

FREEDOM AS A PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAL:
NIETZSCHE AND HIS ANTECEDENTS

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‘Freedom’ is one of the most contested terms in the lexicon of Western philosophy. In its most basic sense, ‘freedom’ designates a person’s ability to think or act in a way that is unhindered, or that expresses a source of activity proper to her. But the freedom that is thereby ascribed to a person can be conceived in a variety of ways: as a *right* that others are obliged to recognize; as a *capacity* that entails a person’s responsibility for her actions; or as a distinctive form of *perfection* that marks a person as possessing a superlative degree of independence of thought or action. Different philosophers have developed these conceptions of freedom in different ways, drawing them more or less closely together, or emphasizing one at the expense of others. The ensuing debates about the proper understanding of freedom have formed a central thread in the history of Western philosophy.

For the most part, these debates have not been seen as integral to the interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy. The intensity of Nietzsche’s attacks on political liberty, and on the freedom of the will as a condition of moral responsibility, has often led to his being cast as an opponent of freedom. Yet even a cursory reading of his works shows that Nietzsche appeals frequently to the idea of freedom and related notions of independence, autonomy and sovereignty in articulating his vision of the “higher human being.” To the extent that he defends a positive conception of freedom, then, Nietzsche is principally concerned with freedom as a normative

ideal: a form of perfection that is characteristic of the noble type, and a standard on which Nietzsche relies in formulating his project of the revaluation of values.

In what follows I aim to elaborate Nietzsche's normative conception of freedom, and to do so in a way that emphasizes the connection between Nietzsche and his philosophical antecedents. That Nietzsche defends an ideal of freedom as part of his conception of the higher human being—the "sovereign individual" who is "autonomous and supramoral" (GM II.2)—has not gone unnoticed in the literature.¹ Neglected by previous commentators, however, has been the affinity between Nietzsche's views and a long tradition of theorizing about the relationship of freedom, fate and perfection that can be traced as far back as the Stoics. Seen from this perspective, Nietzsche's views appear less remarkable than they might otherwise seem. At the same time, from this vantage point, we can identify with greater precision what is genuinely novel about them.

In the next section, I begin by drawing some distinctions that will help to place Nietzsche's positive conception of freedom in better focus; in particular, I isolate two distinct senses in which Nietzsche speaks of the "freedom of the will." I then turn to the philosophers whom I regard as Nietzsche's most important antecedents on the topic, the ancient Stoics and Spinoza, and I discuss the ways in which Nietzsche both affirms and rejects important parts of their positions. Finally, I attempt to spell out in greater detail the principal features of Nietzsche's own account of freedom as a normative ideal.

¹ See Richardson 1996, 207-16; Reginster 2000; Jenkins 2003.

1. Two Senses of ‘Freedom’

Nietzsche’s remarks on the freedom of the will fall into two distinct groups. Most familiar are passages in which he criticizes a conception of freedom that emphasizes the will as a *sui generis* causal power over which an agent exercises conscious control. Freedom of the will in this sense, he believes, is a crude superstition, or a pernicious error, perpetuated by defenders of a “moral world-order.” “Men were considered ‘free’ so that they might be judged and punished—so that they might become *guilty*: consequently, every act had to be considered as willed, and the origin of every act had to be considered as lying within consciousness.”² So understood, freedom of the will is a fiction designed to support claims of moral responsibility: that we are accountable—subject to praise or blame, reward or punishment—for our actions.

In other texts, however, Nietzsche introduces a rival, positive conception of freedom, which he associates with the highest type of existence. Freedom in this sense signifies that

one has assumed responsibility for oneself. That one maintains the distance that separates us. That one becomes more indifferent to difficulties, hardships, privation, even to life itself.... The human being who has *become free*—and how much more the *spirit* who has become free—spits on the contemptible type of well-being dreamed of by shopkeepers, Christians, cows, females, Englishmen and other democrats.³

This “spiritual” freedom, or “the freedom of great souls” (GS 98), is a rare quality that Nietzsche associates with the independence and elevation of mind characteristic of the “free spirit” and the “philosopher of the future.”⁴ Contrasting the former with the Christian believer, he writes that “one could conceive of such a pleasure and power of self-determination, such a *freedom* of the will that the spirit would take leave of all faith and every wish for certainty” (GS 347).

² TI, “The Four Great Errors,” 7. See also GS 345; BGE 19, 21; GM I.13; AC 14.

³ TI, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” 38. See also *ibid.*, 49; GS 347; GM II.2.

⁴ See BGE 212 and GM III.10: “Is there sufficient pride, daring, courage, self-confidence, available today, sufficient will of the spirit, will to responsibility, *freedom of will*, for ‘the philosopher’ to be henceforth—*possible* on earth?—“

That Nietzsche is concerned with two fundamentally different notions of freedom of the will in the above passages should be clear. Less clear is how to characterize the positive ideal of freedom that he defends. It is easiest to say what this freedom does not imply. Freedom, as Nietzsche prizes it, is divorced from any consideration of political right or equality. It is likewise cut off from any consideration of morality. Freedom is defended neither as a value on which all human beings have some claim, nor as a condition of moral agency. It is true that Nietzsche relates his conception of freedom to notions of “responsibility” and “autonomy,” but he understands these notions very differently than they are understood by Kantian moral philosophers. This is seen most strikingly in the connection he establishes between freedom and fatalism, or the affirmation of universal necessity. Since “the fatality of all that has been and will be”⁵ is one of Nietzsche’s primary reasons for rejecting freedom of the will as a contra-causal power, any positive conception of freedom he defends must meet a stringent test that many friends of freedom of the will believe cannot be met. Nietzsche’s conviction that there is a sense of freedom that meets this test is confirmed by his praise of Goethe: “Such a spirit who has *become free* stands amid the cosmos with a joyous and trusting fatalism.”⁶

The burden of this paper is to show that Nietzsche’s writings contain the outlines of a philosophically significant notion of freedom that is both consistent with his fatalism and a recognizable descendent of a neglected tradition in the history of philosophy.⁷ The core idea of freedom that I ascribe to Nietzsche is one that is articulated by earlier thinkers such as the Stoics and Spinoza, who like Nietzsche uphold an ideal of freedom as the highest state of being and see

⁵ TI, “Four Great Errors,” 8.

⁶ TI, “Skirmishes,” 49.

⁷ Leiter, in discussing the “paradox” of Nietzsche’s simultaneous embrace of the doctrines of fatalism and self-creation, interprets the latter doctrine as involving a commitment to a libertarian conception of freedom. Since Nietzsche clearly rejects such a conception, Leiter concludes that the notion of “self-creation” is “at best a poor reflection of genuine creation” (1998, 254). He does not consider the relevance of what I am calling Nietzsche’s “positive conception of freedom.”

no contradiction in defending the possibility of the will's freedom in conjunction with a view of natural events as causally necessitated. Collectively, these philosophers represent a significant alternative to the libertarian conception of freedom defended by many moral philosophers from the late ancient period onward.⁸ For the Stoics and their modern followers, freedom does not consist in a special kind of causality that the human will possesses and other things lack.

Willing, or the initiation of action, is subject to natural necessity in exactly the same way as a rock's falling to the ground. Nevertheless, these philosophers maintain that human beings can be more or less effective in determining their wills and in resisting being determined by external causes. Although all actions have prior causes, such causes can be distinguished in terms of whether they reflect the inherent power of an agent or the power of external forces. As an ideal, freedom is the condition in which an individual's power is exercised in a way that is least constrained by external things, and in which an agent consequently experiences herself as independent or free.

The ideal of freedom that I ascribe to Nietzsche and his antecedents can be summed up in the following points:

- Rather than being a *sui generis* causal power that all rational agents possess, freedom is a state of perfection that one attains: one *becomes* free—and this state is attained only by exceptional individuals.
- Negatively, freedom is a condition of relative *independence* from the influence of external circumstances, actions and commands.
- Positively, freedom is characterized by *self-determination*. One is self-determined to the extent that one's judgments and actions result from the exercise of a power proper to one.

⁸ Susanne Bobzien (1998b, xxx) finds the first evidence of this conception of freedom in Alexander of Aphrodisias's *On Fate* (2nd c. CE).

Such self-determination characterizes the strongest wills, which act according to their own law (autonomy), resisting the force of circumstances and external commands.

- Freedom as autonomy is valued for its own sake and for the sake of the positive affects associated with it. To act from one's own power is simultaneously to *be* and to *feel* master of oneself.
- The acquisition of this freedom is consistent with the assumption that all things exist of necessity. Any action is determined by prior causes; the critical issue is the contribution made by an agent's own powers to the determination of its actions.

One of the key issues separating the Stoic and libertarian conceptions of freedom is that of compatibilism: whether an assertion of the will's freedom is consistent with the assertion of universal causal necessity. Another important difference, however, concerns their respective accounts of why freedom is worth having. For Christian moralists, freedom of the will is valued because it is a necessary condition for moral responsibility—responsibility of a sort that makes the individual agent, and not God, accountable for immoral acts (including original sin). Although the Stoics were challenged by critics who charged that their fatalism precluded a coherent account of moral responsibility (a charge to which they replied along standard compatibilist lines), their interest in freedom stems from a different source. For the Stoics, freedom is valued for its own sake as a component of the best sort of human life: one in which one is active in the initiation of action and experiences joy as the natural affective counterpart of the exercise of agency. It is this notion of freedom, I will argue, that Nietzsche takes over and develops, while at the same time distancing himself from the shadows of theology that cling to the positions of both the Stoics and Spinoza.

2. The Stoics

The surviving texts of the ancient Stoics offer evidence of two distinct notions of freedom.⁹ One is part of a general theory of agency, which defends the will's freedom as a necessary condition for moral responsibility. The other is a normative ideal that plays a prominent role in later presentations of Stoic ethics, particularly that of Epictetus. With respect to Nietzsche, our interest is exclusively in the latter notion of freedom. However, it is worth seeing how the two notions are distinguished by the Stoics, for this will allow us to be clearer on the different philosophical work that the concept of freedom can be called on to do.

The Stoics' first account of freedom is advanced in response to a common criticism of their doctrine of fate: if all things are fated, or determined by prior causes, then there is no action for which a human being can be held accountable. In response to this charge, Chrysippus defended the view that there is a significant difference between actions in which an agent assents to an apparent good and those in which she does not—either because she lacks the capacity for assent, or because she is determined by external causes to act in a way that precludes the possibility of assent (she is “forced” or “compelled” to act). For the Stoics, assent is a distinctive kind of causal contribution that a rational agent (and only a rational agent) can make to the production of an action, and this contribution ensures that the action “depends on” the agent in a way that supports her being accountable for the action.

So described, the Stoics' theory of agency supports a version of compatibilism: the consistency of the claims of causal determinism and moral responsibility. At no point do the Stoics advance anything resembling later incompatibilist theories of freedom: freedom of the will as “indifference,” or “an ability to do otherwise,” or as an undetermined power of choice.

⁹ Here I follow the conclusions of Bobzien (1997, 1998a, b).

Whether an agent possesses a capacity for rational assent is itself the result of prior causes, and similarly for the circumstances and manner in which that capacity is exercised. The Stoics maintain simply that, given all of this, there is a salient difference between cases in which an agent contributes to the production of an action by assenting to it and those in which she does not (because prevented by external causes, etc.), and that this supports the claim that certain actions “depend on” us, in a way that makes us accountable for them.

For the Stoics, all competent adults possess freedom in this first sense: whether or not they act rightly, their actions depend upon their assent to them as choiceworthy. In contrast, the Stoics’ normative conception of freedom, designated by the term *eleutheria*, draws a sharp contrast between free and un-free agents. Freedom as *eleutheria* is limited to those agents who possess the perfection of wisdom or virtue. So conceived, freedom may seem an almost-unattainable ideal, since the Stoic position is that virtue is an all-or-nothing quality that has been instantiated in only a few exceptional individuals (e.g., Diogenes, Socrates, Zeno). Nevertheless, Epictetus and other Stoics present the quest for freedom as being of the utmost importance in the ethical life of a human being.¹⁰

Epictetus makes two principal claims on behalf of freedom as a normative ideal. First, freedom is an essential component of happiness (*eudaimonia*). Freedom is an agent’s “greatest good,” without which it is impossible to be happy (52). Second, freedom is something essentially “noble” (*gennaion*), the possession of which marks an individual as a “master” rather

¹⁰ Epictetus, *Discourses* IV.1 (“Of Freedom): “Are *you*, then, free, says someone?—By the gods I wish to be, and pray to be, but I am not yet able to look into the face of my masters.... But I can show you a free man, so that you will never again have to look for an example. Diogenes was free” (151-2). See also IV.1.159ff on Socrates. Subsequent parenthetical citations are to this discourse. Although I lean heavily on the views of Epictetus, the doxographical tradition traces the connection of wisdom and freedom back to Zeno, the founder of the school: “[The Stoics say:] Only he [the wise man] is free [*eleutheron*], but the inferior are slaves. For freedom is the power of autonomous action [*autopraxias*], but slavery is the lack of autonomous action.” Diogenes Laertius, VII.121-2 (in Long & Sedley 67M).

than a “slave” (54). The root idea of freedom here is political. To be free is to be “independent” (*autezousion*) and “self-governing” (*autonomon*). In contrast, an individual lacks freedom when he is answerable to the demands of another, or when it is in another person’s power to hinder or compel his action (56).

Epictetus’ explanation of this ideal of freedom turns on the connection he establishes between what “depends on us” and the condition of virtue. In contrast to earlier Stoics who accepted a broad notion of an action’s “depending on us” as the basis of moral responsibility, Epictetus restricts his attention to the component of agency which he deems truly to be within our power: the act of assent itself. The success or failure of our efforts to alter our environment depends upon circumstances over which we have no effective control (the actions of other human beings, the physical world, chance). What lies within our power, Epictetus argues, is limited to that which depends *exclusively* on us: our assent, or withholding of assent, to an object as choiceworthy (69-75). This implies a shift in the locus of responsibility from physically instantiated actions to the exercise of an agent’s power of volition or choice (*prohairesis*).

Epictetus’ primary concern in this context is not with whether an agent can be held accountable for her actions, but whether an agent’s choices reflect correct judgments about the good. One of the famous Stoic paradoxes is that none of the things that are commonly regarded as goods—pleasure, wealth, honor, health, or even life itself—is good in the strictest sense; they are at most “preferred indifferents.” The position of Stoic ethics is that nothing is good in a way that contributes to *eudaimonia* except virtue and what partakes of it (correct judgments and the affective states that supervene on them) (82). If to possess virtue is consistently to choose the good based on a knowledge of it, then a virtuous agent is one who recognizes that what is

ultimately of value is not the outcome of actions—our success or failure in altering the world—but only the disposition of our will, that is, making correct judgments about how to act.

Herein lies the basis of Epictetus' claim for the freedom of the virtuous person. For the Stoic sage, the only things that *matter* are those that depend exclusively on her: correct judgments. Accordingly, she is free from the anxieties that attend a life in which happiness is thought to depend upon the favorable dispositions of other human beings or the favorable outcomes of chance. That is the situation of the person who is led by passion rather than by reason. He yearns for the world to go one way rather than another and is disappointed when it does not. He subjects himself to the wants and opinions of others, so that he may receive money, esteem or pleasure in return. The virtuous person does none of these things. She sees no value in the possession of so-called “goods” that lie outside of her control. Consequently, she lives independently. She concedes to neither chance nor other human beings the power to determine her happiness.

For Epictetus, the virtuous individual recognizes only one master, god: the immanent and eternal power, whose *logos* is identified with fate, or the necessary causal order of nature.¹¹ The virtuous person ascribes no intrinsic value to what fate brings—that is the basis of her independence; however, she does affirm the *necessity* of fate (89-90, 99-102, 131). Indeed, since fate can bring nothing bad, and since her happiness depends upon her understanding this fact—that nothing is good except virtue and what partakes of it—the virtuous person not only affirms the necessity of fate but deems god's will *good* in relation to the interests of human beings.

¹¹ Compare Cicero's report of Chrysippus' view: “He says that divine power resides in reason and in the mind and intellect of universal nature. He says that god is the world itself, and the universal pervasiveness of its mind; also that he is the world's own commanding-faculty, since he is located in intellect and reason; that he is the common nature of things, universal and all-embracing; also the force of fate and the necessity of future events (*De natura deorum*, 1.33 [LS 54B]).

Human beings alone live in friendship and community with god, because they have it in them to live happily, as free persons, who are slaves to neither passion nor other human beings.¹²

Epictetus thus presents us with an ideal of freedom as independence and autonomy. The origin of this ideal is political: to be free is to recognize no man as one's master. Yet Epictetus, himself a former slave, finds the true meaning of freedom not in a particular social or political arrangement, but in the constitution of the soul. As he sees it, political freedom is consistent with moral servitude: a failure to govern oneself on the basis of reason, the only thing that lies wholly within our power. For Epictetus, our capacity for reason is the basis of our freedom, but it is also what links us to nature as a whole and to god, whose will is the universal law of nature. Consequently, the Stoic sage embodies a second paradoxical conclusion: her freedom presupposes her rational assent to fate, or the necessity of all things.

3. Spinoza

Spinoza's philosophy incorporates several central tenets of Stoicism. Like the Stoics, Spinoza defends a form of monism, in which God is identified with the substance, power and lawful order of nature. On one critical point, however, Spinoza breaks with the Stoics' position. All of the Stoics, Greek and Roman, accept the proposition that god governs the universe by a reason that is both providential and beneficent. The Stoics, Plutarch complains, "are unceasingly busy crying woe against Epicurus for ruining the preconception of the gods by abolishing providence. For, they say, god is preconceived and thought of not only as immortal and blessed but also as

¹² Cf. IV.1.175: "For freedom is not acquired by satisfying yourself with what you desire, but by destroying your desire."

benevolent, caring and beneficent.”¹³ Spinoza could not be firmer in his opposition to this conception of divine reason:

Nature does nothing on account of an end. That eternal and infinite being we call God, or Nature, acts from the same necessity from which it exists.... The reason, therefore, or cause, why God, or Nature, acts, and the reason why it exists are one and the same. As it exists for the sake of no end, it also acts for the sake of no end (G II 206-7/C 544).

For Spinoza, it is no more than a “prejudice” and “superstition,” and a mark of our ignorance, to suppose that God endows things with ends or directs nature as a whole to the goal of furthering the happiness of rational beings. Given this, Spinoza’s conception of fate, or causal necessity, is even more uncompromising than that of the Stoics: things happen as they do, because they happen *necessarily*. No set of ends, human or divine, offers any further justification for why the world unfolds as it does.

While breaking with the Stoics on this point, Spinoza defends a conception of freedom that is a recognizable descendent of theirs. In the case of both God and human beings he rejects freedom of the will as an “absolute faculty of willing and not willing” (IIP49dem; cf. IP32 cor1). Properly understood, ‘freedom’ designates the mode of acting in which a thing is necessitated to act by its own nature, or power, as opposed to the action of other things on it.

I say that a thing is free if it exists and acts from the necessity of its own nature alone, and compelled [*coactus*] if it is determined by something else to exist and produce effects in a certain and determinate way.¹⁴

It follows from this definition that in the strictest sense “God alone is a free cause. For God alone exists only from the necessity of his nature... and acts from the necessity of his own nature” (IP17Cor 1). In an extended sense, finite things also can be said to act freely, insofar as they are determined to act by a power internal to them. However, Spinoza insists that there are

¹³ “On Common Conceptions,” 1075E (LS 54K). Cf. Diogenes Laertius 7.147 (LS 54A).

¹⁴ Ep. 58 (Curley, *Spinoza Reader*, p. 267). Cf. *Ethics* ID7.

limits on how far this freedom can extend. To *be* finite is for a thing's existence to be causally dependent upon the existence of other finite things, which are responsible for its coming into existence, its ceasing to exist, and much of what happens in between. Consequently, throughout most of its existence, a finite thing is a causal *patient*: the recipient of the actions of other things.¹⁵ In only a limited set of circumstances can it be described as an *agent* responsible for the determination of its own state. The notion of agency, or self-determination, that Spinoza calls on here is a very restricted one, reminiscent of the Stoics' conception of acts that depend exclusively on the agent's causal contribution. In Spinoza's terminology, we *act* in this strict sense, "when something happens, in us or outside us of which we are the adequate cause, i.e. (by D1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and distinctly understood through it alone" (IIID2).

The key question concerns the circumstances under which this notion of agency is instantiated. Here Spinoza follows the Stoics again in explaining it as the exercise of reason. "The power of the Mind, or of reason" is "defined only by understanding" (V pref., II/277, 280). Consequently, the only acts in which we are self-determined are acts of understanding—taken broadly by Spinoza to include any acts in which mental states are determined by prior mental states in accordance with logically necessary relations among their contents.¹⁶

Thus, freedom for Spinoza, as for the Stoics, is rational self-determination. Opposed to this is the condition of bondage, understood as the psychological condition in which a person "lacks the power to moderate and restrain the affects"—passive emotions that are attributable to

¹⁵ "[I]t is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause" (IVP4; cf. IVP4C).

¹⁶ "[I]nsofar as he is determined to do something from the fact that he understands, he acts (by IIIP1), i.e., (IIID2), does something which is perceived through his essence alone, *or* (by D8) which follows adequately from his virtue" (IVP23dem).

the influence of external things on him. It is a state of bondage, because the person “subject to affects is under the control, not of himself, but of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse” (IV pref.).

Changing his terminology slightly, Spinoza writes that we can easily see

the difference between a man who is led only by an affect, *or* by opinion, and one who is led by reason. For the former, whether he will or no, does those things he is most ignorant of, whereas the latter complies with no one’s wishes but his own, and does only those things he knows to be the most important in life, and therefore desires very greatly. Hence, I call the former a slave, but the latter a free man. (IVp66sch.)¹⁷

The free person possesses a strength of mind (*fortitudo*) that allows him to act for himself. Yet because this strength is defined as the power of reason, or understanding, he also is disposed to act in a way that is not narrowly self-interested. He “desires to maintain the principle of common life and common advantage,” and “to keep the common laws of the state” (IVp73dem). But “he strives most of all to conceive things as they are in themselves, and to remove the obstacles to true knowledge, like hate, anger, envy, mockery, [and] pride.... And to this extent [*adeo*]... he strives, as far as he can, to act well and rejoice [*bene agere et laetari*].” (IVp73sch).

Drawing together these points, we find two ways in which Spinoza goes beyond the conception of freedom laid out by the Stoics. The first is his rejection of the Stoics’ conception of a providential deity and of a teleological order of nature. Spinoza rejects both of these in favor of a strict necessitarianism: everything follows necessarily from the infinite power of God, or substance, as modified by the determinate natures of finite things. Spinoza’s metaphysics of power also accounts for the second point on which he diverges from the Stoics. For Spinoza, freedom is directly linked to an individual’s degree of causal power, which determines the extent to which he is capable of acting, as opposed to being acted on. In the case

¹⁷ Cf. IVp67-68.

of a human mind, Spinoza interprets this causal power as the power of understanding, and he explicitly equates acting under the guidance of reason and acting freely. Consequently, on his account, as opposed to that of the Stoics, freedom is not an all-or-nothing ideal. In the strictest sense, only God is perfectly free, but insofar as the notion is applicable to human beings at all, freedom is always a matter of degree.

Acknowledging these differences, Spinoza nonetheless preserves the main outlines of the Stoics' conception of freedom as a normative ideal. At no point in the *Ethics* does he characterize freedom as a condition of moral responsibility. Instead freedom is identified as the condition of an individual who, through reason, has escaped the bondage of the passions and thereby attained a measure of independence from fortune, or those things outside his power. Like the Stoics, again, Spinoza regards this freedom as consistent with the affirmation of fate, or universal causal necessity. As reason affords us a perspective on existence *sub specie aeternitatis*, to the extent that we are guided by reason—the condition of our freedom—we accept without sorrow or resentment the limits of our power and thereby identify our fate with that of the universe:

[H]uman power is very limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes. So we do not have an absolute power to adapt things outside us to our use. Nevertheless, we shall bear calmly those things which happen to us contrary to what the principle of our advantage demands, if we are conscious that we have done our duty, that the power we have could not have extended itself to the point where we could have avoided those things, and that we are a part of the whole of nature, whose order we follow. If we understand this clearly and distinctly, that part of us which is defined by understanding, i.e., the better part of us, will be entirely satisfied with this, and will strive to persevere in that satisfaction. For insofar as we understand, we can want nothing except what is necessary, nor absolutely be satisfied with anything except what is true. Hence, insofar as we understand these things rightly, the striving of the better part of us agrees with the order of the whole of nature [*conatus melioris partis nostri cum ordine totius naturae convenit*] (IVapp. 32; G II 276/C 493-4).

4. Nietzsche on his Antecedents

Common to the ethical outlook of the Stoics and Spinoza is a distinction that Nietzsche sees as characteristic of the ancient world, between the independence of the free person and the dependence of the slave. In GS 18, he describes how, “accustomed to the *doctrine* of human equality,” Europeans of his day have lost their sense of the difference between a free and a slavish existence: “One who is not at his own disposal and who lacks leisure does not by any means seem contemptible to us for that reason.” Yet for the ancients this was a crucial distinction on which rested the very point of philosophy, which promised its practitioners a kind of freedom denied to those who had amassed worldly power and riches:

The Greek philosophers went through life feeling secretly that there were far more slaves than one might think—meaning that everybody who was not a philosopher was a slave. Their pride overflowed at the thought that even the most powerful men on earth belonged among their slaves. This pride, too, is alien and impossible for us; not even metaphorically does the word ‘slave’ possess its full power for us.

The contrast between the noble and the base, the master and the slave, the independent and the dependent, is the most basic value distinction recognized by Nietzsche.¹⁸ And it is one that places him in the same orbit of ethical thought as that occupied by the Stoics and Spinoza. Nevertheless, while these thinkers share the same basic value schema, they articulate the content of these values in different ways. It is one thing to claim that there is a fundamental distinction between a noble and a slavish, or a free and an un-free existence; it is another to spell out exactly what the ideals of freedom and nobility consist in. Here we can begin by taking stock of what Nietzsche says explicitly about the Stoics and Spinoza.

Nietzsche is dismissive of the Stoic doctrine that an authoritative standard of value—a universal law governing all rational beings—can be extracted from nature. For the Stoics, the

¹⁸ See BGE 257, 260.

virtuous life, which is identified with freedom, is a life lived in agreement with nature. And this presupposes that nature has an inherent moral order that can serve as a standard for human action. To assume this, Nietzsche contends, is to misconstrue in a fundamental way the origin of value.

In truth, the matter is altogether different: while you [Stoics] pretend rapturously to read the canon of your law in nature, you want something opposite, you strange actors and self-deceivers! Your pride wants to impose your morality, your ideal, on nature—even on nature.... (BGE 9)

Nietzsche has no sympathy for the specific content of Stoic virtue—or “self-tyranny,” as he calls it—but his main criticism of their position is a metaethical one. The Stoics believe that they have discovered a standard of value within nature, when in fact they have only done what philosophers have always done: impose an ideal of their own making on nature.¹⁹ Implicit in this criticism are two separate theses—one concerning nature, the other concerning value. The latter, to which I will return, is a positive claim about the origin of value: that all values are the imposition on nature of something “created.” Support for this conclusion is supplied by Nietzsche’s first thesis, which represents nature as devoid of any inherent purpose or value. Responding to the Stoics, he asks: “Imagine a being like nature, wasteful beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without purpose and consideration, without mercy and justice, fertile and desolate and uncertain at the same time; imagine indifference itself as a power—how *could* you live according to this nature?” (BGE 9).

Nietzsche’s assessment of Stoic ethics is overwhelmingly negative. The same cannot be said of his response to Spinoza.²⁰ On the face of it, this should come as no surprise. Like Nietzsche, Spinoza is dismissive of the attempt to ground morality in nature. Nature contains no

¹⁹ Philosophy “always creates the world in its own image; it cannot do otherwise. Philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to the ‘creation of the world.’ (BGE 9).

²⁰ For an overview, see Schacht 1995.

inherent purpose or value, nor is it governed by the providential will of God. Again, like Nietzsche, Spinoza identifies the essence of existence with power, and characterizes the life of a finite thing as a struggle defined by its efforts to exercise its power and the efforts of other things to exercise their power on it. Nietzsche was aware of the extent to which Spinoza anticipated his thought on these points. In a famous letter to Overbeck from 1881, he expresses his joy at having discovered a “precursor” in Spinoza:

I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted! I have a *precursor*, and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza.... Not only is his over-all tendency like mine—namely, to make knowledge the *most powerful* affect—but in five main points of his doctrine I recognize myself.... he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world-order, the unegoistic, and evil. Even though the divergences are admittedly tremendous, they are due more to differences in time, culture, and science.

I will not attempt to speculate on how, in Nietzsche’s mind, the divergences between his and Spinoza’s views might be reduced to “differences in time, culture, and science.” Whatever he may mean by this, it is clear that there are real divergences between their positions—ones that are critical for understanding the different meanings they give to the ideal of freedom. The most decisive point on which Nietzsche parts ways with Spinoza is the latter’s identification of a free, or autonomous, existence with a life of reason or understanding.²¹

Nietzsche leaves no doubt about his skepticism concerning the concept of reason. His criticisms of it are wide-ranging. Reason has no capacity to reveal deep truths about reality, for in itself it is merely a reflection of pre-existing linguistic forms: “we read disharmonies and problems into things because we *think only* in the form of language—thus believing in the

²¹ Among the other differences Nietzsche cites are Spinoza’s emphasis on self-preservation as a basic psychological drive, as opposed to the will for greater power (GS 349), and his support for the destruction of harmful affects through intellectual analysis (GS 372).

‘eternal truth’ of ‘reason’ (e.g., subject, predicate, etc.).”²² Philosophy’s elevation of reason as a source of moral and epistemic authority is symptomatic in Nietzsche’s eyes of an underlying physiological degeneracy: “The harshest daylight, rationality at any cost, life bright, cold, circumspect, conscious, without instinct, in opposition to the instincts, has been no more than a form of sickness, another form of sickness—and by no means a way back to ‘virtue,’ to ‘health,’ to happiness.”²³ Given these criticisms it is unsurprising that Nietzsche is unmoved by Spinoza’s efforts to identify an individual’s virtue, psychic health and freedom with a life of understanding. From Nietzsche’s perspective, reason has no special claim on defining the condition of ascendant life that is the source of our freedom.

Supporting this conclusion is a further point on which Nietzsche’s distances himself from Spinoza’s metaphysics. Although Spinoza rejects the doctrine of divine providence, and the existence of a moral order in nature, he nonetheless firmly upholds the *intelligibility* of nature. In nature all things happen necessarily, but they are necessitated in a way that is intelligible to reason. If *A* is an adequate, or sufficient, cause of *B*, then it is in principle possible to *understand* the existence of *B* as necessitated by the existence of *A*. The assumption of this rational order is basic to Spinoza’s account of human freedom. Freedom is the condition in which an individual is both self-determined and maximally effective in ensuring her persistence in the universe. The identification of the power of the human mind with a power of understanding lends support to both of these claims. To the extent that we exercise understanding, we act autonomously, or independently of the actions of other things on us. At the same time, because the content of our knowledge *is* the order of the universe, we are maximally effective in ensuring our continued survival against the actions of things that tend toward our destruction.

²² LN, p. 110.

²³ TI, “The Problem of Socrates,” 11.

Nietzsche's dissatisfaction with a picture of the universe as involving an inherent order or reason is made clear in GS 109:

The total character of the world... is in all eternity chaos—in the sense not of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms.... But how could we reproach or praise the universe? Let us beware of attributing to it heartlessness and unreason or their opposites: it is neither perfect nor beautiful, nor noble, nor does it wish to become any of these things; it does not by any means strive to imitate man. None of our aesthetic and moral judgments apply to it.... Let us beware of saying that there are laws in nature. There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses.

Much of what Nietzsche says here echoes Spinoza's own denunciation, in the appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*, of the human tendency to anthropomorphize nature: to find in it an intrinsic order, beauty, or purpose, and to attribute these marks of intelligence to a divine creator. Yet there is one species of order that Spinoza does not expel from his system, that of *law*, or determination in accordance with intelligible, universal principles. Although Spinoza elsewhere explains the notion of law as originating in human practice—"a rule of life which man prescribes for himself or for others for some purpose"—he retains the same concept in representing the order according to which all things, or things of the same kind, "act in one and the same fixed and determinate manner," in accordance with nature's necessity.²⁴ In Nietzsche's view, to complete the "deification" of nature that Spinoza has begun, this last vestige of anthropomorphic theology must be removed. In place of an intelligible order defined by necessary laws of nature, there is only the brute necessity of power relations:

I take good care not to talk of chemical '*laws*': that has a moral aftertaste. It is rather a matter of the absolute establishment of power relations: the stronger becomes master of the weaker to the extent that the weaker cannot assert its

²⁴ *Theological-Political Treatise*, ch. 4.

degree of autonomy—here there is no mercy, no forbearance, even less a respect for ‘laws’!²⁵

Nietzsche thus aims to dispel the last “shadows of God” that cling to the views of his precursor. Yet this does not mean that he does not share Spinoza’s commitment to an ideal of freedom as a state of perfection attainable by the philosopher. In what follows, I argue that he does and that his account is plausibly understood as a development of Spinoza’s position.

5. Nietzschean Freedom

The outlines of Nietzsche’s mature account of freedom can be discerned most clearly in *Twilight of the Idols*. In sec. 7 of “The Four Great Errors,” he summarizes his case against the traditional conception of free will:

The error of free will. Today we no longer have any pity for the concept of ‘free will’: we know only too well what it really is—the foulest of all theologians’ artifices, aimed at making mankind ‘responsible’ in their sense, that is, *dependent upon them*. Here I simply supply the psychology of all ‘making responsible.’

In the next section, Nietzsche goes on to argue that, in the strictest sense, we are responsible *to* no one, because no one is responsible *for* our existing in the way we do:

No one is responsible for man’s being there at all, for his being such-and-such, or for his being in these circumstances or in this environment. The fatality of his essence is not to be disentangled from the fatality of all that has been and will be. Man is not the effect of some special purpose, of a will, and end.... One is necessary, one is a piece of fatefulness, one belongs to the whole, one is in the whole; there is nothing which could judge, measure, compare, or sentence our being, for that would mean judging, measuring, comparing, or sentencing the whole. But there is nothing besides the whole. That nobody is held responsible any longer... that alone is the great liberation; with this alone is the innocence of becoming restored.²⁶

²⁵ LN, p. 24.

²⁶ TI, “The Four Great Errors,” 8.

In a world in which everything necessarily is as it is, and in which nothing lies outside the world, the concept of responsibility has no meaningful application. And if the concept of responsibility is without application, then the concept of free will, which Nietzsche explains as depending on it, likewise is without application. Yet Nietzsche does not draw from this the conclusion that either concept should be eliminated. In the same passage, we find an allusion to freedom in what he describes as “the great liberation”—our newfound independence from the idea of existence as governed by God. And in a subsequent section of *Twilight of the Idols*, he goes beyond this to suggest a new alignment of the concepts of freedom and responsibility: “What is freedom? That one has the will to assume responsibility for oneself.” On this new articulation of the concepts, freedom and responsibility remain closely linked. However, freedom (or free will) is no longer understood as a capacity for choice that is a prerequisite for moral responsibility. Instead, freedom is a state of perfection that one strives to attain on the basis of possessing the strength of will necessary to assume responsibility for oneself. Freedom, “in the sense in which I understand it,” Nietzsche writes, is “something one has or does *not* have, something one *wants*, something one *conquers*.”²⁷

The ideal of freedom to which Nietzsche here adverts stands opposed to the libertarian conception of freedom (freedom of will or choice) that is a postulate of traditional morality. Nevertheless, Nietzsche’s account has clear precedents in the history of philosophy. As I have suggested, it is plausibly seen as a development of the normative conception of freedom advanced by the Stoics and Spinoza. In bringing out this connection I shall focus on three aspects of Nietzsche’s position, each of which tracks a significant dimension of the positions of his antecedents. In a word, for these philosophers, freedom is *autonomy*, which presupposes

²⁷ TI, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” 38. See also “Morality as Anti-Nature,” 3.

knowledge of nature and is consistent with the truth of *fatalism*. In Nietzsche's thought, these commitments take shape in the following theses, which I discuss in detail below:

- **Autonomy:** To be free is to be autonomous. Autonomy presupposes that one does not merely react to other things, utilizing the power at one's disposal, but that one acts on the basis of a *law*, or principle of action, that is properly one's own. To achieve autonomy, it is necessary both to *liberate* oneself from the influence of external circumstances and to *regiment* in oneself a law that is expressive of one's power. To succeed in doing so is to "assume responsibility for oneself."
- **Knowledge:** The realization of autonomy depends upon acquiring knowledge of the forces that limit one's independence, and knowledge of one's natural powers for action. This knowledge is itself a power that sustains one's autonomy or independence of action.
- **Fatalism:** As a condition of her independence, the autonomous agent affirms the necessity of all things; the world unfolds exactly as she would will it. To think otherwise is to acknowledge a dependence on things outside of her control, that is, fortune and the opinions and actions of others.

Autonomy

Nietzsche uses the term 'autonomy' only rarely, yet his late writings give a prominent place to the concept as an ideal associated with the "higher human being." This is seen most clearly in

GM II.2:

If we place ourselves at the end of this tremendous process, where the tree at last brings forth fruit, where society and the morality of custom at least reveal *what* they have simply been the means to: then we discover that the ripest fruit is the *sovereign individual*, like only to himself, liberated again from morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral (for 'autonomous' and 'moral' are mutually exclusive), in short, the man who has his own independent, protracted will and the

right to make promises—and in him a proud consciousness, quivering in every muscle, of *what* has at length been achieved and become flesh in him, a consciousness of his own power and freedom, a sensation of mankind come to completion. This emancipated individual, with the actual *right* to make promises, this master of a *free* will, this sovereign man—how should he not be aware... of how this mastery over himself also necessarily gives him mastery over circumstances, over nature, and over all more short-willed and unreliable creatures?

I will not try to unravel everything that is going on in this passage, but we can at least register Nietzsche's linking of autonomy to the possession of an "independent" or "*free* will," and to the "consciousness of [one's] own power and freedom." Also noteworthy is his representation of autonomy as the attribute of an "emancipated individual," who has been "liberated from morality." This corresponds to what I highlighted as the first condition of autonomy: liberating oneself from the influence of external circumstances. As the passage continues, Nietzsche alludes to the second condition of autonomy, that one regiment in oneself a principle of action that is expressive of one's own power:

The 'free' man, the possessor of a protracted and unbreakable will, also possesses his *measure of value*: looking out upon others from himself, he honors or he despises... The proud awareness of the extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*, the consciousness of this rare freedom, this power over oneself and over fate, has in his case penetrated to the profoundest depths and become instinct, the dominating instinct.

As Nietzsche describes him, the autonomous or free man is someone who possesses his own "measure of value," and in whom this measure has become "the dominating instinct," that is, an instinct that leads him to adhere consistently to his measure of value.²⁸

The two autonomy conditions—liberation and regimentation—both receive extensive discussion in Nietzsche's writings. The struggle to liberate oneself, to become independent,

²⁸ Nietzsche stresses this point in Z I: "You call yourself free? Your dominant thought I want to hear, and not that you have escaped from a yoke. Are you one of those who had the *right* to escape from a yoke? There are some who threw away their last value when they threw away their servitude" ("On the Way of the Creator").

occurs on a variety of fronts. Most personally, there is a struggle to become free of external circumstances, to stand alone, unmoved by the opinions and expectations of others. “[T]oday the concept of greatness entails being noble, wanting to be by oneself, being able to be different, standing alone and having to live independently” (BGE 212).²⁹ On an intellectual level, the independence Nietzsche describes includes both a skeptical and an affirmative moment. The former defines the stance of the “free spirit,” who eschews convictions, especially those of a moral or religious character:

Strength, *freedom* which is born of the strength and overstrength of the spirit, proves itself by skepticism.... Freedom, from all kinds of convictions, to be able to see freely, is part of strength.... The ‘believer’ does not belong to *himself*, he can only be a means, he must be *used up*, he requires somebody to use him up... (AC 54)

Once a human being reaches the fundamental conviction that he *must* be commanded, he becomes ‘a believer.’ Conversely, one could conceive of such a pleasure and power of self-determination, such a *freedom* of the will that the spirit would take leave of all faith and every wish for certainty, being practiced in maintaining himself on insubstantial ropes and possibilities and dancing even near abysses. Such a spirit would be the *free spirit* par excellence. (GS 347)³⁰

But skepticism does not exhaust the ideal of freedom. The autonomous person does not merely withhold assent from the value judgments of others. Beyond this, she must be capable of determining value for herself. This, for Nietzsche, marks the crucial transformation that makes possible a new kind of “responsibility”—a responsibility to one’s self.

[D]uring the longest period of the human past nothing was more terrible than to feel that one stood by oneself. To be alone, to experience things by oneself, neither to obey nor to rule, to be an individual—that was not a pleasure but a

²⁹ See also BGE 41, 44, 201, 242, 284; LN, p. 111.

³⁰ “From the start, the Christian faith is a sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of the spirit; at the same time, enslavement and self-mockery, self-mutilation.... It has always been not faith but the freedom from faith, that half-stoical and smiling unconcern with the seriousness of faith, that enraged slaves in their masters--against their masters. ‘Enlightenment’ enrages: for the slave wants the unconditional; he understands only what is tyrannical, in morals, too; he loves as he hates, without nuance, to the depths, to the point of pain, of sickness--his abundant *concealed* suffering is enraged against the noble taste that seems to *deny* suffering.” (BGE 46)

punishment; one was sentenced to ‘individuality.’ Freedom of thought was considered discomfort itself.... To be a self and to esteem oneself according to one’s own weight and measure—that offended taste in those days.... There is no point on which we have learned to think and feel more differently. (GS 117)³¹

It is important to distinguish two senses in which it might be left to the individual to determine value for herself. Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant make it the right of an individual to judge questions of value for herself. Yet they remain committed to the assumption that these judgments are answerable to objective standards of correctness: standards independent of the particular will (desires, inclinations) of the individual. Nietzsche, it should be clear, envisions a more radical way in which value judgments depend upon the individual. For him, an autonomous individual is not simply someone capable of *deciding* questions of value for herself. She is someone who recognizes that she herself, and not reason, community, or God, is the ultimate arbiter of the value of persons, actions and things.

With this move it may seem that Nietzsche has abandoned the framework of autonomy that I have argued he shares with Spinoza. But this conclusion would be overly hasty. The autonomy of the “higher human being” is rooted in her ability to regiment in herself a principle of action expressive of her power. This leaves open the question of the source of this principle’s authority. In virtue of what is the autonomous person *bound* to act in conformity with it? In general, we can envision two quite different explanations of this authority, one broadly externalist, the other internalist. On the one hand, the authority of the principle might be thought to lie in the fact that it is objectively valid, or that it represents an objective truth about value. An agent is bound by the principle, then, to the extent that she is appropriately responsive to the

³¹ See also Z II, “On Self-Overcoming,” and Z I, “On the Way of the Creator,” where Nietzsche emphasizes the weight of this responsibility: “Can you give yourself your own evil and your own good and hang your own will over yourself as a law? Can you be your own judge and avenger of your law? Terrible it is to be alone with the judge and avenger of one’s own law.”

truth about value. Alternatively, the authority of the principle might be thought to lie in a fact about the will of the autonomous agent herself: the principle is a law that she cannot fail to observe insofar as she is determined to act by her own power (as opposed to the effects she receives as a result of external things acting on her).

In theory, these two explanations of the authority of practical principles might be seen as reinforcing one another: in an autonomous person, a principle is authoritative in the second sense just in case it is also authoritative in the first sense. Any law that an autonomous person cannot fail to observe insofar as she is determined to act by her own power will be one that is representative of a truth about value that justifies her acting in the way she does. This would be the position of the Stoics and, on one reading, of Kant. Yet one can also imagine these two explanations coming apart. In particular, it might be argued that for a practical principle to be authoritative for an agent it does not have to be grounded in any antecedent truth about value. The authority of such a principle consists simply in the fact that it is the will of the autonomous person: it is a law that she cannot fail to observe insofar as she acts from her own power, as opposed to being determined to act by the effects of external things on her. This, I believe, is Spinoza's position. Spinoza identifies the power of the human mind with the power of understanding. Accordingly, insofar as a person acts on the basis of her own power (i.e. is the adequate cause of her action), she *will* act in accordance with reason. On this view, there is no further justification of the autonomous person's law, beyond her affirming it.³²

³² I assume that for Spinoza there are no normative facts antecedent to facts about the desires of individuals: "we desire nothing because we judge it to be good, but on the contrary, we call it good because we desire it. Consequently, what we are averse to we call evil" (IIP39S; cf. IIP9S). Granting this, it might be objected that the autonomous person's law (the "dictates of reason") receives justification via the (adequate) knowledge that desires expressive of that law result in actions that are advantageous to her, in the sense of maximizing her power or her likelihood of self-preservation. Neither of these properties, however, has normative content independently of the actual (and in this case necessary) desires of agents. Thus, there is no antecedent truth about value to which Spinoza can appeal in justifying the authority of the "dictates of reason."

If this is the correct way to read Spinoza, then it is not very far from Nietzsche's position, setting aside Spinoza's assumption that reason serves as a common measure of the power of a human mind. The starting point for Nietzsche's account of autonomy is his description of the noble mode of evaluation:

The noble type of man experiences *itself* as determining values; it does not need approval; it judges, 'what is harmful to me is harmful in itself'; it knows itself to be that which first accords honor to things; it is *value-creating*. (BGE 260)

The noble individual is the prototype of the autonomous agent: his valuations are a direct expression of his power; his principle of action is whatever he wills it to be. In the genealogical story Nietzsche tells, this noble mode of valuation, "master morality," is replaced by a different mode of valuation, "slave morality," which finds its principle of action in its reaction to the value judgments of the noble type and in values that reinforce the strength and integrity of the group. Nietzsche's project of the *revaluation of values* is an attempt to reclaim the noble mode of valuation in a new register that reflects the history of slave morality—a period that has deepened and complicated human psychology. The new noble type will be the autonomous individual, represented most clearly for Nietzsche by the "philosopher of the future."

The defining characteristic of the philosopher of the future is that he "demands of himself a judgment, a Yes or No, not about the sciences but about life and the value of life"—a judgment for which he alone bears responsibility.³³ In this respect, the autonomous agent does not look to others to verify his judgment, nor does he seek to universalize his judgment as binding on all human beings. As Nietzsche writes in GS 335, "it is selfish to experience one's own judgment as a universal law; and this selfishness is blind, petty, and frugal because it betrays that you have

³³ BGE 205. Cf. BGE 211.

not yet discovered yourself nor created for yourself an ideal of your own, your very own—for that could never be somebody else’s and much less that of all, all!”

Knowledge

In describing the characteristics of the autonomous person, Nietzsche frequently speaks of *creating* values, and even of creating oneself:

Let us therefore *limit* ourselves to the purification of our opinions and valuations and to the *creation of our own new tables of what is good*, and let us stop brooding about the ‘moral value of our actions’!.... [We] *want to become those we are*—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves. (GS 335)

Nietzsche’s talk of the “creation” of values is often taken to imply that the values of the autonomous person are in some sense arbitrary. If our values are our creations, then there seem to be no limits on what we might value; we might end up valuing, and becoming, literally anything. If this is correct, then knowledge would seem to play no essential role in the realization of autonomy.

In the very same section in which Nietzsche suggests this radical view of self-creation, however, he also stresses the role of knowledge in our “becoming who we are.” The section is titled “Long live physics!” It concludes, in the text that immediately follows that just quoted, with this:

To that end we must become the best learners and discoverers of everything that is lawful and necessary in the world: we must become *physicists* in order to be able to be *creators* in this sense—while hitherto all valuations and ideals have been based on *ignorance* of physics or were constructed so as to *contradict* it. Therefore: love live physics! And even more so that which *compels* us to turn to physics—our honesty!

This is a crucial passage for understanding Nietzsche’s view of autonomy. One of the points he makes here is similar to one made by Spinoza: for our power to be expressed in autonomous

action, we must have knowledge of the external forces—physical, social, historical—that can prevent that power from being expressed. If we are to be self-determining agents, we cannot live in a fantasy world: we must know how nature and culture can constrain our activity. This is a decisive rebuke to those who would read Nietzsche as a radical creationist with respect to the self. As we have it here, his view is that the world offers genuine resistance to our attempts to operate on it, and that we become more autonomous to the extent that we acquire knowledge of the forces that impede our activity.

But how exactly does Nietzsche conceive of this knowledge, and how does it contribute to our autonomy? On the traditional account, knowledge is liberating because it allows us to see the truth about how external things constrain our activity. With this knowledge in hand, we are able to overcome such influences and thereby act in a genuinely autonomous manner. As this sort of account is usually developed, it assumes a distinction between intellect and will, and it assumes that the intellect exercises authority over the will: the intellect perceives the truth and it guides or commands the will to act in accordance with the truth. It should be clear that these are assumptions that neither Spinoza nor Nietzsche would accept. So if we are to make sense of the relation of knowledge to autonomy, we must take a different tack.

We may begin by recalling Nietzsche's description to Overbeck of what links his outlook with Spinoza's: "his over-all tendency [is] like mine—namely, to make knowledge the *most powerful* affect." For Spinoza, knowledge is the most powerful affect, because knowing is understanding, and understanding is an expression of the inherent activity of the mind. Any act of knowing represents an increase in the mind's power of understanding, and such an increase in power is experienced as pleasure or joy.³⁴ As it stands, this cannot be Nietzsche's account of the

³⁴ *Ethics*, IIP11S.

relation between knowledge and autonomy. Given his critique of the concepts of reason and law, his position cannot be that autonomy *consists* in understanding the necessary order of nature. For Nietzsche there is no given natural order to be understood, and no correlated human power of understanding. In place of these Spinozistic axioms, Nietzsche proposes instead that all knowing is interpreting, or “perspective knowing”:

let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as ‘pure reason,’ ‘absolute spirituality,’ ‘knowledge in itself’: these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing’.... (GM III.12).

In appealing to the new metaphors of *perspective* and *interpretation*—as opposed to the old metaphors of *grasping* and *comprehending*—Nietzsche is not suggesting that knowledge reduces to making things up, or that any knowledge claim is as good as any other. All interpretation is an attempt to *command* something external, or to subordinate it to our will. It is, therefore, a power relation in which our efforts to subdue are met with an opposing resistance. It is simply false that anything can be interpreted as anything else. Interpretation is, rather, an accommodation to something else, in which our efforts to define its character meet with success insofar as they leave it malleable to our will.³⁵

With this substitution made, we can see how Nietzsche mirrors the structure of Spinoza’s account of the relation between knowledge and autonomy. As an act of interpreting, knowing is a commanding of nature, or subordinating it to our will. Consequently, it represents an increase in our power vis-à-vis nature, which is experienced as pleasure. As Nietzsche describes his affinity with Spinoza to Overbeck, it lies as their shared tendency “to make knowledge the *most*

³⁵ See GS 333 for Nietzsche’s description (offered in response to Spinoza) of knowing as the reconciliation of contesting instincts, each bent on enforcing “its one-sided view of the thing or event.”

powerful affect.” Spinoza understands this claim as metaphysically necessary: knowing or understanding *is* adequate causation, hence it is the fullest expression of our power. Nietzsche offers a more subtle account. There is no necessity that the will to knowledge be the most powerful affect in us. There are basic forces that work against this outcome, with the result that it is an open question whether the will to knowledge can be “incorporated” into life as a will that expresses the primal, life-enhancing drive for power.³⁶ Nevertheless, Nietzsche clearly believes that this can occur, and that it has occurred in him. His overall tendency, which defines the character of his life, is to *make* knowledge the most powerful affect; that is, to live in a way that the drive to knowledge is both life-enhancing and dominates the expression of the other drives in him. Given this, whether we follow Spinoza in defining knowing as understanding, or Nietzsche in defining it as interpreting, knowing can be seen as a paradigm of autonomous activity, which contributes directly to an increase in power.

We find this account borne out by Nietzsche’s efforts to interpret the origins of traditional “tables of value.” Nietzsche’s genealogical analysis is responsive to a range of historical, linguistic, physiological and psychological evidence about the determination of value. The point of genealogy, however, is not merely to arrive at an understanding of the relevant scientific facts. Rather, it is to interpret those facts in such a way as to establish his mastery over the origins of value, freeing himself in the process from the mastery that those values have had over him.

This assertion of power represents the first stage of autonomy: liberating oneself from the constraint imposed by external determinations of value. Full autonomy requires, further, that one regiment in oneself a positive principle of action that is expressive of one’s own power. In this

³⁶ GS 110.

case also Nietzsche links autonomy directly to a particular type of knowledge, namely, self-knowledge. Recall the challenging lines of GS 335:

It is selfish to experience one's own judgment as a universal law; and this selfishness is blind, petty, and frugal because it betrays that you have not yet discovered yourself nor created for yourself an ideal of your own, your very own.... [We] *want to become those we are*—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.

Nietzsche passes easily from “discovering” oneself to “creating” oneself—ideas which on the face of it point to two incompatible models of the self. We avoid any inconsistency if we see these verbs as picking out different aspects of what is involved in becoming autonomous. We *create* ourselves to the extent that we succeed in regimenting in ourselves a principle of action expressive of our power. Given the latter condition, we cannot think of this principle as an arbitrary creation. Rather, it is necessary to discover, or to come to know, the dominant mode in which our power is expressed. “Coming to know” in this way involves a complicated process of self-interpretation, recounted by Nietzsche at various points in his writings, in which will plays against will, vying for a final accounting of how value is assigned by that individual.³⁷

Autonomy marks the resolution of this struggle, in which a “self” and its “law” are defined by a dominant drive. As Nietzsche writes in BGE 158, “To our strongest drive, the tyrant in us, not only our reason bows but also our conscience.”

Fatalism

³⁷ See BGE 19, and the opening sentence of the Preface to GM: “We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge—and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves—how could it happen that we should ever *find* ourselves?”

It remains, finally, to consider the relation of fate and autonomy. An affirmation of fate, or the interconnected necessity of all things, is basic to Nietzsche's efforts to banish the last traces of theology from our self-understanding:

What alone can *our* teaching be? – That no one *gives* a human being his qualities: not God, not society, not his parents or ancestors, not *he himself*.... The fatality of his nature cannot be disentangled from the fatality of all that which has been or will be.... One is necessary, one is a piece of fate, one belongs to the whole, one *is* the whole....³⁸

The individual is, in his future and in his past, a piece of fate, one law more, one necessity more for everything that is and everything that will be.³⁹

Enough has been said already to indicate why Nietzsche finds no conflict between the affirmation of fate and the pursuit of autonomy. Autonomy, for Nietzsche, is the condition in which one succeeds in regimenting in oneself a principle of action that is expressive of one's power. To be autonomous is to be so far as possible self-determined: one's judgments are causally the result of facts about what one is essentially, as opposed to facts about the circumstances in which one finds oneself. Yet, for Nietzsche, facts about what one is essentially are given in terms of what one is *fated* to be. One of his clearest expressions of this outlook is found in BGE 231:

Learning changes us; it does what all nourishment does which also does not merely 'preserve'—as physiologists know. But at the bottom of us, really 'deep down,' there is, of course, something unteachable, some granite of spiritual *fatum*, of predetermined decision and answer to predetermined selected questions. Whenever a cardinal problem is at stake, there speaks an unchangeable 'this is I'; about man and woman, for example, a thinker cannot relearn but only finish learning—only discover ultimately how this is 'settled in him.' At times we find certain solutions of problems that inspire strong faith in *us*; some call them *their* 'convictions.' Later—we see them only as steps to self-knowledge, sign-posts to the problem we *are*—rather, to the great stupidity we are, to our spiritual *fatum*, to what is *unteachable* very 'deep down.'

³⁸ TI, "The Four Great Errors," 8.

³⁹ TI, "Morality as Anti-Nature," 6.

On Nietzsche's account, autonomy presupposes a core of activity that defines the extent to which we are capable of acting from ourselves, as opposed to passively receiving, or reacting to, the actions of other things on us. The person who becomes free is the person whom fate favors with the ability to regiment in herself a principle of acting that is expressive of her inherent power.⁴⁰

For the highest degree of freedom, however, more than this is required. Simply to have discovered and regimented in oneself a "law of one's own" is not yet to have taken full measure of the weight of fate. The success one may have achieved in becoming autonomous is not owed to oneself; it is fate. How and under what circumstances one is able to act from one's own power, is not up to oneself; it is fate. Fate stands over everything we do: no life can be one in which everything flows from its own locus of power. There will always be circumstances, events and people to *bear*, in relation to which one is passive rather than active.⁴¹

An adequate account of the ideal of freedom must accommodate the point that the possibility and limits of autonomy are themselves subject to fate. Yet if this is so, one might question whether freedom in any higher sense is even possible for Nietzsche. Recognizing the way in which one's activity is conditioned by other things, it seems one must either embrace the illusion that one can somehow stand outside the universe, a solitary, self-determining agent, or

⁴⁰ This is exemplified for Nietzsche is the creative activity of artists: "Artists seem to have more sensitive noses in these matters, knowing only too well that precisely when they no longer do anything 'voluntarily' but do everything of necessity, their feeling of freedom, subtlety, full power, of creative placing, disposing, and forming reaches its peak—in short, that necessity and 'freedom of the will' then become one in them" (BGE 213).

⁴¹ Events outside our control can expand or contract the space in which we are able to exercise our agency, and this in turn sets limits to the kind of life we are able to lead. Nietzsche illustrates this in GS 306 with the example of the Epicurean and the Stoic. The former stresses his power to select "the situation, the persons, and even the events that suit his extremely irritable, intellectual constitution." The latter, by contrast, stresses his lack of power over circumstances; hence, "he wants his stomach to become ultimately indifferent to what the accidents of existence might pour into it." Nietzsche goes on to suggest that these philosophies will serve different kinds of lives, identifying his own with that of the Epicurean: "For those with whom fate attempts improvisations—those who live in violent ages and depend on sudden and mercurial people—Stoicism may indeed be advisable. But anyone who foresees more or less that fate permits him to spin a long thread does well to make Epicurean arrangements. That is what all those have always done whose work is of the spirit. For this type it would be the loss of losses to be deprived of their subtle irritability and be awarded in its place a hard Stoic hedgehog skin."

one must acknowledge fate as a necessity to which one is ultimately subject, thereby undermining the presumption that one is in any unqualified sense free. The latter alternative is the only one that could plausibly be attributed to Nietzsche. Nevertheless, it does not, I suggest, represent his deepest conception of freedom. Rather than treating freedom as an autonomy that remains always conditioned by the external power of fate, Nietzsche envisions a freedom that assents to fate as a condition of its own possibility.

Once again, this conception of freedom is best understood in relation to the views of the Stoics and Spinoza. Like his predecessors, Nietzsche locates an individual's highest freedom not in his identification with a core of individual power, "who he is," but with existence as a whole:

My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but *love* it.⁴²

Nietzsche explicitly rejects the alternatives of illusion and submission. One must not just resign oneself to the necessity of all things; one must affirm it, will it, love it. In this he locates the highest freedom exemplified by a spirit such as Goethe, who "stands amid the cosmos with a joyous and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only the particular is loathsome, and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole—*he does not negate any more.*"⁴³

Clear precedents for this stance can be found in the Stoics and Spinoza. The freedom of the Stoic sage is rooted in the identification of his will with the universal law that is the will of god. Judging in accordance with this law, nothing can occur contrary to his will. In Seneca's

⁴² EH, "Why I am so Clever," 10. Cf. GS 276, and EH, "The Case of Wagner," 4: "what is *necessary* does not hurt me; *amor fati* is my inmost nature."

⁴³ TI, "Skirmishes," 49.

words: “I am under no compulsion, I suffer nothing against my will; I am not subject to god but I assent to him [*nec servio deo sed assentior*], and the more so, because I know that everything proceeds according to a law that is fixed and decreed for all time.”⁴⁴ The proper understanding of this passage requires that we recognize the Stoic god as an immanent active principle that animates and orders all things. In this sense, god is not distinct from the universal law of nature, or the universal causal connection that is fate. According to the Stoics, we act in the way that is most free, and least constrained by external causes, when we assent to fate: we will that things be as they necessarily are.

Much the same story can be found in Spinoza. He rejects the teleology that the Stoics attribute to natural things, but he identifies god with the rational, active principle that determines the order of the universe. An individual acts freely when she identifies her will with this order, both because in this way nothing can occur contrary to her will (all events occur in accordance with the necessary order of nature), and because for Spinoza understanding is the inherent activity of the mind. Only insofar as the mind understands does it determine itself, as opposed to being determined by the effects of external things on it.

The emphasis that the Stoics and Spinoza place on the lawful order of the universe and its comprehension by rational minds is an obvious point on which Nietzsche diverges from them. In the present context, however, we might ask whether this difference is sufficient to distinguish in a fundamental way their conceptions of freedom as a normative ideal. In both Nietzsche and his antecedents, a critical juncture is reached at which an acknowledgement of the limits of individual agency (or autonomy) gives way to an affirmation of the necessity of all things. In Zarathustra’s words, one must be capable of “redeeming” existence, by transforming “all ‘it was’

⁴⁴ *De providentia*, V. 6-7.

into a ‘thus I willed it’.⁴⁵ As the Stoics and Spinoza have it, this moment of redemption occurs when one *understands* that nothing could have been different than it is, and thereby assents to the world as it is, without hope or regret. For Nietzsche, exactly the same moment must occur as a condition of achieving an existence that is wholly affirmative and free to the highest degree. The difference is that one must simply *assent* to the necessity, without the consoling conviction that reason supports our assent. Of course, Nietzsche would add, no one has ever really done anything other than this: the conviction that all is as it must be is in the end a matter of faith, albeit “the highest of all possible faiths.”⁴⁶

6. Conclusion

I have argued that an ideal of freedom is central to the normative stance Nietzsche defends in his mature writings. The autonomous person is an example of a “higher human being” (GS 2), whose value judgments are a product of a rigorous scrutiny of inherited values and an honest expression of how the answers to ultimate questions of value are “settled in him” (BGE 231). The autonomous person is thus in a position to take *responsibility* for her value judgments in a way that conventional agents are not.

The notion of responsibility invoked here is distinct from traditional notions of moral responsibility, of which Nietzsche is sharply critical. Indeed, Nietzsche stresses how, for him, the normative conception of freedom is consistent with, and even demands, the affirmation of

⁴⁵ Z II, “On Redemption.”

⁴⁶ TI, “Skirmishes,” 49. It is worth noting that for Spinoza the direct apprehension of the necessity of all things is ascribed not to reason, but to the “third kind of knowledge”: intuitive awareness of the necessary dependence of the essences of finite things on the infinite essence of God. Exactly what this knowledge is and who can be said to have it remains, to say the least, an underdeveloped topic in the *Ethics*.

fate. It is characteristic of the autonomous person that she is capable of affirming the particular shape of her own fate, thus becoming, in Nietzsche's terms, "what she is."

I have argued, finally, that Nietzsche's conception of freedom can be understood as the culmination of a long line of thought in the history of philosophy—one which, beginning with the Stoics and extending through Spinoza, finds no inherent contradiction between the affirmation of fate and the realization of freedom, but which restricts this freedom to relatively few higher or "noble" individuals, who escape the bondage of conventional mores and passive emotional states. Although Nietzsche rejects key assumptions made by both the Stoics and Spinoza, his positive ethical stance can be interpreted as an extension of their efforts to elaborate the notion of freedom as a normative ideal.

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References to this edition are indicated by KSA followed by volume and page number. The German text of Nietzsche's correspondence is found in *Nietzsche Briefwechsel. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1975-).

References to this edition are indicated by KGB followed by volume, part, and page number. Translations of Nietzsche's writings are cited according to the following abbreviations (with Roman numerals referring to major divisions of a work and Arabic numerals to its sections):

- A *The Anti-Christ*, tr. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1954).
- BGE *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).
- D *Daybreak*, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
- EH *Ecce Homo*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).
- GM *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).
- GS *The Gay Science*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).
- LN *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- TI *Twilight of the Idols*, tr. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1954).
- WP *The Will to Power*, tr. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

Z *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1954).

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