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Nietzsche on Strength

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NIETZSCHE ON STRENGTH

Thomas Carroll Lambert

A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
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OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Daniel Garber, primary adviser
Alexander Nehamas, secondary adviser

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I offer an extended interpretation of nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's ethical ideal of strength [*Stärke*]. As I argue in these chapters, Nietzschean strength is strength of *will*. Furthermore, I argue, Nietzsche advances a distinctive and philosophically rich theory of what it is to have a strong or weak will.

In Chapter 1, I confront the notorious passages in which Nietzsche appears to be engaged in little more than the crude worship of physical dominance and martial prowess. I argue that such a flat-footed interpretation would be mistaken, and I demonstrate that Nietzsche's praise of strength and criticism of weakness is best understood as referring to strength and weakness of *will*. This raises the question guiding the subsequent two chapters, namely, how Nietzsche conceives of these notions.

In Chapter 2, I turn to the question of how Nietzsche accounts for the phenomenon historically identified with weakness of will in the Western philosophical tradition, *akrasia*. Akratic action is typically defined as action contrary to an agent's better judgment, but Nietzsche's view appears to be that both action and better judgment have their source in the strength of the drives. Thus, it is unclear how they could ever diverge. I demonstrate, however, that Nietzsche *can* ultimately account for *akrasia*.

As I show in Chapter 3, however, Nietzsche does not *identify* weakness of will with *akrasia*. Instead, Nietzschean weakness of will is a condition of character, resulting from the ordering of one's drives, that *disposes* agents not only to act akratically, but also to exhibit another sort of agential failure: *irresoluteness,* the failure to persist in their intentions. Strong agents, in turn, are insulated from experiencing either phenomenon. Hence, Nietzsche's theory of strength and weakness of will is a *unifying* theory.

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Much of this dissertation was written during the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that the already rather solitary task of writing a dissertation in philosophy often felt all the more isolating. As the project draws to an end, however, I find myself wishing to thank quite a few people for their contributions to my research, my graduate school experience, and my life in Princeton over the past six and a half years. It is heartening to be reminded, however lonely I have sometimes felt, that many individuals helped make this dissertation possible. The dissertation itself is not long, so I ask the reader to indulge me here as I thank them all.

Section 255 of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* features a dialogue between two individuals: "A: 'What? You want no imitators?' B: 'I do not want to have people imitate my example; I wish that everyone would fashion his own example, as *I* do.' A: 'So?'" If B's position expresses Nietzsche's ideal of individuality, it equally reflects Alexander Nehamas's approach as a dissertation adviser. For as long as I have known him, I have admired Alexander as a philosopher, as a writer, as a teacher, and as a man. For as long as he has known me, Alexander has encouraged me to be my *own* philosopher, to find my *own* voice as a writer and teacher, and, most importantly, to become my *own* authentic self. For all this, I express my deepest gratitude.

I would also like to thank Alexander for continuing to supervise my dissertation following his retirement in June 2021. Due to Princeton University policy, emeritus faculty members cannot serve as primary dissertation advisers. However, Alexander has continued in that role in everything but name. In fact, he has done *more* for me than a primary adviser insofar as he also served as one of two departmental readers of my dissertation, producing a detailed reader's report that will prove invaluable as I revise

this work for future publication. It does not do Alexander justice that he is listed on the title page of this dissertation as my secondary adviser.

Following Alexander's retirement, my secondary adviser, Dan Garber, became my official primary adviser. I am sincerely grateful to Dan for his willingness to advise a dissertation on Nietzsche, a figure who falls outside of the Early Modern period of which his knowledge is encyclopedic. My research has benefitted—and will continue to benefit in the future—from Dan's helpful comments on my dissertation chapters and from our many conversations about not only Nietzsche, but also Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Leibniz.

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Character is just another word for having a perfectly disciplined and educated will.

Vince Lombardi

Introduction

In this dissertation, I offer an extended interpretation of nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's ethical ideal of strength [*Stärke*]. Strength is, famously (or, perhaps, *in*famously), one of Nietzsche's core values. However, Nietzsche's conception of strength has received little coverage in the secondary literature. In fact, this dissertation represents, to my knowledge, the *first* extended interpretation of Nietzschean strength. As I argue in these chapters, Nietzschean strength is strength of *will*. Furthermore, I argue that Nietzsche advances a distinctive and philosophically rich theory of what it is to have a strong or weak will. According to Nietzsche, agents are strong- or weak-willed to the degree that they possess a single, dominant psychological drive. An insufficiently dominant strongest drive disposes a weak-willed agent to experience *akrasia*, the phenomenon historically identified with weakness of will in the Western philosophical tradition. It *also* disposes agents to be *irresolute*, understood as the failure to persist in one's intentions. *Strength* of will, which, on this view, involves the possession of an especially dominant strongest drive, effectively insulates agents from both akratic action and irresoluteness. In this regard, Nietzsche's theory of strength and weakness of will is a *unifying* theory, one that explains the occurrence of both types of agential failure that have been associated with weakness of will. I provide a brief overview of the dissertation below.

The dissertation consists of three main chapters. In Chapter 1, I confront Nietzsche's colorful and easily misinterpreted imagery of accounts of birds of prey, marauding barbarians, and, perhaps most notoriously, the "blond beast" (GM I.11).[1]

[1] Throughout this dissertation I employ the following abbreviations to cite Nietzsche's works: A (*The Antichrist*), BGE (*Beyond Good and Evil*), D (*Daybreak*), EH (*Ecce Homo*), NF (*Nachgelassene Fragmente*), GM (*On the Genealogy of Morality*), GS (*The Gay Science*), HAH (*Human, All Too Human*), TI (*Twilight of the Idols*), WS (*The Wanderer and His Shadow*).

While Nietzsche may appear to be engaged in little more than the crude worship of physical dominance and martial prowess, I argue that such a flat-footed interpretation is mistaken. While there is no doubt that there are passages in which Nietzsche elevates physically strong individuals, he explicitly states that "their predominance did not lie mainly in physical strength but in strength of the *soul*" (BGE 257; emphasis mine). Further, I argue, Nietzsche identifies strength of the soul with strength of the *will*. Hence, I suggest that except where he plainly states otherwise, Nietzsche's talk of strength and weakness refers to strength and weakness of will. This, of course, raises the issue of just how Nietzsche understands these notions, and the remaining two chapters of the dissertation are devoted to answering that question.

In Chapter 2, I turn to the question of how Nietzsche accounts for *akrasia,* the phenomenon historically identified with weakness of will in the Western philosophical tradition. Akratic action is typically defined as action contrary to an agent's better judgment, and this raises an interpretive puzzle, for Nietzsche's view appears to be that both action and "conscience" (which Nietzsche associates with unconditional evaluative judgment) have their source in the strength of the drives. But if action and conscience have the same source, it is unclear how they could ever diverge in the manner that is required for akratic action. There is tension, then, between the theoretical commitments of Nietzsche's philosophical psychology and his affirmation of the possibility of *akrasia*. As I argue, however, Nietzsche ultimately *can* account for *akrasia*. On my interpretation, Nietzsche associates conscience with the single, *relatively* strongest drive (that is, the drive stronger than any other individual drive), while he ties motivation to *absolute* strength of the affects caused by agents' drives (that is, to the affect or coalition of affects stronger than any other coalition). This, I argue, allows for the divergence of action and conscience, giving Nietzsche the resources to account for akratic action.

While it is an important result that Nietzsche's theories of motivation and conscience can accommodate akratic action, I argue in Chapter 3 that Nietzsche does not actually *identify* weakness of will with *akrasia*. Instead, I argue, Nietzsche considers weakness of will a condition of character, resulting from the ordering of one's drives. In particular, weakness is the lack of any single, dominant drive, which results in the "lack of a center of gravity" (NF 1888 14[219]). This condition *disposes* agents to act akratically because it increases the likelihood that the drive or drives informing conscience may be motivationally outweighed by a competing coalition. At the same time, the condition also disposes agents to be *irresolute*, where this involves not acting contrary to conscience, but—in virtue of lacking any single drive strong enough to provide psychic stability—failing to persist in one's intentions. This renders one, in Nietzsche's terms, "short-willed" (GM II.2). Thus, I argue, Nietzsche's theory of weakness is a *unifying* theory in the sense that both *akrasia* and irresoluteness—the two primary phenomena identified by philosophers with weakness of will—can be *explained* by appeal to the underlying condition of the drives. Agents are *strong*-willed, according to Nietzsche, when they *do* have a single, dominant drive. In virtue of possessing such a drive—and enjoying the relative psychic stability it affords—the strong individual possesses a "long and unbreakable will" that affords what Nietzsche calls the "right to make promises" (GM II.2).

1. Nietzschean Strength as Strength of Will

Famously, or perhaps *infamously*, strength [*Stärke*] lies at or near the heart of nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's ethical philosophy, alongside such notions as freedom, life affirmation, health, and nihilism.[2] Unlike these other topics, however, Nietzsche's conception of strength has received little treatment in the secondary literature.[3] This is the case despite the fact that strength figures centrally in some of the most memorable passages to be found in Nietzsche's works. Consider, for example, the "birds of prey" from Section 13 of the First Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

> That lambs dislike great birds of prey does not seem strange: only it gives no grounds for reproaching these birds of prey for bearing off little lambs. And if the lambs say among themselves: "these birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey, but rather its opposite, a lamb—would he not be good?" there is no reason to find fault with this institution of an ideal, except perhaps that the birds of prey might view it a little ironically and say: *we* even love them: nothing is more tasty than a tender lamb."
>
> To demand of strength that it should *not* express itself as strength, that it should *not* be a desire to overcome, a desire to throw down, a desire to become master, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs, is just as absurd as to demand of weakness that it should express itself as strength. (GM I.13)

Following this striking depiction of violent physical exploitation, Nietzsche informs the reader of its purpose, writing that "popular morality … separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was *free* to express strength or not to do so" (GM I.13). This is a view that he rejects. According to Nietzsche, it is "absurd" to "demand of strength that it should *not* express itself as strength" because "there is no such substratum; there is no 'being'

[2] Representative passages in which Nietzsche praises strength or criticizes weakness include GS 347, BGE 29, BGE 51, BGE 200, BGE 257, GM I.13, GM II.2, TI IX.38, TI IX.49, and A 54.
[3] See, however, Anderson (2006). On freedom, see the papers collected in Gemes and May (2009). Anderson (2014) also offers a helpful survey of this literature. On the affirmation of life, see Reginster (2006). On health, see Huddleston (2017). On nihilism, see, again, Reginster (2006), as well as Huddleston (2019) and Creasy (2020).

behind doing, effecting, becoming; the 'doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything" (GM I.13). In a slogan, strength is as strength does.

Images of physical dominance abound in Nietzsche's works. In both the *Genealogy* and his previous book, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche waxes poetic about the "barbarians" whom he credits with founding early aristocratic societies:

> To be sure, one should not yield to humanitarian illusions about the origins of an aristocratic society (and thus, of the presupposition of this enhancement of the type "man"): truth is hard. Let us admit to ourselves, without trying to be considerate, how every higher culture on earth so far has *begun*. Human beings whose nature was still natural, barbarians in every terrible sense of the word, men of prey who were still in possession of unbroken strength of will and lust for power, hurled themselves upon weaker, more civilized, more peaceful races, perhaps traders or cattle raisers, or upon mellow old cultures whose last vitality was even then flaring up in splendid fireworks of spirit and corruption. (BGE 257)

> I employed the word "state": it is obvious what is meant—some pack of blond beasts of prey, a conqueror and master race which, organized for war and with the ability to organize, unhesitatingly lays its terrible claws upon a populace perhaps tremendously superior in numbers but still formless and nomad. That is after all how the "state" began on earth: I think that sentimentalism which would have it begin with a "contract" has been disposed of. (GM II.17)

In short, according to Nietzsche, the origin of aristocratic social structures is to be found in mighty acts of physical aggression by men—or *beasts*—of prey against the weaker, more docile masses. Indeed, it is such nobles that inspire what is one of Nietzsche's most infamous—and, retrospectively, perhaps his most unfortunate—expressions: that of the "splendid *blond beast* prowling about avidly in search of spoil and victory," whom "one cannot fail to see at the bottom of all these noble races" (GM I.11; *see also* GM II.17, TI VII.2.)[4]

[4] As Kaufmann importantly notes, "the 'blond beast' is not a racial concept and does not refer to the 'Nordic race' of which the Nazis later made so much. Nietzsche specifically refers to Arabs and Japanese, Romans and Greeks ... the 'blondness' obviously refers to the beast, the lion, rather than the kind of man" (1974, 225).

There is undoubtedly an intense physicality to the subjects of these images. So, too, is physical strength bound up with the *values* Nietzsche ascribes to such characters. The "noble-aristocratic mode of evaluation," Nietzsche writes, "presupposed a powerful physicality, a flourishing, abundant, even overflowing health, together with that which serves to preserve it: war, adventure, hunting, dancing, war games, and in general all that involves vigorous, free, joyful activity" (GM I.7). In short, strength is a notion of great importance to Nietzsche, and, as evidenced by the passages quoted above, what he at times appears to glorify is *physical* strength, expressed through martial prowess and physical dominance and exploitation.[5]

In light of these passages, and, no doubt, at least partly as a function of the deeply unfortunate legacy of Nietzsche's writings in connection with the wave of ethnic nationalism and anti-Semitism that swept through Germany in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century and culminated in the formation of the Third Reich, the Holocaust, and the Second World War, Nietzsche is still, occasionally, read as a proponent of militant German nationalism and anti-Semitism.[6] Such an interpretation, of course, is badly mistaken, as Walter Kaufmann's *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* decisively established already more than seventy years ago.[7]

Nevertheless, even setting aside the issue of Nietzsche's relation to later historical developments, the contention may linger, largely on the basis of the texts presented above, that when Nietzsche writes reverently of strength, he means to valorize physical

[5] The association of Nietzsche with physical strength occasionally extends even to accounts of his *writing style*, as is the case with Ratner-Rosenhagen's description of his "strident, *muscular* language" (2012, 63; emphasis mine).
[6] Another cause of this association may be the fact that Martin Heidegger, who advanced an interpretation of Nietzsche (Heidegger 1979) that remained influential throughout the twentieth century, actually *was* a Nazi sympathizer.
[7] Despite Kaufmann's efforts, persistent doubt remains, as evidenced by, for example, Holub (2015). For a critical review of Holub, see Leiter (2015). See also Anderson (2011) for a nuanced take on Nietzsche's Jewish priests of GM I.

strength, martial prowess, or interpersonal dominance and exploitation of another form—in other words, that his ethical ideal could be expressed by the slogan, "might makes right."[8] My view is that such a conclusion would be mistaken, and that Nietzsche's primary notion of strength cannot consist in any of these alternatives. Instead, I will argue, the sort of strength that primarily interests Nietzsche is strength of *will*.

The chapter consists of four main sections. In Section 1, I show that Nietzsche's appraisal of the figures we have encountered above is, in fact, rather ambivalent. Indeed, it is precisely in his description of their violent physical natures that Nietzsche's ambivalence is most conspicuous. In Section 2, I marshal further textual support for the contention that Nietzsche's primary ideal of strength cannot be that of physical strength, citing two of Nietzsche's own examples of individuals whom he classifies as strong in spite of their (relative) physical weakness. In Section 3, I argue that the notion of strength that is of primary interest to Nietzsche is strength of will. Starting from Nietzsche's assertion that the predominance of the barbarian conquerors of BGE 257 stemmed not from their physical strength, but from what he calls their "strength of soul," I offer an interpretation of the meaning this latter expression by examining Nietzsche's remarks on the nature of "the soul" itself, concluding that for Nietzsche, strength of soul just is strength of will. Finally, in Section 4, I address the question of how Nietzsche can even be committed to an ideal of strength of will given that he apparently denies the existence of the will altogether.

[8] That Nietzsche endorses an ethics of "might makes right" is a contention among some scholars, as in the Appendix to Dodds (1959), titled "Socrates, Callicles, and Nietzsche." It is an especially common view, however, among non-academic writers, as evidenced by Linker (2015), who associates Nietzsche's ethics with the worldview of disgraced former U.S. President and world-historic charlatan Donald Trump. Recent years have seen a spate of such pieces, including Wehner (2016). For a rebuttal to Wehner by a respected expert on Nietzsche's thought, see Schacht (2016).

1.1.

My contention is that Nietzsche is ultimately concerned with strength of will rather than physical strength. What, then, are we to make of the texts presented above? After all, at face value, these portrayals of birds and beasts of prey, marauding barbarians, and the infamous "blond beast" certainly could be taken to crudely glorify physical dominance. A preliminary task, therefore, is to undertake a contextually informed appraisal of the passages in question. I argue that three factors tell in favor of questioning the extent to which Nietzsche actually venerates these figures for their physical strength or martial prowess.

The first point to recognize is simply that, for a philosopher, Nietzsche is a highly literary and metaphorical writer, which can increase the difficulty of interpreting his texts.[9] And it should be clear from the context of GM I.13 that the Nietzsche's intention in introducing the metaphor of the birds of prey is *not* to praise physical strength or violence. In fact, the passage is ultimately not about physical strength at all. After imagining the attitudes of the parties involved in his example, Nietzsche reveals the true focus of the passage, which is the metaphysics of action:

> A quantum of force is equivalent to a quantum of drive, will, effect—more, it is nothing other than precisely this very driving, willing, effecting, and only owing to the seduction of language … can it appear otherwise. For just as the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for an *action*, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was *free* to express strength or not to do so. But there is no such substratum; there is no "being" behind doing, effecting, becoming; "the doer" is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything. (GM I.13)

[9] In fact, he writes at times as if it is his *goal* to be difficult to understand: "It is not by any means necessarily an objection to a book when anyone finds it impossible to understand: perhaps that was part of the author's intention—he did not want to be understood by just 'anybody'" (GS 381; see also BGE 30). Famously, Williams (1993) claims that Nietzsche's writing "is booby-trapped not only against recovering theory from it, but, in many cases, against any systematic exegesis that assimilates it to theory" (66).

It is beyond the scope of our present task to interpret this passage in detail. For our present purposes, it suffices to note that Nietzsche's general point is apparently to reject a certain view of human agency according to which agents possess a causally effective faculty of choice that is unconstrained by preceding causes. On such a view, which Nietzsche elsewhere calls "'freedom of the will' in the superlative metaphysical sense" (BGE 21), an agent who performs an action ϕ could have, holding all conditions fixed, chosen *not* to ϕ, and is therefore deeply morally responsible for ϕ-ing.[10] Nietzsche's claim, then, that it is absurd to "demand of strength that it should *not* express itself as strength" (GM I.13), is an implication of his denial of "freedom of the will in the superlative metaphysical sense" (BGE 21), not of his esteem for physical strength and violent exploitation.

In the remainder of the passage, Nietzsche proceeds to speculate about what he takes to be the psychological underpinnings of such a theory of will:

> [N]o wonder if the submerged, darkly glowering emotions of vengefulness and hatred exploit this belief for their own ends and in fact maintain no belief more ardently than the belief that *the strong man* is free to be weak and the bird of prey to be a lamb—for thus they gain the right to make the bird of prey *accountable* for being a bird of prey. (GM I.13)

In short, he ties the development of such theories to the birth of Christianity and the desire of priests to gain power over others via the introduction of a deep sense of freedom that warrants attributions of responsibility and the institution of punishments.[11, 12] In sum, when it is read within the context of the entire section,

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[10] There is obviously a great deal more that could be said on this topic. We will touch on Nietzsche's views on willing and the will again in Section 4 of this chapter and in Chapters 2 and 3.

[11] See also TI VI.7: "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 an making mankind 'responsible' ... Wherever responsibilities are sought, it is usually the instinct of wanting to judge and punish which is at work."

[12] Nietzsche's speculation here may strike readers as implausible. However, it is worth noting that scholars have argued that the general conception of willing that Nietzsche calls a

Nietzsche's account of the "birds of prey" in GM I.13 is clearly intended not to glorify physical strength, but rather to introduce a discussion of the metaphysics—and, critically, the *psychology* that he takes to motivate theories—of willing and moral responsibility.

We turn now to the second factor that should lead us to question the notion that Nietzsche's ethical ideal glorifies physical strength. Here the task is to take a more holistic view of Nietzsche's appraisal of the "noble-aristocratic" type exemplified in the images of barbarians and wild beasts of prey. A common misreading of the First Essay of the *Genealogy* is that Nietzsche simply endorses the "noble-aristocratic mode of evaluation" and repudiates the inverted "value-equation" brought about through the "slave revolt in morality" (GM I.7). In fact, his position is more nuanced. Nietzsche is, ultimately, rather *ambivalent* about the warrior nobles and their values.[13] In particular, it is precisely with respect to certain expressions of physical strength that Nietzsche adopts a critical tone. For example, he decries as "monsters" those of the noble type prone to engaging in "*disgusting* [*scheusslichen*] procession[s] of murder, arson, rape, and torture" (GM I.11; emphasis mine). In the same vein, the barbarians who founded early aristocratic societies by "hurl[ing] themselves upon weaker…races" are described as "barbarians in every *terrible* [*furchtbaren*] sense of the word" (BGE 257; emphasis mine).[14] If Nietzsche truly venerated physical strength and martial prowess, were his ethical ideal expressible by the slogan "might makes right," such claims would have

"theologians' artifice" arose via Christianity. See, for example, Forster (2019). For an account of the historical development of the notion of will (and its freedom) in antiquity, see Frede (2011).

[13] The same is true with respect to the priestly nobles. Nietzsche writes, "human history would be altogether too stupid a thing without the spirit that the impotent have introduced into it" (GM I.7). Indeed, his position is that the "slave revolt in morality" was necessary for creating the conditions for the highest expression of human excellence.

[14] See also GM II.17. There Nietzsche refers to the "*terrible* [*furchtbaren*] claws" of the "blond beasts of prey" (emphasis mine).

little place in his philosophy, their presence constituting a deviation from his core message, a glaring inconsistency to be explained away. Alternately, we might simply take these remarks as evidence that Nietzsche has something else in mind when he writes of strength, that his core ideal of strength is intended to pick out something other than physical dominance. As a matter of interpretive principle, I take it that a reading that *avoids* attributing inconsistent claims to an author is preferable to the alternative. As such, I conclude, we have good reason to question the centrality of physical strength or martial prowess to Nietzsche's ethical ideal.

A third reason to question whether Nietzsche actually intends to glorify physical strength and martial prowess relates to the context in which he writes of the barbarian founders of early aristocratic societies. For Nietzsche introduces these figures not to advance an ideal, but to make a *historical* point, namely, a point about the *origins* of aristocratic societies and the systems of valuation that emerge from them. Consider again the following passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> To be sure, one should not yield to humanitarian illusions about the origins of an aristocratic society (and thus, of the presupposition of this enhancement of the type "man"): truth is hard. Let us admit to ourselves, without trying to be considerate, how every higher culture on earth so far has *begun*. Human beings whose nature was still natural, barbarians in every terrible sense of the word, men of prey who were still in possession of unbroken strength of will and lust for power, hurled themselves upon weaker, more civilized, more peaceful races, perhaps traders or cattle raisers, or upon mellow old cultures whose last vitality was even then flaring up in splendid fireworks of spirit and corruption. (BGE 257)

While Nietzsche does express an evaluative judgment in this passage, referring to "*higher* culture" (emphasis mine), his point is *not* to describe the present features of such cultures or explain what makes them "higher"; rather, the focus of the passage is on "how every higher culture on earth so far has *begun*." In other words, Nietzsche is interested here in describing the historical origins of the sort of culture he favors, not describing the traits of individuals that he holds in high esteem. Thus, there is little

reason to conclude that Nietzsche intends to praise the—again, "terrible"!—barbarians for their violent subjugation of other human beings.

And indeed, in the very passage we have been considering, Nietzsche quite tellingly *downplays* the significance of physical strength. Though it is true (according to Nietzsche's historical speculation at least) that "in the beginning, the noble caste was always the barbarian caste," it is *also* the case that "their predominance did not lie mainly in physical strength, but in strength of the *soul*" (BGE 257; emphasis mine). The implication of this statement could not be clearer: the notion of strength that Nietzsche associates with nobility is not *physical* strength, even if, according to the historical account he advances, the earliest nobles were in fact physically strong. Nietzschean strength is something else, namely "strength of the soul." I will offer an interpretation of what Nietzsche means by this expression—one that begins with an analysis of his conception of the "soul" in general—in Section 3. In the next section, however, we will consider further evidence that Nietzsche's core notion of strength must be something other than physical strength—or even interpersonal dominance of another form.

1.2.

In the preceding section, I suggested that while Nietzsche's invocations of powerful warriors and predators from the animal kingdom could give the impression that his ideal of strength is that of *physical* strength or martial prowess, there are good reasons to suspect that Nietzschean strength must involve something else entirely. And to perceptive readers, it should come as little surprise that Nietzschean strength is something other than physical strength. This is, after all, the more natural reading of his texts. We have already seen that Nietzsche makes a point of distinguishing the nobles'

physical strength from their "strength of the soul" in BGE 257, emphasizing the latter as the trait that enables their "predominance." As this suggests that the Nietzschean ideal of strength can come apart from physical strength, it should come as little surprise that there are at least two prominent instances in Nietzsche's writings in which he attributes strength to individuals whom he also explicitly identifies as suffering from forms of physical weakness. We turn to those cases now.

Consider the way Nietzsche characterizes strength in the following two passages:

> [T]his mastery over himself also necessarily gives him master over circumstances … he is bound to honor his peers, the strong and reliable … (GM II.2)
>
> [H]e must also be strong, master over himself … (GM III.15)

In each quotation, Nietzsche characterizes the strength of the individual under consideration as involving a certain kind of internal or self-relation. Specifically, each possesses *self-mastery*.[15] But just who are these characters? The first is the widely discussed "*sovereign individual*" (hereafter, SI), who appears in the second section of the Second Essay of the *Genealogy*.[16] It is generally agreed upon that the SI represents a Nietzschean ideal, particularly his ideal of freedom.[17] Nietzsche certainly does describe the SI as "free," "autonomous," and the "master of a *free* will," but, as the quotation under consideration suggests, another of his distinguishing traits is his strength, his "mastery over himself."

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[15] That the strength of these individuals involves an *internal* relation appears to fit nicely with Nietzsche's emphasis on "strength of the soul" at BGE 257. We will consider this latter expression in Section 3.

[16] Leiter (2011), in the course of offering his "deflationary" reading of the passage, notes that this is the SI's only appearance anywhere in Nietzsche's writings. While this is *technically* true, Leiter discounts the fact that Nietzsche attributes the conjunction of many of the same *features* he ascribes to the SI to figures (whether real or merely possible) in several other passages. See, for example, GS 98, GS 335, BGE 211, and TI IX.49. We will consider the SI in greater detail in Chapter 3.

[17] See, for example, Gemes (2009a, 37), Poellner (2009, 152), and Richardson (2009, 128). Note again, however, Leiter's (2011) dissenting view.

This brings us to the second quotation. Who is this other "strong" individual? Fascinatingly, unlike the SI, it is *not* a figure Nietzsche reveres at all. Rather, it is the reviled "ascetic priest," who also appears in the *Genealogy* and for whom "pleasure is felt and *sought* in ill-constitutedness, decay, pain, mischance, ugliness, voluntary deprivation, self-mortification, self-flagellation, self-sacrifice" (GM III.11). There is clearly much about the ascetic priest to which Nietzsche objects. For our present purposes, however, it is not necessary to explore this matter. Instead, we need only to note that in ascribing his unqualified notion of strength to the priest, Nietzsche plainly signals that strength is *compatible* with physical weakness. For the ascetic priest, as a rule, is physically weak. Nietzsche describes him as a "*delicate* animal" and the "natural opponent *and despiser* of all rude, stormy, unbridled, hard, violent, beast-of-prey health and might" who "will not be spared war with the beasts of prey, a war of cunning (of the 'spirit') rather than one of force, as goes without saying" (GM III.15). Of course, it "goes without saying" that the priestly war against the "might" of the barbarian warrior nobles must be a *psychological* war because the "delicate" priest is physically inferior to the warrior and stands no chance in combat against such a physically imposing enemy. This point, of course, recalls Nietzsche's account in the First Essay of the divergence of the priestly-noble mode of evaluation from the knightly-aristocratic and his remark that "the priestly caste and the warrior caste are in jealous opposition to one another and are unwilling to comes to terms" but that "it is disadvantageous for [the priests] when it comes to war!" (GM I.7). They are, in Nietzsche's words, "impotent," and in the absence of any meaningful opportunity to successfully fight back physically, their only option is to enact a "spiritual revenge" by initiating a "slave revolt in morality" (GM I.7). A major theme in Nietzsche's works, of course, is his lamentation of the results of this "slave revolt." Nevertheless, despite his objections to the priests, it is important to

appreciate that Nietzsche plainly still does consider them "strong." And, given that he makes this attribution while also fully acknowledging—indeed, *emphasizing*—their physical weakness, there is good reason to conclude that the most important notion of strength, for Nietzsche, could not be *physical* strength.

At this point, it might be suggested that even if Nietzschean strength is not brute physical strength or martial prowess, the notion could pick out a different sort of external relation—that is, a relation between the agent and something (or someone) else. Thus, even if strength is not a matter of how much weight one can lift or whom one can defeat in battle, it could still necessarily involve—the thought might go—interpersonal domination of others in a social or psychological, rather than physical, sense. For just as the "strong" barbarian nobles exercise command over the populations they conquer, the priests *also* exhibit a form of social control, just not one achieved through psychological rather than physical means. Consider, for example, Nietzsche's account of the priests in *Twilight of the Idols*:

> *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* … the doctrine of the will has been invented essentially for the purpose of punishment, that is, because one wanted to impute guilt. The entire old psychology, the psychology of will, was conditioned by the fact that its originators, the priests at the head of ancient communities, wanted to create for themselves the right to punish… (TI VI.7)

For our present purposes, the key idea expressed in this passage is that it was the priests who introduced certain ideas ("free will," "guilt") into the population in order to make it "*dependent on them,*" thereby acquiring for themselves a dominant social role "at the head of ancient communities." According to the proposal now under consideration, then, if both the "strong" priests and barbarians both enjoy a form of social dominance, perhaps it is just such dominance that constitutes Nietzschean strength.

Such a conclusion, while admittedly less flat-footed than the crude reading according to which Nietzschean strength is a matter of physical brawn, would nevertheless still render Nietzsche's ideal a slightly more nuanced version of the problematic ethical outlook sloganized as "might makes right." Fortunately, there is good reason to think that this interpretation misses the mark as well. To see this, we turn to Nietzsche's second example of a "strong" but physically weak individual: Nietzsche himself.

As is well known, after becoming the youngest-ever appointee to a chair of classical philology at a German-speaking University in 1869 at the age of 24, Nietzsche was forced to resign from his post at the University of Basel in 1879 due to poor health, after which "continued spells of migraine headaches and painful vomiting … made Nietzsche miserable during the next ten years" (Kaufmann 1974, 26). The consuming nature of Nietzsche's poor health is evidenced by his immediate reference to the matter in the opening pages of his intellectual autobiography, *Ecce Homo*. Recounting the writing of *Daybreak*, the first book he published following his resignation from Basel, Nietzsche writes,

> The following winter, my first one in Genoa, that sweetening and spiritualization which is almost inseparably connected with an extreme poverty of blood and muscle, produced *Daybreak*. The perfect brightness and cheerfulness, even exuberance of the spirit, reflected in this work, is compatible in my case not only with the most profound physiological weakness, but even with an excess of pain. In the midst of the torments that go with an uninterrupted three-day migraine, accompanied by laborious vomiting of phlegm, I possessed a dialectician's clarity *par excellence* and thought through with very cold blood matters for which under healthier circumstances I am not mountain-climber, not subtle, not *cold* enough. (EH I.1)

Nietzsche himself, then, was hardly a paragon of "powerful physicality" or "flourishing, abundant, even overflowing health" (GM I.7). Rather, in his own words, his condition was one of "extreme poverty of blood and muscle" and the "most profound *physiological*

weakness" (EH I.1; emphasis mine). Tellingly, however, in spite of his wretched physical health, Nietzsche goes on in the very next section to count himself among those "*who [have] turned out well*" (EH I.2), an expression he associates elsewhere with *strength*:[18]

> What is it, fundamentally, that allows us to recognize *who has turned out well?* That a well-turned-out person pleases our senses, that he is carved from wood that is hard, delicate, and at the same time smells good. He has a taste only for what is good for him; his pleasure, his delight cease where the measure of what is good for him is transgressed. He guesses what remedies avail against what is harmful; he exploits bad accidents to his advantage; what does not kill him makes him stronger. Instinctively, he collects from everything he sees, hears, lives through, *his* sum: he is a principle of selection, he discards much. He is always in his own company, whether he associates with books, human beings, or landscapes: he honors by *choosing,* by *admitting*, by *trusting.* He reacts slowly to all kinds of stimuli, with the slowness which long caution and deliberate pride have bred in him: he examines the stimulus that approaches him, he is far from meeting it halfway. He believes neither in "misfortune" nor in "guilt": he comes to terms with himself, with others; he knows how to *forget*—he is strong enough; hence everything *must* turn out for his best.
>
> Well then, I am the *opposite* of a decadent, for I have just described *myself.* (EH I.2)

While describing the well-turned-out person, Nietzsche twice makes reference to strength.[19] And, again, he counts *himself* among such individuals. So, despite his self-described "profound physiological weakness," Nietzsche considers himself "strong." Surely, then, this is all the evidence we need to conclude that Nietzschean strength cannot be a matter of physical strength. Crucially, Nietzsche's inclusion of himself among the ranks of the "strong" also firmly establishes that Nietzschean strength cannot consist of social or interpersonal dominance either. For, unlike the other "strong"

[18] See, for example, GM III.14, III.16.

[19] Additionally, Nietzsche cites an ability to react "slowly to all kinds of stimuli," a phrase he commonly employs to describe strength of *will*. See, for example, TI VIII.6. Plausibly, the account of "strength of character" [*Charakter-Stärke*] in the much earlier NF 1883 7[253] also describes strength of will insofar as it involves, "taking on many stimuli and … nevertheless asserting one's overall direction [*Gesammtrichtung*]." This aspect of Nietzschean strength will be a focus of Chapter 3.

individuals we have considered in this chapter, the ascetic priest and the barbarian noble, Nietzsche never occupied a position of corresponding social or political authority.

If Nietzschean strength does not refer to either kind of these types of external relations, the remaining possibility is that it instead picks out an *internal* relation—that is, a relation not between agents and other things or people, but rather a *self*-relation.[20] Lending credence to this suggestion is both the language of self-mastery that Nietzsche sometimes employs to describe "strong" individuals (as in GM II.2 and GM III.15, cited above) and his remark at BGE 257 that the predominance of early barbarian nobles "did not lie mainly in physical strength, but in strength of the *soul*." In the next section, I will offer an interpretation of this notion, arguing that "strength of soul"—and ultimately Nietzschean strength more generally—is strength of the *will*.

1.3.

If we are to get a handle on the expression "strength of the soul," a natural place to begin our investigation is Nietzsche's conception of the soul itself. How are we to understand this expression? And what could the term "soul" even mean in the mouth of the self-described "godless anti-metaphysician" (GS 344)? The soul is, after all, is one of the key notions that comes under attack in Nietzsche's sweeping critical survey of Western philosophy from Book I of *Beyond Good and Evil,* tellingly titled "On the Prejudices of Philosophers." There Nietzsche writes,

> [O]ne must … give the finishing stroke to that other and more calamitous atomism which Christianity has taught best and longest, the *soul atomism*.

[20] As a matter of clarification, I do not mean to claim that Nietzsche *never* employs the language of strength and weakness to describe ways in which people (or things) might interact with other people (or things). I also do not claim to be offering a unified definition of Nietzschean strength that captures all his uses of expressions like "strength," "weakness," and related terms. I merely contend that the primary notion of strength of *interest* to Nietzsche (and which he holds up as an ethical ideal) is a matter of how one relates to *oneself*. Thanks to Andrew Huddleston for pressing me for clarification on this point.

> Let it be permitted to designate by this expression the belief which regards the soul as something indestructible, eternal, indivisible, as a monad, as an *atomon*: this belief ought to be expelled from science! (BGE 12)

Clearly, in rejecting "soul atomism," Nietzsche means to deny the existence of the soul as traditionally conceived in Western philosophy, and he goes on list a series of properties commonly attributed to this soul, drawn from the theories of "prejudiced" Early Modern philosophers like Descartes and Leibniz.

Of course, if Nietzsche were to deny the existence of souls *outright*, he would have no grounds for appealing to the idea of a soul's *strength*. But Nietzsche has no intention of denying the soul outright. "Between ourselves," he continues, "it is not at all necessary to get rid of 'the soul' at the same time, and thus to renounce one of the most ancient and venerable hypotheses—as happens frequently to clumsy naturalists who can hardly touch on 'the soul' without immediately losing it" (BGE 12). So, Nietzsche's intention is to deny only the traditional *conception* of the soul but not, like the "clumsy naturalists," to abandon the idea entirely. In other words, Nietzsche wishes to *reconceive* of the soul, and he goes on to propose several alternative—and by his lights, naturalistically respectable—conceptions of the soul: "the way is open for new versions and refinements of the soul-hypothesis; and such conceptions as 'mortal soul,' and 'soul as subjective multiplicity,' and 'soul as social structure of the drives and affects,' want henceforth to have citizens' rights in science" (BGE 12). In our effort get a handle on Nietzsche's expression "strength of the soul," we will direct our attention to his third formulation, the idea of the "soul as a social structure of the drives and affects."

Nietzsche frequently employs the language of social and political relations in the context of the drives.[21] But just what are drives? It is beyond the scope of our current inquiry to give a detailed analysis of the nature of Nietzschean drives; that is a task we

[21] See, for example, NF 1883 7[94], NF 1884 27[27], BGE 6, BGE 19, and EH II.9.

will undertake in Chapter 2. For our present purposes, however, it suffices to say that there is widespread scholarly agreement that the drive [*Trieb; Instinkt*] is the primary explanatory unit in Nietzsche's philosophical psychology.[22] Drives figure centrally in Nietzsche's accounts of the self (D 119, BGE 6), (conscious and unconscious) thought (GS 333), and motivation (D 109). In fact, it is in the context of motivation that Nietzsche employs nearly the exact terms as his proposal for a naturalistically respectable conception of the soul. In an extended discussion of the phenomenology of volition, also appearing in Book I of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes,

> [T]he person exercising volition adds the feelings of delight of his successful executive instruments, the useful "under-wills" or under-souls—indeed, our body is but a social structure composed of many souls—to his feelings of delight as commander. *L'effet c'est moi*: what happens here is what happens in every well-constructed and happy commonwealth; namely, the governing class identifies itself with the successes of the commonwealth. In all willing it is absolutely a question of commanding and obeying, on the basis, as already said, of a social structure composed of many "souls." (BGE 19)

So, Nietzsche describes both the "soul" and the experience of willing in social/political language that invokes the drives. It is clear that the two notions are, for Nietzsche, deeply functionally intertwined. Indeed, one suspects that, at least in some instances, he may employ the two terms interchangeably.[23] And, given the equation of "under-wills" and "under-souls" in BGE 19, a natural conclusion is that the "strength of soul" to which Nietzsche refers in BGE 257 is, ultimately, strength of *will*.[24]

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[22] See, for example, Richardson (1996, 2004, 2020), Janaway (2007, 2012), Anderson (2012), Clark and Dudrick (2012), Leiter (2013), Welshon (2014), Katsafanas (2016), and Riccardi (2018, 2021). Against the grain, Stern (2015) argues that Nietzsche lacks any theory of the drives.

[23] This impression is strengthened by the fact that, as we shall see in Chapter 2, drives have a fundamentally *urging* character; they are, at bottom, dispositions to *act*.

[24] Also suggestive is the fact that Nietzsche explicitly attributes "unbroken strength of will" to the barbarians (BGE 257). Finally, in sharp contrast to the dozens of references to strength and weakness of will, there are few mentions of "strength of soul" or related constructions in Nietzsche's published writings and notebooks, none of which give a sense of what an alternative meaning for the expression might be.

This conclusion finds support in a remark about the contrary notion in a late notebook entry. There Nietzsche writes, rather hyperbolically, that "all weakness is weakness of will" (NF 1887 11[48]). Presumably, then, all strength would, correspondingly, be strength of *will*.[25] On such an interpretation, then, we may conclude that wherever Nietzsche *writes* of strength and weakness, he refers, unless he explicitly states otherwise (as he does with respect to physical strength in BGE 257), to strength and weakness of *will*.[26] Thus, the mark of a strong individual, for Nietzsche, is not—despite what the colorful imagery of birds of prey, barbarians, and lions might suggest to the uncareful reader—physical strength, martial prowess, or any other sort of interpersonal domination. Indeed, Nietzschean strength seems not to involve an external relation—a relation between oneself and other people or things—but rather an *internal* relation. Specifically, the notions of strength and weakness so central to Nietzsche's ethical project is strength of *will*. Just as he puts it in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "nothing is as timely [*zeitgemass*] as weakness of the will. In the philosopher's ideal, therefore, precisely strength of the will ... must belong to the concept of 'greatness'" (BGE 212).

It will be the project of the next two chapters to articulate how Nietzsche *conceives* of strength and weakness of will. A preliminary task, however, concerns the notion of will itself, for Nietzsche repeatedly denies that the will exists![27] While we have just seen Nietzsche claim that "strength of the will … must belong to the concept of

[25] As a matter of clarification, this note should not be interpreted such that Nietzsche advances the implausibly silly view that literally *all* strength and weakness (including *physical* strength and weakness) are strength and weakness of will. After all, he explicitly distinguishes strength of soul from physical strength in his discussion of the barbarians in BGE 257; if he considered the two identical, he would have no reason (and no means) to do so. Thus, the point expressed in Nietzsche's notebook must be something more qualified, perhaps that the only (or at least the primary) notions strength and weakness doing important work *within his philosophy* are strength and weakness of will.
[26] See Anderson (2006, 103) for a similar proposal.
[27] See, for example, D 124, D 130, NF 1885 34[53], NF 1886 5[9], NF 1887 11[73], NF 1888 14[121], NF 1888 14[219], TI III.5, TI VI.3, A 14.

'greatness'" (BGE 212), this declaration stands in significant tension with his remark in *Twilight of the Idols* that "the 'inner world' is full of phantoms and will-o'-the-wisps: the will is one of them" (TI VI.3). How can Nietzsche be committed to an ideal of strength of will if he denies the existence of the will altogether? In the final section of this chapter, I will argue that Nietzsche is best interpreted as denying one particular *conception* of the will, namely that of the will conceived as a conscious, deliberative faculty that both represents actions as to be performed or abstained from and is endowed with the causal power to initiate actions.

1.4.

Skepticism regarding the concept of will is a recurring theme in Nietzsche's philosophy, one that manifests in texts spanning the final productive decade of his life. For example, in *Daybreak*, a relatively early work published in 1881, we find the following passage:

> *What is willing!*—We laugh at him who steps out of his room at the moment when the sun steps out of its room, and then says: *'I will* that the sun shall rise': and at him who cannot stop a wheel, and says: '*I will* that it shall roll': and at him who is thrown down in wrestling, and says: 'here I lie, but *I will* to lie here!' But, all laughter aside, are we ourselves ever acting any differently whenever we employ the expression: '*I will'*? (D 124)

Nietzsche's rhetorical question suggests that he embraces some form of *eliminativism* about the will, that is, that view will *does not exist*. After all, the men's choices in Nietzsche's examples play no role whatsoever in bringing about the resultant states of affairs.[28] And indeed, just six aphorisms later, Nietzsche articulates his suggestion more explicitly: "perhaps there exists neither will nor purposes, and we have only imagined them" (D 130).

[28] That is, setting aside the possibility that the wrestler intentionally remains pinned in order to throw the wrestling match.

In the years following the publication of *Daybreak,* Nietzsche moves from making merely suggestive remarks about the will to embracing some brand of eliminativism. Beginning in notebooks from the mid-1880s, Nietzsche explicitly denies the existence of the will.[29] Claims of an eliminativist flavor are also present in the late published works. In *Twilight of the Idols*, for example, Nietzsche writes that "the inner world is full of phantoms and will-o-the-wisps: the will is one of them" (TI VI.3) and that "today we know that [the will] is only a word" (TI III.5). In *The Antichrist,* he states, "formerly man was given a 'free will' as his dowry from a higher order: today we have taken his will away altogether…" (A 14). Whatever Nietzsche's earlier view, he clearly comes to embrace some form of eliminativism about the will. And this, of course, stands in significant tension with the emphasis he places of strength and weakness of will.

Fortunately, the textual evidence suggests a path toward resolving this tension. While Nietzsche's denial of the will at times—particularly in the notebooks—has an air of absoluteness, there are also instances in which his remarks suggest a more restrained view. For example, consider this line from the same passage from *Twilight* in which Nietzsche claims that the will is "only a word": "In the beginning there is that great calamity of an error that the will is something which is effective, that will is a faculty [*Vermögen*]" (TI III.5). It is also the idea of the will as a "faculty" at which Nietzsche takes aim in *The Antichrist.* There he writes that, "we no longer admit the will as a faculty [*Vermögen*] … the will no longer 'acts' or 'moves'" (A 14). In these instances, Nietzsche seems to articulate not a full-blown eliminativism about the will, but rather a more qualified skepticism. In particular, he rejects the idea of the "will as a faculty." The broad outline of an interpretive strategy should now be clear. If Nietzsche denies only

[29] For a representative notebook entry, see NF 1886 5[9]. See also NF 1885 34[53], NF 1887 11[73], NF 1888 14[121], NF 1888 14[219].

one *conception* of the will (the will "as a faculty"), he may consistently embrace notions like strength and weakness of the will so long as they do not presuppose that conception.

But what does it mean to deny the will as a faculty? What, exactly, does Nietzsche have in mind when he employs this expression? As a starting point, it is worth noting that Nietzsche expresses a general skepticism about explanation by appeal to mental faculties. On this point, section 11 of *Beyond Good and Evil* is instructive. The passage is as humorous as it is illuminating of Nietzsche's general attitude toward the appeal to "faculties," so we will quote it at length:

> "How are synthetic judgments *a priori possible?"* Kant asked himself—and what really is his answer? *"By virtue of a faculty*"—but unfortunately not in five words, but so circumstantially, venerably, and with such a display of German profundity and curlicues that people simply failed to note the comical *niaiserie allemande* involved in such an answer. People were actually beside themselves with delight over this new faculty, and the jubilation reached its climax when Kant further discovered a moral faculty in man—for at that time the Germans were still moral and not yet addicted to *Realpolitik*.
>
> The honeymoon of German philosophy arrived. All the young theologians of the Tübingen seminary went into the bushes—all looking for "faculties." And what did they not find—in that innocent, rich, and still youthful period of the German spirit, to which romanticism, the malignant fairy, piped and sang, when one could not yet distinguish between "finding" and "inventing"! Above all, a faculty for the "suprasensible": Schelling christened it intellectual intuition, and thus gratified the most heartfelt cravings of the Germans, whose cravings were at bottom pious. One can do no greater wrong to the whole of this exuberant and enthusiastic movement, which was really youthfulness, however boldly it disguised itself in hoary and senile concepts, than to take it seriously, or worse, to treat it with moral indignation. Enough, one grew older and the dream vanished. A time came when people scratched their heads, and they still scratch them today. One had been dreaming, and first and foremost—old Kant. "By virtue of a faculty"—he had said, or at least meant. But is that—an answer? An explanation? Or is it not rather merely a repetition of the question? How does opium induce sleep? "By virtue of a faculty," namely the *virtus dormitiva,* replies the doctor in Molière,
>
> > *Quia est in eo virtus dormitiva,*
> > *Cujus est natura sensus assoupire.*
>
> But such replies belong in comedy. (BGE 11)

Nietzsche's specific target in this passage is Kant's notion of synthetic *a priori* judgment, the possibility of which, Nietzsche claims, Kant explains by appealing to a faculty: "He was proud of having *discovered* a new faculty in man, the faculty for synthetic judgments, *a priori*" (BGE 11). As Nietzsche writes shortly thereafter, "'by virtue of a faculty'—he had said, or at least meant. But is that—an answer? An explanation? Or is it not rather merely a repetition of the question?" (BGE 11). In short, Nietzsche takes Kant's account to fail because it is an instance of a general explanatory strategy that Nietzsche rejects, namely, explanation of phenomena in terms of the operation of mental faculties, the appeal to which he considers "merely a repetition of the question." Indeed, in a notebook from the period in which he was writing *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche cites "faculty" as one of several "words with which we explain nothing" (NF 1885 1[86]).

Crucially, as BGE 11 already suggests, the appeal to faculties is an explanatory strategy that Nietzsche associates with Kant in particular. Thus, we find in his notebooks such remarks as "Kant's nonsense with 'appearance' … where he finds no explanation, insert a faculty!" (NF 1884 26 [461]) and "whoever means to explain something with ["faculty"] must be … badly trained" (NF 1885 34[82]), the latter statement coming in a note featuring the heading, "*Anti-Kant.*" And for our purposes, Nietzsche's clear association of faculty talk with Kant offers a hint as to what he means to reject in denying the will "as a faculty." For Kant in fact conceives of the *will* as a faculty.[30] Thus, we shall briefly examine Kant's conception of the will in order to illuminate Nietzsche's skeptical remarks about will and willing.

[30] Of course, Kant is by no means the first philosopher to engage in faculty psychology or to conceive of the will as a faculty. In his Fourth Meditation, for example, Descartes posits two basic faculties of the mind: intellect and will. Relatedly, Nietzsche is far from the first

In the *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals,* Kant explicitly defines the will [*Wille*] as a faculty, namely, "a faculty [*Vermögen*] to choose *only that* which reason independently of inclination cognizes as practically necessary, that is, as good" (GMS 4:412; translation changed), a definition that accords with his earlier remark in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that "in the human being there is a faculty [*Vermögen*] of determining oneself from oneself, independently of necessitation by sensible impulses" (KRV A534/B562).[31] This faculty of will possesses two distinct functions, for which Kant uses distinct terms (MS 6:213, MS 6:226). As Henry Allison explains the distinction,

> Kant uses the terms *Wille* and *Willkür* to characterize respectively the legislative and executive functions of a unified faculty of volition, which he likewise refers to as *Wille*. Accordingly, *Wille* has both a broad sense in which it connotes the faculty of volition or will as a whole and a narrow sense in which it connotes one function of that faculty. (Allison 1990, 129)

The Kantian will possesses a *legislative* function insofar as it dictates (according to the moral law) how the agent must act, as well as an *executive* function insofar as it is endowed with the power to initiate an action (either according to or contrary to the command of its legislative aspect. As Allison continues,

> [I]t is *Wille* in the narrow sense that provides the norm and *Willkür* that chooses in light of this norm. Similarly, this distinction allows us to speak of the will as giving the law to, or even as being the law for, itself, since this is just a matter of *Wille* giving the law to, or being the law for, *Willkür*. (Allison 1990, 130)

To summarize, for Kant, the will (*Wille* in the broader sense) is a conscious, deliberative faculty of choice that both represents actions as to be performed or abstained from

philosopher to *reject* the will conceived as a faculty. Hobbes (in *Leviathan*) and Spinoza (in the *Ethics*) also fall into this camp.

[31] I employ the following abbreviations to cite Kant's works: GMS (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*), KRV (*Critique of Pure Reason*), MS (*Metaphysics of Morals*).

(*Wille* in the narrower sense) and is endowed with the power to cause actions through choice (*Willkür*).

Now, there should be no question that Nietzsche rejects one key aspect of Kant's conception of the will insofar as it is ascribes to humans a *freedom* that Nietzsche clearly denies. For the Kantian will, as a "faculty [*Vermögen*] of determining oneself from oneself, independently of necessitation by sensible impulses" (KRV A534/B562), endows agents with what Nietzsche derisively calls, "'freedom of the will' in the superlative metaphysical sense":

> The desire for "freedom of the will" in the superlative metaphysical sense, which still holds sway, unfortunately, in the minds of the half-educated; the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one's actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely … *causa sui*… (BGE 21)

Nietzsche considers it absurd to posit this sort of freedom, which philosophers today refer to as *agent-causal libertarianism*.[32, 33] He takes it to require agents to be *causa sui*, or self-caused, a notion that Nietzsche considers, "the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far, a rape and perversion of logic (BGE 21; see also BGE 15). For to be *causa sui,* Nietzsche continues, would be, "with more than Münchhausen's audacity, to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness" (BGE 21).[34]

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[32] For a contemporary defense of this position, see Chisholm (1964), who admits that the view he defends may strike readers as rather incredible: "[I]f what I have been trying to say is true, we have a prerogative which some would attribute only to God" (55).

[33] BGE 21 is noteworthy in that it is quite clear which of the many conceptions of free will Nietzsche is targeting. In many passages in which he denies freedom of the will, Nietzsche offers little to no elaboration on his specific target. Plausibly, then, it is primarily this "'freedom of the will' in the superlative metaphysical sense" to which Nietzsche objects. After all, he apparently does embrace some alternative notion of freedom. See, for example, GS 335, GM II.2, TI IX.38, and TI IX.49. For a variety of interpretive approaches to the thorny issue of Nietzsche's conception of freedom, see the papers collected in Gemes and May (2009). Anderson (2014) also offers a helpful survey of this literature.

[34] Nietzsche lifts this humorous image from Schopenhauer, who writes in *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* that "the proper emblem for *causa sui* is Baron

Even setting aside the question of *free will,* however, it is clear that Nietzsche rejects the very notion that there is a unified faculty of will endowed with both legislative and executive functions. Two sections earlier in *Beyond Good and Evil,* for example, Nietzsche writes that while "philosophers are accustomed to speak of the will as if it were the best-known thing in the world … Willing seems to me above all something *complicated*, something that is a unit only as a word…" (BGE 19). For Nietzsche, contra Kant, the sources of various aspects of the phenomenology of volition are in fact (or at least can be) be distinct from the causes of our actions. Due to "popular prejudice" and the "inadequate caution of philosophers" (BGE 19), however, these aspects—Nietzsche includes bodily sensation, thought, and the "affect of the command"—are treated as aspects of one unified faculty. As a result, he continues,

> a whole series of erroneous conclusions, and consequently of false evaluations of the will itself, has become attached to the act of willing—to such a degree that he who wills believes sincerely that willing *suffices* for action … In short, he who wills believes with a fair amount of certainty that will and action are somehow one; he ascribes the success, the carrying out of the willing, to the will itself … (BGE 19)

Crucially, Nietzsche considers these conclusions "erroneous." On his view there is no faculty of will whose operation produce both the phenomenology of volition and causes our actions; "the will" does not perform "the carrying out of the willing." The *actual* source of our actions, therefore, must lie elsewhere. We will turn to Nietzsche's alternative account of the etiology of action in Chapter 2.

Conclusion

Strength is a concept of critical importance for Nietzsche's ethical ideal, and his writings abound with imagery of physical dominance and violent exploitation. This may give the

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Münchhausen on horseback and sinking into the water, gripping his horse with his thighs and lifting himself and the animal up by means of his own pigtail" (21).

impression that the operative notion of strength in Nietzsche's philosophy is *physical* strength. As I have argued in this chapter, however, such a reading would be mistaken. Not only is Nietzsche apparently *critical* of excessive acts of physical violence, but, as we have seen, he at times attributes strength to unambiguously physically weak individuals. Given the textual evidence we have considered in this chapter, it is far more plausible to conclude that the ideal of strength, for Nietzsche, is that of strength of *will*. In what follows, we will develop an interpretation of Nietzsche's conceptions of strength and weakness of will. That task begins in Chapter 2, in which we shall turn to the question of how Nietzsche makes sense of the phenomenon traditionally associated with weakness of will, namely, *akrasia*.

2. Willing and Not Being Able: Nietzsche on Akratic Action[35]

In Chapter 1 we took the first steps toward developing an interpretation of Nietzsche's ideal of strength. There I suggested that Nietzsche's primary notion of strength is not—despite his employment of imagery that might suggest otherwise—physical strength, but rather what he refers to as "strength of soul," which I then argued he understands as strength of the *will*. But just what *is* strength of will for Nietzsche? In this chapter we shall make progress toward answering that question by considering the *opposite* notion, *weakness* of will. Specifically, we shall consider how Nietzsche accounts for the phenomenon traditionally associated with weakness of will, namely, *akrasia*.[36] As will soon become clear, however, this task presents an interpretive difficulty insofar as Nietzsche's philosophical-psychological commitments seem to preclude him from admitting the possibility of akratic action.

The chapter consists of four sections. In Section 1, I present the chapter's guiding interpretive puzzle by laying out textual evidence of Nietzsche's theories of action and evaluative judgment. In the next two sections, I provide more detailed interpretations of these aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy. Finally, in Section 4, I show how, given the details of his theory of the etiology of action and his account of the origins of "conscience," Nietzsche can ultimately make sense of akratic action.

2.1.

In this section I will motivate the chapter's guiding interpretive puzzle, namely that Nietzsche's claims regarding the sources of action and evaluative judgment appear to entail the impossibility of akratic action, the phenomenon traditionally associated with

[35] An earlier version of this chapter will be published in *Inquiry* in early 2023 with the same title.
[36] I provide a definition of akratic action in Section 1.

weakness of will. Thus, before proceeding, let us pause to clarify precisely what this phenomenon is supposed to involve. Philosophers have been interested in *akrasia* since at least the time of Plato, whose Socrates character in the *Protagoras* famously denies the possibility of akratic action, claiming that, "no one who knows or believes there is something else better than what he is doing, something possible, will go on doing what he has been doing" (Protagoras 358c). The phenomenon that Socrates rejects as impossible is composed of two elements: an *action* and a *belief* or *judgment* that it would be better to perform some *other* possible action. Thus, philosophers say that you act akratically at time *t* if your action is contrary to your *better judgment* (also at time *t*) about what you ought to do.

In the secondary literature on Nietzsche, commentators have largely operated on the assumption that Nietzsche follows his philosophical predecessors in identifying weakness of will with *akrasia*. On this point, Lanier Anderson's view is exemplary: "[Nietzschean] weakness is fundamentally weakness of will in the traditional moral psychological sense" (Anderson 2006, 102).[37,38] On the one hand, this assumption may seem rather misguided, for there is in fact only a single explicit reference to *akrasia* in the entire surviving Nietzschean corpus.[39,40] However, as we saw in Chapter 1,

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[37] See also Nehamas (1985, 182), Clark and Dudrick (2012, 242), Richardson (2020, 67), and Riccardi (2021, 210). Strong (2008) is a notable exception on this point.

[38] While he apparently operates with the same assumption in later work—see, e.g., Anderson (2012, 229)—more recently Anderson has adopted a new stance: "I think Nietzsche deploys an even broader conception of ethico-psychological weakness of will, covering all kinds of psychological dissociation that interfere with wholehearted valuation and action" (Anderson 2022, 376).

[39] "I need much altruism for the sake of my ego and to have its pleasure … *akrasia* !!" [*Viel Altruismus habe ich nöthig, um meines ego willen und seine Lust zu haben …* ἀκρασία !!] (NF 1883 17[37]). While the meaning of this note is not immediately clear, it is possible that Nietzsche means to convey that he is tempted toward altruistic behavior despite his considered judgment that pity is harmful. In published work from the same period, for example, Nietzsche writes, "*Where are your greatest dangers?*—In pity" (GS 271; see also GS 338).

[40] This fact is plausibly what informs Leiter's (2011, 111n) remark that "I do not see any textual evidence that Nietzsche is interested … in the problem of akrasia." Of course, the "problem of akrasia" could be taken to refer to one of two things. First, it could refer to a puzzle in the

Nietzsche not only states that "in the philosopher's ideal … precisely strength of the will … must belong to the concept of 'greatness,'" but also that "nothing is as timely as weakness of the will" (BGE 212). For as little explicit attention as Nietzsche devotes to "*akrasia,"* the German terms for strength of will [*Stärke des Willens, Willensstärke*], weakness of will [*Schwäche des Willens, Willensschwäche*], and their variants occur *dozens* of times throughout the corpus. And Nietzsche, trained as he was as a classical philologist, would undoubtedly have been aware of the tradition stretching back to the ancients of identifying weakness of will with *akrasia*. Furthermore, Nietzsche certainly never states that he *rejects* the association of weakness with akratic action, something he *does* do in the case of philosophical notions he finds problematic and wishes to "replace" with what he considers more respectable alternatives.[41] To the contrary, the published passage in which Nietzsche comes closest to providing his own definition of weakness of will is in fact highly evocative of *akrasia*: "weakness of the will—or, to speak more definitely, the inability *not* to respond to a stimulus" (TI V.2; see also TI VIII.6, EH I.2, EH I.4). Thus, whatever the precise nature of the relation between Nietzschean weakness and *akrasia*—that is, whether Nietzsche strictly identifies weakness with *akrasia* or considers the latter only one manifestation of the former—it is a fair assumption that there is at least *some* relation, and that Nietzsche therefore considers it possible for agents to act akratically.

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philosophy of action about how to account for the possibility of akratic action. Second, it could refer to the *ethical* or *practical* problem posed by agents' susceptibility to acting akratically. Whether or not a philosopher explicitly articulates a solution to the former problem, anyone who acknowledges the reality of *akrasia* should *at least*—on pain of inconsistency—have the theoretical resources to account for it. Insofar as Nietzsche *does* acknowledge *akrasia*, then, his theory of action ought to be compatible with the phenomenon of akratic action. As I argue below, Nietzsche not only acknowledges the possibility—indeed, the *ubiquity*—of akratic action but in fact offers explicit remarks about how it occurs, even if he does not refer to the phenomenon by name.

[41] Examples of notions that Nietzsche "replaces" in this manner include the soul (BGE 12) and objectivity (GM III.12).

Rather surprisingly, then, no account has been offered in the secondary literature of precisely *how* agents come to act akratically for Nietzsche. And such an account is sorely needed, for at least at face value, there is a considerable tension between Nietzsche's theoretical commitments regarding the sources of our actions and evaluative judgments, on the one hand, and his affirmation of the possibility of akratic action, on the other. To appreciate this, let us first consider the following passage from *Daybreak*:

> [*T*]*hat* one *desires* to combat the vehemence of a drive at all, however, does not stand within our own power; nor does the choice of any particular method; nor does the success or failure of this method. What is clearly the case is that in this entire procedure our intellect is only the blind instrument of *another drive* which is a *rival* of the drive whose vehemence is tormenting us … While 'we' believe that we are complaining about the vehemence of a drive, at bottom it is one drive *which is complaining about another*; that is to say: for us to become aware that we are suffering from the *vehemence* of a drive presupposes the existence of another equally vehement or even more vehement drive … (D 109)

According to Brian Leiter's influential interpretation, the view Nietzsche expresses in this passage is that "the will … is itself the product of various unconscious drives or affects" (Leiter 2009, 125). Thus, whatever choice the agent ultimately makes is an "effect of the underlying type-facts characteristic of that person: namely, which of his various drives happens to be strongest" (Ibid.) On this picture, what we do is a function of the strength of our various drives.

So much for a quick gloss of Nietzsche's theory of action. What about evaluative judgment? According to Nietzsche, the drives are *also* the ultimate source of our evaluative judgments. In Book I of *Beyond Good and Evil,* for example, he writes that a philosopher's morality "bears decided and decisive witness to *who he is*—that is, in what order of rank the innermost drives of his nature stand in relation to each other" (BGE 6). In Book III, Nietzsche elaborates on this remark, claiming in a short aphorism that "to our strongest drive, the tyrant in us, not only our reason bows, but also our

conscience" (BGE 158; see also GM II.2). What one's morality reveals is which of one's drives is *strongest*, and one's strongest drive determines one's conscience.[42]

At this juncture, the interpretive tension should be manifest. In the passages we have just considered, Nietzsche appears to account for both what we do and what we judge we ought to do by appeal to the strength of the drives.[43] But if both action *and* conscience are determined by the strength of our drives, it isn't immediately clear how the two could ever diverge. In short, Nietzsche's theories regarding the origins of action and conscience seem to preclude the possibility of akratic action, which *just is* the divergence of an agent's action from conscience.[44]

If Nietzsche cannot account for akratic action, this result is problematic on two fronts, one philosophical and the other textual. First, *philosophically*, it would simply be unfortunate if Nietzsche's theoretical commitment precluded the possibility of akratic action. Pre-theoretically, *akrasia* appears to be a pervasive feature of the human experience, the occurrence of which seemingly nobody would deny. In this regard, to the extent that a philosophical theory compels us to deny the possibility of akratic action, this seems like a *pro tanto* reason to do away with the theory, not the phenomenon.[45]

Perhaps more troublingly, it would also prove to be *textually* problematic if Nietzsche were unable to account for akratic action, given—as we observed above—the

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[42] I make the case that for conscience to "bow" to the strongest drive is for the former to be *determined* by the latter in Section 3.

[43] I demonstrate that Nietzsche associates conscience with unconditional evaluative judgment in Section 3.

[44] For example, acting contrary to conscience is precisely how Mark Twain depicts Huck Finn when he lies about Jim's race to the slave hunters in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The philosophical literature on this case beginning with Bennett (1974) treats Huck's action as akratic.

[45] Here I take inspiration from Wiggins (1979), who memorably writes, "I do venture to say that he who values his pet theory above the phenomenon, and wants to hold that weakness of will as I have described it is simply an illusion, will need to command some formidable conceptual-cum-explanatory leverage in the philosophy of value and mind—and an Archimedean fulcrum of otherwise inexplicable facts of human conduct" (251). Admittedly, my position here may be a matter of taste. I direct those who don't share my taste only to the textual problem.

importance he places on strength and weakness of will. Of course, one could attempt to absolve Nietzsche of inconsistency by claiming that he employs those terms entirely differently than his philosophical predecessors.[46] However, even if one wishes to argue that Nietzsche doesn't *identify* weakness with *akrasia*, we have already seen that he affirms the existence of the latter in the *Nachlass*.[47] Further, in addition to there being *no* direct textual evidence that Nietzsche *denies* the possibility of *akrasia*, his characterization in *Twilight* of weakness as "the inability *not* to respond to a stimulus" (TI V.2) is certainly evocative of that notion. The threat of inconsistency looms.

While the interpretive tension I have just presented has largely been overlooked by Nietzsche scholars, Lanier Anderson (2012) comes close to articulating the same problem, though in a slightly different context. Anderson criticizes what he calls the "naturalist" interpretations of Nietzsche on the nature of the *self*, specifically the result, according to such readings, that "so far from there being a self capable of standing back from all the drives, what speaks for 'the self' is nothing but the strongest or dominant drive itself" (Anderson 2012, 206).[48] Against this conclusion, Anderson argues that,

> [E]ven desperately weak-willed individuals who are wholly at the mercy of their drives—that is, people who are deeply unfree and certainly incapable of ruling themselves autonomously—have a minimal self with this capacity for reflexive self-assessment. In fact, if they lacked that capacity, we could not understand them as weak-willed at all; the drive that actually determined their behaviour would *ipso facto* count as the ruling drive (and therefore as their self in the only meaningful sense), and there would be no sense in which the agent/wanton was acting against her own values, will, or considered assessment.
> (Anderson 2012, 230)

[46] This is the conclusion drawn in Strong (2008), to my knowledge the most extended scholarly treatment of Nietzsche on weakness of will.
[47] Nietzsche also appears to *describe* the phenomenon elsewhere, as, for example, when he writes of "'willing and not being able'" [*Wollen-und-nicht-können*] (NF 1881 11[131]). I discuss this passage in Section 4.
[48] Anderson identifies Leiter (2002, 2009), Leiter and Knobe (2007), and Risse (2007) as examples of this strain of interpretation.

To count as weak-willed, claims Anderson, people must have the capacity for "reflexive self- assessment"; that is, they must be able to possess attitudes about their own behavior.[49] Further, this "assessment" must diverge from their behavior. For example, in the famous example from Frankfurt (1971), the "unwilling addict" possesses a second-order desire *not* to have a first-order desire to take the drug. According to Anderson, the "naturalist" Nietzsche, insofar as he associates the *self* with the strongest drive (here, whichever drive actually motivates action), rules out the possibility that people could ever possess such negative attitudes toward their effective desires. But, as Anderson puts it, "criticism of weakness of will and related forms of evaluative inconsistency are central to Nietzsche's core philosophical stances" (Anderson 2012, 230). Since the naturalist interpretation of the Nietzschean self "lacks the resources to make sense of these complaints … the reading is not adequate to Nietzsche's purposes" (Anderson 2012, 230).

We needn't wade into the debate regarding Nietzsche's metaphysics of the self here.[50] Regardless of whether Nietzsche identifies "reflexive self-assessment" with the "true" or "deep" *self*, there is a problem if, according to his theory, action and conscience cannot diverge. The issue is therefore much larger than is suggested by Anderson's presentation of his objection as only a "broad-brush textual reason for rejecting extreme naturalism" (Anderson 2012, 230). For, as we have seen, it is Nietzsche *himself* (and not his "naturalist" interpreters) who clearly states that conscience "bows" to the strongest drive (BGE 158). The threat of inconsistency looms, therefore, for *Nietzsche*, not just for one faction of his interpreters.

[49] Here Anderson seems to operate on the assumption that Nietzsche identifies weakness with *akrasia*.
[50] For interpretations of the Nietzschean self, see Nehamas (1985), Gardner (2009), Anderson (2012), Clark and Dudrick (2012), Katsafanas (2016), Richardson (2020), Riccardi (2021)

Fortunately, as I will argue in the remainder of this chapter, the apparent inconsistency is indeed only apparent: Nietzsche *can* in fact make sense of *akrasia*. In the next two sections, I reconstruct Nietzsche's theories of the sources of action and conscience, respectively. Equipped with the more nuanced interpretations developed in Sections 2 and 3, I proceed to demonstrate in Section 4 how Nietzsche can account for akratic action.

2.2.

According to a familiar view of agency, we act through the operation of the *will*, understood as a conscious, deliberative faculty of choice with the power to initiate (or at least proximately cause) action. This, for example, is the view Kant expresses in the *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals,* writing that the will "is a faculty of choosing only that which reason, independently of inclination, recognizes as practically necessary, i.e., as good" (GMS 4:412). As we saw in Chapter 1, Nietzsche rejects this picture:

> [W]e no longer admit the will as a faculty [*Vermögen*]. The old word "will" now serves only to denote a resultant, a kind of individual reaction, which follows necessarily upon a number of partly contradictory, partly harmonious stimuli: the will no longer "acts" or "moves."
> (A 14; see also TI III.5)

According to Nietzsche, while we *feel* as though our conscious experience of choosing to act *causes* us to act, this is an illusion. In reality, "willing" and action do not stand in this sort of causal relationship. A thought of the form "I will ϕ" does not bring it about that the agent ϕ's, even if, as Nietzsche grants, "he who wills believes sincerely that willing *suffices* for action" (BGE 19; see also GS 127). Here the idea seems to be that our belief that "willing" causes action arises from our repeated experience of observing the two in succession: first the thought, then the action. In short, Nietzsche draws on Hume's insight regarding the human tendency to infer a causal relation between two

repeatedly "conjoined" objects, which Hume chalks up to "custom" (EHU 5.1.5) and Nietzsche calls the "causal instinct" (TI VI.4).[51] Importantly, though, Nietzsche considers this instance of causal inference to be an error. As he writes in *Twilight of the Idols*, "the will no longer moves anything … it merely accompanies events; it can also be absent" (TI VI.4). Rather than causing action, the experience of "willing" is an epiphenomenon that, along with the action to which it refers, is caused by something *else*. Specifically, our actions are, on Nietzsche's view, caused by our psychological *drives*.

The notion of drive [*Trieb*] is central to Nietzsche's philosophical psychology, and there is widespread scholarly consensus that drives are "behavioral dispositions toward specific patterns of goal-directed behavior" (Riccardi 2018, 22).[52] While we cannot offer a complete interpretation of the nature of drives here, several features of drives bear emphasizing. First, as *behavioral* dispositions, drives possess an urging character. As Nietzsche writes in a notebook entry, "each 'drive' is the drive to 'something good', as seen from a certain standpoint; there is valuation [*Werthschätzung*] in it" (NF 1884 26[72]). Here we see that the urging or motivational aspect of drives is bound up with *evaluation*: the object toward which a drive directs us is judged, in some respect, *good*. Indeed, Nietzsche emphasizes that drives condition our *judgments*, writing that "thinking is only a behavior of the drives towards one another" (BGE 36). Finally, in addition to taking *objects* (towards which we are thereby urged and about which our judgments are thereby conditioned), each drive possesses a characteristic *aim* (Katsafanas 2016, 101). In contrast to occurrent desires, which are typically understood

[51] I employ the abbreviation EHU to cite Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.
[52] For more on the nature of Nietzschean drives, see Richardson (1996, 2004, 2020), Anderson (2012), Clark and Dudrick (2012), Katsafanas (2016), and Riccardi (2018, 2021). Stern (2015) argues that Nietzsche lacks a theory of the drives.

to take only an object (e.g., an item or a propositionally-structured state of affairs)—and thereby dissipate once satisfied—each drive is a constant source of motivation. Though drives may be momentarily satisfied by acquiring their objects, they soon reactivate, fixing on—that is, urging agents towards and shaping their judgments about—*new* objects that afford opportunities for the drives' expression.

Armed with this sketch of the nature of drives, we turn now to the account of action that Nietzsche proposes in place of the faculty model of the will. Far from locating the source of our actions in the activity of such a faculty, Nietzsche writes that our actions emerge from a power struggle between the drives. Consider again the following passage from *Daybreak,* which we first encountered in Section 1:

> *T*]*hat* one *desires* to combat the vehemence of a drive at all, however, does not stand within our own power; nor does the choice of any particular method; nor does the success or failure of this method. What is clearly the case is that in this entire procedure our intellect is only the blind instrument of *another drive* which is a *rival* of the drive whose vehemence is tormenting us … While 'we' believe that we are complaining about the vehemence of a drive, at bottom it is one drive *which is complaining about another*; that is to say: for us to become aware that we are suffering from the *vehemence* of a drive presupposes the existence of another equally vehement or even more vehement drive … (D 109)[53]

Considered in isolation, this passage reads quite naturally as expressing the view that our actions are expressions of the "vehemence" of our drives, with the strongest or most "vehement" drive proving motivationally effective. Elsewhere, however, Nietzsche appears to express a similar thought not about drives, but *affects*: "The will to overcome

[53] Nietzsche continues, "and that a *struggle* is in prospect in which our intellect is going to have to take sides" (D 109). This *could* be taken to suggest that some aspect of the self—the "intellect"—remains in some sense independent of the competing drives and is therefore free to choose which of them to support. Such a reading would, however, be mistaken. For as Nietzsche describes the situation in this passage, the "intellect" has *already* taken sides insofar as the agent "*desires* to combat the vehemence of [one] drive" and the "intellect is only the blind instrument of *another drive*." Thus, the "struggle .. in prospect" is not the *current* conflict between the two drives, but rather the possibility—indeed, the likelihood—of *future* conflicts. The very presence of two "rival" drives will result in repeated, persistent internal conflict until the drives in question arrive at a more or less stable dynamic. Thanks to Alexander Nehamas for pressing me on this issue.

an affect is, in the end, itself only the will of another, or several other, affects" (BGE 117). How should these passages be squared with one another?

One strategy would be to interpret Nietzsche's notions of "drive" [*Trieb*] and "affect" [*Affekt*] as picking out the same kind of thing. At one point, for example, Nietzsche calls the self a "social structure of the drives and affects" (BGE 12), whereas in other places (e.g. D 119, BGE 6) he refers only to drives. As John Richardson notes, "sometimes [Nietzsche] uses 'affect' in the very place we might have expected him to use 'drive'" (Richardson 2020, 117).[54] Thus, as Christopher Janaway puts it, "we may wonder whether drives and affects are even properly distinguishable kinds" (Janaway 2009, 55).

There are, however, good reasons to think that Nietzsche's considered position is that drives and affects *are* distinguishable kinds.[55] For starters, whereas Nietzsche writes that we remain wholly unconscious of many of our drives (D 109), this cannot be the case for affects. In a list compiled by Janaway (2007) of things claimed by Nietzsche to be affects in *Beyond Good and Evil* and the *Genealogy,* we find the following items:

> [A]nger, fear, love, hatred, hope, envy, revenge, lust, jealousy, irascibility, exuberance, calmness, self-satisfaction, self-humiliation, self-crucifixion, power-lust, greed, suspicion, malice, cruelty, contempt, despair, triumph, feeling of looking down on, feeling of a superior glance towards others, desire to justify oneself in the eyes of others, demand for respect, feelings of laziness, feeling of a command, and brooding over bad deeds. (205)

[54] Richardson cites NF 1885 40[37] as another example of this tendency. He also points out that at NF 1881 11[73], Nietzsche "passes back and forth between *Trieb* and *Affekt* in making [his] points" (Richardson 2020, 117n5)

[55] Janaway and Richardson do ultimately agree. See also Anderson (2012) on this point. For more on affects in Nietzsche, see Welshon (2014), Fowles (2020), Richardson (2020), and Riccardi (2021).

Affects are, Janaway concludes, "ways in which we *feel*" (2007, 206). They are states individuated by their distinctive phenomenologies. As such—and unlike drives—affects must be conscious.[56]

A preferable reading, therefore, interprets Nietzsche's view of the relation between drives and affects being that drives *cause* affects, states with distinctive phenomenologies which prompt action. This is the interpretation explicitly defended by Mattia Riccardi (2018, 2021), and which appears to be implicit, as Riccardi notes (2021, 62), in Paul Katsafanas' view of drives as "dispositions that *induce* affective orientations" (Katsafanas 2016, 94; emphasis mine).

On such an interpretation of the relation between drives and affects, it isn't difficult to see how Nietzsche's claims in D 109 and BGE 117 can be squared with one another. For a drive to be "vehement," as Nietzsche puts it at D 109, is just for it to cause an affect of sufficient strength for the agent to become reflectively aware of being in that affective state. Thus, the "vehemence" of just is the strength of the affect it causes. Thus, Nietzsche's remark at BGE 117 that "the will to overcome an affect is, in the end, itself only the will of another, or several other, affects" can be understood as *extending* his claim at D 109: for a drive to be vehement is for it to generate some affective response conducive to the drive's aims. What the agent then *does* will be determined by the strength of the various affects: the *strongest* affect—or, as we see at BGE 117—the strongest *coalition* of affects (that share a common object) proves motivationally effective.[57]

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[56] That is, they must be *phenomenally* conscious. Agents can fail to be *reflectively* conscious of the affects they experience, but they will still *feel* them.

[57] Admittedly, both D 109 and BGE 117 describe instances of the will to *overcome* a drive or affect, which we might consider a special instance of action. However, it is difficult to see why the picture wouldn't generalize to cover all actions. If what we do in cases of conscious, internal conflict is a function of the strongest affect(s) involved in that conflict, why wouldn't the strongest affect(s) also motivate in instances where *no* such conflict exists? There would simply

2.3.

Akratic action is commonly characterized as action contrary to an agent's better judgment, where the latter notion amounts to an unconditional or "all-out" evaluative judgment.[58] Having considered Nietzsche's account of the etiology of action in the previous section. We turn now to the second component of an akratic action, an agent's better judgment. Given that better judgment is a species of evaluative belief, a natural starting point for our investigation into Nietzsche's theory of its origin is his account of the genesis of our evaluative beliefs in general.

We begin to get a sense of Nietzsche's view from a remark in Book 1 of *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; also, that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ of life from which the whole plant had grown. (BGE 6)

Nietzsche claims that philosophical theories reveal the *character* of their authors, even if the philosophers don't undertake their theorizing consciously intending this outcome. As he continues shortly thereafter, "in the philosopher … there is nothing whatever that is impersonal; and above all, his morality bears decisive witness to *who he is*—that is, in what order of rank the innermost drives of his nature stand in relation to each other" (BGE 6). Nietzsche's view now comes into greater focus: what is revealed about philosophers by their theories—and, in particular, their *ethical* theories—is a fact about their *drives*, specifically the "order of rank" in which they stand, an expression which

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be less resistance to overcome. Besides, Nietzsche indicates that *every* action involves internal conflict insofar as each impulse to act faces, minimally, internal resistance in the form of a "pleasure of the calm of idleness" [*die Lust der Ruhe der Trägheit*] "which must be overridden" [*muß aufgehoben werden*] (NF 1881 11[131]).

[58] See, for example, Davidson (1970).

presumably refers to their relative strength.[59] In short, the thought seems to be that philosophers' evaluative beliefs are *expressions* of whichever of their drives are strongest. As Nietzsche puts it later in the same work, for example, "moralities are … merely a *sign language of the affects*" (BGE 187).

While BGE 6 and BGE 187 pertain to *general* evaluative convictions, sourcing them the drives and affects, Nietzsche also comments on the nature of discrete evaluative judgments that are relevant to an instance of akratic action. One instance of that kind of "all-out" judgment is the conclusion Nietzsche takes an agent to draw from the experience of "conscience" [*Gewissen*]. Here section 335 of *The Gay Science* is instructive.

Nietzsche begins GS 335 by noting the rarity of self-knowledge, which, as we may glean from his remark about the philosopher at BGE 6, he takes to be—at least in part—a matter of appreciating facts about the relative strengths of one's drives: "That the case of self-observation is indeed … desperate … is attested best of all by the manner in which *almost everybody* talks about the essence of moral actions" (GS 335). Here, as in BGE 6, we find Nietzsche connecting the topic of the nature of the *self* with that of evaluative (specifically, *moral*) belief. And indeed, the upshot of the ensuing imagined dialogue between Nietzsche and a generic moralist is that the evaluative beliefs of average people are also expressions of their drives.

Following this imagined interlocutor's assertion that "when a human being judges *'this is right'* and then infers *'therefore it must be done,'* and then proceeds to *do*

[59] There are competing accounts of the nature of the "order of rank" of drives. Clark and Dudrick (2012) advance a normative interpretation, according to which the order is a function of subordinate drives recognizing the normative authority of commanding drives. Katsafanas (2016) and Riccardi (2018) argue that this reading commits Nietzsche to the homunculus fallacy. A second interpretation, defended by Riccardi (2018, 2021) interprets the order of the drive as function of drives' causal strength.

what he has thus recognized as right and designated as necessary—then the essence of his action is *moral*" (GS 335), Nietzsche presses his opponent to justify his confidence that the judgment and corresponding inference are correct. To this, the interlocutor falls back on the idea that the "voice of conscience" provides direct access to moral truth, claiming, "because this is what my conscience tells me; and the voice of conscience is never immoral, for it alone determines what is to be moral" (GS 335). Of course, Nietzsche finds this response unacceptable: "But why do you *listen* to the voice of your conscience? And what gives you the right to consider such a judgment true and infallible? For this *faith*—is there no conscience for that? Have you never heard of an intellectual conscience? A conscience behind your 'conscience'?" (GS 335). In short, it is precisely this failure to investigate the origins of one's moral beliefs that Nietzsche believes renders the "case of self-observation" so "desperate." For, as he concludes in the imagined dialogue, "your judgment 'this is right' has a pre-history in your drives, likes, dislikes, experiences, and lack of experiences" (GS 335). Here Nietzsche offers a debunking explanation of the "voice of conscience," connecting it to the drives, just as he does with the philosopher's morality in BGE 6.[60] Indeed, a note about conscience

[60] While Nietzsche offers a list of factors that shape evaluative belief, his claim boils down to the same point made in BGE 6. After all, Nietzsche also takes our "likes" and "dislikes" to be a product of our drives (NF 1881 11[164]). And a passage from *Daybreak* neatly expresses his position regarding the relationship between drives and experience:

> This nutriment [of the drives] is therefore a work of chance: our daily experiences throw some prey in the way of now this, now that drive, and the drive seizes it eagerly; but the coming and going of these events as a whole stands in no rational relationship to the nutritional requirements of the totality of the drives: so that the outcome will always be twofold—the starvation and stunting of some and the overfeeding of others. Every moment of our lives sees some of the polyp-arms of our being grow and others of them wither, all according to the nutriment which the moment does or does not bear with it. Our experiences are, as already said, all in this sense means of nourishment, but the nourishment is scattered indiscriminately without distinguishing between the hungry and those already possessing a superfluity. And as a consequence of this chance nourishment of the parts, the whole, fully grown polyp will be something just as accidental as its growth has been. (D 119)

from 1883 bears striking similarity to BGE 6: "Conscience is the feeling in which the order of rank of our drives comes to consciousness" (NF 1883 15[51]).

Importantly, whereas Nietzsche's remarks at BGE 6 associate evaluative belief *in general* with the "order of rank" of the drives, his claim in the 1883 note picks out something narrower, namely *conscience*. As the dialogue at GS 335 illustrates, conscience is an *occurrent* phenomenon, one Nietzsche associates with judgments like "*this is right … therefore it must be done*" (GS 335). Indeed, in *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, Nietzsche writes, "it is … conscience that excites that feeling of compulsion ('I must do this, not do that')" (WS 52).[61] So, conscience, for Nietzsche, is an occurrent *feeling*—an affect—that is bound up with a specific type of practical judgment, namely a judgment with an air of *decisiveness* or *finality*. Conscience, then, generates precisely the sort of unconditional or "all-out" judgment against which the akratic agent acts. Thus, as we proceed in our discussion of *akrasia*, we will employ Nietzsche's terminology, referring to akratic action as "action contrary to conscience" rather than the standard "action contrary to better judgment."

Our experiences "nourish" our drives in the sense that they provide opportunities for expression (and strengthening) of individual drives. The strength of each drive—and thus, the "order of rank" determining a person's "morality"—is therefore, at least in part, a product of environmental factors like ideology and social conditioning. Of course, this picture is perfectly compatible with Nietzsche's claim in BGE 6 that the "order of rank" of the drives determines one's "morality." While the *causal history* of the "rank ordering" involves environmental influence, Nietzsche's view is that one's evaluative convictions at a given point in time are a product of their drives at that time. For example, John Doe's dream to own a house with a garage and a white picket fence may be informed by consumerist capitalist ideology, but the mechanism by which ideology shapes his conscious evaluative attitudes is by nourishing certain drives that come to occupy dominant roles within his psyche.

[61] These formulations come close to the way Nietzsche characterizes the "affect of the command" in his account of the phenomenology of volition in BGE 19. There Nietzsche writes that the will is, "above all an *affect,* and specifically the affect of the command,"
proceeding to associate this affect with "the unconditional evaluation that 'this and nothing else is necessary now'" (BGE 19). Plausibly, then, Nietzsche views the experience of conscience as tightly connected to the *legislative*—if not the executive aspect—of the will as conceived by Kant. This would help explain why Nietzsche describes an akratic episode in his notebooks as a case of "willing and not being able," which he contrasts with "volition that leads to a deed" (NF 1881 11[131]). I discuss this passage in Section 4.

Let us take stock. We have seen that, on Nietzsche's view, evaluative beliefs in general—and, crucially, the deliverances of conscience in particular—reflect something about the "order of rank" of a person's drives. What, specifically, does Nietzsche take to be revealed in these judgments? It can't be the case that we come to know the "order of rank" of the drives in its *entirety*. After all, as Nietzsche writes in *Daybreak*, "however far a man may go in self-knowledge, nothing however can be more incomplete than his image of the totality of *drives* which constitute his being" (D 119). To have knowledge of the entire rank ordering of the drives would *just be* to possess a complete "image of the totality of *drives*," so whatever we can learn about people's drives from their values must be more limited in scope.

As it happens, later in BGE, Nietzsche articulates what he takes to be the more limited conclusion we may draw regarding the relation between people's values and their drives. Specifically, he lays out his view regarding the origins of *conscience*: "To our strongest drive, the tyrant in us, not only our reason bows, but also our conscience" (BGE 158). Writing about the "sovereign individual" in the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche goes so far as to *identify* his conscience with his "dominating instinct" (GM II.2). So, what we can learn about the "order of rank" of a person's drives from the content of conscience is which of these drives is *strongest*. This is because, as Nietzsche puts it, conscience "bows" to the strongest drive. The strongest drive causes the affective state identified as "conscience," and on the basis of that affect the agent makes a conclusive practical judgment.

2.4.

Having considered Nietzsche's accounts of the sources of action and conscience, we are now in position to appreciate how actions could *diverge* from conscience in the manner

characteristic of *akrasia*. The concern, as it was presented in Section 1, was that insofar as Nietzsche seems to account for both action and conscience by appealing to the strength of the drives, it would apparently be impossible for agents to act contrary to conscience. As we saw in Section 2, however, Nietzsche's theory of action is slightly more complicated. Drives cause affects, which *in turn* cause actions: "The will to overcome an affect is the will of another, or several other, affects" (BGE 117). The strongest affect or coalition of similarly valanced affects that share an object induces action. In Section 3, we saw that conscience, too, involves an affective response, one which Nietzsche traces to the activity of the strongest drive (BGE 158; GM II.2) and which can therefore be partially revealing of the drives' "rank ordering" (BGE 6; NF 1883 15[51]).

Crucially, these accounts of the sources of action and conscience allow for at least two manners in which agents might come to act contrary to conscience. First, nothing about Nietzsche's view as presented here commits him to the claim that the strength or intensity of an occurrent affect must be proportional to the strength of the drive that causes it. Thus, the affective response caused by an agent's strongest drive may occasionally be weaker or less "vehement" than some other affect that therefore proves motivationally effective instead.

Of course, it might be objected that such a proposal fails to accurately capture the phenomenology of conscience. For by Nietzsche's own lights, the intensity of the affective response in the case of conscience is in fact quite high. It is, after all, an experience sufficient to lead agents to draw conclusions like "*this … must be done*" (GS 335) and "I must do this" (WS 52). Thus, we should expect conscience—the affect caused by the strongest drive—to have a correspondingly high degree of strength.

Importantly, as I'll now argue, Nietzsche has the resources to account for action contrary to conscience in a second manner, even on the assumption that the strength of an affect directly corresponds to the strength of the drive that causes it. In other words, Nietzsche's theories of action and conscience can accommodate akratic action even supposing that conscience is the *strongest* affect. For there are two senses in which an affect might be considered "strongest," and that one affect counts as strongest in the first sense needn't imply that it is also strongest in the second. We may illustrate this point by way of an example, one that draws on a metaphor offered by Nietzsche himself.

As we have seen, Nietzsche occasionally writes that the drives and affects exist in a social or political hierarchy (BGE 12, 19; see also NF 1883 7[94], NF 1884 27[27]). Borrowing this image, let us momentarily set aside the drives that Nietzsche at one point claims constitute the *human* body (BGE 19) and imagine instead the seats that constitute a *legislative* body like a parliament. Now, in describing a parliament, it would be quite natural to employ the expression "strongest party" to refer to the party in possession of a *plurality* of seats—that is, to whichever individual party possesses more seats than any *other* individual party. For example, in the case of the 44th Canadian Parliament, we might refer to the Liberal Party as the "strongest party" in virtue of its possessing 159 seats in the House of Commons, 40 more than the next largest party, the Conservatives.

On the other hand, there is also a sense in which the Liberal Party is *hardly* the "strongest" entity in parliament, for in the 44th Canadian Parliament the Liberals form a *minority government*, meaning that they do not possess a majority of the seats in the House of Commons. Of the 338 available seats, 179 seats belong, collectively, to the Conservative Party (119), Bloc Québécois (32), the New Democratic Party (25), the Green Party (2), and one Independent. Thus, if the members of these other parties were

ever to unite against the Liberals in a party-line vote, they would be able to vote down any piece of Liberal legislation in virtue of collectively possessing a *majority* of the seats. Such a coalition, would, as it were, be "stronger" than the "strongest" party.

The upshot of this example, I take it, is that are two senses in which a party (or coalition of parties) might naturally be described as "strongest." We might say that the party possessing a plurality of seats is *relatively* strongest, whereas the party (or coalition) possessing a majority of seats is *absolutely* strongest. And, presumably, we might say the same thing about *drives* and *affects*. Thus, when approaching Nietzsche's remarks about the origins of action and conscience, we ought to consider whether he has *absolute* or merely *relative* strength in mind.

It should now be clear how we might go about dispelling the concern that Nietzsche's theories of motivation and conscience entail the impossibility of akratic action. That worry arises if we assume that the "strongest" affect that induces action must be the same affect that manifests as conscience and informs thoughts like "*this … must be done*" (GS 335) and "I must do this" (WS 52). But, as our parliamentary example illustrates, we may have reason to reject that assumption. Of course, Nietzsche never goes out of his way to state that he employs the language of strength in two distinct senses. However, faced with the choice between reading him as either holding inconsistent views, on the one hand, or using imprecise language, on the other, we should, as a matter of interpretative charity, favor the latter option.

As a matter of fact, the textual evidence also gives some indication that Nietzsche thinks about the drives in the manner I have suggested, employing the language of strength in two distinct senses. Specifically, in the context of *motivation*, Nietzsche acknowledges the possibility of two or more affects forming a sort of coalition to overcome another drive: "The will to overcome an affect is, in the end, itself only the

will of another, or *several other*, affects" (BGE 117; emphasis mine). Quite clearly, then, Nietzsche's view is that what a person *does* is a matter of whichever affect (or coalition of affects) is *absolutely* strongest. Importantly, this means that if two or more drives—each with its own distinct aim—momentarily fixed upon a shared object, these drives could generate affects that motivate action contrary to the aim of some third drive with a different object, even if this latter drive produces an affect that is *relatively* stronger than any of the individual constituents of the opposing coalition.

What, then, of conscience? As we have seen, Nietzsche claims that conscience "bows" to the "strongest drive" (BGE 158). However, unlike in the case of motivation, where Nietzsche sometimes refers to a single drive (D 109) and sometimes to a coalition (BGE 117)—indicating that motivation is a matter of the *absolute* strength of the drives—he refers only to a *single* drive when remarking about the origin of conscience, even seemingly *identifying* the SI's conscience with his strongest drive (GM II.2). Thus, we may at least claim that there is no textual evidence telling *against* reading these passages as referring to the *relatively* strongest drive. Admittedly, this observation hardly amounts to a knockdown argument. However, to reiterate my position, given the choice between attributing an inconsistency to Nietzsche or interpreting him in a way that avoids such an attribution (and, crucially, in a manner that is *at least* consistent with what he actually writes), charity recommends the latter alternative.

We now have the beginnings of a solution to the textual puzzle of how Nietzsche's commitments regarding the origins of action and conscience may be rendered consistent with his affirmation of the possibility of *akrasia*. On the interpretive proposal outlined here, we should read Nietzsche as holding that motivation is a matter of the *absolute* strength of the affects. At a given moment, the affect (or coalition of affects) commanding the majority of total active motivational power will determine an

agent's action at that moment. Conscience, on this proposal, is *also* a matter of the strength of the drives. However, conscience, as Nietzsche puts it, is an affect that "bows" to whichever of the drives is *relatively* strongest—that is, to whichever drive is stronger than any other individual drive according to pairwise comparison. Of course, other drives sharing an object with the relatively strongest drive could add to the motivational strength of conscience. However, that an affect is merely relatively strongest does not prevent it from being motivationally swamped by a coalition of *other* affects stemming from drives fixed on a common object. Two or more drives, each relatively weaker than the relatively strongest, could fix on the same object, leading to a coalition of affects that is absolutely stronger than the relatively strongest affect—thereby motivating the agent to act contrary to the voice of conscience. And this, of course, is just *what it is* to act akratically.

At this point it may seem that we have arrived at a solution. However, another possible objection arises once we adopt the interpretation I have proposed. For, we might grant that Nietzsche thinks about conscience in the manner suggested here but still wonder whether it makes any *sense* for him to hold such a view. Why should we accept that the product of the merely *relatively* strongest drive should count as conscience even in cases in which it is motivationally swamped by a coalition of affects caused by other drives? If conscience is ultimately a just a function of our drives and affects, shouldn't we expect the *absolutely* strongest entity to count as conscience? This objection brings us to the second and final part of our solution to the original interpretive tension. As I will now argue, the justification for Nietzsche's association conscience with the relatively strongest drive emerges from a feature of his philosophical psychology which we have not yet addressed—specifically, his reflections on conscious and unconscious thought.

Before we turn to Nietzsche's theory of *conscious* and *unconscious* thought, let us pause to consider his views on thought in general. Here, too, drives play a central role. As we saw above, for example, Nietzsche writes that "thinking is only a behavior of the drives towards one another" (BGE 36; see also GS 333). Elsewhere, thoughts are considered "not the inner events themselves," but rather a "sign-language for the power-balance of the affects" (NF 1885 1[28]), that is, "symptoms of the actual event" (NF 1885 1[61]). In short, according to Nietzsche, our thoughts, like our actions, reflect the internal power struggle between our drives and affects. However, if Nietzsche is to account for *akrasia*, there must be some difference in the outcome of the power struggle expressed by our actions, on the one hand, and that reflected in our thoughts, on the other. The critical divergence, as we will now see, arises due to Nietzsche's distinction between conscious and unconscious thought.

Nietzsche emphasizes that unconscious thought is ubiquitous. In this respect, his stance on thought parallels his view of the drives. In *Daybreak*, for example, Nietzsche writes that "however far a man may go in self-knowledge, nothing however can be more incomplete than his image of the totality of *drives* which constitute his being" (D 119). We will always remain unconscious of some drives. As a matter of fact, given how rare Nietzsche considers self-knowledge to be (GS 335), his view seems to be that we are unconscious of *many* of our drives. And since thinking is, on his view, a *product* of the relations between these drives, it should not be surprising that unconscious thought figures so prominently for Nietzsche.

In fact, it would be difficult to overstate the ubiquity of unconscious thought for Nietzsche. As he writes in *The Gay Science*, "man, like every living being, thinks continually without knowing it" (GS 354). Furthermore, not only are we continually thinking unconsciously, but "by far the greatest part of our spirit's activity remains

unconscious and unfelt" (GS 333). Indeed, "the thinking that rises to *consciousness* is only the smallest part of all this" (GS 354). On this view, *most* of our thought is unconscious. Elsewhere elaborating on his claim that thought is the product of the struggle between drives, writing that "only the last scenes of reconciliation and the final accounting at the end of this long process rise to our consciousness" (GS 333; see also GS 111). In broad outline, the power struggle between drives results in thought, the bulk of which remains unconscious. The vastly smaller, *conscious* portion of our thought reflects only the result of the struggle, a state of affairs Nietzsche famously illustrates with his remark in *Ecce Homo* that "consciousness is a surface" (EH II.9).

But what, exactly, *is* the "result" of this power struggle between the drives? In other words, *what* rises to the surface of consciousness? Here it is instructive to consider a passage from *Daybreak*:

> [W]ords are really only on hand for *superlative* degrees of these processes and drives; and where words are lacking, we are accustomed to abandoning exacting observation because exact thinking there becomes painful; indeed, in earlier times one involuntarily concluded that where the realm of words ceased the realm of existence ceased also. Anger, hatred, love, pity, desire, knowledge, joy, pain—all are names for *extreme* states: the milder, middle degrees, not to speak of the lower degrees which are continually in play, elude us, and yet it is they which weave the web of our character and destiny. These extreme outbursts—and even the most moderate *conscious* pleasure or displeasure, while eating food or hearing a note, is perhaps, rightly understood, an extreme outburst—very often rend the web apart, and then they constitute violent exceptions, no doubt usually consequent on built-up congestions: —and, as such, how easy it is for them to mislead the observer! No less easy than it is for them to mislead the person in whom they occur. *We are none of us* that which we appear to be in accordance with the states for which we alone have consciousness and words, and consequently praise and blame; those cruder outbursts of which alone we are aware make us *misunderstand* ourselves, we draw a conclusion on the basis of data in which the exceptions outweigh the rule. (D 115; translation changed)

In this passage, titled "*The so-called 'ego,'*" Nietzsche presents what he takes to be an obstacle to the acquisition of self-knowledge, namely, that our "*opinions of ourself*" are misguided. Specifically, Nietzsche claims that we fail to account for unconscious drives

and processes, which, as we have seen, he believes constitute most of our mental activity. We only "have words" for "extreme outbursts", this claim presumably referring to Nietzsche's view that only "conscious thinking *takes the form of words*" (GS 354). It is a contentious interpretative question what exactly Nietzsche means by this, but minimally we might understand Nietzsche's point to be that in virtue of being unaware of any *token* unconscious thought, one is thereby unable to linguistically articulate its content. In any case, Nietzsche's central claim is that conscious thoughts, despite constituting only a fraction of mental activity, play an outsized role in shaping self-perception. Importantly, for our purposes, we also get a characterization of what makes it the case that certain thoughts rise to the level of consciousness. We "have words" for—that is, are reflectively conscious of—"*extreme* states" and "cruder outbursts." Presumably Nietzsche refers here to the states and outbursts of drives—in other words, to our *affects*. A natural interpretation, then, is that the intensity of an affect determines whether it manifests consciously. And this, of course, is just to say that whether an affect breaks the surface of consciousness is a matter of its *strength*.

Herein lies the justification for Nietzsche's association of conscience with the relatively strongest drive. The voice of conscience, after all, is a *conscious* phenomenon. If conscious thought reflects outbursts of only our strongest drives, certainly the drive stronger than any other drive will loom very large indeed at the level of consciousness. As such, it will tend to shape conscience.

We've now considered both steps of the solution to the textual puzzle of how Nietzsche accounts for akratic action while maintaining that both action and conscience are functions of the strength of the drives. The first step involved distinguishing between two senses of what it is for something to be "strongest." As I argued, we may interpret Nietzsche as claiming that the *absolute* strength of affects determines action

while associating the *relatively* strongest drive with conscience. The second step involved investigating Nietzsche's reflections on conscious and unconscious thought. As we saw, the strength of the drives again figures prominently, with only the strongest of the drives rising to the level of consciousness. This, I argued, explains Nietzsche's association of conscience with the relatively strongest drive. Since conscience is a *conscious* phenomenon, and which thoughts rise to consciousness is a matter of the strength of the underlying drives, the relatively strongest drive tends to dominate the conscious mental economy.

Yet according to Nietzsche, conscious thought represents only a small portion of the total mental economy; countless affects fail to rise to manifest at the level of consciousness and therefore remain inaccessible during agents' deliberation. Nevertheless, unconscious affects still carry *motivational* weight. As such, were they to share the object of a stronger, *conscious* affects, they might collectively form a coalition sufficient to motivationally outweigh an agent's conscience. A notebook entry from 1881 confirms that Nietzsche thinks about *akrasia* along precisely the lines I've just suggested. In the course of a discussion about the mechanism of action in general, he writes,

> In order for a stimulus [*Reiz*] to really function as the trigger [of an action], it must be stronger than the counter-stimulus [*Gegenreiz*], which also always exists, for example the pleasure of the calm of idleness must be overridden. Thus, the *image* of an event *doesn't always* function as the triggering stimulus because a substantial counter-stimulus exists that is stronger. There we speak of "willing and not being able"—the counter-stimulus is often not in our consciousness, but we notice a force striving in opposition that, *and let it be ever so clear,* drains the power of the stimulus of the image. There exists a conflict, though we do not know *who* fights. Volition that leads to a deed occurs when the opposing stimulus is weaker. (NF 1881 11[131])

Here we again encounter Nietzsche's general account of action. The stimulus that proves effective—that is, the object that a person pursues—is the object taken by the

absolutely strongest affect (or collectively strongest *coalition* of affects). For our current purposes, however, the key element of this passage is Nietzsche's claim that "the *image* of an event *doesn't always* function as the triggering stimulus because a substantial counter-stimulus exists that is stronger." One may judge than an object should be pursued but nevertheless fail to pursue it due to the strength of the "counter-stimulus," that is, because a stronger coalition of affects has taken a *different* object. Nietzsche's description of such cases as instances of "'willing and not being able'" implies that agents *identify* with (or *endorse*) the pursuit of object of the stimulus and not the counter-stimulus, which is just to say that these cases are instances of akratic action.[62] And, crucially, Nietzsche invokes the conscious-unconscious distinction to describe them, writing that "the counter-stimulus is often not in our consciousness, but we notice a force striving in opposition."[63] For Nietzsche, then, agents act akratically when the dominant coalition of drives that have risen to consciousness is motivationally outweighed by an opposing coalition of affects whose drives are fixed on a different object. This opposing coalition will feature some drives too weak to rise to consciousness and factor into conscious *deliberation*, but which nevertheless tip the *motivational* scales.

[62] The expression "willing and not being able" (in contrast to "volition that leads to a deed") is admittedly strange. Note, however, that Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* that the will is, "above all an *affect,* and specifically the affect of the command," proceeding to associate this affect with "the unconditional evaluation that 'this and nothing else is necessary now'" (BGE 19). Nietzsche seems to associate "willing" primarily with the *legislative*—if not the executive aspect—of the will as conceived by Kant.

[63] It may seem that Nietzsche contradicts himself in claiming that "the counter-stimulus is often not in our consciousness, but we notice a force striving in opposition" (NF 1881 11[131]). As Riccardi (2021) argues, however, Nietzsche is a pluralist about types of consciousness. An agent might be *phenomenally* conscious of a stimulus without being *reflectively* conscious of being in the affective state caused by the stimulus.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have offered an interpretation of how Nietzsche accounts for akratic action, the phenomenon traditionally associated with weakness of will. On the interpretation offered here, Nietzsche's view is that agents act akratically when the drives shaping one's conscience are different from the drives producing the affective response that causes action. Both philosophically and textually it is a felicitous interpretive result that Nietzsche possesses the theoretical resources to account for akratic action. However, Nietzsche appears to depart from his philosophical predecessors insofar as he does not seem to *identify* weakness with *akrasia*. Instead, when he characterizes weakness, Nietzsche often seems focused on a different phenomenon, one involving an "oscillation" (NF 1888 14[219]) that renders the weak "short-willed" (GM II.2). We will consider these expressions in the course of examining Nietzsche's distinctive theory of what it is to have a strong or a weak will in Chapter 3.

3. Nietzsche's Unifying Theory of Strength

In Chapter 2, I argued that despite Nietzsche's claim that both action and conscience are products of the strength of the drives, his philosophical psychology is nevertheless equipped to account for the phenomenon of akratic action. This, I argued, is an important and felicitous interpretive result for at least two reasons. Textually, it is an important result because it preserves the consistency between those claims and his commitment to the possibility of akratic action. As we saw in Chapter 2, Nietzsche at one point refers to *akrasia* explicitly (NF 1883 17[37]), and, as I argued, his remark about "willing and not being able" (NF 1881 11[131]) reads naturally as an account of akratic action as well. If Nietzsche lacked the theoretical resources to account for *akrasia*, therefore, his positions would be inconsistent. The interpretive result is also important systematically. Setting aside the question of textual consistency, akratic action appears to be a pervasive feature of the human experience. To the extent that a philosophical theory is unable to accommodate it, this seems to be a *pro tanto* reason to reject the theory rather than the phenomenon.[64]

However, as I will argue in this chapter, while Nietzsche can ultimately make sense of the phenomenon his philosophical predecessors typically associate with weakness of will, he nevertheless diverges from this tradition in an important respect. On my interpretation, Nietzsche's does not *identify* weakness of will with *akrasia* (or, correspondingly, strength of will with *enkrateia*). Rather, Nietzschean weakness amounts to a condition of character, stemming from the order of the drives, that not only disposes agents to act akratically, but also to exhibit another feature sometimes associated with weakness of will, namely, *irresoluteness*, the failure to persist in one's intentions. In fact, as I shall argue here, it is this latter phenomenon (and its opposite,

[64] See, again, Wiggins (1979, 251) on this point.

resoluteness) which Nietzsche tends to emphasize in his discussions of weakness (and strength) of will.

The chapter consists of four main sections. In Section 1, I present Nietzsche's published "definition" of weakness of will, arguing that in the absence of significant elaboration and clarification, it faces challenges for both systematic and textual reasons. Thus, in Section 2 I turn elsewhere for evidence of how Nietzsche conceives of weakness and strength of will, arguing that several important clues about these notions emerge from his account of religious fanaticism in *The Gay Science*. In Sections 3 and 4, I fill in the details of Nietzsche's conceptions of weakness and strength, arguing that Nietzsche conceives of weakness as a condition of character that results from an agent's drives lacking a stable order. Strength, in turn, arises from the possession of a single, dominant drive that provides the psychological stability to prevent agential failures like akratic action and irresoluteness.

3.1.

As we saw in Chapter 2, it is commonly assumed in the secondary literature that Nietzsche follows his philosophical predecessors in identifying weakness of will with *akrasia*.[65] As Lanier Anderson puts it, "[Nietzschean] weakness is fundamentally weakness of will in the traditional moral psychological sense—very crisply defined by Nietzsche as the 'inability *not* to respond to a stimulus'" (Anderson 2006, 102). Here Anderson cites a passage from *Twilight of the Idols* in which Nietzsche claims to be "speak[ing] more definitely" (TI V.2).[66] But while Anderson and others apparently

[65] See, for example, Nehamas (1985, 182), Anderson (2006, 102), Clark and Dudrick (2012, 242), Richardson (2020, 67), and Riccardi (2021, 210). Strong (2008) is a notable exception on this point.
[66] Nietzsche employs similar language at NF 1883 7[253], TI VIII.6, EH I.2, and EH I.4.

conclude on the basis of this line that Nietzsche straightforwardly identifies weakness with *akrasia*, it bears emphasizing that Nietzsche's "definition," evocative as it may be for a historically informed reader, *fails* as definition of *akrasia*, wrongly counting all sorts of behaviors as akratic actions.

To see this, consider the classic reflex test performed at virtually every medical check-up: when the doctor or nurse taps you just below the kneecap with the reflex hammer, your leg automatically swings out in front of you (indeed, it is from this occurrence that we have the expression "knee-jerk reaction"). In this case, you exhibit a reflexive response (the extension of your leg) to a stimulus (the striking of the patellar tendon), and in virtue of being reflexive and therefore involuntary, it is a response which you cannot prevent. In other words, the tapping of the patellar tendon by the reflex hammer is a stimulus to which you exhibit the "inability *not* to respond" (TI V.2)—and therefore an instance of akratic action. Indeed, if Nietzsche's "definition" of weakness of will is taken to describe *akrasia*, *all* automatic, reflexive behaviors would apparently count as akratic actions. But this, of course, would be an absurd result.

In fact, it would be bizarre eve to think of reflex responses as *actions* rather than mere behaviors.[67] Perhaps, then, Nietzsche's "definition" should be understood in a more restricted manner such that agents count as akratic only when they exhibit the "inability *not* to respond to a stimulus" (TI V.2) in cases of genuine action. However, even once such a restriction is applied, two worries remain for Nietzsche's "definition" as a characterization of *akrasia*. One of these, we shall see, proves to be rather superficial. The other, however, presents a serious challenge.

[67] Furthermore, such reflexes are instance of normal, healthy human functioning. It is difficult to see what could possibly be *weak* (or problematic in any way whatsoever) about a well-functioning nervous system. To the extent that individuals might be *defective* with respect to their reflexes, it would be precisely those who do *not* exhibit the typical responses, not those who *do*.

The first worry concerns Nietzsche's language of responding to stimuli. For it might seem that in characterizing *akrasia* as the "inability *not* to respond to a stimulus" (TI V.2), Nietzsche accounts for only a narrow class of putatively akratic actions, namely those in which agents, driven by their impulses, display a complete loss of self-control. To see that akratic action needn't (and indeed often *doesn't*) involve such impulsiveness, consider J.L. Austin's famous objection to Platonic and Aristotelian accounts of *akrasia*:

> I am very partial to ice cream, and a bombe is served divided into segments corresponding one to one with the persons at High Table: I am tempted to help myself to two segments and do so, thus succumbing to temptation and even conceivably (but why necessarily?) going against my principles. But do I lose control of myself? Do I raven, do I snatch the morsels from the dish and wolf them down, impervious to the consternation of my colleagues? Not a bit of it. We often succumb to temptation with calm and even with finesse. (Austin 1956, 24n)

Austin's example shows that akratic action does not necessarily involve losing control of oneself in the face of temptation.[68] But, the worry might go, in characterizing *akrasia* as the "inability *not* to respond to a stimulus" (TI V.2), Nietzsche may collapse this distinction.

As I stated above, this worry proves to be rather superficial. Nietzsche's general account of action allows for individuals to respond to stimuli in complicated, highly controlled ways. One way that "a movement occurs," writes Nietzsche, is,

> through *representation* of the movement through the image of the event in us … countless times the event begotten by a stimulus is followed by the image of the event in the eye and brain and *eventually* there exists a bond [*Band*] so secure that the *reverse* process occurs: as soon as that image arises, the corresponding action occurs. *The image serves as the triggering stimulus.* (NF 1881 11[131])

[68] I take no stand on the question of whether Austin's point amounts to a successful criticism of Plato or Aristotle. For a defense of Aristotle against Austin's charge that he collapses succumbing to temptation into losing control of oneself, see Kraut (2022).

According to this model, agents' representations of their various actions may, though extended processes of socialization and habit formation, become highly nuanced and context-sensitive such that the "triggering stimulus" (NF 1881 11[131]) to which the akratic shows an "inability *not* to respond" (TI V.2) could be a representation of, to borrow Austin's example, helping oneself to two segments of the bombe "with calm and even with finesse" (Austin 1956, 24n). In this regard, Nietzsche's highly physiological language of action involving responses to stimuli should simply be understood as a function of his commitment to "'*naturaliz*[*ing*]' humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature" (GS 109). As a naturalist, Nietzsche seeks to philosophize in a manner that is continuous with the natural sciences, and it is this commitment that informs his rather "physiological" language.[69]

But if attending to Nietzsche's characterization of action as a kind of stimulus response allows us to set aside the concern that his characterization of weakness captures only cases of impulsive loss of self-control, it also raises a further worry, one that is much more substantial. Specifically, assuming that Nietzsche's "definition" of weakness refers to *akrasia* threatens to commit him to the view that *all* actions are akratic.

In the same note that we just considered, Nietzsche articulates the general account of action that we encountered in the previous chapter, claiming that all actions as the product of a struggle between "stimuli" and "counter-stimuli." As we saw in Chapter 2, according to Nietzsche, what we *do* is always simply a matter of the strength of our drives. More precisely, active drives produce affective responses, and the absolutely strongest affect (or coalition of affects whose drives share an object)

[69] For more on Nietzsche's naturalism, see Leiter (2002, 2014), Hussain (2004), Janaway (2007), Kail (2009), and Fowles (2020).

determines action. As Nietzsche puts it, "the will to overcome an affect is, in the end, itself only the will of another, or several other, affects" (BGE 117).

Importantly, for our current purposes, one consequence of this picture of action is that there is no meaningful sense in which agents could act differently than they actually do, at least holding fixed their drive psychologies and their environments. In this respect, according to Nietzsche, agents lack what philosophers today call the "ability to do otherwise."

Typically, when philosophers are interested in the question of whether agents could have acted otherwise, it is for the purposes of answering questions about the attribution of moral responsibility. According to one influential view, known as the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP), agents are only morally responsible for their actions if they could have done otherwise. As it happens, Nietzsche himself endorses PAP (BGE 21; see also HAH I.106, TI VI.7) and, since he claims that we can never act other than we do, he denies that we are morally responsible for our actions.

Commentators have made much of the implications of this aspect of Nietzsche's theory of action for the possibility of moral responsibility.[70] Less attention has been paid, however, to how it relates to the phenomenon of weakness of will. But since, on Nietzsche's view, every action is a response to a stimulus, and since there is no sense in which an agent could *not* respond to the stimulus that proves motivationally effective, if we assume that his "definition" of weakness of will is an account of *akrasia*, it turns out that he must count *every* action as an akratic action. Of course, this is an absurd conclusion, and it surely does not reflect Nietzsche's actual position. Thus, if we are to get clear on how Nietzsche *actually* conceives of strength and weakness of will, we must

[70] See, for example, Strawson (1994) and Leiter (2002, 2009, 2011, 2019).

turn away from his "definition" of weakness (and the assumption that it simply describes *akrasia*) and examine other texts for evidence of his view.

In what follows, I will argue that strength and weakness of will, for Nietzsche, are conditions of character stemming from the structure of agents' drives. Specifically, Nietzsche considers agents strong- or weak-willed to the extent that they possess a single, dominant drive. As I will demonstrate, an insufficiently dominant drive disposes an agent not only to undergo bouts of *akrasia*, but also to suffer from irresoluteness, the failure to persist in one's intentions. In contrast, strong-willed agents' psychological constitutions render them immune from both kinds of agential failure.

3.2.

In the previous section I argued that despite the tendency in the secondary literature to assume, on the basis of Nietzsche's "definition," that he identifies weakness of will with *akrasia*, this strategy fails insofar as it results in committing Nietzsche to the absurdly implausible view that *all* actions are akratic actions. It is necessary, then, to look beyond Nietzsche's "definition" if we are to arrive at a satisfying interpretation of his conceptions of strength and weakness of will. In this section, we adopt this strategy, turning to other passages in search of textual evidence of Nietzsche's view.

As it happens, Nietzsche provides a significant clue as to how he thinks about weakness (and strength) of will in a rather surprising place, a section of *The Gay Science* titled "*The faithful and their need for faith"* (GS 347). In this passage, Nietzsche offers an account of religious *fanaticism*, which he claims arises out of "the *need* for a faith, a support, a backbone, something to fall back on" (GS 347). According to Nietzsche, such a "need for faith" is revealing of a person's psychology: "How much one needs a *faith* in order to flourish, how much that is 'firm' and that one does not wish to be shaken

because one *clings* to it, that is a measure of the degree of one's strength (or, to put the point more clearly, of one's weakness)" (GS 347).[71] Here Nietzsche diagnoses the source of the "need for faith" as *weakness*, and it is clear from his subsequent remarks that the relevant notion of weakness at play is, as usual, weakness of *will*:

> Faith is always coveted most and needed most urgently where will is lacking; for will, as the affect of command, is the decisive sign of sovereignty and strength. In other words, the less one knows how to command, the more urgently one covets someone who commands, who commands severely—a god, prince, class, physician, father, confessor, dogma, or party conscience. (GS 347).

According to Nietzsche, the "need for faith" arises in individuals who are too weak-willed to "command" themselves and must therefore seek out external sources of motivation and constraint.[72] And it is such a condition that enables and sustains *fanaticism*.

It is beyond the scope of the current project to offer a sustained interpretation of Nietzsche's account of fanaticism.[73] However, insofar as he connects this topic to the issue of weakness of will, Nietzsche's remarks about the nature of fanaticism bear quoting at length. Upon asserting the connection between weakness and the "need for faith," Nietzsche writes,

> From this, one might perhaps gather that the two world religions, Buddhism and Christianity, may have owed their origin and above all their sudden spread to a tremendous collapse and *disease of the will*. And that is what actually happened: both religions encountered a situation in which the will had become diseased, giving rise to a demand that had become diseased, giving rise to a demand that had become utterly desperate for

[71] Nietzsche takes the "need for faith" to apply in secular contexts as well, and he refers in the passage to "convictions of all kinds" (GS 347). As possible secular substitutes for *religious* dogma, Nietzsche lists "patriotism," "petty aesthetic creeds," "nihilism," and "party conscience" (Ibid.).

[72] Nietzsche expresses this point in exceptionally unsavory terms at A 54: "If one considers how necessary most people find something regulatory, which will bind them from without and tie them down; how compulsion, *slavery* in a higher sense, is the sole and ultimate condition under which the more weak-willed human being, woman in particular, can prosper—then one will also understand conviction, 'faith.'"

[73] For a treatment of Nietzsche's conception of fanaticism, see Reginster (2003).

> some "thou shalt." Both religions taught fanaticism in ages in which the will had become exhausted, and thus they offered innumerable people some support, a new possibility of willing, some delight in willing. For fanaticism is the only "strength of the will" that even the weak and insecure can be brought to attain, being a sort of hypnotism of the whole system of the senses and the intellect for the benefit of an excessive nourishment (hypertrophy) of a single point of view and feeling that henceforth becomes dominant—which the Christian calls his *faith*." (GS 347)

According to Nietzsche, underlying the development and spread of Christianity and Buddhism was a historical context in which a "disease of the will"—by which he means *weakness* of will—became pervasive. By teaching fanaticism—which Nietzsche characterizes as a sort of "hypnotism" that begets the dominance of a "single point of view"—these religions offered a remedy to the so-called "disease": through fanaticism, the weak-willed could attain at least a semblance of the strength of will which they otherwise lacked. For our purposes, however, the significance of this passage lies not in Nietzsche's speculative historical diagnosis itself, but rather in the clues it offers about the notions of strength and weakness of will at play in his analysis. Specifically, there are three points to be emphasized, which we shall now consider.

First, we may infer from this passage that Nietzsche conceives of strength and weakness not as binary opposites, but rather as occurring on a spectrum. It is true that Nietzsche often writes simply about "the strong" and "the weak," as, for example, when he appears to present strength and weakness as mutually exclusive opposites in the First Essay of the *Genealogy*. There Nietzsche describes "weak" lambs and the "strong" birds of prey who hunt them, writing that, "to demand of strength that it should *not* express itself as strength … is just as absurd as to demand of weakness that it should express itself as strength" (GM I.13). Yet the very first line of GS 347 presents a different picture: "How much one needs a *faith* in order to flourish, how much that is 'firm' and that one does not wish to be shake because one *clings* to it, that is a measure of the

degree of one's strength (or, to put the point more clearly, of one's weakness)" (GS 347). Here it is clear that while Nietzsche's rhetoric at times presents a strict dichotomy between the strong and weak, his considered position is that strength and weakness occur on a spectrum such that agents possess *more* or *less* strength.

The second conclusion suggested Nietzsche's remarks about strength and weakness at GS 347 regards the proper targets of ascriptions of strength and weakness. In writing that "fanaticism is the only 'strength of will' that even the weak and insecure can be brought to attain" (GS 347) and that "how much one needs a *faith* … is a measure of the degree of one's strength (or, to put the point more clearly, of one's weakness)" (GS 347), Nietzsche ascribes strength and weakness not to *actions*, but to *agents*. In this regard, Nietzsche's remarks on strength and weakness of will fit a pattern that pervades his ethical thought more generally, namely his concern with evaluating the *character* of individuals rather than describing specific actions.[74] Just as he conceives of freedom as a state to be attained (TI V.3), and just as he applauds the "rare art" of "giving style to one's character" (GS 290), Nietzsche applies the notions "strong" and "weak" to individual *agents*, not discrete *actions*.[75]

Finally, GS 347 offers a clue about just what Nietzschean strength and weakness of will involve—that is, about the conditions of agents' psychologies in virtue of which

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[74] In this respect—and this comes as no great surprise—Nietzsche's reflections on strength and weakness are more in line with, say, Aristotle's in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, than with those of Anglo-American philosophers writing since the reemergence of interest in the topic in the middle of the twentieth century. While Aristotle is interested in the ethical project of describing and explaining character traits, the latter group, for whom Hare (1952) and Davidson (1970) are early touchstones, focuses almost exclusively on the puzzle in the philosophy of action of how (or, in Hare's case, whether) akratic action occurs.

[75] Of course, this is not to say that attending to specific actions is of no importance for Nietzsche's ethical project. The point is simply that Nietzsche's ethical vocabulary serves primarily to evaluate the character of agents rather than to determine the ethical status of those agents' actions. Crucially, however, observing and interpreting agents' specific behaviors is instrumental to the process of evaluating their character. Thus, while Nietzsche tends to focus on weak *characters* rather than weak *actions*, it remains true that akratic (and, as we shall see, another form of weak) action is relevant to his conception of weakness of will.

he considers them either strong or weak. According to Nietzsche's account of fanaticism, the persistence of Christianity and Buddhism lay in their appeal to weak-willed individuals, namely that they,

> offered innumerable people some support, a new possibility of willing, some delight in willing. For fanaticism is the only "strength of the will" that even the weak and insecure can be brought to attain, being a sort of hypnotism of the whole system of the senses and the intellect for the benefit of an excessive nourishment (hypertrophy) of a single point of view and feeling that henceforth becomes dominant. (GS 347)

Part of the psychological appeal of fanaticism, Nietzsche claims, is that it provides a path by which weak-willed individuals can approximate strength of will. Though they remain on the "weak" end of the spectrum, fanaticism offers such individuals a way to attain a higher degree of strength than they otherwise could. For our purposes, the key element of the passage is Nietzsche's description of the mechanism by which the will is strengthened: "hypnotism of the whole system of the senses and the intellect for the benefit of an excessive nourishment (hypertrophy) of a single point of view and feeling" (GS 347). But to what does this highly metaphorical account of the process by which weak individuals increase their strength refer? Specifically, what *is* a so-called "point of view and feeling," and what does it mean for such a thing to become "dominant?"

When Nietzsche writes of a "point of view," it is natural to think of his doctrine of *perspectivism*. Precisely how to interpret this theory is a matter of contention among commentators, and as is the case with fanaticism, it is beyond the scope of the current project to develop a full interpretation here.[76] However, one uncontentious aspect of Nietzsche's perspectivism bears emphasizing, namely his critique of the notion of *objectivity*. In the Third Essay of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche writes,

> [L]et us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a "pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject"; let us guard

[76] For more on Nietzsche's doctrine of perspectivism, see Nehamas (1985), Clark (1990), and Anderson (1998).

> 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. (GM III.12)

It is clear from the remarks immediately preceding these lines that the "dangerous old conceptual fiction" to which Nietzsche here refers is a certain understanding of *objectivity*, namely that of "'contemplation without interest' (which is a nonsensical absurdity)" (GM III.12). Drawing metaphorically on the case of visual perception, Nietzsche claims that just as the perception of "an eye turned in no particular direction"—the sort of eye that could produce a "view from nowhere" (Nagel 1986)—is an absurdity, so too is the notion that any thought could occur in the absence of "active and interpreting forces." In short, Nietzsche's claim is that all thought—and therefore also all *knowledge*—is fundamentally and inescapably *perspectival*. He continues,

> There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective "knowing"; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our "concept" of this thing, our "objectivity," be. (GM III.12)

Though Nietzsche considers objectivity understood as "contemplation without interest" to be an impossible absurdity, he offers an alternative conception of "objectivity"; far from being a "view from nowhere," Nietzschean "objectivity" would amount to a "view from *every*where"—or at least from as many perspectives as the thinker can manage to occupy.

For our purposes, the key element of Nietzsche's critique of objectivity is his idea that there is "*only* a perspective 'knowing'" due to the essential presence of "active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*" (GM III.12). For if we can determine the identity of these "forces," we will have a possible answer to the question of what Nietzsche means at GS 347 when he claims that the

fanatic attains strength of will through the "hypertrophy of a single point of view." The question, in short, is this: in virtue of *what* is thinking perspectival? And Nietzsche's answer to this question is clear: it is our *drives* that render thinking fundamentally perspectival.

In Chapter 2 we saw that, for Nietzsche, drives heavily inform our thinking. Indeed, in *The Gay Science* he writes that our conscious thought is "*a certain behavior of the drives toward one another"* (GS 333; translation changed). In *Beyond Good and Evil* he makes the broader claim that thinking *itself* "is merely a relation of [the] drives to each other" (BGE 36). Given this commitment regarding the nature of thought, it isn't difficult to see why Nietzsche contends that there can be "*only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing'" (GM III.12), for drives, as dispositions towards patterns of goal-directed behavior, are fundamentally *interested.* As Nietzsche writes in a notebook entry from 1884, "each 'drive' is the drive to 'something good', as seen from a certain standpoint" (NF 1884 26[72]). Consider, for example, the sex drive: an active sex drive not only impels an individual to blindly pursue sexual gratification. It also conditions thought by representing possible objects of sexual gratification as, in Nietzsche's words, "something good." As Nietzsche puts in in another note from the same period, "from each of our basic drives there is a different perspectival valuation [*perspektivische Abschätzung*]. Thus, according to Nietzsche, our thoughts are products of various evaluative perspectives, and as such there can be no "contemplation without interest" (GM III.12).[77] Drives are, we now see, the "active and interpreting forces, through

[77] In *Daybreak,* Nietzsche claims that drives color our perception of even the most mundane experiences:

> Suppose we were in the market place one day and we noticed someone laughing at us as we went by: this event will signify this or that to us according to whether this or that drive happens at that moment to be at its height in us—and it will be a quite different event according to the kind of person we are. One person will absorb it like a drop of

which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*" (GM III.12). Drives constitute *perspectives*.

Let us take stock. In this section we've seen that Nietzsche characterizes fanaticism as a path to strength of will insofar as it involves "excessive nourishment (hypertrophy) of a single point of view and feeling that henceforth becomes dominant" (GS 347). As I have suggested here, in writing of a "single point of view and feeling," Nietzsche refers to a *drive*. A plausible interpretive hypothesis, therefore, is that for Nietzsche, it is in virtue of possessing (or lacking) a single, dominant drive that an agent exhibits strength (or weakness) of will. And, as we shall see in the next section, this is precisely his view.

3.3.

While Nietzsche purports to be offering a definition in *Twilight* when he describes weakness of will as "the inability *not* to respond to a stimulus" (TI V.2), the most thorough explication of his conceptions of strength and weakness comes in a notebook from the same period:

> Weakness of will: that is a metaphor that can mislead. For there is no will, and accordingly neither a strong nor a weak will. The multiplicity and disgregation of the drives, the lack of a system among them, results in a "weak will"; the coordination of the same under the predominance of an individual drive results in a "strong will";—in the former case it is the oscillation and lack of a center of gravity; in the latter the precision and clarity of direction. (NF 1888 14[219])

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rain, another will shake it from him like an insect, another will try to pick a quarrel, another will examine his clothing to see if there is anything about it that might give rise to laughter, another will be glad to have involuntarily augmented the amount of cheerfulness and sunshine in the world—and in each case a drive has gratified itself, whether it bet the drive to annoyance or to combativeness or to reflection or to benevolence. This drive seized the event as its prey: why precisely this one? Because, thirsty and hungry, it was lying in wait. (D 119)

This passage confirms the interpretive hypothesis presented in the preceding section, namely, that on Nietzsche's view, agents' *drives* determine whether they are strong- or weak-willed. More precisely, as Nietzsche states rather metaphorically at GS 347 and quite explicitly here, whether agents are strong or weak is a function of the power relations that hold between their drives; strength of will arises from the "coordination of the [drives] under the predominance of an individual drive"—which provides what Nietzsche calls a "center of gravity" [*Schwergewicht*][78]—while weakness is a matter of lacking such a drive. Weakness is the condition of an agent whose relatively strongest drive—which, as we saw in Chapter 2, tends to inform the agent's *conscience*—is insufficiently dominant, failing to secure a stable "order of rank" (BGE 6) among the drives.[79] An agent is *strong,* then, precisely insofar as the relatively strongest drive *does* provide structural stability to the agent's psyche.[80]

But what does it mean for the drives to be "coordinat[ed] … under the predominance of an individual drive" (NF 1888 14[219]), and how does the dominant drive bring about this coordination to provides the psychological stability or "center of gravity" that Nietzsche considers paradigmatic of strength of will? Answering these

[78] Literally, the German word *Schwergewicht* translates as "heavyweight." Thus, the line might also be translated as a stating that weakness arises from the "lack of a heavyweight" among the drives—that is, when none of the drives is especially powerful or dominant.
[79] See also NF 1887 11[48]: "All weakness of will arises from the fact that no passion, no categorical imperative, commands."
[80] While Nietzsche writes in binary terms in this note, describing only a "weak will" and a "strong will," the model he proposes allows that strength and weakness admit of degrees. As we saw in the previous section, one of the key features of the notions of strength and weakness that emerge from Nietzsche's remarks about fanaticism in *The Gay Science* is that weak agents can still *approximate* strength. If strength is the coordination of the drives into a system in which one drives is predominant, it is easy to see how strength and weakness are best conceived as falling on a spectrum rather than standing in a binary relation. After all, agents' drives could be more or less coordinated: one agent's strongest drive might coordinate more of the total drives than that of another, or a collection of drives of greater cumulative strength might be integrated in the case of one agent compared to another. In such instances, the agent with more integrated drives could be said to be stronger than the agent with less integrated drives, even if both agents ultimately fall on the "weak" end of the spectrum. Hence Nietzsche's remark that it is possible to "measure … the degree of one's strength" (GS 347).

questions requires attending to the ways in which Nietzsche claims that drives can interact with each other. As we shall now see, there are three general modes of interaction that can occur between a stronger and a weaker drive.[81]

The first mode of interaction between drives to consider is the extreme case of *repression*. Repression occurs when one drive is prevented from satisfying its aim or pursuing an object by another drive (or coalition of drives) of greater strength, which is liable to occur when the former drive's object (or, especially) its aim is considered "bad" from the evaluative perspective of the latter. Nietzsche describes this dynamic in a passage from *Daybreak* in which he lays out a variety of strategies an individual might employ to combat the "vehemence" of a particular drive: "one can avoid opportunities for gratification of the drive, and through long and ever longer periods of non-gratification weaken it and make it wither away" (D 109). The "vehement" drive, in such a case, is prevented from being satisfied through the attainment of its object—or even from engaging at all in the distinctive pattern of behavior by which it can be differentiated from other drives. For example, ascetic individuals might strive to prevent any discharge whatsoever on the part of certain "sensual" drives like the hunger or sex drive. In some cases, the repression of a drive could apparently result in it "wither[ing] away" (D 109)—that is, being extinguished entirely (see also D 119 and GS 290).[82] Importantly, though, Nietzsche does assume that certain drives are fundamental and ineliminable. As such, repression is far from the optimal way of achieving order between

[81] My views on this topic are informed by Richardson (2020, 104-108). I follow Richardson's terminology in the case of "permission" and "sublimation," but I substitute "repression" for his "suppression."
[82] For more on the elimination of drives, see Elliott (2020).

drives. Indeed, Nietzsche claims that engaging in repression of a drive is a sign of "degeneration" (TI V.2).[83]

Of course, there are many cases in which agents *don't* wish to combat the "vehemence" of a drive. For example, whereas an ascetic might seek to repress his sex drive, there would be many instances in which non-ascetics would feel no such desire to deny an active sex drive an opportunity for expression. In such cases, non-ascetics' sex drives might participate in the coalitions of active drives that discharge in action—that is, that induce the affects that motivate them to pursue one or another form of sexual gratification. In such a case, an agent's *strongest* drive might never be activated at all. For example, in the case of an individual whose life is primarily structured by a drive to creative artistic expression, an object that activates the sex drive might not stimulate the former drive at all. In this case, in virtue of remaining entirely inactive, the drive toward artistic expression could be said to occupy a neutral stance toward the object of sexual desire and the activity of the sex drive itself. Thus, the relation between the stronger artistic drive and the weaker sex drive would be one of *permission*: to the extent that the activity of the sex drive does not interfere with the aim of the artistic drive, the latter, while theoretically strong enough to counteract the "vehemence" of the former, permits it the opportunity for active expression—expression that is entirely unrelated to the aim of the stronger artistic drive.[84]

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[83] This claim comes in the section of *Twilight* in which Nietzsche first introduces his "definition" of weakness of will:

> [C]astration, extirpation—is instinctively chosen by those who are too weak-willed, too degenerate, to be able to impose moderation on themselves; by those who are so constituted that they require … some kind of definitive declaration of hostility, a *cleft* between themselves and the passion. Radical means are indispensable only for the degenerate; the weakness of the will—or, to speak more definitely, the inability *not* to respond to a stimulus—is itself merely another form of degeneration. (TI V.2)

[84] Nietzsche describes permission in his account in *Twilight* of one of his heroes, and paragons of strength, Goethe:

As Nietzsche's remarks about "degenerates" make clear, his general view is that it is preferable for agents' drives to stand in relations of permission rather than repression. This is, in part, because relations of permission between drives are apt to promote greater self-efficacy compared to relations of repression. In the case of repression, many of the psychological resources commanded by the stronger drive go to waste simply to overcome the repressed drive. In contrast, the stronger drive in a relation of permission can commit more of its resources to the pursuit of its own positive aim.

But while permission is thereby preferable to repression, there is a third mode of relation between drives that is superior to permission as well: *sublimation*. When one drive sublimates another, rather than simply depriving the latter the opportunity for discharge (as in the case of repression) or remaining inactive as the latter pursues its object (as in the case of permission), the sublimating drive *redirects* the sublimated drive toward a new object, one whose pursuit also satisfies the aim of the former. As Ken Gemes helpfully puts it, "in sublimation the stronger drive co-opts a weaker drive as an ally and this allows the weaker drive expression" (Gemes 2009b, 48).[85] In other words, when a weaker drive is sublimated by a dominant drive, the former is subordinated to the latter such that the activity by which it is exercised contributes to the achievement of ends the agent sets in virtue of the latter's dominance. In this respect, whereas repression involves the "subtraction" of psychic resources, sublimation may be thought

> Goethe conceived a human being who would be strong, highly educated, skillful in all bodily matters, self-controlled, reverent toward himself, and who might dare to afford the whole range and wealth of being natural, being strong enough for such freedom; the man of tolerance, not from weakness but from strength, because he knows how to use to his advantage, even that from which the average nature would perish; the man for whom there is no longer anything that is forbidden … (TI IX.49)

[85] Gemes' paper is extremely illuminating on the topic of Nietzsche on sublimation, addressing the relation to Freud as well.

of as a form of "addition" insofar as the resources commanded by a sublimated drive *contribute* to the satisfaction of the sublimating drive's aim. Both drives find opportunity for satisfaction of their characteristic aim through pursuit of a shared object selected by the dominant drive.[86]

Armed with these accounts of the types of relations that can exist between drives, let us return to Nietzsche's account of strength and weakness of will from the 1888 notebook. We may now appreciate that for the drives to be "coordinat[ed] … under the predominance of an individual drive" (NF 1888 14[219]) is for the agent's relatively strongest drive to stand in relations of repression, permission, and/or sublimation with

[86] I have hardly scratched the surface of Nietzsche's view of sublimation, and there are many questions which must be left unresolved here. For example, one question is whether Nietzsche's account of the relations between drives requires that drives possess recognitional capacities. If so, this would commit Nietzsche to a form of homuncularism. Clark and Dudrick (2012) have argued that Nietzsche does embrace homuncularism about the drives, while Katsafanas (2016) and Riccardi (2018) have criticized their approach. Gemes (2009b, 51) argues that a nonhomuncular account of repression can be given in terms of "the stronger drive grabbing resources and thus preventing a competing drive from grabbing those same resources," but concedes that "it seems more difficult to provide a nonhomuncular account of sublimation" (Ibid.).

A second question concerns the range of drives which are realistic candidates for sublimation. A famous purported case of sublimation is Freud's account of Leonardo da Vinci in his essay, "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood" (SE 11:57-137). According to Freud, Leonardo's homosexual desires become sublimated by his more powerful drive for scientific research and artist creation. Specifically, Freud claims, Leonardo's homosexual impulses are satisfied through his depictions of the human male form. Even granting for the sake of argument that the sex drive could be sublimated in this manner, it seems clear that certain other drives could not be satisfied through artistic pursuits. For example, it is wildly implausible to claim that the hunger drive could be satisfied by painting a still life of a bowl of fruit. Of course, this is not to say that the hunger drive couldn't be sublimated by another drive in a context in which eating serves the end of a different drive. Thanks to Hendrik Lorenz for raising this point.

Third, while the examples of repression, permission, and sublimation presented here represent paradigm cases, it isn't clear that every relation between drives can be neatly sorted into one of these three categories. For example, consider a religious individual who disavows his sex drive and refrains from engaging in any sex acts, but nevertheless views pornography on the internet. Such an individual does not seem to be fully repressing his sex drive, but he needn't reflectively endorse his porn habit (permission) either. And his activity certainly doesn't appear to serve the aims of another drive (sublimation). It is therefore unclear how we should think of this individual's drive relations. One option would be to insist that his drives simply stand in an *imperfect* relationship of repression. Another possibility is that some drive relations might be "mixed," exhibiting features of more than one of the paradigm relations. I take no stand on this matter here. Thanks to Andrew Huddleston for raising this issue.

enough other drives to provide a stable "order of rank" among them. The stronger this drive is, the greater the resulting "center of gravity." When the drive is relatively weak, however, the absence (or insufficient quantity) of such relations results in the "multiplicity and disgregation of the drives, the lack of a system among them" (NF 1888 14[219]).

Part of what it is to be weak agent, then, is to be disposed to act akratically whenever a coalition of individually relatively weaker drives produces an affective response that motivationally swamps the relatively strongest drive (to which, as we saw in Chapter 2, the agent's conscience "bows"). In turn, when Nietzsche writes that weakness of will is the "inability *not* to respond to a stimulus" (TI V.2), he means that weak-willed individuals will be motivated by affects triggered by a *certain* stimulus even while conscience commands resistance. This is why he claims, correspondingly, that in the case of *strength* of will, "the essential feature is precisely *not* to 'will'—to *be able* to suspend decision" (TI VIII.5). Faced with a stimulus to act in a manner that violates the agent's conscience, the strong individual remains capable of refraining from action. Of course, refraining from an action is *also* an action of sorts, and in such cases there is therefore *another* stimulus which the strong agent can't help but respond to. Crucially, however, in refraining from action the strong agent's behavior is properly "filtered" through the agent's dominant drive and its relations to the other, weaker drives. A weak agent, in contrast, is liable to respond to stimuli in a manner that bypasses any such "filter."

Importantly, while we've seen that Nietzschean weakness of will involves the disposition to suffer from bouts of *akrasia* and that strength involves *enkrateia,* the phenomena that Nietzsche chooses to emphasize in the *Nachlass* passage we have been considering are not *akrasia* and *enkrateia*, but rather "oscillation" (in the case of

weakness) and "clarity of direction" (in the case of strength). To see that Nietzsche cannot be using these expressions to refer to akratic and enkratic actions, consider "oscillation": whatever "oscillation" *is*—and we will consider this question in the next section—it cannot be akratic action. For akratic action is a *synchronic* phenomenon. We say that agents act akratically when their actions at time *t* fail to correspond to their better judgment *also* at *t*. But "oscillation" connotes a movement (whether literally or figuratively) between two or more points, and for something to move requires the passage of time. An agent *A* cannot "oscillate" between *x* and *y* at time *t*, but only over the interval from one point in time (t^1) to another (t^2). Hence, whereas akratic action as we have characterized it is understood synchronically, Nietzsche's choice to emphasize "oscillation"—whatever this expression picks out—in his account of weakness of will suggests that he takes weakness to dispose agents not only (or even *primarily*) to act akratically, but also toward another kind of agential failure, one that manifests *diachronically*.[87]

To get sense of what "oscillation" involves, for Nietzsche, we turn in the next section to several key passages in which he describes weak-willed individuals (and their strong counterparts). As we shall see, in virtue of their strongest drives being insufficiently dominant, weak agents are disposed to be *irresolute*, that is, to fail to

[87] In his *On Moral Virtue,* Plutarch notes that the Stoics, insofar as they deny a distinction between passion and reason, account for the phenomenology of akratic action as the result of consciously imperceptible change in reason: "a turning of the single reason in both directions, which we do not notice owing to the sharpness and speed of the change" (65G). Trained as a classicist, Nietzsche would likely have been familiar with this account. Thus, one might be inclined to interpret Nietzsche's reference to "oscillation" as evidence that he holds a similar view. Hence, the "oscillation" would just be his way of accounting for the phenomenology of akratic action rather than something entirely distinct from *akrasia*. However, two points tell against this conclusion. First, as we saw in Chapter 2, Nietzsche conceives of akratic action synchronically, as an instance of "willing and not being able" (NF 1881 11[131]). Second, as we shall see in the next section, Nietzsche frequently emphasizes diachronic features of the wills of strong and weak agents. The phenomena he describes in these passages are distinct from enkratic and akratic action. Thanks to Hendrik Lorenz for bringing this text to my attention.

persist in their intentions. Strong-willed agents, in contrast, exhibit a "precision and clarity of direction" (NF 1888 14[219]) in their intentions and actions across time.

3.4.

To begin our investigation into the nature of Nietzschean "oscillation," let us consider the widely discussed second section of the Second Essay of the *Genealogy*, in which Nietzsche introduces the character he christens as "the *sovereign individual"* [*das souveraine Individuum*] (GM II.2).[88] As it shall prove indispensable for our interpretation of Nietzsche's ideal of strength, the passage is reproduced nearly in its entirety:

> 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 last 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 shirt, the man who has his own independent, long 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 his superiority over all those who lack the right to make promises and stand as their own guarantors, of how much trust, how much fear, how much reverence he arouses--he "*deserve*s" all three—and of how this mastery over himself also necessarily gives him mastery over circumstances, over nature, and over all more short-willed and unreliable creatures? The "free" man, the possessor of a long and unbreakable will, also possesses his *measure of value*: looking out upon others from himself, he honors or he despises; and just as he is bound to honor his peers, the strong and reliable (those with the *right* to make promises)—that is, all those who promise like sovereigns, reluctantly, rarely, slowly, who are chary of trusting, whose trust is a mark of *distinction*, who give their world as something that can be relied on because they know themselves strong enough to maintain it in the face of accidents, even "in the face of fate"—he is bound to reserve a kick for the feeble windbags who promise without the right to do so, and a rod for the liar who breaks his word even at the moment he utters it. The proud awareness of the extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*, the consciousness

[88] Hereafter, I refer to the "*sovereign individual*" as the SI.

> 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. What will he call this dominating instinct, supposing he feels the need to give it a name? The answer is beyond doubt: this sovereign man calls it his *conscience*. (GM II.2; translation changed)

This passage is regularly cited in scholarly treatments of Nietzsche's views on agency, though due to Nietzsche's characterization of the SI as "autonomous" and the "master of a *free* will," much of this work aims at interpreting Nietzsche's views on *freedom* of the will, not strength and weakness. It is a contentious exegetical issue precisely how to interpret Nietzsche on freedom. We will sidestep that question here entirely, however, focusing solely on what Nietzsche's account of the SI reveals about his conceptions of strength and weakness.[89]

Nietzsche describes the SI as the "possessor of a long and unbreakable will" who is "bound to honor his peers, the strong and reliable," contrasting him with "more short-willed and unreliable creatures" (GM II.2). By opposing the "strong" SI to those who are "short-willed," Nietzsche signals that he takes strength and weakness to involve the possession of "longer" and "shorter" wills, respectively. And, of course, this emphasis on a "durational" aspect of strength fits very naturally with the account of strength and weakness of will at NF 1888 14[219], in which Nietzsche associates weakness with the diachronic phenomenon of "oscillation."

But what is it for a will to be either "long" or "short?" The answer lies in the section of the *Genealogy*'s Second Essay that immediately precedes his account of the SI. Characterizing what he calls "*memory of the will,"* Nietzsche writes, "between the original 'I will,' 'I shall do this' and the actual discharge of the will, its *act*, a world of strange new things, circumstances, even acts of will may be interposed without breaking

[89] For a variety of interpretive approaches to Nietzsche's views on free will, see the papers collected in Gemes and May (2009). Anderson (2014) also provides a useful survey of recent literature on this topic.

this long chain of will" (GM II.1). Agents possess long wills—and so *strong* wills—when they exhibit persistence, particularly in cases in which the formation of an intention is not immediately followed by the intended action. When Nietzsche writes that, "a world of strange new things, circumstances, even acts of will may be interposed" between the formation of an intention ("I shall do this") and the intended action, he emphasizes that possessing a strong will involves persisting in the pursuit of larger, longer-term goals. He stresses the same feature in declaring strength of will as an ideal in Book VI of *Beyond Good and Evil*: "In the philosopher's ideal, therefore, precisely strength of the will, hardness, and *the capacity for long-range decision* must belong to the concept of 'greatness'" (BGE 212; emphasis mine).[90]

Possessing a *short* will, on this picture, involves failing to persist in one's intentions, abandoning them in the face of "strange new things, circumstances, [and/or] acts of will" (GM II.1). So, the "oscillation" to which Nietzsche refers at NF 1888 14[219] is an alternation between competing sets of intentions such that many "chain[s] of will"—and particularly those which require commitment over an extended interval of time—never ultimately result in the "discharge of the will." As we saw in Chapter 2, Nietzsche particularly associates the "will" with what he calls the "affect of the command" (BGE 19; see also GS 347), which manifests in "the unconditional evaluation that 'this and nothing else is necessary now'" (Ibid.). Thus, one way for a

[90] Nietzsche appears to embrace roughly the same conception of strength already by the end of the prior decade. In a note from 1879, for example, he writes,

> The strong-*willed* one 1) he sees see the goal clearly. 2) he thinks himself capable of the strength, at least to the *means*. 3) he listens to himself more than to others. 4) he doesn't fatigue easily, and in his fatigue his goals *do not fade*. He is an experienced mountain climber. 5) he is not easily or badly frightened. Thus: this sort of freedom of the will for which he is praised is *determination* and *strength* of willing along with proficiency and weakness of fantasy, as well as mastery or domineering nature and self-assurance. We speak of *freedom* because it is customarily associated with strength and mastery. (NF 1879 42[25])

"chain of will" to break is for this underlying evaluation to be abandoned such that the agent sees no (or less) reason to maintain the intention. Nietzsche associates unconditional evaluative judgments with "conscience," which tends to be shaped by the agent's strongest drive: "To our strongest drive, the tyrant in us, bows not only reason, but also conscience" (BGE 158). Thus, as is the case for akratic action, agents are disposed to experience "oscillation" as a result of their strongest drives being insufficiently dominant. In this case, coalitions of other drives, momentarily fixed on a shared object, may swamp a relatively weaker strongest drive (or even a coalition featuring that drive), altering the content of conscience itself.

In emphasizing "oscillation" in his account of weakness, Nietzsche anticipates recent work on weakness of will by Richard Holton (1999, 2003, 2009).[91] According to Holton, weakness of will is best understood not as *akrasia,* but as a species of *irresoluteness,* the failure to persist in one's intentions. Specifically, it is irresoluteness with respect to intentions that (unless abandoned) close off satisfaction of desires that conflict with the desire one forms an intention to satisfy. As Holton puts it, "if someone over-readily revises an intention which is, at least partially, contrary inclination defeating, that is weakness of will" (1999, 7). To illustrate the kind of phenomenon that he has in mind, Holton provides an example from Thomas Schelling (1984):

> As a boy I saw a movie about Admiral Byrd's Antarctic expedition and was impressed that as a boy he had gone outdoors in shirtsleeves to toughen himself up against the cold. I resolved to go to bed at night with one blanket too few. That decision to go to bed minus one blanket was made by a warm boy. Another boy awoke cold in the night, too cold to retrieve the blanket and resolving to restore it tomorrow. But the next bedtime it was the warm boy again, dreaming of Antarctica, who got to make the decision. And he always did it again. (Cited in Holton 1999, 8)

[91] The "oscillation" central to Nietzsche's account of weakness is also reminiscent of the "democratic individual" presented in Book VIII of Plato's *Republic*.

Holton invites the reader to consider how we would describe this situation if the boy had attempted to retrieve the blanket.[92] By Nietzsche's lights, that version of the young Schelling would be precisely the sort of "short-willed creature" with whom he contrasts the "strong" SI, both for reaching for the blanket after resolving to sleep without it and for resolving to sleep without it again the next night despite having resolved (the *previous* night) to leave it on. In each case, the "chain" of young Schelling's will would be broken by the change in his evaluative judgment and corresponding formation of a new, contrary intention. According to Nietzsche, therefore, he would possess a weak will.[93]

Indeed, as we have seen, it is this phenomenon of *irresoluteness* rather than *akrasia* that Nietzsche emphasizes in his accounts of strong and weak individuals.[94] And, given his valorization of individuals whose "goals *do not fade*" in the face of fatigue (NF 1879 42[25]) and who possess the "capacity for long-range decision" (BGE 212), it makes sense that Nietzsche would place greater weight on the abandonment of intention than on akratic action. After all, while *akrasia* certainly *could* undermine agents' life projects, irresoluteness seems far more apt to do so. In many cases, merely

[92] Interestingly, Holton describes such a case as an instance of "oscillating weakness of will" (1999, 8). While it is unclear whether he is familiar with Nietzsche's similar terminology at NF 1888 14[219], Holton does cite Nietzsche earlier in the paper: "To close your ears to even the best arguments once the decision has been made: sign of a strong character" (BGE 107, as cited in Holton 1999, 5).

[93] It is important to emphasize that *akrasia* and irresoluteness are entirely conceptually distinct. We can imagine agents who always act according to their better judgment (and therefore never experience *akrasia*), but who consistently abandon their intentions because their judgments are highly prone to revision. While such agents would not count as weak-willed in the traditional sense of *akrasia*, they are clearly defective *qua* agents.

[94] In this regard, Nietzsche and Holton are of a piece. However, while Nietzsche and Holton agree that weakness is not identical to *akrasia*, Holton identifies weakness with irresoluteness, while Nietzsche embraces a broader conception of weakness that explains both *akrasia* and irresoluteness. Further, Holton considers only one species of irresoluteness to be weakness: the abandonment of "contrary inclination defeating" intentions. In contrast, Nietzsche, as Holton notes (1999, 5), seems to consider *all* irresoluteness weak.

succumbing to temptation and acting contrary to better judgment will not substantially affect an agent's ability to accomplish a long-term goal.[95]

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that Nietzsche conceives of strength and weakness of will in terms of the degree to which agents' psyches are structured by their strongest drives. To possess strength of will, on this account, is to possess a single, dominant drive that stands in relations of dominance with enough other drives to afford psychological stability. We have also considered Nietzsche's "definition" of weakness as the "inability *not* to respond to a stimulus" (TI VI.2). As we saw in the previous section, such an inability to resist stimuli results not only in akratic action, but in one's conscience being subject to frequent revision as different drives become active and color one's practical deliberation.

In contrast, the SI, in virtue of possessing a "dominating instinct" that has "penetrated to the profoundest depths" of his drive psychology (GM II.2)—that is, in virtue of his strongest drive being stronger than any possible coalition of other drives—is not susceptible to experiencing this kind of revision of his conscience. Thus, the structural stability afforded by the SI's "dominating instinct" effectively *insulates* him from experiencing both *akrasia* and irresoluteness (or, in Nietzsche's terms, "shortness" of will). In this regard, Nietzsche's theory of strength and weakness is a *unifying* theory, one with the explanatory power to explain both key phenomena that philosophers have

[95] Autobiographically, while I regularly succumbed to temptation in the weeks and months prior to submitting this dissertation, my propensity for consuming Green Bay Packers content, playing online chess, and doing the Wordle during periods that I believed I should be writing did not ultimately prevent me from completing the project. In contrast, I likely would not have finished it if I had come to judge that it would be better for me to become a writer for a Packers fan website rather than write philosophy.

associated with weakness of will.[96] The SI never fails (at least not due to *internal,* psychological factors) to act according to his conscience (which, in his case, Nietzsche goes so far as to *identify* with his strongest drive) or to follow through in action once he forms an intention.

Indeed, I propose that it is in virtue of this incredible psychological strength that the SI possesses a trait that Nietzsche emphasizes no fewer than *six* times over the course of the two paragraphs that constitute GM II.2: his rather cryptic notion of the "right to make promises."[97] It follows very naturally from the interpretation of Nietzschean strength developed here that the SI possesses the "right to make promises" because, in contrast to the "feeble windbags" prone to being buffeted about by rogue drives, *all* of the SI's actions are properly "filtered" through the stable evaluative apparatus shaped by his "dominant instinct"—that is, through his conscience. While the SI promises, "rarely, reluctantly, slowly" (GM II.2), once he commits himself, he is incapable of *not* following through.[98] And this, for Nietzsche, is what it means to be strong.

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[96] To my knowledge, I am the first to suggest that Nietzsche primarily associates weakness of will with irresoluteness. I am not, however, the first to claim Nietzschean weakness is broader than *akrasia*. While Lanier Anderson has previously argued that "[Nietzschean] weakness is weakness of will in the traditional moral psychological sense" (2006, 102), he has recently revised his view: "I think Nietzsche deploys an even broader conception of ethico-psychological weakness of will, covering all kinds of psychological dissociation that interfere with wholehearted valuation and action" (Anderson 2022, 376). Presumably, Anderson has Frankfurt's (1987) notion of "wholeheartedness" in mind. I wholeheartedly agree with Anderson's general claim that Nietzschean weakness is broader than *akrasia*, though it is unclear to me whether irresoluteness would count as a failure to be "wholehearted." After all, it seems possible for an agent to by synchronically "wholehearted" but diachronically fragmented in virtue of being irresolute.

[97] The German here is *versprechen dürfen,* which is more naturally translated as "to be permitted to promise." I don't think this difference affects the content of Nietzsche's view, so I follow Kaufmann's formulation here.

[98] Hence, Brian Leiter's (2011) "deflationary" reading of the SI misses the mark. Leiter writes that it "surely ... bears emphasizing that [the SI] is described as having one and only one skill: he can actually make and keep a promise" (108). But many individuals, including those contrasted with the SI at GM II.2, can make and keep promises. What is distinctive of the SI is

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have offered what is, to my knowledge, the first extended interpretation of nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's ethical ideal of strength. As I argued in these chapters, Nietzschean strength is strength of *will*. Furthermore, I argued that Nietzsche advances a distinctive and philosophically rich theory of what it is to have a strong or weak will. According to Nietzsche, agents are strong- or weak-willed to the degree that they possess a single, dominant psychological drive. An insufficiently dominant strongest drive disposes a weak-willed agent to experience *akrasia*, the phenomenon historically identified with weakness of will in the Western philosophical tradition. It *also* disposes agents to be *irresolute*, understood as the failure to persist in one's intentions. *Strength* of will, which, on this view, involves the possession of an especially dominant strongest drive, effectively insulates agents from both akratic action and irresoluteness. In this regard, I have argued, Nietzsche's theory of strength and weakness of will is a *unifying* theory, one that explains the occurrence of both types of agential failure that have been associated with weakness of will. In this Conclusion, I wish to emphasize a way in which strength of will as interpreted here connects to another aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy. Specifically, I will draw attention to an irony involving Nietzsche rhetorical style and his ideal of strength.

As a writer, Nietzsche favors aphorism over straightforward argumentation.[99] This is not to say that he *never* presents his views through explicit arguments.[100] Still, such cases are the exceptions that prove the rule. One explanation for this stylistic preference is the poor health that plagued during the final productive decade of his

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that he *can't fail*—at least due to *internal,* psychological factors—to keep his promises. And this is *quite* a skill.

[99] "I approach deep problems like cold baths: quickly into them and quickly out again" (GS 381).

[100] Consider, for example, his argument for "sensualism" at BGE 15.

life.[101] However, another reason that Nietzsche's oeuvre doesn't consist of treatises in which he trots out one argument after another is that, as a pragmatic point, Nietzsche despairs of the efficacy of rational argumentation as a means to convincing one's audience. As he humorously puts it in *Twilight of the Idols*, "nothing is easier to erase than a dialectical effect: the experience of every meeting at which there are speeches proves this" (TI II.6). The reason that "dialectical effects" are so easily erased, in Nietzsche's view, is that people will cling to their beliefs, even in the face of refutation, for as long as those beliefs are practically necessary (GS 347). Thus, in order to effect a change in his *own* audience, Nietzsche seeks to provoke an *affective* response, one that may even stir his readers only at the unconscious level. And, of course, Nietzsche has a specific (and very *narrow*) set of readers in mind.[102] He takes himself to be writing for those rare individuals capable of achieving greatness: nascent "higher human beings" (GS 301). Of course, due to the overwhelming effects of cultural and ideology, such individuals are likely to be firmly in the grips of the Judeo-Christian "slave morality" (GM I) of which Nietzsche's own "revaluation of values" is the critique *par excellence*. Hence, there is a considerable irony lying at the heart of Nietzsche's ethical project: in despairing of the efficacy of rational argumentation, the philosopher for whom, "strength of the will … must belong to the concept of 'greatness'" (BGE 212) is left with no option but to tempt and seduce his readers away from their established evaluative outlooks. Thus, Nietzsche *himself* ultimately seeks to become that stimulus to which some nascent great individuals will find themselves unable not to respond. The path to strength, then, must go through weakness.

[101] As Prideaux (2018) claims, brevity "was to become an increasingly valuable power [in Nietzsche's final product decade] as the creative intervals between bouts of illness became shorter, leaving him with the problem of how to communicate his thoughts speedily and to maximum effect before the next attack" (35).
[102] See, for example, BGE 30 and, again, GS 381.

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