

The Will to Life: Nietzsche and the Organic

. . . a sea of forces . . . with tremendous years of recurrence, with an ebb and flood of its forms; out of the simplest forms striving toward the most complex . . . (Nietzsche, WP, 1067).

It is clear to anyone who is acquainted with Nietzsche's writings that virtually all aspects of his philosophy have been regarded at one time or another as controversial. Undoubtedly, many of his ideas which have been deemed dangerous or controversial in fact are, and to deny this would be to misunderstand his meaning entirely. But there are some cases in which this controversy is due to a particular interpretation, or a misinterpretation, of his writings. One interesting aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy which may have been widely misunderstood is his notion of life, or the organic. This is also an aspect of his writings which we would do well to consider, as it opens-up some interesting ground for discussion, and provides a basis for a further understanding of Nietzsche's ethical theory and project.

The definition, character, and import of the organic are aspects of any philosophy which have profound moral and ethical implications. It is no surprise that Nietzsche wrote about the concept of life, in both its physical and moral senses, because as living beings, our nature, and the distinction between the living and the inanimate is absolutely fundamental to our view of the world. Nietzsche is certainly not alone in this; these questions have been a topic of discussion for virtually all philosophers. Considerations of life informed the philosophy of Thales; and Aristotle's conception of the soul, starting with the nutritive soul, which he saw as the basis of all 'life' and the unique distinction of the animate, was crucial to the development of western philosophy. It should come as no surprise, however, that compared to most others Nietzsche had

a radically unique conception of what life is, and from where it arises. Following, as we outline his beliefs on these issues, we will see that not only is his conception startlingly unique, but also that its roots reach back into his very cosmology and its ramifications cannot help but affect us all as living beings.

The first major point in Nietzsche's conception of life to consider is this: *life does not hold any special or unique place in the cosmos*. Many philosophies have traditionally split the world into two broad categories of things: the organic and the inorganic, the animate and the inanimate, and the living and the non-living. This thinking enables (and necessitates) such philosophies to accord special privileges, rights, or properties to living things that the inanimate, or the non-living, do not possess. Nietzsche discussed this common notion, but in the end he flatly denied any such distinction. Let us examine a few lines from section 109 of his book The Gay Science to see how we come to this conclusion:

Let us beware of thinking that the world is a living being. Where should it expand? On what should it feed? How could it grow and multiply? We have some notion of the nature of the organic; and we should not reinterpret the exceedingly derivative, late, rare, accidental, that we perceive only on the crust of the earth and make of it something essential, universal, and eternal . . . (Nietzsche, GS, 167).

If the living and the non-living are not ultimately reducible to one another, if they are two wholly different types of things, as has been claimed by others, then the universe must be such that it includes elements of both. That is, if one claims that living things and non-living things both possess unique properties or characteristics, which the other does not possess, then, by this fact, one knows something fundamental about the universe itself: one knows something of its structure. If physical matter can be said to possess 'extension,' then extension must be a property of the universe itself. Likewise, if life is a 'special case,' a distinct type of being, which possesses unique attributes or characteristics that are not reducible to physical processes, then those processes or characteristics which make it unique, for example consciousness, emotion,

and reason, (assuming they cannot be explained by other properties) must also be universal principles.

Nietzsche clearly rejects in the above passage that life is a necessary type of being in the universe. If he rejects that life is an “essential, universal and eternal” element then he is, at the same time, rejecting the necessity of living things and instead claiming that life is contingent upon some other factor(s).

The astral order in which we live is an exception; this order and the relative duration that depends on it have again made possible an exception of exceptions: the formation of the organic (Nietzsche, GS, 168).

He says clearly that life does not hold a privileged place in the cosmos. He is not saying that life is a non-sensical proposition; in fact, in all of his writing he takes it as a premise that ‘life’ exists. What he says here is that life is not essential, that it is not *necessary* that life exist – that it is not a universal. If this is the case, then he is claiming that life is not any more special than, or distinct from, the non-living. Later he states exactly this: “Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type” (Nietzsche, GS, 168).

If life and the material are not separate and distinct types of things, if they are instead one-in-the-same, we might assume a materialistic philosophy, to say that all that exists is matter (or the non-living) and that although there is an apparent distinction between the two, one is a chimera, and is actually reducible to the other – that life seems to be distinct, but in the end it can be fully explained by physical processes. Indeed, that is exactly what the above quotation seems to suggest; but a little more analysis will show us that Nietzsche does not take this path.

Despite what we might be tempted to infer from the above quote, Nietzsche in other places has forcefully attacked materialism. In fact, in section 12 of Beyond Good and Evil he says of “materialistic atomism” that it is “one of the best refuted theories,” and that “perhaps no one in the learned world is now so unscholarly as to attach serious significance to it, except for

convenient household use.” He goes on to praise Boscovich, an eighteenth century Jesuit philosopher, for having “taught us to abjure the belief in ‘substance,’ in ‘matter,’ in the earth-residuum and particle-atom” (Nietzsche, BGE, 19-20). Boscovich, in his writings, had defined atoms as “centers of force, and not as particles of matter in which powers somehow inhere,” which is an idea we will revisit later (Gillespie, 455). This begins to make it clear that Nietzsche could not have been falling-back on a materialist explanation of life.

Does he then claim the contrary: that all that exists is life, and that all “matter” is reducible to it? To answer this question, let us examine another passage from Beyond Good and Evil which will take us into the heart of Nietzsche’s cosmology. He asserts his cosmological proposition by way of asking this rhetorical question of the reader:

Suppose nothing else were “given” as real except our world of desires and passions, and we could not get down, or up, to any other “reality” besides the reality of our drives – for thinking is merely a relation of these drives to each other: is it not permitted to make the experiment and to ask the question whether this “given” would not be *sufficient* for also understanding on the basis of this kind of thing the so-called mechanistic (or ‘material’) world? I mean, not as a deception, as ‘mere appearance,’ an ‘idea’ (in the sense of Berkeley and Schopenhauer) but as holding the same rank of reality as our affect – as a more primitive form of the world of affects in which everything still lies contained in a powerful unity before it undergoes ramifications and developments in the organic process (and, as is only fair, also becomes tenderer and weaker) – as a kind of instinctive life in which all organic functions are still synthetically intertwined along with self-regulation, assimilation, nourishment, excretion, and metabolism – as a *pre-form* of life . . . The question is in the end whether we recognize the will as *efficient*, whether we believe in the causality of the will . . . In short, one has to risk the hypothesis whether will does not affect will wherever ‘effects’ are recognized – and whether all mechanical occurrences are not, insofar as a force is active in them, will force, effects of will (Nietzsche, BGE, 47-48).

There is certainly a great deal to digest here, but the crucial point is this: *both life and the non-living are themselves based on something even more fundamental*. They both appear as distinct types of things, but in reality the primacy of either one as the foundation of the other, whether in

the form of a physical materialism or an idealism, is a mistaken assertion; they are both the product of something else. Let us explore this idea further.

In either case, whether one assumes that it is the living or the non-living that is the foundation, it is the “essential” properties that define each that are important. In a physical materialism, in which it is the properties of shape, extension, and duration, for example, that are the universal principles, it is to these principles that “life” is supposed to be reducible.

Conversely, given the opposite idea, that “life” is all that exists, it is the “essential” properties of life upon which “matter” can be based. The question then becomes: what are the essential properties of life as Nietzsche discusses it - what in it makes it unique and non-reducible – and could this answer also be sufficient to explain the material world? In the passage above he assumes “the reality of our drives” as the foundation of existence for a living thing, and as the basis of its experience of life; he goes on to refer to this as the “will.” Will, he says, is a “pre-form” of life. Life is not based on the attributes of physical matter, but on will. But neither is the material world based on unique attributes; it also is based on the will. This can be stated as our third major point: *that “will” is the only essential universal element, that everything both living and inanimate is a manifestation of will, and that all “effects” are effects of will.*

This being the case, we can see why Boscovich’s proposition was attractive to Nietzsche. To define atoms as “centers of force” meant to Nietzsche that, stated another way, they are *units of will*. And these units of will, once they interact with one another, and “undergo ramifications and developments in the organic process” result in what we refer to and experience as life. We can also infer that these units of will, having undergone “ramifications and developments” to different or much lesser extents result in all of the simpler objects of the material world. In this case it is clearer what he meant when he said that the “living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type.”

Let us now examine in more detail a line of the above passage: “whether will does not affect will wherever ‘effects’ are recognized – and whether all mechanical occurrences are not, insofar as a force is active in them, will force, effects of will.” This line gives us an important clue to Nietzsche’s conception of the material world. To help us understand, we shall also draw upon a passage from The Gay Science. When discussing the world of matter here, Nietzsche gives the reader this warning: “Let us beware of saying there are laws in nature. There are only necessities. There is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses” (Nietzsche, GS, 168). He rejects the physicists’ notion that matter behaves according to physical laws, as this also could be understood in terms of the will. For example, when two stars are locked in what the physicists call a gravitational ‘tug-of-war’ (which is itself an interesting expression for a materialist to use), it is the larger of the two which will pull harder, and it is the smaller which will *be pulled* farther. To Nietzsche, this is not the result of these two entities “obeying” physical “laws.” They are both ramification of the will; the forces they exert on one another and the cosmos are forces of willing and the effects they produce are “effects of will.” The larger star has a greater strength of gravitational attraction because it literally has a stronger will, a greater “will force.” The will is, and to Nietzsche *must* be, logically prior to the material world, just as it is logically prior to living beings.

The will is the foundational force and it is the will that develops into material structures; these material structures have the potential to develop and organize further. Given the right environmental conditions (of constancy and temperateness, for example) and enough time to develop and interact (such “tremendous years of recurrence”), they can become more complex and more delicately balanced (therefore “tenderer and weaker”). Structures of matter may organize (*literally - they develop into distinct associations of organs*) into what we recognize as “life forms” – as *organisms* – which are incredibly refined manifestations of will, and wherein

even slight changes in the environment are registered by their organs – also wherein the “will effects” of individual organs, are registered by other parts of themselves, other sub-structures.

Organic systems are structures of matter which have become so complex and delicate that, to a much greater and more sensitive extent than most physical structures, they are able to respond to their own “will effects” and to be affected by their own “will effects.” They become able to feed-back on themselves - to influence themselves and to sense, and respond to, their own will - to self-regulate and maintain homeostasis, for example. They become able to respond to their environments in more subtle and anticipatory ways, which we recognize as the familiar processes of living systems, such as metabolism, digestion, gravitropism and phototropism, and even (at a much greater level of organization) learned behaviors. The brain, for example, is probably the most complex and self-referential system known in the universe. This high level of organization is necessary (and possibly even sufficient) for the reactions and responsiveness that are characteristic of advanced organic structures.

As a shorthand expression, the material could be said to be a “pre-form” of life, and the will a “pre-form” of the material. In reality, of course, the development of living systems is inseparable from the development of other physical structures; it is merely a further refinement of structure. There is no clear distinction and thus nowhere to draw a line. This is, to a large extent why a clear definition of life – as distinct from the inanimate – has been so difficult to achieve; the processes of living things, and the processes by which living things develop, are identical to other ‘inorganic’ physical processes. For example, fire can, in a very literal sense, be said to consume (*i.e.* digest - in fact, even by the same chemical reactions), expand, and “die.” Crystals are also delicate, balanced, and highly organized structures which require precise environmental conditions, and which exhibit interesting patterns of growth that have some similarities with living things. Viruses, which lie very noticeably on our (imaginary) border

between the living and the non-living, exhibit such behaviors as usurpation, invasion, and manipulation, which are terms Nietzsche would not have used purely *symbolically*. In all such cases, Nietzsche would seem to have no problem discussing these symbolic metaphors as movements of will – as *real* forces. That *we* are capable of willing, and manipulating is predicated on the fact that the world itself can will and manipulate. The development of life, just as in the evolution of the material world (of galaxies, stars, and planets), has been a genealogy of interactions of will.

Let us now examine what import this kind of thinking has for us as ‘living’ beings – for we who are such “late, rare, accidental” structures. In Beyond Good and Evil, as quoted previously, when speaking of the “reality of our drives,” Nietzsche makes the interesting assertion that “thinking is merely a relation of these drives to each other.” When we hear this kind of language - of ‘relations of drives’ - directed at our process of thinking, it calls to mind our awareness of the internal struggles, or dialogues, which we experience when making decisions. But any decision making process must be the result of the same types of interactions of will we have been discussing above. In another section of Beyond Good and Evil, he calls psychology “physio-psychology,” and calls on us to understand psychology “as morphology and *the doctrine of the development of the will to power*” (Nietzsche, BGE, 31), as *morphology* – literally! – as the overall shape, and pattern of relations of the force of will as expressed in a particular individual. Also: the “development of the will to power,” as the genealogy of its process of development – its evolution! The biologists tell us that it is an organism’s structure that determines its function; likewise, it is also an individual’s structure, the “relations of [his or her] drives to one another” which determines their psychology. And the further refined this structure, the more potential exists for expressions of psychology. Complex organisms reflect more complex psychological movements, and, just as there is no clear dividing line between the

living and the dead, there is no clear distinction between those structures which possess a psychology and those which do not.

Nietzsche, by clarifying psychology as “physio-psychology,” denies that psychology exists exclusively within the realm of the living, but neither does he place it exclusively in the realm of the physical. Instead, he denies the distinction between the living and the non-living and places it in the realm of the will, subject to the same processes of interactions of “will force.” Therefore, just as in the case of the two stars, one more massive than the other, to Nietzsche, it will always be our strongest drive, the substructure of our being with the greatest force, which will necessarily determine our actions. This raises some interesting questions about free-will. Given what we have said so far, it is not hard to guess that Nietzsche denied the concept of “free-will” as it is commonly understood. We will not get into this discussion, as it is much too broad a topic to adequately treat here, but in passing let us ask this question of the free-will: if Nietzsche takes the “will” itself as fundamental, then what does it mean to talk of *free-will* – what about *unfree-will* – or simply *will*?

Now that we have examined the notion of the organic as an expression of the movement of the will, let us clarify this movement. We will then go on to examine what import this has for us as ‘animate-objects,’ and for our experiences of living.

Let us ask a question of the will, the answer to which Nietzsche will take as absolutely fundamental: What is it that defines will *as will*? What does it mean to will? Take this passage from The Will to Power:

Life, as the form of being most familiar to us, is specifically a will to the accumulation of force; all the processes of life depend on this: nothing wants to preserve itself, everything is to be added and accumulated . . . Life as a special case . . . strives after a maximal feeling of power; essentially a striving for more power; striving is nothing other than striving for power; the basic and innermost thing is still this will (Nietzsche, WP, 689).

Will always expresses itself. In fact, in this framework, it is impossible to consider the concept of unexpressed-will; for Nietzsche this would be a contradiction. Will cannot help but produce effects, as will *is* the production of effects. Life is an expression of will, and willing, for Nietzsche, is always a willing to become greater, to maximize power. All life is striving. In his writings, Nietzsche took the will as the fundamental force. Later, he began to qualify it as “will to power,” when he took this striving as the will’s fundamental character. “Everything is to be added and accumulated . . . Life . . . strives after a maximal feeling of power.” Nietzsche took this as his premise. According to him, this could be perceived very clearly and immediately when one examined one’s own experiences, and observed the world around them. To be alive is to strive, and striving is always directed toward a feeling of increasing power, and an expanding influence, regardless of the particular mode of expression. No one would rather grow weaker; to feel alive is to feel strong. Every individual, as a manifestation of will, wants to feel more powerful. If Nietzsche is correct in this assertion, then one of the central questions of life is how best to achieve our highest strength and how to maximize our potential for expression. In Ecce Homo, Nietzsche addresses exactly this, from many different angles, as it applies to human life:

I am interested in quite a different way in a question upon which the ‘salvation of mankind’ depends far more than it does upon any kind of quaint curiosity of the theologians: the question of *nutriment*. One can for convenience sake formulate it thus: ‘how to nourish yourself so as to attain your maximum of strength . . .’
(Nietzsche, EH, 21-22).

Nietzsche is not concerned in this case, as many others have been, with attempts to heighten one’s power through strictly spiritual or religious means, a project which would likely be a waste of time, and often actually detrimental to our strength; he is much more interested in practical matters. He goes into great detail in this section as to what pattern of diet makes him feel the most alive, light, and energetic. For him the “salvation of mankind,” its advancing of strength, does not depend on the search for “the truth,” or the consideration of some ethereal

values, but in our simplest patterns of behavior, for example, our nourishment – what we choose to eat. Our choice of diet has profound effects on our physiology, which cannot help but have profound effects on our psychology.

What he says of the choice of nutriment is also true of what he talks about in the next section of Ecce Homo: the choice of one's "place and climate," – one's environment:

Most closely related to the question of nutriment is the question of *place* and *climate* . . . The influence of climate on the *metabolism*, its slowing down, its speeding up, extends so far that a blunder in regard to place and climate can not only estrange anyone from his task but withhold it from him altogether . . . His animalic *vigor* never grows sufficiently great for him to attain to that freedom overflowing into the most spiritual domain . . . A never so infinitesimal sluggishness of the intestines grown into a bad habit completely suffices to transform a genius into something mediocre . . . The *tempo* of the metabolism stands in an exact relationship to the mobility or lameness of the *feet* of the spirit; the 'spirit' itself is indeed only a species of this metabolism. Make a list of the places where there are and have been gifted men . . . where genius has almost necessarily made its home: they all possess an excellent dry air. Paris, Provence, Jerusalem, Athens – these names prove something: that genius is *conditioned* by dry air, clear sky – that is to say by rapid metabolism, by the possibility of again and again supplying oneself with great, even tremendous quantities of energy (Nietzsche, EH, 24).

Of the most interesting lines of this passage is this: "the 'spirit' itself is indeed only a species of [the] metabolism." The feeling of having a "spirit," a feeling of power (even spiritual power), of having lightness, is often predicated upon (among other things) a certain choice of diet and of climate: that diet and climate which is best for our bodies. A proper and strong physiology is necessary for the development and enhancement of a healthy psychology. The stronger our body is, the stronger our feelings can become; we then have the *opportunity* to feel a strong "spirit." It is a common experience that a good bout of exercise almost necessarily brings about a feeling of spiritual strength (called an 'elevated mood' among the psychologists); and this increase of one's physical powers seems to coincide with the feeling of an increase in one's metaphysical powers: one's possibilities begin to seem greater. Conversely, a sedentary lifestyle and a poor diet almost

necessarily brings about a depressed and lethargic state, in which one's force is weak and even one's spirit feels "lame." To Nietzsche, it was vitally important to develop the "possibility of again and again supplying oneself with great, even tremendous quantities of energy." Such an abundance of energy is necessary if one is to have a greater chance of becoming more refined, increasing one's potential, and perhaps becoming a more "rare" being. To neglect this would be to consign ourselves to being "something mediocre."

This brings us back to one of the central points in Nietzsche's writings which has been quoted here: "The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type." Life grows out of what is not alive. Therefore, it may even be *necessary* that life is rare. The organic emerges out of cosmos as a convergence and appropriation of elements, and as such is predicated upon a much larger system. It springs from an environment which is already a "pre-form of life." Life is an organization which is an expression of the resources which are available to it to be appropriated and accumulated – and of what it is capable of appropriating and accumulating. The more developed and refined an organism, the greater its base of resources and structures of support need be.

Indeed, just as the physical objects in the universe, we living-things are also manifestations of will. That there is no fundamental difference between the living and the inanimate will make some of us feel either exalted or devalued. It has been a commonly held belief that the material is profane, while the living is sacred. That people have argued about where the line is to be drawn is immaterial; the important fact is that they insist on a line. This is, no doubt, a major source of controversy surrounding this aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy. Most people refuse to accept either a reduction of life to the level of the material, or an uplifting of the material world to be considered as valuable as life. To many, this feels like an insult to our sacredness, and our uniqueness.

But if both the animate and the inanimate are manifestations of the will then those who accept the distinction between the sacred and the profane have two distinct options: to declare that will is itself sacred, and thus the entire universe worthy of respect; or that will is irrational, and thus the whole world is meaningless and of little value. Nietzsche, no doubt, would completely reject their concepts of ‘sacredness’ as unfounded. So upon what, if anything, can any feeling of privilege be based? Given Nietzsche’s framework, it is possible that our *rareness* can be understood apart from our ‘sacredness,’ or any other value we may choose to claim for ourselves. Nietzsche was adamant that it was absurd to apply to the universe any “aesthetic anthropomorphisms” simply because they might sound pleasant to our ears (Nietzsche, GS, 168). Nevertheless, it is still true that we are all unique, and extremely rare systems: systems which have become sufficiently *complex*, and thus at which it is at least *possible* to be amazed. As such rare structures, perhaps we *can* accord to ourselves special privileges, rights, or properties, which less complex structures do not possess – not because we are fundamentally different, but because we are so *rare*. Nietzsche believed that the fundamental force behind every seemingly distinct object is the same – that the world is will. Therefore if we can view life as miraculous, then the entire world becomes miraculous as an entity which is capable of bringing about such things. Life is to deserve more celebration than the inanimate for the same reasons that precious gems or striking crystal formations are valued higher than common stones – because they are rare and amazing *expressions* of the universe – the will. It may be here that we can find Nietzsche’s affirmation.

If there is, or could be, a development of organization higher than the organic, or the possibility of organic or psychological manifestations even more rare (and it is hard to say that there could not be) then these would deserve an even greater celebration. We *can* accord honor to ourselves as amazing beings, but then we should also be willing to accord more honor upon

what *could* develop, and upon our further refinements. We must be willing to give ourselves this opportunity, and to work toward it: to become the “pre-form” of something greater. Indeed, it may be crucial to actively encourage opportunities for further development; the next-step could likely start out even more tender and more weak than we are. It may even be helpful to work toward designing a *more perfect* environment (both in the physiological *and* psychological sense) as an incubator, in which this ‘next-step’ has a chance to develop. It would be a worthwhile project to design an environment more likely to inspire feelings of strength – an environment that encourages people to grow and overcome and become powerful, rather than maintain an environment that encourages complacency and sedentariness. This is one path which would lead toward meeting the challenge that Nietzsche posed in his Zarathustra:

Man is something that should be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? All creatures hitherto have created something beyond themselves: and do you want to be the ebb of this great tide . . . What is the ape to men? A laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment. And just so shall man be to the [Overman]: a laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment.(Nietzsche, Z, 41-42).

Along with Nietzsche, we can only hope...

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