. The more fruitful way to see the difference is to look at the *phenomenology* of religious experience (see point (iii) above): for James, that phenomenology necessarily includes a moment of passivity, i.e., that in it one feels as if something has been *given* to one from without, something that one could not have obtained by one's own conscious effort. In his lecture on healthy-mindedness, James gives a good description of the state of mind: "Passivity, not activity; relaxation, not intentness, should be now the rule. Give up the feeling of responsibility, let go your hold, resign the care of your destiny to higher powers, be genuinely indifferent as to what becomes of it all, and you will find not only that you gain a perfect inward relief, but often also, in addition, the particular goods you sincerely thought you

were renouncing” (VRE, 105). Someone undergoing this experience is left with “an impression that he has been wrought on by an external power” (ibid., 106).¹⁵

It is the way in which Rorty and James treat this peculiar phenomenological feature of the experience that marks the real site of their disagreement. Rorty is firmly opposed to the idea that there might be something “not ourselves” to which we might have to be receptive in order to be happy, and connects it with the idea that humans must submit to the commands of an external authority. He admits that one might sincerely feel this way, but that “even if a nonhuman authority tells you something, the only way to figure out whether what you have been told is true is to see whether it gets you the sort of life you want.” He admits too that such an experience might even “change your wants,” but that “you nevertheless test those new wants . . . in the same way: by living them, trying them out in everyday life, seeing whether they make you and yours happier” (Rorty 1998, 32). Thus, the “authority” here still rests with the human person, with the utilitarian standard of whether the life prescribed makes her happy. In the final analysis, it is and must be we ourselves, and not something “not ourselves,” who do the real work of changing our lives.¹⁶ Because of this, Leuba’s claim that God is “used” or that religious belief is “useful” to us is unproblematically true for Rorty.

Rorty’s position amounts to the claim that the moment of passivity in religious experience, upon which James insists, should make no practical difference. If we really are pragmatists, i.e., if we really think that religious belief like anything else ought to be judged by its “fruits” rather than its “roots,” then we don’t need to posit something outside ourselves to judge the value of the experience; we just need to see if living out our particular inspiration makes us happy. But in fact, Rorty oversimplifies the situation in a way that hides a crucial existential difference. If we accept

the feeling of passivity as it presents itself in religious experience, and don't treat it as something misleading that requires explaining away, then our attitude toward the experience, and the kinds of action it inspires us to, really does change.

To see how, let us imagine that someone undergoes a religious experience after a period of pessimistic despair, in which she finds herself newly inspired and motivated to live her life, on different terms than she has in the past. Let's stipulate that this experience contains the disputed phenomenological feature: the person perhaps had tried as hard as she could consciously to will herself out of her despair, but underwent her transformative, inspirational experience more or less at the moment when she stopped trying to bring it about on her own, so that it felt to her like a revelation from without.¹⁷ Everything is great until she sets about trying to live according to this inspiration. When she does, she finds herself frustrated – perhaps the ideal the inspiration sets up for her is too difficult for her to live up to, or crucial details of it remain frustratingly vague or elusive to her, or it is unclear how to apply it to particular difficulties she happens to have now.¹⁸ With Rorty's advice in mind, she might well begin to doubt the original experience that she took to be so important, since attempting to live in accordance with it has not really made her happy. Perhaps she will even think of herself as silly for having invested so much in a thought or feeling that after all came on so suddenly, and for which she didn't really have any evidence. But let us imagine instead that she is in the Jamesian camp – she thinks of her experience as a revelation from something not herself, something divine, and with that takes the emotional force of the experience to have a kind of authority over her. She might be moved to say, for instance, “what are all the experiences of my life *for*, after all, if not to lead me to a place where I could feel like *that*?” Such a statement reveals that she sees the “message” conveyed in the experience, however hard to

interpret or difficult to apply to her life it might be, as something to *live up to*, as a challenge for her to go out to meet, rather than as a strategy whose value must be tested. If she has trouble living up to it, that is not the fault of the content of the inspiration, but of *her*.¹⁹ She might seek to refresh in her memory the details of the experience, or attempt to make herself receptive to more such experiences, so that she can return with new vigor to the attempt to live up to the ideal conveyed in them. What she cannot do, what she is bound to regard as a kind of self-betrayal, is to seek retrospectively to undermine the significance of the original inspirational experience.

It is important to note here that our imagined convert's attitude is not non-Rortyan merely because she has a different conception of the source of her inspiration. That is, it is not merely the case that she (along with James) believes in God and Rorty does not. What is distinctive about her attitude is the way that she attends to the character of her experience. What does it mean, for instance, to say that her experience has a kind of "emotional force" or "authority" for her? Part of the answer must be that what it inspires in her is not mere happiness but a new orientation for her life, a new commitment. It is because of this that it was able to save her from despair. It is because of this, too, that the unhappiness that inevitably comes with trying to live up to her new commitment is not an objection to the original experience that inspired this new life. And finally, it is because of this that she will feel a bit queasy, even if she does turn out happy in the end, to say that this experience was "useful" to her.²⁰ That's true in a sense, of course – it helped her to transform her life in a way that saved it from despair. But the experience's "usefulness," if one insists upon calling it that, is contingent on her explicitly refraining from approaching it in a consciously calculative manner.

This willingness to be transformed naturally leaves her more vulnerable to chance than if she took Rorty's advice – after all, in following such an “inspiration” she might end up committing her whole life to an error, a random thought or feeling of a moment that she just happened to imbue with significance. But, as James says toward the close of the “Postscript” to the *Varieties*, “[f]or practical life at any rate, the *chance* of salvation is enough. No fact in human nature is more characteristic than its willingness to live on a chance” (VRE, 469).²¹ But in any case, independently of questions of the relative value of the two approaches, the fact remains that choosing to adopt one over the other can have rather large existential implications. Emphasizing the passive moment in inspirational experiences makes you less likely to see the ideals they convey as something fully in your control; that means that you are more likely to imbue them with a significance that *sustains* long-term engagement with them, and thus more likely to experience the kind of fundamental character transformation that is, for James, a hallmark of the unique value of the religious. The principal virtue of such a life would not be rigor, prudence, or self-mastery, but a receptivity to the opportunities life affords. The principal value guiding such a life would not be happiness, conceived of as the satisfaction of one's antecedently existing desires, but an openness to the possibility of even fundamental transformations of those desires, if the exalted feelings of the inspirational experience so lead.²² These virtues of receptivity and openness to transformation are not merely passive virtues, either. Cultivating them does not require yielding all of our decision-making power to some external thing. The moment of passivity in religious experience is, after all, but one moment among others, even if that moment has a special significance. That moment ought to be prepared for with a consciously chosen way of life that renders one ready to receive the inspiration when it comes. And it ought to be followed up by a consciously chosen way of life that

seeks both to understand properly the content of the inspiration and to live up to it adequately. What this outlook militates against, then, is not activity as such, or even conscious control as such, but the positing of complete conscious control over one's life as one's end.²³

4. Nietzsche on Phenomenological Passivity and Inspiration

It might appear at this point as if we have strayed rather far from Nietzsche. It was, after all, the reduction of “polytheism” to pluralism about human value that allowed Rorty to bring James and Nietzsche so close together in the first place. And it might well be thought that the importance James places on the passive moment in religious experience takes him even further away from anything recognizably Nietzschean. After all, at least in the popular imagination, Nietzsche is the great theorist of the will to power, given to flights of fancy about the titanic struggle of the single individual subject to create new values for herself. Hans Joas, in his wonderful historical study *The Genesis of Values*, credits Nietzsche with being the first to discover the question with which his book deals – “how do values and value commitments arise?” (Joas 2000, 1). The answer Joas seeks to give to that question, that “values arise in experiences of self-formation and self-transcendence,” is in keeping with Jamesian religious experience as I have described it thus far (ibid.). Indeed, James' *Varieties* plays an important role in Joas' own conceptions of self-formation and self-transcendence (see ibid., pp. 35–53). Nietzsche, however, does not. Though Nietzsche recognizes the active role that subjects take in creating new values, Joas finds little in his writings that would illuminate how this process might occur, and his critique of (especially Kantian) morality “remains fixated on the premises of morality and moral philosophy he is combatting”; Nietzsche “only

reverses” the Kantian dichotomy between duty and inclination, valorizing the latter (ibid., 33). But Joas’ Nietzsche does not develop anything like a conception of the transformative experience that James describes in the *Varieties*. The latter is introduced as a “more circumspect” answer to the (originally Nietzschean) question about the origin of values.²⁴ Nonetheless, contra Joas and this intuitive appearance, I want to suggest in what follows that Nietzsche too stresses the value of experiences like the ones James and Joas describe.

If we return to GS 143, we do find Nietzsche mentioning the feeling of passivity in religious experience, though hardly in a straightforwardly laudatory kind of way. The phrase “Not I! Not I! But a god *through* me!” that Nietzsche gives to past creators of ideals and values is meant to be a mask – it’s a way of asserting one’s own value conception against the traditional one, while hiding the fact that it is one’s own. In fact, it is especially important for Nietzsche that early polytheists hid this fact not just from others but from themselves as well. It is an “apology to themselves” he says, and a necessary one, since such self-assertion against the normal type enforced by the customary morality of the tribe – what Nietzsche likes to call the “*Sittlichkeit der Sitte*” – is for that morality the very height of evil.²⁵ This hesitance of the creative type appears again in an unpublished note from the summer of 1885, while Nietzsche was working on *Beyond Good and Evil* (LN, 39–40; cf. KSA vol. 11, 611–613).²⁶ Nietzsche draws a distinction between philosophers who seek to systematize past valuations and those who seek to command and legislate new ones, and laments that the latter “rarely turns out well” (LN, 39). There was a “will to blindness” present in Plato, who could not straightforwardly assert his own values but had to pretend that he had discovered them in some eternal realm, and in Mohammed and other religious founders, who hid instead behind the claim that their values came from “divine inspiration” (Nietzsche himself uses

the scare quotes). These, Nietzsche suggests, are “means of consolation” in the face of a terrifying task, whose “new and unprecedented terror” is revealed after we have come to see through all of them. Nietzsche might well have left the discussion there, but his most consuming interest is in the psychological state of the person who faces this new terror, the terror of feeling the urgency, even duty, of creating new values without the ability to appeal to any external justificatory apparatus. Such a person might well seek to evade the duty in any way he can, perhaps by saying to himself that “this new, distant duty is a seduction and a temptation, a diversion from all duties, a sickness, a kind of madness” (ibid., 40). Such evasions sometimes succeed, so that the lives of such people are completely overrun by a bad conscience. But when they don’t, the nascent creator experiences a “redeeming hour, that autumn hour of ripeness, where they had to do what they did not even ‘want’ to do – and the deed they had most feared fell easily and undesired from the tree, as a deed without choice, almost as a gift” (ibid.).

The language Nietzsche uses to describe this psychological state is striking for someone who has James’ account of religious experience in mind. The biggest difference between the two is, perhaps, the context – James focuses on experiences in which the individual feels “saved” in some sense, while Nietzsche is speaking of value creation. But Nietzsche calls the hour of creation a “redeeming” one, and like James emphasizes the energy and vitality that such an experience unlocks. And though he is keen to insist (here and in GS 143) on the self-assertiveness of the creator, his account culminates in a nod to the moment of passivity in the experience – the “deed” of creation is experienced as something that the creator “has” rather than “wants” to do, and comes “without choice, almost as a gift.”

If the language itself left one in any doubt that Nietzsche was speaking from experience, his account in *Ecce Homo* of the composition of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – surely the deed in the doing of which Nietzsche felt he came closest to “creating values” – makes it abundantly clear. Here too, Nietzsche emphasizes the felt passivity of the experience. He says that the central thought of the book – that of the eternal recurrence – “came to” him in August of 1881, and he describes the next 18 months as an extended “pregnancy” before the abrupt “birth” of the work in a flurry of activity in February of 1883 (EH, “Zarathustra,” 1). The time of birth was a particularly bad winter – Nietzsche’s health was, as it was so often, very poor, the weather was colder and rainier than usual, and the hotel he stayed in “was pretty much the opposite of what I could have wanted” (ibid.). (It is important to remember here that Nietzsche’s attempts to exercise conscious control over living conditions, his state of health, and the climate in which he worked, were practically fanatical.) But the composition came about nevertheless, “as if to prove my claim that everything decisive comes into being nevertheless” (ibid.).²⁷ At that time, Zarathustra “occurred to me,” but it would be “more accurate to say he *overtook me*” (EH, “Zarathustra” 1). The act of composition itself, which occurred in a state he calls “inspiration,” is described both carefully and rapturously, with the focus squarely on what I have been calling phenomenological passivity:

The idea of revelation in the sense of something suddenly becoming *visible* and audible with unspeakable assurance and subtlety, something that throws you down and leaves you deeply shaken – this simply describes the facts of the case. You listen, you do not look for anything, you take, you do not ask who gives [*man nimmt, man fragt nicht, wer da giebt*]²⁸; a thought lights up in a flash, with necessity, without hesitation as to its form, – I never had any choice . . . All of this is involuntary to the highest degree, but takes place as if in a storm of feelings of freedom, of unrestricted activity, of power, of divinity...The most remarkable thing is the involuntary nature of the image, the metaphor; you do not know what an image, a metaphor, is any more, everything offers itself up as the closest, simplest, most fitting expression. It really seems (to recall something Zarathustra once said) as if things approached on their own and offered themselves up as metaphors . . . This is my

experience of inspiration . . . (ibid., section 3; translation emended; bracketed ellipses mark my own omissions)

Nietzsche repeats numerous times that what happens is involuntary, or occurs without choice. He stresses in the lead-in to the passage that “even the slightest residue of superstition” would lead one straightaway to believe one was a mouthpiece of a god, of “overpowering forces” (ibid.). Of course, Nietzsche is *not* superstitious; he lacks even this residue, and so is able to resist the very strong temptation to interpret the experience theistically. But that does not stop him from elucidating phenomenologically the “facts of the case,” which are that one feels simply as if something had been given, that one’s action – free, unrestricted, powerful, even divine – is no titanic struggle for self-overcoming but really a kind of perfect responsiveness to what is given. One acts, but more as a conduit than anything else. The natural reaction to such a windfall is gratitude, and Nietzsche begins *Ecce Homo* itself with an expression of gratitude – he asks, in looking back on the course of his life: “*How could I not be grateful to my whole life?*” That emotional response permeates his discussion not just of his life in general, but of this episode of it in particular.

Gratitude is a positive response to a situation in which some good is given to you without your having to do something consciously to earn it. Typically, though perhaps not always, that good has come from *someone* other than yourself.²⁹ I certainly don’t intend to make the facile argument that Nietzsche’s grateful attitude conceptually commits him to the existence of some supernatural person who could “give” him the images, metaphors, and inspirational experiences for which he is grateful. What I *do* want to stress is another feature of gratitude: that it is an *accepting* and *responsive* attitude to the benefit received. It is inimical to the presence of the emotion itself, or at the very least to feeling it wholeheartedly, to take a skeptical or critical stance toward the value of what is given. When you’re truly grateful, you not only see the thing given as valuable

but seek to act in such a way that you can realize and enjoy that value. Nothing could be further from the grateful attitude than the desire to submit what is given to a test. Nietzsche expresses this clearly and emphatically in his description of the inspirational state: “You listen, you do not look for anything, you take, you do not ask who gives.”³⁰

This highly uncritical attitude might well strike the reader as reckless, in much the same way that the Jamesian reaction to religious experience was. Such experiences might lead one down all sorts of paths, not all of them beneficial. But Nietzsche, like James, embraces this recklessness as an essential part of human life, a life that remains open to possible sources of value that cannot be tapped in any other way. The largely rationalist and systematizing ambitions of philosophers throughout its history have predisposed them to overpraise our ability to be in *control* of ourselves.³¹ Neither James nor Nietzsche would seek to advance the absurd proposition that self-control is a bad thing, but both do think that turning self-control into a *moral* ideal cuts us off from crucial sources of value. Nietzsche makes this clear in GS 305, where he claims that philosophers who seek to make a moral value of the ability to control oneself “afflict [humans] with a peculiar disease, namely, a constant irritability at all natural stirrings and inclinations and as it were a kind of itch.”³² A person possessed by this virtue naturally takes up a defensive stance against anything that can be conceived of as exerting force on them from outside. Though such a person can “become great” by taking up this stance, that greatness comes at a drastic cost; the person becomes “impoverished” and “cut off from the most beautiful fortuities of the soul.” But perhaps the worst is that he is cut off from “all further *instruction!* For one must be able to lose oneself if one wants to learn something from things we ourselves are not.”

5. Conclusions

This ability to be receptive to instruction from “things we ourselves are not” summarizes nicely what I called in the introduction the “existential core” that James and Nietzsche’s views of a good human life share in common.³³ That for James such receptivity involves interpreting the “things we ourselves are not” as divinities might seem still to put serious distance between the two. That is, I think, a just response to the argument I’ve made here, and I hardly wish to suggest that there is no distance at all between James and Nietzsche on the topic of religion. But I would still want to insist that that distance is *considerably* smaller than one might have expected, given the two philosophers’ respective reputations. I think it would be facile to deny that Nietzsche was an atheist. But my argument here suggests that he would have agreed with James in finding something flattened and existentially impoverished in Rorty’s self-satisfied secularism. Nietzsche was well aware of the awe-inspiring vitality and creative facility that religious belief makes possible. We moderns, in Nietzsche’s diagnosis, face the danger of living not only with a dead God (cf. GS 125, 343) but *also* with an asceticism, a fetishization of the virtue of self-control, that threatens to become even more entrenched in our thoroughly secular society (cf. GM III:24–28). This combination is potentially disastrous – we have gradually but deliberately made ourselves capable of systematically shutting ourselves off from all potentially vital sources of inspiration, and this capability is itself a central piece of the “nihilism” Nietzsche sees coming if we do not change course soon. The beliefs of Jewish and Christian religious communities play the central role in the historical account Nietzsche gives of the rise of this development. But the fact that Jewish and Christian religious beliefs helped to advance the ascetic ideal hardly implies on its own that religious activity in general can play no role in the fight against it. In BGE 53, Nietzsche gives the

reasons for being an atheist today – we are through, he says, with looking at God as a father, a judge, a giver of rewards, a clear communicator. But while these rejections explain why “theism” is in decline in Europe, they are not incompatible, he says, with the “vigorous growth” of “the religious instinct,” which persists in us despite our rejection of “any specifically theistic gratification” of it.

Nor are they incompatible, I would suggest, with “religious” interpretations of the kinds of transformative and inspirational experiences James and Nietzsche commend to our attention. Nietzsche is, in his own way, a deeply religious figure,³⁴ and it is precisely this feature of his character that marks him out as distinctive among atheistic philosophers. Though he continually insists, as James never would have, on describing the process of value creation as a kind of self-assertion, Nietzsche goes out of his way in his autobiography (*Ecce Homo*) to tell us that the “self” he is asserting is hardly one that is under his full control. Though he proclaims the death of God, the language he uses to describe his own philosophical task is often obviously repurposed from religious contexts. (One might cite the whole of *Zarathustra* as proof.) Though he insists that his ideals come from himself, he has a striking, even unnerving habit of personifying them, and treating them as if they had an existence independent from his own.³⁵ This habit, it might be argued, serves as a useful rhetorical move for expressing that central feature of inspirational experience – its phenomenological passivity. Nietzsche was just as committed as James to the pluralistic idea that there was nothing in those experiences that dictated that the source of his inspiration need be the same as that of someone else’s, and for him that thought served not to undermine but to clarify and enhance the transformative power of the experience. Given both the religiosity and pluralism of Nietzsche’s outlook, “polytheism” serves as a helpful term to describe it,

and he could have sincerely looked forward with James to a time when “a sort of polytheism” could “return upon us” (VRE, 468).

¹ Richard Swinburne expresses what is surely a widely-held view among modern theists *and* atheists when he claims that the monotheistic hypothesis (what he calls “theism”), whether true or false, possesses the important epistemic virtue of simplicity: “It is a hallmark of a simple explanation to postulate few causes. There could in this respect be no simpler explanation than one which postulated only one cause. Theism is simpler than polytheism” (Swinburne 1996, 43).

² This argument is of course at least as old as Plato’s *Euthyphro*. Socrates doesn’t advocate for monotheism there, but certainly rejects any polytheism that would posit multiple potentially conflicting sources of ultimate value.

³ Cf. VRE, 125: “[P]hilosophic theism has always shown a tendency to become pantheistic and monistic, and to consider the world as one unit of absolute fact; and this has been at variance with popular and practical theism, which latter has ever been more or less frankly pluralistic, not to say polytheistic.”

⁴ There are three prominent exceptions in the literature on James. They are Funkenstein 1994, Rorty 1998, and Hall 2009. All three note, and to some extent explore, a connection between James and Nietzsche on this point, though not in the way I will develop here. I will return to Rorty in detail below.

⁵ See A 19.

⁶ For this reason, I wish Nietzsche had not characterized polytheism as positing a plurality of *norms*, since the very idea of characterizing an ideal for one’s life as a “norm” suggests a monotheistic conception of that ideal. Though GS 143 may well be his most explicit treatment of the matter, Nietzsche is critical throughout his oeuvre of the normalizing effect of modern morality, and never (except in this one instance – “plurality of norms”) uses the word “norm” or its cognates as general ethical terms. Neo-Kantian philosophers like Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert did much to popularize this philosophical use of “norm” and “normativity,” and the effects of their terminological innovation are still evident in a great deal of contemporary ethical discussion. For some relevant discussion, see Beiser 2009. Nietzsche himself far preferred speaking in terms of “values” and “ideals.”

⁷ As James colorfully puts it, the experiences ought to be judged by their “fruits” rather than their “roots” (VRE, 26).

⁸ On the one hand, he says that, “for us Christians at least,” God is the “natural appellation” for it (VRE, 461), but that is an oddly hesitant way for a Christian to put the point (VRE, 461). On the other, he often mentions the importance of the modern psychological discovery of the subliminal or subconscious, and seems convinced that whatever causes religious experiences, they operate on us by means of affecting in some way or other that subconscious sphere. But that leaves open, as James well knew, the possibility that the “something greater outside myself” might just be identical with my subconscious.

⁹ James is cagey enough to leave his expression of the view in the subjunctive case. He explicitly refrains from defending the view as his own in VRE, though only because “my only aim at present is to keep the testimony of

religious experience clearly within its proper bounds,” and not because he does not hold it (ibid.). In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James describes the view of Gustav Fechner (for whom James’ admiration was clear) as “clearly polytheistic; but the word ‘polytheism’ usually gives offence, so perhaps it is better not to use it” (APU, 771). It is clear in both cases that James’ reluctance to call himself a polytheist stems only from worries about the reaction of the audience to the term, and not from any lingering doubts about the position.

¹⁰ James provides a spirited and personal plea for this kind of respect in the pair of essays “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” and “What Makes a Life Significant?”, published just two years before he began giving the Gifford Lectures that would become the *Varieties*. See TT, 841–880.

¹¹ For Rorty, polytheism is “pretty much coextensive with romantic utilitarianism” (ibid., 24); Isaiah Berlin’s pluralism is “in my sense, a polytheistic manifesto” (23). J.S. Mill and Matthew Arnold, who both looked forward to a society in which “poetry should take over the role that religion has played in the formation of individual human lives” (24), are also enlisted as members of the club.

¹² Cf. VRE, 453 and Rorty 1998, 30 for quotations of Leuba. Rorty merely quotes James’ initial quotation, which is selective in a way that calls for comment. I’ll return to Leuba’s explicit wording in a moment.

¹³ For a view on VRE with similar motivations, see Kitcher 2004. Kitcher’s own secularist views in the philosophy of religion are heavily inspired by Dewey, and are set forth in his *Life After Faith* (Kitcher 2014). Whether Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy of religion is as “half-hearted” as Rorty says is an interesting and complex matter. The idea of “natural piety” that Dewey appeals to at a couple of key junctures in *A Common Faith* suggests that Dewey accepted James’ belief in something larger than us (nature itself, in Dewey’s case) as “friendly” in some broad sense to our projects and endeavors, and even to feel a kind of gratitude for nature’s hospitality. Dewey too was willing to critique overly secularized views (that of the “militant atheist” or the “truly unreligious”) that “[attribute] human achievement and purpose to man in isolation from the world of physical nature and his fellows” (Dewey 1934, 25). The “half-hearted” epithet may well be drawn from George Santayana, who in a review of Dewey’s *Experience and Nature*, had used it to critique Dewey’s naturalism specifically, though that critique had clear religious overtones (Santayana 1925). See also Dewey’s very interesting response, entitled simply “Half-Hearted Naturalism,” in Dewey 1927. For illuminating critical discussion of the debate, see Comstock 1965, Price 1993, pp. 154–157, Wilson 1995, and Joas 2000, pp. 111–113. I thank an anonymous referee for pushing me on this point.

¹⁴ One useful way to characterize the difference between Leuba and James on this point might be to ground it in a disagreement over the meaning of the term “life.” James’ notion of “life” is far more romantic and capacious than that of Leuba, whose use is primarily influenced by Darwin and Spencer, among others. James is, it seems to me, far closer to members of the *Lebensphilosophie* tradition in France and Germany in the late 19th and early 20th century (including Dilthey, Bergson, Scheler, and Nietzsche himself) – “life” for them means a kind of openness to development, expansion and growth, and they were each at pains to separate that conception from a reductive one that emphasized self-preservation and the satisfaction of antecedently existing desires. Rorty’s talk of “romantic utilitarianism” seems to me to elide this important distinction. But I don’t have space to argue fully for that claim here.

¹⁵ See also, in James’ lecture on “Conversion,” VRE 193–194. There James admits that there are also “volitional” (i.e., consciously active) types of the phenomenon (he cites the example of a C.G. Finney), but immediately adds that such types are “as a rule less interesting than those of the self-surrender type, in which the subconscious effects are more abundant and often startling” (VRE, 193). Even more importantly, he says that even in the volitional cases “there are passages of partial self-surrender interposed” and that such self-surrender is indispensable in “the great majority of all cases” (ibid.) Finally, though James’ famous definition of mystical experience (VRE 343–344) is often wrongly treated as a definition for religious experience mobilized in attempts at proofs of the existence of God, mysticism is still an important phenomenon for James, and “passivity” is one of the four markers of that experience. That passivity does not wholly characterize the way of life of the subject of religious experience, however, as I will make clear below, nor is the subject of mystical experience in particular wholly passive in nature. On this, see note 23 below.

¹⁶ One is reminded of Sartre’s famous discussion of anguish in his “Existentialism is a Humanism” lecture: “And if I hear voices, what proof is there that they come from heaven and not from hell, or from the subconscious, or a pathological condition? What proves that they are addressed to me?...I’ll never find any proof or sign to convince me of that. If a voice addresses me, it is always for me to decide that this is the angel’s voice; if I consider that such an act is a good one, it is I who will choose to say that it is good rather than bad” (Sartre 1965, 39). Of course, Sartre is no utilitarian, and so does not invoke the criterion of “happiness” as Rorty does.

¹⁷ Cf. VRE, 193 ff. for James’ analysis of the passivity involved in conversion experiences, and numerous examples that exhibit precisely this feature (i.e., sudden revelation only after the relaxation of conscious effort).

¹⁸ Rorty's way of speaking of divine inspiration, like many critics of the phenomenon, seems to assume as the paradigm case something like Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai – the divine gives more or less well-defined orders that the believer is then enjoined to follow (or test for their goodness). But, as James' collection of accounts of religious experience show, it is far more ordinary for the messages conveyed by such experiences to be highly ambiguous, multiply interpretable. Their *force* is clear and evident, their meaning less so. (Rorty treats the phenomenon as if precisely the reverse were true.) This is part of the reason I have used the term "inspiration" so much throughout, even though neither Rorty nor James particularly emphasize that way of speaking. Homer's conception of his relationship to the Muses would be a better candidate for a paradigm case than Moses and Yahweh.

¹⁹ There are parallels here to debates in the philosophy of science about confirmation and falsification. This shouldn't surprise us, since pragmatists in the wake of Mill are fond of speaking of "experiments in living." We might think of Rorty's as the Popperian falsificationist view: an ideal is tested by means of a life experiment, and the ideal is disconfirmed or falsified if living according to it does not make us happy. But (as philosophers like Duhem, Quine and Kuhn have pointed out) if an experiment leads to a result that is contradictory to the prediction of one's theory, jettisoning the theory is only one of *many* possible responses (and often the least desirable one). One might just as well conclude that one has performed the experiment improperly, or that one was operating with an overly simple interpretation of the theory, etc.

²⁰ It is, naturally, somewhat debatable whether the reader will detect this "queasiness" in James' own use of the language of usefulness to speak of the value of religious experience (e.g., at VRE 303, quoted above). There is indeed a tension in James' way of speaking that is, I think, never fully resolved. It is enough for my purposes to insist upon the important philosophical motivation for the queasiness, namely, that in order for religious experience to have the salvific value James ascribes to it, it necessarily cannot be merely instrumentalized. I thank an anonymous referee for pushing me to clarify this point.

²¹ James' attitude here ought to be compared to the position Martha Nussbaum defends in *The Fragility of Goodness* (Nussbaum 1986). For both James and Nussbaum, it is a central part of the best human life that it risks attachment to things that are vulnerable to chance (for the Greek authors Nussbaum discusses, the relevant term is *tuche*, which she usually translates as "luck").

²² See Llanera 2016 for a sympathetic reconstruction of Rorty's views that mitigates to some extent the self-centeredness I attribute to him here. Llanera argues that paying attention to the value Rorty places on practices of solidarity and self-creation can save the Rortyan from the kind of egotism that leads to nihilistic despair. It seems to me, however, that Rorty's self-professed ironism makes it impossible for him to advocate the kind of commitment to an ideal that James finds necessary in order for one to really undergo one of his "saving" experiences.

²³ Thus in the famous lecture on "Mysticism," James stresses the necessity of passively receiving the mystical experience, but makes clear that mysticism itself doesn't necessitate or encourage a passive way of life generally. Thus he says that in "natively strong minds and characters" the mystical experience is a strong source of active energy: "Saint Ignatius was a mystic, but his mysticism made him assuredly one of the most powerfully practical human engines that ever lived" (VRE, 373).

²⁴ Joas lauds James particularly for being less dogmatically critical of Christianity. He says of James that "he approaches religion neither as an apologist, nor with a positivistic or Nietzschean conviction of its historical obsolescence, but rather with the intention of investigating whether religious belief is possible in a postmetaphysical, scientifically determined age" (ibid., 40). As I will try to show below, I think this positivistic reading of Nietzsche's view of religion in general is shortsighted.

²⁵ This need for the creative thinker to apologize for and even to himself, since his creation can only be regarded according to existing morality as "evil," is a persistent theme in Nietzsche's works in the middle and late periods. It is especially prominent in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, but see also GM III:6–10.

²⁶ Nietzsche reworked important parts of the note into BGE 211, one of his most important statements on the value-creative role of philosophers of the future.

²⁷ This mention of "my claim" may perhaps be a reference to EH, "Clever" 9, in which Nietzsche describes the largely passive state he found himself in in the course of his development; the suggestion of an obstetric metaphor looms large in the background here, though it is not made fully explicit. Though Nietzsche was sometimes drawn to the image of the Goethean striving Prometheus, and that has obviously determined the popular perception of his work, he emphatically rejects it here: "I have no memory of ever having made an effort, – you will not detect any trace of *struggle* [*Kampf*] in my life, I am the opposite of a heroic nature. To 'will' anything, to 'strive' [*streben*] after anything, to have a 'goal,' a 'wish' in mind – I have never experienced this."

²⁸ Here I have emended Norman's translation, which reads: "you take, you do not ask who is there," which seems to me mistaken. Walter Kaufmann's translation reads: "one takes, one does not ask who gives" (see *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 756).

²⁹ Gratitude is undergoing a bit of a scholarly renaissance in recent years, and there is much debate about how to analyze it conceptually, including whether or not it is an emotion, as I assume for my purposes. But one of the central debates concerns whether gratitude has a triadic or dyadic structure – i.e., whether one can only be grateful to someone for bestowing some benefit, or one can also simply be grateful that one has been benefited in some way. For an even-handed discussion of the various views among philosophers and psychologists, see Gulliford, Morgan & Kristjánsson 2013, 297-301.

³⁰ This extended passage in *Ecce Homo* is, it seems to me, a kind of apotheosis in Nietzsche's writing: it is a moving and careful description of the elevated state of mind he valued most, a phenomenology of the act of creation. The almost unbelievably exalted place he gives *Zarathustra* in world literature is hard enough to take seriously, but it would be unjust to laugh off the passage as merely megalomaniacal (see, for instance, Hollingdale 1965, 199-200). These passages in EH are better read as an attempt to remain faithful to the experience he had of writing *Zarathustra*. Nietzsche's treatment of the text and its composition is self-consciously uncritical; Nietzsche was certainly capable of criticizing his own works, but *refused* to do so in the case of *Zarathustra*. That refusal, I would maintain, is grounded in the thought that to do so would have amounted to betraying the greatest experience of his life. I am of course here consciously echoing some of the elements of my description of the Jamesian reaction to religious experience. For now, I only suggest these deeper connections as a possibility to the reader, since it would take me too far afield to try to justify them fully here.

³¹ Christine Korsgaard takes such a position to its absurd conclusion in suggesting that the moral of Nietzsche's story is "that we get a little control over our own self-control" (Korsgaard et. al. 1996, 160).

³² Nietzsche may well have been thinking of Socrates' conversation with Callicles in the *Gorgias*, in which an itch is used as the primary example of a meaningless desire, and so as a counterexample to Callicles' claim that the good life is spent allowing one's appetites to get strong and then satisfying them (cf. especially 492a–494e). Though the Stoics are probably his principal target in GS 305, since they are mentioned explicitly in the following section, Socrates cannot have been far from Nietzsche's mind when he spoke of philosophers who valued self-control (in Greek: *sophrosune*) above all else. For a highly relevant discussion, see Nussbaum 1986, 142 ff.

³³ The explanation for this shared core is likely to have a lot to do with Emerson, who was an inspirational figure for both James and Nietzsche. John Stuhr, in a discussion of the relationship of pragmatism to postmodernism in his *Genealogical Pragmatism*, initially draws a distinction between pragmatists who are "children of Emerson" in maintaining an optimistic, "melioristic faith," and postmodernists who are more the more ironic, pessimistic "children of Nietzsche" (Stuhr 1997, pp. 106–107). But Stuhr rightly goes on to suggest that Nietzsche's theorizing too was guided by a kind of Emersonian cheerfulness (he cites the foreword to TI). Emerson himself was no stranger to the kinds of experiences I've been describing; for further discussion, see Wilson 1995, 330–334.

³⁴ In its general form, this claim has been advanced recently by Julian Young, in his *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion* (Young 2006), but Young's focus there is on an argument for the ambitious and controversial thesis that Nietzsche was a religious communitarian throughout his writing career. Like many others, I am not convinced by that argument, and the comparison I've made of Nietzsche to James inevitably highlights more personal rather than communal features of religious life and experience.

³⁵ One might point here to his tendency throughout EH to treat Zarathustra as a person with a life of his own rather than as Nietzsche's creation – this is perhaps clearest in EH, "Zarathustra" 6, when Zarathustra is compared favorably to Goethe, Dante and Shakespeare (rather than the far more natural comparison of Nietzsche to the great writers, or of Zarathustra to Faust or Hamlet). The figure of Dionysus is often treated similarly, especially in BGE 295, where Nietzsche speaks of having "offered my firstborn" (i.e., BT) to Dionysus, and says that the god "was always many steps ahead of me." In *Zarathustra* itself, one of the climaxes comes when Zarathustra meets and converses with a personified (and feminized) "Life" (cf. Z, "The Other Dancing Song"). Such passages and this "self-doubling" habit in general are usually met with silence by Nietzsche's philosophical admirers, but they have understandably been of considerable interest to readers with psychoanalytic training. See, for instance, Andreas-Salomé ([1894] 1988) and Jung 1988.

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