

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a beach scene. In the foreground, there is a sandy beach with some small dark spots. The ocean waves are breaking, creating white foam. The sky is a deep blue with several birds in flight, their silhouettes visible against the lighter sky. The title text is overlaid on the sky portion of the image.

# THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

JULIAN YOUNG

SECOND EDITION

ROUTLEDGE



# The Death of God and the Meaning of Life

What is the meaning of life? In today's secular, post-religious scientific world, this question has become a serious preoccupation. It also has a long history: many major philosophers from Plato to Heidegger have thought deeply about it, as Julian Young vividly illustrates in this lucid and thought-provoking introduction to the subject.

A major feature of this second edition is the addition of three new chapters examining Søren Kierkegaard's attempts to preserve a Christian answer to the question of the meaning of life; Karl Marx's attempt to translate this answer into naturalistic and atheistic terms; and Sigmund Freud's deep pessimism about the possibility of any version of such an answer.

The first part of the book presents an historical overview of philosophers from Plato to Marx who have believed in a meaning of life, either in some supposed 'other' world or in the future of this world. The second part assesses what happened when the traditional structures that give life meaning began to erode, giving way to the threat of nihilism and the appearance that life is meaningless. Julian Young looks at the responses to this threat in chapters on Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Foucault and Derrida.

Fully revised and updated throughout, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life, second edition* is ideal for anyone who's ever asked themselves where life's meaning (if there is one) really lies. It also is a very useful introduction to some key themes in continental philosophy, as well as philosophy of literature and philosophy of religion.

**Julian Young** is William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Humanities in the Department of Philosophy at Wake Forest University, USA. He is the author of 11 books, including *Schopenhauer* (Routledge, 2005), *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, which won the Association of American Publishers' 2010 PROSE award for philosophy, and *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek* (2013).

Praise for the first edition

This book is excellent as a weekend read, yet is sectioned perfectly for use as a course text; it is absolutely a worthwhile read for professional philosophers and students of philosophy alike, as well as anyone who has ever wondered about "the meaning of life".

*Dialogue*

‘Young is to be congratulated in producing a lively and accessible discussion of some difficult philosophical texts.’

*The London Magazine*

‘Young’s book builds on his excellent study of Nietzsche’s aesthetics.’

*The Philosopher’s Magazine*

This inventive and consistently engaging book steps outside the dusty problematics central to mainstream philosophy and addresses a question that is central to a wide audience in the modern world... As a result, the book marks out genuinely new ground ... the conclusion is not only intellectually engaging, but also deeply moving.’

Charles Guignon, *University of South Florida, USA*

# The Death of God and the Meaning of Life

Second edition

Julian Young

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# Abbreviations

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## Camus

MS                    *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*

## Derrida

D                    ‘*Différance*’

FP                    *French Philosophers in Conversation*, chapter 6

## Foucault

FR                    *The Foucault Reader*

## Freud

F                    *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*,  
vol. 21 (most references are to *Civilization and Its Discontents*)

## Hegel

PS                    *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (numerals refer to sections, not  
pages)

## Heidegger

B&T                    *Being and Time* (unless otherwise indicated, numerals refer to  
the page numbers in the margins of the translation)

N                    *Nietzsche* (4 vols)

PLT                    *Poetry, Language, Thought*

QCT                    *The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays*

## Kant

CPR

*Critique of Pure Reason* (numerals refer to the page numbers in the margins of the translation)

## **Kierkegaard**

CA	<i>The Concept of Anxiety</i>
CUP	<i>Concluding Unscientific Postscript</i>
EO	<i>Either/Or</i> (2 vols)
FT	<i>Fear and Trembling</i>
SUD	<i>Sickness unto Death</i>

## **Nietzsche**

In all the Nietzsche texts, Arabic numerals refer to sections, not pages.

BT	<i>The Birth of Tragedy</i>
GS	<i>The Gay Science</i>
GM	<i>On the Genealogy of Morals</i> (Roman numerals refer to essay numbers)
TI	<i>Twilight of the Idols</i> (Roman numerals refer to the main section numbers)
WP	<i>The Will to Power</i>
Z	<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> (Roman numerals refer to part numbers)

## **Plato**

P	<i>Plato's Phaedrus</i> (numerals refer to the page numbers in the margins of the translation)
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## **Sartre**

BN	<i>Being and Nothingness</i>
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## **Schopenhauer**

FR	<i>On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason</i>
PP	<i>Parerga and Paralipomena</i> (2 vols)
WR	<i>The World as Will and Representation</i> (2 vols)

# Introduction

This is the second edition of a book that first appeared in 2003. Its original chapters have all been rethought and rewritten. In addition, three entirely new chapters have been added: Chapter 3 on Kierkegaard, Chapter 5 on Freud, and Chapter 8 on Marx. The *overall* argument of the book remains, however, unchanged.

\* \* \*

Nietzsche once remarked that when people talk a lot about ‘values’ one knows that values are in trouble. The same is true of the meaning of life. That we talk, make nervous jokes, write and read books such as this one about it, suggests that we are troubled by the topic. Such talk, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon. For most of our Western history we have not talked about the meaning of life. This is because we used to be quite certain that we knew what it was. We were certain about it because we thought we knew that over and above this world of doubtful virtue and happiness is another world: a world Nietzsche calls (somewhat ironically) the ‘true world’ or, alternatively expressed, ‘God’.

A true world<sup>1</sup> is a destination – a destination such that to reach it is to enter (or perhaps re-enter) a state of ‘eternal bliss’, a heaven, paradise or utopia. Hence true-world philosophies (in a broad sense which includes religions) give meaning to life by representing it as a journey – a journey towards ‘redemption’, towards an arrival which will more than make up for the stress and discomfort of the travelling. Since journeys have a beginning, a middle and an end, a true-world account of the proper course of our lives is a kind of story, a narrative. And since true-world narratives (that, for example, of Christianity) are global rather than individual, since they narrate the proper course, not just of your life or mine, but of all lives at all times and places, they are, as I shall call them, ‘grand’ narratives.

Part I of this study is concerned with true-world, grand-narrative philosophies. In Chapter 1 I trace the idea of the true world from its entry into philosophy in the dialogues of Plato to its heyday, its assumption of world-historical dominion, in the shape of medieval Christianity.

At the beginning of the modern period, however, the birth and success of experimental science presented the severest of challenges to traditional Christian belief. For it became clear that on the map of the cosmos as drawn by Copernicus, Galileo and Newton, no plausible place remained in which to locate the Christian heaven and its inhabitants. Previously a kind of *terra incognita*, a kind of Australia though even further away, an unexplored continent beyond the stars, there now seemed to remain no unexplored part of the cosmos in which it could be said to be. In Chapter 2 I examine Kant’s attempt, at the end of the eighteenth century, to deploy his metaphysical<sup>2</sup> distinction between appearance and reality to rescue traditional religious belief. There *is* no place, Kant admits, in the world

that is mapped by science for God, the angels or the souls of the saved. But this doesn't matter. For whereas the space-time world of nature that is (completely and correctly) described by science is a world of 'appearance', absolutely beyond the ken of science is another world, the world of ultimate reality, of the 'thing in itself'. So there is, after all, a place for God to inhabit, a 'supersensible' domain – supersensible not in the sense of being, like Australia, too far away for us to see, but in the sense rather of being, in principle, not the kind of thing that ever could be accessible to the physical senses. Of course, says Kant, since the senses are the sole source of knowledge we cannot *know* anything about the supersensible. But we can at least have *faith* that the claims of Christianity are realised in it, can rest secure in the knowledge that the faith of our forefathers can never be challenged by natural science. This faith, moreover, is a faith we *must* retain, for without God morality makes no sense. In Chapter 3 I examine Kierkegaard's defence of this final, Kantian point: unless we make the 'leap' to faith, he argues, our lives will be without ethical 'seriousness', and therefore without meaning. And without meaning we will be in 'despair'.

In Chapter 4 I look at Schopenhauer's critique of the Kantian attempt to save Christianity. Though he fully accepts Kant's distinction between the sensible world of appearance and supersensible world of the thing in itself, Schopenhauer argues compellingly that the omnipresence of cruelty and suffering in the former discloses the idea of the latter as inhabited by the Christian God of love as, at best, a bad joke. Surprisingly though, Schopenhauer's demolition of the Christian theology's benevolent creator does not lead him to abandon the idea of a true world. Rather, it leads him to identify that world, entry into which is to redeem us from the miseries of this bad dream of a life, with *nirvana*, the a-theistic domain of Buddhist 'nothingness'.

In Chapter 5 I discuss Freud, who not only read Schopenhauer but basically, I suggest, agrees with his pessimistic conclusion that, on account of the omnipresence and inescapability of pain – 'discontent' as he calls it – this life is not worth living.

In Chapter 6 I show how Schopenhauer's ardent disciple, the youthful Nietzsche, follows him, with some modifications, into 'European Buddhism'. In essence, 'European Buddhism' (later Nietzsche's derisive term for his youthful enthusiasm) is an exotic species of Kantianism. But the essence of Kantianism is the unknowability of reality 'in itself'. Why, then, even if we accept Kant's metaphysical duality between appearance and reality, should we believe entry into the supersensible world to constitute 'redemption' from suffering? The answer, implicit in Schopenhauer and explicit in Nietzsche, is that since it is only in space and time that there can be a *plurality* of things, the thing in itself is 'beyond plurality'. But since suffering requires a disjunction between desiring subject and recalcitrant object, suffering requires plurality. Beyond plurality, therefore, there can be no suffering. This, however, I suggest, is not really a compelling argument. Since the essence of Kantianism is the *unknowability* of the thing in itself, one of the things that we cannot know about it is precisely the claim that it is non-spatio-temporal. There just might be, for all we know, a more or less complete correspondence between our image of reality and the way it actually is in itself. I conclude, at the end of Chapter 6, that we have no more reason to accept Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's *nirvana* than we have to accept

Kant and Kierkegaard's heaven. This, however, is not the end of the true world – a resilient idea we have been extremely reluctant to abandon.

In Chapter 7 I turn to Hegel and in Chapter 8 to his disciple, Marx. Both, I argue, propose a fully naturalistic philosophy: both accept the death of the supersensible world in its Kantian as well as in its medieval form. Yet they do not abandon the true world. Rather, they relocate it, transport it from a supposed *other* world into the future of *this* world. The history of the (one and only) world is pictured as moving according to inexorably progressive, 'dialectical' laws towards a final utopia the arrival of which will bring history to an end. The old distinction between nature and super-nature is reinterpreted as a distinction between present and future.

The trouble with this final version of true-worldism, I argue, is that 'history', as conceived by Hegel, is a myth (albeit a potent one) and utopia, as conceived by Marx, an impossibility. I conclude that there is no version of the true-world answer to the question of the meaning of life that merits belief.

And, in fact, speaking of the character of our culture as a whole, there is none that receives it. When Nietzsche reported, in 1882, that 'God is dead', he articulated no more than the truth: the sociological fact (on account of which fundamentalist Islam despises us) that Western culture has ceased to be, either overtly or covertly, a religious culture.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

When a traditional structure in terms of which the meaning of life has been defined no longer commands belief, and when nothing takes its place, the result is 'nihilism', understood in Nietzsche's sense:

What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves.* The aim is lacking.

(WP 2)

Part II of this book looks at the responses to the threat of nihilism – to the appearance that life, in the absence of the true world, is meaningless – that are to be found in the works of philosophers from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day: specifically, in the works of the later Nietzsche (Chapters 9 and 10), of Sartre (Chapters 12 and 13), Camus (Chapter 14), Foucault (Chapter 15), Derrida (Chapter 16) and Heidegger (Chapters 11 and 17). Since the definition of 'continental philosophy' as 'philosophy which, as its primary task, seeks to respond to the question of what can be said about the meaning of life in the light of the death of the God of traditional Christianity' is more useful than most, this book may be regarded as a brief history of the highlights (and a few of the lowlights) of continental philosophy. Two features, however, make this history idiosyncratic. First, since the order of ideas – intellectual affinities and conflicts – is not always the order of history, the philosophers I discuss will not always appear in chronological order. Second, my history is a *critical* history, one, moreover, that finds itself, in the final chapter, inclined towards an *answer* to the question of the meaning of life.

Part I of this study, being concerned with those philosophers who respond to the question of the meaning of life within the broad parameters of the traditional true-world structure, may be said to be concerned with the more 'conservative'

side of continental philosophy. Part II, being concerned with those philosophers who reject the true-world structure, root and branch, and start afresh on the problem of meaning, is concerned with its more 'radical' side. It may be observed that the rift between the conservative and the radical runs straight through Nietzsche's philosophy – which is what makes him so pivotal to the understanding of where we are now.

\* \* \*

Why exactly is the question of the meaning of life interesting? Why is it important? We all sense its importance (even though we try to cover up our incompetence to answer it with Pythonesque jokes) but just what is it that we sense?

Camus famously begins *The Myth of Sisyphus* by saying that 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide.' The question of whether or not one should commit suicide is, of course, the question of whether or not life is worth living. And what makes this a real issue for us, Camus claims, is the 'absurdity' of existence, the meaninglessness of life. Though the connection between the issue of meaning and that of worth is somewhat obscure in *The Myth*, the suggestion made in its opening pages is, I believe, fundamentally correct: my life<sup>4</sup> is worth living if, but only if, it is (to me, at least) meaningful. Let me try to justify the two parts of this claim.

First, why is it true that if my life is meaningful then it is a life worth living? The meaning (point, purpose, goal) of my life, if it has one, is my fundamental project – whether that be to gain 'eternal bliss', to be virtuous, to promote the communist utopia, to become a famous rock star, or simply to watch over my children's growth and development. But, intuitively, to say 'I possess a fundamental project and the capacity to pursue it, yet my life isn't worth living' fails to make sense. Why is this? Because, I think, 'my fundamental project' means 'project the realisation of which is more important to me than anything else'. Nietzsche (taking a swipe at Bentham's 'utilitarian' maxim that right action is action which promotes the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest number) says, 'Man does not seek pleasure; only the Englishman does.' What 'man' seeks, he continues, is 'meaning'. But this, I think, by making the primacy of meaning seem a psychological or anthropological truth, misses the point. The real point is a conceptual one. There is, that is to say, an imperialism about the concept 'meaning of life': to acknowledge something as the meaning of my life is – conceptually – to acknowledge it as my highest value, a value that outweighs all my other values combined. It follows that, whatever sufferings I may endure, whatever 'evils' may befall me, so long as I have a life-meaning and retain the capacity to pursue it, my life is worth living.

Why, to turn to the second part of my claim, is it true that if life is worth living then it must be meaningful? I shall return to this issue in discussing Camus (who actually purports to reject the claim). Here, let me simply assert that, however full of pleasure and free of pain a life may be, if it is a life that lacks the possibility of *growth*, a possibility that can only come from the possession of a life-project, then it represents a fundamentally tedious existence, one that cannot but be *boring*. But bearing in mind Schopenhauer's insight that boredom is not an inner sensation but rather the way *everything* in one's world shows up – grey,

flat, unprofitable, dead – a life the overall character of which is boredom cannot be one that is worth living.

## Notes

- 1 Here, and from now on, I abandon the 'scare quotes' round 'true world'. Whenever the phrase occurs, however, they should be imagined to be there, lending the phrase a tone of mild irony.
- 2 The basic definition of 'metaphysics' is 'the study of what ultimately exists'. Sometimes, however, philosophers emphasise the etymological components of the word – *meta-physics*, above-the-physical – so that the word is used in a more restricted way (particularly by nineteenth-century Germans) to mean 'the study of the (putative) supra-natural world'. A third use of 'metaphysics', which will not appear until Chapter 17, is introduced by Heidegger. In this book the first of these three uses will be the most common.
- 3 If I know someone has drunk a slow-acting, but invariably fatal, poison, I may correctly say 'You're dead' even though you are, in fact, still alive. When Nietzsche announced the death of God in 1882, he spoke with the prescience of the seer. He knew perfectly well that Marxism – 'socialism', as he called it – was a perpetuation of the idea of God by other means: he called it God's 'shadow'. But he also knew that this form of the idea had to 'die' too. It is, therefore, no objection to Nietzsche to point out that 'God's' death throes did not completely end until the fall of the Berlin Wall (the final and visible collapse of communism) in 1989.
- 4 'Life' is not the same as 'my life'. While 'life is meaningful' entails 'my life is meaningful', on the surface, at least, it would seem that my life might be meaningful even if life as such were not. I shall return to this point later on.

# Part I

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BEFORE THE DEATH OF GOD



# 1 Plato

Plato (about 428–347 BCE), unmarried aristocrat and sometime cavalry officer, belonged in his youth to the circle of Socrates, a group of young Athenian men who admired and loved the philosopher (in spite of his snub nose, bald head and bulging eyes) and learnt from him how philosophy should be done. The most traumatic event in Plato's life, which occurred when he was about 31, was the execution of Socrates, who was required to drink hemlock after conviction by the Athenian court on charges of 'irreligion' and corrupting the minds of young men. Other significant events in Plato's life were his founding of the 'Academy', the first university (attended by, among others, Aristotle), and his three visits to Syracuse in Sicily. In his most famous work, the *Republic*, Plato argues that the ideal state can only come into being when the philosopher becomes king – or, presumably, when the king becomes a philosopher. The visit to Syracuse appears to have been an (unsuccessful) attempt to put theory into practice, to persuade the military dictator of Syracuse to govern his state according to the principles set out in the *Republic*. (A couple of millennia later, as we shall see, after Heidegger's resignation from his post as an important Nazi official, a friend remarked ruefully: 'Back from Syracuse?')

Plato wrote some two dozen compositions known as 'dialogues' on account of their conversational form. In almost all of them, the main character is 'Socrates'. Though modelled on the real person, it seems to be the case that, as Plato became older, 'Socrates' became ever increasingly his own literary construction, a mouthpiece through which he expressed his own ideas rather than reporting those of the hero of his youth.

## Being versus becoming

As observed in the Introduction, the true world first enters philosophy in Plato's mature dialogues. The foundation of his philosophy, expressed most famously in the *Republic*, is the division of reality into two worlds. On the one hand, there is the world of everyday visibility – the world that we see, smell, hear, feel and touch – which, because it is always changing, he called the world of 'becoming'. On the other, there is the invisible, but nonetheless absolutely real, world of unchanging 'being'.

The world of Being is the world of the 'Forms'. The Forms are what account for the division of the visible world into kinds of things: this and that are both trees because they are 'semblances' – copies or imitations – of the very same thing, the Form of the Tree, 'the tree itself'. This and that are both circles because they are copies of 'the circle itself', this and that person or action are courageous

or wise because they are copies of ‘courage itself’ or ‘wisdom itself’. The things of this world are always imperfect copies of their originals in the world of Being. (However carefully you draw it, a physical circle will always have a kink in it somewhere, so it can only ever be an approximate circle.) In the *Republic*, Plato uses the image of the shadow to express the inferiority of everyday things to their originals. We physical creatures are like prisoners in a cave, chained so that we can only see the rock wall in front of us. Beyond the mouth of the cave behind us are real things which, because they are illuminated by the sun, cast shadows on the wall, shadows which most of us, because we cannot turn around, mistake for the real things themselves.

Though we cannot see the Forms physically, we can know them intellectually; we can see them in the ‘mind’s eye’. And in fact all human beings have a dim and confused knowledge of the Forms. This is the explanation of the defining human attribute, the ability to reason and communicate by means of language. The reason you can follow my instructions when I say ‘draw a circle’ is that what you have in mind when you hear the word ‘circle’ is the very same thing – circularity, ‘the circle itself’ – as I have in mind when I say it. The Forms are the meanings of words.

\* \* \*

Plato, then, distinguishes between the true world of being and the ‘apparent’ world of becoming: apparent because, whereas, for Plato, things in the world of Forms are truly the things they are, things in the realm of nature are only approximately – i.e. *not* really – the things we take them to be. So far, this dichotomy looks to be a contribution to metaphysics and the philosophy of language. In fact, however, it is also the heart of a philosophy of life. To see why this is so, I want to examine one of Plato’s later dialogues, the *Phaedrus*.

\* \* \*

The dialogue is set in the countryside, a short walk outside Athens. The place is an enchanted one, for it is where, according to legend, the wind god Boreas seized Orithyia from the river. The enchantment has its effect on Socrates. ‘Truly’, he says, noting, after a time, that his usually dry style of speech has become somewhat ‘dithyrambic’ (rapturous), ‘there seems to be a divine presence in this spot’ (P 238d).

The conversation is between Socrates and Phaedrus, a bright but impressionable youth. The topic is love. What makes it relevant to our concerns is that, in the course of discovering the nature of love, Socrates (Plato) deploys his true-versus-apparent-world metaphysics in such a way as to provide, in effect, an answer to the question of the meaning of life – an answer, moreover, which would dominate Western thought and feeling for the next two millennia.

## The claim that love is madness

Phaedrus pulls from under his cloak a scroll that records a speech given by one Lysias, a speech by which he is mightily impressed.

Lysias’ speech is an attack on love. Though one senses that Lysias himself is not unlike the unattractive figure valorised in his speech, he does so principally in order to demonstrate his skill in rhetoric. As the ‘speaker for the affirmative’ in

the school debating team might choose to defend the most absurd of positions in order to show off his skill as a debater, so Lysias chooses the scandalous path of attacking love in order, principally, to display his rhetorical virtuosity. (Scandalous and indeed blasphemous, because love, for the Greeks, was a god – Eros. To fall in love was to fall under the power of Eros.)

When deciding with whom to spend his time, the boy, Lysias argues, should consort not with the lover but with the non-lover, the man who frankly confesses to not being in love at all. Whereas the non-lover will offer a relationship of calmness and discretion, the lover will be jealous and possessive, isolating the boy from friends and other adult influences. When, however, the ‘disease or madness’ of love has passed, when the lover’s sick passion has transferred itself to a new object – as it inevitably will – then he will cast the boy off, abandoning him to a miserable and lonely existence.

(The context of this speech is, of course, *homosexual*. Though there was some uncertainty as to whether it should be allowed physical expression, love of boys was widespread among men of the Greek upper classes such as Plato and Lysias. Nothing of philosophical significance, however, hangs on this context. ‘She’s may be imagined in place of the ‘he’s at the appropriate places without, it seems to me, affecting the substance of the argument in any way at all.)

## Heaven-sent madness

Lysias’ speech (which I have radically abbreviated) is long, rambling, boring and ugly. ‘How clever of Lysias to say the same thing twice over and with equal success each time’, remarks Socrates snidely. Nonetheless, faced with Phaedrus’ enthusiasm for its style and substance, Socrates decides that he must make a speech *in defence* of love.<sup>1</sup> With Lysias as counsel for the prosecution, Socrates appoints himself, as it were, counsel for the defence.

Socrates starts by admitting that, as Lysias had claimed, love is indeed a kind of madness. But not all madness is bad. It is, indeed, precisely the opposite – ‘mankind’s greatest blessing’ – when it is ‘heaven sent’. One example of heaven-sent madness is poetry. Great poetry happens only when a ‘tender, virgin soul is seized ... by the Muses who ... stimulate it to rapt and passionate expression’. Poetry that is the product of merely ‘man-made skill’ is worthless. To produce great poetry, in other words, the poet must be ‘taken over’, ‘inspired’ by some supra-normal force. Poetry composed out of a mundane state of mind is mundane.

Another example of heaven-sent madness, suggests Socrates, is love. But to prove the point, he says, he needs first to provide a metaphysical account of the soul – of its nature, origin and ‘destiny’ (where it will, or at least ought, to end up). He provides this in the form of a narrative that abolishes the boundaries between poetry and prose, religion and philosophy.

## The soul’s constitution

The soul, the source of all movement and action, is, says Socrates, immortal. The proof is as follows. We know that the soul is the uncaused cause of action, for when we decide to do something we *freely* so decide – nothing *compels* us to

make one decision rather than another. But that means that the soul can neither come into nor go out of existence. It cannot come into existence, because then it would have to have, after all, a cause. And it cannot go out of existence because the only way something can cease to exist is through the removal of its originating and sustaining cause. As a 'first principle of motion', therefore, the soul is immortal. (This is actually a pretty dodgy argument, but I shall not labour the point.)

What, now, of the constitution of this immortal psyche? The soul, says Socrates, may be compared to

the union of powers in a team of winged steeds and their winged charioteer. Now all the gods steeds and all their charioteers are good, and of good stock, but with other beings it is not wholly so. With us men, [whereas one steed] ... is noble and good and of good stock ... the other has the opposite character and his stock is opposite. Hence the task of our charioteer is difficult and troublesome.

(P 246a–b)

Later on in the dialogue (drawing, perhaps, on his experience in the cavalry) Plato provides a fuller description of the two horses:

The good horse is upright and clean-limbed, carrying his neck high, with something of a hooked nose; in colour he is white with black eyes; a lover of glory but with temperance and modesty, one that consorts with genuine renown, and needs no whip, being driven by the word of command.

The other horse, by contrast,

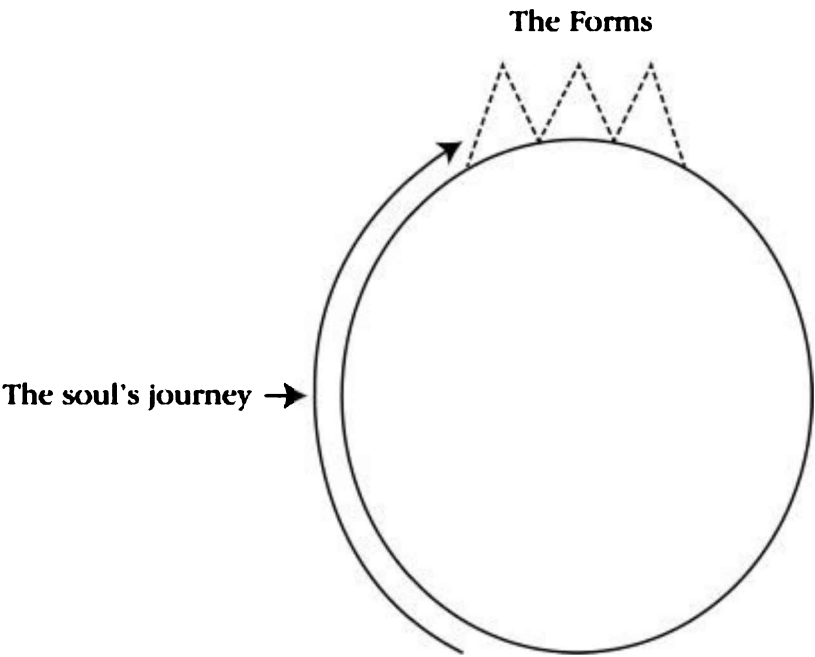
is crooked of frame, a massive jumble of a creature, with thick short neck, snub nose, black skin, and gray eyes; hot-blooded and consorting with wantonness and vainglory: shaggy of ear, deaf, and hard to control with whip and goad.

(P 253d–e)

As Plato conceives it, the soul is a political entity. (In the *Republic* he argues that the structure of the state and the structure of the soul exactly mirror each other.) The charioteer represents 'reason ... the soul's pilot' (P 247b). Reason (or 'intelligence'), he holds, is the legislative power in the soul. To it belongs the business of 'command', of 'setting the course' of action. The white horse represents the executive, the power of action; or rather, it represents the executive power of the soul insofar as it has an innate tendency to be in harmony with the commands of reason. The 'massive jumble' of the black horse represents the many-headed monster of physical desire which Plato refers to as 'appetite'. It is, as it were, the rabble in the soul. In a harmonious, properly disciplined, soul, the energy of appetite is subordinated to the will of reason and thereby augments the motive power of the executive. (Freud, we shall see in Chapter 5, calls this appropriation of the energy of appetite 'sublimation'.) Unfortunately, however, appetite often escapes the discipline of reason. As we shall see, disharmony in the soul, spiritual sickness, is always caused by rapacious 'appetite'.

**The fall and rise of the soul**

Originally, the soul belonged to the ‘train’ of one of the gods as it made its journey around the ‘rim of the heavens’. (Following a particular god makes one ‘most like’ (P 248a) that god. If, for example, one belongs to the train of Zeus one is likely to exhibit ‘constancy’, ‘wisdom’ and be a ‘leader of men’; if one belongs to that of Ares one is likely to exhibit a warlike disposition (P 252c–e); if one follows Apollo one is likely to be musical; if Hermes, gifted in speaking; if Hestia, home-making; and so on.) From its vantage point on the rim of the heavens the soul was able, periodically, to receive its ‘true nourishment’ (P 247d), namely, illumination by the Forms (Figure 1.1).



*Figure 1.1*

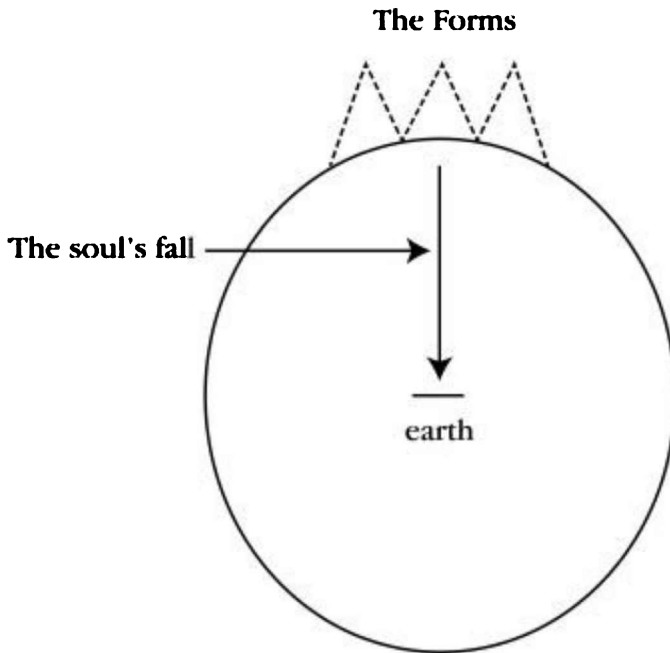


Figure 1.2

On account, however, of the struggle to control the black horse some souls had their wings broken. No longer able to fly, they fell to earth where they became incarnate, entered into material bodies (Figure 1.2).

Normally, there is no return to the rim of the heavens (and to the soul's 'true nourishment') for 10,000 years. Rather, the soul is condemned to constant reincarnation in bodily form, its current position in the order of things being determined by the merit or otherwise of its previous life. If, however, the soul has three times lived the best life – the 'philosophical life' – then the period that must be endured before a return to the heavens is abbreviated to 3,000 years (P 248e–249a).

## The philosophical life

What is the 'philosophical life'? It is the life spent in the pursuit, not of power, fame, fortune or sensuous pleasure, but of *knowledge*, knowledge of the Forms. More exactly, it is the life that attempts to remember the Forms. Since all human souls once had direct experience of the Forms – as we have seen, they could not otherwise possess the distinctively human attribute of reason and understanding of language (P 249b) – knowing the Forms is really a matter of remembering them, just as, for instance, knowing the furnishings of one's childhood bedroom is a matter of remembering them.

The other central characteristic of the philosophical life is that it is virtuous. It is, indeed, the *only* truly virtuous life. The Forms, remember, are the standards, ideals or perfect examples of which things in the everyday world are at best

imperfect copies. So the Form of the wise, the courageous, the just and the good are the standards of wisdom, courage, justice and goodness. Now since, says Socrates, one obviously cannot consistently *do* what is good or wise unless one *knows* what is good or wise – know the standard that makes an action good or wise – it follows that only the life devoted to knowing the good and the wise has any chance of *being* good and wise. (To gain an intuitive grasp of the idea of the Forms of justice, wisdom, goodness, et cetera as standards or ideals, it may help to think of ‘role models’, and to observe that people who become role models are always, *as* role models, better, more perfect, than they are in their everyday lives. No man, as the French proverb observes, is a hero to his valet.)

## Platonic love

What has all this to do with love? Where does love fit into the philosophical life?

Love, says Socrates, is essentially concerned with *beauty*. Now beauty, he argues, is unique among the Forms. In a difficult passage (P 250b–d), his argument appears to run as follows. As embodied beings, our typical and only easy access to things is through the physical senses. But beauty is the only Form that comes to presence in sense experience.<sup>2</sup> To determine whether an action is genuinely just, wise or courageous one cannot just *look*; one has to *think* about it, usually in quite complex ways. With beauty, on the other hand, one does just look. Indeed, looking, one might argue, is the *only* way of determining whether or not something is beautiful. Hence beauty represents a kind of fissure through which something from the realm of Forms, as it were, leaks through into the domain of sense. For sensory beings such as ourselves, therefore, the experience of beauty is more likely than anything else to remind us of the Forms and of our former proximity to them.

Seeing the beautiful is what love is. The man is suddenly ‘captivated’ by the beauty of the boy. He loses all interest in anything else, allows his worldly affairs to go to rack and ruin. The result is that ‘standing aside from the busy doings of mankind he is rebuked by the multitude as being out of his wits’. But what is really happening inside him is a kind of remembering. Since the eye of the lover always idealises the beloved, the earthly beauty of the boy has granted him an experience of true beauty, of the Form of beauty. In doing so it reminds him of his true home on the ‘rim of the heavens’, of that home we all inhabited when we were ‘without taint of that prison house which we are now encompassed within, and call a body, fast bound therein as an oyster in its shell’ (P 250c). The wings of the soul begin to grow again, the feeling of which is the ‘bitter-sweet’ feeling of love: bitter because the memory reminds us of our current homelessness, sweet because, as a hope, a promise, a goal, homecoming has suddenly come closer to us.

Ravished by beauty, the lover has begun, therefore, a kind of self-transformation; he has begun to live the ‘philosophical life’ of knowing the Forms. The boy, in turn, suggests Plato, will become infected by the lover’s love so that he, too, will turn towards the philosophical life. If this becomes established as the life that the two live together, then their souls are preparing themselves for a return to the heavens.

They prepare themselves, that is to say, if they live a life spent in spiritual contemplation, a life of meditation and reflection directed towards the Forms. Characteristic of such a life, a life directed away from the earthly and towards the heavenly, is asceticism, a disciplined turning away from things of the earth and of the flesh. Their life, therefore, is a life of abstention from physical enjoyment, from, in particular, enjoyment of each other's bodies. Such restraint demands strenuous self-discipline, since the black horse in the soul strives for physical satisfaction, lusts after 'a monstrous and forbidden act'. Time after time the charioteer must 'jerk back the bit in the mouth of the wanton horse ... bespattering his railing tongue and jaws with blood' (P 254c). If the black horse is not subdued an opportunity will have been missed, for then the two will have been diverted from their task of regrowing their wings. But if it is finally 'humbled' then they will have already begun their journey of spiritual homecoming, will 'stand victorious in the first of the three rounds of that truly Olympian struggle' (P 256b).

\* \* \*

This, then, is the defence of love – of 'Platonic love', as we say, referring to the fact that Plato's love is non-physical, chaste. Platonic love is a particular form of the philosophical life and, as such, the beginning of a return from exile.

By the standards of the everyday world such love is, indeed, Socrates admits, a kind of madness. In reality, however, it is an understanding of the hollowness of those standards. True love is a meditation on 'first and last things'. As such, it casts the cares and concerns of the everyday into a perspective from which they are seen to be matters of the utmost triviality. Who cares about fortune or reputation, who cares about the discretion offered by Lysias' seedy roué, when what is at stake is the salvation of the soul!

## Criticism

What is the intended status of Plato's myth? Though, like almost everything to do with Plato, this is a matter of scholarly debate, some points, I think, are clear. The first is that Plato certainly believed in the real existence of the Forms, the immortality of the soul, and in the latter's prenatal exposure to the former. All of these doctrines are affirmed, and provided with 'proofs', in many other dialogues.<sup>3</sup> The second is that we are intended to take the myth of the soul's fall and rise seriously. Early in the dialogue Phaedrus asks Socrates whether he believes the myth that Orithyia was abducted and raped by Boreas at the place where they are. Socrates replies that, though one might expect him to go along with 'our clever men' and say that she was probably blown off a rock by the north wind, he finds this 'too clever and laboured', preferring to accept traditional beliefs at face value (P 229c). Plato was no 'demythologiser', was not disposed to rationalise myths out of existence. They communicate, for him, important truth.

On the other hand, this does not commit him to the literal truth of each and every detail of his own myth. One of Socrates' most consistent assertions is that the only thing he is quite certain about is the extent of his own ignorance. And, of course, such ignorance would be at its maximum in relation to the afterlife. Given this, it would be absurd of him to claim to be certain about all the details



of his story – the 10,000 years shortened to 3,000, and so on. All, I think, that is claimed to be true is the metaphysical framework of the myth, the dichotomy between the world of sense and the world of the Forms, and the general outline of the story – sin, fall and redemption.

Were our primary concern with Plato criticism, we might, at this point, raise some challenging questions. Do we really need to believe in the supernatural world of the Forms to be able to explain the possibility of language? Does Plato really prove the soul to be immortal? Can the ugly not be loved? Would not the beauty of art (Michelangelo's *David*, for example) do just as well as that of the boy to remind the lover of the Form of beauty? If so, does not Plato 'objectify' the beloved? As Lysias reduces the boy to a 'sex object' does not Plato reduce him to a 'thought object'? And finally, must true love really deny itself physical expression? Is there not something disturbing about Plato's alienation from the physical in general, from our own bodies and from sex in particular?<sup>4</sup>

But Plato criticism is not, here, our principal concern, so I will pursue these questions no further. What I want rather to do is draw attention to the way in which Plato uses his metaphysical dichotomy between the two worlds to give meaning to life.

## The meaning of life

One of the primary sources of meaning is narrative. And, typically, the way in which a narrative endows its hero's life with a purpose, goal or meaning is by reference to the past. The plot of a classic Western, for example, has the hero devoting his life to tracking down the Indians who burnt his house and murdered his family. A Jane Austen novel will explain the heroine's burning ambition to marry in terms of the married status of all her sisters and the modesty of her father's means. Providing meaning in terms of the past is the essential character of Plato's story of the soul's journey.

His story has, that is, a three-part structure. It is a story of (a) an initial state of grace – a paradise – a place of integration, being at home, being in place, in the *right* place, (b) a fall, a fall from grace to a place of alienation and exile, and (c) redemption. But redemption is simply homecoming, a return to the place from which one came. The character, then, of a life's goal is determined by its past.

Notice that Plato's story does not just explain life's goal, our task. It does at least three other things. First, it explains the sense of alienation, exile ('thrownness' we will find Heidegger calling it) to which we are sometimes vulnerable. (Of course, true-world metaphysics – now revealed as 'true-home' metaphysics – and the sense of alienation are mutually reinforcing.) Second, it explains the *justice* of our present condition – it is our own fault we are here since the fall is the result of our failure to control the black horse, the result of the disorderly state of our souls. And third, it explains what we are to do, the kind of life we are to lead – the life of knowledge, virtue and ascetic self-discipline – if we are to achieve our goal.

## Plato and Christianity

Someone might say: well all this, in its own quaint way, is quite engaging. The

question is, however: what has it to do with *us*? The *Phaedrus* was, after all, written two-and-a-half millennia ago and we no longer believe in the things – the supernatural world, the immortal soul, reincarnation, let alone the Forms – in which Plato believed. Isn't, then, this excursion into Plato's dialogue, diverting though it may be, in the end no more than an irrelevant piece of cultural archaeology?

The answer is that it is not. For Plato's way of giving meaning to life – if not the exact details of his story – has dominated almost the entire history of Western thought.

I am referring, here, in the first instance, to Christianity – though, as we shall see, Platonism (which I use as a synonym for 'true-worldism') continued, in disguised and devious ways, to dominate Western thinking even in the materialist atmosphere of the post-Christian era. But let us attend, for now, to Christianity.

One does not, I think, need much convincing that Christianity (according to Nietzsche, the product of St Paul's grafting of Jesus' ethics onto Greek metaphysics) is a version of Platonism, of the true-world/true-home view of reality. The identity between the two is, of course, not perfect. An important difference is that there is no omnipotent creator-God in Plato.<sup>5</sup> And neither is there anything corresponding to the Crucifixion, to the idea of God's dying in order to make it possible for us to achieve salvation.<sup>6</sup> Yet in both the Platonic and the Christian story there is the same, immortal, immaterial soul which figures in the same three-part story of sin, fall and redemption. In both stories there is the same metaphysical division between the natural and super-natural worlds, between earth and heaven, with the latter portrayed as home and the former a place of exile.<sup>7</sup> In both stories, therefore, physical desire in general, and sex in particular, is portrayed as something problematic, something to be avoided whenever possible. In both stories, moreover, the fall is our own fault – in the Christian story it occurred because we disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit.

The historical importance of Christianity is that it achieved virtually complete hegemony over Western thought and feeling from about the beginning of the fourth century until well into the eighteenth. The consequences of this will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Notes

1 I have somewhat simplified the structure of the dialogue at this point.

2 It is hard to think why the Forms of colours should not be equally accessible through the senses. Socrates ought to mean, here, that beauty is unique among the 'moral' Forms, the Forms that are concerned with value.

3 In the *Meno*, Socrates 'proves' that knowledge is really recollection by getting a slave boy to solve a mathematical problem even though he has done nothing but ask him questions – the so-called 'Socratic method'.

4 Michel Foucault, whom we shall meet in Chapter 15, comments: 'it's very significant that when Plato tries to integrate love for boys and friendship he is obliged to put aside sexual relations. Friendship is reciprocal and sexual relationships are not reciprocal: in sexual relations you can penetrate or you are penetrated.' Lack of reciprocity, he adds, was, for the Greeks, not a problem so far as women were concerned. But it was with regard to boys since they were future citizens and should not, therefore, be used as sex objects (FR: 344–46). This passage seems to tell us something about the Greeks and quite a lot about Foucault.

5 In the *Timaeus* the world is the creation of a divine craftsman who, following the model of the Forms, attempts to reproduce their perfection in his creation. Forced, however, to work with inadequate and

unstable materials (matter), which he did not create, he cannot do so.

6 The Crucifixion myth is, however, anticipated by the Dionysus myth: the god of the vine must die in the autumn in order to be resurrected in the spring.

7 Inscription on a nineteenth-century Moravian grave in Winston-Salem, North Carolina: 'Home at Last'.

## 2 Kant and Christianity

From about the fourth to the eighteenth century Western thinking was Christian thinking. This meant that, throughout this period, the question of the meaning of life was a non-issue: a non-issue because the answer was *obvious*, self-evident, the topic completely sewn up by Christianity's version of Platonism. And if, perchance, one did threaten the prevailing, meaning-giving story then one got persecuted. (Hence Schopenhauer's sardonic remark that Christianity's single greatest argument has always been the stake.)

### The persecution of Galileo

Though he was not burnt at the stake, a case in point is Galileo (1564– 1642), who was persecuted by the Catholic Inquisition for saying (after Copernicus) that the earth rotates around the sun, precisely the opposite of what the Church had always taught. (He was shown rather than subjected to the instruments of torture.)

One might wonder how Galileo could possibly bother the Vatican one way or the other, how a theory of astronomy could possibly bother an institution that was in the meaning-of-life business rather than that of science.

The answer is as follows. We saw that Plato's account of the cosmos is as represented by Figure 2.1.

With a little more detail added, and the substitution of God for the Forms, this becomes the metaphysics of medieval Christianity (Figure 2.2). The thing to notice about this second map of the cosmos is that it represents *both* a theory of astronomy *and* an account of the meaning of life. To say that the picture is wrong, to say, as Galileo did, that the earth is not the centre of the universe, to say that the earth *moves*, is, therefore, not just to propose a new theory of astronomy. It is to threaten an entire meaning-giving worldview.

From its point of view, therefore, the Church was quite *right* to persecute Galileo, to demand, and eventually obtain, his retraction of the new astronomy. For what he threatened to bring into being (though any such consequence was certainly far from his conscious intention) was a world in which no one knew the meaning of life any more, an age of nihilism. It is noteworthy that Nietzsche, in seeking to describe the 'death of God' and the consequent meaninglessness he takes to characterise the modern age, takes his metaphor from Galileo's astronomy:

## The Forms

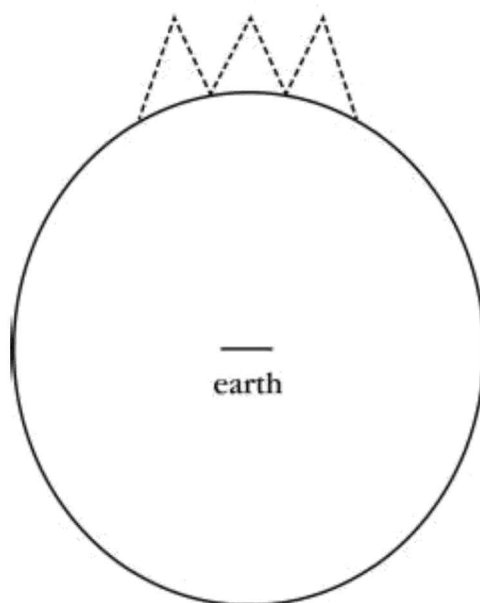


Figure 2.1

## God/heaven

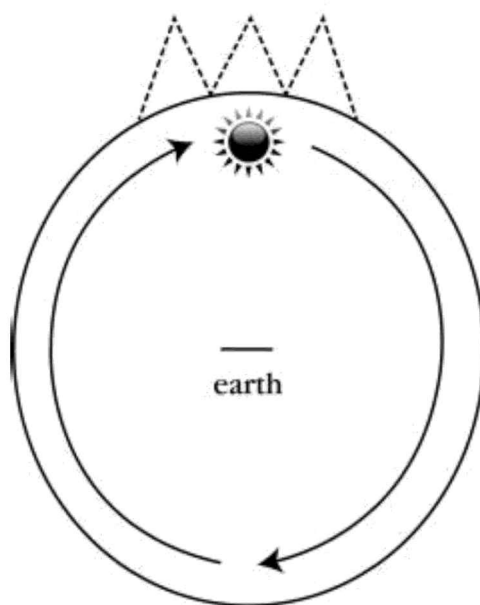


Figure 2.2

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. 'Whither is God?' he cried; 'I will tell you. *We have killed him* – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth<sup>1</sup> from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up and down? Are we not straying through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? ...

(GS 125)

The Catholic Church continued to persecute defenders of Galileo's heliocentric view well into the seventeenth century. But it was fighting a losing battle. In 1619 Johannes Kepler published his laws describing the motions of the planets – including the earth – around the sun, and in 1687 Isaac Newton (1642–1727) published his laws of motion, which explained why Kepler's laws were true. By the end of the century books of popular science<sup>2</sup> were presenting the heliocentric theory as established fact with the result that belief in the geocentric view was no longer an option for educated people. And so it became inevitable that the question of the meaning of life should re-emerge as an *issue*, as something needing to be newly thought out and answered in a new way.

The first of the great – of the really great – post-medieval philosophers to respond to this challenge was Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant's single greatest work is the *Critique of Pure Reason* which appeared in 1781, but he wrote two further 'Critiques', the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and the *Critique of Judgment* (1790). (There is nothing at all to say about Kant's life save that he spent all of it in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), where he was born, became professor at the university, wrote, never married, and died. So regular – so Newtonian, one might say – were his habits that the citizens of Königsberg are said to have corrected their clocks as he passed by on his afternoon walks.)

Kant saw that the old, Platonic-Christian, true-world story had become problematic, that its power to convince was waning. In general, it seems to me, there are two possible strategies one may adopt in the face of the crumbling of a previously dominant ideology. On the one hand there is the *radical* response: to abolish the old ideology and put something entirely different in its place. On the other, there is the *conservative* response: to retain the old ideology but reform it in such a way that it continues to be capable of commanding belief and commitment in the current circumstances. The important thing to know about Kant is that he adopted this second strategy, that he was a reformer rather than a revolutionary. With respect to the question of the meaning of life, with respect, that is, to the question of what to do about Christianity, Kant was a reforming conservative.

## The problem of science

In what way, first of all, did Kant see the traditional, meaning-giving story as

having become problematic?

The fundamental fact about Kant's philosophy is that it was a response to the eighteenth-century 'Enlightenment' which Kant saw breaking out all around him. The basic character of the Enlightenment was a tremendous optimism about the power of human reason. No longer was knowledge, as it had been in the Middle Ages, God's dispensation, the product of divine revelation in the holy scriptures and writings of the Church fathers. Rather, it was humanity's own achievement, the product of human reasoning based on careful observation of the visible world. Eighteenth-century thinkers were led to this new optimism and self-confidence by, above all, the power of the new natural science worked out in the previous century, in part by Galileo, but above all by Newton. To many of them it seemed that the new science, the new physics, had, in principle, the power to describe, explain and predict absolutely everything: that natural science had been brought to a conclusion by Newton.

What did the new science say? In brief, that the cosmos is nothing but molecules in motion, a giant piece of molecular clockwork that works, precisely, exceptionlessly and eternally, in accordance with Newton's laws.

Given this outlook, nature ceases to be a place of surprise or mystery. There is no room left for miracles, for divine intervention in the world. (Perhaps someone is needed to wind the clock up in the first place, but given that it is in perfect working order and never needs repairing, the divine clockmaker is not someone about whom we ever really need to think.) The same is true of the immortal soul. If my body is a bunch of molecules completely governed by the inexorable laws of physics, then my soul, even if it exists, is powerless to intervene in the workings of the world. Like God, it becomes, at best, an irrelevant *spectator* of those workings.

Under the impact of modern science, then, God and the soul fade into insignificance. Pretty soon, indeed, the thought presents itself that they *don't really exist at all*. Looked at in the harsh light of scientific reason, that is to say, the thought becomes ever more insistent that Plato's second world, the supernatural, immaterial, transcendent world is nothing but a myth, a primitive, pre-scientific superstition.

\* \* \*

Kant was a rationalist – he saw himself as belonging to the Enlightenment – but also, as I have said, a conservative. He was a man with one foot in the rationalist present – the 'Age of Reason' – and one foot in the medieval past, the 'Age of Faith'. As a member of the Enlightenment he was tremendously impressed by, and proud of, the achievements of the new science, but as a religious conservative (his upbringing was that of Pietism, a Quaker-like version of German Lutheranism) he was concerned to retain the traditional Christian story, and to protect it from the threat posed by the new science, the threat of 'materialism, fatalism [and] atheism', 'isms' which are 'universally injurious' to human life (CPR Bxxxiv). (He includes 'fatalism' because, if we are completely governed by Newton's laws, then 'free will' is a fiction.)

## How to believe in science and in God

The essence of Kant's strategy for retaining both traditional Christianity and

modern science consists in establishing four propositions.

His first proposition says that nature, the world of things in space and time, is not 'real' but rather 'ideal'. (This technical term 'ideal' is potentially misleading. It is best thought of in connection not with 'perfect' but rather with 'idea'.) The world of shoes and ships, cabbages and kings – and the world, too, of quarks, electrons and black holes – is indeed, as the Enlightenment claims, completely fathomed by natural science. Yet, in the final analysis, this world is not reality itself but merely an 'appearance' of it, in the final analysis, a fiction unconsciously constructed by the human mind. Space, time and thingness (*our* kind of space, time and thingness, at least) are not really 'out there' in reality at all, but are, rather, mere 'forms of experience', filters through which the mind feeds all the input it receives from external reality. (Naturally, the *Critique of Pure Reason* offers many detailed and complex *arguments* for this claim. In the 'Aesthetic', Kant argues that only the 'ideality' of nature can explain our knowledge of mathematics; in the 'Analytic', that it alone can explain our knowledge of physics. In the 'Dialectic', he argues that insoluble 'antinomies' arise if we suppose space and time to exist independently of us: we can prove that the world has always existed, but also that it had a beginning in time, we can prove that space is infinite, but also that it is finite. The ideality of space and time is, he claims, the only escape from these and other contradictions. Here, however, we are concerned only with Kant's *conclusion*.)

Imagine you are wearing green-tinted sunglasses, which you cannot remove since they are glued onto your head with extra-tough glue. (This analogy is a cliché – Schopenhauer was already apologising for using it to elucidate Kant in the 1820s. But it is useful.) If you are wearing such glasses, then all the things you see are green, even though, in reality, only some, and perhaps none, of them are. Analogously, Kant argues that we all wear spatialising, temporalising and thing-ising filters 'hardwired' (to change the metaphor) into the computer that is our mind.

Kant's second proposition is that reality – the 'thing in itself' – is *absolutely unknowable*, by the human mind. To know what the world is *really* like – what it is like 'in itself' – one would have to be able to take the glasses off. But that we cannot do: they are irremovable, stuck on, as it were, with metaphysical glue. We can, in other words, never step outside the structure of our minds, never pierce the veil it interposes between us and the world. So reality itself is unknowable by us.

Kant's third proposition is that because we can have no *knowledge* of reality itself, it can *therefore* remain for us an object of *faith*, faith that it has the character attributed to it by traditional Christianity. 'I have', he writes, 'found it necessary to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*' (CPR Bxxx). This discloses the strategic bearing of his distinction between appearance and reality on the threat to the traditional meaning-of-life story posed by modern science. Science, for Kant, is omniscient, all-knowing. Everything about nature is the way science says it is. In the final analysis, however, nature is mere appearance. Beyond (or better, perhaps, 'behind') it is another world, the supra-natural, ultimately real domain of the 'thing in itself'. Concerning this, science can say nothing at all. It cannot, therefore, challenge the claims of religion, and hence



traditional religious belief remains for us an option. We cannot, of course, *know* that God and the immortal soul exist any more than science can know that they do not, but we can have *faith* that they do, a faith science is powerless to challenge.

## The moral argument for God

Kant's final proposition is that religious faith is not merely something we *can* have but is rather something which, as moral beings, we *must* have. The final, and so what he must take to be the best of his several attempts to formulate this argument, occurs in section 87 of his *Critique of Judgment*,<sup>3</sup> which is entitled 'On the Moral Proof of the Existence of God'. (The title is somewhat misleading since the argument attempts to prove, not that God exists, but rather that it is necessary for us to *believe* that he does.) The argument proceeds in the following steps.

- (1) The 'final purpose' of morality, the 'highest good', is '*man* (every rational being of the world) *under moral laws*' combined with his enjoying complete 'happiness'. The final purpose of morality is happiness combined with 'worthiness to be happy'.

Morality is an institution that we pass down from generation to generation. What, Kant asks, is its ultimate point? It is, he claims, a utopia in which *everyone* then alive is completely good.<sup>4</sup> (In a similar manner, one might ask what the final purpose of the institution of medicine is, to which the answer would be a race of human beings all of whom are completely healthy.) As history progresses, moral people try to improve the morality of their fellow human beings – by educating their children, by helping to remove the conditions, poverty and ignorance, that breed wickedness. The final goal of this process is a race of human beings *all* of whom are completely good. But, says Kant, the 'subjective condition' under which alone 'man ... can set a final purpose before himself ... is happiness'. We human beings, at least, cannot see the point of, cannot have, a goal unless it somehow contributes to human well-being, to 'happiness'. Hence, the final goal of morality is complete virtue *combined with* complete happiness.<sup>5</sup> But, Kant now argues,

- (2) If there are only 'natural causes' at work in the world there is no reason to believe that the highest good will ever come into being.

Not only is there a great deal of 'deceit, violence and envy' around, there is also no obvious evidence of a reliable correlation between happiness and 'worthiness to be happy'. The 'righteous' man is as likely to be afflicted by 'disease, want and untimely death' as anyone else. And so, if we are to remain committed to morality,

- (3) We must 'assume' 'a moral world cause (an author of the world) ...that is, a God'.

How would this help? Kant's primary problem is not, I think, the injustice of the world. It is rather that, from a moral point of view, unless we assume the existence of God, the world is *chaotic*, lacks what he calls a 'moral teleology'. From a purely secular point of view the world – history – is, he says, 'purposeless chaos'. If the only kind of causation at work is natural causation then, in our efforts to promote the twin goods of virtue and happiness, we may expect 'here and there a contingent accordance' between our aims and the way the world is, but 'can never expect a regular harmony according to constant rules'. If, however, we have faith that beneath the patternless surface of history there is a 'moral cause' at work (in the language of Kant's contemporary, Adam Smith, a 'hidden hand'), then we may, and indeed must, suppose that, although we ourselves can see it at best through a glass darkly, there is in fact a pattern to world history, that it is in reality progressing towards the highest good.

But suppose we refuse, or find ourselves unable, to 'assume' the existence of God? Morality, Kant holds, is simply rationality. If I do something that causes you pain, and is hence something I would not want you to do to me, then, since we are in relevant respects the same – we can both feel pain – I am being inconsistent, *logically* inconsistent, irrational, in that I am treating things that are the same as different. Now because we are rational beings (because that is our essential nature), and because morality *is* rationality, we want to follow the 'moral laws'. We cannot escape the force of, 'inner determination [*innere Bestimmung*]' by, the moral 'ought'. But now consider the virtuous atheist, 'say Spinoza'. (Kant picks on Spinoza (1632–77) because, while the Dutch-Jewish lens-grinder was known to be a fine human being, he rejected Christian theism, defending in its place a form of pantheism. Kant was deeply worried by the fact that, towards the end of his life, Spinozian pantheism was beginning to replace Christian theism among the younger generation of German philosophers.)

On the one hand Spinoza cannot but feel committed to the moral enterprise and would experience 'self-contempt' if he abandoned his commitment. On the other hand, however, he must believe that the goal of the enterprise is 'impossible', and so must finally abandon his moral efforts as futile. And so he is condemned to self-contempt, to self-hatred. Kant does not make this explicit, but the real conclusion of his argument is this:

(4) The atheist is in despair.

## Criticism

Kant's response to the existential predicament of his times was the product of spiritual seriousness and intellectual genius of the highest order. No subsequent philosopher has been able to ignore him. Arguments between philosophers about ultimate things have an uncanny knack of resolving themselves, sooner or later, into different interpretations of Kant. There are, however, two problematic features of his version of Plato's 'true-world' metaphysics which, for our purposes, it is important to notice.

The first is that Kant's version of Platonism betrays a certain *lack of confidence*. (Kant himself, it appears, abandoned the practice of church attendance in which he had been brought up.) For the medievals, the Christian

heaven was not a problem. You could, after all, *see* it, at night, shining down through the holes in the ‘rim of the heavens’ – what we call the stars. (You could also *see* the circular path of the sun – its rising and setting – as it rotates about the earth. In persecuting Galileo, the Inquisition had not only religious dogma but also ‘common sense’ on its side.) By the time we get to Kant, however, the Platonic world has become ‘unknowable’. The confidence of *knowledge* has given way to the hesitancy of mere *belief*. In a section of *Twilight of the Idols* entitled ‘How the “True World” finally became a Fable’, Nietzsche notes that Plato’s ‘sun’ (the sun that shines outside the cave (p. 4 above)), though shining brightly in medieval Christianity, has, by the time we get to Kant, come to be ‘seen through mist and skepticism’, has come to be ‘elusive, pale, Nordic, Königsbergian’ (TI IV). With Kant, the transcendent, supernatural world takes on a distinctly faded quality – like a much-loved pair of jeans that have been through the wash once too often even by the standards of fashion.

The second thing to notice about Kant’s attempted rescue of Christianity is that it is open to the following objection. If the world ‘in itself’, ultimate reality, is, in truth, unknowable, then we can, surely, make *various* guesses – have various ‘faiths’ about – its true character. Why, then, should we prefer the Christian guess to that of rival (religious or a-religious) candidates? (One rival candidate, as we will see when we come to Schopenhauer in Chapter 4, is that ultimate reality is not divine but demonic.) Kant, of course, answers: because we cannot help believing in morality, and morality doesn’t make sense without the Christian God.

But could we not turn matters the other way round and say: we do not know there to be a God so our moral commitments are nothing but old, culturally inherited habits we should do our very best (e.g. through psychotherapy or ‘deconstruction’)<sup>6</sup> to get rid of? If God is ‘dead’, are not all things permitted?

Kant’s response to this is that we cannot escape the moral ‘ought’, because we are rational beings and morality is simply an aspect of rationality. But this is a mistake. Kant thinks that if I say ‘don’t do that it’s hurting me’ and expect you to stop, then if you say ‘don’t do that it’s hurting me’, to be consistent, I have to accept that as a reason for stopping what I’m doing to you. But that means I have to treat others as I treat myself, that is, I have to be impartial, in other words, moral.

But suppose I say ‘Don’t do that it’s hurting me and I’m a white person.’ And suppose you are black. Then I can say ‘Sure, logically, if you were a white person I’d have to accept I have a reason to stop hurting you. But you are not. You are black so I’m going to carry on hurting you.’ This, clearly, is highly immoral. But there is no *logical* inconsistency in the position of the racist. Kant’s mistake is to confuse impartiality with consistency, ethical inconsistency with logical inconsistency.

## Notes

- 1 One might be tempted to read Nietzsche’s ‘unchaining’ metaphor as representing the pre-Galilean earth as anchored to the sun. But that, since it represents precisely the heliocentric view, would turn the passage into historical nonsense. To understand the passage, think of a medieval knight’s ball and chain. The pre-Galilean sun rotated around the fixed point of the earth as the ball on the chain rotates around the fixed point of the knight.

- 2 Such, for example, as Bernard de Fontenelle's *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* which appeared in 1686 and received its first English translation in 1687.
- 3 Kant 1951.
- 4 One might ask why the final end of morality should not be just to make the world less bad than it would have been without it, why the institution of morality has to be essentially utopian, but I shall not pursue this criticism.
- 5 Note that, since human wickedness is by no means the only source of human unhappiness, Kant must include, here, all that contributes to human well-being, all of art, science and technology, as aspects of this final goal of morality.
- 6 On 'deconstruction' see further Chapter 16 below.

### 3 Kierkegaard

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) was born in Copenhagen. He was the son of a wealthy, but melancholic, businessman. Raised in long, sunless winters and a dour, brooding Lutheranism, Kierkegaard inherited his father's depressive condition. Rather than reducing him to apathy, however, melancholy provided him with a rich, introspective store of material for his philosophical and theological writings. Two traumatic events defined his life. The first was his engagement to Regina Olsen in 1840 which, for uncertain reasons, he regretted almost as soon as his proposal had been accepted. The following year he broke off the engagement, choosing thereafter a life of chastity. The second trauma involved a satirical magazine, the *Corsair*. A vitriolic exchange between Kierkegaard and one of his literary critics in 1846 resulted in his being systematically lampooned by the magazine and turned into a figure of public derision. As a result he abandoned his plans to become a Lutheran pastor and for the remainder of his short life lived as a recluse, albeit a recluse whose inherited wealth allowed him a certain degree of luxury.

The foundation of Kierkegaard's thought is Christianity. The fundamental claim made in his philosophical writings (he also wrote 'upbuilding' works of a purely theological character) is that only if one believes – fully and passionately – in the God of traditional Christianity can one's life be meaningful, and so worth living.

Kierkegaard is thus, like Kant half a century earlier, a conservative with respect to the meaning of life. But, also like Kant, he has enough respect for Enlightenment thinking to know that there is no *proof* of the existence of God, that religious belief takes us beyond the domain of scientific reason. He wishes to show, however, that no matter how 'paradoxical' and even 'absurd' Christian faith may appear from the point of view of reason, the 'leap' that takes us beyond *knowledge* and to *faith* is one we *must* make if our lives are to have meaning. Kant's mode of philosophising is dry and academic whereas Kierkegaard's is 'existential' and literary. In these two, very important, ways, however, he is a Kantian.

Kierkegaard's entire philosophy is really a single argument on behalf of the 'leap'. This argument is not directed against explicit atheists, who were few and far between in nineteenth-century Denmark. Most people in his society, he observes, call themselves Christians and pride themselves on regular church attendance. Yet really they are atheists, for their professed faith amounts to no more than socially useful lip service, their Christian 'beliefs' carefully modulated so as to be incapable of challenging their comfortable, worldly desires. Against such hypocrisy, his aim, he says, is to show that it is 'difficult' to be a genuine

Christian (CUP: 495), that a life lived in imitation of Christ demands sacrifice, sacrifice perhaps as great as Christ's (or, as we shall see, Abraham's) own. Bourgeois Christianity is, in reality, no Christianity at all.

A further target of criticism is theological modernisation, the attempt to show that religious commitment requires one to believe nothing that is not endorsed by modern science. What Kierkegaard has in mind here is the attempt to interpret the Christian message as a kind of pantheistic spirituality requiring belief in nothing beyond the world of nature. (He appears to regard this attempt by philosophers and the fake Christianity of the bourgeoisie as natural, mutually supporting bedfellows.) He has in his sights, here, philosophers influenced by Spinoza, in particular Hegel (the topic of Chapter 7). He interprets Hegel, in my view correctly, as a kind of evolutionary pantheist for whom God and the world that is studied by science are really the same thing. The Christian message, however, we will find him insisting, must not be watered down in this manner. The 'contradiction' between the natural 'here' and the supernatural 'hereafter' is absolute and must not be disguised (CUP: 505). Concerning the content of authentic Christian belief, Kierkegaard is thus a traditionalist and literalist. One might even call him a Christian fundamentalist.

One further preliminary remark. Kierkegaard pens his philosophical works under various pseudonyms. Some of these pseudonymous authors articulate points of view that are not Kierkegaard's own. This is most obviously so in the first of his philosophical works, *Either/Or*, published in 1843. The author of Part I, 'A',<sup>1</sup> and to a lesser extent the author of Part II, 'B', defend views Kierkegaard himself clearly rejects. Rather than being, like the Socrates of the later Platonic dialogues, the author's mouthpiece, A and B resemble characters in a novel whose points of view we are intended to empathise with to a certain degree, yet not endorse. Mostly, however, the views of the pseudonymous authors are identical with, or at least very close to, Kierkegaard's own, the point of the pseudonymous conceits being more literary than philosophical. In the main, therefore, I shall ignore the conceits and speak of 'Kierkegaard' as the person whose views we are discussing.

\* \* \*

The underlying structure of Kierkegaard's thought is relatively simple. His fundamental question – the question that makes him, in one sense of the word, a self-declared 'existential[ist]' (CUP: 107–9) – is: how should I live? Sharing with Plato, Hegel and Freud the philosopher's fascination with tripartite divisions, he identifies three possible answers to the question, three basic (though internally subdivided) forms of life, or 'spheres of existence', as he calls them, between which one can choose: the 'aesthetic' (roughly, doing whatever you want), the 'ethical' and the 'religious'. These styles of living, Kierkegaard states, are not mutually exclusive. While the 'aesthete' (my word for one who leads the 'aesthetic' life, not Kierkegaard's) seeks to exclude both the ethical and the religious from his life, it is possible for the ethical life to include the aesthetic and for the religious to include both the aesthetic and the ethical. Kierkegaard often associates the 'aesthetic' with childishness and the religious with full maturity, so one way of looking at the three-stage sequence is to regard it as an account of growth from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity, a spiritual *Bildungsroman*. From our point of view, however, what is really important is Kierkegaard's claim

that only insofar as one progresses to the end of the sequence does one's life become genuinely meaningful. And since he also holds that without meaning we live in a state of more-or-less conscious 'despair', his claim is that without progressing to the religious our lives are not worth living. I shall discuss the three stages one by one.

## The aesthetic life

Kierkegaard's principal discussion of the 'aesthetic' lifestyle occurs in Part I of *Either/Or*, which, as noted, is purportedly written by 'A'. The word 'aesthetic' comes from the Greek *aisthesis* the root meaning of which is 'sensation'. It is in this sense of the word that the first section of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which discusses the pre-conceptual sensory material out of which the mind manufactures consciousness, is entitled 'The Transcendental Aesthetic'. In the eighteenth century, 'aesthetic' began to acquire a specific association with art, but here, too, the reference is to sensation: 'aesthetics' became the study of the (of course pleasurable) sensations we derive from art.

Kierkegaard's use of 'aesthetic' to describe the first of his spheres of existence naturally suggests that the lifestyle he is describing is one of hedonism, a life, that is, that aims at nothing but pleasure, pleasurable sensation. Many readers interpret him in this way and his use of the term suggests that he himself may, at least some of the time, have thought of the aesthetic life as the life of hedonism.<sup>2</sup> In fact, however, it is not so identical.<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard makes this point in the following passage:

Real enjoyment consists not in what one enjoys but in the idea. If I had at my service a submissive spirit who, when I asked for a glass of water, would bring me all the world's costliest wines deliciously blended in a goblet, I would dismiss him until he learned that the enjoyment consists not in what I enjoy but in getting my own way.

(EO I: 31)

The point, here, is that whereas the point of drinking a fine wine is the experience of a delicious sensation (Kierkegaard overstates his point by suggesting this is not a 'real' enjoyment) in the mouth and head, there is no corresponding sensation in the experience of power over others. More exactly, while there might be a pleasurable sensation resulting from the knowledge of one's power, that is not the aim of the hypothetical action Kierkegaard describes. The aim is simply the knowledge of one's power. Moreover, unless one desired power for its own sake it would not be possible to derive pleasure from knowledge of its possession.

What then is the aesthetic life? The best way to characterise it is as the life of unrestricted desire, the life of doing *whatever* one wants. In both the ethical and religious lives desire is constrained by ethical and religious considerations, but in the aesthetic life there are no such constraints.

## *Don Giovanni*

Since we have many types of desire there are obviously many versions of the aesthetic life. Kierkegaard chooses, however, to take as his paradigm of such a life a life given over to sexual desire. As we shall see, this is a somewhat problematic choice.

As the three spheres of existence are ranked into higher and lower, so there occurs a ranking into higher and lower within each sphere. Within the aesthetic the, as it were, entry-level version of sexual aestheticism is represented by Don Juan as portrayed in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, an opera which Kierkegaard appears to regard as, not merely the greatest opera, but as the greatest artwork of all time (EO I: 48).<sup>4</sup>

Don Giovanni is a serial seducer. There is nothing more to him than that. His only interest in life is seduction. And being a wealthy aristocrat he has the means to devote himself exclusively to his goal, and the means to be generally successful. (Under the guise of comedy Mozart is, in fact, making a protest against the abuse of social power by the aristocracy, but Kierkegaard has no interest in that.) In the famous 'Catalogue' aria the Don's long-suffering manservant, Leporello, lists his master's achievements:

My dear lady, this is a list  
Of the beauties my master has loved,  
A list which I have compiled.  
Observe, read along with me.  
In Italy, six hundred and forty;  
In Germany, two hundred and thirty-one;  
A hundred in France; in Turkey, ninety-one;  
In Spain alone one thousand and three

and so on and on for some considerable time.

What is supposed to be wrong with this entry-level version of the aesthetic life, with being an entry-level aesthete? Why do we need to progress, if not yet to the ethical life, at least to a more sophisticated form of the aesthetic? One might think that since every woman is reduced to a mere conquest – *veni vidi vici* (I came, I saw, I conquered) is as much the Don's motto as it is Caesar's (EO I: 81) – being the Don would soon become boring since the women would become indistinguishable and he would just be doing the same thing all the time (see, further, p. 193 below). But this is not Kierkegaard's criticism of Mozart's Don. Referring to the 'Catalogue' aria, Kierkegaard observes that the point of the ridiculously impossible number of 'one thousand and three' in Spain alone is not merely humour but is also designed to present the Don as something other than a real person. He is more like a force of nature, like the wind. And just as the wind never gets bored with blowing so, qua force of nature, the Don never gets bored with seduction (EO I: 92–93). What then is the problem with the Don?

As Kierkegaard sees it, I think, the opera itself tells us: in the end, to the sound of some very scary music, the Don goes, literally, to hell. If, that is, one were to attempt really to live like Mozart's Don one would find oneself in an early grave at the hands of furious fathers or husbands. At the very least, as the fate of Silvio Berlusconi (the former prime minister of Italy) or Dominic Strauss-Kahn (until a



2011 sex scandal, director of the International Monetary Fund and front runner to become the president of France) indicates, one runs a serious risk of losing family, position, income and reputation, of ending up an object of repulsion, ridicule and pity. That is why the nearest approach to Mozart's Don in real life would need to be, at the very least, extremely calculating, 'crafty' (EO I: 98).

Kierkegaard does not tell us directly what is wrong with the life of the cunning seducer. Instead, *Either/Or* moved from discussing Mozart to a seemingly unrelated discussion of tragedy, tragic drama (EO I: 137–64). The implication, however, is, I think, this. Even with the best calculations, the serial seducer is, like Strauss-Kahn (certainly no intellectual slouch) likely to end up a melancholy, tragic figure. (One can imagine Plato interjecting at this point that if you insist on nourishing, strengthening, the black horse it is liable to leap out at inappropriate moments and lead to trouble.) No matter how cunning, the seducer is still liable to appear in the divorce courts and tabloid press. Most seriously, with advancing age and infirmity, his success rate will become lower and lower, as will (even with chemical assistance) his own capacity to pursue his chosen way of life.

Kierkegaard assumes that what is true of the erotic life is true of aesthetic lifestyles in general. (I shall shortly return to this assumption.) From the fact that the life of even the cunning seducer is doomed to disappointment and despair he concludes that if any form of the aesthetic life is defensible it must be, not 'vulgar' and 'immediate' eroticism, but rather 'reflective' eroticism. This is the life that is described in 'The Seducer's Diary'. (The literary conceit, here – or rather the double conceit – is that the 'editor' of *Either/Or* has discovered the diary among A's papers and that, although he is unwilling to admit this, A is in fact its author.)

### 'The Seducer's Diary'

The seducer is 'Johannes' and his target is 'Cordelia'. (The allusion to Shakespeare's *King Lear* is perhaps intended to emphasise the innocence, naivety even, of his victim. It is also possible that Johannes is Kierkegaard himself and that, as John Updike has suggested, the diary as a whole is intended as an exposition of what Kierkegaard considered wrong in his attitude to Regina Olsen.) The seducer is given to 'mind games'. Secretly he learns all of Cordelia's likes and dislikes and presents himself as her ideal man, pretending, however, to be a confirmed bachelor. He even arranges for her to meet an inadequate rival by contrast with whom he will appear even more desirable in her eyes. His aim is to bring his relationship with Cordelia 'to a point where a girl has but one task for her freedom, to give herself, so that she feels her whole happiness is this, so that she practically begs for this devotedness and yet is free' (EO I: 342). It is in this *willingness* to surrender that the reflective seducer achieves his aim.

What exactly is the difference between the 'immediate' and the 'reflective' seducer? Let us return to the remark quoted earlier about enjoying the 'idea' of power over others as distinct from the taste of delicious wine (p. 28 above). What the reflective seducer enjoys is the 'idea', the knowledge, of his power over Cordelia, the knowledge that he *could* bed her *if he* so chose. Whether or not, very discretely, he actually does so is unimportant – probably he does not. But this aim is actually the Don's aim, too. He, too, is concerned with 'conquest'.

Hence the reflective seducer achieves the very same aim, the very same notch on his belt, as the crudely immediate seducer without, however, any of the attendant risks.

## Kierkegaard's critique of the aesthetic life

Reflective aestheticism is the best form of the aesthetic life but it is still, argues Kierkegaard, open to fundamental objections. Some of these objections are put in the form of A's self doubt, others in the form of B's criticisms of A that appear in Part II of *Either/Or*. (B turns out to be a 'Judge William' who is older, and presumably wiser, than A.)

One of A's implicit self-criticisms is that he cannot in fact escape the ethical. Although he tries to be moved by nothing but his own desire, he possesses, the Judge tells him, an ethical 'earnestness' (EO II: 204–6). And the author of 'The Seducer's Diary' – in other words, A – confesses that he 'has always had a certain respect for the ethical' causing him never to have made a false promise of marriage in the process of seduction (EO I: 367). (It is no doubt A's shame over the content of the diary – an ethical feeling – that makes him unwilling to own up to its authorship.) And despite himself, he admires a 'couple who are destined for each other' who have anchored themselves in the ethical 'permanence' of marriage (EO I: 359).

The suggestion, here, is that since the reflective aesthete cannot in fact escape the ethical the purely aesthetic life is impossible. But even if that is so (and the fact that Kierkegaard builds ethical self-criticism into A's character provides no argument that it is), A has an easy reply to the objection. The ethical, he can say, is the product of social conditioning. It is (as in Chapter 5 we shall see Freud arguing) nothing more than a 'superego' imposed on us by the society in which we live. True, it may intrude on the life of one who wishes to live amorally, but that just shows that the aesthete has a certain task of self-liberation – one he can perhaps fulfil by reading philosophy or undergoing psychoanalysis – in order to fully realise his ideal. Even if he cannot completely fulfil his ideal he may still find the aesthetic life preferable to either of the other two forms of life.

An equally ineffective criticism levelled by Judge William is that the aesthetic life lacks 'freedom' in the sense of autonomy or self-creation. While someone who lives the ethical life subjects all his desires to ethical critique the aesthete simply accepts his fundamental desires as given. Hence he fails to 'choose' himself since 'an aesthetic choice is no choice' at all (EO II: 166–67, 225–26). But this, surely, is just wrong. The aesthete *does* make a choice, the choice to do what he wants rather than having his wants manipulated, frustrated or manufactured for him by social pressure. It is true that Don Giovanni no more chooses to do what he does than the wind chooses to do what it does (p. 29 above), but the Don's life is that of a supra-human whereas what we are talking about is human life.

A further criticism the Judge frequently levels against the reflective aesthete is that he is full of melancholy, permanently 'depressed'. In assessing this claim it is important to distinguish two different kinds of depression. The first concerns the self-contradictory character of his life, the second its meaninglessness.

The reflective seducer retreats from the life of an actual seducer in order to avoid the suffering that will sooner or later be visited on the latter. But being an

actual seducer is what he really wants to do. So, in fact, Kierkegaard sometimes portrays him as admitting, the reflective seducer is *not* living the life he wants to live at all. Prudence has forced him into a second best kind of life. He is playing at life and love not living it (EO I: 334).

In assessing this criticism it is important to bear in mind that although Kierkegaard's discussion of the aesthetic life is focused almost entirely on sexuality (he seems to have the kind of horrified obsession with it that is often the consequence of a commitment to chastity), the conclusion that the reflective form is preferable to the immediate is supposed to be true of the aesthetic life *in general*, and is hence supposed to be true of all the other possible versions of such a life. It is supposed, therefore, to be true of, let us say, a life devoted to the enjoyment of food, wine, music, poetry, golf, philosophy or the sights and sounds of nature. These forms of life, however, are crucially different from the life of seduction in being unlikely to be confronted with social hostility and in being relatively immune to being disabled by age. There is, therefore, no suffering intrinsic to *these* versions of the 'immediately' aesthetic life and therefore no need for them to graduate to a 'reflective' stage. (I am not even sure that the idea of a reflective version of enjoying golf or philosophy makes much sense.) The need of the seducer so to graduate is, therefore, exceptional rather than typical of the aesthetic, and Kierkegaard's argument for a *general* need to graduate to the reflective, and so miss out on the life one *really* wants to live, a failure.

The second form of the 'depression' critique, the claim that the aesthete (of whatever stripe) is depressed since he cannot satisfy the fundamental human need for meaning (EO II: 179, 204), seems to me, however, much more powerful. Initially, this criticism seems implausible since at least the reflective aesthete is explicitly said to have a guiding 'idea' of himself which he tries to live by. Kierkegaard's point, however (one that emerges most clearly in *Sickness unto Death*, written six years after *Either/Or*), is that although the reflective aesthete has an ideal of himself it is not one that can genuinely *grip* him. And this means that, in reality, he is merely 'experimenting' with that ideal, that his life lacks 'seriousness'. Lacking genuine commitment to his ideal he is depressed by the futility of his existence (SUD: 110–12; CUP: 495).

To grasp Kierkegaard's point consider an aesthete who, rather than being guided by an erotic self-conception, is devoted to art connoisseurship. What this aesthete desires is not sexual conquest but rather the acquisition of artworks. One might think, here, of the Fricks, Mellons or Lehmans who built up vast art collections in the early twentieth century. Compare such a collector with, let us say, a doctor fighting malaria in Africa, or a good cop fighting crime in the Chicago projects. What motivates such people to live lives of discomfort and danger? At least in many cases it is the experience of a 'calling' or 'mission'. They feel that, whatever the cost, what they do they 'must' do. These, I think, are lives of what Kierkegaard calls 'seriousness', total commitment. (His own life of recalling his contemporaries to true Christianity he would also offer, surely, as a life of 'seriousness'.)

The billionaire art collector may sometimes have a sense of mission. In many cases, however – and these are the only ones that are relevant here – he knows in his heart of hearts that his chosen form of life is really just a matter of doing

*something* with his money, of filling in time. Although he does have to fill in time he does not *have* to do it by collecting art. Even if he has invested a great deal of energy in the pastime (a pregnant word), he is still merely ‘experimenting’ with art collecting, for he knows that if he gets bored he can and will do something else – collect vintage cars or attractive young women, perhaps. And so, at bottom, the collector knows that his life is empty, meaningless. He knows that the world would have been no poorer had he never been born.

And this, says Kierkegaard, introducing one of his key words, means that deep down the aesthete is in a state of ‘despair’. There is, however, he holds, something potentially ‘propitious’ in this despair (EO II: 209). For if one faces up thoughtfully to one’s despair then one comes to see that personal choice alone cannot provide the basis of a truly meaningful life. One sees, that is, that genuine meaning needs to be based on something beyond the self, some kind of external ‘power’ or authority (SUD: 11). Meaning according to Kierkegaard – this, in my view, is a correct and profound insight – is a ‘calling’. And, as with telephones, if I am to receive a call something other than me must do the calling. Meaning can only be grounded in something other, and higher, than the self. It is in the quest for this grounding authority that Kierkegaard now turns to the ethical.

## The ethical life

As A’s defence of the aesthetic in Part I of *Either/Or* focuses on the erotic, so Judge William’s defence of the ethical in Part II focuses on marriage, which he claims to be not the cancellation but rather the ‘transfiguration’ (EO II: 31), the ethical ‘metamorphosis’ (EO II: 57, 190), of the erotic. The claim that marriage annihilates the joy of first love is, he says, mistaken. If one works at it one can preserve the freshness of ‘first love’ throughout a marriage (EO II: 47). (One of the Judge’s arguments for preferring the ethical to the aesthetic is thus that one does not lose the erotic in the ethical life of marriage but rather adds some additional benefits to it. While this is certainly true of *love*, it is surely false of what A was talking about, the different phenomenon of sexual excitement. Kierkegaard’s (possibly total) lack of personal experience in the field of sexuality appears, here, as a philosophical disadvantage.)

Why is the move from seduction to marriage a move from the aesthetic to the ethical? To choose the ethical form of life is, Kierkegaard tells us, to choose to make ‘good’ and ‘evil’ the governing categories of one’s life, ‘the qualification under which one views all existence’ (EO II: 169). And so marriage is a particular application of the ethical. In contrast to both the immediate and the reflective seducer, in committing oneself to a marriage one commits to doing good and avoiding evil with respect to one’s spouse.

Why is the ethical life superior to the aesthetic? Because, Judge William claims, the ethical gives genuine meaning to one’s life. Whereas the aesthete merely has ‘possibilities’ with which he ‘experiments’, the ethicist experiences the authority of – as Kant called it, the ‘inner determination’ by (p. 22 above) – the moral ‘ought’. He possesses a genuine ‘calling’, a mission. He has an ideal of himself to which he knows he *must* live up. He may well, of course, fall short of his ideal but if he does he experiences ‘guilt’ (EO II: 217), something entirely absent from the aesthetic life. This gives his life the ‘seriousness’ the aesthete lacks, provides it

with genuine meaning.

The idea of 'the ethical' as one's ultimate goal sounds, initially, so abstract as to be almost vacuous. 'Be good!' is more like a way of saying 'Goodbye' than a satisfactory answer to the question 'how should I live?' How, then, *is* 'the ethical' supposed to give one one's life-defining task?

Kierkegaard emphasises that in choosing an ethical ideal for oneself one chooses oneself in one's 'concretion' (EO II: 222, 251). What this means, I think, is that the kind of specific life one chooses is determined by the combination of the demands of morality with one's specific life circumstances, the nature of the world one inhabits and one's own strengths and weaknesses (one's 'facticity' we will find both Heidegger and Sartre calling it). If, for example, one has exceptional talent as a painter then one will find a way of promoting the good through painting. (One might, for example, like Diego Riviera, paint for the socialist revolution or like Goya against the horrors of war.) One does not, however, Kierkegaard emphasises, need an exceptional talent to live an ethically meaningful life. Whether they hear it or not, everyone has a 'calling', even if it is only to marry and produce happy children (EO II: 292).

Since, as we know, Kierkegaard wants to draw a radical distinction between the ethical and religious it comes as a surprise to learn that Judge William is not an atheist but rather assigns to God an important role in the ethical life. In choosing the ethical, he says, one 'finds oneself in God', which means that 'guilt' over one's ethical shortcomings is also 'repentance', repentance that one has failed to live according to God's will (EO II: 214–16). Hence, he observes, to answer one's ethical calling is to choose to 'assist God' in realising his plan for the world (EO II: 250). Judge William, then, appears to fully endorse God as the foundation of the ethical life. Given this, we shall have to look rather hard to find what it is that distinguishes the religious from the ethical, an issue to which I now turn.

## The religious life

How does the religious life differ from the ethical? One crucial point to recall in attempting to find an answer is that each of the three spheres of existence *incorporates* its predecessor. So just as the ethical incorporates the aesthetic in a 'transfigured' (EO II: 31) form, so the religious incorporates the ethical (and therefore the aesthetic), also in a 'transfigured' form.

What, then, is the difference between the religious and the ethical? The principal work in which Kierkegaard argues that the religious life is a distinct and higher form of existence than the ethical is *Fear and Trembling*, which was written in the same year as *Either/Or* and appears to be intended as a completion of the argument of its predecessor. The focus of the argument is the biblical story (in Genesis 22:1–19) of Abraham, who was called upon by God to sacrifice his only son Isaac as, in Kierkegaard's words, a 'proof of his faith' (FT: 60). At the very last moment, as Abraham's obedient knife is raised to kill the most precious thing in his life, an angel appears telling him to substitute a ram for the boy.

Kierkegaard (via his pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio) argues that 'we' admire Abraham, this exemplary 'knight of faith', as a great soul who performed a 'great' act. He seems, indeed, to claim Abraham as 'the greatest of

all' the heroes history presents us with (FT: 16, 53). The crucial point, however, is that Abraham is not an *ethical* hero. Although he feels the force of the ethical as much as anyone, and hence experiences great 'anxiety' given that what God has commanded him to do seems, from the ethical point of view, to be *murder*, his greatness consists precisely in resisting the 'temptation' (FT: 60) to allow the ethical to determine his act (FT: 30, 53). It follows that we must recognise a new 'category' for describing the highest form of human existence, namely, 'the religious'. (One might at this point wish to strenuously object that 'we' no more admire Abraham than we admire the suicide bomber, but at this stage in his argument, I think, Kierkegaard takes the 'we' to refer only to committed Christians, those who regard the Bible as a source of infallible truth. Later on he will provide an independent argument that non-Christians need to join the Christian 'we' so that they, too, need to recognise the religious as the highest 'sphere of existence'.)

## The suspension of the ethical

Kierkegaard describes Abraham's readiness to kill his son as the 'teleological suspension of the ethical'. To understand the difference between the religious and the ethical life forms we need to understand this phrase. To do so we need to understand (a) the 'telos', the end or goal in favour of which the 'suspension' occurs, and (b) what exactly it is that is 'suspended'.

The telos in question is 'duty', Abraham's duty to obey God's will (FT: 60). Kierkegaard tells us what it is that is suspended by contrasting Abraham with the tragic hero, Agamemnon. As the myth is told in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (FT: 87), Agamemnon confronts, like Abraham, the demand to sacrifice a dearly beloved child. If he refuses to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, to the goddess Artemis she will not restore the wind necessary to sail his fleet on to Troy. And if the already restive army stays becalmed much longer it will mutiny and overthrow the Mycenaean state. In great agony Agamemnon performs the sacrifice.

According to Kierkegaard, Agamemnon is an ethical as well as tragic hero. From the ethical point of view he is an exemplary figure. Faced with two conflicting ethical obligations, familial duty versus the good of the nation (the first supported by intense personal feeling), he does the right thing in acting for the good of the nation as a whole (FT: 57–59). This is why, although superficially similar, Agamemnon is a very different figure from Abraham. Whereas the latter 'suspends' the ethical, the former 'is still within the ethical' (FT: 59). Agamemnon remains within the ethical because he can *explain and justify* his action in ethical terms (FT: 57) (and so lead us to withdraw the description 'murder' and replace it with something like 'tragic but justified homicide'). Abraham, on the other hand, because he has made 'the leap' to faith,<sup>5</sup> has transcended the realm of 'human calculation'. He can neither explain nor justify himself, even to his wife, Sarah. He is condemned to a silent and appalling solitude (FR: 112–13).

Exactly what, then, is it that is 'suspended', put, at least temporarily, out of action? Contrary to appearances, it cannot be 'the ethical' as such – seeking to do good and avoid evil – because, remember, the religious life *incorporates* the ethical. Rather, it seems to be the necessity of being able to give reasons for one's

actions, the necessity of ethical self-justification. From the point of view of someone who lives the (merely) ethical life, the ability to give reasons for one's actions is necessary to its being a morally good action. If one cannot justify a proposed action it is morally wrong to perform it. For the 'knight of faith', on the other hand, this is not so. Although it is, no doubt, generally required that one find moral justification for a proposed action, in the exceptional and extraordinary event that God speaks to one directly the requirement is 'suspended'.

But how could Abraham's proposed slaughter of his innocent son *possibly* incorporate the ethical, the requirement that one seek to perform good and avoid evil? Kierkegaard finds the answer in Abraham's faith, his faith not merely that God exists but that *what he commands is always the good*. This faith is not merely faith in a post-mortem equalisation of this-worldly injustices, but is a faith

specifically for this life – faith that he would grow old in this country, be honoured among the people, blessed by posterity, and unforgettable in Isaac, the most precious thing in his life ... [Abraham] did not doubt; he believed the preposterous.

(FT: 20)

As Kierkegaard imagines him, then, Abraham believes that he will be 'unforgettable in Isaac'. He believes, in other words, that Isaac *will live on* – either because (as actually happened) God will stay his hand at the last moment or because, like Lazarus (whom Kierkegaard discusses in *Sickness unto Death*), Isaac will be restored to life. Abraham has complete confidence that, far from being remembered by his people as a madman and murderer, he will be 'honoured' as a hero. Thus, what Abraham, and 'religious' consciousness in general, suspends is *not* the demands made on us by the ethical, but rather the insistence that those demands be always open to, the products of, ethical reasoning. As William Cowper's famous hymn puts it,

God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform:  
... judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.

God knows best what is good for us. Of course, Abraham does not believe that God's ways are *always* 'mysterious'. Generally, revelation (as one might call it) and reason will agree with each other. But in the rare cases in which they do not, both Kierkegaard and the knight of faith agree, God's direct command takes precedence over reason.

This reveals what is, I believe, the fundamental point Kierkegaard wishes to make. From the religious (this is, *his*) point of view, he says, the duty to obey God's command is 'absolute'. But this does not 'invalidate' our normal conception of the ethical life. Rather, it reveals its true *ground*. That ground is

God's command (FT: 70). This means that Kierkegaard subscribes to what is sometimes called a 'divine command theory of ethics': the morally right thing to do is whatever – *whatever* – God commands. Nearly always it will be obvious to us why God commands what he does. He commands us, for instance, to love our neighbour and it is obvious to us that we should indeed love our neighbour (ibid.). But occasionally the reason for God's command will not be obvious. It remains, however, our duty to obey that command.

Up to this point I have assumed that 'suspension' (*suspension* in the Danish original, too) means 'cancellation' – as when a football team's right to play in a competition is cancelled on account of match-fixing. And I have suggested that in this sense it is not the ethical as such that Abraham suspends on account of his absolute duty to God but only the assumption that the ethically good is always accessible to human reason. That Kierkegaard subscribes to a divine command theory of ethics, however, reveals a second sense of 'suspension' in which what is suspended really is the ethical as such. In this sense, however, 'suspension' is not suspension *of* but rather suspension *from*. The ethical is suspended *from* the 'telos' of our duty to obey the divine will (and hence from the divine will itself) as a chandelier is suspended from a ceiling.

## The difference between the ethical and the religious

Judge William, recall, is no atheist, so how, we asked, are the ethical and religious spheres of existence to be distinguished from each other? We are now in a position to answer this question. Kierkegaard says that from the (merely) ethical point of view,

'God' is understood in a totally abstract sense [simply] as ... duty. The whole existence of the human race rounds itself off as a perfect self-contained sphere, and then the ethical is that which limits and fills at one and the same time. God becomes an invisible vanishing point, an impotent thought.

(FT: 68)

The issue, here, seems to me to be the one first raised in Plato's *Euthyphro*: which is primary, the ethical or the divine, which is the ground of the other? Is the good good because it is loved by God (Plato actually says 'the gods') or is God God because he loves the good? Kierkegaard and the knight of faith, we have seen, assert the former: God's command is what determines something as ethically good. The ethicist, on the other hand, asserts the latter. The ethical is supreme and 'limits' God in that he has his divine status *only in virtue of* being a perfect exemplar of the ethical. He thus becomes 'impotent', impotent to provide the grounding authority that imparts genuine 'seriousness' to the ethical. (This is why Kierkegaard says that if and when the ethicist says 'I love God' his statement is a mere 'tautology' (ibid.): since God is defined as the perfect embodiment of the ethical, if someone says, 'I as a committed ethicist love God' all he is really saying is 'I as a committed ethicist love the ethical.')

## Kierkegaard's critique of the ethical



Thus the difference between the (merely) ethical and the religious forms of life. But Kierkegaard, of course, wishes to argue more: that as a worthwhile life must advance from the aesthetic to the ethical so it must continue its progress and advance from the ethical to the religious. Kierkegaard's argument for this can be summed up, once again, in the one word, 'despair'. To live the merely ethical life is to be in a state of more or less explicitly acknowledged 'despair'.

Let us recapitulate what we already know about 'despair'. A life without meaning, it has been argued (pp. 32–3 above), a life without a 'task' or 'calling', without an ideal self one strives to live up to, is not worth living. A meaningful life is the task and process of self-perfection. With respect to a life-defining meaning there are two possibilities: either one sets it oneself or it is set for one by something other than oneself. If, however, one sets one's own meaning then, as we have seen, one is merely 'experimenting' with a life-meaning and lacks the 'seriousness' of genuine commitment. And so, in the absence of genuine commitment, one is in a condition of 'despair'. The ethicist thinks to overcome the despair that attaches to the merely aesthetic by ascending to the 'seriousness' of the ethical, to the compelling force of a command we feel we 'must' obey, an ethical task we 'must' fulfil. But, as we have seen, ethical commands are, in reality, divine commands. Indeed they *can only be* divine commands since a command without a commander makes no sense and only God possesses the authority to issue commands that override all the other considerations. An ethical 'calling' demands a caller and that caller can only be God.

Kierkegaard does not think that the ethicist is *wrong* in supposing that living up to an ethical ideal is what makes a life 'serious'. It is rather that he has failed to think through what it is that must constitute the seriousness of the ethical. Insofar as he fails to recognise that it can only come from God's grounding authority, seriousness has been 'stolen', Kierkegaard asserts, from the 'idea of God' (SUD: 110).

Are there not, however, people whose lives are of the utmost ethical seriousness but who (like Spinoza (p. 22 above)) sincerely call themselves atheists? (Judge William, of course, is not one of them, but since he makes God merely an exemplar and not a condition of there being such a thing as the ethical he seems to admit the possibility of an atheist ethicist.) Kierkegaard, I think, does not deny that this is possible. His view, however, is that such people are confused.<sup>6</sup> In denying God with their intellects they deny that which, in their lives of passionate action, they affirm. In the passionate 'seriousness' of their lives it is precisely God they affirm. They are 'in the truth' (CUP: 178) of Christianity whatever they may say in words.

## Overcoming the despair of weakness

God, then, God as a meaning-giver, is presupposed by a life that overcomes despair. But no sooner is the despair of meaninglessness overcome than another kind threatens, the 'despair ... of weakness' (SUD: 78). The essence of Kierkegaard's position, here, is the idea of a 'moral gap',<sup>7</sup> a gap between our actual and our ideal selves. This gap is definitive of what it is to be a human being: neither beasts nor angels have it (CA: 155). Kierkegaard sometimes deploys the religious notion of 'hereditary [i.e. original] sin' (CA: 25) to explain the

inevitability of the gap, but whether we are religious or not we all know that we sometimes fall short of our ideal of ourselves, and it seems plausible to regard this 'falling-shortness' as unique to and partially definitive of what it is to be a human being. (Nietzsche's Zarathustra does so, describing man as a 'rope' strung between himself and the 'superman'.) The spirit, as we say, is willing but the flesh is weak. Thus, claims Kierkegaard, we know that 'humanly speaking', 'salvation', living up to our ideal, is impossible, and this threatens us with deep and lasting self-contempt, with 'despair'. Yet we also know that for and with God 'all things are possible' (FT: 46). And so, once again, in order to be free of despair we need to believe in God. A life that overcomes despair presupposes belief in God not merely as the 'task'-setter but also as our guide and helper. As providence.

## God and immortality

Kierkegaard argues, then, that religious belief is a presupposition of the flourishing ethical life (as this is of a flourishing aesthetic life), that the ethical life collapses into both the despair of meaninglessness and the despair of weakness without at least implicit religious commitment. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* he backs up this argument for the necessity of ascent to the religious with a different kind of argument, one that appears to be independent of the question of the presuppositions of the meaningful life. This begins by emphasising that the 'knight of faith' is a knight of *faith*. He has – we have – no proof of God's existence, no 'certainty', so that religious belief (as Kant emphasises) is always a matter of faith rather than knowledge. Nonetheless, given that Christianity promises eternal happiness and given that we are all 'infinitely interested in eternal happiness' (CUP: 20) ('infinitely', here, seems to mean 'interested in a way that overrides all other interests') the problem is not whether, but rather 'how [to] ... participate in the happiness promised by Christianity' (CUP: 20).

It is surprising that Kierkegaard does not mention Blaise Pascal (1623– 62) at this juncture, since his argument bears a strong resemblance to Pascal's famous wager.<sup>8</sup> Pascal's argument, in a nutshell, is this: it is unknown whether God exists or not. Yet we cannot avoid the choice between committing to Christian belief and refusing so to commit. We are (in Kierkegaard's language) in an 'either/or' situation. Now the reward for adopting Christian belief and living a Christian life is (again in Kierkegaard's language) 'eternal happiness'. There is, perhaps, a small cost – giving up the pleasures of sin – but the potential reward is 'infinite'. On the other hand, the reward for not committing to Christ is very small and the cost infinitely great. Evidently therefore, commitment to Christianity is an offer we cannot refuse.

It might seem that since the knight of faith lives ethically because it is his duty to do God's will, it cannot also be the case that he lives an ethical life because he hopes, with Pascal, for personal reward. But this is not so. If he lives a genuinely religious life then it must be true that he *would have* followed God's will *even if* there had been no prospect of personal reward. But it is quite compatible with love of God being a sufficient motive for his ethical life that he finds in the prospect of eternal happiness an *additional* motive for such a life. And that it is

legitimate to hope for and seek this personal reward seems to be exactly what Kierkegaard says. 'I, Johannes Climacus,' he writes (Climacus being the nom de plume under which he writes *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*),<sup>9</sup>

assume that there awaits me a highest good, an eternal happiness, in the same sense that such a good awaits a servant girl or [even?] a professor. I have heard that Christianity proposes itself as a condition for the acquirement of this good, and now I ask how I may establish a proper relation to this doctrine. 'What extraordinary presumption', I seem to hear a thinker say, 'what egoistical vanity to dare to lay so much stress upon one's own petty self' ... But my conscience is quite clear in this matter; it is not I who have become so presumptuous of my own accord, but it is Christianity itself which compels me to ask the question in this manner. It puts quite an extraordinary emphasis upon my own petty self, and upon every other self however petty, in that it proposes to endow each self with an eternal happiness provided a proper relationship is established.

(CUP: 19)<sup>10</sup>

## Religiousness A versus religiousness B

One of the criticisms of Pascal first made by his contemporary Denis Diderot, is that since there are *many* religions *each* promising eternal bliss, even if one accepted the idea of the wager it does not follow that Christian belief is the right option to take. In spite of the fact that he never mentions Pascal, Kierkegaard produces, in effect, an at least partial response to this criticism in his discussion of what the right sort of faith is to which we should commit. The options he considers divide into what he calls 'religiousness A' and 'religiousness B'.

Religiousness A, which can, Kierkegaard says, exist in 'paganism', is, he in effect says, an existential version of the divinity postulated by 'speculative philosophy', by the Spinoza-influenced German idealists, and in particular, as we shall see, by Hegel. God, for religiousness A, is history. God is the world considered as a temporal totality perfecting itself through time. As such the world is divine. Religiousness A is a form of pantheism: 'God is [not] ... a something' but rather 'all, the infinitely all' (CUP: 498).

Kierkegaard describes religiousness A as an 'immanent' religiousness (CUP: 496). In doing so he has, I think, a number of related points in mind. First, it is not a metaphysical – not a meta-physical – outlook. For religiousness A there is nothing 'above' the world of nature, nothing outside of space and time. Like 'speculative philosophy', it 'resolves' the distinction between the 'here' and the 'hereafter' into the unity of an undivided 'pure being'. The 'here' becomes the present of the natural world and the 'hereafter' its future (we shall investigate this process of translation further at the beginning of Chapter 7), with the result that the 'eternal' and atemporal 'disappears' into the 'actual' and temporal (CUP: 505–6). Second, there is nothing 'paradoxical' about A, nothing that 'contradicts', offends human reason. For speculative philosophy, indeed, there is a perfect *coincidence* between religion and reason. Belonging to this naturalisation of religion is the treatment of traditional Christian theology as allegory or myth, myth that tells us a great deal about human nature and human desires but

nothing about reality. For religiousness A (here Kierkegaard quotes, without naming, one of the younger generation of Hegelians, Ludwig Feuerbach) 'all theology is anthropology' (CUP: 513).<sup>11</sup>

Religiousness B, on the other hand, is Christianity. Not a modernised – 'paganised' – watered down version, but the Christianity of traditional theology. Such Christianity is 'transcendent' in its insistence on an absolute, ontological distinction between the 'here' and the 'hereafter', the temporal and the eternal, on the eternal as 'at a definite place' (CUP: 506). Not only does religiousness B insist on the distinction between time and eternity, it insists on the 'paradox' and 'contradiction', on the fact that God became man, that the eternal entered the temporal as an individual man at a particular moment in history (CUP: 512).

Religiousness B is where Kierkegaard's story terminates. As the aesthetic must give way to the ethical and the ethical to the religious, so, if the religious finds its first expression in religiousness A, it, in turn, must give way to religiousness B. Why so? Why should we prefer B to A? Kierkegaard's argument is that religiousness A 'dissipates the concept *existence*' (CUP: 111), that, while it may satisfy professors, it cannot properly address the 'existential' concerns of real human beings with real human anxieties about good and evil, death and immortality. It cannot ground the distinction between good and evil – and so cannot ground an ethically 'serious' life – because to place divinity *in* the world means that everything is divine and immortality a 'mere prank' (CUP: 111, 509). The pantheist cannot recognise the existence of evil. (This seems a poor argument, at least as far as it concerns the pantheist who thinks of the divine as a process of unfolding. For all he is committed to is the claim that *in the long run* what is in itself evil will be seen to contribute to a greater good.) Second, religiousness A cannot do the job of offering personal immortality – the only kind it offers is 'self-annihilation', dissolution of the personal self into the totality of 'pure being'.<sup>12</sup>

Religiousness B, that is, traditional Christianity, on the other hand, is free of both these failings. In insisting on an absolute metaphysical distinction between the 'here' and the 'hereafter' it promises a genuinely *personal* immortality answering to our basic need. And in affirming a God who wills some things and not others it accounts for the distinction between good and evil, thereby providing the possibility of a task and meaning of life that is genuinely 'serious'.

## Criticism

I should like to conclude this chapter by raising six issues concerning Kierkegaard's philosophy as it lies, now, before us. The first concerns Abraham's 'absurdity', the second the despair of meaninglessness, the third the despair of weakness, the fourth the issue of immortality, and the fifth the 'leap' to faith. Finally, I should like to consider the 'health' of Kierkegaard's philosophy, whether it is the product of, and conducive to, a healthy state of mind.

Kierkegaard repeatedly calls Abraham a 'preposterous', 'paradoxical', 'absurd' figure. But since he also calls him 'sublime' (FT: 41) he evidently regards these epithets as expressions of praise. Of course he seems 'absurd' to us, but that is because he is, as Jacques Lacan explains the concept of the sublime, 'beyond the signifier',<sup>13</sup> beyond the grasp of our petty little minds and language. I, however,

would like to suggest that he is 'absurd' in a sense that implies no praise at all.

Abraham, we have seen, has absolute conviction that God wills only the good. Why does he have this conviction? One possibility might be that Jehovah is the god who has looked after his people, a people who have prospered, so that, although he cannot understand the command to kill his son, there is good reason to believe that all God's commands, including this one, are ultimately benevolent. But that cannot be the ground of his conviction, for then he could explain himself to Sarah. And so Abraham, as Kierkegaard conceives him, has no reason at all for killing Isaac other than that he has heard God telling him to do so. But how does he know that it really is God telling him and not his own diseased and hallucinating personality? How does he know that it is not a devil, either literal or metaphorical, whose voice he hears? Why does he not engage in Hamlet's reflection, on being told by what appears to be the ghost of his father that Claudius has murdered him, that 'the devil has the power to assume a pleasing face'? Abraham lacks Hamlet's good sense either because he does not realise that appearances can sometimes be deceptive, in which case he is absurdly stupid, or because he believes that he has an infallible capacity to distinguish between God's true voice and delusions of God's voice, in which case he is absurdly arrogant. Either way he is the opposite of an admirable figure.

My second criticism concerns the despair of meaninglessness. To find genuine meaning in life, Kierkegaard argues, one needs the ethical. But for the ethical to be genuinely authoritative, it needs to derive from a source other than one's own choice. For there to be an ethical law there needs to be a lawgiver, for there to be an ethical command there needs to be a 'commander'. And that commander can only be God. If God is 'dead' for one, all things are permitted, and hence meaningless. But this final step is, I believe, a step too far.

Kierkegaard's claim that a genuine meaning must be based on something other than one's own arbitrary choice represents, I believe, a crucial insight, the most important insight in his entire philosophy. But the history of philosophy has produced a number of rival 'authorities' in which philosophers have sought to ground the 'seriousness' of the ethical, the moral 'must'. According to Kant, as we have seen, the authority in which ethics is grounded is reason: to act immorally is to act irrationally, and rationality commands our immediate respect.<sup>14</sup> According to Hume it is the sentiment of benevolence intrinsic to human nature that grounds the ethical: I feel I *must* relieve your distress because it pains me to see you in it. Although I shall not further argue the point here, I do not believe that either of these attempts to establish a foundation for ethics is adequate. I actually *agree* with Kierkegaard that the ethical must be grounded in the religious. What I shall attempt to argue in this book's final chapter, however, is, in effect, that it is 'religiousness A', not 'religiousness B', that properly grounds the ethical. At this juncture, however, the only point I want to make is that since there are *many* candidates claiming to be the grounding authority of ethics, Kierkegaard's 'leap' to the Christian God as the only possible ground is a leap too far.

My third criticism concerns the despair of weakness. We need, Kierkegaard argues, an authoritative ethical ideal to give meaning to our lives. But because of our 'hereditary' – i.e. inborn and inescapable – sinfulness we will certainly fall short of that ideal unless we believe in the helping hand of a supernatural God

with whom 'all things are possible'. Without such belief we will lapse into self-hating 'despair' (p. 40 above).

Making sinfulness the source of the – without God – unconquerable moral gap is, however, at least unconsciously, a trick. That one is culpable for an action, or an entire way of life, that it is 'sinful', presupposes that action or mode of life is *freely* chosen. Yet that we must fall short of the Christian moral ideal of living in imitation of Christ is a matter of *logic*, not of culpable choices that we make. To live like Christ, a being who never experiences sexual desire and never kills another living being, we would have to be body-less. But we are not. And as natural, embodied, biological organisms we *must* experience sexual desire and *must* kill – we must kill to eat, must kill (ants, worms and micro-organisms) to take a single step along the pavement (sidewalk). What makes it *impossible* for us to live up to the Christian ideal is not anything we choose and are to blame for, but simply the fact that the ideal is constructed in such a way that it is impossible for any biological being to fulfil. (Notice that even with God's help we could not fulfil the ideal in this life. The ideal can only ever be realised in a disembodied – or miraculously bodied – afterlife.)

Kierkegaard is nonetheless, it seems to me, right about the necessity of the moral gap. Even if one's ideal is one that it is conceptually possible for natural beings to fulfil we will inevitably, I think, fall short. The reason for this lies in the nature of ideals. Ideals are pictures of the perfect functioning of that of which they are the ideal. And the fact is that human beings are simply not perfectly functioning beings. As an actual car can never match up to the ideal car – one that never needs repair – so human beings must from time to time suffer 'breakdowns'. Why, however, should this be a source of *despair*? Surely, since we know our ideals *are* ideals we know that we will fall short of them. Falling short may give rise to a moment of annoyance and perhaps even guilt, but in a healthy person that will be replaced – not by despair and abandonment of the attempt to live up to the ideal – but by the resolve to try harder in the future.

My fourth criticism concerns our supposed desire for personal immortality. Our desire for 'eternal happiness' is so overriding that we should accept Pascal's wager and commit ourselves to Christian belief. Kierkegaard may well be right that, at least for the run of humanity, the desire for personal immortality is of such overriding importance that it leads to fear of death as the worst evil that can befall us. That, however, does not make knowledge of personal immortality an ultimate human *need*. For it may be, as we shall see when we come to discuss Heidegger's early philosophy in Chapter 11, that it is in fact only because of our absolute finitude that our lives can be meaningful. It may be, that is, that in demanding personal immortality we are actually *mistaken* about our deepest needs. It may be, therefore, that the non-personal kind of immortality offered by religiousness A (by the idea that the one and only true 'self' is the totality of things) is all we should set our hearts upon.

A fifth criticism – one that applies not only to Kierkegaard but also to Kant and Pascal – concerns the notion of belief. Kierkegaard emphasises time after time that there is no 'objective' proof, no 'certainty', of God's existence.<sup>15</sup> And so if one is to acquire religious belief one needs to make the 'leap of faith'. In reality, of course, many people have no such need, for they have inherited such a belief

from their parents and have never doubted it. Implicitly therefore, when Kierkegaard argues for 'the leap' he is addressing those of us who have no current, Christian belief. It is they who must 'transcend' what one might call the 'ethics of rationality', the idea that one should have no beliefs other than those supported by evidence, by good reasons. They must transcend this restriction on belief and 'leap' into – decide for – religious belief. The problem with this, however, is that it is not at all clear that one can *decide* to believe something. Beliefs, that is, seem to be the sort of things that *are forced on* us – forced on us by *reasons*, by evidence. So-called beliefs that are decided upon would seem to be fake beliefs.

If this line of thought is correct what it suggests is that genuine religious belief *cannot* be of the 'paradoxical' kind, that one *cannot* genuinely have a belief while simultaneously asserting that there are, and can be, no adequate reasons for holding it. If this is correct then the acquisition of religious belief is something we can best work our way towards by discovering *reasons* that support it. In my judgement, Kierkegaard is absolutely correct: it is not possible to discover adequate reasons for believing in the doctrines of religiousness B. In my final chapter, however, I shall attempt to argue that there *are* adequate reasons for accepting the ideas of religiousness A.

My final criticism concerns, as I should like to put it, the 'health' and healthiness of Kierkegaard's philosophy. It is, I think, impossible to miss the fact that the fundamental mood of his philosophy is one of dark, Nordic gloom. Its key words are 'sin', 'anxiety', 'guilt' and 'despair' (in that order). There is, to be sure, humour – though one might suspect it of being the gallows humour of one who stands before the abyss. What accounts for this dark, despairing tone is the moral gap between our actual and ideal selves created, allegedly, by our immersion in 'hereditary' sinfulness. The reason we are so immersed is that, as I expressed Kierkegaard's thought, while the spirit is willing the flesh is weak (p. 40 above). 'Flesh', here, corresponds to the 'aesthetic'. The principal reason, according to Kierkegaard, we are bound to fall short of our moral ideals is our innate taste for the sensuous and especially the sensual.

Kierkegaard has, as noted, an obsession with sexuality, an obsession which manifests a deep revulsion and, one might guess, fear. At times, this leads him into overt misogyny: women are, for biological reasons, he claims, more sensuous than men, so that, although sexuality is not, in itself, a 'sin' (CA: 80), it is an object of 'shame' in a properly modest male (CA: 68) – although not, apparently, in women. In *Either/Or*, it is true, Judge William attempted to argue that sexuality is 'transfigured' in the ethical life of marriage, by which he meant *preserved* within an ethical context (p. 33 above). But a year later, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, the 'transfiguring' effect of love is explained thus: 'the spirit is so victorious that the sexual ['the flesh'] is forgotten, and recollected only in forgetfulness' (CA: 80).<sup>16</sup> Sex, in other words, is something that happens only before love has become fully developed (as long, at least, as the modest male – or, I am tempted to say, 'nerd' – has his way). That this, rather than Judge William's account, reflects Kierkegaard's true attitude to sexuality is suggested by his own decision to abandon marriage in favour of a life of chastity.

What all this suggests is that at heart Kierkegaard is a Platonist, that he is

fundamentally at odds with embodiment and with the 'black horse' element of sensuality that it brings to the soul. Like Plato he yearns to be released from imprisonment in the sinful 'oyster shell' of the body (p.10 above); like Plato, he is nauseated by the natural. If we ask what it is that creates this nausea the answer returns us, once again, to the moral gap. Since living up to the Christian ideal requires disembodied, immaterial being, and since one feels guilt and despair at not living up to the ideal, one yearns for release from the body, which alone can bring about release from self-hatred. If we ask why anyone should adopt such an ideal the answer can only be the social conditioning we have, for millennia, been subjected to.

Kierkegaard's self-hatred, the clinical depression he more or less admits to in his writings, is a form of mental disease – something Nietzsche understood in referring to Kierkegaard as, not a philosophical, but a 'psychological problem'.<sup>17</sup> It is, moreover, a communicable disease, something we will catch if we become absorbed by Kierkegaard's philosophy. But the way of avoiding it is surely obvious. We need, as Nietzsche puts it, a 'revaluation of all values' that will replace the anti-human, impossible ideal of Christ-like existence foisted on us by generations of priests in order to make us dependent on them, and return to something like the more humane ideals of the pre-Christian, classical world. Only thus can we overcome Kierkegaardian self-loathing.

## Notes

- 1 The elaborate conceit, more exactly, is that Part I comprises A's 'papers' gathered together by an 'editor', Victor Eremita.
- 2 See, further, note 4, below.
- 3 This point is well made in Evans 2009, 71–72.
- 4 The argument, in a nutshell, is that the opera displays a perfect balance of form and content (EO I: 49). The content of the opera is seduction. Its topic, that is, is pure sensuousness, more specifically, pure eroticism, pure sensuality. Language can talk about the sensual but only music can communicate its actual feeling. And this is something that Mozart's 'sexy' music achieves magnificently. (Interestingly, Kierkegaard's exact contemporary, Richard Wagner, published the libretto of his opera, *Tannhäuser* – an opera that is both about the sensual and full of sensual music – in the same year in which *Either/Or* appeared.)
- 5 The phrase 'leap of faith', generally thought to sum up Kierkegaard's philosophy, is one he rarely, in fact, uses. With good reason. For 'the leap' – a phrase he *does* frequently use – is a leap *to* 'faith', not a leap made by someone already in possession of 'faith'. (He does, however, use 'leap of faith' at CUP: 15.)
- 6 Evans 2009, 115, offers a somewhat similar interpretation to this.
- 7 This phrase is taken from the title of Hare 1996, a work highly sympathetic to Kierkegaard's view of the gap and the possibility of bridging it.
- 8 Put forward in his *Pensées* (Pascal 1969, pt 3, §233).
- 9 Kierkegaard scholars agree that Climacus is the pseudonymous author who comes closest to Kierkegaard himself.
- 10 In his *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) holds that traditional Christianity is a perversion of 'true religion' because it turns Christianity into a 'deal' whereby one submits to God only for the sake of the reward; 'one submerges oneself in God only to get oneself back again' (Feuerbach 1980, 14). Kierkegaard dislikes Feuerbach and, while not mentioning him by name, regards his philosophy as a critique of, among others, Feuerbach (see p. 42). He appears, here, to be defending the 'deal' against religious reformers such as Feuerbach.
- 11 In the Swenson and Lowrie translation there is an obvious inversion, here, of 'religiousness A' and 'religiousness B' which is corrected in other translations.
- 12 This may well be another allusion to Feuerbach. 'Theology is anthropology' actually has two meanings, for Feuerbach. On the one hand, it has the meaning Kierkegaard takes it to have: the properties we attribute to our gods are ones we wish we had, so that theology provides a metaphorical map of human desire. But on the other hand, as used in *Principles of a Philosophy of the Future* (published in 1843, the



same year as *Either/Or*), it is an injunction to the 'true' religion that is to replace the misinterpretation of Christianity as a self-interested 'deal'. True religion is the genuine 'submergence' of oneself in God, the God in question being the ongoing historical phenomenon of the human race.

- 13 Lacan 1986, 235–36.
- 14 Notice that Judge William's position is really just Kant's since he is represented as supposing the ethical to be that which reason tells us to be the correct course of action. Kierkegaard claims that in supposing that the ethical is, by itself, binding, one has 'stolen' the idea of God (p. 39). But this simply begs the question against Kant. He might retort that, on the contrary, in supposing God's command to be binding one has 'stolen' the idea of the rational.
- 15 Sometimes he claims this to be actually a good thing on the grounds that if we knew God to exist we could no longer live in 'passionate conviction' (CUP: 15). Given, however, that one can be both certain of the existence of the coach of one's football team and passionately devoted to fulfilling his demands and expectations, this seems a dubious claim.
- 16 'Recollection in forgetfulness' is, surely, repression. To repress something so that it is 'forgotten' by consciousness, some part of the mind has to know what it is that is to be forgotten. Since the 'black horse' of sexuality is always there, some part of the self must always keep an eye on it.
- 17 In a letter to Kierkegaard's fellow Dane, Georg Brandes, of 19 February 1888. Nietzsche never read Kierkegaard, but he heard enough from Brandes to know where the real problem lay.

## 4 Schopenhauer

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) was born, like Kierkegaard, on the Baltic, in Danzig (now Gdansk). Like Kierkegaard, he was the son of a wealthy but melancholic businessman. His mother, Johanna, was a popular novelist. He was educated in Germany, France and England, and, already as a teenager, spoke and wrote French and English as well as his native German. His father jumped to his death from the attic of his house when Schopenhauer was 17. His mother (whose combination of hardness and frivolity led acquaintances to describe her as possessing neither heart nor soul) disliked him on account of, as she put it, his morbid tendency to ‘brood over the misery of things’. Independently comfortable, he never held a paid university post, making the point that independence of mind requires independence of means. He published his only major work of systematic philosophy, *The World as Will and Representation*, in 1819, to which he added a second volume that more than doubled its length in 1844.<sup>1</sup> He never married, and was given to making remarks about women whose extreme chauvinism now makes them seem funny. (‘Women are qualified to be the nurses and governesses of our earliest childhood by the very fact that they are themselves childish, trifling, and short-sighted, in a word, are all their lives grown-up children; a kind of intermediate stage between the child and the man, who is the human being in the real sense’ (PP II: 614–15).) Schopenhauer loved (of course) writing, conversation, poodles, playing the flute, and going to the opera in Frankfurt, which is where he spent the final 27 years of his life.

Schopenhauer was the first, and almost the last, major European philosopher to be influenced by Eastern, in particular by Buddhist, thought. Though his influence on Nietzsche and Wittgenstein was substantial, he has generally been ignored by philosophers on account of his scandalous reputation as a pessimist, nihilist and (worst of all) hater of professors. From artists, however, he has received more acknowledgement than probably any philosopher since Plato. Major figures who were his explicit admirers include Wagner, Mahler, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Proust, Conrad, Thomas Hardy and Thomas Mann. As we shall see in the next chapter, he had an important influence on the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud.

### The possibility of metaphysics

Schopenhauer was a profound – though not uncritical – admirer of Kant. He explicitly called himself a ‘Kantian’, indeed often thought of himself as the only true Kantian left in an age devoted, under the cover of lip service to the master, to abandoning his essential doctrine.

The first of Kant's major propositions, the ideal, merely apparent, status of the space-time world, Schopenhauer accepts without question. For Schopenhauer, to question the ideality of that world after Kant would be as absurd as questioning the heliocentric account of the cosmos after Galileo.

He did, however, make one modification to Kant's metaphysics of 'phenomenon' (appearance) and 'thing in itself'. Individuality and plurality, he suggests, are inconceivable apart from space and time. If there are two distinct things, then either they must occupy different places or, if they occupy the same place, do so at different times. Space and time are the principle of individuality – hence Schopenhauer's frequent reference to the phenomenal world as the world 'subject to the *principium individuationis*'. What follows from this is that the thing in itself is 'beyond plurality'. Since it lies outside of space and time it must be a unity, in some sense 'one' (WR I: 112–13, 128). (Notice that this argument poses a serious difficulty for Kant. If the 'in itself' cannot be a 'plurality', then it cannot be, in particular, the plurality that consists of God, the angels and the souls of the departed.)

Although he endorsed Kant's idealism, like most of his fellow 'post-Kantians', Schopenhauer found Kant's second proposition – the unknowability of the thing in itself – unacceptable. The reason was that it seems to entail the impossibility of metaphysics – the traditional heart of philosophy. Since metaphysics, as traditionally understood, is the attempt to gain knowledge of ultimate reality (of 'the absolute' or 'the unconditioned', as Schopenhauer's contemporaries tended to call the thing in itself) Kant's second proposition entailed, essentially, the end of philosophy.

Many of the post-Kantians – the 'German idealists' as they are known – simply denied Kant's second proposition by claiming to have direct experience of the thing in itself – 'rational' or 'intellectual intuition' of it. This, however – the idea of 'so to speak, a little window that admits us to the superlunary and even supernatural world' (FR: 180–81) – Schopenhauer considered a fraud. There is, he agreed with Kant, no *direct* experience of reality in itself, no experience save that which is received through the 'forms' of experience, the 'sunglasses' of the mind. Nonetheless, he argued, metaphysics can still be pursued. One can be a metaphysician and yet still retain a clear, Kantian conscience.

Kant's fundamental argument for the unknowability of the thing in itself, it will be remembered, takes it to be a simple consequence of the ideality of the natural world. Since space and time (as well as substance and causality) are the forms, the 'sunglasses', of all our experience, we can have no experience of anything which falls outside those forms. But experience is the sole source of knowledge. It follows that we can have no knowledge of that which lies beyond space and time.

Schopenhauer's response to this argument is, in effect, to accept that sense experience is indeed the sole source of knowledge, but to point out that knowledge can be grounded in experience in ways other, and more subtle, than being the product of direct looking. In particular, he argues, an account of things can be given which is (a) an account of the thing in itself and as such genuinely metaphysical, but (b) has its claim to constitute knowledge firmly grounded in experience.

How, then, is it that 'a science drawn from experience can lead beyond it, and thus merit the name *metaphysics*' (WR II: 182)? The world, Schopenhauer

answers,

is like a cryptograph, and philosophy is like the deciphering of it, and the correctness of this is confirmed by the continuity and connexion that appear everywhere. If only this whole is grasped in sufficient depth, and inner experience is connected to outer, it must be capable of being interpreted, explained from itself.

(Ibid.)

To understand this, consider molecules. Why do we believe in them? Not because we can see them. Rather, because molecular theory provides a satisfying interpretation and explanation of things we can see – the release of steam by boiling water, the fracture of glass when dropped on the floor.

Metaphysics, suggests Schopenhauer, can be conceived in a similar way: its status as knowledge is based entirely on experience, yet because its topic lies beyond experience – in a way analogous to the way in which molecules lie beyond experience – it can count as genuinely metaphysical.

The similarity between physical theory and metaphysical ‘theory’ as conceived by Schopenhauer is particularly striking in his discussion of how one chooses between different and competing metaphysical theories. In science, what we demand of a theory is, above all, comprehensiveness: if one theory explains only some of, while another explains all, the observed phenomena, then we prefer the latter. Similarly, Schopenhauer says, with metaphysics,

the deciphering of the world must be completely confirmed from itself ... This confirmation from itself is the characteristic stamp of its genuineness; for every false deciphering, even though it suits some phenomena, will all the more glaringly contradict the remainder. Thus, for example, the optimism of Leibniz conflicts with the obvious misery of existence; Spinoza’s doctrine that the world is the only possible and absolutely necessary substance is incompatible with our wonder and astonishment at its existence and essential nature; Wolff’s doctrine that man has his *existentia* and *essentia* from a will foreign to him runs counter to our moral responsibility for actions ... The oft-repeated doctrine of a progressive development of mankind to ever higher perfection ... is opposed to the *a priori* view that up to any point in time an infinite time has already elapsed, and consequently that all that is supposed to come with time is bound to have existed already.<sup>2</sup>

(WR II: 184)

## The world as will

Metaphysics, then, is possible: a rational, Kantian metaphysics that does not lapse into the charlatanry of purported ‘intellectual intuition’ of the absolute. But what is the correct ‘deciphering’ of the world that will reveal to us the nature of the thing in itself?

Schopenhauer’s answer comes in two phases. In the first, he offers an answer to the question of the essential nature of the thing in itself – it is, he claims, ‘will’ – and, in the second, he proceeds to ‘decipher’ the specific character of this will.

The most salient thing about the world, Schopenhauer suggests, is striving.

Human beings are constantly in action, striving to achieve their goals. Human beings are goal-directed beings. Similarly the animals, though in a simpler, more one-dimensional way: they are constantly in action striving simply to survive. Plants strive upwards for light and downwards for nutrition, and even (so-called) inorganic things strive to attract other things (gravity) or to repel penetration by them (hardness). Now each of us, in our own cases, has direct knowledge of the inner reality that underlies all our striving. It is 'will' – desire, lust, craving, yearning, repulsion, fear, hatred and so on. Hence we are constrained to conceive of the same inner reality as underlying the striving of all beings. Of course, will, in the human case, is accompanied by intellect: we calculate how to achieve what we will. This is not the case in non-human nature. The will in non-human nature is mere instinct, 'blind'.

This might look more like landscape painting than philosophy, but Schopenhauer has another, strictly philosophical argument to the same conclusion. It arises out of reflection on the foundations of natural science, on, in particular, the inadequacy of the atomistic conception of matter. This he describes as a 'revolting absurdity' subscribed to mainly by the French on account of 'the backward state of [their] ... metaphysics' (WR II: 302) (a remark, one could be tempted to add, as true today as it was in 1844). Ultimate nature, he holds, cannot be conceived as a collection of tiny chunks of matter but must be understood, rather, as a flux of immaterial energy or 'force'.

Schopenhauer's argument for this, in a nutshell, is the following. The ultimate entities of scientific theory must possess causal powers (gravity, resistance and so on) in order to be able to explain anything at all. But since atomism holds that any power is grounded in atomic structure it is committed to an infinite regress of ever more fundamental structures of entities and can never, therefore, consistently claim to provide an account of ultimate nature. What follows is that we must abandon the attempt to ground every power in structure and accept powers ('forces') as themselves, the ultimate constituents of reality.

The ultimate entities of science must, then, be conceived as 'forces'. But how can we make sense of the notion of force? The only possible way is by reference to our own inner experience of force in the form of our own will. Only by reference to our own cravings and yearnings can we make the notion of force intelligible to ourselves. We are, therefore, constrained to conceive ultimate natural reality as analogous to our own inner experience, as 'will'. By looking inward at the 'microcosm', as Schopenhauer often puts it, we discover the fundamental nature of the 'macrocosm'.

It is possible to suspect that sleight of hand is involved in moving from 'will' as the *kind* of thing that the ultimate entities of science are to 'the will' as the unitary, non-spatio-temporal thing in itself. Nonetheless, what is really controversial about Schopenhauer is not the claim that the thing in itself is will but rather his characterisation of that will. When we have examined that characterisation we will see that, implicitly, Schopenhauer has another, quite different argument for identifying the thing in itself as will.

## **To will is to suffer**

What is the overall character of the world as we know it? Until we have answered this question we will not be in a position to determine which

metaphysical hypothesis best explains the existence and nature of that world.

Schopenhauer complains that since the rise of Christianity, no Western philosopher has approached this question with a genuinely open mind. Saddled by the presumption that the world is the creation of a wholly powerful, all-knowing and completely benevolent God ('the omnigod' as some philosophers refer to the concept), they have been required to put a particular spin on things – to discover the world to be, as Leibniz put it, 'the best of all possible worlds'. For obviously, if it is not the best then God is either incompetent – lacks the power to create a first-rate world – or malevolent, lacks the will to do so. Or both. Whichever way one turns, heresy and persecution threaten someone who does not adopt Leibniz's, in Schopenhauer's view, shallow and heartless 'optimism'.

If, however, one frees oneself from the theological pressure to come to this absurd conclusion – since Schopenhauer never held a paid university post, it was easier for him than for contemporaries such as Hegel to escape such pressure – then, claims Schopenhauer, one comes to the unavoidable conclusion that there is one overwhelmingly salient characteristic which life thrusts under one's nose: suffering. Life, the impartial observer must conclude, is overwhelmingly (although not exclusively) suffering. This is the 'pessimism' which gives Schopenhauer an almost unique position in the history of Western philosophy.

At one level, Schopenhauer's case for pessimism consists in the simple injunction: 'Don't think; just look.' All it needs to convince oneself that life is suffering is the honest, unflinching eye; the 'candid' eye, he calls it, alluding to the eponymous hero of Voltaire's satire on Leibniz's 'best of all possible worlds' hypothesis, *Candide* (WR II: 583). Since, however, his claim is one about the balance between suffering and happiness – the former outweighs, vastly outweighs, the latter – he is aware of his vulnerability to the 'beer-glass' objection: the pessimist sees as half empty what the optimist sees as half full; there is no fact of the matter, it is all a matter of subjective interpretation, of projecting one's own particular temperament onto the world at large. In order, therefore, to escape the charge of selectively choosing examples so as to produce 'a mere declamation on human misery' which, as such, would be 'one-sided' (WR I: 323), Schopenhauer produces a series of arguments which proceed, not by assembling examples of life's horrors, but rather from something 'universal' and '*a priori*' (WR I: 324).

\* \* \*

This universal, metaphysically necessary, feature is, of course, 'will'. Every being in the phenomenal world is, in its innermost nature, will. This fact inexorably condemns it to suffering. How so?

Consider, first, non-human life, the life of the animals. Every animal has, as its most fundamental impulse, the will to survive. (Since survival is the fundamental goal of every will, Schopenhauer often refers to the will as 'the will to life'.) Yet in order to survive, he observes (anticipating by some fifty years central aspects of Darwin's *Origin of Species*), life must feed on life. The way, that is to say, that nature preserves her system of species is through overpopulation. She produces enough members of one species – sheep – so that, in the first place, there are enough sheep to ensure the survival of that species, but, in the second, a surplus left over adequate to ensure the survival of another species – wolves. What follows from this, however, is that fear, terror, pain and death are not accidental

or occasional malfunctions of a mainly benign order of things. They are, rather, written into the very structure of nature. Nature, that is to say, cares not a fig for the individual, but only for the species. The suffering and death of individuals are the horrendous means she has chosen in order to preserve her system of species (WR I: §§27–29; II: ch. 28).

We are, perhaps, not generally accustomed to look on non-human nature with a moral eye. But if we do – as, of course, the Christian apologist's claim that this is the best of all possible worlds invites us to – then, says Schopenhauer, we are forced to the very opposite of the Christian judgement. Viewed with an honest eye, nature must be adjudged a morally disgusting phenomenon, something that 'ought not to exist' (WR II: 605). Schopenhauer finds the endless and pointless horror of animal life personified in the report of an early nineteenth-century visitor to Java, F. W. Junghuhn. Junghuhn records, says Schopenhauer (representing the traveller's report in his own language),

how he saw an immense field covered with skeletons, and took it to be a battlefield. However, they were nothing but skeletons of large turtles, five feet long, three feet broad, and of equal height. These turtles come this way from the sea, in order to lay their eggs, and are then seized by wild dogs (*canis rutilans*); with their united strength, these dogs lay them on their backs, tear open their lower armour, the small scales of the belly, and devour them alive. But then a tiger often pounces on the dogs. Now all this misery is repeated thousands and thousands of times, year in, year out. For this, then, are these turtles born. For what offence must they suffer this agony?<sup>3</sup> What is the point of this whole scene of horror? The only answer is that the will-to-live thus objectifies [expresses] itself.

(WR II: 354)

Animal life is, then, *bellum omnium contra omnes*, war, all against all. The will-to-live in one individual is locked in mortal combat with the will in another. It is the same with plants competing for light in the jungle, and the same even on the so-called inorganic level. Centrifugal force must overcome centripetal force in order to maintain itself, rigidity must overcome gravity in order to survive.

Turning, now, to human life, we find the same fundamental phenomenon of war, all against all, that pulsates through the rest of nature. Nations are either overtly or covertly at war with each other, as are individuals. If one gains a professional, social or sexual advantage another loses out. As the ancients observed, *homo homini lupus*, man is a wolf for man (WR II: 577). Social life, in more modern language, is a 'zero-sum game'.

\* \* \*

Schopenhauer's principal and most interesting argument for pessimism with respect, specifically, to the human condition – I shall call it the 'stress or boredom' argument – has to do, however, not with our interaction with others but rather with our own internal natures. According to this argument, even if one were to emigrate to an uninhabited South Sea island (with a stock of good books, CDs, many cases of New Zealand wine, but no Internet) one would still suffer.

As with all living things, the essence of human existence is will. As human beings, what we are is 'objectified' (i.e. physiologically expressed) will: 'teeth,

gullet and intestinal canal are objectified hunger, the genitals objectified sexual impulse; grasping hands and nimble feet correspond to the more indirect strivings of the will' (WR I: 108). Since will is our essence, what we do – all of the time save when we are sleeping, and sometimes even then – is to will. Always, restlessly and tirelessly, we are needing, wanting, desiring, striving for and against things. Our willing, says Schopenhauer, 'can be fully compared to an unquenchable thirst'. 'The basis of all willing, however',

is need, lack, and hence pain, and by its very nature and origin it [the human being] is therefore destined to pain. If on the other hand it lacks objects of willing, because it is at once deprived of them by ... satisfaction, a fearful emptiness and boredom comes over it; in other words, its being and its existence itself becomes an intolerable burden for it. Hence its life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are, in fact, its ultimate constituents.

(WR I: 312)

Schopenhauer is the first – and almost only – major Western philosopher to have paid serious attention to boredom. And he has some insightful things to say about it. Boredom, he suggests, not the child's momentary tantrum but real, adult boredom ('depression' as we call it these days), is marked by three essential characteristics. The first concerns the look of things, the look, not of this or that, but rather of everything, of the world as a whole. In boredom, the world as a whole loses colour, becomes stale, flat and unprofitable, 'dreary' (WR I: 314) and 'dead' (WR I: 164). The second mark of boredom concerns the will. In unbored existence one experiences, always, the 'pressure of the will'. This pressure, however, *continues* when one is bored. But since the will can find no goal to latch onto, one experiences a terrible frustration, the suffering of 'a longing without any definite object' (WR I: 164). (The point, here, can be put as follows. In boredom, we experience a second-order willing, a willing about willing. We will to be engaged in, and therefore have targets of, first-order willing. This second-order willing, however, the 'will to will', is unsatisfied.) The third mark of boredom is philosophical in character. Deprived of the ability to act, expelled, as it were, from the 'game' (ibid.) of life, one sees life as precisely that: a set of moves which are entirely without point or purpose save that of filling in the tedious interval between now and death. In boredom, life presents itself as an alien, meaningless phenomenon.

Boredom is, then, suffering, indeed the most terrible of all forms of suffering, since, paradoxically, the suffering of unsatisfied desire, of the unsatisfied will to will, is incorporated into the suffering of satisfied desire. But life is either unsatisfied desire – 'stress' – or satisfied desire, 'boredom'. Hence, life is suffering: it 'swings like a pendulum' between the suffering of stress and the suffering of boredom. (The former, observes Schopenhauer, is most commonly the fate of the poor, the latter of the rich. Hence it is among the latter, he says, that one usually finds addiction to time-killing devices such as card games, cigar smoking and drumming on the table with one's thumbs (WR I: 313).)

For Schopenhauer, the paradigm of life's oscillation between stress and boredom is sexual love. Under the influence of the sexual instinct we magnify the virtues of the beloved out of all proportion to reality. He or she becomes the most



perfect, desirable, beautiful object in existence; no other goal is worth pursuing. Disdained, we suffer the agonies of unrequited love. Should, however, the beloved relent and at last smile on us so that we finally attain our goal, then, afterwards, she or he becomes so ordinary that we wonder what all the fuss was about. *Omne animal post coitum triste*, 'Everyone is disappointed after sex', runs the Roman proverb (WR I: §60; II: ch. 44).

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Life, then, is, overwhelmingly, suffering. But what has this to do with the character of the metaphysical will that is the thing in itself? (We have, remember, been discussing the character of the world as a preliminary to determining which account of the thing in itself best explains the world's existence and nature.) In contrast to the absurd Christian view that the world is the creation of a wholly benevolent divinity, we are forced to conclude precisely the opposite: that the creative origin of the universe is 'not divine but demonic', 'devilish' (WR II: 349). In opposition to 'the palpably sophistical proofs of Leibniz that this is the best of all possible worlds', suggests Schopenhauer, 'we may even oppose seriously and honestly the proof that it is the worst of all possible worlds'. For if it were but a little worse it could not exist at all (WR II: 583). Traits, that is to say, which theists take to be proof that the world is created by a benevolent intelligence – the orderly progression of the planets, a climate conducive to life – are, in fact, no more than conditions of its existence. For example, a very modest increase in heat, says Schopenhauer (anticipating a current concern), would result in the extermination of all life (ibid.). Schopenhauer thus ends up with an exact reversal of Christianity: the all-powerful creator of the universe represents, not absolute good, but absolute evil.

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Though he never explicitly states it as such, we can now see Schopenhauer's most fundamental reason for designating the thing in itself 'will'. One of the most persuasive of the traditional arguments for the existence of God is the so-called 'argument from design', an argument which runs as follows. The world exhibits an intricate 'design' – for example, the adaptation of animals to their environment and vice versa – that could only have issued from an intelligent source. Moreover, this design is so benevolent – there is a wonderful harmony to the way in which all the parts of nature fit together with each other – that we must conclude this intelligence to possess a wholly benevolent will. Schopenhauer accepts the first part of this argument. There is indeed 'design' in the world and this presupposes the wilful activity of an intelligent creator. But since this design is *malevolent* – the minimal order required to allow the existence of beings capable of suffering – we must conclude its creator to possess an entirely malevolent will. Schopenhauer's fundamental argument that the thing in itself is will is, it seems to me, this, as it were, mirror image of the theist's argument from design.

## Redemption

What are we to do about life's suffering? Though claiming to have arrived at his conclusions independently, Schopenhauer had an intense admiration for

Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> And, in fact, his pessimism is identical with (at least on some interpretations) one of the major doctrines of Buddhism: the first of the Four Noble Truths in which the Buddha summed up his life's teaching is 'Life is suffering [*dhukka*].' The second Truth is 'The origin of suffering is craving', i.e. willing, which, as we have seen, is precisely Schopenhauer's analysis. The Buddha's third Truth maintains that 'The cessation of suffering is possible through the cessation of craving.' (The fourth, the 'eightfold path' to the cessation of craving, does not concern us here.) This, too, is precisely Schopenhauer's answer to the question of what we are to do about life's suffering, what we are to do in the face of the truth of pessimism. Since the source of suffering is willing, the solution to the 'riddle' of life (WR II: ch. 17, *passim*), says Schopenhauer, lies in 'denial of the will'.

In the first instance, the transition from 'affirmation' to 'denial' of the will consists in a 'transition ... to asceticism' (WR I: 380). Someone who has seen the Schopenhauerian truth of things will turn from the life of ambitious striving to a life of as little willing as possible. The characteristics of such a life will be the traditional monastic virtues: poverty, chastity and obedience. (Notice, here, echoes of Plato's 'philosophical life' (p. 9 above).) But though, perhaps surprisingly, Schopenhauer rejects suicide,<sup>5</sup> the ultimate and complete solution to the problem of life consists in death, the most enlightened death being that of the ascetic who starves, not by a deliberate act, but simply because he has become too will-less to eat. (This should not be confused with anorexia which, on most accounts, is a powerful affirmation of the will.)

But is this not the most abject nihilism? Is not death the entry into a mere 'nothingness'? And is not Schopenhauer, therefore, offering nothingness, becoming nothing, as the goal and meaning of life?

To be sure, Schopenhauer replies, to our finite minds 'what remains after the complete abolition of the will is ... assuredly nothing' (WR I: 412). But we only have to observe the 'deep tranquillity', the 'ocean-like calmness of the spirit' in the face of the mystic to 'banish the dark impression of that nothingness, which as the final goal hovers behind all virtue and holiness' (WR I: 411). The mystics, in other words, know something that is inaccessible to ordinary minds. They know that what seems to us to be nothing is, in fact, a 'better place'. (Schopenhauer thinks that we can sometimes share in the mystics' insight through music, as did Franz Schubert. In 'To Music', he praises his 'blessed art' as that which 'transport[s] us to a better place'.)

As we have seen, Schopenhauer despises Christianity. What he in fact despises, however, is not Christianity as such but rather the idea of our world as the creation of an omnipotent God of love. Other aspects of Christianity, the ethics of compassion and the idea that this world is a 'vale of tears' from which we need other-worldly 'redemption', he completely endorses. Surprisingly, therefore, Schopenhauer turns out to be, in the end, yet another 'true-world' theorist. Salvation consists in transcendence of the world of the *principium individuationis*, in breaking through the 'web of Maya' (WR I: 17) so as to achieve unification – or reunification – with the absolute. (Transcendence of individuality must be unification because, remember, beyond the phenomena there is no plurality.) The only real difference between Schopenhauer and Christianity is that his true world is not populated by God and the angels, but is

the a-theistic true world of Buddhism, in other language, *nirvana*. In the end, to use what the later Nietzsche deploys as a term of disparagement, Schopenhauer turns out to be a 'European Buddhist'.

## Criticism

How good is Schopenhauer's case for pessimism? Let us look first at the case for pessimism in non-human nature. Nature, Schopenhauer claims, red in tooth and claw, is a scene of fear, pain and death. In fact, however, since most animals have no anticipation of the future beyond a few moments, they cannot experience anything but the brief terror and pain which comes at the point of death itself. To be set against this is the relatively pleasant condition in which most of their lives are quite often spent. That, at least, is what we generally suppose. The reason we take free-range farming to be important is that we assume animals which range freely to enjoy a generally pleasant kind of existence.

Turning to the 'man is a wolf for man' argument, Schopenhauer seems to assume that social life must be more or less overt 'war, all against all' since the satisfaction of one person's desire must inevitably frustrate the satisfaction of another's. But that, surely, is by no means invariably the case. I may be the only applicant for the job, the only person in love with my beloved. You and I may not have to compete for food, because there is enough for both of us.

The most interesting part of Schopenhauer's case for pessimism is, however, the 'stress or boredom' argument. What are we to make of it?

Let us, for ease of reference, set the argument out in a formal kind of way. It is, I suggest, the following:

- (1) To live is to will.
- (2) To will is to pursue a goal.
- (3) Either one's goal is satisfied or it is not.
- (4) If it is not then one suffers a lack, i.e. suffers.
- (5) If it is then one is bored, i.e. suffers.

So

- (6) Life is suffering.

Interesting though this argument is, it is possible to raise objections against it. Against (2) one might point out that, as human beings we will not one goal, but many goals. Hence, against (3), one might point out that satisfaction is not an all-or-nothing business. Some of one's goals might be unsatisfied, thereby warding off boredom, while others are satisfied, thereby producing an overall state which is unbored yet, on balance, pleasant. Against (4) one might point out that it is not really true that unsatisfied desire always amounts to suffering. Certainly the pangs of hunger may be an ingredient in one's pre-dinner condition, but the pleasant anticipation of the excellent pheasant in orange sauce at one's favourite German restaurant surely outweighs those pangs. Certainly the heart may pine for the absent beloved, but the pleasure of looking forward to the evening together, on the bench in the park, under the moon, surely outweighs any suffering involved. Many unsatisfied desires have, that is, a bitter-sweet quality

to them. And the sweetness often outweighs the bitterness. Against (5) one might point out that even if one ultimately becomes bored with an attained goal there may be a period of genuine enjoyment before boredom sets in, during which time a new goal may have emerged to ward off boredom.

The most instructive objection to (5), however, is the following. Schopenhauer's argument assumes that the satisfaction of a desire constitutes its immediate elimination, together with the goal it provides. He has to make this assumption for otherwise boredom – goal-lessness – cannot be the automatic consequence of the satisfaction of desire. Of many desires this is perfectly true. Once one has satisfied one's hunger, then (as a matter of physiology) the desire to eat disappears. Once one has become the first man on the moon or the first to conquer Everest, then (as a matter of logic) the desire to achieve that goal must be eliminated. But there is a very important range of desires which are capable of satisfaction *without* elimination. Being a philosopher, for example, is a life-forming desire of mine. It is, moreover, a satisfied desire – I am satisfying it at this very moment. But that doesn't mean I have been deprived of the goal of being a philosopher. It is one which – as far as I know – I shall retain for the rest of my life. Some desires, in short, can be satisfied without being extinguished.

(Why does the satisfaction of desires such as the desire to be a philosopher not entail its elimination? In a nutshell, I think, because becoming a philosopher – novelist, poet, physicist, doctor, mother and so on – is a beginning, not an end. To satisfy one's desire to become a philosopher is to take possession of an (almost certainly inexhaustible) range of further desires: desires to communicate with the great minds of the past, to understand the nature of knowledge, truth, being, the human being, the good life and so on. It is to enter, in Heidegger's language, a 'path of thinking' that is almost certainly endless.)

For numerous reasons, then, the 'stress or boredom' argument fails to constitute a compelling argument for pessimism. (This, however, should not be allowed to disguise the major insight that it represents. Human beings do – typically, though not, I suggest, inevitably – fall into the trap of sacrificing their present lives on the altar of some future goal, only to find boredom awaiting them when they achieve that goal. That allowing one's life to be formed by a desire whose satisfaction does *not* entail its extinction escapes this trap is a point to which I shall return.)

\* \* \*

One final criticism of Schopenhauer. According to his metaphysics – his inference to the nature of the thing in itself as that hypothesis which best 'deciphers' the character of the phenomenal world – the thing in itself is will. And the will is absolutely evil, 'devilish' not divine. According, however, to his practical philosophy, his account of what we are to do about the truth of pessimism, 'salvation' lies in transcendence of the *principium individuationis* and, with the mystics, achieving unification with the thing in itself. Yet how can unification with absolute evil be regarded with anything but horror? How could it be regarded as redemption, how could a vision of themselves as united with absolute evil be the object of the mystics' 'oceanlike calmness of spirit'? There seems, in short, to be a serious inconsistency between Schopenhauer's metaphysics and his practical philosophy. In Chapter 6, we will see how his ardent disciple, the youthful Nietzsche, perceived this inconsistency and proposed

a solution to it.<sup>6</sup>

\* \* \*

A final comment. Schopenhauer does not, I have argued, establish the truth of pessimism: that the character of life is overwhelmingly one of suffering. On the other hand, by having the clear-eyed independence of mind to point out the very great deal of suffering that undoubtedly exists in the world, he surely does show the theist's assertion that this is 'the best of all possible worlds' to be, as he claims, a shallow 'sophism'. That a totally powerful, all-knowing, wholly benevolent deity (Kant and Kierkegaard's God) could not have ameliorated the fate of the turtles even a little, consistent with the aim of preserving the species *Canis rutilans*, beggars belief.

This, as the Frankfurt philosopher Max Horkheimer calls it, 'stripping the gold foil from the absolute' is, perhaps, Schopenhauer's principal significance in the history of philosophy. What he shows, specifically, is the pointlessness of Kant's strategy for preserving traditional Christian belief. For even if it can survive the challenge from science, it cannot survive the 'candid' use of our own eyes.

## Notes

- 1 The original work, which became volume I of the 1844 edition, is divided into four 'books'. Volume II of the 1844 edition consists of a 'supplement' to each of the four books of volume I.
- 2 This last point, as we shall see, is an affirmation of 'the eternal return of the same', a doctrine often thought to have made its first appearance in Nietzsche.
- 3 In *Suddenly Last Summer* Tennessee Williams is similarly appalled by the fate of turtles.
- 4 Since the Sanskrit texts were translated (into English) for the first time during Schopenhauer's lifetime, he was the first major Western philosopher to have access to Buddhist and Hindu thought.
- 5 For interesting but complex reasons he regards suicide that results from depression as, in fact, an *affirmation* of the will, an affirmation of life (though not, of course, of the suicide's own life). It is thus based on a *mistake*, a mistake about the character of life. See WR I: §69.
- 6 In my *Schopenhauer* (Young 2005), I have suggested that Schopenhauer, particularly later Schopenhauer, can be read as proposing a three-part metaphysics – phenomenon, will and thing in itself – whereby he denies the identity of the will with the thing in itself. Will, while meta-physical, above physics, falls short of being the thing in itself. Such a reading would resolve this inconsistency, which is its principal recommendation. Here, however, I have not proposed this reading, because it is not how his most important disciple, the youthful Friedrich Nietzsche, read him and is not the solution to the inconsistency he proposed. Since the youthful Nietzsche will be the subject of Chapter 6 I am concerned, here, to present Schopenhauer's ultimately ambiguous philosophy in such a way as to reveal where the younger Nietzsche is 'coming from'.

## 5 Freud

Most philosophers think of consciousness and reason as the primary forces in human life. But for Schopenhauer, as we saw in the previous chapter, the primary force is will. This makes it unsurprising that the principle of repression and of the unconscious as the locus of repressed desires was his discovery. Because we have many desires of which our reason disapproves, says Schopenhauer, we deny them admission to 'clear consciousness': 'the intellect is not to know anything about them ... since the good opinion we have of ourselves would thereby suffer' (WR II: 209–10). This means that it is sometimes only by accident that we discover what we desire. The feeling, for example, of 'joy not unmixed with shame' on hearing of the death of a relative whose heir we are may acquaint us for the first time with a desire we have unconsciously harboured for years (WR II: 210). And it may only be thoughtful reflection on the fact that one's accountancy errors are predominantly in one's own favour which acquaints one with, not certainly any conscious dishonesty, but rather 'an unconscious tendency to diminish one's *debit* and increase one's *credit*' (WR II: 218). Another area in which Schopenhauer speaks of repression is in connection with madness. Madness, he suggests, is, at least often, a disease of the memory. A savagely traumatic experience is repressed from consciousness and a fictitious memory inserted to fill up the resulting gap in memory, a substitution necessary to the success of the repression (WR I: 192–93).

Given these themes, and given, too, Schopenhauer's interest in sexual desire, which he describes as 'the ultimate goal of almost all human effort' (WR II: 533), it is unsurprising that one of his close readers was Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Freud denied that he had taken the principle of repression and the unconscious from Schopenhauer. Late in life he did admit that it was Schopenhauer rather than he who first discovered the principle but claimed his own discovery to have been independently made due to his 'not being well read'. This, however, is at variance with the truth, for the fact is that as a young man he attended an entire seminar devoted to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.<sup>1</sup> He thus appears to have fallen victim to repression, to an unconscious desire to diminish his *debit* and increase his *credit* with respect to originality!

Freud lived most of his life in Vienna save for his final year when he had to flee to London to escape the Nazis. He belonged to a brilliant circle of artists and thinkers most of whom were Jewish and who between them created much of the most important art and science of the twentieth century: among others, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Otto Neurath, Karl Popper, Ernst Mach, Gustav Klimt, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Carl Kraus, Otto Loss, Arnold Schönberg and Gustav Mahler. He qualified as a medical doctor but soon became more interested in psychological disorders such as hysteria than in purely physical ones. Initially he thought of

hypnosis as a promising method of treatment but later abandoned it for the idea of therapy as involving nothing more than talk, mainly on the part of the patient. The basic idea was that by bringing repressed traumas to clear consciousness the patient would then be 'purged' of them, would achieve a kind of 'catharsis'. ('Catharsis' is the word Aristotle uses to describe the effect of Greek tragedy. One of the most important accounts of Aristotle's theory of catharsis was written in 1857 by Jacob Bernays, Freud's uncle by marriage. It is probable that it was Bernays who alerted Freud to the therapeutic possibilities of catharsis.)<sup>2</sup>

Towards the end of his life Freud began to write in a more philosophical vein. In the 1930 *Civilization and Its Discontents* (F: 59–145) he presents something that looks very like a new, clinically inflected, way of arguing for Schopenhauerian pessimism. It is because Freud is, in this and other respects, a Schopenhauerian that I have positioned him next to Schopenhauer.

## The question: is civilisation worth it?

Freud begins *Civilization and Its Discontents* by saying that the question of what the 'purpose' of human life is has no answer since it is based on the false presumption that there is some purpose to human life. No one asks the purpose of animal life, so only human presumptuousness leads to the idea that there must be a purpose to human life (F: 75–76). (This is not entirely convincing. Since animals do not set their own goals whereas humans do, the question 'are there any goals which, simply as a human being, I ought to pursue?' makes sense for a human being to ask but, even if it could talk, would not make sense for an animal to ask.) Having rejected the question of the purpose of human life Freud turns to the 'less ambitious' one of what human beings actually pursue, what they *take* as their purpose. The unsurprising answer is 'happiness', which Freud identifies with the absence of pain combined with strong feelings of pleasure. That our lives are dominated by the quest for happiness thus conceived (that, as philosophers call it, 'psychological hedonism' is true) he calls 'the pleasure principle' (F: 76).

There is, however, absolutely no possibility of the pleasure principle's programme being fully realised. 'One feels inclined to say [with Schopenhauer] that the intention that man should be "happy" is not included in the plan of "Creation".' Intense pleasure only comes from the satisfaction of 'damned-up' desire (and therefore presupposes Schopenhauerian 'stress') and quickly dissipates into at best 'a feeling of mild contentment' (i.e., soon turns into Schopenhauerian boredom) (F: 76). Recognising this, we turn our attention from the achievement of pleasure to the avoidance of suffering – an operation of what Freud calls the 'reality principle' (F: 67) (aka a 'reality check').

There are, he continues, three principal sources of suffering: external nature (natural disasters), one's own body (disease) and other human beings, the 'sacrifices' we have to make to cohabit with them, the constraints placed on us by 'civilisation'. However hard we try, these constraints, constraints which 'adjust the mutual relations among human beings in the family, the state and society', will always be 'inadequate' to prevent our interaction with other human beings being a source of suffering (F: 86). Concerning external nature and our own bodies, although we cannot completely eliminate the suffering that arises from them, we have made terrific progress – through, for instance, engineering and

medicine. Yet frustratingly – frustrating because being entirely dependent on ourselves it would seem most under our control – we seem to have made no progress at all on the third source of suffering. Social life causes the individual as much suffering today as it did in ancient Greece. This, says Freud, gives rise to the thought that actually we *can't* make progress in eliminating the suffering that we cause each other. The thought arises that there is a piece of 'unconquerable nature' (ibid.) in us which is at fundamental odds with the whole idea of civilisation, and that it is the conflict between this piece of primitive nature and the restrictions that must be imposed on us for civilisation to exist at all that is the principal reason social life is, and must always be, a source of suffering.

This poses the central question Freud sets out to discuss: is civilisation worth it? Do its benefits outweigh the costs? Some people have believed they do not, he observes. A negative assessment of the value of civilisation must, he suggests, have been at work in the victory of Christianity over the heathen religions in the later Roman Empire, for only thus would its low valuation of earthly life (and eager expectation of a second coming) have had appeal. And it is manifested, too, in the nineteenth century's cultivation of primitivism (one might think, here, of Paul Gauguin's Tahitian paintings), the idea that the recently discovered Pacific Islands were places where pre-civilised peoples lived in a utopia of happiness the secret of which had been somehow forgotten by Europeans (F: 87).

With good reason, Freud doubts that the Pacific Islands really ever were utopias. Some recent writers have, however, defended the idea that the arrival of 'civilisation' really was a curse rather than a blessing. Jared Diamond<sup>3</sup> and John Gray<sup>4</sup> have both expressed the view that the 'worst mistake' in the history of the human race was urbanisation, the transformation of nomadic bands of hunter-gatherers into settled communities of farmers. The life of the hunter-gatherers was healthier and happier, was free of the diseases and neuroses of civilisation. Nietzsche expresses a similar view in the second essay in his *Genealogy of Morals*, a work to which Freud's essay is, as we shall see, considerably indebted.

## What is civilisation?

To discuss the question of the value of civilisation we need first, Freud observes, to determine what it is. (Germanic thinkers almost always distinguish between 'civilisation' (plumbing and the police) and 'culture' (art and ethics), but Freud 'scorns' (F: 6) this time-honoured distinction and treats the words as synonyms. His motive is partly, I think, anti-snobbism. More important, however, is the fact that, as we shall see, he regards the 'higher' life of the mind as continuous with mundane things like engineering in that both are expressions of the same primal instincts.) Freud defines 'civilisation' as 'the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors'. These are of two kinds: 'those that protect men against nature' and those that 'adjust their mutual relations' (F: 89). Freud has no interest in discussing the first – essentially technology in its full range – so, for the rest of the essay, 'civilisation' is effectively reduced to the latter.

It is an obvious truth, he observes, that civilisation demands restrictions on the liberty of the individual in the interests of the well-being of society as a whole, restrictions which apply equally to all. Pre-civilised man had more freedom (to,



for example, rape and pillage). Civilisation is built upon the 'renunciation of instinct' (F: 97) and this means that no perfect accommodation between instinct and society is possible. This, as Freud recognises, is all rather obvious. It is when he draws on his clinical experience to describe particular forms the renunciation of instinct must take – specifically, the renunciation of sexuality and aggression – that Freud's originality comes to the fore.

## Sexuality

Civilisation depends, first of all, claims Freud, on the renunciation – or at least severe curtailment – of sexual pleasure. It needs to dilute and divert the sexual drive away from its natural expression. This is particularly harsh since sexual satisfaction is the most intense pleasure we can experience, the 'prototype' of all happiness (F: 101). (One might observe the extension of 'sexy' from its literal object to things like cars and even mathematical proofs as well as the omnipresence of sex in advertising to see some plausibility in the idea that the excellence of a pleasure is a function of how well it measures up to sexual pleasure.) Freud's argument for there being an incompatibility between civilisation and a life of rich sexual satisfaction is the following.

Civilisation is the incorporation of small into larger social unities. The basic unit of social life is the family. But the family cannot come into being without a diversion of the sexual instinct. If one cared only about the object of sexual pleasure then one would not care for one's children. And so 'genital' love needs to be 'sublimated' into 'aim-inhibited' love – that is, love which has an object other than its immediate, natural object. (It seems odd that Freud would count this as an effect of *civilisation*. Love of offspring is surely something we share with non-human animals rather than something that sets us apart from them, something biological rather than cultural.) If civilisation is to come into being, however, a second sublimation has to occur. Individuals must care not just about their families but also about society as a whole and about its expression as the state. Indeed ultimately individuals must come to care *more* about society than about family (presumably because if love of family trumps all other concerns then one has a fractious collection of clans rather than a genuine society or a functioning state). And so the sexual instinct must be sublimated still further into a generalised concern for others, into love, or at least friendliness, towards one's fellow members of society. The practical expression of this love will be the works of civilisation (art, science and technology), works that improve their condition. This kind of love remains, however, Freud insists, fundamentally erotic, 'libidinal' in character. All love is libidinal – as is evidenced by our careless use of the word 'love' (F: 102). Eros and Agape are at bottom the same. Everyone is thus at bottom bisexual (F: 105).

Even if all this is true, however, the question remains as to why we cannot have a life that is *both* full of rich, sexual pleasure *and* engaged in the works of civilisation. Why cannot natural and sublimated sexuality peacefully coexist? Freud's answer is that it is a matter of 'economic necessity'. There is only a limited quantity of libidinal 'energy' and since civilisation needs all of it, it cannot allow it to be squandered in natural sexual behaviour. (This idea seems to have filtered down to football coaches who, it appears, still forbid sexual activity

by team members on the day or even week before a big game.) As a ruling elite oppresses the working class by harnessing its energy for its own ends, so civilisation has oppressed the individual with respect to the sexual instinct (F: 104).

It does this by surrounding sexuality with multiple taboos, taboos which – since childhood training forms adult character – begin by stigmatising the natural sexuality of children. Sex is to be restricted to monogamous ‘genital’ contact ‘between one man and one woman’,<sup>5</sup> and even then it should not happen often. Everything else – Freud mentions incest and homosexuality – is stigmatised as a ‘perversion’ because anything that makes sex fun is counterproductive from the point of view of civilisation. Civilisation needs sex to be as boring as possible (F: 104–5). (This idea in reverse, I think, lay behind the slogan of the hippie movement, ‘make love not war’, in the 1960s. If one made a great deal of love then there would be no energy left to fuel the war machine of a corrupt civilisation.)

From the fact that civilisation depends on diverting libidinal energy to its own ends Freud draws a conclusion that civilisation depends on men. Since women, he claims, have little capacity for ‘instinctual sublimation’ their love rarely extends beyond the family, which leaves the ‘work of civilisation’ as the province of men. As men, however, with maturity, get drawn more and more into that work (‘the office’) they spend more and more of their time with other men and become ever more remote from the family. This makes women instinctively hostile to civilisation, to society and to the state (F: 103–4). Civilised marriage is not a happy state.

Although this appears to be based on nothing but personal, sexist prejudice, Freud’s claims are in fact based on Greek tragedy, of which he was a close reader (hence the ‘Oedipus complex’). For a persistent theme in Greek tragedy – in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy and in Sophocles’ *Antigone* – is the conflict between family and state, *that is*, between women and men.<sup>6</sup> More particularly, I suspect, Freud’s claims are based on the account of the collapse of Greek civilisation which Hegel derives from *Antigone*. As we shall see in Chapter 7, Freud’s account of the process of marital alienation closely mirrors Hegel’s account of the collapse of Greek society.

## Aggression

The second major instinct that is at loggerheads with civilisation is aggression. Human beings are naturally aggressive:

men are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love, who simply defend themselves if they are attacked: they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and kill him. [As Schopenhauer observes] *Homo homini lupus*.

An immediate conclusion Freud draws from this observation is that communism is an illusion. Aggression reigned in the pre-civilised world where there was no private property and it shows up among children in the nursery. Moreover, even with the abolition of private property by a communist state, sexual competition and possessiveness would still give rise to aggression (F: 113–14). (I shall return to this critique of communism in Chapter 8.)

Where does aggression come from? From the ‘death instinct’ (or ‘drive’), from, as some of Freud’s followers christened it, the ‘Thanatos principle’, Thanatos being the Greek god of death.

Freud is somewhat defensive about the introduction of this principle, having long maintained (until *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of 1920) that all human drives were ‘libidinal’ in origin (F: 118). (The mere identification of the ‘libidinal’ with the ‘sexual’ makes this assumption, since ‘libido’ is simply the Latin word for ‘desire’ – desire in general, not any subspecies of it.) But now he introduces this new ‘instinct’, so that, instead of Eros being the sole underlying agent, human life is now pictured as a battle between Eros, the principle which wants to join living beings into ever larger unities, and the Thanatos principle which wants to destroy such unities. Eros creates civilisation, Thanatos is aggressive towards it, aims at its ‘death’ (F: 118–23).

What moved Freud to postulate the death instinct? He mentions sadism and masochism as phenomena requiring the addition of a ‘destructive instinct’ to the erotic impulse for their explanation (F: 119), but these pathological phenomena hardly suffice to support the idea of Thanatos as a *universal* element in human nature to be given equal billing with Eros. (The same remark applies to the grounding of the postulation given in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the harmful disposition of patients to relive traumatic experiences from their past both in their dreams and in their current personal relationships.) I suspect that the real ground of the postulation is simply a matter of Freud’s opening his eyes, of achieving Schopenhauer’s ‘candid’ (p. 55 above) view of humanity. As he himself says, one is loath to accept the death drive, because it offends against the idea that God made us all in the image of his perfection (F: 120). All one has to do to see that ‘men are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love, who simply defend themselves’ is to free one’s mind of sentimental preconceptions. In Freud’s own case, he probably also needed to free himself of the drive, common to most theoreticians, to reduce everything to a single, explanatory principle.

The way in which civilisation deals with aggression and destructiveness, says Freud, is by colonising a portion of the ‘ego’. It implants in the ego a ‘superego’ which is to act as a ‘garrison in a conquered city’ (F: 124–25). There is, claims Freud, no innate sense of good and evil. Rather, the rules that distinguish one from the other are trained into us by our upbringing so that they become a permanent internal monitor of our behaviour – our so-called ‘conscience’. Thus, if the child’s behaviour displeases the mother it suffers ‘loss of love’. Eventually, the repetition of this maternal punishment causes the child to internalise the voice of the parent (which is, of course, the voice of society at large), to take over the role of disapprobation itself.

From the point of view of civilisation, this internalisation of the voice of society has two advantages. First, the superego monitors not just actions but also

that which leads to action, namely desire, and so nips many harmful actions in the bud. Second, it allows the aggressive instinct *safe* satisfaction. By internalising aggression it transforms aggression towards others into aggression towards *the self*. As the mother punishes the child through withdrawal of love so the superego 'withdraws love' from the ego, forcing it to feel 'guilty' (F: 123). (This notion of the defusing of aggression by turning it inward is taken directly from the second essay in Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* entitled 'On "Guilt", the "Bad Conscience", and Related Matters', an origin, however, that is nowhere acknowledged.)<sup>7</sup>

From the point of view of the individual, however, there is a high price to pay. The primordial instincts which Freud refers to collectively as the 'id' never go away.<sup>8</sup> But neither does the superego, which hates and condemns them, wishes, in fact, for their 'death'. The expression of this is a permanent feeling of guilt which, Freud says, is often not recognised as such but is experienced rather as 'anxiety', a generalised 'malaise'. This, says Freud, drawing on his clinical experience, is the most significant of the costs imposed on us by civilisation (F: 134–35).

## The answer

So is civilisation worth it? Are its necessary but painful manipulations of our primal sexual and aggressive instincts outweighed by the benefits of civilisation? Coming to the end of his essay Freud avoids answering the question directly. He merely says that he can listen 'without indignation' to someone who says that it is not (F: 144–45). Near the beginning of the essay, however, the mask of agnosticism slips: 'primitive man', Freud flatly states, 'was better off knowing no restrictions of instinct', even though 'his prospects of enjoying this happiness for any length of time were very slender'. What civilised man has done, therefore, is to exchange 'a portion of happiness' for 'a portion of security' (F: 115). But put in these terms – as a choice between a long life riddled with guilt and sexual frustration or a short life of freedom and joy – the answer, Freud's answer, seems obvious. By his own route, Freud seems to have found his way to Schopenhauer's conclusion that 'life [civilised life, the only life available to modern humanity] is a business that does not cover its costs' (WR II: 574).

## Criticism

Should we accept Freud's Schopenhauerian conclusion? A number of doubts can, I think, be raised.

First, why should we accept that the works of civilisation must commandeer *the totality* of one's libidinal energy? Freud is surely right that one has only a finite amount of libidinal – or any kind of – energy but why should there not be a sufficient amount in most individuals to allow *both* a rich sex life *and* the sublimation of some libidinal energy into the works of civilisation? Nietzsche, a likely influence once again, holds the same view as Freud. Making art or philosophy is, he writes, just another way of 'making children'. Hence, 'chastity' is simply the 'economy of the artist' or of the philosopher. As every 'athlete or

jockey' knows, one needs to abstain from sex when on the threshold of any great endeavour. But neither Freud nor Nietzsche produces a shred of evidence for their principle of 'economy'. And the reason is, surely, that there is none. We have no reason to believe that the principle is anything more than an old wives' (or old football coach's) tale.

Second, even if we do sublimate libidinal energy in cultural activities of one sort or another – and there is, surely, insight in the idea that such sublimation occurs – what exactly is the 'discontent' it entails? Freud holds, we have seen, that sexual pleasure is the highest, the 'prototype', of all pleasures, so that according to him if sexual energy is diverted into, say, art then one substitutes at best an inferior pleasure for a superior one. But this, surely, is a peculiar scale of values. Was Michelangelo's satisfaction in completing the Sistine ceiling inferior to that he might have experienced in bed with some young man?

Turning to aggression, is not its representation as a purely destructive impulse a mistake? Some aggression, to be sure, expresses itself as pointless vandalism. But a great deal more has a creative aspect to it – as Nietzsche recognises in his concept of the 'will to power'. Surely just as sexuality can be sublimated into the works of civilisation so can aggression – into the building of businesses, skyscrapers, empires and philosophical arguments. It is peculiar that while allowing the creative sublimation of sexuality Freud does not allow the same for aggression. Note that allowing aggression to be a second source of creative energy strengthens the case for allowing that civilisation does not need to commandeer the *totality* of libidinal energy. It does not need to do so because it has another source available to it.

Finally, a comment about 'guilt'. Freud is, of course, right that many upbringings, especially religious ones, induce in individuals a crippling sense of guilt, guilt it is impossible to expiate because, in reality, it is guilt about desires that embodied, natural beings cannot avoid having. But if there is anything to be learnt from Kierkegaard it is that the superego does not have to be a purely punitive agent. If it is the product of a more enlightened culture its primary function can be to inspire rather than punish. And even if one has the misfortune to be brought up in an unenlightened culture, does not Freud's own psychoanalysis, or one of its numerous offshoots, offer a way of disposing of guilt, a way of doing so while remaining within civilisation?

## Notes

1 See Young 2005, 238–41.

2 See Young 2013, 27–29.

3 Diamond 1987, 64–66.

4 Gray 2002.

5 As amended in 2012, North Carolina's marriage law states that 'marriage between one man and one woman is the only domestic legal union that shall be valid or recognized in this state'.

6 See Young 2013, ch. 7.

7 Freud's knowledge of Nietzsche's thought was not confined to the seminar of his youth (p. 65). In 1883 and 1884 Nietzsche was visited by a member of Freud's inner circle, Dr Joseph Paneth, who took extensive notes of his long conversations with the philosopher and reported back to Freud (Young 2010, 365, 205–6).

8 WP 800, GM III 8.

## 6 Early Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was born in 1844, the son of a Lutheran pastor who died – probably of a brain tumour – when Nietzsche was five years old. In 1865 he discovered Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* in a second-hand bookshop, a book he found to be written 'especially for me'. Mutual reverence for Schopenhauer – mutual conviction that Schopenhauer had courageously told the *truth* about life – led to his close friendship with the opera composer Richard Wagner. A decade later, however, claiming to have discovered them both to be 'sick', Nietzsche broke with both Schopenhauer and Wagner. Though an invited and honoured guest at the first Bayreuth Festival of Wagner's operas in 1876, he walked out, in disgust, half way through.

In 1869 Nietzsche became professor of Greek at the Swiss University of Basle, where, in 1872, he published his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* – the topic of this chapter. In 1879 he resigned the chair at Basle and took up the life of a wanderer, living in cheap boarding houses in Switzerland, Italy and France. In 1882 he pronounced for the first time that 'God is dead' (in *The Gay Science*), and between 1883 and 1885 produced his most famous book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. At the beginning of 1889 his rapidly deteriorating mental condition tipped clearly into madness. In a letter to Jacob Burckhardt he claimed to be God, and to the patients in the sanatorium to which he was, for a time, confined, he apologised for the bad weather they had been having, promising to 'prepare the loveliest weather for tomorrow'. The cause of his madness is uncertain. The traditional view that he suffered from syphilis has been questioned by a number of medical authorities. A more recent view is that he suffered from an, in the end, extreme form of bipolar disorder. Nietzsche died in 1900 without ever regaining sanity.

### Hellenism and pessimism

Nietzsche wrote *The Birth of Tragedy* under the influence of his intense admiration for Schopenhauer. The book's alternative title, *Hellenism and Pessimism*, indicates how much Schopenhauer was on his mind. The argument of the work is, in outline, the following.

The Greeks, a 'hypersensitive' people, 'emotionally intense', exquisitely 'equipped for suffering', knew full well the 'terror and horror' of existence. Their myths reveal how large it loomed in their consciousness: 'the vulture which fed upon the great philanthropist, Prometheus, the terrible lot drawn by the wise Oedipus; the curse on the house of Atreus which brought Orestes to the murder of his mother' (BT 3). The Greeks knew the horrendous 'cruelty of nature'

(Schopenhauer's 'war, all against all') and the 'terrible destructiveness of so-called world history' (BT 7) (a rejection of what, in Chapter 7, we will see to be Hegel's view that history is an inevitable progress towards perfection). The Greeks, in a word, knew the truth of Schopenhauerian pessimism; they knew that life is suffering. And, as their myths also reveal, they knew the powerful inclination to move from pessimism to nihilism, to the conviction that life, human life, is not worth living: the story, for example, of the demigod Silenus who, captured by king Midas and forced to disclose his wisdom, spoke as follows: 'the best for you is ... not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best is – to die soon' (BT 3).

The Greeks knew, then, the experience of action-paralysing 'nausea', and the temptation to lapse into a 'Buddhistic [i.e. Schopenhauerian] negation of the will' (BT 7), the ultimate expression of which is suicide (BT 15). But, in fact, they did not lapse into denial of the will. They acted. They defeated the Persians and, *en passant*, as it were, created Western civilisation. They survived and thrived. How so? Through, claims Nietzsche, their art. More specifically, through their two main types of art, the 'Apollonian' art of Homer and the 'Dionysian' art of the great tragedians, Aeschylus and Sophocles.

Formally speaking, this argument is offered as a piece of classical scholarship – as already noted, Nietzsche was a professor of Greek literature when he wrote *The Birth*. His fundamental interest, however, is in *us*, in understanding ourselves in the 'polished mirror' provided by the Greeks. If, Nietzsche holds, we can understand how the Greeks overcame 'nausea' and 'negation of the will' we will understand how we, we readers of Schopenhauer, can overcome nihilism too. (Nietzsche's answer to the question 'how can we overcome nihilism?' is: 'through the rebirth of Greek tragedy that is happening in the music dramas of Richard Wagner'. His basic motive in writing *The Birth* was to support Wagner's attempt to build his custom-designed opera house at Bayreuth – which is why his walking out of the first Bayreuth Festival represented such a dramatic change in his thinking.)

## The Apollonian solution to nihilism

Since they had two types of nihilism-overcoming art, the Apollonian art of Homer in the eighth century BCE and the Dionysian art of the fifth-century tragedians, the Greeks had, in fact, Nietzsche notes, two 'solutions' to the problem of nihilism. I shall begin with the former.

'Apollonian', as Nietzsche uses it, is ambiguous: sometimes it merely describes a type of consciousness, and sometimes the enhancement of that consciousness through art. In the first sense, 'Apollonian' applies to consciousness which is of the mundane, everyday variety. In this sense, Apollonian consciousness is consciousness of oneself as one individual in the midst of a plurality of individuals located in space and time. It is consciousness which, says Nietzsche, is subject to the *principium individuationis* (BT 1, 2). (This use of Schopenhauer's terminology suggests, what is in fact the case, that the metaphysics of *The Birth* is identical with that of *The World as Will*. As we will shortly see, for Nietzsche, too, the world of individuals is ideal and the reality behind it, the 'thing in itself',

is 'beyond plurality'.) The essence of the Apollonian mind is, says Nietzsche, plurality, division, 'boundary setting' (BT 9). It is the Apollonian mind that distinguishes between you and me, but also between yours and mine. Along with division, legality and justice are products of the Apollonian side of the mind (BT 2, 9).

Apollonian art is the aesthetic transformation of the consciousness that is subject to the *principium individuationis*. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Homer produced the 'radiant dream-birth of the Olympians' through which the Greeks 'overcame ... or at any rate veiled' (BT 3) the terror and horror of existence. In their tales of gods and heroes, says Nietzsche, the Homeric Greeks erected, not a non-or anti-human ideal like that of Christianity (Jesus never has, for example, sex), but rather a 'transfigured' (BT 18) self-portrait, a glorification of *human* existence. In this way they 'seduced' (ibid.) themselves into continued existence. 'Existence under the bright sunshine of such gods is regarded as desirable in itself' (BT 3).

What, exactly, is transfiguration? Frequently, Nietzsche describes it as a matter of 'illusion' and 'lies' (BT 3, 7, 16, 18), which suggests that, in his view, what Homer produced is (like the television advertisement for cornflakes, or the 'spun' image of the presidential candidate) a picture of life with all the nasty bits airbrushed out. Yet Homer is full of death and destruction – his stories are *war* stories – and Nietzsche, in any case says that, in Homer, 'all things whether good or evil are deified' (BT 3; emphasis added). So censoring out the nasty bits cannot, in fact, be his account of transfiguration.

Nietzsche speaks of Apollonian art as 'transform[ing] the most terrible things by joy in mere appearance and redemption through mere appearance' (BT 12). And he speaks of the Apollonian artist as – unlike the scientist, who always wants to get to the bottom of, to 'uncover', things – one who 'cling[s] with rapt gaze on what remains covering even after such uncovering' (BT 15). Even after the uncovering of unpleasant truth, the Apollonian artist takes delight in the 'beautiful', delight, that is, in 'beautiful forms' (BT 16).

This suggests that the art of the Homeric epic – and the corresponding attitude to life – is a matter of, not elimination, but rather focus. It suggests an attitude in which one is inclined to describe life as 'terrible but magnificent'. In the Renaissance painter Uccello's *Battle of San Romano*, for example (please google 'Uccello Battle of San Romano'), the ground is littered with bodies and body parts, but what captures one's attention is the magnificence of the horses, the exhilarating athleticism of the combatants, the sheen on the armour, and the vibrant colour of the proudly flying pennants. (This is an apposite comparison since, at one point, Nietzsche says that human existence is like the existence of a soldier in an oil-painting of a battle scene (BT 5).) Were one to look for a modern instance of Apollonian art, what might come to mind is the western: death and destruction are all about, but what one focuses on is the beauty, courage and sheer 'style' of its heroes. To some extent the same phenomenon occurs in the world of the magazines at the supermarket checkout counter. Terrible things – drunkenness, disease, drugs and divorce – happen to the gods and goddesses who inhabit this world (film stars, royals and football players), but through it all their glamour remains, their stardom shines on. (Homer was, of course, the *popular* culture of eighth-century Greece, so this comparison is not as wide of the mark as



it might seem.)

\* \* \*

The Apollonian attitude to life – in a later work Nietzsche calls it ‘superficiality out of profundity’ (GS ‘Preface to the Second Edition’, 4) – requires a strongly external approach to both others and ourselves. It requires that death be, as it is in the Western or the video game, bloodless and painless. It requires a kind of inner anaesthesia. This, I think, is why Nietzsche associates it with ‘illusion’: it, as it were, represents a three-dimensional object as two-dimensional. Though there is no censorship of *facts* there is, nonetheless, censorship – censorship of *perspectives*. The inner perspective, how it feels to be on the *inside* of loss, injury and mortality, is not allowed to be shown. But the Greeks *knew* about the inside of things. They had an exquisite sensitivity to the ‘terror and horror’ of existence. This is why Nietzsche calls the Apollonian attitude (in an entirely non-judgemental way) a ‘lie’. It is a form of self-deception.

This makes the Apollonian outlook seem a somewhat fragile ‘prophylactic’ (BT 11) against nihilism, against ‘nausea’ and despair. The pain of things has a way of forcing itself on one, no matter how ‘superficially’ one lives. One thinks, perhaps, of the tragic imprisonment, decay and death of the brilliant Oscar Wilde (Nietzsche’s almost exact contemporary), the ‘aesthete’ who can be seen as attempting to personify the Apollonian stance. Or one thinks of the impossibility of maintaining such a stance in the face of the death of one’s child.

It is on account of this fragility, I think, that, while giving the Apollonian solution to nihilism honourable mention, Nietzsche’s preferred solution, in *The Birth*, is the Dionysian, the solution embodied in Greek tragedy and which he describes as the ‘more profound’ (BT 10) of the two. With Greek tragedy, he says, art attains ‘the highest goal ... of all art’ (BT 21, 24); it is, that is to say, of the highest service to life (BT 2, 5).

## The Dionysian solution to nihilism

Nietzsche’s key word for the Apollonian is ‘dream’. This does double duty, indicating, first, that the world of the *principium individuationis* is ideal, ultimately, as Schopenhauer says, a mere dream, and second, that, in Apollonian art, that world has been raised to a state of beauty. It serves the latter function because, for Nietzsche, beauty consists in the economy of ‘essential’ or ‘significant’ form, and because ‘in our dreams we delight in immediate understanding of figures; all forms speak to us; there is nothing unimportant or superfluous’ (BT 1). Dreams, that is, are like good literature. Shakespeare does not tell us whether or not Hamlet had a mole under his left arm because such a detail is aesthetically irrelevant. In a similar way, dreams omit the irrelevant.

By contrast, his key word for the Dionysian is *Rausch* – ‘intoxication’, ‘ecstasy’, ‘rapture’, ‘frenzy’. (Dionysus, Bacchus, is of course the god of wine.) Dionysian consciousness is a state of metaphysical intoxication in which we overcome the ‘sobriety’ of ordinary Apollonian consciousness which presents the world of the *principium individuationis* as absolute and ultimate reality. In Dionysian rapture, one penetrates the ‘veil of Maya’ (BT 1) (notice, once again, the reappearance of Schopenhauer’s Indian terminology) to realise that, in truth,

reality is beyond plurality, is the 'universal will' (BT 17), a 'primordial unity' (BT 1).

Dionysian consciousness is (like literal intoxication) a double-edged phenomenon. On the one hand it can have a benign expression: 'under the charm of the Dionysian' it can happen that the 'rigid hostile barriers' which the Apollonian mind has set between man and man, and between man and nature, are broken down. In the Dionysian festivals of the ancient world those barriers are replaced by a 'gospel of universal harmony' in which everyone

feels himself not only united, reconciled, and fused with his neighbour, but quite literally one with him, as if the veil of Maya had been torn aside and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious primordial being.

(BT 1)

(Nietzsche adds that it is this 'gospel' that receives expression in the choral singing in the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.)

On the other hand, Dionysian consciousness can lead to a 'horrible witches brew' of 'sensuality and cruelty' (BT 2). It can have this consequence because, if we are all, in reality, one then the individual is without value. In the death of an individual, nothing at all is lost. Human sacrifice may even occur as an affirmation of the transindividual nature of our true identity. (Deer hunters sometimes speak of the mystic bond between hunter and prey, even of the deer as 'willing' its own death. Underlying such talk is, I think, the metaphysics of Dionysianism, the identity of all things in the primordial unity.)

The 'barbarians' of the ancient world had no protection against the possibility of a horrible manifestation of Dionysianism. It was the achievement of the Greeks, however, to divert Dionysian consciousness into art, specifically into tragedy. Instead of actual human sacrifice, we have, in tragedy, the symbolic sacrifice of the hero. Without eliminating Dionysian intoxication, the Greeks made it safe.

\* \* \*

The question Nietzsche focuses on with regard to Greek tragedy is the nature of the 'tragic effect', a question that has puzzled philosophers since Aristotle. Why is it that we willingly subject ourselves to – and therefore, presumably derive some kind of satisfaction from – the sight of the catastrophic, the destruction of, not just human beings, but, in many respects, the finest examples of itself that humanity has to offer? Nietzsche's answer is that whereas Apollonian art teaches us to take delight in the phenomenal world, Dionysian art 'teaches us that we are to seek joy not in the phenomena but behind them' (BT 17). The destruction of the tragic hero is presented in such a way that we do not become 'rigid with fear' (Greek tragedy is different from a horror movie). Rather, 'a metaphysical comfort tears us momentarily from the bustle of changing figures. We really are, for a brief moment, the primordial being itself' (ibid.).

Schopenhauer, following Kant (and ultimately, the eighteenth-century English philosopher-politician, Edmund Burke), distinguished between the 'beautiful' and the 'sublime'. Experience of the beautiful is experience of significant form in the phenomena, the feeling of the sublime is becoming alive to one's supra-phenomenal nature, to, in Kant's words, 'the supersensible side of our being'. Tragedy is the highest form of the 'feeling of the sublime' (WR I: 253; II: 433).

Nietzsche's account of the tragic effect is almost exactly the same, indeed he uses the same word: the 'artistic taming of the horrible' is, he says, 'the sublime' (BT 7). Tragic joy consists in an at least momentary escape from the terrors of existence as an individual human being and is, therefore, an intimation of our 'higher', supra-human destiny: tragedy

in the person of the tragic hero ... knows how to redeem us from the greedy thirst for existence, and with an admonishing gesture ... reminds us of another existence and a higher pleasure for which the tragic hero prepared himself by means of his destruction, not by means of his triumphs.

(BT 21)

What enables Greek tragedy to produce this 'metaphysical comfort' is the chorus. Tragedy, that is to say, grew out of the Dionysian festivals of archaic Greece, festivals of ecstatic chanting in which everyone took part. Even after the addition of actors and the formal division between chorus and audience, the audience still felt itself to be part of the chorus. Thus, though partially identifying with the tragic hero and experiencing, therefore, his or her suffering, the audience identifies primarily with the chorus whose dithyrambic singing draws it into a primal oneness. (The football crowd feeling.) Thus, whereas the 'barbarians', in an exuberant affirmation of their supra-individual and inexhaustible identity, sacrificed people in reality, the Greeks sacrificed them in art.

Nietzsche says that tragedy offers 'a profound and pessimistic view of the world'. It offers 'the conception of individuation [membership of the world of the *principium individuationis*] as the primal cause of evil', but also 'the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness' (BT 10). And he speaks of the yearning of Dionysian initiates for a 'rebirth of Dionysus which we must now dimly conceive as the end of individuation' (ibid.). But if *this* is the nature of the tragic effect, why did the Greeks *not* lapse into 'nausea' and 'Buddhist negation of the will'? Why did the Greeks *act*? Because, Nietzsche answers, they were subject to the 'noble deception' (BT 21) that their tragedies concerned only individuals in a world of individuality, concerned only the Apollonian realm. Even the authors of these works could not understand their true import. In this way, the Greeks received a 'metaphysical comfort' while, at the same time, being 'relieved of the burden' of explicit metaphysical insight. The effectiveness of Dionysian art, therefore, is that while, on the one hand, it affirms to us our ultimate deliverance from the pain and anxiety of individuation, on the other – recognising, as it were, that 'action requires the veil of illusion' (BT 7) – it acts like a fairy godmother and draws a veil of forgetfulness over what we have experienced. In this way, we are returned to the world, strangely comforted yet able to act.

## European Buddhism

What has early Nietzsche to tell us about the meaning of life? Here, we have to confront a difficulty in his methodology. Nietzsche assumes that by studying the Greeks we are studying ourselves and our own situation. The task of the classicist, he writes in an unpublished essay, is that of 'understanding *his own* age

better by means of the classical world'. The Greeks overcame nausea and nihilism through tragedy and so can we – through the rebirth of Greek tragedy in the music dramas of Richard Wagner. But what he forgets is the effect of his own discussion of tragedy: we, his readers, can't be subject to the 'noble deception' because he, Nietzsche, has, as it were, spilled the beans. If, that is, we are convinced by his metaphysics then we *know* about our supra-individual identity, and if we are convinced by his pessimism then we know that life in the world of the *principium individuationis* is, inescapably and unalterably, suffering. Why, then, should we engage with that world, why should we act? If 'action requires the veil of illusion', if action requires false belief about life and metaphysics, then knowing the truth entails that we should *abandon* action. Unlike the Greeks, Nietzsche, and any reader he manages to convince, is, in fact, himself committed to 'Buddhistic negation of the will'. In a word, though he is somewhat confused about it, early Nietzsche's response to pessimism is essentially the same as that of his master, Schopenhauer. Like Schopenhauer, he is a 'European Buddhist'.

Later Nietzsche knows this perfectly well, referring to his youthful self as suffering from a bad case of 'romanticism', by which he means pessimism about this world combined with 'metaphysical comfort', the offering of a fuzzy kind of other-worldly redemption. In the 1886 'Attempt at a Self-Criticism', which he added as a kind of introduction to later editions of *The Birth*, he advises 'young romantics' such as himself to abandon metaphysics and seek rather a '*this-worldly* comfort'.

## The world as an aesthetic phenomenon

Is there nothing early Nietzsche has to add to Schopenhauer's solution to nihilism? One thing, I think. Schopenhauer says, it will be remembered (a) that 'redemption' consists in reunion with the absolute, transcendence of the *principium individuationis*, but also that (b) the absolute, the 'thing in itself', is absolutely evil. As we observed, however, these propositions are incompatible (p. 63). Union with evil cannot be regarded as redemption, but can only be viewed with horror and revulsion.

Schopenhauer's view of the absolute as absolute evil is simply the reversal of the Christian view of it as absolute good. Nietzsche, however, suggests a third view. The source of all existence is to be conceived, neither as saint nor sadist, but rather as 'an entirely reckless and amoral artist-god' (BT 'Attempt at a Self-Criticism' 5), a 'world-building force' which 'the dark Heraclitus compares to a playing child who places stones here and there and builds sand hills only to overthrow them again' (BT 24). This child-artist creates the world of the *principium individuationis* for its own entertainment. That is its sole point and justification: 'only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world ... justified' (BT 5, 24). The world is a kind of gigantic movie the point of which is to occupy and entertain its 'sole author and spectator' (recall the 1998 movie *The Truman Show*). Or rather, it is a series of movies – to view the same movie all the time would become boring. From time to time the creative force destroys the sandcastle worlds it has built and constructs new ones. (This corresponds to what

we regard as 'the terrible destructiveness of ... world history' (p. 76 above.)

How does this Nietzschean anthropomorphisation of the absolute bear on the inconsistency in Schopenhauer's philosophy? Very much later, Nietzsche writes in his notebooks:

Against the theory that the 'in-itself' must necessarily be good, blessed, true, and one, Schopenhauer's interpretation of the 'in-itself' as will was an essential step; but he did not understand how to *deify* this will; he remained entangled in the moral-Christian ideal ... see[ing] it as bad, stupid, and absolutely reprehensible.

(WP 1005)

This is completely correct. Schopenhauer judges the Christian God by the standards of Christian morality and finds it absolutely wanting. This moralisation, Nietzsche suggests, is what creates the inconsistency in Schopenhauer's position. If, on the other hand, we view the primordial unity as a 'child' – as, that is, 'innocent', an inappropriate object of moral judgement – then the barrier to regarding unification with it as 'salvation' is removed.

This, it seems to me, is Nietzsche's contribution to the Schopenhauerian solution to the perceived worthlessness of our existence. It is not merely the child-artist who must be regarded as 'amoral'. We must become amoral – 'beyond good and evil' (BT Attempt at a Self-Criticism' 5) – in order to escape the pain of life as an individual through identification with the author-creator of the world-movie. The main significance of *The Birth* is as a kind of footnote to Schopenhauer, a footnote that removes an inconsistency in 'European Buddhism'.<sup>1</sup>

## Critique of European Buddhism

European Buddhism is an exotic version of true-worldism. According to it, the meaning of life is the attainment of *nirvana*, passage from this world of pain to a place (or 'place') that is 'beyond suffering'. Should we become European Buddhists?

The answer, surely, is that we should if and only if there really is (or we have reason to think there might well be) a place beyond suffering, a paradise or utopia. Why should we believe this?

According to Schopenhauer, the serenity of the mystics, their 'oceanlike calmness of spirit' is 'complete and certain gospel' (WR I: 411). But this is silly. There are people who are serene because they think they are about to be teleported away by beings from another planet. Others are serene because they think Christ's Second Coming is about to happen. Are we to believe in imminent salvation by aliens or salvation by Christ? What is important for serenity is belief, not knowledge. Delusions can produce serenity at least as well as truth. ('We possess art lest we perish of the truth' later Nietzsche suggests in one place.) And in any case mystic serenity may well be caused, not by any particular vision, but by the endorphin bursts produced by ascetic practices.

The real argument that beyond the phenomenal world there really is a painless place, only implicit in Schopenhauer, is first made explicit by Nietzsche. It goes

like this. We know from Kant that the world of space-time is ideal, appearance merely, not reality 'in itself'. And we know from Schopenhauer that plurality and individuality can only exist within space and time. It follows that ultimate reality is 'beyond plurality', beyond individuality. But 'individuality [is] ... the source of all suffering' (BT 10). Hence ultimate reality must be beyond suffering.

The reason individuality is taken to be the source of suffering is, I think, this. At the most general level of analysis, as we know from Schopenhauer, suffering is a disjunction between subject and object, between the way I want the world to be and the way it is. So suffering presupposes a distinction between subject and object, presupposes division, difference, plurality, individuality. Hence, beyond space and time, beyond plurality, there can be no suffering.

The trouble with this argument is that, actually, we *don't* know from Kant that reality itself is beyond space and time. Let us return once again to the tiresomely helpful sunglasses analogy. Everything looks green through green sunglasses. So we suppose that the image of reality that appears through the glasses fails to correspond to the way reality actually is. But maybe, in fact, everything where we are *is* green. The same is true with respect to Kant. From the fact that the human mind constructs its own story of the world, nothing at all actually follows about whether or not that story corresponds to the way it really is. Maybe it just so happens that the world we construct exactly corresponds to the way the 'in itself' really is.

René Magritte, the brilliant surrealist painter, made this point in a witty critique of Kant's style of true-world thinking. One of his hyper-realistic paintings (please google 'Magritte *The Key to the Fields*') shows, from the inside, a window on which has been painted a landscape of meadow and hills. The window has a jagged hole in it, broken, perhaps, by some projectile coming from within the room. Through the hole one can see a portion of the real landscape beyond the window. It exactly fits the painted landscape, the contours of the two are completely continuous. The painting seems to be aimed directly at European Buddhism: a person has leapt through the window to be free of the mundane world only to discover himself in – the mundane world.

What follows from this is that Kantians – those who accept the broad (and surely correct) thesis that the mind (or language) constructs our image of reality – must take absolutely seriously, more seriously than Kant himself took it, the thesis that there is *nothing at all* we can know about that which lies beyond that image, *including* the claim that it is radically different in character from the world that is presented within the image.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, even if reality does not, in fact, possess the spatio-temporal ordering of our constructed world, it by no means follows that it is 'beyond plurality'. For it might still be spatio-temporal, its space-time differing from ours only in having different mathematical properties. (This is the case with respect to the difference between common-sense space and Einsteinian space. The former is Euclidean – the angles of a triangle equal 180 degrees – but the latter is not. Since gravity 'bends' light, a triangle in Einsteinian space, defined as the intersection of three light rays, actually has angles greater than 180 degrees.)

\* \* \*

In Chapter 4 we saw Schopenhauer providing us with a powerful reason for rejecting the Christian account of ultimate reality. Since our world is evidently

not the best of all possible worlds, it cannot be the creation of an all-powerful, wholly benevolent God. That left the field open for an alternative account of the 'thing in itself', specifically, for the account provided by European Buddhism. We now see, however, that we have no good reason to believe in a domain beyond plurality and thus beyond pain. Belief in *nirvana*, while not as irrational as belief in the heaven of traditional Christianity, is still irrational.

\* \* \*

Another, quite different, kind of objection to European Buddhism – and, in fact, to the Platonic and Christian versions of true-world philosophy, as well – is one that is raised by Nietzsche himself, in a later phase of his thinking. Discussing 'romantic pessimism', he raises the question as to why anyone should *need* a 'metaphysical comfort' for life in this world. Why should they be attracted to a doctrine – *this*-worldly nihilism – that represents life in this world as worthless? Because, it seems plausible to conclude, such people represent life's *failures*, those lacking in the spiritual energy, the spiritual *health*, to cope with its challenges and complexities (GS 370). They are, to put it unkindly, life's failures, its cripples.

The upshot of the reflections of this chapter, together with the discussion of Kant, Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, is, then, that neither the Christian nor the European Buddhist version of the true-world answer to the question of the meaning of life is any good. As thinking beings we have no grounds for believing in any kind of supra-natural paradise. And if we find ourselves, in spite of this, drawn towards such belief, drawn towards the Kierkegaardian 'leap', then we should try to improve our state of psychological health.

This, however, is not the end of the true world. For as we will see in the next chapter, its extraordinary adaptability enables it to survive the death of the supernatural.

## Notes

- 1 On the whole Nietzsche removes this inconsistency. Sometimes, however, he suggests that the primordial unity itself is 'ever suffering and contradictory and has need of rapt vision and delightful illusion to redeem itself' (BT 4). The child-artist creates the world in order to distract itself from its own pain. This messes everything up. It is inconsistent with 'individuation is the primal cause of evil' (BT 10) and makes it incomprehensible why anyone should find 'metaphysical comfort' in identification with the primordial unity – recreates, that is to say, the Schopenhauerian inconsistency that has just been resolved. Moreover, the reference to 'delightful illusion', with its suggestion that the primordial unity is an *Apollonian* artist, indicates a confusion in Nietzsche's mind between the two senses of 'Apollonian'. The only 'artwork' the primordial unity can create is the Apollonian world, in the *mundane* sense of the word. All it can create is the 'dream'. Apollonian art, however, is that world raised to a state of glory. It is a dream *within* a dream which only *human* artists can have. Conceived as an artist, in fact, the primordial unity is *neither* an Apollonian *nor* a Dionysian artist. Nietzsche's categories do not cover this case.
- 2 Kant himself thought that we could have the negative knowledge about the in itself that it is non-spatio-temporal. For as mentioned in Chapter 2 (p. 19), he argues that insoluble paradoxes, 'antinomies', arise from the supposition that space and time have mind-independent reality: we can prove that they are both finite and infinite. While these arguments are of great interest, it is pretty obvious that they cannot finally be sound: contemporary science, while containing many perplexities, does not find itself driven into intolerable antinomies by assuming, as it does, the reality of space and time.

## 7 Hegel

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) was born, wrote, became a professor, wrote a great deal more, and died. Nothing else interesting happened in his life. (Actually this is not quite true. He had an illegitimate child and was, in his student days, intimate friends with the great romantic poet, Friedrich Hölderlin.)

Readers disagree as to where, in his massive output, the ‘essential’ Hegel is to be found. Following Marx and Sartre, I take the view that he is to be found mainly in the relatively early work, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which he completed in 1806, in Jena, to the sound of the guns of Napoleon’s advancing army. The *Phenomenology* will be our principal text.

The 600 pages of the *Phenomenology* are extraordinarily difficult to read. This is partly because of the mud-like obscurity of Hegel’s prose (Schopenhauer claims that reading Hegel rots the brain (WR II: 442)) and partly because there appears to be no genuine principle of organisation: the discussion swerves from topic to unrelated topic in a way that has led some readers to suggest that the *Phenomenology* was written under the influence of drugs and others to compare it to the works of James Joyce – to view it as the product of an unmediated ‘stream of consciousness’. Nonetheless it is a work that has had an extraordinary influence on world history, on nineteenth-century German philosophy and on twentieth-century French philosophy, and so it requires discussion.

### Absolute idealism

The aim of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel says, is to establish the truth of what he calls ‘absolute idealism’. Our first task is, therefore, to find out what this is.

Writing only twenty-five years after the publication of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and only two years after Kant’s death, one would naturally assume ‘idealism’ to indicate that Hegel is operating within Kant’s dichotomy between mind-dependent, mind-constructed ‘phenomena’ or ‘appearances’ and the mind-independent ‘thing in itself’. In fact, however, this is not the case. His own ‘absolute idealism’ is, he says, quite different from Kant’s ‘subjective idealism’ which he rejects.<sup>1</sup> For him objects in space and time are entirely real. As Schopenhauer says, Hegel ‘regards the *phenomenon* as the *being in itself* of the world’ (WR II: 442), in other words, draws no distinction between the space-time world and ultimate reality. What then is ‘absolute idealism’? What, in particular, is ‘ideal’ about it?

The doctrine, it seems to me, can be captured in the following five



propositions.

(1) The 'absolute' – the 'unconditioned' or, in Kant's language, 'thing in itself' – is a 'subject', an 'I' (PS 233). It is a person-like entity in that it has particular goals. (James Lovelock's 'Gaia Hypothesis' makes the same suggestion with respect to the earth.) Hegel's designation of it as *Geist*, 'mind' or better 'spirit', is indicative of this person-like character. It is conscious, hence he often refers to it simply as 'consciousness'. And it is rational, hence it is often referred to just as 'reason'.

(2) 'The true is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development' (PS 20). The absolute is, that is, best regarded not as a thing but as a process, an 'organic' (PS 2) process of self-development. As an acorn contains the 'essence' of the oak, so the goal of this process, and the various steps leading to it, are contained in the absolute from the beginning as an entelechy, a kind of blueprint of its full development, its 'essence'.

(3) The bearers of this process, the agents through which it happens, are human beings. Individuals who are especially prominent in bringing about the next step in the developmental process, Luther or Napoleon, for example, are known as 'world-historical' individuals.<sup>2</sup>

(4) 'Nature is *rational within itself*.'<sup>3</sup> The history of the world divides up into distinct world-views, spirits of the age, or, as Hegel calls them, 'shapes of consciousness'. The transition from one shape of consciousness to the next is 'dialectical', is, that is, the product of rational criticism, of a rational 'conversation' (*dialectos*, in Greek, means conversation) that spirit has with itself. The development which this criticism (Hegel calls it 'negation') produces has a triadic structure. An existing shape of consciousness, a 'thesis', is seen to be inadequate which gives rise to an opposing shape, an 'antithesis'. Both shapes are found to be too 'onesided' and so a third shape comes into being which provides a 'synthesis' of what is valuable in each. Recent Hegel scholars typically reject this triadic account of the dialectic, mainly on the grounds that it often does not fit the developmental narratives Hegel provides. That, however, may show, not that Hegel did not picture the dialectic in a triadic way, but that he had difficulty in applying the picture to actual history, a point to which I shall return. Note that thesis (4) explains why Hegel calls his metaphysics absolute *idealism*. If history is dialectical in something like the manner suggested then it is driven not by accident or by material causes but by the conflict and reconciliation of *ideas*. ('Ideational realism' might be a less misleading title than 'absolute idealism'.)

(5) The process is finite. It will terminate when a shape of consciousness arrives that is susceptible to no further criticism. When this happens 'time', that is history, is 'annulled' (PS 801–2). We will have reached the 'end of history'.

\* \* \*

How does Hegel aim to convince us of this mind-boggling metaphysical doctrine? His method consists in actually *presenting* the history of the world (actually of the West – Hegel is a complete 'Eurocentrist') as a process conforming to thesis (4) above. His aim, he says, is to show, in the presentation, that 'the series of shapes [*Gestaltungen*] which consciousness goes through along the road is, in reality the detailed history of the *education* [*Bildung*] of

consciousness to the standpoint of science' (PS 78), the 'standpoint of science' being the history-terminating shape mentioned in (5) above. Hegel's method, in other words, is to exhibit 'world' history as a *Bildungsroman*. (A *Bildungsroman* is a 'novel of education' in which, through a series of, sometimes painful, 'learning experiences', the hero progresses from naivety to wisdom.) Part of Hegel's *Roman*, in some ways its most successful part, is a history of science, a history of the dialectic at work in the progress of our attempt to unravel the secrets of nature, a history that proceeds from the first beginnings of science with our prehistoric ancestors and terminates with modern (Newtonian) science. The bulk of the *Phenomenology*, however, focuses not on theoretical but on practical life, on humanity's efforts to find a satisfactory organisation of social life. I shall discuss Hegel's two most famous illustrations of the dialectic at work in social life, his discussion of the Greek state and his discussion of the master-slave relationship.

### ***Antigone* and the Greek state**

As far as politics is concerned, world history begins (and almost ends), for Hegel, with what he calls the 'ethical' or 'happy' state (PS 444–83). He indicates that the reference, here, is to the 'ancient' world (PS 390). Fairly clearly, as we shall see, the specific reference is to the time and place in which Sophocles was writing, namely Athens in the fifth century BCE.

The happy state is a state of harmonious cooperation which is grounded in the fact that every individual recognises his or her highest commitments in the 'ethical substance' of a people. This ethical substance, the 'living spirit' of a society, is constituted by its *ethos* or 'customs [*Sittlichkeit*]', its ethical tradition. It is constituted, as one might put it, by an intuitive, shared sense of how 'we' do things. Since everyone accepts the same set of fundamental ethical standards, it would seem that there can be no fundamental ethical clashes within the ethical state. Moreover, since custom is something independent of the will of any individual or elite, there can, Hegel thinks, be no question of anyone finding the conventions of custom oppressive. The harmonious order of custom-based society is something entirely different from the kind of order created by a dictator or his secret police. It is not an order that is imposed, but one that freely flows from the individual's own will.

Why, then, is the 'happy' state no longer with us? Why did it collapse? Because of an unresolved tension concealed within its ethical substance. Following Sophocles' *Antigone*, Hegel divides the 'customs' that make up ethical substance into 'divine laws' and 'human laws' (PS 445). The former are the laws of the family, the latter the laws of the state. The former are generally intuitively felt rather than verbally articulated (Antigone appeals to the 'unwritten laws divine'), the latter are conceptually articulated. Otherwise put – since, says Hegel, men generally have clear, conceptually articulate intelligences focused on the universal while women have dark, intuitive intelligences focused on the particular – family values are the primary values of women while state values are the primary values of men. (Recall Freud's claims about women's lack of interest in, and capacity for, the works of 'civilisation' (p. 70 above).) In *Antigone* – which Hegel takes to be the emergence into literature of the unresolved tension in Greek

*ethos* – these two sets of values come into outright, and tragic, conflict. The king, Creon, orders that, because he attacked his own city, the body of Oedipus' son, Polyneices, shall, on pain of death, be left unburied. (Polyneices attacked Thebes, it should be said, only because, on Oedipus' death, the two brothers had agreed to share the throne, turn and turn about, an agreement Eteocles broke by refusing to abdicate.) Antigone, however, knows that it is her duty to bury her brother (without a proper burial he will have a tormented afterlife), buries him, and is condemned to death.

According to Hegel, the tension between male and female values – 'gender politics' – led to the downfall of the Greek state. The women resent and make fun of the grave universalism of the men – their devotion to the affairs of the state, of the community as a whole – and encourage the natural tendency to anarchic individualism (teenage rebellion) among the youth. Eventually anarchy takes over and the state collapses.

Hegel discusses *Antigone* in greater detail in his *Aesthetics Lectures* in the process of illustrating a general theory of tragedy.<sup>4</sup> Both Antigone and Creon, he there points out, are 'one-sided' fanatics. Not only do they disagree concerning the relative importance of state and family, they do not attach *any* weight to each other's values and do not listen to each other's arguments. They are both thus 'right' and yet at the same time 'guilty'. We, however, in reflecting on the drama, can see this. And because we do, we can see the need for, and possibility of, what Hegel calls a 'reconciliation' between the two positions. Out of the conflict between the 'thesis' of family and 'antithesis' of state we can see that a proper political order, while attaching great importance to the good of society as a whole, will also recognise and protect individual rights. We see, moreover, something else. We see that, although we may not yet have achieved a perfect balance between individual rights and communal obligations, we have, since the time of the Greeks (who executed Socrates merely for teaching philosophy), at least made progress towards finding the proper synthesis between their competing demands. We see, in short, that 'reason' has been at work in history.

## The master–slave dialectic

The master–slave dialectic (PS 166–96), although relatively short, has been more widely discussed than any other part of the *Phenomenology*. The dialectic begins with what Hegel calls the 'life and death struggle' (PS 187–88). A self-conscious being, having for a long time regarded other self-conscious beings as mere 'objects' ('sex objects', presumably, will have been particularly salient) suddenly realises that 'the other' is self-conscious, is just like himself. (The individual in question is, relatively speaking, a kind of genius, a 'world-historical individual'. Perhaps what he does is to work out that just as he screams when stabbed by a spear *because he is in pain* so, since the other screams when stabbed with a spear, he, too, is probably conscious of pain.) Our hero's immediate reaction is to 'supersede the otherness of itself' (PS 180), in other words to kill the other.

Notice that, reasonably clearly, the life and death struggle corresponds to what the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes called the 'state of nature': the condition of humanity prior to the birth of the first organised society, the first state. Like Hobbes, Hegel pictures this as a state of 'war, all against all', a

condition in which human life is, as Hobbes put it, 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'.<sup>5</sup>

The difficult question is why Hegel thinks that primeval man's instinctive reaction is to fear the other as an enemy rather than to welcome him as a friend, as his man Friday, someone to alleviate his solitude. His answer is that it is only in the fight to the death that 'freedom is won' (PS 187). What, then, is 'freedom'? Recalling that Hegel is supposed to be providing a *Bildungsroman* of humanity's development from infancy to maturity, and since we are, here, in the infancy stage, it may be helpful to think of individual infants, babies. The baby is lord of all it surveys. It simply commands – cries – and is usually obeyed. Sometimes there is a delay, but that is simply temporary malfunction of the system. It is not due to a challenge to its lordship, to competition. But then, one day, a new sibling arrives. As we know, this results in 'sibling rivalry'. The newcomer is resented because it provides competition for scarce resources. The baby wishes to restore the status quo ante where it has unrestricted 'freedom' to satisfy its demands.

Killing the other turns out, however, to be a bad move. The reason is that we have a fundamental need for *Anerkennung*, which may be translated either as 'recognition' or 'acknowledgement'. And that is something a corpse cannot provide.

Millennia of existence without 'recognition' pass until one day, another world-historical genius has a brilliant idea. Up to now, he reflects, I have killed the other because he threatened my freedom, my unchallenged power. But in killing him I deprived myself of the recognition I crave. The solution – light bulbs start flashing – is not to kill but rather to enslave the other. As a slave he knows he cannot challenge my power because he will be killed if he attempts to do so. But as a human being rather than a corpse he can give me recognition. (Notice the triadic progression here: the 'thesis' of killing the other preserves freedom but precludes recognition, the 'antithesis' of allowing the other to roam free allows recognition but restricts freedom, and so the 'synthesis' of slavery arrives which, so it seems, allows for recognition while preserving freedom.) Thus we pass from the state of nature to the first societies, which were, of course, as a matter of historical fact, slave societies.

In fact, however, the brilliant idea of enslaving the other in order to receive recognition without having to fear a challenge to one's power wasn't really a brilliant idea at all. For since the slave lives in terror of the master the 'recognition' he fulsomely offers is not genuine recognition but is offered in order to avoid torture and death. At least, although the slave might genuinely admire the master, the latter can never be sure that he is being offered anything more than prudent lip service. Even if he could be sure, the 'recognition' would still be valueless to him simply because the slave is a slave. Since he is, in the master's eyes, simply a tool for satisfying his desires, a mere 'thing' (PS 89–90), he can no more provide 'recognition proper' than can a washing machine. Being 'one-sided and unequal' (PS 191) the recognition is valueless.

\* \* \*

What is the moral of this story? We need first of all to work out what 'recognition' amounts to. It amounts, surely, to *respect*. The kind of respect Kant talks about when he says that the ultimate law of morality is the command to treat all human beings as 'ends in themselves' and never merely as means. And

the point of Hegel's story is that for me to gain respect 'proper' the person I gain it from must be a *free* person, free of my power. Furthermore, he must be, in some sense, *equal* to me. If, for instance, I want respect as a musician, say as a concert violinist, the only people who can give it to me are other musicians whom I respect as musicians. The hero worship of people who know virtually nothing about violin playing is not what I desire. I may, indeed, find it positively tiresome. Recognition is reciprocal. It can only come from those I respect as my peers.

But why do I actually need recognition? Hegel says that 'self-consciousness exists in and for itself only when it so exists for another – that is in being acknowledged' (PS 178). 'Self-consciousness' is Hegel's word for 'person'. But he cannot here mean what at first glance he seems to mean: he cannot mean to say that it is impossible to be the last person alive (after, say, a nuclear holocaust). What he is doing, I think, is taking 'person' in an essentially legal sense and saying that I cannot regard myself as a person in the legal sense unless others so regard me, other beings whom I myself regard as persons. It is similar, it seems to me, to diplomatic recognition. The Palestinians cannot simply declare themselves to be a nation. Even in their own eyes they cannot genuinely regard themselves as a nation until they receive recognition as such from other countries – by, for example, being admitted into the United Nations. It is the same with regard to being a doctor. I cannot be a doctor, even in my own eyes, if no one recognises me as a doctor. To be a doctor I must be recognised as such by those I recognise as doctors, i.e. by the Medical Council.

What is it to acknowledge someone as a person in the legal and moral sense, to recognise him or her as a person as opposed to a mere 'thing'? It is to recognise and respect them as the bearer of *rights*, rights which mere 'things' do not have, rights such as freedom of speech, conscience, religion and so on.

What has the master–slave dialectic got to do with showing the operation of reason in history? Hegel's essential point, I think, is that we in modernity, for all the imperfections of our social organisation, have at least advanced beyond the slave society. We do acknowledge individual rights – maybe not enough or not the right ones, but we have at least progressed, plausibly by a 'dialectical' process of trial and error, beyond the kind of societies that existed in the past. We have, of course, a great deal further to go, but we have at least made progress. Notice that here, as in the discussion of the imperfections of the Greek state, acknowledgement of the individual is of crucial importance. Clearly progress towards, in the proper sense of the word, liberalism is a crucial element in discovering what Hegel regards as the operation of reason in history.

## Overcoming alienation

I said at the beginning of this chapter that the point of the *Phenomenology* is to establish the truth of absolute idealism. But actually that is only the penultimate point. The ultimate point is, says Hegel, to overcome 'alienation' (PS 19). To the mind untutored by (his) philosophy, he observes, the world can appear as a chaotic and alien place, hostile or at best indifferent to our desires and purposes. The final aim of philosophy is to overcome this sense of despair by enabling us to discover a reason and order in nature that is in harmony with our own reason.

‘The aim’, he says, ‘is to divest the objective world that stands opposed to us of its strangeness, and, as the phrase is, find ourselves at home in it.’<sup>6</sup> And discovering reason, our own kind of reason, at work in the world does this because it enables us to pursue our own goals – as long as they are rational goals – with confidence of success. As a truck driver who knows the roads well is said to be ‘at home’ on the road – which means that he can find his way from place to place with ease and confidence – so we can be ‘at home’ in a world that reflects our own rationality back at us, a world, Nietzsche remarks, which has been ‘anthropomorphised’ (GS 109) by Hegel’s philosophy.

I should like, now, to suggest that the problem of alienation Hegel sets out to overcome is essentially the same problem that Kant seeks to overcome in his final version of the ‘moral proof’ of the necessity of belief in God (pp. 20–2 above). The virtuous atheist, ‘say Spinoza’, we saw Kant arguing, must despair of morality because without faith that God’s hidden hand is at work he can find no reason to believe that the history of the world is in progress towards the final end of morality, the utopia in which all are both perfectly good and perfectly happy. (In a similar manner, Kant might suggest, a doctor, deprived of the conviction that medicine was making progress towards producing a race of completely healthy human beings, might give up being a doctor.) To act with moral conviction, to find one’s life’s meaning in the moral task, Kant argues, one needs to believe in God as an active cause at work in the history of the world. One needs to believe that, in one’s moral endeavours, one has the tide of history with one – that there is a ‘tide’ of history and that it is progressing towards the ‘highest good’. One needs to believe, in a word, in providence.

But this is just what Hegel provides us with: a world that is moving towards the final good because it is becoming more and more rational – a God in history. Moreover, if his basic claim about the rationality of history is correct, Hegel improves on Kant in an important respect: whereas, for Kant, belief that history is providential is a matter merely of *faith*, for Hegel it is a matter of *fact*. It is a matter of fact because what he has done is to translate Kant’s God into the inexorable logic, the dialectic, of history.

Something, of course, has been lost in translation. For while Kant’s God inhabits an atemporal super-nature, Hegel’s God is entirely natural: it is the inner essence of nature, of time. Otherwise expressed, Hegel’s God is the object of Kierkegaard’s ‘religiousness A’ (p. 42 above) while Kant and Kierkegaard’s God is the object of ‘religiousness B’. But that, for Hegel, is all to the good. For what Kant and Kierkegaard believe in is, in effect, the old God of the Middle Ages, the God which is the object of what Hegel calls the ‘unhappy consciousness’ (PS 206–30). The unhappy consciousness is unhappy precisely because it projects true happiness, indeed the true self, into the realm of the supernatural, thereby turning this world into a worthless vale of tears. If the problem is to overcome alienation, to become ‘at home’ in our world, medieval Christianity is something that must be overcome too.

The way in which Hegel is different from, but at the same time close to, Kant shows how he stands in relation to the theme of this book. Even though he is a thoroughgoing realist, even though he abolishes the supernatural, he is, in fact, yet another ‘true-world’ philosopher. The meaning of life consists in the attainment of a ‘true world’, a kind of utopia located at the end of history, a state of being that is so completely rational as to leave no room for further criticism.

As with traditional Christianity, the meaning of life, in Hegelianism, is the promotion and final attainment of the 'city of God'. The only difference is that it is located not in the sky but on the (future) earth. Hegelianism is, then, not the abandonment, but simply the relocation, of the 'true world'.

Of course you and I, as individuals, will not be there at the end of history. We can work for the city of God but will not enjoy it. This, however, says Hegel, ought not to bother us. For if we have understood his philosophy properly we will have seen that the only ultimate 'subject', the only true 'I', is world spirit, so that from a deep point of view, individuals 'have no being in themselves' (PS 171). In a deep sense, then, we *will* be there at the end of history – as world spirit.

Hegel would not, I think, object to my characterisation of him as a 'true-world' philosopher who has brought the 'true world' down to earth. For he quite explicitly states that his intention is to preserve the essence of Christianity for an age that neither can, nor should, accept any longer the quaint 'picture thinking' of the medieval theology (PS 374–787). What I am suggesting, in short, is that Hegel would agree that he is, first and foremost, a Christian theologian who seeks (by developing a line of thought that really begins with Kant) to naturalise theology, to overcome the alienating dualism of the Middle Ages with an integrating monism.

## Criticism

Hegel's aim, then, is to show that history is driven by the logic of rationality. And his method of proof is to present us with the history of the world in a way that makes this logic explicit, *shows* it at work. The problem, however, is that for all that he highlights the parts of history favourable to his case and obscures the parts that are not, the histories he actually tells still fall woefully short of demonstrating what they are supposed to demonstrate. Without intending to, I should like to suggest, Hegel the historian refutes Hegel the metaphysician.

Thus, to return to the story that begins with the collapse of the Greek state caused by the unresolved conflict between individual rights and duty to the state, if history were to follow the Hegelian dialectic what would have followed the collapse of the Greek state would have been a synthesis of state and individual rights, something approaching a liberal democracy. But Hegel the narrative historian knows perfectly well that this did not happen. Instead, what follows, in his political history of the West, is the Roman Republic, a world of 'legal status' (PS 477–83). Rather than being a synthesis of individual and communal duties, this, as Hegel represents it, is a world in which only individual rights count, a world which has swung a hundred per cent to Antigone's point of view and gives no weight at all to Creon's (PS 479). Since – to cut a very long story short – this is a society of atomic individualism, beneath the veneer of civilisation, says Hegel, it is a society in a condition of 'war, all against all'. Eventually someone (Augustus) wins the war and sets up a tyranny: the Roman Republic becomes the Roman Empire, society has swung a hundred per cent back to Creon's point of view. Medieval feudalism (PS 488–526) is simply another form of Creonism, absolute power being in the hands of the king. Essentially this form of tyranny persists, in Hegel's narrative, until the French Revolution (1789), an anarchy of total individualism (Antigone's point of view) that quickly leads to the bloody 'Terror'. And here Hegel's political history terminates because he has arrived at

his own historical present. It may be that, sitting in Berlin, in Prussia's authoritarian but slightly liberal and slightly democratic state, Hegel feels that in Prussia the need for a synthesis between individual and state rights pointed to by Sophocles has been somewhat achieved. Really, however, the political history he tells does the opposite of showing that the process of arriving at the Prussian social order has been in any sense a rational one.

The same lack of fit between what Hegel needs to show and what he actually shows pertains to the master-slave dialectic. Because we need 'recognition' as well as freedom, the moral of Hegel's narrative is, as we saw, the need for progress in the direction of liberal democracy. And so, if he is to show reason at work in history, that is what he needs to display in his history of the social development of the West subsequent to the slave societies of antiquity. In fact, however, having pointed to the impossibility of gaining genuine recognition from a slave Hegel simply drops the whole topic of recognition, and turns instead to the slave's attempt to *feel* that he has the master's freedom by becoming a Stoic (PS 197–201). The slave pretends that only his thoughts are important to him so that, even if he is in chains, he is still absolutely free, master of all that matters. The narrative continues by suggesting that in the 'unhappy consciousness' of the Middle Ages one thinks of one's true self as God – and so as absolutely free – and then petering out with the Enlightenment's elimination of such thinking as mere 'superstition' (PS 538–73). En route, we are offered fascinating perspectives on historical phenomena, but Hegel seems to have simply forgotten that his project is supposed to be the demonstration of reason in history, rational progress towards liberal democracy. It might be replied that I have failed to understand Hegel's conception of the rational dialectic. But the point is, it seems to me, that, *whatever* that conception is, what he actually exhibits at work in history is no kind of rationality at all, but simply (and truthfully) randomness, chaos.

It might be said, in Hegel's defence, that at least we have now arrived at liberal democracy, so that although Hegel may not have done a particularly good job of demonstrating the rationality of how we got here, the hidden hand of reason must – somehow – have been at work. But this is an invalid inference: that *B* is a more rational state of society than *A* does not imply that it was reasoning that got us from *A* to *B*. A heavenly vision, for example, might have led us to institute *B*. Moreover, the question can be raised as to whether we in the West *do*, in fact, live in liberal democracies. We all, of course, pay lip service to the idea that we do, but in an age in which (unless we whisper to each other in the remote countryside) all our communications are monitored by the NSA and GCHQ, it is hard to see that what we live in is a genuinely liberal (rights-respecting) society. And in an age in which political outcomes (in the US at least) are almost entirely determined by the anonymous funding of multibillionaires, it is hard to see that we live in a democratic society.

If we focus on science and technology, there is no question but that our advance in the last two millennia has been spectacular. And (though 'anarchist' philosophers of science such as Paul Feyerabend would disagree) it is plausible to regard that progress as proceeding, in the main, along rational lines. Hegel would like to picture our forms of social existence as exhibiting a parallel development. But, actually, if we consider our current political and social situation, not only does there seem no reason to believe we have proceeded from ancient Greece to



where we are now by ‘rational’ means, it seems open to serious doubt that where we are now in terms of social and political relations is, actually, any more ‘rational’ than where we were then. Our spectacular competence in the field of science and technology, one might well feel, is matched by an equally spectacular incompetence in the field of social and personal relations.

A final criticism of Hegel’s *Bildungsroman* is this. His fundamental mission, I have suggested, is to rescue the ‘true-world’ account of the meaning of life in an age that has rejected the supernatural. The aim is to re-present that account in a manner that does not conflict with scientific naturalism. And so ‘spirit’, world or human spirit, is, at bottom, Hegel’s account of God. But a God worth believing in is, surely, one who, in his – or its – might, majesty and power, exceeds human comprehension. A god who is truly godly is one before whom we can bow down in awe and who is, as such, essentially mysterious. An awesome god is not to be comprehended, calculated or controlled by the parameters of human rationality – as both Heraclitus and Nietzsche understood in making the God of history a child at play (p. 83). If, then, there is a god in history, the attempt to domesticate it within the laws of Hegelian dialectic is a kind of bourgeois blasphemy. In spite of his youthful friendship with the great lyric poet Friedrich Hölderlin, Hegel had no time for what he called the ‘rapturous haziness’ (PS 10) of poetic thinking. His attempt, however, to encompass everything within the limits of our puny little ‘reason’ produces a kind of spiritual claustrophobia. A true God, as opposed to what we will see Heidegger calling ‘the god of the philosophers’, is, surely, one that can be approached, if anywhere, *only* in poetic thinking.

This, I think, is the point of Kierkegaard’s attack on ‘religiousness A’ (pp. 42–3). While I shall eventually be concerned to defend a version of religiousness A, his attack on Hegel’s version makes, I think, the points I have been making. Hegel’s god, he asserts, is a ‘professor’s’ concoction which does not begin to satisfy our existential needs (CUP, 509). Even if it existed it would not be the god of the capital ‘G’, not a god before whom we could bow our heads in awe.

## Notes

1 Hegel 1975, p. 73.

2 Hegel 1955, pp. 97–103, 82–89.

3 Hegel 1991, p. 12.

4 For a detailed discussion of Hegel’s views on *Antigone* and on Greek tragedy in general see Young 2013, ch. 7.

5 Hobbes 1994, ch. 13, para. 9.

6 Hegel 1975, p. 216.

## 8 Marx

Hegel dreamt the seductive dream of Western history as a *Bildungsroman*. But his attempt to show that the dream corresponds to reality, I argued in the last chapter, is a fairly complete failure. Nonetheless, the dream did not die with him. Under the title 'Hegelianism', on the contrary, it became the dominant idea of German philosophy for the rest of the nineteenth century. The only major philosopher to resist being seduced by it was Schopenhauer. The Hegelians, however, split into two factions. The 'Right' or 'Old' and the 'Left' or 'New' Hegelians. The disagreement between them concerned the ending of the *Bildungsroman*, the 'end of history'.

If we return for a moment to the master-slave dialectic, the moral seemed to be that since we all have a fundamental need for 'recognition', and since authentic recognition can only occur between the free and equal, history would come to an end when and only when we were all free and equal. Just what, however, is freedom, and just what is equality? These emotive but highly abstract terms are capable of various interpretations.

According to the Right Hegelians – Hegel's immediate students and possibly Hegel himself – at least in outline, the end of history had already arrived. Arrived, at least, in Hegel's home country of Prussia. For Prussia (which in 1870 morphed into Germany, the second 'Reich') was a state which, while united by the shared 'ethical substance' of Protestantism, a powerful king and an extensive bureaucracy, also allowed for limited democracy and guaranteed basic individual rights, the right to freedom of speech, conscience and even religion. To the Right Hegelians, therefore, Prussia represented the 'synthesis' between state and individual values the West had been searching for ever since the conflict between Antigone and Creon and the collapse of the Greek state (p. 89–91). As a dialectic of ideas history had thus come to an end. It was only a matter of time before the model provided by Prussia – a social organism as perfect as human beings are capable of achieving – became universal.

To the Left Hegelians – who appeared on the scene a generation after their conservative rivals – the dialectical march of history still had a long, long way to go. And they believed, moreover, that the true end of history would be something far more utopian than the flawed institution of the Prussian state. Virtually all the Left Hegelians were (and called themselves) 'communists'. They believed that true 'equality' was economic equality and that it therefore required the abolition of private property. But on the question of 'freedom' the Left split again into two factions. Some, Proudhon, Bakunin and the composer Richard Wagner, called themselves 'anarchists'. They believed that after the revolution that would overthrow capitalism there should be an immediate abolition of all constraints on

individual liberty, of, that is, the entire machinery of the state. Others, however, believed that, at least for the time being, the preservation of the state was a necessity. Those of this latter conviction coalesced around the figure of Karl Marx (1813–83), who, together with his close friend and collaborator, Friedrich Engels (1820–95), was by far the most historically influential of the Left Hegelians.

## Dialectical materialism

Like Hegel, Marx has a ‘dialectical’ view of history. Like Hegel, he tells the history of the West as a *Bildungsroman*, one that is divided into separate, clearly distinguished chapters. And as with Hegel, progress from one chapter, one historical epoch, to the next is taken to be governed by an inexorable logic. The major difference between Marx and Hegel, however, is that, whereas Hegel sees the ‘shapes of consciousness’ that make up history as embodied equally in every kind of human activity, for Marx history is driven by just one kind of activity: economic activity that is concerned with the production, ownership and exchange of wealth. For Marx, money is what makes the world go round. This has the consequence that fundamental history is, for him, a history of economic structures. Economics provides the foundation of history, everything else – science, art, politics, law, religion, morality – is mere ‘superstructure’, froth on top of the beer. The broad economic structures that make up Marx’s *Bildungsroman* are (Marxists have finer-grained categories within these) slavery (the ancient world), feudalism (the Middle Ages), capitalism (modernity) and communism (post-modernity). Because the logic of economic history is inexorable, the collapse of each of these structures into its successor is inevitable. And hence the transition, sooner or later, from capitalism to communism is inevitable.

Marx’s famously vitriolic remarks about religion illustrate what he means by ‘superstructure’. Religion, he says (repeating, essentially, Hegel’s critique of the ‘unhappy consciousness’), is a belief system that places true happiness in the supernatural. Hence it ‘alienates’ (the multifaceted key word in Marx’s critique of modernity), leads us to believe that happiness in this life is not to be expected. It thus renders the economically oppressed docile, unwilling to undermine the power of the oppressors. Religion is, Marx famously said (he had a gift for aphorism), ‘the opium of the masses’,<sup>1</sup> a device for preserving the economic privilege of the bourgeoisie against any potential demand for social justice.

## Capitalism

Marx views all the economic structures that have existed since the primitive communism of the hunter-gatherers disappeared as more or less disguised forms of oppression, of slavery. In particular, the chapter of his *Bildungsroman* in which we find ourselves, capitalism, is and must be, as a *system*, a form of slavery. This is because, in a capitalist society, the demand for profit dictates that wages must be as low as possible consistent with there being an adequate supply of labour fit enough to work. It is true that, unlike the Graeco-Roman slave or the feudal serf, the modern ‘wage slave’ is free to accept or decline the offer of work. But since the alternative to acceptance is starvation and death the modern slave is in reality

no more free than the slave of the ancient world.

What, precisely, is wrong with this system? Why is it so fatally flawed that it must eventually collapse into communism? And since the system determines that a prudent employer keeps his workers fed and healthy why should we desire its removal? Marx has, I think, four principal objections.

First, capitalism does not really require that the workers be fed and healthy, merely that their food and health meet the *minimum* requirements of their being able to work effectively. And that means that generally a great deal of suffering, exhaustion and physical abuse will be inflicted on the workers. Marx has in mind, here, the dark, satanic mills of nineteenth-century industrial Britain – Engels made a detailed study of the condition of workers in the Manchester cotton mills. The cotton mills have disappeared, but Marx would find plenty of modern examples to confirm his point: the Indonesian child labour that produces Western sports shoes, for example, or the Foxconn factory in China that produces Apple products. (In the factory many workers have committed suicide on account of the working conditions and because those who protested against the conditions were beaten up by thugs employed by the owners.)<sup>2</sup>

Second, in a capitalist system the workers are ‘alienated’ from their work. Marx explains this as follows:

In what, then, consists the alienation of labour? First, in the fact that labour is external to the worker, i.e., that it does not belong to his nature, that therefore he does not realize himself in his work, that he denies himself in it, that he does not feel at ease in it, but rather unhappy, that he does not develop any free physical or mental energy, but rather mortifies his flesh and ruins his spirit. The worker, therefore, is only himself when he does *not* work, and in his work he feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home.<sup>3</sup>

The worker, that is, does not ‘realise’ himself in his work because it is not *creative*, does not stem from his own ‘nature’. All he does is to tighten a couple of nuts on the endless stream of car bodies that passes him on the conveyor belt, which reduces him to a ‘tool’ for the realisation of someone *else’s* design – unlike, say, a hand potter who is realising her own design. The result is that he finds no satisfaction in – actively dislikes – his work. And the result is that, as Marx puts it elsewhere, ‘real life starts when work ceases – at table, in the bar, in bed’.<sup>4</sup> For many, this ‘alienation of labour’ is built into the very meaning of ‘work’. (‘That’s not *work*’, I am frequently told, ‘You *enjoy* being a philosopher.’)

Third, capitalism ‘alienates’ class from class. The workers naturally hate and envy the bourgeoisie, the capitalists who inflict suffering and boredom upon them, and in return the capitalists despise and fear the workers. Instead of a cooperative society working towards a common goal, society becomes a battleground, a place of ‘class warfare’ between, as we now say, the ‘one per cent’ on the one side, and the ‘ninety-nine per cent’ on the other.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, capitalism does not make even the capitalists happy. It dulls their lives: ‘the mineral dealer sees only the market value of the jewels [he deals in] not their beauty’.<sup>6</sup> Within the capitalist view of the world, that is, objects are, for the capitalists themselves as much as the workers, ‘commodified’. The only value

they come to have is their monetary value. The beautiful landscape is reduced to mere 'real estate', the sublime alp to an annoying impediment to road construction. Capitalists are those who, as the saying goes, know the price of everything and the value of nothing. Thus capitalism effects a triple alienation: it alienates worker from work, class from class, and humanity from nature.

## After the revolution

A house divided against itself cannot stand. Class conflict makes a capitalist society inherently unstable. By oppressing the workers the capitalists create the force that will eventually overthrow them. (The 'opium' of religion can only have a limited effect.) One cannot keep a lid on boiling water forever; eventually the pressure will become irresistible and there will be a revolution. The 'workers' are thus the heroes, the 'world-historical' figures, who will propel history to its next, post-capitalist phase: 'The nobility of man shines forth from their toil-worn bodies.'<sup>7</sup>

Hegel famously said that the owl of Minerva (the symbol of wisdom) flies only at dusk, meaning that philosophy can only understand history in retrospect. Against this, Marx reacts with the famous statement inscribed on his grave in Highgate Cemetery in London:

Philosophers have only sought to understand the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.

This is in part self-referential. Marx thinks of his own work as promoting the workers' uprising through a raising of consciousness. By making the workers explicitly, starkly and dramatically aware of their oppressed condition he thinks of himself as enhancing their determination to overthrow their oppressors, as promoting the revolution.

What will happen after the revolution? To begin with there will be a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. This is not yet communism but rather 'state socialism'. The workers will seize political power (as for example happened in Moscow in 1918) and turn all property into state property. As Marx and Engels put it in the *Communist Manifesto*, their inflammatory contribution to the attempted workers' revolution of 1848, 'The theory of the Communists may be summed up in a single sentence: abolition of private property.' As a result of this abolition of property the dictatorial state will eventually become redundant and, in Engel's words, slowly 'wither away'. He uses the word 'withering' to contrast his and Marx's view with, as he sees it, the absurd demand of the 'so-called anarchists' (Bakunin *et al.*) that the state be 'abolished overnight'.<sup>8</sup> His reasoning, evidently, is that were the state to be immediately abolished the old dispositions to greed and acquisitiveness would simply reassert themselves, so that post-revolutionary society would simply return to capitalism and nothing would have been achieved. If, however, communism is enforced over several, perhaps many, generations, so that the memory, and even the very concept, of (private) property has disappeared, then human nature will have transformed itself. Without having anything to be greedy about, greed, and the conflict it generates, will have disappeared from human nature. Cooperation will replace competition, class conflict, indeed class itself, will have disappeared and, finding itself without a

function, the state will simply disappear. State socialism will have graduated to communism, the *freely* communist utopia will have arrived.

## The communist utopia

Marx thought it pointless to stargaze the society that would succeed the disappearance of the state but some of its features, in addition to the disappearance of class warfare, seem to be implied by the critique of capitalism. With the disappearance of the acquisitive instinct, the commodification of natural and human things will cease. We will become alive once more to the beauties of nature and of people. The land, for example, will show up as landscape rather than 'real estate', friendship will cease to be mere 'networking' and will return to being genuine friendship. Alienation from nature and from other people will be overcome. Industrial technology will, however, Marx insists, continue and develop. Marxism is not Luddism. (Since we will now be alive to the beauty of nature it will, however, surely be 'clean and green' technology.) Eventually machines will take over the kind of work that is unavoidably unpleasant – toilet cleaning, washing dishes, etc. – so that the only work we will need to do will be that which is creative and enjoyable. Alienation from work will disappear too.

The communist utopia is, essentially, Kant's end of history – perfect happiness married to perfect virtue (p. 20–2) – reborn. With the disappearance of '*cupiditas*' (greed), that '*radix malorum*' (root of all evil), we will have a society of complete virtue, and with the disappearance of capitalism and the progress of science and technology, complete happiness. And, here, we see Marx's bearing on the theme of this book. Marx insists that he is a complete naturalist. He calls his *Bildungsroman* of the West 'historical materialism'. Religion, supernaturalism in general, is a delusion, mere 'opium'. There is nothing but the 'material'. The point to notice, however, is that, just like Hegel, Marx posits, however hazily, a paradise, a 'true world', whose inevitable arrival will constitute the 'end of history'. And so Marx, too, is a closet theologian, a 'true-world' philosopher in disguise. For, like Hegel, what Marx effects is a translation of the duality between the natural and supernatural world into a duality between the present and the future of the natural world. Heaven in the sky becomes heaven in the future of the earth. Revolutionary though he is, Marx is thus, in an important sense, also a conservative: he seeks to preserve the Platonic-Christian meaning-giving narrative within the one world of nature.

Albert Camus notes that, in effect, this turns communism into a religion, a new 'faith', 'a new mystification' (p. 188) – a new (to turn Marx's own word against him) 'opiate'. For this reason Camus despised Marxism. But for many others, the fact that, without requiring belief in the supernatural, it restored a religious dimension to life was precisely its attraction. During the Cold War, this attraction was strong enough to cause significant numbers of American and (particularly) British men from privileged backgrounds (Burgess, Maclean, Blunt and Philby, for example) to spy for the Soviet Union. 'There aren't any good brave causes left' is a famous line that occurs in John Osborne's 1956 play *Look Back in Anger*. Defeating Hitler had been such a cause, but in the post-war world it was hard to find a substitute. To many of the post-war generation, as to Osborne's Jimmy Porter, the West seemed sunk in nihilism, in meaninglessness. 'Building

socialism' thus presented itself as almost the only 'good brave cause' there was, the only cause that could provide one's life with meaning and commitment. How good that cause really was is a question to which I now turn.

## Bakunin's objection

There are two sides to Marxism: the critique of capitalism and the utopian *Bildungsroman*. The former is independent of the latter. Even if the *Bildungsroman* is, in reality, nothing more than a *Roman*, a fiction, the critique of capitalism may still be sound. Here, however, we are interested only in the *Bildungsroman*. Is anything like the utopian end of history that it postulates remotely possible?

One issue concerns the so-called 'dictatorship of the proletariat', the transition from state socialism to communism proper. Mikhail Bakunin (whom Marx had expelled from the International Working Men's Association in 1872) pointed out that since government could not literally be placed in the hands of millions of workers, the so-called 'dictatorship of the proletariat' would inevitably turn into dictatorship by a self-serving and self-perpetuating elite, an elite that would actually prevent rather than promote the notional 'withering away' of the state. The anarchist demand of the immediate abolition of the state was, he asserted, the only means of avoiding such tyranny. Noam Chomsky, an admirer of Bakunin, observes that his prediction concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat is one of the relatively few made by social scientists which (in China and the Soviet Union) have turned out to be true.<sup>9</sup>

## Freud's objection

Let us suppose, however, that the dictatorship of the proletariat turns out to be a genuinely benevolent dictatorship really prepared to abdicate power at the appropriate moment. Would the appropriate moment ever arrive? Here we need to return to Freud's criticism (F: 113–14), briefly mentioned in Chapter 5 (p. 71).

As we know, Freud claims that aggression is an innate and fundamental instinct. It was not created by private property and so cannot be defused by its abolition. It existed, he observes, among the primitive hunter-gatherers who had no private property, and it reigns among children among whom the conception of private property is also absent. Even without private property, he adds, sexual competition and possessiveness would provide an independent source of aggression.

In fact, Freud thinks that very young children *do* have a conception of private property. They go through an 'anal' phase where they regard the contents of their bowels as property and resist having bowel movements (F: 113). And, of course, in offering sexual possessiveness as a source of aggression he is, in effect, introducing the idea of property into sexual relations. So his point is not really that primitive tribes and children have *no* conception of property, but rather that even if the kind of property that *could* be abolished by political action were to be abolished – property as a legal institution – there would still remain powerful feelings of ownership that would inevitably be a source of conflict. Freud's

conception thus seems to be that the aggressive drive and the conception of property are mutually dependent and are both innate: aggression is the drive to defend the property one has and to acquire more.

That the drive to own is innate does not, however, of itself mean that it cannot be trained out of us. That it can be is precisely the claim of utopian Marxism. The claim is that social training can *alter human nature*, alter, that is, which drives are and which are not innate. This claim is, in fact, susceptible to empirical testing. For since the Middle Ages, but particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century and in the 1960s, people have attempted to live in communes, either secular or religious, based on the communal ownership of property. The evidence of these attempts is, however, overwhelmingly in Freud's favour. For almost all have, after at most a few decades, collapsed. An exception is the kibbutz movement in Israel, which, as Tama Halfin observes, was originally based on 'a utopian-communist notion that [sought] to create "a new man" and a "reformed society", which would realize the values of cooperation and equality, in the spirit of socialism'.<sup>10</sup> The kibbutzim (which account for 42 per cent of Israel's agriculture) have, however, survived only by abandoning the original, communist ideal. In about three-quarters of them there is either no communal property at all or else members hand over only a small portion of their income to a common pool.

## Anarchy and peer-group pressure

Ultimately, utopian Marxists are anarchists. (The Greek *anarchos* – *anarchos* – means 'without rulers'.) The goal is to live without a state. Engels's disagreement with Bakunin is a disagreement about the means, not the end. One thing anarchists of all varieties acknowledge is the need for order. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65), whom Marx greatly admired, was the first person to call himself an anarchist. After 'Property is theft' his most famous aphorism is 'Anarchy is order.' (The anarchist symbol, a capital 'A' inscribed within an 'O' is said to be derived from this slogan.) There cannot be any kind of social life without order, without predictability in human behaviour. (Consider driving.) And so both anti-Marxist and Marxist anarchists face the question of how, in the absence of the state and its organs (the police, law courts and so on), order is to be preserved. The answer is 'public opinion' or, less pleasantly, 'peer group pressure'. It is often remarked, of communes in general and of the kibbutzim in particular, that the pressure to conform to prevailing opinion is much stronger than in ordinary society. Those who do not conform receive the cold shoulder, or worse: one thinks of forcible beard-cutting among the Amish<sup>11</sup> or of marriages forced on women among fundamentalist Mormons.<sup>12</sup> As Nietzsche observes, even though the early warrior bands (the Goths, Vandals and Vikings, for example) were utterly uninhibited in their murder, rape and pillage of those outside the band, within it they were 'held in check ... through spying on one another and through peer group jealousy'.<sup>13</sup> They must have been, for otherwise they could not have survived as a cohesive fighting force.

What seems to be the case, therefore, is that even seemingly stateless societies always institute their own principle of order, a set of social norms that are enforced by accompanying sanctions and which, therefore, to a greater or lesser



extent constrain the liberty of the individual. A succinct way of putting this is to say that even stateless societies have, in all but name, a state. Indeed, if we define 'state' as 'government enforced by sanctions' then what seems to be the case is that the stateless society dreamt of by both anarchists and Marxists is, in fact, an impossibility.

## Notes

- 1 Marx 1970, 131.
- 2 'Foxconn Suicides', *Wikipedia* [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foxconn\\_suicides](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foxconn_suicides).
- 3 Marx 1964, 72. Emphasis added.
- 4 Marx 1893, 12.
- 5 Marx's prediction that since, within capitalism, the name of the game is monopoly, wealth would become concentrated in fewer and fewer hands seems to have been abundantly confirmed.
- 6 Marx 1964, 89.
- 7 McLellan 1973, 87.
- 8 Engels 1941, 315.
- 9 Chomsky 2003, 248.
- 10 "The Kibbutz ... a Communist establishment?', p. 3  
[https://wiki.brown.edu/confluence/download/attachments/73106098/Halfin\\_Moral+Economies+.pdf](https://wiki.brown.edu/confluence/download/attachments/73106098/Halfin_Moral+Economies+.pdf).
- 11 See 'Amish Sect Leader Sentenced to 15 Years in Hair-Cutting Attacks', *New York Times*, 8 February 2013 [www.nytimes.com/2013/02/09/us/amish-sect-leader-gets-15-years-in-beard-cutting-attacks.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/09/us/amish-sect-leader-gets-15-years-in-beard-cutting-attacks.html?_r=0).
- 12 See 'Warren Jeffs', *Wikipedia* [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warren\\_Jeffs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warren_Jeffs).
- 13 GM I 11.

# Part II

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AFTER THE DEATH OF GOD

## 9 Later Nietzsche

‘Continental philosophy’, I suggested in the Introduction, is philosophy which responds to the death of the Christian God. ‘Conservative’ continental philosophy – the principle topic of Part I of this study – I suggested, seeks to resurrect him in different forms. ‘Radical’ continental philosophy – the topic of Part II – on the other hand, accepts that resurrection is impossible, that if anything helpful can be said about the meaning of life it must take some form other than that of the grand – true-world/end-of-history – narrative.

When Nietzsche announced, in 1882, that ‘God is dead’ (GS 125), he did not mean merely the God of traditional Christianity. He meant, rather, anything that performs the meaning-giving function in human life that was once performed by that God. A ‘religion’, in other words, is anything that postulates or promises a true world. Hence Schopenhauer’s ‘European Buddhism’ counts as a religion, as do both Hegelianism and Marxism. Nietzsche explicitly includes the latter pair among the doctrines that can no longer be believed:

The total character of the world is ... in all eternity chaos – in the sense not of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms.  
(GS 109)

In one sense, Nietzsche is saying, the world is far from chaotic: it exhibits the ‘necessities’, the lawful causal regularities, discovered by science. But in another sense it is: it lacks the historical ‘arrangement, form, beauty’ and ever-increasing ‘wisdom’ attributed to it by the Hegelian or Marxist *Bildungsroman*.

This is the beginning of, as I call it, radical continental philosophy. Radical continental philosophy begins, that is, with the recognition that not only the Christian God but also all these ‘shadows of God’ (GS 108) are mirages, ‘anthropomorphic’ projections, wishful thoughts that have no basis in reality. It begins with the recognition that reality is, in Nietzsche’s sense, ‘chaos’.<sup>1</sup> How (if at all), it then asks, can life be meaningful, how can it be worth living, in such a ‘chaotic’ universe?

Notice that while Nietzsche is the first radical continental philosopher – the first to announce the death of all true worlds and to ask what we are to do about it – he was also (among major figures) the last of the conservatives. For, as we saw in Chapter 6, in his youthful Schopenhauerian/Wagnerian days, he himself offered us the ‘metaphysical comfort’ of a supernatural world accessible through art. Thus the line between conservative and radical continental philosophy cuts through Nietzsche’s work, separating earlier from later Nietzsche, who is the topic of this chapter.

As I mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 6, the decisive mark of Nietzsche's break with Wagner, and with Schopenhauerian-Kantian metaphysics, was his walking out of the first Bayreuth Festival in 1876 – if the previous paragraph is correct, a world historical as well as personal event! His first book thereafter, *Human, All Too Human* (1878), I count as the beginning of 'later Nietzsche', and his last published work, *Ecce Homo* (1888), I count as the end. (As we shall see there is also 'posthumous Nietzsche' to be discussed.) I shall, however, focus mainly on two works: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85), which Nietzsche considered his greatest book (indeed, the greatest book ever written by anyone!), and, even more, on *The Gay Science* (1882–87), which I consider his greatest book.

\* \* \*

Think back, for a moment, to all the attempts to answer the question of the meaning of life we have so far considered – to true-world philosophy in all its forms, whether supernaturalistic, as in traditional Christianity, or naturalistic, as in Marxism. One thing to notice about all of them is that life's meaning is taken to be, first, *universal*, the same for everyone, and second, *independent of choice*. Whether we are talking, with Plato, about a return to 'the rim of the heavens', with Kierkegaard about the attainment of eternal bliss, with Schopenhauer about absorption into the 'nothingness' of *nirvana*, with Hegel about the realisation of complete rationality, or with Marx and Engels about the 'withering away of the state', that which makes life meaningful for me is exactly the same as that which makes it meaningful for you. Moreover, this meaning has nothing to do with anyone's *choice*. For the Christian, for example, what gives life meaning (that we are in transit to an afterlife in which, depending on how we have lived, we will suffer either eternal damnation or eternal bliss) is simply *given* to us as something written into the metaphysical structure of reality, given in the same way as is the height of Mount Everest, the second law of thermodynamics or the structure of DNA. For traditional thinkers, that is to say, the meaning of life is something we *discover*. We do not *choose* or *make* it to be the case. These two features – universality and givenness – characterise every grand-narrative philosophy. All true-world philosophers, of whatever shape or hue, presuppose that these two features must characterise any genuine answer to the question of the meaning of life.

Suppose, however, that we now reject both of them. Suppose we acknowledge that there are no true worlds, that every grand narrative is a fiction, that reality is, in Nietzsche's sense, 'chaos'. And suppose we further conclude (at least for the time being) that there is no such thing as *the* – universal – meaning of life, that no meaning is written into the metaphysical structure of reality. Still, one might reflect, that doesn't mean that *my* life can't have meaning. It doesn't mean that I can't *create* meaning in my life, my own *individual* meaning.

## Drifting

Gunvald Larsson didn't want to become any older. He was almost fifty, and asked himself, ever more frequently, what meaning his life had had. He had enjoyed squandering the greater part of his inheritance as quickly as possible.

He had quite liked it in the navy and even more in the merchant navy, but ...<sup>2</sup>

What is it that bothers Gunvald Larsson? Not, I think, (at least not explicitly) the death of God. Rather, two things about his own life. First, that it has been an accidental life, a matter of *drift*, reactive rather than proactive – the life, as he would perhaps put it, of a rat in a maze rather than of a human being. And second, that it has no overall point to it. These features are, of course, connected. It is because there is no overall purpose to which his life is dedicated that Gunvald must react rather than proact. What should he do about his life?

As we have seen throughout Part I of this book, an insight grasped by every grand-narrative philosopher is that *stories create meaning*. Every true-world philosopher is, in one way or another, a storyteller. Every true-world philosophy from Plato onwards, in one way or another, tells a story of ‘the soul’s journey’. Perhaps, then, when one complains that one’s life is meaningless, what one is complaining about is the lack of a story. If I look back on my past all I see are a series of episodes connected by nothing more than ‘and then’s – I was born, and then I went to school, and then I became a loving wife and mother, and then the kids left home, and then ... and if I look forward into the future all I see are many options – to stay married, get divorced, become a feminist, travel the world, start a career, take up knitting – which are all equally possible and appropriate and yet, for that very reason, all equally pointless. Maybe, in short, what I need to do to overcome my sense of meaninglessness is to construct the story of my life, to construct my ‘personal narrative’. Notice that even in the absence of a *grand* narrative, there seems no reason why one should not be able to construct a *personal* narrative.

## Learning from artists

These reflections occurred, I believe, to the later Nietzsche. In order to create meaning in our lives we must, he says, become the ‘heroes’ of those lives. ‘Hero’, here, does not mean ‘superhero’ or ‘performer of heroic deeds’ – though, of course, heroism *might* turn out to be the character of my particular story. It simply means what it means in ‘the hero of the novel’: central character.

To become the hero of our lives we must, first of all, be able to *see* the hero that we are, ‘see the hero that is hidden in everyday characters’ (GS 78). And to do this we must

learn from artists, while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them [their] ... subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be poets *of our life*.

(GS 299; emphasis added)

Great artists, that is to say, at least stereotypically, produce great art but messy lives. (Wagner was an anti-Semitic egomaniac, Dostoevsky a compulsive gambler, Coleridge a drug addict, Dylan Thomas drank himself to death, Sylvia Plath, Mark Rothko, Kurt Cobain, Vincent van Gogh, Ernest Hemingway, David Foster Wallace and Virginia Woolf all committed suicide, Philip Larkin was given to fascist opinions and kinky sex – and so on.) What ‘we’ want to do, however, is

to devote our skills *to life*, to make life itself our primary 'artwork'.

To become 'heroes' of our lives what we need to learn from artists is

the art of viewing ourselves ... from a distance and, as it were, simplified and transfigured – the art of 'putting oneself on stage' before oneself. Only thus can we get over certain lowly details in ourselves. Without this we would be nothing but foreground and live entirely in the spell of that perspective which makes what is closest at hand ... appear as if it were vast, and reality itself.

(GS 78)

Nietzsche wants us to think visually here. If one is very close up to something – say a mountain – all one sees are its details. Everything is, as Nietzsche puts it, 'foreground'. To see its overall shape, to allow the mountain to resolve into figure and background, what one needs is 'distance'. (Note that one cannot see a figure without also seeing a ground.) The same is true with regard to our lives. Normally, we are so, as it were, close up to them that all we see are the seemingly urgent details: the next essay to be written for our university course, the five-o'clock train to catch for which we will already have to run, the shopping to be done, the dinner to be cooked, this morning's squabble with our partner over whose turn it is to clean the bathroom somehow to be patched up, and so on. In daily life we are so tightly focused on, obsessed by, its details that we miss the forest on account of the trees. We fail to ask ourselves whether and why it is important to finish our university essay, whether and why it is really important to be at university at all, whether and why it is important to patch up the quarrel with our partner.

Modern, electronic technology has increased this disposition to live lives that are entirely 'foreground' beyond anything Nietzsche could have imagined. Our use of the Internet and above all of cell phones massively increases the number of trivial details in our lives, the number of stimuli that seem to *demand* an immediate response. And we easily become *addicted* to receiving and responding to these stimuli, tend to become, as one might put it, 'foreground addicts'. It is probably true that the cautious, even hostile, attitude of thoughtful groups such as the Amish towards most modern technology is generated by the well-founded suspicion that by bombarding us with the trivial it makes us lose our grasp of the essential. How, then, does one grasp the essential shape of one's life, understand who its hero is?

What one needs is 'time out' from the obsessive business of daily life. This was the function of the Christian Sunday. Regardless of what one thinks of Christian doctrine, there was wisdom in the idea of a work-free day as a time for acquiring distance from, and so space for, reflection upon the overall shape of one's life. The Church fathers understood, it seems to me, that grasping its overall shape is necessary to a healthy, 'centred', life, a life not rendered shapeless by trivia. That Moslems are required to pray five times a day is another technique for achieving this distancing and shaping effect. Nietzsche acknowledges this therapeutic function of religion. Although he hates Christianity as a religion that turns this world into a 'dungeon' and us into its 'criminal' inhabitants, he concedes that this, at least, can be said for it: that by

describing eternal [true-world] perspectives around him, it taught man to view

himself from a distance and as something past and whole.

(GS 78)

Understanding the hero of one's life is a matter of grasping the story of one's life *as a whole* – grasping it *as if completed*, as 'past and whole'. In Christian thought, the idea of such a grasping is the idea of the Last Judgement, a moment in which one's whole life is weighed in the balance. (This same idea of imaginatively 'looking back' on one's life from its end is embodied in the folk wisdom which advises one to write one's own obituary – the obituary one would *like* to have – and then live up to it.)

In our 24/7, secular age, the Christian Sunday is no longer with us. And so one needs something else that will play the role it once played, something that will provide us with 'time out'. With this in mind we go, perhaps, on a tramping holiday in New Zealand's Southern Alps.<sup>3</sup> Here, perhaps, high above the valley of daily life, we achieve distance from (as we say, 'perspective on') our lives. And so, with luck, it may come to us who is to be the hero of our lives. We may begin to view ourselves, that is, as if we were the hero of a well-constructed novel. Nietzsche calls this 'becoming the poet of one's life' to draw attention to the idea of a meaningful life as living as though one is in the process of constructing a fine work of literature.

What exactly does one achieve if, through 'artistic distance', one grasps who is to be the hero of one's life? What one grasps is the overall script, the 'big picture', the personal narrative, of one's life. This narrative – in *this* respect it is just like the Platonic or Christian grand narrative – tells one three things: first, one's history up to now; second, one's present condition; and third, in virtue of these two together, the outline of the *proper continuation* of one's life into the future. To know the story of one's past and present, that is to say, is to know one's 'identity'. And to know one's identity gives purpose and meaning to one's life. It is to know *how to go on*, how to fulfil, in elevated language, one's 'destiny'.

## Self-creation

To make Nietzsche's idea as clear as possible, let me try to give a concrete illustration of the process he has in mind, which I have simplified to the point of banality. (To provide a fully realised example of seeing one's life as a work of literature one would have to produce – a work of literature.)

Suppose I have studied for years and have eventually become an accountant. In every spare moment, however, I have written poetry. For years, I have lived this double life, but I find my life miserable and meaningless. One day, tramping through the Southern Alps, I attempt to grasp my life as a totality, as a story with a past, present and future which I am in the process of living out. What is the story? There are at least two (in real life, indefinitely many) decisions I may make as to an answer.

First decision: I'm an untalented poet about to become a partner in a multinational accountancy firm with many opportunities for lateral movement and international travel, who is making himself miserable through sentimental yearnings (generated by the frustrated poetic ambitions of his father) for a lifestyle to which he is, in fact, completely unsuited. I must burn my sonnets.

Second decision: I'm a talented, passionate poet who is making himself miserable by living a life that is secure but fundamentally at odds with his deepest desires and needs. I need to make the act of courage that I have so far evaded.

Notice three things about this moment of decision. First, each narrative tells me who I am, who is the 'hero' of my life. In the first the 'hero' who is 'hidden' within the confusion of details is the accountant, in the second it is the poet. Second, whichever story I tell gives direction, purpose, meaning to my life, tells me how to go on. Only if I fail to make a decision does my life lack meaning. And third, whatever decision I make is *up to me*. I do not *discover* but rather *create* the meaning of my life. Nietzsche emphasises this last point: 'we want', he says, 'to become ... beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves' (GS 335) – create themselves, that is, through their 'practical and theoretical skill in interpreting and arranging events' (GS 277). (I take 'theoretical skill' to be the skill needed to 'write' the 'story of one's life' and 'practical skill' the skill to discipline oneself to live by one's story.)

Self-creation, of course, has its materials and its limits. To become creators, Nietzsche continues,

we must become discoverers of everything lawful and necessary in the world ... *physicists* – while hitherto all valuations and ideals have been built on ignorance of physics and in *contradiction* to it.

(GS 335)

The point, here, is obviously not that we all need to gain PhDs in physics. He means merely that we must know and respect nature (*physis*, in Greek, just means 'nature'), including, centrally, one's own nature. There is no point in narrating my life as that of a professional basketball player if I am five feet four inches tall. However self-disciplined I am, I am never going to realise that story and will thus end up in failure and depression. In referring to the 'ideals' that have hitherto contradicted 'physics' Nietzsche has in mind, of course, Christianity. None of us can avoid anger, greed or lust; none of us can avoid murdering millions of micro-organisms every time we take a step. The ideal of living a life in imitation of Christ is an ideal which, on account of 'physics' – on account of our physicality – we *must* fail to live up to. And so, if we tell ourselves *that* story, we will end up, once again, in failure and depression – in Kierkegaard's 'despair of weakness' (p. 40), despair over the gap between the ideal and the real. Of course, Kierkegaard *wants* us to despair so that, to escape it, we will make the 'leap' to God. Nietzsche suggests, however, not unreasonably, that it is better to avoid despair in the first place by *not* choosing an impossible ideal of oneself. Christianity may offer us a cure, but it also creates the disease in the first place.

## Being clear about who one is

As my simplified examples bring out, Nietzsche holds it to be absolutely essential to living a flourishing life that one achieves *clarity* about who one is. This, I



think, is why he says we must learn the art of ‘putting oneself on stage’, not from artists in general, but ‘particularly from those of the theatre’ (GS 78). Remembering that he was a professor of Greek literature, the theatre he has in mind, here, is almost certainly *Greek* theatre, above all, Greek tragedy. What distinguishes a Greek from a modern tragic hero, Antigone from Hamlet, is lack of psychological complexity. There is almost nothing to Antigone other than the principle of loyalty to family, almost nothing to Creon other than the principle of loyalty to the state. They are, as it were, walking principles.<sup>4</sup> Hamlet, by contrast, is an unfathomably complex psychological conundrum (no one really knows why he spends almost the entire play failing to take revenge on the murderer of his father), a paradigm of modernity’s confusion and lack of meaning. It is because he thinks we should live like a *Greek* tragic hero that Nietzsche writes: ‘Formula of my happiness: a Yes, a No, a straight line, a goal’ (TI I 44).

## The eternal return of the same

In 1881, near Sils Maria in the Swiss Alps, ‘six thousand feet above man and time’, as he puts it, there came to Nietzsche what he regarded as his most important idea, ‘the eternal return of the same’.<sup>5</sup> Here is his first statement of it (a statement which, in *Ecce Homo*, he describes as expressing ‘the basic idea of *Zarathustra*’):

What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: ‘this life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself.’ ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: ‘You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.’ ... how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?

(GS 341)

As presented here, the idea of the eternal return of one’s life and world, <sup>6</sup> exactly as it is down to the very last detail, is clearly not a metaphysical thesis, a metaphysical assertion of the circularity of time. It is, indeed, not a thesis at all, for the question of its truth or otherwise is, here, irrelevant. Its status, rather, is that of a ‘what if’. It is a thought experiment, the point of which is to provide a test to determine whether one is living as successfully as possible.

Nietzsche, who describes the philosopher as ‘the doctor of culture’, is much given to medical metaphors. Human types are classified as either ‘sick’, ‘convalescent’ or ‘healthy’. One’s degree of health or otherwise is measured according to one’s ability to ‘affirm life’, to be a ‘Yes-sayer’ (GS 276). Someone, like Schopenhauer or the Christian ascetic (or the youthful Nietzsche), for whom this life is nothing but a vale of tears from which he yearns for quick release, is

completely sick. Such people are, in Nietzsche's judgement, sick because they are eaten up by 'resentment' against life. Someone, Zarathustra, for example, who has overcome the disposition to believe in a true world but finds the eternal return an 'abysmal thought' (Z III 13), is convalescent, but not yet properly healthy. That he cannot will the eternal return shows that his soul is still corroded by the resentment and guilt (i.e. resentment against oneself) taught to him by his Christian heritage. To count as a fully healthy, fully thriving human being, to possess 'the great health' (GS 382), one must be entirely free of resentment. One must experience one's life as being of such perfection that one can say to the demon 'never have I heard anything more divine'; one must, in other words, accept, embrace, 'crave nothing more fervently', than the eternal return of one's exact life. (Of course, since I am unaware in this life of having lived it before, if it recurs *exactly* as it is, I will continue to be unaware of having lived it before. Boredom, therefore, is not an issue.)

## Loving fate

How does the test of the eternal return fit together with the idea of living one's life as if it were a well-constructed work of literature?

An essential element in all grand-narrative philosophies is redemption. The final state that brings history to an end is always a redemptive state, one that makes sense of, and makes up for, the suffering and imperfection that has preceded it. 'Redemption' is a notion that is at least as important to Nietzsche as it was to his grand-narrative predecessors. It is just as important, that is to say, that a personal narrative should be redemptive as that a grand narrative should be so (Z II 20).

But not all personal narratives *are* redemptive. For it is perfectly possible to use the skill one has learnt from the artists to construct a story of one's life in which one figures, in one's own eyes, as a victim or villain. Delinquent adolescents often do this. They construct an account of their lives in which they are victims of a bad upbringing and are consequently thoroughly and inescapably bad themselves. On that path, however, lies self-loathing, despair and death. Hence, Nietzsche emphasises, the story one tells must be one which constructs a self that one 'desires' and 'esteems' (GS 290, 78). It must, that is, be a story one *likes* being the 'hero' of. One must like the life one has decided to have.

There are, however, degrees of liking. I may tell the story of my life in such a way that, while on the whole I like the life I have led, there are some things which I wish hadn't happened to me, and some things I regret having done. Though this qualified affirmation of life might seem to be the best we could hope for, for Nietzsche, for Nietzschean 'health', as we have seen, it is not enough.

One of Nietzsche's central mottos is '*amor fati*', 'love of fate' or necessity, the ability to 'see as beautiful what is necessary in things' (GS 276). Since the whole of the past is 'necessary' – it cannot be altered – to 'love fate' is not just to tolerate, but to love the *whole* of the past, *everything* that has happened. In other words, it is to will, to 'crave nothing more fervently', than the eternal return of *everything* that has happened. That we should be able to 'love fate' and 'will the eternal return' are the same idea in different language.

## Personal providence

But how can I script my life so that I not merely like it, but like it so much that I 'crave nothing more fervently' than that it should return forever and ever, down to the very last detail? To do so, says Nietzsche, we must be able to see a 'personal providence' in things, reach a 'high point' in which we see

how palpably always everything that happens to us turns out for the best. Every day and every hour, life seems to have no other wish than to prove this proposition again and again. Whatever it is, bad weather or good, the loss of a friend, sickness, slander, the failure of some letter to arrive, the spraining of an ankle, a glance into a shop, a counter-argument, the opening of a book, a dream, a fraud – either immediately or very soon after it proves to be something that 'must not be missing'; it has a profound significance and use precisely for *us*.

(GS 277)

So, for example, to return to my poet-accountant example, in the *Bildungsroman* which is my story of my life, the misery and frustration I suffered in my years as an accountant must find their place and justification as something necessary to point me in the direction of my true vocation as a poet. 'What doesn't kill me makes me stronger' (TI I 8) is one of Nietzsche's most celebrated aphorisms.

## The superman

Nietzsche thinks it is very difficult to will the eternal return, and he is right. To see this, it is vital to bear in mind that willing the eternal return is to prefer the return of one's *exact* life to all other options. Many people would be prepared, in general terms, to live their lives again, but few, if any, would *prefer* to relive their exact life to living a judiciously expurgated version in which certain traumatic events – the failed second marriage, the death of a child, the Holocaust, 9/11, Syria (as noted in note 6, my *knowledge* of those world events is part of my life) – were simply omitted. The reason, of course, is that, in practice, it is doubtful whether anyone can fit everything that has happened into the *Bildungsroman* that is the story of their life. And even when events can be thus 'redeemed', even when one finds justification for an incident in terms of some subsequent effect that it causes, one cannot but be conscious of less painful ways in which the same effect could have been achieved. Instead of seven years of misery as an accountant, for example, six.

Certainly Nietzsche himself couldn't will the eternal return, though he constantly told himself to try. After, for example, the rejection of his proposal of marriage by Lou Salomé in which he saw his best friend, Paul Rée, also in love with Lou, as having played a treacherous hand, he wrote to another friend,

If I do not discover the alchemist's trick of making gold from shit – from this too – I am lost. Here I have the best possible opportunity to prove that, to me [here Nietzsche quotes the American, Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom he had admired since boyhood], 'all experiences are useful, all days holy, and all men

divine'!!!<sup>7</sup>

Nietzsche expresses the difficulty of willing the eternal return by saying that only the '*Übermensch*' (Z I 4) – the 'superman' or (less accurately) 'overman' – can do so. Only, that is, someone who transcends the present state of humanity, only a type of human being of which history as yet offers 'no certain examples' (GS 288), possesses 'the great health'. Who, then, is the superman? What has he got that we lack?

The answer, in a word, is *Rausch*: the 'frenzy', 'intoxication' or 'ecstasy' of the 'Dionysian god and man' (GS 370).<sup>8</sup> 'What is essential about frenzy', he says, is

the feeling of increased strength and fullness. Out of this feeling one lends to things, one *forces* them to accept from us, one violates them – this process is called *idealising*. Let us get rid of a prejudice here: idealising does not consist, as is commonly held, in subtracting or discounting the petty and inconsequential. What is decisive is rather a tremendous drive to bring out the main features, so that the others disappear in the process.

(TI IX 8)

In other words, the difference between the superman and us is that he does not have a problem about turning 'shit into gold'. He does not have a problem, because he simply *does not see* the details of his life that are irrelevant to, or cannot be justified in terms of, his life story – not because, being too weak to face up to them, he represses them, but because, passionately committed to the creative task determined for him by his life story and full of the urgency of the creator, full of 'an overflowing energy that is pregnant with future' (GS 370), he is too busy getting on with things to spare them the time of day:

to be incapable of taking one's enemies, one's accidents, even one's misdeeds seriously for very long – that is a sign of strong, full natures in which there is an excess of power to form, to mould, to recuperate, and to forget (a good example is Mirabeau<sup>9</sup> who had no memory for insults and vile actions done him and was unable to forgive simply because he forgot).

(GM I 10)

The reason, then, that the superman does not have a problem with willing the eternal return is that he suffers from what one might call creative amnesia. (This is the background to Nietzsche's remark: 'that a philosopher sees a problem in the value of life is an objection to him' (TI II 2).)

## Criticism

Later Nietzsche's ideas are deep, exciting and speak directly to one's own existential concerns. Questions, nonetheless, remain.

His response to the question of how one is to render one's life meaningful seems, we have seen, to be the following. One is to construct one's life as if it were a well-written work of literature with oneself as its 'hero'. If one happens to be endowed with *übermenschlich* energy, the intoxicated 'fullness of life' (GS

370) of the superman, then one will be able to take the further step of willing the eternal return. Passionately committed to the urgency of one's chosen life – 'am I concerned with *happiness*? I am concerned with my *work*' (Z IV 20), says Zarathustra impatiently – one will simply 'forget' details that do not fit into the organic whole of one's life-narrative. If, on the other hand, one constructs oneself as a hero but cannot will the eternal return – if, that is, one's life story is less well constructed, a less perfect work of art, than that of the superman, if there are parts that will not fit, organically, into the whole – then one is, presumably, what Nietzsche refers to as a 'higher type' (Z IV 13): one does not possess the 'great health' of the superman, but, on the other hand, one lives a more thriving existence than someone like Gunvald Larsson who has no life-narrative at all.

One thing, however, that is common to the lives of both the superman and the higher type is the fact that their life stories, together with the 'futures' with which they are 'pregnant' (GS 370), are, as we have seen, within the limits imposed by 'physics', *chosen* rather than *discovered*. In neither case is one's life story and task given to one as part of the furniture of the world in which one finds oneself. Rather, it is always, to repeat, the product of 'our own practical and theoretical skill in interpreting and arranging events' (p. 117). In no case, that is, is one's life story determined by 'the given'. It is always, rather, an act of free 'interpretation'. Whether superman or mere higher type, one chooses one's interpretation of oneself, and chooses, therefore, 'who one is'.

This generates two problems. The first, which I shall call 'the problem of the immoral script', is this. If all that matters is that I *like* the person I have chosen to be, does it not follow that it doesn't matter whether that person is a saint or a sinner, that the flourishing life is, in Nietzsche's own language, 'beyond good and evil'? Granted that to like myself I must show up as an admirable person in my own eyes, still mustn't there be some external check on what counts as an admirable person? The Mafia boss may well count, in his own eyes, as a fine fellow (good family man, generous to his wife, children, friends and dog), but do we really want to allow him to be able to count as a leading example of flourishing, 'healthy' humanity?

The second problem is what, following Kierkegaard (pp. 32–3), I shall call 'the problem of seriousness'. A life that is chosen by me can always be unchosen by me and is for that reason, as Kierkegaard puts it, an 'experimental' life. For if the sole ground of my task in life is my own choice, then that task, it would seem, cannot have *authority over* me. Authority, to repeat, presupposes 'otherness' (it remains to be seen whether the only satisfactory 'other' is Kierkegaard's God). I cannot provide my life-task with authority over myself. And if that task has no authority over me then it cannot be an object of true *commitment*. Thus, to go back to my poet/accountant example, suppose that I reject accountancy in favour of poetry, but then none of my poems get published, my bank balance looks bleak, and my wife begins to talk about leaving. If this happens I will find myself with no ground at all for resisting the thought: 'Well I chose poetry, it hasn't worked, let's go back to accountancy.'

Nietzsche says, to repeat, that we must learn especially from 'the artists of the theatre ... the art of "putting oneself on stage" before oneself'. But isn't it in fact the case that, in living the life he recommends, we actually learn *too much* from the artists of the theatre: that we become, not passionate and committed human

beings capable of pursuing our projects through hardship and disappointment, but rather *actors*, ironically detached from the roles we ‘experiment’ with, ready to swap roles if and when the need – or even the whim – takes us? Isn’t a life that is, in Nietzsche’s sense, chosen, in a word, not meaningful but rather meaningless?

Nietzsche’s account of the artistic – more generally, creative – psyche as one gifted with a superabundance of energy is, it seems to me, deeply insightful. Iris Murdoch, for example, in a letter to a friend, wrote ‘I feel, even at the lowest moment, such endless vitality within me’, a vitality she referred to as ‘joy’.<sup>10</sup> But Murdoch, I feel sure, did not, in Nietzsche’s sense, *choose* to become a novelist. Having found herself unable to communicate the nature of the good in the dry language of Oxford philosophy (she was, for a time, a tutor in philosophy at St Anne’s College, Oxford) she *had no choice but* to become a novelist. She did not ‘create’ but rather *discovered* her calling. A calling, indeed, is something one *cannot* create oneself. As with telephones, to repeat, one cannot call oneself.

In sum, Nietzsche’s recommendation that we should become the ‘heroes’ of our lives is an excellent and indispensable idea. But the notion that we should *choose* the hero we are to become is not. In Chapter 11 we will see how Heidegger seeks to improve on Nietzschean thinking: how he retains the former idea but integrates it into an account of the self which seems to make discovered as opposed to merely chosen meaning possible.

## Notes

- 1 Nietzsche also makes the point that to attribute ‘heartlessness and unreason’ [à la Schopenhauer] to the world is just as much an anthropomorphic projection as its opposite (*GS* 109).
- 2 From Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö’s detective story, *Die Terroristen* (Sjöwall and Wahlöö 1977, 150).
- 3 Henry Thoreau took a more radical approach, going to live for two years in the woods around Walden Pond. ‘I went to the woods’, he explained, ‘because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life’. Without this retreat from the manifold trivia of life in Concord, Massachusetts, he feared that, on his deathbed, he would ‘discover that I had not lived’.
- 4 This is oversimplified. For further elaboration see Young 2013, ch. 7.
- 5 As we saw in Chapter 4 (note 2) the idea of the eternal return occurs in Schopenhauer – who doesn’t represent it as an original idea of his own. What came to Nietzsche, we must suppose, was not the idea itself but rather the particular use of it which I am about to describe.
- 6 My life includes my experience and knowledge of the world around me. It includes the-world-as-I-experience-it. This, I think, is the point of the reference to the spider in the moonlight.
- 7 For a full account of the ‘Salomé affair’ see Young 2010, ch. 18. The quotation can be found on p. 355.
- 8 Though it has lost its interpretation in terms of Kantian–Schopenhauerian metaphysics, Dionysian ‘intoxication’ is as important to later Nietzsche as it is to earlier.
- 9 Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, comte de Mirabeau (1749–91), French revolutionary politician and orator, much loved on account of his eloquence and integrity.
- 10 The quotation is from a review of Peter Conradi’s *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, by Stuart Hampshire (2001).

## 10 Posthumous Nietzsche

Along with remarks like ‘I have forgotten my umbrella’, Nietzsche’s notebooks contain various sketches for the contents page of a prospective book to be called *The Will to Power*. In some sketches the subtitle *Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values* is suggested. After Nietzsche’s death, his sister, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche (a dyed-in-the-wool Nazi and friend of Hitler), gathered together a bunch of jottings from Nietzsche’s *Nachlass* (unpublished papers) written between 1883 and 1888 and published them as *The Will to Power*. Thanks in no small measure to Heidegger, this posthumous collection came to be viewed as Nietzsche’s masterwork. The view became established that, as Heidegger puts it in the massive, four-volume Nietzsche study he produced during the 1930s and early 1940s,

Nietzsche’s philosophy proper, the fundamental position on the basis of which he speaks in ... all the writings he himself published, did not assume a final form and was not itself published in any book. ... What Nietzsche himself published during his creative life was always foreground ... His philosophy proper was left behind as posthumous, unpublished work.

(N I: 8–9)

We now know, however, not only that Nietzsche abandoned the *Will to Power* project in 1888, but that over three-quarters of the 1,067 entries that appear in what now presents itself as *The Will to Power* (WP) were never intended for publication in any shape or form.<sup>1</sup> (As the chapter progresses I shall suggest that Nietzsche had extremely good reasons for wishing not to publish these musings, good reasons, indeed, for abandoning the entire project.) What follows from this is that for Nietzsche’s final word we must look to the works published during his lifetime that were discussed in the previous chapter rather than to that rubbish bin of thought, the doodles, daydreams and (usually failed) thought experiments of *The Will to Power*.

In spite of this, ‘posthumous Nietzsche’ as I shall call him (I might equally well have spoken of ‘Heidegger’s Nietzsche’ or ‘the Nietzsche that never was’) is interesting, important (particularly for his influence on postmodern French philosophy), and relevant to the theme of this book. He deserves, therefore, a chapter to himself.

### The world as will to power

The 'true world', posthumous Nietzsche of course holds, is a 'mere fiction' (WP 568). But he also holds that the world of our everyday experience, the 'manifest' or 'life world' as some philosophers call it, is a fiction – a construct moulded by considerations of utility, by our needs and desires as practical agents. What, then, putting aside all fictions, both useless and useful, is the world really like?

One thing philosophers have always observed about the manifest world (usually downgrading it on that account) is that it is a world of 'change, becoming, multiplicity, opposition, contradiction' and, Nietzsche adds, 'war' (WP 584). The world's 'becoming' is, moreover, he claims, entirely devoid of any 'goal or end' (WP 12 A). Since the world is uncreated (there is no God to create it), it has, Nietzsche reasons, existed for an infinite period of time. Since every possibility is realised over infinite time, if the world had a goal, if there could be an 'end of history', it would already have been reached. But once history stops it can never start again. QED (WP 1062). This argument is obviously suspect (one reason for doubting that Nietzsche was doing anything more than playing around with it, for resisting the idea that he was convinced by the argument).<sup>2</sup>

What are the elements that figure in this endless flux of becoming? Not 'beings', not the ordinary middle-sized objects of everyday experience. These are just the useful fictions by which human beings conceive of the world in action-friendly ways (WP 517). Rather, the ultimate constituents of reality are 'quanta', quanta of, in the first instance, 'force', force fields. 'Force', however, as the ultimate concept of science, is inadequate. Inadequate in two ways. First – Nietzsche exactly follows, here, Schopenhauer's line of reasoning (pp. 53–4 above) – the word has no meaning for us unless we specify its meaning in terms of the only force of which we have experience, namely 'will': 'a force we cannot imagine is an empty word and should be allowed no rights of citizenship in science' (WP 621), from which it follows that 'the victorious concept "force" by means of which our physicists have created ... the world, still needs to be completed: an inner will must be assigned to it' (WP 619). Second, since mere force fields might exist in harmonious equilibrium with each other, the idea of reality as force will not explain the observable fact of, metaphorically expressed, 'contradiction', 'war'. From this it follows that the nature of the world-constituting quanta must be characterised not merely as will, but more specifically as 'will to power' (ibid.). This is what reality ultimately is: *'This world is the will to power – and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power – and nothing besides' (WP 1067).

Why 'will to power' rather than Schopenhauer's will to survive, his 'will to live'? Since the most enduring things are always the simplest, the mere will to live cannot explain the existence of complex systems (WP 684). Of course, survival is necessary to power. The point, however, is that it is willed as a means, never as an end. (The premise of this argument is, in its universality, so obviously questionable that one doubts, once again, that Nietzsche took it very seriously.)

Will to power is will to 'mastery' (WP 636), to 'domination' (WP 715). Every 'quantum of will to power' (ibid.) strives to dominate every other quantum, to incorporate it, to take it over. (Political and possibly commercial models of domination, imperialism and colonisation, are surely at the root of Nietzsche's thinking here.) But it encounters resistance. The outcome of such power-struggles is that organised systems of quanta come into being – 'bodies', from our everyday point of view – which then try to dominate other organised systems



(WP 636). Hence the power-struggles visible on the macroscopic level, the fact that life, whether on the animal or human level, is nothing but 'lunging at the weaker' and 'defending against the stronger' (WP 655), 'a will to violate and to defend oneself against violation' (WP 634).

## The will to power and the eternal return

Two further points. First, the will to power is always the will to more power (WP 689). The will to power is always 'insatiable' (WP 619). Second, as a system of quanta becomes larger and larger it becomes potentially more and more unstable. This is because power is a function of the organisation as well as the quantity of force, and because increased size puts increased strain on the organisation of a system. (The Roman Empire provides one example of this; the business that turns from a small, focused, efficient organisation into a shambles as it takes over more and more companies is another.) What follows from this is not indeed the eternal return as we met it in the previous chapter, but at least a *vague* version of it: that systems go on getting larger and larger until, one day, they implode and everything goes back more or less to the beginning (WP 1067).

The fact that the idea of the world as will to power entails the vague version of eternal return leads posthumous Nietzsche to wonder whether the *precise* version discussed in the previous chapter – the infinite return of the world's history *down to the very last detail* – is not just a useful test of psychological health but also a metaphysical truth. He suggests that it is. Since every possibility is realised over infinite time it follows that the return of the *exact* present state of affairs is guaranteed (WP 1066). (As we saw (p. 53), exactly the same argument is used by Schopenhauer to refute the 'oft-repeated doctrine of a progressive development of mankind to an ever higher perfection', i.e., Hegelianism. History, Schopenhauer and posthumous Nietzsche agree, is circular, not linear.) In fact, however, the argument is unsound since, as Georg Simmel showed in 1907 (in a book called *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche*), the idea that every possibility must be realised over infinite time can be mathematically disproved.

## Power is the meaning of life

Given Nietzsche's (naturalistic) metaphysics, given that the world is, and we ourselves are, 'will to power and nothing besides', what follows about the meaning of life? 'Assuming that life is the will to power', Nietzsche answers, 'there is nothing in life that has value except the degree of power' (WP 55). The meaning of life is, therefore, *power* – the power to 'violate' (WP 634) other things, both human and non-human, in other words to exploit them. To what end? To the end, presumably, of more power.

Power, of course, one must hasten to add, comes in many forms. There are more or less subtle ways in which it may be exercised. Though it may be the power of the general, it may also be the 'transfigured' power of the artist (WP 1051). I shall return to this point shortly.

\* \* \*

The death of God, Nietzsche holds, results in the 'devaluation' of the hitherto

'highest values' (WP 2). They no longer grip us, are no longer able to give direction and meaning to our lives. A value vacuum – Nietzsche calls it 'nihilism' (ibid.) – comes into being. What is needed is a 'revaluation of all values', a new and fundamental principle of value. This is the will to power: 'The standpoint of value is the standpoint of conditions of preservation and enhancement for complex forms of relative life-duration', complex 'forms', that is to say, 'of domination' (WP 715). The highest value, in other words, the only thing that is valuable in itself, is increase in power. Everything else is valuable to, and only to, the extent that it promotes the growth of power.

Although I have called the will to power a 'new' principle of valuation, it is, for Nietzsche, only relatively new. Throughout the Christian era, he says, values (compassion, selflessness, turning the other cheek) were 'denaturalised' values. All his revaluation of values does, therefore, is to 'again set free' 'the value feelings that hitherto have been squandered on the world of ["true"] being' (WP 585 C). The 'naturalisation of morality' (WP 462), in other words, merely restored us to the values we used to have before we fell under the spell of that strange, 'sick'-making thought-construction called Christianity.

The goal of this process of liberation and restoration is the creation of a new 'species', a 'higher type', of humanity – 'my metaphor for this type is, as one knows, the word "superman"' (WP 866). (Another way, therefore, of expressing posthumous Nietzsche's account of the meaning of life is to say that it is the superman.) The goal, that is, of the revaluation of values is, in Hegelian language, a new (but also old) 'shape of consciousness' in which human beings fully accept and affirm the proposition that 'This world is the will to power – and nothing besides! And you yourself are also this will to power – and nothing besides!' The goal is human beings who say an unqualified 'yes' to life in the full and explicit knowledge that 'life is will to power' (WP 254), and nothing besides.

## Criticism

How should we respond to this strong but, in most ways, repellent portrait of being and value? The first thing to say, I think, is that there is something uncomfortably familiar about the portrait. We seem, somehow, to recognise who it is a portrait of. In his commentary on Nietzsche, Heidegger explains this familiarity in terms of his general thesis that great metaphysicians, 'essential thinkers', articulate in their metaphysics the Hegelian shape of consciousness definitive of the historical epoch they inhabit.<sup>3</sup> (The history of Western metaphysics is thus the history of the West.) Nietzsche's metaphysics of will to power, Heidegger holds, articulates the metaphysics of modernity. Generalising about the dominant character of our culture as a whole, it is in fact true, Heidegger suggests, that, more or less explicitly and more or less wholeheartedly, we accept the will to power as the principle of valuation, regard things as valuable only to the extent that they enhance our power. That modernity is the struggle for unconditioned power over man and nature shows that, as a species, we are the superman.

More exactly, since the superman is one who does not merely accept, but *ecstatically affirms*, life as the will to power, the supermen are those among us who glory in the fact that they are 'will to power and nothing else'. Writing in

1943, it was obvious to Heidegger who were the glorifiers of the will to power par excellence: the Nazi SS.<sup>4</sup>

Scholars who reject this reading of Nietzsche as a proto-Nazi as an utterly crude misunderstanding point to his admiration for artists and his emphasis on sublimation. All passions, says *Twilight of the Idols*, have a 'stupid' phase. That is why the Church tried to 'castrate' them. What we should do, however, since we need the energy and drive they constitute, is to 'spiritualise' (in Freud's language 'sublimate') them (TI V 1). And again, in *Zarathustra*, 'once you suffered passions and called them evil'. The trick, however, is to turn these 'wild dogs in your cellar' into 'birds and lovely singers' (Z I 5). And they point to Nietzsche's unequivocal condemnation of the 'uncaged beast of prey', 'the blond ... beast' (GM I 11). The superman thus appears as one who possesses a passionate heart but a cool, self-disciplining head. The will to power seems to be the will to a kind of power over *oneself* rather than over others, the power to channel the energy of one's raw impulses into productive, cultural achievements – very much as the Greeks, according to *The Birth of Tragedy*, channelled raw Dionysianism into the art of Greek tragedy (pp. 79–80).

Yet as the metaphysics of will to power is developed in *The Will to Power* there is no question but that power, as we have seen, is specified as in terms of 'violation', 'lunging', 'domination' – domination of others (other 'systems of quanta'). If we are unlimited 'will to power and nothing else' then wholehearted self-affirmation is seeking as much power over others as possible. Though we may find ourselves more adept at gaining power by spiritual rather than physical techniques – we may seek to control others through their minds and wills rather than their bodies, to 'manufacture' rather than compel assent, in Noam Chomsky's language – it is, so far as I can see, impossible to rule out the 'blond beast' as one genuine example of the superman, as conceived in the philosophy of posthumous Nietzsche. This is an especially strong reason for reiterating that *Nietzsche* is a different person from posthumous Nietzsche. The Nietzsche who wrote *The Gay Science*, *Twilight of the Idols* and *Zarathustra*, the real later Nietzsche, is a different Nietzsche from the one who thinks that life is the will to dominate others – and nothing else. The impossible task of integrating the metaphysics of will to power over others with the theme of sublimation is created, not by Nietzsche, who never wanted anyone to see his musings, jottings, experiments, daydreams and nightmares, but by those who pry into his notes and then try to represent what they find as constituting his 'philosophy proper'.

\* \* \*

Heidegger sums up his reading of Nietzsche by saying, with reference to the 'blond beast', that 'at the end of [Nietzsche's] metaphysics stands the statement: *Homo est brutum bestiale*' (N IV: 148), man is brutal, a bestial brute. This, I have suggested, is not Nietzsche. But it might still be *true*. More exactly, two things might be true: (1) that the world really is will to power and nothing else, and (2), that, given (1), we have no option but to accept power as the highest value, the meaning of life. Are either of these two claims true? I shall start with the second.

Why does posthumous Nietzsche think that on the assumption that life is the will to power, it *follows* that power is the highest value? Isn't this assumption, it

might be said, a classic instance of the well-known fallacy of confusing the desired with the *desirable*, i.e. valuable? (Lying in bed until midday may be desired but is far from being desirable, *worthy* of desire.) I think not. Posthumous Nietzsche's move from (1) to (2) is based not on this elementary mistake but rather, I think, on the following piece of reasoning. Life is the will to power – not just here and now but in all places and at all times. Power is, therefore, the only game in town, and will always remain so. There is no hope of ever overcoming the will to power. Hence the choice is a stark one: to affirm the will to power, to join in the game of power, or else to reject life as such. But the latter option is 'nihilism' the ultimate expression of which is 'nausea and suicide'.<sup>5</sup>

This, however, doesn't really answer the question. The all-embracingness of will to power on Nietzsche's picture indeed entails that *either* one embraces power as the highest value *or* else one rejects life and ought to commit suicide. But it does not tell us *which* of these alternatives to embrace. Given Camus' assertion that the question of suicide is the only truly serious question of philosophy (p. 187), we have to conclude that this central question is one to which posthumous Nietzsche has, in fact, no answer. He *assumes* that suicide is a non-option but never actually tells us why. Even if life is the will to power, in short, Nietzsche fails to establish that power is the highest value – or that it has any value at all.

But, to turn to (1), *is* life the will to power?

What actually lies at the root of posthumous Nietzsche's vision of reality? Schopenhauer's world as will, of course, revised in the light of Heraclitus' dark assertion that 'war [*polemos*] is the father of all things' (fragment 53), and his view (p. 83) that history periodically comes to an 'end' and then starts again. These, however, are mere *sources* for Nietzsche's view. What supports it in the way of *evidence*?

Precious little. So far as I can see, all he has to go on is the claim that the manifest world is 'war' (WP 584), not just war but, specifically, imperialist war, war of conquest, colonisation. (As we will see, this vision of things is shared by Foucault.) But why should we believe this?

One problem, internal to Nietzsche's own thinking, is that he claims that all beliefs about the manifest world are 'perspectival' (WP 567): useful fictions that serve the growth of the power of the 'power centre' that has the belief. So why should *this* claim be supra-perspectival? Why should it be anything more than Nietzsche's personal 'take' on things? Setting this problem of consistency aside, however, why should we believe that life is more or less overt warfare?

If it is true that life is war, then it must be true, in particular, that non-human, animal life is war. And, as we have seen in discussing Schopenhauer, the idea of war, of 'war, all against all', can be applied quite successfully to the animal world. But is this 'war' generated by an impulse to empire or merely by the struggle to survive? Given there is a 'will in nature', is it Nietzsche's 'will to power' or Schopenhauer's 'will to live'?

Surely the latter. Surely the great and obvious contrast between some (but by no means all, I would suggest) human activity and that of the animals is that whereas the former seek to dominate, the latter do not. Bees, ants, birds do not strive to take over the world. They strive, merely, to survive. (The nightmare

quality of Hitchcock's *The Birds* is precisely that it imagines this not to be the case.) Nietzsche criticises Darwin as follows:

The influence of 'external circumstances' is overestimated by Darwin to a ridiculous extent: the essential thing in the life process is precisely the tremendous shaping, form-creating force [i.e. the will to power] working from within which *utilises* and *exploits* 'external circumstances'.

(WP 647)

Species, Nietzsche is suggesting, don't merely respond to their environments, for that would imply that life is merely a struggle for survival. Rather, they actively 'exploit' those environments in order to increase their power. But this, I think every contemporary biologist would agree, is pure fiction.

\* \* \*

I conclude that (a) even if life were the will to power we would not have a conclusive reason to make the will to power the principle of valuation, but that (b) life is not, in fact, the will to power. To be sure, the will to power – power as domination of others – is a *prevalent* motive in human behaviour that *often* expresses itself in disguised ways which pre-posthumous Nietzsche is a master at exposing. But it is not the *only* motive on which human beings act, although it may be true, as Heidegger suggests, that it is the dominant motive for modern humanity. As I shall suggest in the last chapter, however, to the extent that this is true of it, the behaviour of modern humanity is *pathological*. The will to power, that is, represents, not a universal norm, but rather a pathology of human behaviour.

Since this is all really rather *obviously* the case we see, further, that Nietzsche had good reasons for abandoning the project of writing a book called *The Will to Power*; why he, in fact, *rejected* the metaphysics of will to power. (Though the published works often use 'will to power' as a diagnostic tool for discussing particular forms of human behaviour, in over 8,000 pages of text, only two passages (GM II 12 and *Beyond Good and Evil* 36) even suggest the idea that 'the world is will to power – and nothing besides', and both have a strongly 'what if' character to them.)

\* \* \*

Even though posthumous Nietzsche fails to prove it, could it not actually be true, still, that power, domination of others, is in fact the meaning of life? No. Quite apart from what I propose to argue in the last chapter, we already know this, I think, from Hegel. What we know from Hegel, that is to say, is that a basic human need is for 'recognition' from others. But, as we saw (pp. 91–4), a slave cannot provide authentic recognition. It can be provided only by a free being, a being over whom we do not have – or refrain from having – power.

## Notes

1 See Magnus 1988. For an even fuller discussion see Young 2010, ch. 26.

2 Of course, the *conclusion* of the argument that the world is 'chaos' is one, as we have seen, that he accepts (p. 111). The conclusion, however, does not need the argument. It can be based solely on

reflection on the actual course of history and on the human disposition to wishful thinking.

- 3 A useful summary of the main conclusions of the vast *Nietzsche* study is to be found in Heidegger (2002).
- 4 Heidegger does not say this to glorify the Nazis but rather to point to the horror implicit in Nietzsche's metaphysics. Though himself an early supporter of Nazism, Heidegger had, by 1943, thoroughly rejected what Nazism revealed itself to be. For at least a decade after the Second World War, Nietzsche, perceived as the philosopher of Nazism par excellence, was unteachable in Anglo-Saxon universities. There is a certain complex irony in the fact that while the 'Nazi' Heidegger was largely responsible for the reading of Nietzsche as a Nazi, his stance towards the 'Nazi' Nietzsche was one, not of sympathy, but of extreme antipathy. I have discussed this whole issue in chapter 5 of Young 1997.
- 5 Another alternative, to return to the Apollonianism of *The Birth of Tragedy*, might be to cover over the 'terror and horror' of existence with illusion. But that, we argued in Chapter 6, is unlikely to constitute a successful long-term strategy.

## 11 Early Heidegger

Heidegger is a tense topic. A fairly recent history of Western philosophy contains the sentence 'Any subject that is responsible for producing Heidegger ... owes the world an apology.'<sup>1</sup> The source of tension lies in Heidegger's biography.

Martin Heidegger was born, in 1889, into a peasant family in Messkirch in the Black Forest region of southwest Germany. (Since 1889 was the year in which Nietzsche's productive life was terminated by madness one might be inclined to see it as the year in which – for better or worse – the torch of German philosophy was handed over from Nietzsche to Heidegger.) He died and was buried in the graveyard of the Catholic church in Messkirch, where his father had been sexton, in 1976. Save for annual visits to Provence in the south of France in the 1950s and 1960s, which he came to regard as his 'second homeland', he spent almost his entire life in the region of his birth. His main teaching post was at the University of Freiburg, where he remained in spite of repeated offers of more prestigious posts elsewhere.

Heidegger shared Nietzsche's analysis of the condition of the post-death-of-God West as one of 'nihilism'. In 1933 he joined the Nazi Party believing it to represent the 'revaluation of all values' the West so desperately needed. In the same year he became Rector (vice-chancellor) of Freiburg University, seeking to make it, and the German universities in general, a vital force that would ensure that the Nazi movement became a movement of genuine spiritual renewal. As Plato had sought to make his philosophy the guiding force in the political life of the dictator of Syracuse (p. 3), so Heidegger sought to make his philosophy the guiding force in the politics of the dictator of Germany. He made many compromising speeches in support of Hitler and National Socialism. Eighteen months later, realising that he had radically misjudged the character of the Nazi movement and foolishly overestimated the possibility of his own influence over it, he resigned as Rector and returned to the duties of an ordinary professor. In his lectures from 1935 onwards – particularly in a series of lectures on Nietzsche that ran from 1936 until 1940 which became the *Nietzsche* work (N) referred to in the last chapter – he became an ever more bitter critic of the reality of Nazi Germany which he saw taking shape around him. This required a certain degree of courage given that from 1936 onwards his lectures were delivered under the frequent observation of Gestapo spies.

In spite of the fact that Heidegger awoke relatively quickly from his initial euphoria to the real character of Nazism, his involvement with the movement, together with his stubborn refusal to provide a public *mea culpa*, has, as the sentence quoted at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, proved a disaster for his philosophical reputation. (Others who were also involved, Carl Gustav Jung,

Hans-Georg Gadamer, Werner Heisenberg, Wilhelm Furtwängler and Wieland Wagner, for example, have escaped with their reputations virtually unscathed.) Since the end of the war there has been an enormous literature – a kind of feeding frenzy – devoted to proving that Heidegger was a Nazi *because of his* philosophy, in other words, that his philosophy is ‘Nazi philosophy’. None of these attempts are, I believe, successful. One can accept some, or all, of the central claims of Heidegger’s philosophy while remaining committed to basic human rights and a democratic form of government.<sup>2</sup>

Actually, ‘Heidegger’s philosophy’ is a misnomer, for he spoke of a *Kehre*, a ‘U-turn’, a radical ‘reversal’ in his thinking, as having occurred in the early 1930s. For this reason, one needs to distinguish between his ‘early’, *pre-Kehre* philosophy, which is the topic of this chapter, and his ‘later’ philosophy which will be the topic of Chapter 17. The principle expression of the early philosophy is *Being and Time* (B&T), which appeared in 1927.

## Being-in-the-world

So what is *Being and Time* about? The work starts by considering what it is to be a person, or, as Heidegger calls it, a ‘Dasein’. (*Dasein* is the ordinary German word for ‘existence’, but literally it means ‘being-here’. In asking what it is to be a Dasein, Heidegger is asking what it is to be here, in the world, in the manner that is distinctive of human beings.) Is, for example, being a person a matter of being a Platonic or Christian ‘soul’, a ‘soul substance’, as Heidegger puts it: a non-physical entity temporarily housed in a body that is situated in a physical world but which might, and one day will, find itself existing in a non-physical world?

Not at all, says Heidegger. If we really want to understand what a person is (rather than fabricating a story to fit the requirements of Platonic-Christian metaphysics), the place to start is with the recognition that a person is essentially an *agent*, a being that does things, that *acts*. Moreover, the kind of person you are depends on the kind of acts you perform. To be kind, generous, truthful, polite or punctual is not a matter of something going on in some mysterious, invisible, inner entity called a ‘soul’ or ‘mind’, but simply to *act* – and act habitually – in certain specific ways. A punctual person simply *is* a person who regularly turns up on time, a polite person one who regularly says ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, a truthful person one who regularly speaks the truth. ‘One is’, says Heidegger, ‘what one does’ (B&T: 239).

Now just as you can’t have a (theatrical) actor without a stage to act on, so you can’t have an agent without a world to act in. The idea of a person existing without a world to exist in makes no sense at all.

\* \* \*

At this point, I need to introduce some background information. The great articulator of the Platonic-Christian view of the self in the modern era was the French philosopher-mathematician René Descartes (1596–1650). According to Descartes, the essential self is a ‘thinking thing’ or mind that is temporarily housed in a body – rather like a pea in a pod. (An invisible pea in a mechanical



pod – like Newton, Descartes took the physical world to be a giant machine, to function according to mechanical laws that are universal and exceptionless. Hence the satirical account of Cartesianism as the view that a person is a ‘ghost in the machine’.)

Descartes’ quest is for absolute certainty. Accordingly, in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he sets out to doubt everything which can be doubted. His own existence and the fact that he thinks and experiences, however, he cannot doubt. Even if all his thoughts are wrong and his experiences deceptive, those thoughts and experiences must still exist to be wrong, and he must exist to have them. But what about the world outside his mind, the world of everyday things? Certainly he has *experiences* that seem to be of such a world. But he has experiences that seem to be of a world when he is dreaming. How, then, does he know that he is not dreaming all the time?

Eventually Descartes decides that he does know, for certain, that the world exists: he ‘proves’ God’s existence (with an exceptionally shonky argument), and then decides it would be inconsistent with God’s goodness to give him such a powerful inclination to believe in a world outside his mind if, in fact, there was no such world. None of this is very convincing – one doubts that Descartes himself believed it. The result is that, on the Cartesian view, the existence of the ‘external’ world remains a permanent, theoretical problem.

The primary negative ambition of *Being and Time* is the destruction of the Cartesian view of the self in all its aspects. With respect to the existence of the world, it would be wrong to say that Heidegger *refutes* the theoretical doubt raised by the dream argument. It’s consistent with everything Heidegger says still to maintain that there *might* be an immaterial thing – one can call it ‘I’ if one likes – whose experiences as of a world are actually pure illusion. The mistake Heidegger points out is that of supposing this ‘I’ to be a *person* and of concluding that since the ‘I’ can exist without a world, ‘person’ can be explained without reference to ‘world’, and personal characteristics – generosity, kindness, etc. – without reference to action. A person, to repeat, is a being that acts and action requires a world. Person and world are inseparable, a point Heidegger makes by saying that Dasein is ‘being-in-the-world’ (B&T: 113) – the function of the hyphens is to emphasise this inseparability. What a person is can only be explained by reference to world and to action within it.

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What, then, is a world? One thing it is not is chunks of matter floating around in physical space according to mechanical laws. (Once again, Heidegger has Descartes in his sights, here – the ‘machine’ part of the ‘ghost in the machine’ story.) It is not that this is necessarily a *wrong* description of reality. On the contrary, it (or something like it) is a perfectly appropriate description if what we are doing is natural science. But if, on the other hand, we are trying to understand what a person is it is absolutely inappropriate.

What, then, is appropriate? Heidegger’s central concept, here, is that of the ‘ready-to-hand’ (B&T: 69) or, in a very broad sense of the term, ‘equipment’ (B&T: 68).

What is ‘equipment’? Cars are equipment, as are computers and hammers. Wind, too, is equipment when it is ‘wind in the sails’, when it is used, for

example, to power a yacht. A river is equipment when it is used to generate electricity; clouds are equipment when they are used to predict the weather.

Consider a hammer. What makes something to be *that* sort of equipment? Not, certainly, its physical appearance. Someone might construct something made out of papier mâché that *looked* just like a hammer. The inhabitants of a distant planet might manufacture things that looked just like hammers but were, in fact, religious symbols. Something might look just like a hammer – might in fact *be* an ex-hammer – but actually be an incredibly valuable piece of ‘ready-made’ art. What makes something a hammer is its use – that it is used for knocking in nails. By whom? By carpenters. What for? To build, for example, houses. Again, what for? For people – the purchasers of the houses – to live in. Dasein’s world, therefore, essentially contains not just equipment but also other Dasein, other people.

Once again, a point is being made here against Descartes. One of the live possibilities, as we have seen, on a Cartesian view of things (on Descartes’ view minus the world-guaranteeing God whose existence, of course, he cannot really prove), is that nothing exists outside my consciousness, that really there is no world at all. But supposing we have somehow been able to lay this first doubt to rest. Another doubt still remains. This consists in the possibility that though there really is a world, I am *alone* in it. To be sure, says Descartes in the fourth of his *Meditations*, I’m surrounded by beings in hats and coats who look very like me and behave in remarkably similar ways – if I stick a pin in one of them it screws up its face, jumps and utters the sounds ‘Ouch, that hurts’ – but how do I know that they aren’t all really just cleverly constructed robots completely devoid of consciousness and feeling? This kind of reflection – I know, for certain, that I exist, but whether anyone else does is open to doubt – makes it look as though one can and must explain what it is for me to be me, for a person to be a person, without any reference to the existence of other people. Once again, however, Heidegger points out Descartes’ confusion between the idea of a solitary pinpoint of body-less consciousness and the idea of a person. This confusion has serious consequences because it obscures the crucial fact that being-among-other-people is part of the *explanation* of what it is to be a person.

To see how deeply others are implicated in one’s life as a person consider, says Heidegger, a boat or a field. Even though you want to cross the river you do not touch the boat on the bank. To get to the other side of the field you walk round the edge rather than across the middle. Why is this? Because the boat and the field are *private property*; they belong, that is, to *another person*. (Notice that we do not ascribe property rights to robots.) Far from being alone in it, our world is *saturated* with other-peopleness – even when they are not around. For Descartes, there is a serious problem in ‘getting over’ from the solitary ‘I’ to other people. But for Heidegger, as we will see, the problem is precisely the opposite: getting away from them.

## Inauthenticity

Dasein, then, essentially inhabits a world, a world that is a kind of interconnected network of equipment and other Dasein. Is this, then, all there is to be said about

being a Dasein, being a person? Not so.

Another of Dasein's defining traits, says Heidegger, is that it is, essentially and uniquely, that being for which its own being is an 'issue' (B&T: 12). Dasein, that is to say, inescapably confronts a *choice* as to the fundamental quality of the life it is to lead. Neither dogs nor daffodils confront such a choice. Only beings that are persons do.

The key term in understanding this choice is *Eigentlichkeit*, usually translated as 'authenticity', though (since '*eigen*' means 'own', '*lich*' means 'ly' and '*keit*' means 'ness') a more revealing translation would be 'ownliness'. A person who has *Eigentlichkeit* is someone who is their *own* person, who *owns* his or her self.

To explain authenticity (since 'ownliness' isn't a proper word I'll stick to the standard translation) we need to start with the opposite – inauthenticity. What is that?

Go back to the carpenter. Being a carpenter is a *social role*. Social roles determine one's actions: Harry builds houses because he is a carpenter and because building houses is what carpenters do.

One's job-description is one type of social role, but each of us inhabits an endless variety of others: being a Republican, being a Democrat, being a father, being a son, being a Protestant, being a Catholic, being a Manchester United supporter, being a Manchester City supporter, being gay, being straight, being middle class, being working class, being an intellectual, being a redneck, and so on ad infinitum. Each role determines a range of actions that are appropriate to it.

Mostly, the way in which we inhabit the selection of social roles that defines who we are is, in a strong sense, *non-optional*. This is because we succumb to the pressure of 'public opinion' (B&T: 174–75, 403), to conform to the norms that are approved by the group or subculture to which we belong. We succumb to what Heidegger calls 'the dictatorship of *das Man*' ('the They' or, better, 'the One'), the pressure to do what 'one' does – the 'one' of 'One does not eat with one's mouth open, Billy.' This pressure 'levels us down' to the 'averageness' of the group. Typically, says Heidegger,

we take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *one* takes pleasure; we read, see and judge about literature and art as *one* sees and judges; likewise, we shrink back from the 'great mass' as *one* shrinks back; we find shocking what one finds shocking.

(B&T: 126–27)

Typically, Heidegger suggests, individual lives are nothing more than a function of the One, a function of public opinion, of 'peer pressure'. Typically, individuals are nothing more than, as it were, a multiplicity of loudspeakers through which booms the single, self-confident voice of *das Man*, expressing the same opinions, the same tastes and the same judgements over and over again. Typically, that is to say, individuals are precisely *not* individual. They are, rather, endlessly repeated clones of each other, their lives tedious clichés concerning which, if you know a couple of features, you can predict all the rest. Nietzsche spotted this phenomenon and spoke, unkindly, of the great majority of people as 'herd animals'. (It is in contrast to these that he says – encouraging his readers through

flattery – that ‘we, however’, want to become beings who are ‘new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves’ (p.117). As we shall see, however, Heidegger’s conception of authenticity is more deeply thought out than this.)

\* \* \*

Inauthentic life has a certain downside to it. There is, Heidegger suggests, a certain sense of something being amiss, a dim sense of self-betrayal. One senses that one has given over the running of one’s life to someone else whereas, in fact, the only proper person to run it is oneself. One is troubled by the ‘voice of conscience’ (B&T: 268).

Heidegger, though brought up a Catholic and originally trained to be a Catholic priest, married a Protestant. He wrote *Being and Time* under the influence of a close friendship and collaboration with the Protestant theologian Rudolf Bultman. This influence endows the work with a particular character that has led to its being described as ‘Godless theology’. (‘Godless’ because according to *Being and Time* that which underlies our this-worldly existence is the ‘nothing’ (B&T: 308), ‘theology’ because a plausible way of reading Heidegger’s ‘authenticity’ is to see it as preserving the essence of the Protestant life *in spite of* the death of God.) Heidegger’s assertion that we all have a fundamental sense that the only proper person to run one’s life is oneself might well be seen as an articulation of the founding claim of the Protestant Reformation – Martin Luther’s assertion that the ultimate authority which determines the right and the good is not the Pope but always, in the end, one’s own conscience.

\* \* \*

The downside of inauthenticity, then, is a sense of ‘lostness’ (B&T: 268), lack of self-ownership. On the other hand, there is a certain upside. Inauthentic life, says Heidegger, can’t exactly be called ‘tranquil’. Because of the vague sense of self-betrayal there is an underlying restlessness which often expresses itself in a dabbling in Eastern religions or in ‘the exaggerated self-dissection’ (B&T: 178) of psychoanalysis. But if not exactly tranquil, inauthentic life is, at least, ‘tranquillised’ (B&T: 177). As valium, alcohol and background music dull things down that we don’t really want to think about, so inauthentic life has the advantage of covering over something that we are extremely reluctant to face up to.

What is this unpleasant something? What is it which, in the flight to conformism, we are seeking to evade? What are we running away *from*? At this point, Heidegger makes a startling and dramatic claim: what, in inauthenticity, we are seeking to evade is *death*.

## Inauthentic being-towards-death

Why, after all, asks Heidegger, do we succumb to the pressure to conform exerted on us by *das Man*? What makes the phenomenon surprising is that, unlike a real dictatorship, the ‘dictatorship’ of the One is not normally backed up by any obvious threat of punishment for those who fail to conform. No one, for example, actually gets tortured for wearing Speedos where baggy shorts are the fashion or for wearing narrow jeans in an age of flares.

Heidegger explains conformism in terms of what he calls 'distantiality' (B&T: 126). Human beings are so constituted that they begin to feel extremely uncomfortable if they find themselves more than a little distanced from social norms.

At first, distantiality looks to be just a basic, brute fact about the human psyche, something incapable of explanation in terms of anything more basic. Later on in *Being and Time*, however, Heidegger provides an explanation of our strong disposition to huddle up to social norms. The explanation is that it is, as it were, cold on the outside. In what does this coldness consist? It consists, says Heidegger, in *death*. Outside the group, what you feel is the chill wind of death.

Outsiders – individuals – that is to say, die. But the group, *das Man*, does not die. So to the extent that I identify myself with the group I seem to evade death. To the extent that I think of myself, not as an individual for whom the question of what life one is to lead is an 'issue', but rather as a mere, as it were, vehicle for the One to drive around in, to the extent that I take the only 'self' in the picture to be the One, then I seem to rise above death. Death ceases to be *mine*. The flight from authenticity, the flight from owning one's own individuality is, then, the flight from owning – owning up to – one's own death.

\* \* \*

Given that 'average, everyday' Dasein is heavily committed to this self-deceiving evasion of death, it comes as no surprise that death – particularly 'my death' – is a topic we like to avoid. We – particularly we in the modern West – tuck dying and death out of sight in old people's homes and crematoria. We engage in euphemisms – 'passed away', 'gone to sleep' – and in nervous, Woody Allenish jokes ('It's not that I'm afraid of death; I'd just rather not be there when it happens'). Most importantly, as Heidegger points out (B&T: 258), we engage in evasive thought patterns. I think, for example, of death as something that happens to *other* people (and even then only when there is some 'failure of the health system'). And if I am forced to face up to the fact that death happens to me, I still, in effect, manage to make it someone else's problem. I tell myself: 'Of course I will die sometime – but not yet.' The weasel clause here is the 'not yet'. What I am really thinking is: death is something that happens to old people, to the old Young. But I am the young (or youngish) Young. So death is no concern of *mine* but only of some distant, as it were, 'descendant' of my present self about whom I am not concerned. (Students sometimes think about exams in the same way: the exam at the end of the term concerns only a remote successor of oneself, so one's present self has no need to do anything save smoke dope and go skiing.) Of course, when I get older I think of death as something that happens only to *very* old people, and so on. By strategies such as this we endow ourselves with, and live our lives under the influence of, an *illusion of immortality*, an illusion that enables us to escape the three, as Heidegger calls them, 'ontological' (defining) features of death: death is *mine*, it happens not just to other people but also to *me*; death is inevitable, it *must* happen; and, most importantly, it may happen *at any moment*. This last feature is of crucial significance because it is only its evasion which enables one to pass the buck of death from one's present self to a remote self of the future.

## Authentic being-towards-death

If the evasion of death is the real motive for living inauthentically, it follows that the key to getting out of inauthenticity, to becoming authentic, is to genuinely face up to the fact of one's own death, genuinely to face up to its three ontological features. Heidegger calls this owning up to one's own death 'authentic being-towards-death' and sometimes '*Vorlaufen*' – 'anticipation of', or literally, 'running-forwards-into' – death (B&T: §§52–53).

What happens if one does genuinely own one's own death; not just pay it lip service, but live one's whole life in the light of one's mortality?

To make the question more vivid imagine you have just been diagnosed as HIV positive. (Of course, metaphysically speaking, we are all, as it were, HIV positive: life, someone wittily remarked, is a terminal condition that is sexually transmitted.)

Heidegger says that facing up to death 'wrenches Dasein away from *das Man*'. It does this because one realises that 'all being-with-others will fail us when [death] ... is the issue' (B&T: 263). Insofar, that is, as the motive for one's conforming to the dictates of *das Man* is the attempt to escape the mineness of death, an authentic confrontation with death (whether by choice or necessity) must reveal it as a failed strategy. Nothing can take away death. It is inevitable, could happen any time, and happens to *me*.

This insight, of course, may only last a split second. One may hastily tuck it away under the usual cover-up. But suppose one holds onto it. Then, says Heidegger, Dasein becomes 'individualised down to itself' (B&T: 263), plunged, as it were, into a Protestant isolation. Understanding that entry into death is something I do alone, that my social group is something I leave behind at the moment of death, I attain a vivid grasp of my own individuality. Understanding that, I understand that *I myself have* to make the choices that determine my life. I give up being a mindless conformist, become immune to the pressure to conform to the approved norms of public opinion. No longer 'dictated' to by *das Man* – no longer dictated to by 'the others' – one becomes, as I shall put it, 'autonomous', self-governing.

## Authenticity

Autonomy, making your own life-choices, 'doing it *my way*', though a part, is not the totality of what makes up authenticity – being your own person. One might, after all (so, at least, it would seem on the surface of things), escape the clutches of the One only to lapse into a mind-blasted life of sex, drink and drugs – the last days of the ageing rock star, perhaps. If your choices add up to a meaningless chaos such as this, Heidegger would say that, far from being an authentic person, you don't really count as a person at all, only as a jumble of what might be called 'person fragments'. Nietzsche says, as we saw in Chapter 9, that we need to learn from artists how to become the 'heroes' of our lives, how to grasp everything about them as belonging to a single 'artistic plan' (GS 290). Heidegger believes this, too. To be any kind of a person, one's life must have a unity to it, the continuity and coherence which comes from grasping one's life as possessing a unifying plan. The word I now want to use to designate the unity in

question is 'focus'. So, using my own terminology, what I want to suggest is that Heidegger's notion of authenticity is really a *combination* of autonomy and focus. Authenticity is, as one might put it, focused autonomy.

But Heidegger thinks that facing up to death is the key, not only to autonomy, but also to focus. Facing and holding onto knowledge of our mortality (of death in the full ontological richness of its three defining features) gives us autonomy and focus *at one and the same time*.

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Why should facing up to death give our lives focus?

Go back to discovering yourself to be HIV positive. HIV may never kill you. Even if it becomes 'full-blown' AIDS, you may, with modern drugs, live a full life for several decades. Nonetheless, in receiving the diagnosis you are unavoidably confronted with the fact you normally evade – your own mortality, the finiteness of your existence. If you hang onto this knowledge, if you make productive use of the occasion (I once heard a cancer patient refer to 'the privilege of having cancer'), then, says Heidegger, you become 'liberated' from 'lostness in those possibilities which may accidentally thrust themselves upon one', liberated 'in such a way that, for the first time, one can authentically understand and choose among the factical possibilities lying ahead of ... [death]' (B&T: 264).

The thought, here, is neither particularly difficult nor particularly original. Dr Johnson had it in the eighteenth century when he remarked that there is nothing like the prospect of a hanging to concentrate the mind. The point is that to be properly aware of your finitude – to realise that death happens to *you*, that it *must* happen, and may happen *at any moment* – is to realise that you *do not have time* to explore all the multiplicity of options which life places before you. What one is compelled to do, therefore, is to determine which life options are the important, 'essential' ones and which are the trivial distractions, the, as Heidegger calls them, 'accidental' time-wasters which life thrusts one's way.

Grasping one's finitude is more than simply realising that there is no time to lose. To be able to make the distinction between essential and irrelevant life options one must, says Heidegger, grasp one's life as a 'totality', as a 'whole' (B&T: 232). (Nietzsche, remember, says exactly the same thing: to narrate one's life as a work of literature one must grasp it as if it were already something 'past and whole' (GS 78).) But to do that one must *vorlaufen*, 'anticipate' one's death, 'run forward', in imagination, to life's end. Only by positioning oneself at the end of life and grasping it as if it were completed and past, can one grasp it as a whole. The Christian notion of the Last Judgement is, I suggested, an aid to this self-totalising, self-summing-up, as is the injunction to write one's own obituary and then live in the light of what one has written. Another relevant phenomenon is the car-crash experience. 'My whole life flashed before my eyes', survivors often say. Obviously in the split second before the crash there is not time to review every single incident in one's past. What presents itself, rather, in the moment before impact, is 'one's whole life' simplified down to its three or four defining moments or people. (Let me hasten to add that the car crash is just *a* way in which life can disclose its focus. One does not *need* to drive fast to become authentic.)

If, then, one 'anticipates' one's death, one grasps one's life as a simplified

whole and sees which options are essential and which are trivial distractions. The poet-accountant of Chapter 9, for example (pp. 116–18 above), will see either that he is a poet or that he is an accountant.<sup>3</sup> Not only that, but – let’s suppose that he sees he is a poet – he will see that he has wasted a great deal of precious time on irrelevancies and that, to be who he is, *there is no more time to lose*.

To sum up. Authentic life is autonomous. But it is also focused. As focused, it is marked by urgency, energy (becoming focused concentrates a tremendous amount of previously dissipated energy) and commitment. It is, in other words, intensely meaningful. Authenticity is Heidegger’s account of what it is to live a meaningful life.

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Notice, in passing, that on Heidegger’s account, an immortal life would be a life without meaning. Since all life-possibilities can be realised over infinite time, there can be no choices that matter if I am condemned to eternal life. The poet, for example, does not have to reject being an accountant; he only has to reject it for now, knowing full well that it’s an option he may well take up in the next hundred years. This means that his current life is no more than a role he is playing at the moment. It can’t tell him who he is since he knows that he will soon be someone quite different. And since it can’t do that, it can’t give meaning to his life. (This perhaps, is why the (Greek) gods so often stir up trouble among mortals, why we are, to them, ‘as flies to wanton boys’. Since there is no passion, no commitment, in their eternal lives they are fundamentally bored and hence need to stir up trouble to distract themselves.)

## Heritage

I’ve been bringing Nietzsche into the discussion over the last few pages because it seems to me clear that Heidegger’s notion of authenticity is very close to Nietzsche’s notion of the meaningful life as a life lived as if it were a well-written work of literature. Now, however, I want to look at the differences between the two accounts of the meaningful life.

Nietzsche holds, we saw, that to live meaningfully, we are to narrate our lives into organic wholes in such a way as to disclose the ‘heroes’ who we are. For him, however, it is (within the limits of ‘physics’ (p. 117 above)) absolutely *up to me* which of the many available stories I should chose to be *my* story. Though superficially attractive (particularly to those dissatisfied with their current lives) this freedom to become whoever one wants is, on closer inspection, problematic. For two reasons.

The first, to recapitulate, is that if all life options are equally available then the sole ground for my choice of one rather than another is my own free, and indeed arbitrary, choice. But that means that the life option I have chosen possesses no genuine authority for me. It cannot therefore be an object of genuine commitment, cannot provide me with a ground for persevering through hardship and disappointment. And that, in turn, means that it can’t render my life genuinely meaningful. This is what I referred to as Kierkegaard’s ‘problem of seriousness’.

The second problem we saw to affect Nietzsche’s position is what I called ‘the



problem of the immoral script'. Given that all that matters is that I *like* the life I have scripted for myself, couldn't I just as easily script myself the life of a Mafia boss as that of a doctor working to cure malaria in Africa? Isn't Nietzsche committed to the view that the former life is just as good a choice as the latter; isn't he guilty, that is, of elevating meaning over morality?

Now I want to return to Heidegger and see how he fares with respect to these two problematic features of Nietzschean thinking.

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Authenticity, as thus far explained, is a purely *formal* concept. Its definition in terms of 'autonomy' and 'focus', that is to say, tells us about the form of the authentic life but nothing about its *content*. Put another way, authenticity, as thus far understood, is compatible with *any* life content. You can be an autonomously focused communist, fascist, liberal democrat, terrorist, Mafia boss, malaria doctor, accountant or poet. This is the second of Nietzsche's problems.

Heidegger, however, thinks further than Nietzsche. Noting the purely formal character of autonomy-plus-focus, he explicitly raises the question of from 'whence ... Dasein can draw those possibilities on which it factually projects itself' (B&T: 383), from whence it can derive the content of its life. His answer is: 'from heritage' (B&T: §§74-75).

Heritage – roughly speaking, the ethical tradition of one's community – is almost never written down in a big book of rules. Rather, it is embodied in certain 'hero' figures who are preserved – handed down from generation to generation – in the myths, folk tales, artworks, sacred books and so on of the culture. Heroes (note that Heidegger's use of the term is different from the Nietzschean use with which we have been acquainted up to now) are, very roughly speaking, 'role models': exemplary figures which tell us how to live. For the Greeks, Hera embodied the virtue of homeliness, Zeus the virtue of leadership; for the Americans Washington embodies the virtue of truthfulness, Lincoln the virtue of shrewd humanity; for the Scots, the tale of Robert Bruce and the spider embodies the virtue of perseverance; for the Dutch, the little boy with his finger in the dyke the virtue of communal responsibility; for the English, Captain Oates ('I'm going out now; I may be some little time'), the virtue of understated courage; for New Zealanders, Edmund Hillary the virtue of modesty in high achievement. Note that a 'hero' may be a living figure. If living, however, the figure in question will be, to one degree or another, mythologised. As he or she becomes part of the heritage of the culture, 'warts' will be removed in order to heighten their effectiveness as role models.

Heidegger's crucial thought is that *heritage is not something we choose*. Rather, we are born into it. As we grow into adulthood – always, of course, within a particular culture – we find ourselves *already in possession of* a pantheon of hero figures and the values they personify. It's part of mastering the language. We master our *native* language, that is, not in the classroom but in listening to the talk of our parents and peers into which are woven the value-laden, heritage-preserving tales and myths of our culture. By the time we have mastered the language – have become human beings in the full sense of the word – we have mastered our heritage too.

The values embodied by our heroes, the commitments of heritage, it is

important to see, *all belong to one's authentic self*. You are who you are, in a large part, because you have grown to adulthood – 'Daseinhood' – within a particular culture. The commitments of heritage, Heidegger holds, are *your* commitments, the deepest values that you have.<sup>4</sup> It follows that authenticity, and in particular autonomy – doing what *you* decide to do rather than what public opinion tells you to do – is acting out of the values of heritage. *Being true to heritage is being true to your own, deepest self*.

\* \* \*

So how does heritage govern the choice of the content of the authentic life?

One finds oneself, says Heidegger, in a particular 'facticity'. (We will find this notion re-emerging in Sartre.) Facticity is made up of two things: one's personal circumstances and, as Heidegger puts it, one's 'historical' situation. By 'personal circumstances' is meant, here, the social context in which one finds oneself (that one is in a capitalist rather than communist society, for example) together with the particular set of abilities and disabilities with which one is endowed. One may, for example, be an excellent writer but terrible mathematician. One's historical situation is constituted by the particular way in which current public opinion and practice falls short of the values of heritage.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to notice that there will almost always be such a discrepancy. There are at least two reasons for this. First, the way in which the values of heritage are applied in practice constantly needs updating in the light of new knowledge. If, for example, we become convinced that women are actually *capable* of doing those jobs it used to be thought only men could do – being a French-horn player, being a fighter pilot – then we may need to re-evaluate what, in practice, the value of equality comes to. Second, the meaning of the values of heritage – and that means the way we understand our hero figures – constantly needs reinterpreting so as to make sense in the contemporary context. Freedom, for example, meant one thing in Nazi-occupied Europe, but to make sense in the age of the subtle herding of individuals into mass opinions by the media, it has to mean something else.

Dasein always finds itself, then, with a particular set of personal capacities and incapacities in a particular historical situation constituted by the salience of some gap between heritage and current opinion and practice. These two together, Heidegger holds, determine the content of the authentic life. Knowing equality to be a fundamental value enshrined in the heritage of your society, for example, you might be particularly struck by the discrepancy between heritage, on the one hand, and the actual treatment of women, as compared with men, on the other. This discrepancy, taken together with your exceptional talent for writing, might disclose to you that which defines and gives meaning to your life: being a feminist journalist. Authenticity is a matter of closing the gap between heritage and current practice.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to emphasise that the content of the authentic – meaningful – life is not something you *choose*. Rather, you *discover* it in the conjunction of heritage and facticity. Certain elements of choice, of course, remain: which newspaper, for example, to write for. Even here, however, facticity is likely to suggest an answer.

Now I should like to return to the two problems that afflict Nietzsche's account of the meaningful life. Does Heidegger fare any better than Nietzsche with respect to these problems?

First, the problem of seriousness. On Heidegger's account, this seems to disappear. Since the content of the authentic life is *discovered* in the conjunction of facticity and heritage rather than arbitrarily chosen, the problem that arbitrary choice can't provide a basis for genuine commitment seems to disappear. Should, of course, one's feminist writings fail to get published, one might, in the end, have to reassess the question of one's talent as a writer. But all that means is that one might have made a *mistake* about one's facticity, not that there is anything wrong with the idea that the conjunction of heritage and facticity determines the content of the meaningful life. All it means is that one needs to look harder into that conjunction.

The problem of the immoral script. This problem also seems to disappear. Since the heritage of a culture is its morality, it follows that the authentic life, a life guided by the fundamental values of one's community, must also be a moral life.

## Criticism

And yet doubts about Heidegger remain. Concerning the problem of seriousness, he assumes that the values of heritage necessarily constitute one's own fundamental values, so that any questioning of the ethical (moral) tradition of one's culture is impossible. But is this really so? Suppose, for example, one emigrates, and lives for a long time in a radically different culture, say in Iran or China, so that one becomes aware that there are radically different ways of doing things, *fundamentally* different ethical traditions. If so, might this not reintroduce the arbitrariness of choice? Wouldn't it mean that one had to choose which fundamental heritage one is going to live within? And doesn't this suggest that something is missing from Heidegger's account, something that would put the fundamental values of one's life *genuinely* beyond question?

Concerning the problem of the immoral script the truth of the matter is that Heidegger hasn't really solved it. True, it turns out that the authentic life must be not merely something pleasing to me, but rather something that accords with the fundamental values of my community. But what is there to say that those fundamental values aren't themselves immoral, or might, at least, be judged so from the perspective of the fundamental values of another moral community? It seems that what we need, to *really* solve the problem of the immoral script, is a *universal* set of values, values that hold for everyone regardless of the particular culture to which they belong.

This remark leads to another. With Nietzsche, as we may put it, the meaning of life is *individual*: there is the meaning of life for me – my chosen self-narration – and the meaning of life for you – yours. There is no linking or bond between the two, indeed they may be in fundamental conflict with each other. (We grow up together in Sicily, but you choose to become a Mafia boss while I become a Mafia-busting judge.) With Heidegger something different is the case: the meaning of life has become *communal*. There is, that is to say, a particular way or

set of ways in which actual practice falls short of heritage. For everyone in the community their authentic life is the life dedicated to closing the gap between heritage and actual practice. Of course, I have my own particular way of closing that gap while other members of the community have theirs. Every authentic member of the community has, as we might put it, his or her own sub-meaning of life. Yet they are all linked together (like the members of a football team) by a commitment to the realisation of a common goal – Heidegger calls it the ‘destiny’ of a ‘people’ (B&T: 384–85). So with Heidegger, we may speak of the meaning of life *for a community*. This, however, falls short of establishing *the* – community-independent – meaning of life. Early Heidegger, no less than Nietzsche, has given up on discovering *the* – universal – meaning of life.

Of course, there might be no such meaning. Suppose, however, that there were, that we could discover a *universal* set of fundamental values. Then we would have discovered a universal task to which *all* authentic human beings would, each in their own way, contribute. In this case we would have accomplished the Platonic task of discovering *the* human task, *the* meaning of life.

These remarks are sketchy and probably hard to follow. They are intended, however, as a preview to the discussion of the later Heidegger in Chapter 17 where I shall try to make them clearer.

## Notes

- 1 Gottlieb 2000, ix.
- 2 Young 1997 is devoted in its entirety to establishing this conclusion.
- 3 Notice that whereas Nietzsche assumes it to be a matter of free choice who one is to be, Heidegger assumes that one discovers who one is. Why he makes this assumption will become clear shortly.
- 4 In the 1930s, influenced by his reading of Antigone, Heidegger assimilates heritage to Sophocles’ ‘unwritten law divine’, the law to which Antigone appeals in resisting the unjust laws of the state. This is much more plausible than the confinement, in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, of divine law as the law of the family (p. 90).
- 5 Notice that both heritage and current opinion consist in a sense of what ‘one’ does (or ‘we’ do). Both, in fact, are aspects of ‘the One’. Das Man is, therefore, internally complex and, almost always divided against itself. It is an ambiguous phenomenon, the source of inauthenticity, but also of the possibility of authenticity.
- 6 But is there not at least the theoretical possibility that there is no gap between heritage and the practices approved of by current public opinion? Might not, perhaps, the community of first Christians, hiding in the catacombs, have been such a society? What Heidegger needs to say, with respect to this possibility, is that provided one has checked that current practice really does fully match up to the values of heritage then one can follow public opinion without impugning one’s authenticity. In this case, one can conform without being a conformist.

## 12 Sartre

Born into a middle-class background in Paris in 1905, Jean-Paul Sartre lived almost his entire life in the city of his birth. He never, he said, felt at home anywhere save in a fifth-floor Paris apartment and particularly disliked the countryside. An ugly, bug-eyed chain-smoker (rather like Socrates, in the eye and nature-hating departments), he was nonetheless highly attractive to women. Success as a novelist enabled him to give up university teaching and to spend most of his time in cafés, where many of his major insights occurred. In 1929 he met Simone de Beauvoir, who remained his companion in a sexually open partnership for the rest of his life. At the beginning of the 1950s Sartre engaged in a serious rereading of Marx and became a kind of freethinking Marxist engaged in many political causes from a left-wing standpoint. In 1964 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, which, however, he declined on the grounds that he did not wish to become an institution. He did not, that is, wish to become a member of the bourgeoisie, his lifelong hatred. He died in 1980.

My interest in this chapter is entirely focused on one work, Sartre's philosophical classic, *Being and Nothingness* (BN), published in Nazioccupied Paris in 1943. Since Marx is someone we have already discussed, I intend to ignore later Sartre's less original and, I think, less interesting thinking. My focus is entirely on his 'existentialism' and the comprehensive statement it receives in *Being and Nothingness*.

### Being-for-itself versus being-in-itself

*Being and Nothingness* is a grandiose piece of elaborate philosophical architecture, clearly modelled on Heidegger's *Being and Time*, of which Sartre was a great, though not uncritical, admirer. Like *Being and Time*, it offers itself as a work that will describe the 'ontology' of human being (BN: 625), an attempt to define the structures which human beings, as persons, necessarily inhabit – structures which define what it is to be a person. Like Heidegger, however, Sartre has his own special term for 'person'. Whereas Heidegger speaks of 'Dasein' Sartre speaks of 'being-for-itself [*être-pour-soi*]'.

Being-for-itself is contrasted with 'being-in-itself [*être-en-soi*]'. (The terminology comes from Hegel who – together with Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Husserl – represents the other major influence on Sartre's thinking. Behind every French thinker you can always find a German, someone unkindly remarked.) What the contrast is intended to be between is moderately clear: people, on the one hand, and 'things' on the other, 'things' in a very broad (and

perhaps reprehensible) sense of the term which includes not just rocks, inkwells and robots, but also trees, worms and spiders.

What, however, about cats, dogs, apes, chimpanzees, dolphins and whales? Are they beings-for-themselves or beings-in-themselves?

The rationale behind Sartre's choice of terminology has to do with self-consciousness. Beings-for-themselves come before – are 'for' – themselves in consciousness whereas beings-in-themselves do not. But what is it to be self-conscious?

Sartre makes a useful distinction between explicit ('reflective', 'thetic') and implicit ('non-reflective', 'non-thetic') self-consciousness. The first occurs when I make myself the direct target of consciousness, as when I monitor my thoughts, emotions, habits, character traits, and actions ('Am I being paranoid?', 'Do I get angry too easily?', 'Am I about to say "*tu*" when it ought to be "*vous*"?'). Sartre's example of the second sort of self-consciousness has to do with counting (actually of cigarettes (BN: liii), but, this being a smoke-free book, I have changed the example). A teacher anxiously counts the children getting back on the bus after a school outing to make sure none are missing. Her attention is entirely focused on the children. Yet if you interrupt her and ask what she is doing she will of course be able immediately to answer 'counting the children' – which indicates that as well as being explicitly conscious of the children she has implicit consciousness of herself and her own activity.

Sartre claims that all consciousness is self-consciousness (BN: lii). Not, obviously, that all consciousness is explicitly self-conscious, but rather that it is always at least implicitly so. I think he is right about this (though not for the poor reason he actually gives (ibid.)). The reason for this was given long ago by Schopenhauer.

How do I know where things are in the world? The mountain, for example? Well the mountain, let us say, is behind the river. But where is the river? It runs down the easterly side of the wood. But where is the wood? Unless I can answer this question I don't know where anything else is. The answer is that the wood is about 50 meters and to the left of *here*. Where, in other words, *I* am. So what we see is that we can't locate anything in space unless the chain of references can be traced, ultimately, back to ourselves. All spatial locating is relative, ultimately, to the self as a kind of centre, a fixed point of reference in space. And the same with time. When did the Normans invade England? – 1066. But when was that? – 948 years before 2014. But when is 2014? – 2014 is *now*, in other words, where, in time, *I* am. I can locate nothing in time unless I can relate it ultimately to myself as a centre, a fixed reference point in time.

It follows that though cats, dogs, dolphins, etc., almost certainly do not have explicit self-consciousness, they – and any beings capable of using a conscious representation of their environment to guide their behaviour – must have implicit self-consciousness in order, for example, to know where their bowl of food is placed or where their bone is buried.

So it seems that Sartre ought to recognise many of the higher animals as beings-for-themselves. But he does not. As rigidly as his great French predecessor (and secret hero) Descartes – who thought that animals were all machines and only humans had consciousness – he uses the for-itself/in-itself dichotomy to divide off human beings from everything else.

The reason for this is that though, formally, the dichotomy is supposed to turn

on self-consciousness as such, it actually turns on a different property which Sartre attributes, uniquely, to human beings: freedom. 'In-itself' beings have fixed, immutable natures or, as Sartre calls them, 'essences'. 'For-itself' beings, on the other hand, have the power to decide what their essences are to be and, should they so choose, to change them.

This power, I think, the power to reflect upon and perhaps change one's 'essence', one's identity, Sartre plausibly takes to presuppose *explicit*, 'reflective', self-consciousness. So it is this capacity, it seems to me, that wears the trousers (or, as the French say, skirt) when it comes to distinguishing the for-itself from the in-itself.

But we have got a little ahead of ourselves. Let us return to the grand scheme of things, the fundamental aim of *Being and Nothingness*.

## Sartre-One

What the work seeks to discover, we have said, is the 'ontological' structure of human – the for-itself's – existence. Unfortunately, however, without ever being properly aware that this is what he is doing, what Sartre actually offers, it seems to me, are *two* – different and incompatible – accounts of that structure. The result, so I shall argue, is that what *Being and Nothingness* actually offers is two books inside one cover or, as it were, two buildings behind one facade. Aided by immense literary skills and the plasticity of key terms such as 'contingent', 'absurd', 'anguish', 'being-in-itself-for-itself', which play central roles in both accounts, Sartre is able to smooth over the joint between the two buildings so that, even to him, they look like one. But in fact they are not, so that separating them becomes vital to an unclouded understanding of *Being and Nothingness*. The first of the two accounts, whose author I shall call 'Sartre-One', is the account that tends to dominate in Parts I and IV of the work, the second, whose author I shall call 'Sartre-Two', tends to dominate in Parts II and III. Sartre-One will be the topic of this chapter, Sartre-Two of the next.

## Facticity and freedom

According to Sartre-One (hereafter and until further notice just 'Sartre'), the first and inescapable fact about human beings – the first ingredient in the 'ontological' structure which constitutes being-for-itself – is our 'facticity' (BN: pt II, ch. 1, §2). At any moment in my life as a human being I find myself *already* in a given 'situation', a situation that is not of my making. The historical epoch I inhabit, my native language, my nationality, my social class, my sex, my biological capacities and incapacities (for example, that I can run a 100 metres in 30 seconds but not in 10) are facts about me that are completely independent of any desire or choice on my part. Other facts about me – that I am a member of the Democratic Party and in training to become a professional footballer – might seem to be different. Even these aspects of my facticity, however, Sartre wants to say, are not of my making. They depend, to be sure, on the decisions and commitments made by some *past* incarnation of myself. But if we use the word 'me' to designate *this here and now present being* – which is how Sartre always

wants us to think of the 'me' – then even these aspects of my facticity are not of my making. My facticity is, then, the totality of the facts about me that are dependent on my *past*, whether that past consists in choices of my past self, or in factors that are entirely beyond my control. My facticity is the legacy of the past, the 'baggage' I carry around as a result of having had the particular past I have had.

\* \* \*

A thesis Sartre calls 'psychological determinism' (BN: 31) holds that how I choose to act now is a completely inevitable consequence of my facticity (together, presumably, with the particular circumstances in which I now find myself.) Who I am, my 'essence', is an inevitable and unalterable function of my past. '*Wesen ist was gewesen ist*' (BN: 35 *et passim*), 'essence is what has been'; Sartre regularly uses this quotation from Hegel to sum up psychological determinism.

Exactly what is psychological determinism? Notice that since the thesis holds that *every* choice is determined by facticity, this must apply to the *first* choice I ever made. So if we divide my present facticity into volitional (chosen) and non-volitional elements, what psychological determinism holds is that all my choices and actions are completely foreordained by the *non-volitional* part of my facticity. Psychological determinism is the thesis that the kind of person I am, and hence all my future choices and actions, are completely determined by the totality of physical and cultural facts about me. If someone – God, for example – knew all there is to know about my biological and cultural situation, he would be able to predict, with absolute certainty, all my future actions.

Sartre absolutely rejects psychological determinism. He points out, first of all, that we all have, as it is sometimes called, the 'feeling of freedom'. Often, this is an unpleasant feeling. The gambler, having yesterday firmly decided to give up his destructive habit, knows today, as soon as he wakes up, that he still has it all before him – that he is, unfortunately, still free to return to the tables should he now so choose. Nothing the gambler (let us call him Dostoevsky) knows about the Dostoevsky of yesterday can determine, take away the freedom of, the Dostoevsky of today (BN: 32). Here is another of Sartre's spooky examples. Hiking along a mountain track I have a sudden feeling of psychological vertigo: I feel certain that, notwithstanding my eminently happy life and my exciting ambitions and hopes for the future, I *could*, at this very moment decide to simply throw myself over the precipice (BN: 31). Nothing, we feel, that happened in the past can bind what one does now.

A deeper reason Sartre has for rejecting psychological determinism has to do with the phenomenon of 'questioning' (BN: 33–34). What Sartre says here is greatly influenced by Descartes and by what he says about doubt.

Descartes suggests that though, unlike God, my knowledge of the truth about the world is severely limited, I yet resemble God in one respect: my power to withhold assent from propositions which are open to doubt is absolutely unlimited. I have experiences as of a world of physical nature outside my mind. But (the idea we touched on in the previous chapter) maybe I am dreaming. Nothing can *force* me to believe in a world outside the mind in the absence of conclusive proof. Similarly, nothing can prevent me from believing something



that is absolutely certain:  $2 + 2 = 4$ .

Loyal to his French intellectual ancestry, Sartre thinks of the self in exactly the same way. What I, this present being, am is nothing but freedom, nothing but the power of assent or dissent. What I am, in particular, therefore, is the power to assent or dissent to my facticity or past self, the power either to choose that self to be *my* (present and future) self or to reject it in favour of something else. Crucially, I am the power of dissent. 'I am', says Sartre, 'the permanent possibility of negating what I am in the form of having been' (BN: 439).

Since I always, therefore, stand outside, 'beyond', my essence, I am, says Sartre, 'transcendence' (BN: 42) (a term which, for him, is synonymous with 'freedom'). But since, on the other hand, this transcendent 'I' is not a thing – it has no intrinsic nature of its own – it is, says Sartre, a nothing, a 'nothingness' (BN: 34). In Sartre's technical yet dramatically paradoxical language, the for-itself is a nothingness that transcends its facticity.

At the end of the *Republic*, Plato presents what he calls 'the myth of Er'. What the myth offers is an account of reincarnation in which one's future life is determined by free choice. At the end of a life, the soul surveys a range of future lives (as one might survey a rack of suits) and chooses one that it likes best. Since, however, Plato announces, in the *Phaedrus*, the principle of karma (see p. 9 above) – the general level of one's future life is determined by the degree of virtue displayed in the previous one – the range of options is, presumably, limited by karma. It is useful to keep this picture in mind, since it provides a vivid image that corresponds fairly closely to Sartre's account of the relation between the for-itself's freedom and its facticity. Like Plato, he believes that who we are, our identity or 'essence', is the result of an act of free choice, and like Plato he holds that that choice is limited – though limited not by karma but by facticity. I cannot (at present) choose to have three arms (BN: 481). If I live in the thirteenth century I cannot choose to fly (BN: 522). Unless I am Japanese, I cannot choose to commit hara-kiri – though I can of course choose to commit suicide.

\* \* \*

We are, then, free because we have the feeling of freedom. But on a deeper level, we are free because of the nature of the self as a 'self-questioning' being, a being with the absolute power to question and, should it so wish, reject the identity it has had up to now.

It may be objected that feelings are not proofs. That just because *we feel* free to change our identities at will, free to assent to or dissent from them, doesn't mean *we are* free. Maybe our feeling of freedom reflects nothing but our ignorance of underlying causes. The business tycoon may feel he freely decided to build the hundred-story skyscraper when, in fact, it is absolutely clear to the psychoanalyst that he is the victim of a bad case of penile anxiety. Or it may be clear to the physicist that he is nothing but a swirl of atoms the movements of which are completely determined by atomic events that happened millions of years ago. I think, however, that this objection misunderstands the nature of Sartre's project.

*Being and Nothingness's* subtitle calls it 'An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology'. 'Phenomenology' is description, description of the world as it presents itself in immediate, natural, everyday human experience – the 'manifest world', as we might call it. Since, therefore, Sartre's self-appointed task is confined to describing the manifest world (and to doing so in such a way as to reveal its

‘ontological’, structural features) he would, I think, say that whether or not some scientific account of the world represents human beings as determined and hence unfree is entirely irrelevant to his interests. His task, he would say, is not to prove, against deterministic science, that humans are free, but simply to show that – however humans may appear in the ‘scientific world’ – freedom is a structural, central and inescapable feature of the manifest world. (He might also wish to suggest that science is just another story about reality, useful for practical purposes but with no unique claim to truth. This, however, remains peripheral to his task as a phenomenologist.)

\* \* \*

Speaking from the perspective of a phenomenological ontologist, then, Sartre’s claim is that I can, at any moment, ‘negate’ who I have been up to now, radically change my identity. Certainly, I may have lived the last 35 years as an insurance clerk, as did my father and grandfather before me. Certainly my life may seem, to others, as predictable as did Kant’s to the citizens of Königsberg who corrected their clocks by his afternoon walks. Yet I *can*, should I so choose, this very moment, burn every bridge that connects me with my life to date. Like, say, John Walker Lindh, no longer able to stand his life as a middle-class, Catholic Californian, I can simply vanish from my past life and re-emerge as a Moslem fighting for the Taliban in Afghanistan. At every moment, that is, I have the inalienable power to choose to become a different kind of person, to choose for myself a new essence. When I reflect, moreover, I *know* that I have this power. Hence *not* abandoning my life as a middle-class American is a choice, too – the choice to prefer the oppressive yet familiar to the new and scary. The only choice I can’t make is the choice not to choose. Choice is inescapable; freedom is something to which we are, says Sartre, ‘condemned’ (BN: 439). (The reason behind this ominous choice of a word will emerge shortly.)

## Values are chosen

Whereas I have been talking about the choice of one’s ‘essence’ or identity (one’s who-one-is-ness) Sartre often speaks in terms of ‘values’. These are, however, two ways of talking about the same thing. The reason is the following.

Sartre says that who I am is my ‘original projection of myself which stands as my choice of myself in the world’ (BN: 39). Elsewhere he calls this my ‘fundamental project’ (BN: 565; 479–80). One’s fundamental project is that project which gives unity and meaning to all one’s lesser projects. It consists in the set of things which one most fundamentally desires, aims at, or, in other words, *values*. If, for example, the thread that runs through my life is the quest for love, then that defines who I am. If it is the quest for power or status then I am someone else. (Notice the assumption that everyone *has* a fundamental project, has a kind of underlying consistency to their lives. For Nietzsche or Heidegger, on the other hand, to acquire such consistency is a positive *achievement*.)

Put in terms of values, Sartre’s point about freedom is as follows. I have, let us suppose, grown up in a small farming community in New Zealand. Though relatively young, I am talented and about to play first-grade ‘football’ (rugby union) for the local team coached by my father. Harriet and I have grown up

together, and for some years now she has been wearing my ring. Our families have been friends for generations. I am expected to have as my fundamental project being-a-God-fearing-rugby-playing-loving-husband-and-father.<sup>1</sup> And maybe I do. But – though there will be all hell to pay if I don't – none of this determines that I *will* play for the team or that I *will* marry Harriet. Only if I reaffirm the fundamental values of my community, the fundamental values I have had up to now, will these things happen. And maybe I won't do that. Maybe smalltown rugby values will come to seem to me exclusionary and stultifying. Maybe I will launch myself into an 'identity crisis' and leave town.

\* \* \*

Is *every* value something that is my present value only if I choose it to be such? Are there *no* values which are unchosen and which, moreover, I do not have the power to choose not to have? What, for example, about basic bodily desires for food, warmth and shelter? Are these not values that are *unavoidably* mine?

Not so, according to Sartre. Values are always relative to goals and goals only exist if they are chosen. Nineteenth-century industrial workers (those who figure, for example, in the novels of Dickens or Zola) suffered from desperately inadequate food and housing, but many found this to be *just the way things are* and so had no aspirations to a more adequate level of food or shelter. In general, claims Sartre, 'no factual state can determine consciousness to apprehend it as a lack' (BN: 435–36), to value, in other words, its removal. Other examples Sartre might have used to support this claim are asceticism and suicide. Religious penitents do not value food or shelter and neither do those bent on suicide. To the extent, then, that I do value such things I choose to *reject* the life of the ascetic or would-be suicide in favour of some other form of life.

What about my emotions? Surely emotions are, first, conditions which introduce value into the world (if I'm in love with Harriet then I place a high value on being near her, gazing into her eyes, etc.) but, second, things that *happen to* one rather than things one chooses, or could choose, to make happen. I *fall* in love, am *roused* to anger or to sympathy for the plight of another. I do not choose to be in love, choose to be angry or choose to be empathetic. This is why the traditional word for emotion is 'passion'. Emotions are things with respect to which one is 'passive' rather than active, a recipient rather than an agent.

Sartre simply denies this. Being in love, for example, *is* a choice, indeed a stratagem, by which we pursue various of our aims which have nothing in particular to do with the beloved. To be sure, we *talk* as if love were something that happens to, rather than being chosen by, us but that is simply a way of disguising from ourselves its true nature. The argument for this account of love will have to wait until the discussion of Sartre-Two in the next chapter.

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The determinists are, then, wrong. My facticity, my past, does not determine who I am. Only my free choice does. My past can never capture me (unless I let it), I am always 'beyond' its reach. But if my identity does not come from my past, where does it come from? From my own free choice. What makes an identity, an 'essence', mine is my own choice. This is the point of the famous slogan which has come to sum up existentialism: 'existence precedes and

commands essence' (BN: 438), existence is prior to essence. I exist as nothing but – with no intrinsic nature other than – the power of free choice. Only *subsequent to* and dependent on an always revisable exercise of that power does an essence become *my* essence.<sup>2</sup>

## There are no excuses

One further point about the scope of freedom. In choosing ourselves – in choosing our identities – we also, says Sartre, choose our 'world', since the latter is just 'the image of my free choice of myself' (BN: 554). Since we are the 'author' of our world, it follows that there are 'no excuses' (BN: 36): 'I am without excuse; for from the instant of my upsurge into being, I carry the weight of the world by myself alone without anything or any person being able to lighten it' (BN: 555).

What does Sartre mean by calling my world an 'image' of my own freely chosen self? And why does it follow from the fact that it is such an image that there are 'no excuses'?

Sartre's point is that the world or 'situation' in which I find myself isn't just made up of neutral, objective facts. It is, rather, created by the interpretation of those facts in terms of the values I hold. Since I choose my values – cannot but chose them – I create my world – out of, of course, the facts that are at my disposal. It follows that nothing in the world can ever provide an 'excuse', absolve me of responsibility, for my actions, since the world is my very own creation.

Sartre's illustrative example – appropriately enough, given his situation in Nazi-occupied France – is the war (BN: 554–55). (In what follows, I have adapted the example since his own presentation is rather muddled.) My country (France) is at war, fighting for its survival. It seems that I have no moral alternative but to join in the defence of my country. In fact, however, there is always an alternative. Suppose, for example, in an act of fundamental choice I adopt the values of pacifism. Then the war will present itself to me not as just and heroic resistance to brutal aggression, but as a crime against humanity for which blame is spread (though possibly not evenly) between two barbarous opponents. It follows that 'my country is at war' can never excuse me of responsibility for joining the fighting – making the war 'my war', as Sartre puts it – since it is entirely up to me, to my choice of fundamental values, whether 'my country is at war' is a reason for fighting.

This insistence on absolute responsibility looks to be an attractive doctrine – even to provide a philosophical foundation for the Nuremberg trials which would begin a mere three years after the publication of *Being and Nothingness*. But to see how demanding Sartre's 'I create my world' doctrine in fact is, consider another example. Suppose I am attacked and raped in a night-time street. It seems that something indisputably damaging has happened, something objectively horrible. And it seems, therefore, that, contra Sartre, there is value in the world – in this case, negative value – that is entirely independent of any choice of mine. It seems that a misfortune has occurred of which I am clearly not the author and that I have a complete 'excuse' for the deep depression in which I now am.

Sartre, however, denies this: in this as in every case, 'I ... decide the coefficient of adversity in things by deciding myself' (BN: 554). The ultimate project by

which I give shape to my life may, of course, be the maso-chist's one of 'being a victim' (BN: 471–75). I will then seize every opportunity to interpret events as life's thrusting yet another misfortune upon me. And in line with this, the rape will be interpreted as yet another confirmation of my victimhood. On the other hand, however, the life project I chose may be that of, as we might describe it, 'the builder', someone who realises, with Nietzsche, that 'whatever does not kill me makes my stronger', someone who turns every life event, no matter how seemingly horrible, into a productive experience. If that is my fundamental choice then, perhaps, the rape was not a misfortune at all, but rather the decisive moment in which I decided to found WAR (Women against Rape), commitment to which subsequently became the meaning of my life.

The crucial point, for Sartre, is that, even in the rape case, I cannot escape the crucial choice. Even the rape, he is committed to saying, does not *have* to be assessed as possessing negative value, as being a misfortune. If it is so assessed, then I have *chosen* this to be the case. In every case, therefore, I am the author of my own misfortune and am solely responsible for the consequences. Since the world is my responsibility it can never excuse me from responsibility.

\* \* \*

Sartre's doctrine of freedom and responsibility (which clearly owes a great deal to Nietzsche's ideas on self-creation and self-esteem) looks, at least on the surface, extremely attractive. To be sure, the 'no excuses' aspect of his position is tough. But it is also bracing. And what seems positively exhilarating is the absolute freedom of self-creation that he offers us. All those 'bourgeois' values thrust on us by our parents and upbringing, Sartre seems to show, are nothing more than 'baggage' dumped on us by others. To live free, exciting and 'authentic' lives all we have to do is to drop them. Sartre, it seems, is the philosopher, the ultimate validator, of *revolt*.

## The anguish of freedom

The surprising fact, however – at this point, the fundamental darkness of Sartre's existentialism begins to appear – is that, according to him, rather than embracing the seemingly joyful opportunity to create who we are, we do our level best to *evade* it. (It is, moreover, rather hard, in the end, to avoid the conclusion that what he is really committed to is that we are *right* in so doing.) According to Sartre, we do our level best to *deny* our 'transcendence' of facticity, to deny our freedom, to convince ourselves that we possess no such thing. We tell ourselves that '*Wesen*' really is '*gewesen*', that who we are is absolutely fixed by our past, and that is the end of the matter. We tell ourselves, in other words, that 'psychological determinism' is true. Two questions now present themselves. First, *why* do we do this? And second, *how* – how do we convince ourselves of something that is actually, in Sartre's view, false? First, the 'why' question.

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That freedom is not the joyous attribute it initially looked to be is indicated by Sartre's already noted remark that freedom is something to which we are 'condemned' (BN: 439). Freedom, judging by the theological overtones of this

word, is hell, a state of torment. To be conscious of one's freedom is not to celebrate but to be, rather, in a state of what Sartre calls 'anxiety' or 'anguish' (BN: 29). Why should this be? Why is freedom not a blessing, but rather a curse?

Sartre says that the gambler (see p. 156 above) who has resolved to give up gambling is in anguish because he realises that yesterday's decision may be 'ineffectual' (BN: 32). The hiker on the mountain path, though full of exciting plans and hopes for the future, is in anguish because he realises he *can* decide to throw himself over the precipice (BN: 31). These examples make the claim that consciousness of freedom – consciousness that it can never be evaded, that fundamental choice can never be pushed into the past as something over and done with – is anguish. But they do not explain why it should be so.

A pointer towards answering this question is provided by the remark that 'everyday morality is exclusive of ... anguish' (BN: 38). Anguish is focused on *values*. If we live our lives in the morally sleepy, semiconscious way of 'everyday' humanity then we hardly notice it. But once we become explicitly aware of the fact that we are the source of our own values, it appears. Yet why should *that* cause us anguish?

Sartre replies that since my freedom, my free choice, is 'the unique foundation of values', it follows that

nothing justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, or this or that particular scale of values. As a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable. My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation.

(BN: 38)

What does this mean?

\* \* \*

Normally, says Sartre, my life is one of 'engagement'. I am fully and busily engaged with the world that is shaped, coloured and created by the fundamental set of values, the fundamental 'project', that I am. In normal life I operate *within* this project. The result is that life is – or at least seems – meaningful. Alarm clocks, traffic lights, even tax forms show up as meaningful things demanding 'urgent' attention because they show up within my fundamental project. But sometimes engagement breaks down, I 'disengage' from the world (BN: 39). Now, in reflective consciousness, I confront the fundamental project which defines my identity and gives my life urgency and meaning from *without*. I realise that I – that pinpoint of selfhood naked save for its power of choice – stand 'beyond' my (putative or hitherto) 'essence'.

But so what? What, exactly, is supposed to be so traumatic about one's standing-beyondness, one's 'transcendence', about the unavoidable necessity of having to say either 'yes' or 'no' to one's hitherto identity? Go back to Plato's myth of Er – which is really just a metaphorical picture of this moment of disengagement. I survey my current life and if I like what I see I say (à la Nietzsche) 'Yes please; more of the same.' In other words, I simply re-choose, reaffirm my original choice. If, on the other hand, I don't like what I see then I say 'No thank you', and choose some new and different kind of life. So where, one might ask, is the anguish?

Sartre's answer is that in the disengaged, spectatorial stance I confront the fact that I, my free choice, am the foundation of my life. But I also confront the fact that this foundation is 'itself without foundation'. I confront the fact that I am the 'foundationless foundation' of my values, project or essence, that I create myself '*ex nihilo*' (BN: 33). In a certain sense, I have an 'apprehension of nothingness' (BN: 29).

Since my choice of values is groundless I realise, says Sartre, that it is 'beyond all reasons', 'gratuitous' (BN: 479). And realising this I realise 'the *absurdity* of my choice and consequently of my being' (BN: 480).

## The absurd

What does 'absurd' mean here? Sartre says that to confront my life from the external, disengaged standpoint gives me 'a feeling of unjustifiability' (BN: 480). I realise, that is, that whatever choice I have made or could make is no more justified (or unjustified) than any alternative choice. Consider the Spanish Civil War. Suppose I choose to fight for the communist left against the fascist right and that this is part of a life-defining act of fundamental choice. Then, if Sartre is right, I have no ground at all for saying that my choice is in any way more justified than – preferable to, better than – the equally life-defining choice made by the fascist. But that means that nothing can be said to show that it *matters* which choice I make, and hence, it seems, it *doesn't* matter which choice I make. It matters no more than, for example, choosing to make a habit of walking on the left-hand side of the pavement (sidewalk) as opposed to the right. Hence, my life as a communist doesn't matter, is utterly unimportant, trivial. This seems to tell us what 'absurd' means. Our lives are absurd in the way in which someone's devoting their life to always walking on the left-hand side of the pavement, or to never stepping on the cracks, is absurd. They are absurd because of the deadly seriousness with which we pursue goals that, in themselves, are utterly devoid of significance. Looked at from the spectatorial point of view, life is a tragicomedy.

But just why, one might continue to ask, should this knowledge be a cause for anguish? Because, I think, to see the unimportance of your life-defining goal means that you cannot take it seriously, cannot be genuinely *committed* to it.<sup>3</sup> (I shall return to this point towards the end of the next chapter.) And if you are not committed to a goal then you don't really *have* that goal. The result is that life discloses itself as meaningless. This is the reason knowledge of one's absurdity generates anguish. It frustrates, I take Sartre to hold, the human being's fundamental need for meaning; in Schopenhauerian language, it frustrates the 'will to will' (see p. 57 above).

## Bad faith

Given this, it is not surprising that we try to suppress the spectatorial knowledge we have of ourselves, the knowledge of the existence and nature of our freedom. We seek to 'veil' it (BN: 43) from ourselves. We do this (here we come to the question raised earlier as to *how* we deny our freedom) by indulging in what Sartre calls 'bad faith [*mauvaise foi*]'. Instead of acknowledging that – absurdly –

we choose our essences we pretend that we *are* our essences. We pretend that the kind of people we are is laid down in our facticity, and that there is nothing we can do about it.

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Sartre's great ontological divide is between the for-itself and the in-itself. Though a being-for-itself is always 'beyond', separate from, 'prior' to, its essence, a being-in-itself *is* its essence. For beings-in-themselves are, as we observed, in a broad sense of the term just *things*. And the thing about things, the thing which *defines* them as things, is that they lack freedom, simply *are* their essences. To be a daffodil, a worm or a tiger is to come into existence bound to a given nature which your life then simply unfolds. There is no question of choosing whether or not to live a daffodilish, wormish or tigerish kind of existence. (Children's books with titles like *The Tiger Who Became a Vegetarian* are either allegories or unfit for – the pun is accidental – human consumption.)

It follows that the attempt to deny one's freedom is the attempt to cross from one ontological category to another, to convince oneself that one is a being-in-itself rather than a being-for-itself. In bad faith, says Sartre, we seek the 'impermeability and infinite density' of a mere thing (BN: 566). (In Sartre's novel *The Age of Reason*, his hero Daniel 'wishes to be a pederast as an oak tree is an oak tree'.) We seek to convince ourselves we are beings who choose their natures as little as rocks choose theirs, and whose response to their environments is as inexorably the outcome of those natures as is the response of rocks. Hence Sartre's famous example of the Paris waiter whose waiterly gestures are always perfect – always a little *too* perfect – an over-the-top-ness which endows them with a robotic quality (BN: 59–60). This is what the waiter seeks to convince himself he is: a robot.

## Self-deception

Sartre's explains that bad faith is always *self-deception*. (As he uses them, the terms are, in fact, synonyms.) In bad faith I am in flight from my 'transcendence'.<sup>4</sup> But to be in flight from something I have to have it constantly in mind: 'I must think of it constantly in order to take care not to think of it' (BN: 43). So I really always know that my life is free – and hence absurd. Bad faith is lying to oneself.

As Sartre recognises, this raises the question of whether bad faith – successfully lying to oneself – is really possible. What makes the possibility of lying to others unproblematic is the distinctness of the lie-teller and the lied-to. But when they are the same, one might think, the and the lied-to. But when they are the same, one might think, the attempt can no more succeed than, when playing chess against oneself, one can succeed in luring oneself into a trap. How can I possibly convince myself of something, *p*, when I know perfectly well that not-*p*?

The most obvious way of explaining the possibility of self-deception is to suggest that lying to oneself is like lying to others – to invoke, that is, a plurality of subjects contained within the unity of the self. Though it goes back to



Schopenhauer and even to Plato, this strategy is particularly associated, and is associated by Sartre, with Freud (BN: 50–54). As Sartre presents the part of the theory that interests him, Freud postulates a conscious self or ‘ego’, an unconscious self or ‘id’, and a gateway between the two guarded by a ‘censor’. Faced with unpleasant knowledge – for example, that life is free and absurd – the censor decides to ‘repress’ it, to extract it from consciousness and push it down into the cellar of the unconscious in order to keep it hidden from the conscious self.

Sartre, however, *rejects* this explanation of self-deception. He focuses on the censor. To do the repressing the censor, clearly, must be aware of the to-be-repressed truth. Yet he must be conscious of it ‘*precisely in order not to be conscious of it*’ (BN: 53). So the censor both knows and does not know the truth in question and is, therefore, itself in bad faith. It follows that the problem of bad faith has not been solved but merely relocated (*ibid.*).

This is a poor criticism. Why should the censor have to be unconscious of the unpleasant piece of knowledge? If Bill knows that Mary is cheating on Harry but decides, for Harry’s own good, not to tell him, there is no paradoxical knowing and not knowing on Bill’s part. He simply knows, period.

Since he offers no clear alternative, and seems to forget that he is committed to providing one, it is actually just as well that Sartre’s critique of the Freudian strategy is no good. Given the centrality of bad faith to his account of human existence, and the absence of a demonstration of his own that it is indeed possible, Sartre actually needs to adopt at least the broad outline of the Freudian strategy. He needs to take on board, that is, the general idea of repression: the idea that there is a distinction between clear and explicit consciousness, on the one hand, and fuzzy and indistinct consciousness, on the other, together with the idea that we often relegate knowledge to the latter region because we know that explicit knowledge of it would be an unpleasant experience. (Since Sartre already has the distinction between explicit and implicit self-consciousness (p. 153), this should not be too much of a shock to his system.)

\* \* \*

Sartre-One, to summarise, asserts the following. The fundamental, ‘ontological’ fact about us is our foundationless freedom. But to acknowledge this is anguish, the anguish of acknowledging the absurdity – that is to say, meaninglessness – of our lives. So our fundamental impulse is to deny, to escape knowledge of, our freedom. Our fundamental impulse is, like the waiter’s, to pretend – to indulge in the bad faith of pretending – that we are mere, unfree ‘things’, beings with fixed, unalterable identities. What is central to Sartre-One’s account of our lives is, then, anguish and absurdity. Our lives are governed by the attempt to escape the anguish of recognising our absurdity. In the next chapter I argue that while absurdity and anguish are also central to Sartre-Two’s account of our existence it is, in fact, a radically different kind of anguish and absurdity that is involved.

## Notes

1 This narrative is based on the memory of a novel by Maurice Gee, *Going West*.

2 Sartre notes that he has taken ‘existence is prior to essence’ from Heidegger (BN: 438), something Heidegger indeed asserts (at B&T: 42). Heidegger explains that ‘existence’ is used in a technical sense that makes it unique to persons. To have ‘existence’ is for the question of whether or not to be

authentic to be an inescapable 'issue' for you, a choice you cannot avoid making (B&T: 12). But though *this* is a matter of choice, the question of *what it is* that constitutes my authenticity, what it is that constitutes, in Sartre's sense, my 'essence', is, as we saw in the previous chapter, determined by my facticity, specifically by 'heritage', and has nothing to do with choice. If 'existentialism' is the view that my essence is always the product of my free choice then Heidegger is not an existentialist, and Sartre disguises the fundamental opposition between the two of them by claiming to be following his lead.

- 3 Sartre explores the problem of action in the absence of genuine commitment in a quartet of novels called *The Paths of Liberty* written during the same period as *Being and Nothingness*. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, its hero remarks that 'conscience [thinking deeply about things] makes cowards of us all', makes us unable to act. The only way he can act is impulsively, on the spur of the moment, without any gathering of reasons. Only in the heat of battle can he finally kill Claudius. It is the same for Sartre's characters. The only way they can act – get married, join the communist party, die a soldier's heroic death, stab a knife into the back of one's hand – is by performing an *act gratuit*. They act impulsively, without reasons, because they secretly know that the search for reasons ends in action-paralysing absurdity.
- 4 Bad faith of the relevant sort. Along with the Paris waiter, Sartre's other example of bad faith which sticks in the mind is that of the coquette who wishes to enjoy the flattering attention of her admirer without quite – or quite yet – admitting that anything to do with physical sex is in the air (BN: 55–56). Here, Sartre points out, bad faith consists in a denial, not of freedom, but of embodied facticity – the woman pretends to herself that she is a purely spiritual being and has nothing to do with the body whose hand the man is holding. Fascinating and insightful though it is, this example seems to me to have nothing to do with the main line of Sartre's argument. And in fact, given that 'bad faith' just means 'self-deception', there are, as we will see in the next chapter, several types of bad faith discussed by Sartre that have nothing at all to do with evading the 'anguish' of freedom.

## 13 Sartre (continued)

Anguish and absurdity lie at the heart of *Being and Nothingness*. They lie, too, at the heart of Sartre's novels of the same period, the title of one of which, *Nausea*, gives a pretty unambiguous indication of Sartre's assessment of the human condition. In the last chapter we saw one account of why a clear view of our condition should induce nausea. But, so I claimed, without being properly aware that this is what he is doing, Sartre in fact provides a second and incompatible account of the 'nauseating' character of human existence. This is the account I attribute to, as I call him, 'Sartre-Two', and to which I now turn.

### A futile passion

Like Sartre-One, Sartre-Two (until further notice, just 'Sartre') starts out from human facticity. We find ourselves in a facticial situation – in a particular historical epoch, a particular class, possessing a particular biology, and so on. This facticity is not of our choosing. As we grow from babyhood into properly self-conscious persons, we find ourselves *already* in our facticity. (Heidegger, as we have seen, calls this our 'thrownness' (B&T: 135), in order to emphasise the point that we do not choose but rather – like the child of unkind parents on his first day at boarding school – find ourselves *thrown into* our facticial lot in life.) Not only do we find ourselves as a kind of person that is not of our own choosing, we are held responsible for maintaining ourselves as that kind of person. And if we do not behave in ways appropriate to being, for example, a white, middle-class farmer then we are subject to punishments of various more or less obvious kinds by the white, middle-class farming community in which we find ourselves. (Heidegger's 'the One'.)

All this is something we resent. We resent our 'contingency', our dependency on something other than ourselves, our not being 'the foundation of our own being'. We appear to ourselves as an 'unjustifiable fact' (BN: 80). (Notice the reappearance of much of the same *language* that is used by Sartre-One. What it means, however, as will shortly appear, is now very different.) This means that our fundamental goal in life is to overcome our 'contingency', to become 'the foundation of our own being'. We want to *choose* our being, to make it the case that our being, nature or essence is truly *our* being.

Sartre has a dramatic way of putting this account of every human being's fundamental goal: our goal is to become God (BN: 80–83).

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One of the medieval philosophers' 'proofs' of God's existence was the so-called 'first-cause argument'. Every event has a cause, as we know. But what got the whole historical sequence of causes and effects going in the first place? God. But what caused God? Nothing. If it had, then we would not have answered the question of what got the sequence of causes going in the first place. God is, then, by definition, the first cause. And that means that he caused himself, that he is, in the Latin tag used by Sartre, a *causa sui*. This is what, according to Sartre, we all want to become. To be in the world at all we must possess some kind of an identity. As beings in the world we cannot but be beings of a particular kind, we cannot but have a particular nature or essence. But we do not want to be 'thrown' into this essence. Rather, we want to have *chosen* it. We want to be, like God, self-causing beings.

This, however, claims Sartre, we can never be. Our fundamental goal of becoming a '*causa sui*', of having an identity we ourselves have freely chosen, is, for reasons we will come to shortly, one we can never achieve.<sup>1</sup> Hence, 'the being of human reality is suffering'. Human consciousness is 'by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state' (BN: 90). (Though Sartre gives it a different meaning, the phrase 'unhappy consciousness' is, of course, borrowed from Hegel (see p. 95).) We are in the grips of a 'futile passion' to pursue a goal we can neither achieve nor abandon.

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Before asking why this goal should be impossible to achieve, let me pause to take note of the huge difference between Sartre-One and Sartre-Two. According to Sartre-One, remember, our lives are absurd and therefore anguished because of our inescapable freedom – because we cannot escape being the 'foundationless foundation' of our being; because, in other words, we *cannot but* choose who we are. We feel 'unjustified' because there is nothing to justify making one choice rather than another. According to Sartre-Two, however, we feel unjustified for precisely the *opposite* reason: because we *cannot* become the 'foundation of our being', cannot choose who we are. Using the metaphor of 'becoming God', Sartre-One holds that we are anguished because we cannot but create ourselves '*ex nihilo*' (BN: 33), in other words, *cannot but* be 'God', a *causa sui*. Sartre-Two, on the other hand, holds that we are anguished because we *can never* become 'God'.

Sartre-One and Sartre-Two are, then, not just different. They contradict each other. This is why one gets terribly confused if one does not distinguish them. To be sure, both Sartres picture human existence as absurd and therefore anguished. But the meaning of 'absurd' and hence the source of anguish is different depending on whether you read One or Two. According to Sartre-One our lives are absurd because their goal (whatever it may be) that we take so seriously is utterly unimportant. Here 'absurd' means *meaningless*. According to Sartre-Two, on the other hand, our lives are absurd in the way in which alchemy, trying to raise yourself off the ground by pulling at your own bootlaces or trying to trick yourself at chess are absurd. Here 'absurd' means *futile*. To be sure, as we will see, Sartre-Two as well as Sartre-One pictures human beings as engaging in systematic bad faith in order to evade the absurdity of their lives. But what they are taken to be evading varies radically depending on which Sartre one reads.

Why, according to Sartre(-Two), can't we choose our own natures, become who we want to be? What is the problem? Let us be clear, first of all, that the problem, for Sartre, is not a *practical* one. His point is not that the strength required to raise ourselves out of our facticity, and the self-discipline required to maintain ourselves in our chosen natures, is beyond us. Rather, the problem is a *logical or conceptual* one: the combination 'chosen' and 'essence' is, he claims, like the combination or 'square' and 'circle', a combination of 'incompatible characteristics', an 'impossible synthesis' (BN: 90), an oxymoron.

This is a claim that is far from obvious. It is far from obvious, that is, that the idea of (a) having an identity (or, as we might also say, character) which (b) one has chosen oneself is conceptually incoherent. Sartre-One seems to accept its coherence. And it is the basis of Nietzsche's idea of life as literature which didn't *seem*, when we looked at it, to be conceptually incoherent. It is also (if I may indulge in a small digression) the basis of Kant's reconciliation of freedom and determinism in the *Critique of Pure Reason* ('The Antimony of Pure Reason', §9).

For Kant, every action one performs in the phenomenal world of nature is completely determined by the combination of one's character and the circumstances one is in. It is only a matter of time before science achieves complete knowledge of the nature of each individual which, together with psychological laws, will enable it to predict, with absolute certainty, every action the individual performs. What one's character is, however, is determined by the free choice of one's real or 'intelligible' self<sup>2</sup> (essentially the pre-reincarnation choice made in Plato's myth of Er), which makes it the case that, though determined, one's actions are free, and hence actions for which one is responsible. It's like catching a train. The timing and destination of the trains are determined by forces over which one has no control. Which train one catches, however, depends on one's free choice. Hence one is completely responsible for the destination one arrives at. Sartre realises that his discussion touches on Kantian territory, using Kant's distinctive terminology to refer to the matter under discussion as the 'choice of intelligible character' (BN: 563).

So Sartre's claim is that something which *looks* perfectly intelligible and has a long history of apparently intelligible discussion by philosophers is, in fact, unintelligible, a completely impossible, self-contradictory idea. Clearly he is going to need a pretty formidable argument to establish this conclusion. Let us find out what it is.

## An impossible synthesis

The essence of the argument is the following. The goal, the fundamental aim, of all human striving, we have seen, is to be a *causi sui*, the cause of one's own nature or identity (to become an 'in-itself-for-itself' (BN: 362) in Sartre's ambiguous terminology, which I am not going to use). My identity is, however, claims Sartre (this is the crucial point in the argument), established, not by me, but by *others*. My identity *is*, indeed, my 'being-for-others'; it is the other who 'holds the secret of my being' (BN: 363). I cannot, for example, be a waiter or an accountant unless others, people in general, take me to be a waiter or an

accountant. I cannot take *myself* to be a waiter or accountant unless others so take me. My essence is, then, how I look to others. It is, as one might put it, my exteriority. 'Young is an *X*' means, 'Others take Young to be an *X*.' (It is, of course, somewhat tricky to specify *which* others are relevant here. 'Young is a spy' obviously doesn't mean 'People in general take Young to be a spy.' I'll return to this complication in a bit.)

But now, if it is the 'look' (BN: 363) of the other that determines my nature or essence then it is obviously not me who determines it. What follows is that the goal of combining freedom and identity is impossible to achieve (BN: 362). To the extent that I am free or (let me here introduce the term) autonomous, then I must be a self-choosing, *self*-determining being. But to the extent that I have a nature or essence then I am *other*-determined.

We are, then, committed to a fundamentally self-contradictory goal. Sartre now interprets all human relations – and, in particular, sexual relations – as attempts to finesse this self-contradiction.

Take, for example, *love*. One of the points in the above argument for the impossibility of establishing one's own nature that might be challenged is the inference from the claim that it is the gaze of others that determines my being-in-itself to the conclusion that it can't be me that does so. According to Sartre, 'love' is, in effect, such a challenge.

The lover, perhaps an older, wiser, wittier man, makes himself so seductive, so 'fascinating' (BN: 372) to the beloved – a young, impressionable girl, perhaps – that he becomes her 'whole world' (BN: 367). (Notice that if we fill in the details in this way, the lover begins to look very like Sartre himself. And, in fact, the entire discussion of sexual relations communicates an almost embarrassing sense of personal disclosure.)<sup>3</sup> So bedazzled is she, that he becomes the 'foundation of all [her] values' (BN: 369), with the result that the lover 'feels that ... [his] existence is taken up and willed even in the tiniest details' (BN: 371). In a word, though the lover's identity is indeed dependent on how he looks in the eyes of the beloved, since he has absolute control over those eyes, he has squared the circle, has achieved his chosen nature even though that nature is dependent on her look.

Or so he thinks. In fact, like all the sexual stratagems detailed by Sartre, 'love' is a dismal failure. First, because (BN: 377) the more he is loved by her, the more totally she is absorbed into his outlook on the world and himself, the more he is deprived of a genuine exteriority. What I need to establish my status as, for example, a brilliant writer is for *you* to say: 'You're a very brilliant writer.' But if all I hear is, in effect, a tape-recording of my own voice, then I fail to obtain the confirmation of my chosen nature by another which I seek. In short, the more I succeed in the project of love the more I fail. (It should be obvious by now that Sartre's discussion of sex is, in essence, a rerun of Hegel's master-slave dialectic (pp. 91–3 above) to which Sartre refers at BN: 370.)<sup>4</sup>

Sartre details two further deficiencies of the love stratagem (BN: 377). First, love is fickle. Even if she sees things my way for now, since there is no guarantee she will go on doing so, my condition is one of perpetual 'insecurity'. Second, since the beloved is only one among many other others, that she sees me the way I want to be seen in no way guarantees that others in general do so. For the

stratagem to succeed 'one would have to be alone in the world with the beloved'. (This may seem a very *obvious* flaw in the stratagem. Yet Sartre is right, I think, in suggesting that we do sometimes try to turn the beloved into the whole world of others. One thing I think he undoubtedly causes us to recognise – a theme he shares with Schopenhauer – is how *foolishly* we quite typically behave in sexual and other human relationships.)

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Love, says Sartre, lasts just as long as bad faith lasts: just as long, that is, as I can deceive myself into thinking that the other's 'take' on my being is genuinely hers rather than, as is in fact the case, that which, by subtle power, I have forced upon her. But this means that the 'attitude' of love is inherently unstable, always liable to lapse into another kind of stance to others, another kind of stratagem for becoming a *causa sui*.

One attitude the disillusioned lover might lapse into is what Sartre calls 'indifference'. He describes this as a kind of 'blindness' (BN: 381) in which I see and treat others not as people but as mere functional objects ('equipment', in Heidegger's sense of the word (p. 138 above)): everyone gets reduced to the merely functional status of ticket collectors, waiters and the like (BN: 380–81). In indifference, I lapse into 'a sort of factitious solipsism' (BN: 380). I experience the world, that is to say, in terms of Descartes' nightmare: all those other hats and coats are *just* hats and coats. I am alone, the only genuine person in a world of robots.<sup>5</sup>

What the 'indifferent' person achieves – or seems to achieve – is the abolition of the other-determination which threatens his autonomy, his self-determination. But what he loses, of course, is the look of the other that is necessary to his achieving any kind of nature or identity. To the extent that he is alone – to the extent that not even God is there to witness his life – he has no exteriority, no identity. So indifference fails. Moreover, since he really *knows* that he is surrounded by people and not mere mechanisms, and that they look at and judge him, he is perpetually 'anxious' (BN: 382). He knows that there is something he is repressing (the rat in the bag). Though, if the repression is successful, he may not be explicitly conscious of what it is, he knows that there is *something* unpleasant there, and that it may jump out at any moment. The penalty for repression, for the bad faith on which indifference (and all the other attitudes to others Sartre discusses) is based, is anxiety, 'anguish'.

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A specifically sexual version of 'indifference' would be to see the other as mere 'flesh', as a mere, as we say, 'sex object'. What Sartre actually discusses, however, is an interesting variation on this which he calls 'sexual desire'. Here the hidden strategy behind my *seemingly* simple attitude to women is not just that she appears as 'flesh' to me, but that, in the moment of ecstasy, she should appear so *in her own eyes* too (BN: 395). I want her to become nothing but her body – nothing but a kind of pleasure machine – so that she is incapable of the look that threatens my autonomy.

As a species of indifference the strategy must, of course, fail. For since I need the look of the other to establish my identity, the project fails to the extent it succeeds. And again, since I really know she is looking and judging, the self-

deception on which the strategy depends is liable, at any moment, to fail.

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'Sadism', suggests Sartre (BN: 399ff.), represents one last throw of the dice by someone disillusioned with the stratagem of sexual desire. The – a – problem with sexual desire is that I really know that she has been looking all the time. In sadism, however, I try to *force* her to become pure flesh through pain.

What the sadist particularly hates is 'grace', that unpredictable spontaneity of bodily movement which speaks unmistakably of the presence of another autonomous, looking, judging, human being. What he seeks, therefore, through acts of torture, is to make the movements of the other 'obscene', that is to say, completely 'mechanical'.

Again, of course, the strategy must fail. If it succeeds it fails. But, in fact, it is not very likely to succeed. The sadist is always liable (and is therefore anxious, on this account) to confront the look of the other in the tormented body – as when, in William Faulkner's *Light in August*, the white racist 'good citizens' cannot escape the piercing look of Christmas, the black they have just castrated (BN: 405–6). (The Christian name, of course, calls to mind, as another example of the unextinguished look, Jesus on the cross.)

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The final 'attitude' Sartre considers is 'hate' (BN: 410–12). Here, as it were, the gloves are finally off. Realising the inadequacy of all the foregoing strategies – realising that the 'subjectivity' (personhood) of the other survives all my attempts to abolish it – I simply kill her. I kill the look which threatens my autonomy. Literal extinction of the other replaces the 'as-if' extinction of indifference, desire and sadism. But once again, of course, if I succeed I fail.

Sartre's ordering of the various stratagems – love, indifference, desire, sadism, hate – is not an order of decreasing preference. None of the strategies is any more successful (any less of a failure) than any other. The point is rather that since all the attitudes are based on bad faith – are attempts to achieve a goal which one really knows to be impossible – they are all inherently unstable: there is a tendency to restless movement between them, we are 'indefinitely referred' (BN: 408) from one to another. (Compare Schopenhauer's account of life as swinging 'like a pendulum' between stress and boredom (p. 57).) Our ability to maintain any one attitude depends on how long we can maintain a particular form of bad faith (*ibid.*), something which, though it might last a lifetime, is almost certain to suffer at the very least relapses (BN: 381).

\* \* \*

In Sartre's 1944 play *No Exit* – appropriately titled since, according to his philosophy of the same period, as we have just seen, there is 'no exit' from the impossible goal of becoming a self-choosing being – there occurs the famous assertion that 'hell is other people'. In terms of *Being and Nothingness's* analysis of human existence, one can see why. For according to that analysis, while, on the one hand, I have an absolute need for other people to provide me with the identity that I seek, I also have an absolute need to be without them, since their existence takes away the self-determination, the autonomy which I also seek. Attempting to achieve both goals, I seek to dominate others, either by seeking to control their 'look' or else, more or less literally, by seeking to kill them. But the



other seeks to do exactly the same to me. Hence human relations are always, under the surface at least, conflict, a power struggle, war. Man is a wolf to man. Sartre's lifelong relationship with Simone de Beauvoir may have had something monumental about it but, according to his philosophy (and, in fact, de Beauvoir's reports), it, too, was in essence conflict.

For Sartre-Two, then, other people are hell. Moreover, since life is other people – non-human nature no more figures in Sartre's thoroughly urban philosophy than it does in Socrates'<sup>6</sup> – *life* is hell. Since this conclusion is as devastating, as 'nihilistic' with respect to human life, as anything in Schopenhauer, it becomes a matter of urgency to ask whether we should be convinced by Sartre-Two's account of the human condition. Should we be?

## The look

Let us start by trying to get a clearer view of the fundamental argument that leads to the conclusion that life is hell. Let me try to present it in as clear a form as possible.

The argument begins by asserting that the human being's fundamental aim is to have an essence or identity that it itself has freely chosen. In brief, as I shall put it,

(A) My fundamental aim is to have identity combined with autonomy.

Sartre-Two now points out that

(B) My identity is my 'being-for-others' (how I look to them, appear in their eyes).

So, he concludes,

(C) My identity depends on how I appear to others.

But then

(D) If my identity depends on others it cannot depend on (i.e. be freely chosen by) me.

And so

(E) The combination of identity and autonomy is 'an impossible synthesis'.

What are we to make of this argument?

No man, runs the French proverb, is a hero to his valet. Though depressing, there is a good point contained in this aphorism: if you want to count in your own eyes as a kind and thoughtful person (or, alternatively, if you want to count as a scurrilous bounder) then you must so count in the eyes of those who have the best, the most intimate, knowledge of you. (This, I think, is the point of the *intimacy* of nearly all the relations with others considered by Sartre.) So Sartre's assertion (C) is quite correct: my identity does indeed depend on how I appear to others. In general, to be thoughtful, kind, courageous and so on, *is* for those who,

with regard to the aspect of my being in question, know me best (and are unprejudiced in their judgements) to judge that I am thoughtful, kind, or whatever. (Notice that the knowing-me-best-in-relevant-respects requirement takes care of the spy example mentioned on p. 171 above. Though 'others' in general don't take me to be a spy, those who know me best in my professional life do.) Let us call someone who has relevantly intimate knowledge and who makes impartial judgements an 'ideal observer'. What we can say, then, is that for me to be kind, thoughtful, a spy, a waiter or whatever, is for me to be such that an ideal observer (God, for example, were he to exist) would judge me to be kind, thoughtful, a spy, a waiter<sup>7</sup> or whatever.

So far so good. The question is, however, does the dependency of my identity on how I look to others mean that it can't depend on me, can't be my own, freely chosen identity, as step (D) in Sartre's argument maintains? Not at all. To see this, consider colour, say redness. Bearing in mind that the lighting conditions under which things are seen affect their apparent colour (red things seen under blue light look purple), what is it for something to *be* red? It is for it to look red under *ideal* viewing conditions, i.e. standard daylight. So something *is* red if it looks red under ideal conditions, i.e. to an ideal observer. In this respect, then, redness is just like human identity.

But does this mean that I cannot freely choose the colour of my shirt? Does it mean that I have to manipulate the judgement of the observer, or reduce her to a mere 'indifferent' object, so that she can't challenge my choice of shirt colour? Obviously not. All I have to do is to appear in standard daylight wearing a red shirt. Similarly, all I have to do to persuade the ideal observer that a certain trait is an aspect of my identity is to choose that that trait *be* an aspect of my identity – and, of course, make sure, in a disciplined and resolute way, that I live my life in accordance with my fundamental choice.

In a nutshell, Sartre's mistake is to suppose that the dependency of my identity on the 'other's' judgement means that it can't be dependent on my own choice. The truth of the matter is that it is dependent on both. But since the ideal observer's judgement is dependent on me – I can make her judge whatever I want – the latter dependency is no restriction at all on my freedom to choose who I am to be.

\* \* \*

Why doesn't Sartre see this rather obvious point? I think the answer lies in the way he first introduces 'others' and their 'look'.

I am a soldier in time of war crawling cautiously through the undergrowth. Suddenly I hear a twig break behind me. Or suddenly I realise that I am in full view of the farmhouse on top of a little hill, a farmhouse that probably has enemy snipers in it (BN: 257–59). Or suppose that I am peeping through a bedroom keyhole (BN: 259–60), totally absorbed 'whether through vice, jealousy or curiosity' in what the man and woman are doing on the other side of the door. Suddenly I hear a noise behind me in the darkened hallway. In all these cases, suggests Sartre, two things happen. First, I suddenly apprehend myself as no longer the looker, the *subject* of looking, but as, rather, the looked at, the *object* of looking. Second, as a consequence of this, I feel suddenly threatened, vulnerable, in the presence of something hostile.<sup>8</sup>

Why should this be so? Because, according to Sartre, the look 'objectifies'.

When I look at others, 'I fix the people whom I see into objects' (BN: 366). When they look at me I am stripped of my 'transcendence', the freedom which makes me a person rather than a thing. I appear, in their eyes, as belonging to the same category of being as an inkwell – as a 'being-in-itself' rather than a 'being-for-itself' (BN: 262). To the soldiers in the farmhouse, for example, I am nothing but a dangerous mechanism, a to-be-destroyed enemy soldier. To the looker in the hallway behind me I am nothing but a 'peeping Tom', a 'deviant', malfunctioning piece of human mechanism ripe for psychiatrists and the law courts. Such objectifying is, according to Sartre, the *usual* character of the look: 'This woman whom I see coming toward me, this man who is passing by in the street, this beggar whom I hear calling before my window, all are for me *objects*' (BN: 252). This is the 'fundamental relation' between myself and others (ibid.).<sup>9</sup>

But now, if I always appear in the look of the other as a mere object, then I *never* appear in that look as the human personality I wish to be – for the simple reason that I never appear as a human personality *at all*. Given this to be true, it seems to follow that, in defence of my autonomy, I *have* either to try to manipulate the look of the other (as in 'love') or, either metaphorically or literally, to kill her.

The first thing that needs to be said, here, is that Sartre's claim that the look is always objectifying gains spurious plausibility for the particularly sour set of examples he has chosen. Suppose, for example, he had started off from the look the mother gives her child, the look Jesus gives to Mary Magdalene, the look David gives to Jonathan or the look Juliet gives Romeo – from, in other words, the various species of the *loving look*. Then a totally different account of human relations and human sexuality would have developed. Since love, 'unconditional' love at least, accepts the beloved for what he is, the other's look would then turn out never to be a threat to one's autonomy.

Actually, though, I don't think Sartre's assumption is really the product of an unbalanced set of examples. It is the product, rather, of an inability to think outside the square established by the *éminence grise* of modern French philosophy, René Descartes.

Sartre claims, remember, that the woman, the man and the beggar in the street are, in terms of my immediate experience, nothing but 'objects' for me. This is paradigmatic of my 'fundamental relation' to others in general. Why should Sartre think this? Because, he explains, 'the Other's existence remains purely conjectural' (BN: 252). In other words, the claim that the look with which we see others is always objectifying turns out to be just Descartes' point that we can never prove that those beings in hats and coats are anything more than cleverly constructed robots (p. 139) – that the 'conjecture', hypothesis or postulation that they are genuine people like oneself is merely something we find useful for explaining their behaviour, on a par with the postulation of quarks and black holes in physics.

Earlier (pp. 157–8), I noted that *Being and Nothingness* as a whole is supposed to be an essay in 'phenomenology', a description of the natural, immediate and unreflective experience human beings have of the world. It follows that a claim about my 'fundamental relation' (BN: 252) to others is not a claim about what I can and can't prove, but a descriptive claim about the natural, immediate and

unreflective attitude I in fact adopt to others. But (save with regard to those who have read too much Descartes) it is clearly a very poor piece of phenomenology to claim that the way we respond to others *in general* is to see and treat them as mere objects. What Sartre does here – and in his descriptions of human relations in general – is to offer what is actually the pathology of our experience of others as its anatomy. (The impact of the undoubted insight contained in the pathology can easily lead one to miss this slight of hand.)

Heidegger (in §26 of *Being and Time*) is a much more accurate phenomenologist than Sartre on this point. Though ‘indifference’ is indeed the standard mode of response to people on buses and in the street, it is, for him, not the only, but rather a ‘deficient’ mode of ‘being-with-others’. And even this deficient mode – an even more important point – is different from treating others as mere objects. An object, a piece of firewood, for example, we chop up as suits our needs. The firewood doesn’t have any say in the matter. But even someone to whom we are ‘indifferent’ we won’t chop up (unless we are terrorists or totalitarians) if they happen to be in our way. Even to those whom we are indifferent we accord certain rights, which makes our attitude to them fundamentally different from our attitude to objects. In other words, the distinction between people and things, between, in Sartre’s language, the for-itself and the in-itself, is fundamental to the phenomenology of human being-in-the-world, fundamental to the ‘look’ with which we view others. (This, in fact, is what Sartre started off saying (see pp. 152–4 above). But then he somehow lost sight of the point.)

Let us, however, put all this on one side. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that the ‘other’s’ look is indeed always objectifying. Suppose, therefore, that the others, not taking me to be a person at all, will never take me as the person I wish to be, will deny my autonomy. Then the point to be made is that if this is the way the others universally are, then (C) in Sartre’s argument (on p. 175 above), the claim that my identity depends on how I appear to others, is simply false. For what we established, remember, is that what my identity depends on is the judgement of an *ideal* – ideally knowledgeable and impartial – observer. Yet if, now, none of the others with whom I share my world *are* ideal, if they see me just as an object rather than as the person I am, then it is *false* that my identity depends on *their* judgement. We can, perhaps, put the matter, picturesquely, as follows. If my world contains nothing but others who objectify me (and such a world is imaginable, for example, the world of a prisoner kept secluded from all but the guards or a patient secluded from all but the doctors) then the only observer on whom my identity depends is God – who, of course, doesn’t exist, so it is dependent on no observer at all.

\* \* \*

Sartre-Two, as already remarked, is extremely depressing. Life is ‘hell’ because it is perpetual conflict with others, ‘war, all against all’. But it is hell in another sense, too, hell in the sense of being meaningless. Life, as Sartre-Two portrays it, is meaningless because though he appears to allow it a goal – becoming a *causa sui*, a self-creating, self-‘naturing’ being – it is a goal he portrays as impossible to achieve, and, moreover, one we really know to be impossible. But a goal that is known to be impossible is not a goal at all. Suppose, for example, you have

devoted your entire life to the generation of nuclear power by nuclear fusion but that one day it is shown that some law, coiled like a worm deep in the heart of fundamental physics, entails that nuclear fusion is impossible. Then – until you discover some new goal – your life has become meaningless. For a goal to be a genuine, meaning-giving goal one must know, or at least believe, it to be capable of attainment.

Sartre-Two is, then, doubly depressing. According to his ‘ontological’ investigations, life is both eternal conflict and meaningless. It is no wonder, then, that he says at the end of *Being and Nothingness* that the work is concerned with ontology and not ‘ethics’, with what *is* the case rather than with how we *ought* to lead our lives. ‘Ontology’, he says, ‘cannot formulate ethical precepts’ (BN: 625). As a general principle, as we will see when we come to discuss later Heidegger, this is profoundly false. What is true, on the other hand, is that Sartre’s ontology of human being cannot found an account of the good life, for the simple reason that there is, for him, *no such thing* as the good life. To put the matter another way, the question ‘What is the right way to live?’ makes a presupposition – that life as such is, or can be, worth living. But Sartre denies the presupposition and hence cannot answer the question. Not trying to live well but ceasing to live – suicide – is the rational response to Sartre-Two’s account of the hellish structures within which human beings are condemned to live.<sup>10</sup>

Sartre-Two is, then, a nihilist. But he is also, thankfully, a pretty poor arguer. Carefully considered, his argument offers us no genuine reason for believing in the hellish structures that he claims to be inseparable from human existence. Sartre-Two, therefore, is someone we can forget about.

\* \* \*

We are still left, however, with Sartre-One, to return to the topic of the previous chapter. What are we to say about him?

Sartre-One, remember, unlike Sartre-Two, holds that there is no difficulty in choosing the person we are to be by choosing the fundamental ‘project’ of our lives. Not only *can* we choose our project, we *must* do so. (Even, remember, the choice not to rebel against the identity established for me by my facticity is, not an escape from choice, but rather a choosing of that pre-established identity.) The point about this ultimate choice, however, is that since it is groundless, it, and the life that flows from it, is meaningless.

Knowing our lives to be thus ‘absurd’, as we saw (pp. 162–4 above), gives us a ‘feeling of unjustifiability’, undermines, Sartre seems to say (‘Sartre’ from now on means, once again, ‘Sartre-One’), our ability to take ourselves seriously. It undermines *commitment*. If I know that my life is based on an ungrounded act of fundamental choice then, when the going gets tough, I have no basis at all for resisting the thought that I should now simply unchoose what I have chosen and make a new act of fundamental choice. To put the point at its most dramatic, no one dies for the sake of groundless choices. (Notice that this returns us to the Kierkegaardian ‘problem of seriousness’ which, as we noted, afflicts Nietzsche’s view that one’s identity is one’s own – in effect, groundless – creation.) The result is that unless we draw the ‘veil’ of bad faith over this knowledge we have of ourselves, we live our lives at a distance, like actors, as Kierkegaard puts it, ‘experimentally’.<sup>11</sup> We act out a role for a time and then, when the mood takes

us, move on to a different role. The result is that, though *the roles* all have a meaning, our lives have none. We become, as it were, 'hollow men': emptiness hides behind a facade of activity. Knowledge of absurdity generates anguish because it frustrates our fundamental need for meaning.

## Why absurdity matters

It is of some interest to compare Sartre's discussion of the absurdity of human life with that offered by Thomas Nagel in an influential essay called 'The Absurd'.<sup>12</sup> Like Sartre, Nagel thinks that our lives are, indeed, absurd. And also like Sartre, he thinks that we explicitly experience this absurdity when we step out of the 'internal', engaged perspective and into the 'external', spectatorial perspective on our lives. Unlike Sartre, however, Nagel thinks that absurdity doesn't matter. He denies, in other words, the link between absurdity and anguish. On what grounds?

Here he is not entirely clear. On the one hand he seems to say that the absurdity of our lives is just like scepticism about our knowledge of the external world. Just as our knowledge that we can't prove there to be a world outside the mind (we can't *prove* we aren't dreaming) doesn't affect our daily lives in any way at all – we just get on with it – so knowledge of the absurd doesn't have any affect at all on our daily lives and the seriousness with which we take our projects. On the other hand, however, Nagel says that after an encounter with the absurd, 'our seriousness becomes laced with irony', but that having to live with irony is something that 'doesn't matter'.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to the first answer Sartre would, I think, say that knowledge of the absurd is *not* like scepticism about the external world. For whereas the latter is confined to idle moments of philosophical speculation, the former is always with us. It produces a permanent 'feeling of unjustifiability'. Freedom constantly 'eats away' at freedom (BN: 480), undermines our lives. Knowledge of the absurd, in short, is something we, at best, only ever half repress.

Nagel's second reason for saying that absurdity doesn't matter is harder to assess since he never specifies which of the several meanings of 'irony' he intends. What he probably means, however, is 'detachment', the kind of detachment referred to above as that which distinguishes *acting* a part from *being* that part. If this is what Nagel means then he is wrong to suggest that the ironic stance to one's life generated by an encounter with the absurd doesn't matter. For what it produces, as I argued, is lack of commitment to the ostensible meaning of one's life, in other words a meaningless life.

Nagel is, then, if I have understood him properly, wrong. If it is really true that our lives are based on groundless acts of ultimate choice, Sartre is right: our lives are meaningless and, as meaningless, not worth living. But according to Sartre-One our lives *are* based on groundless acts of ultimate choice. Sartre-One turns out, therefore, to be just as depressing, just as nihilistic, as Sartre-Two. The difference is that he is a much more formidable figure, a figure, as we are about to see, much less easy to dispose of.

## Sartre versus Heidegger

Is it possible to dispose of Sartre-One's depressing conclusion?

Let us return, first of all, to the question of what the human condition would have to be like for life *not* to be absurd. As we have observed, what would have to be the case is that, rather than being 'prior' to our essences, we would have to *be* those essences. If, that is to say, '*Wesen ist was gewesen ist*' (essence is what has been), if the essence laid down for me by my facticity is *what I am*, then there can be no question of my having to *choose* my essence, and hence no question of my having to choose it groundlessly and therefore absurdly.

According to Sartre, of course, it is false that *Wesen ist was gewesen ist*. Moreover, we know it to be false – we know the inescapability of groundless choice – so the belief that essence is what has been, the waiter's belief, for example, is always held in bad faith.

For Heidegger, on the other hand, as we saw in Chapter 11, my essence *is* determined by my facticity. He puts this, we saw, by saying that what I, fundamentally, am, is determined by my 'heritage'. The fundamental values which are *my* fundamental values are not freely chosen but represent something to which I find myself *already* committed as I grow to adulthood within my native culture, their adoption part and parcel of the process of learning my native language. Whereas, for Sartre, the self is an isolated, Cartesian ego, denuded of all properties save the power of choice (and the capacity to think which such a power entails), for Heidegger, the self is an others-implicating, 'socially constructed' entity. (We might put this by saying that whereas Sartre has a 'thin' conception of the self, Heidegger has a 'thick' one.) This doesn't mean that freedom is excluded from Heidegger's picture of things. On the contrary, he insists on it. I *can* fail to act out of heritage, choose to go along with the (usually debased) values of contemporary public opinion. Or I can choose to act out of heritage, choose to be 'authentic', to be, in other words, who I am. The difference from Sartre, however, is that, for Heidegger, what I choose is not myself, but rather *whether to be* myself. Heritage, he says, is the 'sole authority' (B&T: 391) to which a free being can submit, the reason being that the only authority to which I can submit and still be free, in the sense of following my own will, is myself.

On early Heidegger's view, then, life is never meaningless. There is always a meaning, a meaning that is given to us by the culture out of and within which our selves are constructed. Because that meaning (in Heidegger's language 'destiny') is *given*, there is no question of having to choose it, and hence no possibility of absurdity.

So who is right? Sartre notes, correctly, that early Heidegger's notion of heritage is really a notion of place (BN: 489–96). My heritage is the spiritual place within which, according to Heidegger, I become myself. A way of putting Heidegger's view of the self is to say that, at the deepest level, *I am my place*.

Sartre, however, makes a simple but telling criticism of this idea, arguing that only *I* make my place *my* place. To someone like Sartre himself, for example, being within a few kilometres of the Eiffel Tower, and all that that implies, is what constitutes 'being there', being in place. But to someone who, though brought up with the same background, decides that, for him, Chicago is 'where it's at', Paris, France, appears not as a homeland but as a kind of prison. Whether,

in short, my place is *my* place, whether my heritage is *my* heritage, depends upon my fundamental project, and hence upon my choice, and hence upon my freedom and the absurdity that it brings with it.

This seems inescapable. Just because I am born into a given heritage doesn't make it *my* heritage (as I argued on pp. 149–50). Heidegger claims that one *is* one's heritage, but the most that can in truth be said is that I *have been* my heritage up to now. Whether I will *continue* to be that heritage – part of the communal project that it constitutes – is entirely *up to me*. It depends on the freedom – and absurdity – of my ultimate choice.

So it seems that, in the end, Sartre is right and Heidegger wrong. Life is grounded in the inescapable absurdity of groundless choice and is, therefore, meaningless.

But perhaps this conclusion is too hasty. Perhaps we will find in later Heidegger the resources to defeat Sartre's depressing conclusion that are absent from *Being and Time*. This is something I shall investigate in Chapter 17.

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What is Sartre's basic problem? What is the real source of his 'anguish'? It is, I think, the death of God. The reason we have to make our own ultimate choices is that God is no longer there to make them for us. This suggests a way of representing Sartre (Sartre-One) in four sentences. (1) God is dead. (2) Since there is no God to authorise the good, we have to do it for ourselves. But (3) we have no authority over ourselves. Hence (4), we possess no authoritative account of the good, and life is meaningless (and so worthless).<sup>14</sup>

It is possible to see Sartre's later turn to Marxism as the (self-deceiving?) attempt to escape the nihilistic conclusion of this argument by rejecting (1). In Chapter 17, however, I shall suggest that the correct response is to reject (2).

## Notes

- 1 Sartre uses the phrase 'becoming an in-itself-for-itself' (BN: 90, 362) to describe this goal, but this is one of those ambiguously plastic pieces of technical terminology which makes it hard to see what he is up to. In one meaning it might be used to express the desire of, for example, the gambler or the waiter to relegate the anguish-causing phenomenon of free choice to the past, so that from now on one's nature is as absolutely fixed as that of an oak tree (p. 165). But on the other hand it is often used to express the project of becoming a *causa sui*, where it expresses the desire for not a fixed nature, but rather a freely chosen one. Because the phrase is confusing, I shall avoid using it.
- 2 That is, the self 'in itself'. Just as, for Kant, objects or things divide into the 'appearances' of things and 'things in themselves' (p. 20 above), so the self divides into the self as 'appearance' and the self 'in itself'.
- 3 Needless to say, this autobiographical flavour has given rise to a plethora of articles devoted to exposing and criticising Sartre's alleged sexism.
- 4 It is worth wondering whether the carefully manufactured self-presentation that appears on social websites such as Facebook is, in essence, a version of Sartrean 'love'. If so, one can predict Facebook's ultimate demise, at least in its current form.
- 5 Notice that 'indifference' towards all but the beloved must be how the lover tries to make himself 'alone in the world with the beloved'.
- 6 *Phaedrus* 230d:

Phaedrus: 'you, my excellent friend, strike me as the oddest of men ... never leaving town to cross the frontier nor even, I believe, so much as setting foot outside the walls [of Athens]'.

Socrates: 'You must forgive me, dear friend; I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do.'



Sartre, remember, said he never felt at home anywhere except in a fifth-floor Paris apartment.

- 7 Of course, with respect to being a waiter and many similar aspects of identity, there is no 'inner circle' of expertise. Anyone, virtually, can tell as well as anyone else, that a waiter is a waiter.
- 8 Notice that here (and also with respect to the anguish that is said to accompany the experience of freedom) Sartre assumes a given emotional response to be universal to human beings – which contradicts his official position that emotions are always the product of free choice (pp. 159–60).
- 9 Notice that this is essentially the 'indifference' which earlier appeared as the attitude of the disappointed lover. So the special stratagem adopted by the disappointed lover now appears as a universalising of the standard attitude to others, a refusal to make any exceptions to it.
- 10 The final pages of *Being and Nothingness* preview a prospective book which, Sartre claims, will take up the question of ethics. Unsurprisingly, it was never written.
- 11 As we saw in the last chapter (note 3), Sartre's *Paths of Liberty* novels do allow for apparent acts of commitment. Brunet becomes a communist, Mathieu dies a heroic (and futile) death resisting the Germans. Since Sartre holds, however, that we all really know our lives to be meaningless, he is committed to viewing all such acts as being made in bad faith. From the perspective of *Being and Nothingness*, they have to be viewed as *pretences*, rather than authentic acts, of commitment.
- 12 Nagel 2000.
- 13 Nagel 2000, 183, 185.
- 14 This train of thought is virtually explicit in Sartre (1957): 'I'm quite vexed that that's the way it is, but if I've discarded God the Father, there has to be someone to invent values' (p. 47) – which however, as 'invented', have no genuine value at all.

## 14 Camus

Albert Camus (1913–60) was born into a very poor, working-class family in Algiers, the capital of the then French colony of Algeria. His grandmother and mother were both illiterate. All his life he was subject to bouts of tuberculosis which had the effect of ending a possible career as a professional soccer player (he was a fine goalkeeper). Moving to Paris, he became actively and courageously involved in the resistance to the Nazi occupation, editing the underground newspaper *Combat*. (As with Sartre, the existential issues about which he wrote arose not out of thin air but out of his life.) Though he spent most of his working life in Paris, he retained an intense love for his homeland that is often reflected in his writings. Although belonging, in general, to the political left, his ties to his homeland (where his mother still lived) made it impossible for him, during the Algerian war of independence (1954–62), unambiguously to identify himself with the standard left-wing demand for Algeria's immediate independence. (Given a choice between justice and my mother, he said, I choose my mother.) This led to a break with the by-now-Marxist Sartre, who found Camus' position lacking the necessary black-and-whiteness. Camus had great personal charm and, with a cigarette permanently in the corner of his mouth, looked (as he knew) like Humphrey Bogart. This no doubt contributed to his enormous success with women. His appetite for sexual pleasure was insatiable and led to his being perpetually unfaithful to both his wife and current mistress. (As we shall see, this and other aspects of his life and personality are reflected in his philosophy.) He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, and in 1960 died in an accident in a sports car driven by his friend and publisher, Michel Gallimard. Both Camus and Gallimard were addicted to fast driving.

More famous as a playwright and novelist, Camus is often classified as a mere 'writer' and ignored as a philosopher. The French, in particular, tend to diminish his philosophical standing through invidious comparisons with Sartre's supposed philosophical 'genius'. This seems to me a mistake. Camus' major philosophical work, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (MS) of 1940, seems to me to contain philosophical ideas at least as important as anything in Sartre.

### The problem of suicide

'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem', Camus writes at the beginning of *The Myth*, 'and that is suicide', in other words 'judging whether life is or is not worth living' (MS: 11). Though startling, the connection he makes here is surely correct. If life is really not worth living then one ought to commit suicide. But if it is then, of course, one should not. The question of suicide is thus

just a dramatic way of posing the question of life's worth or value.

To say that this question poses a 'problem' is to say that the answer is neither obvious nor straightforward. And to say that is to say that something at least threatens a negative answer to the question. What, we must now ask, is it that makes this a threat? And to whom is the threat made?

Starting with the second question, it is important to see that Camus is not interested in something which might make just your or my individual life worthless (the loss of a loved one, a crime for which one can never atone). But neither, at the other extreme (unlike, say, Schopenhauer), does he think that there is something which threatens to reveal the life of humanity in general as worthless. His concern, rather, is historically situated. There is something, he believes, which threatens to reveal the life of *modern Western humanity* as worthless. He calls it 'the absurd'. Though we have met this term before, what it means for Camus is actually somewhat different from what it means for Sartre.

## The absurd

Absurdity, Camus explains, is a disjunction, a disjunction of large – 'absurd' – proportions, between how one wants things to be and how they are or are likely to become. A man attacking a machine-gun nest with a sword is absurd (MS: 33). Charlie Chaplin (my example, not Camus') is absurd because of the disjunction between the dignity intended by the bowler hat and rolled umbrella and the incredibly undignified things that happen to him: the wall of a house falls on him, he slips on a banana skin. (Notice that a small child slipping on a banana skin is *not* absurd.) Absurdity in general, says Camus, 'is born of the confrontation between human need and the [as it seems to us] unreasonable silence of the world' (MS: 32).

But what is '*the* absurd'? What is the fundamental desire in question which reality fails to satisfy? It is, says Camus, a desire for there to be a 'meaning of life' (MS: 12), 'some great idea that transcends [life] ... and gives it meaning' (MS: 15). It is, in other words, the desire – or rather 'need' – for an account of the meaning of life of the traditional true-world form. It is the 'need' for such meaning, the need for, as I have called it, grand-narrative meaning.

For what kind of grand-narrative meaning do we have this fundamental need? In *The Myth* itself Camus identifies our loss of 'values', of 'meaning', with our inability to 'believe in God' (MS: 7). So the specific grand narrative he has in mind seems to be that of Christianity. But in the 1953 'The Artist and his Times', he makes the point I made at the end of Chapter 8, that Marxism is essentially a translation of the Christian heaven into a naturalistic context, since it postulates 'a miraculous event at the end of time', the coming into being of the communist paradise. It is for this reason (he is defending himself here against his Marxist critics such as Sartre) that he classifies Marxism as a new 'faith', a 'new mystification' (MS: 188–89). So it seems that, in Camus' most considered view, the absurdity of our lives consists in the death, not just of the Christian, but rather of *all* versions of 'God', all true-world narratives.<sup>1</sup>

To say, then, that life is absurd is to point to a radical disjunction between our intense desire that life should have some grand-narrative meaning, on the one hand, and the evident failure of reality to provide such meaning, on the other.<sup>2</sup>

The next question is: why does the realisation that life is absurd threaten suicide? Camus' answer is that it is liable to produce 'the feeling of the absurd' (MS: 32) or, 'as a writer of today [Sartre, of course] calls it', 'nausea' (MS: 21).

Camus gives various examples of this feeling which can strike at any time, 'on a street-corner or in a restaurant's revolving door' (MS: 18–19). The meaningless pantomime of the man in the telephone booth whose words we cannot hear (MS: 21); the stranger in the face of the woman one once loved, or in one's own face in the mirror (ibid.); the unanswerable 'Why?' that strikes one as one surveys the circular path of the daily round – rising, breakfast, car, office, meal, sleep, rising, breakfast, et cetera – and makes 'the stage sets collapse' (MS: 19).

What is common to these examples is alienation, estrangement, disengagement. A life revealed as a 'stage set' is a life that engages me no longer. The woman who has become a stranger is a woman who has lost all value for me. I am as indifferent to her as to the man sitting in the car next to me at the traffic lights. Camus seems to suggest that to be struck by the vivid realisation that life has no (grand-narrative) meaning is to become indifferent to, disengaged from it. (His famous novel *The Outsider* (*L'Étranger*) is an extended exploration of such disengagement. In it, the estranged hero sleepwalks through his life, through a motiveless murder and eventually to his execution.) A deadly 'weariness' (MS: 19) sets in, a saying 'no' to life (MS: 14), a longing to get the whole meaningless (yet stressful) pantomime over with, a 'longing for death' (MS: 14).

One response, then, to the experience of life's absurdity is the conclusion which has suicide as its logical consequence. One treats the experience of 'nausea' as a moment of decisive insight into the truth that life in an absurd world, life without (grand-narrative) meaning, isn't worth living.

Camus' central task is to *reject* this inference, to show that 'even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate'; not legitimate, because 'even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism ... to live and create in the very midst of the desert' (MS: 7). More ambitiously, Camus' aim is to show that, actually, life 'will be lived all the better if it has no meaning' (MS: 53). A crucial question, here, is the meaning of 'meaning'. Does Camus believe that life will be lived all the better in the absence of *grand-narrative* meaning or does he believe that life will be lived all the better in the absence of *any meaning at all*? What makes Camus exceptionally interesting is, it seems to me, that it is this second, more radical, claim that he ultimately wants to defend.

## Camus and Kierkegaard

A different kind of response to absurdity and nausea is what Camus calls 'the leap' (to faith), a term he uses to characterise the position of the religious 'existentialists' (MS: 35), of, above all, Kierkegaard, whom he presents as the 'discoverer of the absurd' (MS: 30).

The essence of Kierkegaard's leap, as Camus presents it, is the denial of reason. To be sure, the leaper says, reason declares there to be no God, no meaning to life. But what's so great about reason? We can say: 'reason declares there to be no

meaning-giving “beyond”, therefore there is none’. But equally, we can say: ‘there is a beyond, therefore reason has its limits’. Moreover we *need* to believe in a ‘beyond’, otherwise we will see life as absurd and lapse into ‘despair’ (MS: 37).

Camus has nothing but contempt for the leap. He rejects it on two grounds. The first is that it is really nothing but a kind of suicide – ‘philosophical suicide’. For what it amounts to is the ‘killing’ of the fundamental and distinctive part of the human being, reason. In its desecration of reason it constitutes a ‘mutilation of the soul’, a burning insult to human dignity and ‘pride’ (MS: 40–41), a kind of grovelling sickness. The really important thing, Camus insists, is to *live with* what our reason tells us, not to demean or diminish the human self.

Second, and more importantly, philosophical, just like literal, suicide is unnecessary, is based on a misapprehension. For the truth of the matter is that life’s absurdity does *not* entail its worthlessness. Why not?

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Camus answers this question by painting a portrait of ‘the absurd man’ – someone who fully accepts life’s absurdity, yet lives a life that is, in both his own and our eyes, clearly, indeed splendidly, worth living. As the phrase suggests, Camus presents himself as having a single, unitary account of what it is to live well in the face of the absurd. In fact, however, he has two quite different accounts of the absurd hero. The key word for the first is ‘revolt’, for the second ‘excess’.

## Sisyphus

The life of ‘revolt’ is personified by Sisyphus, the hero of Greek mythology after whom *The Myth* is named. Condemned by the gods, for obscure reasons, to push a giant boulder to the top of a mountain whence it immediately rolls to the bottom, condemned to do this again and again throughout all eternity, Sisyphus is the ‘proletarian of the gods’ (MS: 109). In the first instance, that is, he is a metaphor for the endlessly repetitive life of the industrial slave of modernity. Really, however, he is all of us to the extent that we tread the circular – and hence meaningless – path of everyday life. (Notice that though Sisyphus is immortal and we are not, this does not matter from the point of view of the metaphor: just as there is nothing but repetitive activity in Sisyphus’ life, so there is nothing but that in our mundane existence.)

Sisyphus, says Camus, is someone who ‘negates the gods’ yet ‘concludes that all is well’:

This universe henceforth without a master [i.e. without God and hence without grand-narrative meaning] seems to him neither sterile nor futile ... The struggle itself towards the height is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

(MS: 111)

Why on earth?

\* \* \*

Let us first of all forget the Greek gods who, if taken literally, conflict with

Camus' central assumption that there are *no* gods, that the universe has no 'master'. Let us imagine Sisyphus' life as that of the modern industrial worker. Then, as Camus describes him, what makes him happy is that, even though he is vividly aware of his fundamental *need* for meaning, of some kind of ultimate consolation for the dreary drudgery of his life, he lives 'without appeal' (MS: 53), without the 'solace' of comforting 'myths' (MS: 135). He lives, that is, without the attempt to satisfy his need, given that he can only do so by denying his 'rationality'. In doing so he is in 'revolt', revolt being 'the certainty of a crushing fate without the resignation that ought to accompany it' (MS: 54). Revolt, that is, is living *with* absurdity. It is the refusal to make the 'sacrifice of the intellect' (MS: 40) that is demanded by the Kierkegaardian 'leap'.

Sisyphus is thus immensely strong, 'virile' (MS: 11). In his 'dogged ... perseverance' (MS: 104) with an unsatisfactory existence he displays the strength of character that is precisely lacking in the leaper. It is this 'nobility of soul' (MS: 109) that endows his life with 'majesty' and 'dignity'. There is, writes Camus, 'no finer sight' (MS: 54). And so we are to conclude, as Sisyphus does, that 'all is well' (MS: 109). Sisyphus is, we must accept, happy. In spite of the absence of grand-narrative meaning his life is a splendid sight, one that is eminently worth living.

\* \* \*

As Camus describes him, Sisyphus is *admirable*, in that he displays a 'courage' (MS: 64) and 'integrity' (MS: 50) that the leaper lacks. Indeed, since courage and integrity are moral virtues he is morally admirable in a way in which the leaper is not. That, however, is not what Camus needs to convince us of. He needs to show not that, having been condemned to an unsatisfactory life, Sisyphus behaves heroically, but that Sisyphus' life is actually eminently satisfactory – a life which we would be 'happy' to lead. But it is surely entirely obvious that we would be the opposite of happy to be condemned to Sisyphus' life. Our response to his situation is not envy but rather pity. Camus has, I think, confused two things: being happy that something is the case and being happy period. Sisyphus is, certainly, *happy that* he has not given way to the weakness of the leaper. But is his *life* a happy one? Does he think it is? Is it one which, given other options (as in Plato's myth of Er (p. 151 above)), he would choose to live again? Surely not.

## Don Juan and the actor

Camus' first account of the absurd hero is not, then, convincing. That he behaves admirably in it does not negate the worthlessness of his life. The second, however, is more promising. On this account, absurd heroes are distinguished by a kind of gargantuan appetite, an enormous lust for life. Their lives are marked, not by 'revolt', but by the fact that they 'expend' themselves in lives devoted to, by all normal standards, 'excess' (MS: 78). What counts for them 'is not quality but quantity'. What defines the life of the authentic hero on this second account is an 'ethics of quantity' (MS: 69).<sup>3</sup> In *The Myth* itself, Camus' central paradigms of the absurd hero of this second type are Don Juan and 'the actor'.

For Kierkegaard, as we saw, Don Juan, 'the seducer', is the paradigm of the

‘aesthetic’ life, the life that is as far removed as possible from the truly worthwhile life, the life most deeply plunged into ‘despair’ (pp. 000–00 above). Apart from investigating what is, as we saw, an aspect of his own personality, Camus chooses to present Don Juan/Giovanni as an absurd hero precisely, surely, in order to stand Kierkegaard on his head, to glorify precisely what the dismal Dane condemns. As in Kierkegaard, the Don does not fall in love or engage in improving conversation. He makes the same speech to every woman since ‘to anyone who seeks [mere] quantity in his joys, the only thing that matters is efficiency’ (MS: 68). Where all that matters, in other words, is conquest, it is foolish to depart from the tried and true.

The actor (an element of autobiography is evident here, too) is a ‘mime of the ephemeral’. He is someone who for ‘three hours’ is Iago and then, for another three, Gloucester, and so on (MS: 74). Someone who lives like an actor constantly uses up one personality and moves on to the next. Devoted to ‘dispersion’, his existence represents (here Camus alludes to the Church’s traditional disapproval of actors and – especially – actresses) a ‘heretical multiplication of souls’ (MS: 78).

## Algerian gods

It is possible to feel that Don Juan and ‘the actor’ are not quite the appealing figures Camus takes them to be. In, however, a number of lyrical essays written a few years either side of *The Myth*, specifically, ‘Summer in Algiers’, ‘The Minotaur’ and ‘Helen’s Exile’, Camus develops the idea of ‘excess’ in what seems to me a considerably more attractive and compelling way.

Written amidst the grimness of wartime and immediately post-war Paris, Camus recalls the Algeria of his youth, recalls, above all, its summertime. He recalls Algeria as a place where ‘whoever is young and alive ... finds occasions for triumph everywhere: in the bay, the sun, the red and white games on the seaward terraces, the flowers and sports stadiums, the cool-legged girls’ (MS: 128). Algeria, he writes, is a place where

every summer morning seems to be the first in the world. Each twilight seems to be the last, the solemn agony announced at sunset by a final glow that darkens every hue. The sea [Camus’ palette, here, seems close to Van Gogh’s] is ultramarine, the road the colour of clotted blood, the beach yellow. Everything disappears with the green sun: an hour later the dunes are bathed in moonlight. There are incomparable nights under a rain of stars.

(MS: 160)

Algiers, he continues, is a place where one says, not ‘go for’, but rather ‘indulge in’, a swim. It is a place where people are not, as in Europe, ‘nudists’ – those tedious ‘Protestants of the flesh’ – but are simply ‘comfortable in the sunlight’. It is a place where people live with Greek *naïveté*: ‘living through the body’, the young men, as they run along the beaches, ‘repeat the gestures of the athletes of Delos’ (MS: 129). It is a place where one cannot fail to ‘participate in [the] ... dialogue of stone and flesh in tune with the seasons’ (MS: 130). Camus recalls returning to the inner harbour from a day-long canoeing expedition with the friends of his youth: ‘how’, he asks, ‘can I fail to feel that I am piloting through

the smooth waters a savage cargo of gods in whom I recognise my brothers?' (ibid.).

How do these beings – at once friends of Camus' youth and reincarnations of the Greeks – live? Like all of Camus' heroes, they live 'without appeal', without appeal to any 'deceptive divinity' (MS: 136). In this land where 'a thirty-year-old workman has already played all the cards in his hand' (MS: 132), one lives, like Don Juan and 'the actor', with a lust for experience, with 'a haste that borders on waste' (MS: 132). In such a land life is 'not to be built up but to be burned up' (MS: 133). A final remark elevates Camus' recollections to the status of philosophy: 'I have the mad hope that, without knowing it perhaps, these barbarians lounging on the beaches are actually modelling the image of a culture in which the image of man will at last find its true likeness' (ibid.).

Here, I think it is clear, we have Camus' account of how to live well in an 'absurd' universe presented at its most appealing. What are we to make of it?

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One criticism (a criticism Nietzsche, for one, would certainly make) is that a life governed by the 'ethics of quantity', a life devoted to 'burning up' rather than 'building up', since it lacks any overriding direction or goal is, in the end, bound to be *boring* and, as such, not worth living. In the end, one might ask, must not Don Juan become bored with his women, must not 'the actor' (like Toad of Toad Hall) become bored with the lives he continually morphs himself into, and must not the 'barbarian gods' become bored with sun and sand? Underlying this objection is the thought introduced in Chapter 9 that while *grand-narrative* meaning is not essential to a worthwhile life – one *can*, therefore, live well in an absurd universe – meaning in the form of a *personal* meaning, narrative or goal is essential to such a life.

But Camus denies this (MS: 56–58). Whereas, he says, 'everyday man lives with aims [and] a concern for justification' of actions in terms of those aims, the absurd hero does not. His life is 'aimless'. From which it follows (to answer a question raised earlier) that when Camus says that life 'will be lived all the better if it has no meaning' he means not merely 'no grand-narrative meaning' but rather 'no meaning period'. Not just a grand, but also a personal narrative is absent from the truly worthwhile life. 'Men with a purpose', says Camus scornfully, live in the city. (MS: 142). They are not to be found on the beaches of his Algerian paradise.

## Burning up versus building up

Let us try to be exact as to just what Camus means by describing the life of the absurd hero as 'purposeless', 'meaningless', 'aimless' or goalless. In a certain sense, of course, like everyone else, the absurd hero has to have goals, short-term goals – food, shelter, sleep, etc. – without which he would simply die. But in the examples Camus gives, he is also allowed long-term goals: to seduce as many women as possible, to experience as great a variety of different lives as possible or to spend as much time on the beach and as little in the classroom as possible. When, therefore, Camus excludes 'aims' from the worthwhile life, what he means to exclude is not goals as such, but rather goals of a quite specific sort.



Life is not to be built up but burned up. Stopping to think and becoming better are out of the question.

(MS: 133)

This tells us what it is that Camus wants to exclude: 'building', a word etymologically and conceptually related to the German *Bildung*. What is entirely 'out of the question' is 'becoming better', scripting one's life as if writing a *Bildungsroman*, a 'novel of education' in the widest sense of the word (see p. 89 above), a narrative of progression towards a fully realised self. What is excluded is the formation of an ideal conception of the self which then provides the basis for a life conceived as a project of disciplined self-development. It is the exclusion of *this* kind of Germanic, Nietzschean goal that Camus has in mind when he claims that the worthwhile life is goalless.<sup>4</sup>

What is supposed to be wrong with the life of *Bildung*? One of Camus' arguments is that to have 'aims', as 'everyday man' does, is to lack freedom – which he takes to be an obvious feature of the worthwhile life. Having raised himself out of his previous everydayness, the absurd hero realises, he says, that 'to the extent he imagined a purpose to his life, he adapted himself to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and became a slave [to it]' (MS: 57).

What does Camus mean, here, by freedom? Earlier, I argued that to genuinely have a life goal is to be *committed* to it. Whatever difficulties I encounter, if it is genuinely my goal, I will not be deterred from its pursuit. There is, however, one exception to this: the case where it becomes obvious that the goal I have set myself is impossible to achieve.

I want to become a first-rate doctor. But I fail my exams. Or kill a few patients. In such a case one must abandon one's commitment, recognise that one's goal is, or has become, incompatible with one's facticity. The, not merely committed, but rather *obsessed* person, however, is unable to recognise the absolute incompatibility of their goal with their facticity. (The exam results have been faked; it was really someone else's fault the patients died.) For the obsessed person there is *nothing* in their facticity that will convince them that they have to abandon their goal. Whereas for the committed person facticity provides a 'reality check' with respect to their goal, for the obsessed person it does not. Here, I think, in obsession, we discover what it is to be 'enslaved' by one's goal.

Once, however, the distinction between obsession and commitment is made, it becomes obvious that Camus' argument is not really very good, depending, as it does, on failing to see any difference between the two. The fact of the matter is that the committed (but not obsessed) person *will* be prepared to modify her goal should it become obvious that it is incompatible with her facticity. Becoming a slave to the goal that defines a life of *Bildung* is a danger, but by no means an inevitability.

Camus' main argument against the life of *Bildung* has, however, to do with time.

Camus claims that 'everyday man', the man with 'aims', 'weighs up his

chances ... counts on "some day", his retirement, the labour of his sons' (MS: 56). He lives, in short, 'in the future'. The absurd hero, by contrast, exhibits total 'indifference' to the future (MS: 59). He lives in 'the present and the succession of presents' (MS: 62). What is supposed to be wrong with 'living in the future'?

A hitherto ambitious opera singer, her career interrupted by cancer from which, through a bone marrow transplant, she has now recovered says, in a (real-life) interview,

Singing is now no longer my be all and end all. I much more enjoy the sky, walking in the park, the birds, just being alive.

This is the 'barbarian gods' living in a land where 'every morning seems to be the first in the world', being alive to the simple joys of just 'being there', being alive to the extraordinariness of the ordinary. The implication of the singer's remark is that prior to the trauma of cancer, the joys of life in the present – and that means the joys of *life*, since in reality, of course, life is always lived in the present – had been sacrificed to a projected future in which she is a famous singer. And, of course, Camus is right: to the extent that one's 'futureness' kills one's being alive to the joys of the present, it is a mistake. Moreover, as Schopenhauer observes, it is a mistake we very commonly make. People, he writes, live

in the expectation of better things ... On the other hand the present is accepted only for the time being, is set at naught, and looked upon merely as the path to the goal. Thus when at the end of their lives most men look back, they will find that they have lived throughout *ad interim*; they will be surprised to see that the very thing they allowed to slip by unappreciated and unenjoyed was just their life, precisely that in the expectation of which they had lived.

(PP II: 285–86)

But 'building' a life towards a goal, it seems to me, does not *have* to kill one's life in the present. One can *both* work at becoming a singer (the interviewee had not, in fact, given up singing) *and* enjoy one's walks in the park, just as one can take the train down the Rhine valley towards one's destination *and*, at the same time, enjoy lunch with a Rhine wine in the restaurant car while delighting in the passing sunlit scene of mermaids, vineyards and island castles. Indeed, the walks in the park are almost certain to help make one a *better* singer. Singers who have an experience of life outside singing will, other things being equal, be better singers than those who do not. (The same is true of philosophers.) A properly thought out life of *Bildung*, in short, will budget generously for activity and experience that does not, in any obvious or direct way, contribute to achieving the defining goal of that life.

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So while Camus is right to warn against the kind of obsession with the future that renders one incapable of experiencing the joys of the present, he is wrong to suppose that the life of 'building' *must* take this form. I want now, however, to argue an even stronger point against Camus: not only *can* the building of a life towards a self-defining goal form part of the worthwhile life, it *must* do so.

Nietzsche remarks that the will to power is always the will to more power. One (though not, as I suggested in Chapter 10, the only) thought contained in this remark is that a continual sense of development, growth, ascending movement, self-overcoming, is *essential* to a worthwhile life. It is in the light of this insight that one can see that there really is something seriously wrong with the lives of Don Juan, 'the actor', and the friends of Camus' youth – given that the latter are offered as models, not just of youth, but of an entire life. What is wrong with such lives is that they are *static*, without any sense of movement or growth. The Don learns nothing from his seductions; nothing from an earlier affair is carried over into any later one. The same is true with respect to the multiple lives of 'the actor', while the 'surfie' friends of Camus' boyhood are so laid back that they don't even try to become better surfers. ('Stopping to think and becoming better', even at surfing, remember, 'are out of the question'.) Camus is quite explicit as to the static character of the absurd hero's life. Of Don Juan he says that, like his speeches, he himself is always the same. He is a seducer who 'will not change'. 'Only in novels [*Bildungsromane*] does one change one's condition or become better' (MS: 69). But that just means that the life of Camus' absurd hero really is, as we earlier suggested, a life of deadly tedium, a life of *boredom*.

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If, then, it is true, as it is, that 'the will to power is always the will to more power', we must conclude that 'building' one's life in the light of a self-defining goal is not just a possible but an *essential* feature of the worthwhile life. For all the many delights of his writing, and for all the credit due to him for looking utterly fundamental issues squarely in the face, Camus is wrong to say that 'life ... will be lived all the better if it has no meaning'. The worthwhile life *requires* meaning, requires a goal that supplies it with an *at least* personal meaning. (Whether this goal can be *merely* personal or whether it needs to be, in some sense, universal, is an issue I shall address in Chapter 17.)

## Notes

- 1 Notice that whereas 'absurd', in Camus, means 'absence of grand-narrative meaning' – which leaves open the possibility that life, or at least my life, might have some other type of meaning 'absurd', in Sartre, means 'meaningless' period. This is why I said that one should not identify the two philosophers' use of the word. (On the other hand, given my suggestion at the end of Chapter 13 that the 'death of God' is at the root of Sartre's (Sartre-One's) notion of absurdity, they are not unrelated either.)
- 2 Or rather, reality as we understand it. For Camus, I think, absurdity is a disjunction between how we want the world to be and how we *take* it to be. How it *actually* is seems to me irrelevant to the question of whether life is, in Camus' sense, absurd.
- 3 Reverting for a moment to the first account of the absurd hero, Camus says that, providing they 'know' the absurdity of life and 'mask nothing', 'the chaste man' or the 'civil servant' can be absurd heroes (MS: 84). Since such figures are paradigms of moderation, this shows that 'excess' plays no essential role in the life of 'revolt'. Similarly one can be devoted to 'excess' without being in 'revolt', without the thought of the Kierkegaardian leap ever crossing one's mind. Though someone *might* well be both in revolt and devoted to excess – one might be devoted to excess *because* one is in revolt – this just shows that someone might qualify as an absurd hero on both of Camus' accounts, not that he has one, unified account of what it is that makes one an absurd hero.
- 4 In fact, it is almost certainly not Nietzsche – whom he admires – that Camus has in his sights but rather, once again, Kierkegaard, who, as we saw, in addition to his philosophical works, wrote numerous 'Upbuilding [*opbyggelige*] Discourses' of a theological character.

## 15 Foucault

Michel Foucault was born in Poitiers in 1926 and died in Paris in 1984. By his own account, the liberationist movements of his age – among others, the student uprising of 1968, the Iranian revolution of 1978–79 and the Solidarity resistance to communism in Poland during the 1980s – had a decisive influence on his thinking. In 1975 he began to make regular visits to the United States, specifically visits to Hubert Dreyfus in Berkeley. He took LSD at Zabriskie Point in Death Valley National Park, which he described as the best experience of his life. Openly gay (though for reasons we shall come to he despised the label ‘homosexual’), he died of AIDS, possibly contracted as a result of engaging in sado-masochistic practices in San Francisco.

### Foucault’s aim

Given the above biographical data it is unsurprising that the most visible aim in Foucault’s writings is the promotion of what he calls ‘freedom’ (FR: 46, 48, 50, 246–47 *et passim*). Why should freedom be a problem?

Recalling (posthumous) Nietzsche’s notion that the essence of everything is the ‘will to power’, Foucault repeatedly insists that the most appropriate model for understanding human society is *war*. Rejecting the view that social phenomena are to be treated as kinds of linguistic *texts* requiring a deciphering of their meaning, he says that ‘one’s point of reference should be, not the great model of language and signs but to [*sic*] that of war and battle’ (FR: 56). In any social situation, according to Foucault, there is always the quest for domination, on the one hand, and on the other the desire (or at least the need) to resist. (Actually, Foucault’s emphasis on oppression-resistance means that it is, not war in general, but rather the war of colonisation, that is his model. Wars fought to settle debts of honour, border disputes or in competition for hitherto unclaimed land are inappropriate models for Foucault’s purposes.)

The forms of oppression that interest Foucault are what he variously calls ‘regimes of knowledge’, ‘regimes of truth’, ‘discourses’, and ‘epistemes’. These terms seem designed to pick out what, in connection with Hegel, we learnt to call ‘shapes of consciousness’ (p. 88). They refer, that is, to what are taken to be fundamental, but historically relative, sets of assumptions about the nature of reality and about, in particular, the nature of human beings. Contained in such assumptions is an assumption about what it is to be a ‘normal’ human being, to be, for example, sane as opposed to mad. Because they thus posit norms of human behaviour, regimes of truth are normative, contain within themselves an

‘ethics’, an assumption about the right way for human beings to be. (Notice how much, on this account, a regime of knowledge looks like Heidegger’s ‘the One’ (p. 140 above). A useful ‘take’ on Foucault’s philosophy is to see it as an exploration and development of Heidegger’s concept of *das Man*.)

Regimes, Foucault holds, are always the product of power. That is, he seems (in a quasi-Marxist way) to hold, they always serve the interests of one social class at the expense of another, and are kept in place by a set of more or less overt ‘technologies’ or ‘disciplines’ of control. Sometimes he says, in Heidegger’s manner, that no one is responsible for the coming into being or maintenance of a regime (FR: 84–85) and seems to imply that *everyone* is oppressed by regimes of knowledge. Mostly, however, he follows Marx in holding that it is ‘the bourgeoisie’ whose interests are served and who maintain the regimes. The disciplinary regime of prison and asylum became, in the eighteenth century, the ‘dark side’ of the *seemingly* emancipatory legislation enacted by ‘the politically dominant class’, the ‘bourgeoisie’ (FR: 211). Moreover, the ‘war’ metaphor, seems to demand an identifiable oppressor as well as an oppressed. It takes two to fight a war.

## Foucault’s method

Foucault’s aim, then, is to make us aware of the regimes under which we suffer and to liberate us from them: in his own language, it is to encourage ‘practical transgression’ (FR: 45). His method is – a term he takes over from Nietzsche – ‘genealogical’. It consists in taking some particular discourse/regime, exhibiting its ‘descent’, and thereby helping to liberate us from it.

What, one might ask, is the connection between knowing the origins of a regime of knowledge and being liberated from it? It is, I think, twofold. First, just to discover that regimes *have* origins weakens their hold over one through their historical relativisation. Foucault emphasises this. Through genealogy, things that seem ‘universal, necessary and obligatory’ are shown to be, in fact, historically local and ‘arbitrary’ (FR: 45). Second, Foucault holds, the origin of the regimes of knowledge that interest him always lies in power, i.e. in oppression. Theoretically, of course, an investigation of the origins of, say, a system of ethics might *strengthen* its hold over us – if it turned out to be God’s command from out of the burning bush, or if it turned out to be the result of a free and rational compact among human beings wishing to escape the nasty, brutish shortness of existence in a ‘state of nature’. But, in fact, Foucault claims, the genealogies that interest him always reveal, not noble or sensible origins but the ignoble ones of class oppression. One might wonder what the connection is between the origin of a social practice or institution and its current operation. To understand this consider a machine the function of which one does not initially understand. But then one is told that the machine was built to put the tops on Coke bottles. From this one can conclude that, probably, that is what the machine does now.

## Madness

Foucault’s three main areas of genealogical investigation are madness, sexuality and the prison. I begin with the first.

Though one might assume that the mad have always been confined, their incarceration actually first began during the Renaissance. From the sixteenth century, claims Foucault, the mad were no longer respected, as they had been during the Middle Ages, as emissaries from the alternative 'world of the irrational and bear[ing] its stigmata' (FR: 136). Initially, the motive for the construction of asylums was to clear the streets of the idle and unproductive, though in times of economic boom they were used to provide a source of cheap labour (FR: 124–39). In the nineteenth century there was a move to abolish chains and bars in favour of a more 'humane' treatment of the insane. In France, for instance, a reformist asylum director, Scipion Pinel, ordered that no one should speak to a man who had delusions of being God and reported that after a time the patient returned to 'more sensible and true' ideas (FR: 150). Silence, ostracism, was one form of coercion, being repeatedly told one was mad was another. And should these 'humane' forms of coercion all fail, the traditional, crude forms of coercion remained in place as a threat of last resort.

Freud, and, following him, modern talk therapists in general, have abandoned the asylum, but they still retain its essential structure of coercion: by making the therapist the omniscient, silent observer and all-powerful judge, they elevate him to 'semi-divine' status (FR: 164–66).

Foucault's claim, then, elaborated with a wealth of historical detail, is that both the modern asylum and modern psychotherapy are oppressive institutions. They are oppressive because, in a word, they seek to 'normalise'.

Since 'normalise' is the central term in Foucault's critical vocabulary, it is worth spending a little time working out exactly what it means. As Foucault uses the word, the primary object of normalisation is a group, a population – usually the entire population of a country (FR: 341). The aim is to create 'the power of the norm', to, via the 'penalty of the norm', create 'standardisation', 'homogeneity', albeit a homogeneity that allows for differentiation into the 'fixed specialities' (mother, father, worker, foreman, etc.) (FR: 196–97). A population is normalised to the extent it is brought to behave according to the relevant (internally differentiated) norm, an individual is normalised to the extent she is incorporated into this process. (Recall Heidegger's talk of the One as 'levelling' the individual down to an 'average' kind of existence.)

In what sense, then, does the asylum normalise? It operates in three principal ways. First, it seeks to 'cure' the previously 'irrational' patient and to return her to the community behaving in more 'normal' ways. Second, even if she is not 'cured' her removal from the community at least removes an example of, and perhaps thereby an incitement to, abnormal behaviour by others and thereby contributes to the normalisation of the population at large. Third, and most important, the incarceration of the 'mad' person acts as a warning and deterrence to the rest of us and thereby helps normalise the population as a whole:

The walls of confinement actually enclose the negative of the moral city the bourgeois conscience began to dream of in the seventeenth century; a moral city ... a city where right reigns only by virtue of a force without appeal – a sort of sovereignty of the good, in which intimidation alone prevails and the only recompense of virtue ... is to escape punishment.

(FR: 138)

One might think, here, of the treatment of political dissidents in the final decades

of the Soviet Union.

## Criticism

The question that needs to be asked of Foucault's critique of the asylum is: does he wish us to shut down all asylums and return to the medieval practice of allowing the 'mad' to wander the streets unimpeded? The answer, I hope, is that he does not. No more than anyone else does he want criminally insane psychopaths roaming free. What then does he want us to do? He wants us, I think, to stop treating the non-dangerously different as 'sick' and in need of medical treatment. 'Since the end of the eighteenth century', Foucault writes, 'the life of unreason no longer manifests itself except in the lightning flash of such works as those of Hölderlin, of Nerval, of Nietzsche, or of Artaud' (FR: 166) (Hölderlin spent his final thirty years in a condition that now would be diagnosed as schizophrenia, Nietzsche was a manic depressive who spent his final decade in a vegetative state, Nerval committed suicide and Artaud died in an asylum, probably at his own hand.) What really bothers Foucault, I think, is the loss of creativity caused by the normalisation of those deemed to be mad, a concern shared by many of his contemporaries. Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* appeared in 1961. The following year saw the appearance of both Antony Burgess' *Clockwork Orange* and Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The first deals with its hero's loss of his love for Beethoven as a result of aversion therapy designed to cure his disposition to street violence, the second with the lobotomisation of a troublesome asylum patient.

Of course, Socrates, too, as we saw (pp. 5–6), was concerned with the medical normalisation. Whereas Lysias had argued that all madness is sickness, Socrates insists that 'heaven-sent' madness, in all its varieties, is the opposite of sickness. 'Don't medicalise heaven-sent madness' is a way of summarising Plato's message.

## Sexuality

I turn now to Foucault's genealogical study of sexuality. Two main themes provide the topic of discussion: psychotherapy and the concept of perversion.

In the ancient world, says Foucault, the concept of a pre-established, innate self didn't exist. The self was something you *created* by following the various disciplines of self-cultivation which advised you on creating the self as a 'work of art' (FR: 362). The idea that one is born with a pre-given self was largely the invention of Christianity. It was part and parcel of the doctrine of original sin – if you are born sinful you have to be born with a set of innate desires and dispositions. The guilty self was that which you had to abandon in order to attain salvation – which has the character, therefore, of a 'new birth' (FR: 262–63). The focus of guilt was sexuality, the personification of the guilty flesh. (And so the guiltless Jesus *had* to have a virgin birth.) Although, from the seventeenth century, there was a taboo on talking about sex in public, in the Catholic confessional you were encouraged to talk in detail about your 'impure' thoughts and deeds. This conception of the essential self as largely sexual was taken over by modern psychotherapy. (As we saw (p. 71), Freud held for a long time that the

only source of psychic energy is the libido.) The only difference is that now (the late 1970s) one is encouraged to *embrace* – to *act on* – the desires of this essential self rather than to extirpate them. Modern psychotherapy is, then, just the reverse of the Catholic confessional (FR: 301–16).

It is not immediately clear why Foucault regards this psychotherapeutic conception of the self as oppressive. But the reason, I think, is that he regards *any* notion of a ‘true self’ as oppressive since, as we will see, freedom, for Foucault as for Sartre, is a matter of *creating* rather than discovering a self. The, as he calls it, ‘Californian’ (FR: 362) conception of the self is oppressive because it ‘normalises’ people into becoming obsessed with ‘getting in touch with their [sexual] feelings’, turns them into Californian clichés.<sup>1</sup> This deprives us of the freedom to acknowledge the truth that, for most of us, ‘sex is boring’, a mere sideshow in our lives. The Greeks, he observes, were much more interested in food than sex, regarding the latter as an ethical triviality (FR: 340).

\* \* \*

Foucault sees the concept of ‘perversion’ as becoming a force for normalisation in the eighteenth century. (In general, he portrays normalisation not, like Heidegger, as an ahistorical phenomenon present in all human societies, but as something that came into being with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Though on the surface preaching reason, freedom, equality and fraternity, the reality, the dark underbelly of the Enlightenment, is, for Foucault, the disciplines and techniques of normalisation.) What came about was the ‘medicalisation’ of sex, particularly unusual sex. Acts became manifestations of personality types – ‘homosexual’, ‘paedophile’, ‘zoophile’ and so on – labels which exclude (FR: 316–29).

The person so labelled is excluded from ‘decent’ society, thereby preserving, among ‘decent’ people, the missionary norm – partly by excluding the abnormal and partly by offering a warning to those tempted by abnormality.

\* \* \*

War, recall, class warfare, according to Foucault, is the fundamental condition of society. The question arises, therefore, as to what class interest is served by the confinement of sexual activity to the ‘missionary’ norm. He doesn’t tell us. Freud, however, as we saw, has something relevant to say on this topic. Sex needs to be made as boring as possible, we saw him arguing (p. 70 above), so that as much libidinal energy as possible is preserved for the works of ‘civilisation’, social bonding, productive activity and so on. But of course, if we add to this the Marxist idea that the works of civilisation always favour the interests of the dominant social class – the ‘one per cent’ as we say nowadays – then we arrive at the conclusion that rendering sex as unexciting as possible serves the interests of the dominant class.

Another question that needs to be raised is that of the consistency of what Foucault says about psychotherapy with what he says about perversion. On the one hand, he says that the ‘Californian’ cult of the ‘true’ self tyrannises one into thinking one must ‘let it all hang out’, sexually speaking. But that implies that if one’s innermost desires fall into the ‘perverted’ category then one is encouraged to let them ‘hang out’ too. But on the other hand, he says that society exerts a strong normalising pressure *against* ‘perverted’ sex.



This contradiction is, however, I think, more apparent than real. In discussing perversion Foucault is focusing on society as a whole, whereas in discussing the ideology of psychotherapy he is discussing only a small and deviant subculture within that society. It is of course a familiar fact that subcultures often have ideologies opposed to the ideology of society as a whole and that the ideology of the subculture may oppress those who are affected by it. One can think of numerous religious cults of which this is true.

## The prison

One of the institutions that appears, quite explicitly, to aim at normalisation is the prison: as well as being an instrument of retribution, it is also, we are told, aimed at retraining the offender into a useful and productive citizen.

What mainly interests Foucault about the modern prison, since he believes this to constitute a central characteristic of modernity in general, is what he calls 'panopticism', 'the gentle efficiency of total surveillance' (FR: 217). The name is taken from Jeremy Bentham's 1791 design for an ideal prison which he called 'The Panopticon'. That design provided for a tall tower in a courtyard surrounded by tiered circles of cells (please google 'panopticon image'), the point being that the prisoners could be kept under constant surveillance, thereby obviating the need for traditional means of prisoner control, chains and violent punishments. People break the rules if they think they will not be caught. But if they know that nothing can be concealed from the observing eye (as nothing can be concealed from God) they will hardly ever break the rules. (Suicide bombers are an exception to this rule.)

Panopticism is not just a means of control. It also facilitates the turning of the offender into an object of scientific study. Not only the offender's behaviour in prison but also his biography and the factors leading up to his crime become a matter of study. Penal and psychological theory intersect so that a 'typology' of criminality is set up. The offender is, therefore, no longer merely someone who has broken the law. He becomes, instead, a particular type of person, a 'delinquent' (FR: 219).

Since the nineteenth century, pointing to the permanently high rate of recidivism (reoffending), critics have charged that the prison system is a failure. In fact, however, suggests Foucault, it does not really 'fail' since reform – normalisation in *that* sense – was never a genuine aim. Its true aim, rather, has always been to isolate a particular form (or forms) of human being, namely, 'delinquency'. It aims to expel delinquency from the social body, to preserve it as a permanent underclass, and so to hold it up to us as an ever-present warning, a negative role model, that is permanently present (FR: 231–32).

It seems, therefore, that contrary to what one would expect Foucault to say, the prison neither succeeds in nor really tries to 'normalise' the prisoner. Rather, it normalises *us*, the docile run of 'normal', non-criminal people.

What are the practical consequences of Foucault's critique? Given that one major function of the prison is the protection of society from the consequences of crime, he does not, presumably, want prisons abolished. Neither does he voice objections to the idea of retribution, the idea that the offender should 'pay his debt to society'. His critique is focused, rather, on the idea of reform. Does he

want a different *type* of reform – one that respects the prisoner’s right to privacy and perhaps replaces psychologists and criminologists with philosophers, actors, IT teachers, job-placement specialists – or does he think there is an *essential* incompatibility between prison and reform, that *any* programme of reform must, as a programme, fail? Foucault does not answer this question and I do not know the answer either.

## Docile bodies

Foucault’s discussions of the asylum, sexuality and the prison focused on particular regions of control and normalisation. When he turns to the topic of what he calls ‘docile bodies’ (FR: 179–205), however, these discussions seem to fall into place as contributing to a more general thesis.

The eighteenth century was a time of struggle for power between nation states. Even when not overtly at war, politics (comprising both political relations with other states and the preservation of internal peace and order) was a continuation of war by other means (FR: 185). This, of course, represented nothing new. What was new, however, was that, in pursuit of pre-eminence, states subjected the ‘bodies’ of their citizens to a unique kind of control, a kind of control Foucault takes to be definitive of the modern epoch, the epoch created by the Enlightenment. The reason for this was that state power depended on economic power, which depended on efficient and reliable labour power, which depended, in turn, on ‘docile bodies’. Foucault speaks, here, of ‘bodies’ rather than ‘people’, I think, to emphasise the fact that, to modern capitalism, people *are* nothing but ‘bodies’ – more or less efficient productive units.

The paradigm of the docile body is the soldier. There is, Foucault points out, a natural ‘rhetoric’ to the body of a soldier – a ‘military air’. What the eighteenth century realised was that this was not the prerogative of a military aristocracy, did not need to be inborn, but could be produced by training. The humblest peasant could be trained to ‘automatism’, the robotic ‘docility’ of the soldier.

The training of docile bodies did not stop with the military. The eighteenth century had a ‘military dream of society’ as a whole:

Politics, as the technique of internal peace and order, sought to implement the mechanism of the perfect army, of the disciplined mass, of the docile, useful troop.

(FR: 185)

(In 1932, Ernst Jünger, whom Foucault seems not to have read, coined the phrase ‘total mobilisation’ to refer to this phenomenon.)<sup>2</sup> The key to such a politics lay in the surveillance and disciplining of every detail in the individual’s life, in the ‘microphysics’ of power (FR: 183) – ‘micro-management’ as we would now say. Napoleon’s aim, as described by a contemporary, was ‘to embrace the whole of this vast machine [i.e. France] without the slightest detail escaping his attention’ (FR: 185). Foucault takes the ‘machine’ metaphor to be very significant in disclosing the dehumanising effect of the Enlightenment ideal of a ‘rationally’ organised society – the reduction of human beings to ‘cogs in the machine’.

The techniques of the ‘microphysics’ of power were many and various.

Foucault organises them, however, under two headings: ‘hierarchical observation’ and ‘normalisation of judgments’ (FR: 188).

‘Hierarchical organisation’ is just panopticism. Foucault introduces this new term, however, I think, to make the point that whereas Bentham’s panopticon involved a single gaze directly viewing every prisoner, military panopticism works through hierarchical delegation: the corporal keeps an eye on the (not so private) private and reports to the sergeant who reports to the lieutenant, and so on.

The military camp is organised for hierarchical observation. But so too is, for example, the workers’ housing estate,<sup>3</sup> built on the model of the camp, and the school (a training ground for, especially, the military and the bureaucracy), where half-doors on the lavatories (FR: 191) mean that, even here, the individual cannot escape surveillance.

One of the major techniques of ‘normalisation of judgements’ we have already discussed: exclusion. The asylum and prison normalise the population by excluding and isolating the ‘lunatic’ or ‘delinquent’. Other techniques of normalisation operate not in this indirect way but directly on the docile-body-to-be. Eighteenth-century society was riddled with microsystems of discipline. The workshop, for example, had an elaborate system of light physical punishments and petty humiliations to deal with ‘incorrect’ attitudes and behaviour such as lateness, chatter, making vulgar gestures, impoliteness, insolence, impurity (FR: 194). In the school, the national examination secured both normalisation and hierarchical observation on a national scale. National examinations, that is, establish ‘norms’ of teaching and learning – hence the *écoles normales* (teachers’ training colleges) – and the collation of national results ensures that the norms are being observed (FR: 196–97).

Normalisation and panopticism work in tandem. Normalisation operates by establishing norms of docility and penalties for those who offend against them. Panopticism ensures that, there being nowhere to hide, norm-breakers will be seen and disciplined. It ensures that the sanctions established by normalisation will only rarely be invoked. Since ‘big brother’ (or the NSA) sees one’s every move, one knows there is no chance of getting away with norm-breaking. Panopticism renders the system of control perfect.

## Freedom and beauty

As I observed, Foucault’s most visible aim appears to be freedom, freedom from the regimes of ‘knowledge’ (‘knowledge’ about, for example, what it is to be sane rather than mad, decent rather than delinquent, straight rather than deviant). Since every regime of knowledge is an instrument of power by means of which some elite group or class threatens to dominate us – to ‘normalise’ us into ‘docile’ (Nietzsche would say ‘herd’) animals – resistance (or, as Foucault calls it ‘transgression’) is a permanent task. Since

everything [every regime of knowledge] is dangerous ... we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.

(FR: 343)

(‘Pessimistic’, because Foucault recognises that most people will remain normalised (‘inauthentic’, ‘herd animals’) most of the time.)

What, however, is the point of resistance? What is so bad about being dominated? What is so good about being free of domination? Why is ‘freedom’ valuable?

One answer, hinted at in the above remark that, as Foucaultians, ‘we always have something to do’, would be that there is actually nothing particularly valuable about freedom as such. It is just, it might be said, that critique and transgression keeps at bay the Schopenhauerian boredom that would otherwise engulf us. The positive message of Foucault’s philosophy would then be that, to give meaning to our lives, we should adopt, as our life project, the persona of the critic. (As the ex-wife of an ex-friend of mine once said of him, ‘It doesn’t matter what it is, he’s against it.’) But this is surely an unsatisfactory answer, for ‘deconstruction’ can only provide genuine (or at least non-guilty) satisfaction when it is a prelude to construction. The eternal and mere critic is rightly despised by creative people. It is an image none of us would really want to adopt as a self-image. And so we need, if possible, to discover some other answer to the question of why we should accept ‘freedom’ to be of such central value.

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Foucault talks at considerable length about the ‘ethics’ of the ancient world (see especially FR: 340–51). The key concept was, he maintains, ‘care of the self’. This, however, he says, meant something different in the Hellenistic period than it meant to the Greeks of the fourth century BCE. To the latter, to Plato, for example, you cared for yourself – got your soul in order, achieved self-mastery, mastery over your unruly desires (the ‘black horse’ discussed in Chapter 1) – in order to be in a fit condition to care for the community as a whole.<sup>4</sup> For the former, however – Foucault is thinking, here, mainly of the Stoics – everyone is to care simply for himself. There is no ulterior end to care of self (FR: 348).

As far as I can tell, Foucault is strongly attached to the conception of ethics that he attributes to the Stoics. The Platonic conception, I think, strikes him as too bossy, too potentially oppressive. Everyone, he thinks, should take care of him- or herself, and leave everyone else alone to do the same. Care for community does not seem to figure in Foucault’s somewhat solipsistic ethical outlook.

The goal of self-care, of self-mastery was, for the Stoics, says Foucault, aesthetic. Though agreeing with Plato on a life of sexual austerity, for them, the point was simply that (according to their taste) sexual incontinence was *ugly*. The point, then, is to live a *beautiful* life, to live one’s life, in effect, as an artwork. The trouble with modernity is that art is excluded from life:

What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialised or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or house be an art object but not our life?

(FR: 350)

Hence (to relate Foucault, finally, to our central theme) when it comes to giving meaning to our lives Foucault’s view is that we are to become works of art. The meaningful life is not a matter (as the ‘Californians’ think) of discovering ‘the

truth about desire, life, nature, body, and so on' (FR: 350). It is not a matter of being true to a real, given but repressed, self. (Foucault attributes this view to Sartre, which is extraordinary, given Sartre's antipathy to Freud and the unconscious.) Rather, it is a matter of being *creative* (FR: 351).

This, of course, is essentially a rerun of Nietzsche's view, discussed in Chapter 9, that we are to construct our lives as works of art with ourselves as the 'heroes'. Foucault acknowledges this, and makes particular reference to §290 of *The Gay Science* (FR: 351), which reads as follows:

*One thing is needful.* – To 'give style' to one's character a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. ... In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything, large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste ...

(Notice that giving a unified 'style' to one's life offers an account of Foucault's otherwise unexplained notion of 'beauty'.) Hence when we ask for Foucault's account of how to live with meaning in a God-deserted universe his answer is the same as Nietzsche's.

What this means is that, for all its prominence, freedom is not Foucault's ultimate value. Rather, beauty, that is to say art, is. Better put, the *creation* of oneself as a beautiful artwork is what Foucault takes to be ultimately valuable. Since creation is, by definition, free activity, freedom seems, for Foucault, to be valuable as a means to beauty. If we are to create ourselves as beings who are, in Nietzsche's words, 'new, unique, incomparable' (GS 335), we must, of course, free ourselves from the clichés established by the regimes of knowledge that surround us.

As what kind of an artwork is one to create oneself? That is entirely up to the individual. Ethics is a matter of 'personal choice' (FR: 248, 361). Notice that there is no inconsistency in Foucault's saying (in the quotation on p. 208 above) that 'everyone' should create themselves as a work of art and that ethics is a matter of personal choice. One's 'ethics', as Foucault conceives it, *is* the artwork one creates oneself as. That one should create oneself as an artwork is the recommendation that one should *have* an ethics.

## Criticism

I am going to offer three criticisms of Foucault's philosophy. The first concerns the 'war' model of society, the second and third the idea of creating oneself as an artwork.

Foucault presents his accounts of domination through normalisation as an analysis of the order of society created by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment; an analysis, in other words, of Western modernity. Actually, however, one might ask, has not normalisation *always* been with us, as prevalent in the Graeco-Roman world Foucault seems so much to admire as in the modern age? Is not the pressure to conform to some historically specific 'regime of knowledge' in fact an

a priori or necessary feature of human existence, as Heidegger takes 'the One' to be?

Now it turns out that, in fact, Foucault *does* believe domination through normalisation to be an omnipresent feature of human existence. This becomes at least relatively clear in the course of a discussion of the 'war' model in an interview conducted in 1983 at Berkeley.

The question is raised as to whether Foucault's view of politics as 'essentially domination and repression' (in other words, 'war') is not excessively 'bleak'. Should not at least the 'fictional possibility' of 'consensus' be allowed (FR: 379)? In other words, is not collective action aimed at a common goal without there being relations of domination and repression within the collectivity at least conceivable? Can we not adopt it as an at least theoretically attainable 'goal' (ibid.)?

Not so, replies Foucault. Even within the seemingly consensual group 'the problem of power relations remains' (FR: 378). The most that can be allowed is the use of consensuality as a 'critical principle': 'one must be against non-consensuality' but 'one must not be for consensuality' (FR: 379). Since, in other words, the overcoming of relations of domination and oppression is not even a 'fictional possibility', to be 'for' consensuality would be entirely futile.

This discussion makes it clear – though Foucault would never use this word – that what he in fact believes in is a *metaphysics* of 'war' (otherwise put, posthumous Nietzsche's metaphysics of 'will to power'), a supposedly universal account of the essence of human relations elevated to the status of a necessary truth. For Foucault, it is *impossible* for any society or social group to escape the war model. In an early work, Foucault says that dreams reveal 'radical liberty' to be the human essence.<sup>5</sup> But equally, it seems, it belongs to the human essence to deny that freedom to others. This is what human relations are all about: the quest for evermore complete domination, and the quest for liberation. Oppression and resistance. In a word, a power struggle. Foucault's metaphysics, it seems, is indistinguishable from the metaphysics of posthumous Nietzsche.

This – the elevation of the war metaphor from an analytic tool to a metaphysics – seems to me to turn Foucault's often profoundly illuminating exposures of particular regions of domination into a thesis that is empirically false, even obviously so. As anyone who lived through the London Blitz or has played in a football team or string quartet knows, 'consensual' action is not merely a theoretical possibility but an actuality.

At the end of the Berkeley interview the interviewers make Foucault realise that his insistence that relations of domination and subjection are internal to even the most seemingly consensual group relies on a confusion between subordination and oppression. (The captain of the rugby team makes the lineout calls, the first violin of the string quartet gives the leads, but that does not at all mean that either oppresses their fellows.) As a result, Foucault retreats to saying that he offers no 'general analysis' of human relations but merely analyses of particular areas of oppression (FR: 380), retreats, in other words, to claiming the war metaphor to be merely an analytic tool. But this, of course, contradicts what he had said earlier in the interview.

\* \* \*

My second criticism concerns the idea of creating oneself as an artwork. We are,

Foucault says, with Nietzsche, to live 'beautiful' lives, to give 'style' to our characters. We are, through the kind of 'self-mastery' prized by the Stoics, to create ourselves as a literary unity à la Nietzsche.

But what is to be the *content* of this artwork? How am I to select among the indefinitely many possibilities available within the limits of my facticity? Am I to constitute myself a poet or an accountant, a saint or a sinner?

Foucault has an extremely interesting fourfold taxonomy of 'ethics'. Ethics has, he says, (1) a topic (for example, erotic desires), (2) a mode of authority (for example, reason, God's command, or natural law), (3) an itemisation of the means of self-transformation (modes of self-discipline, 'asceticism' in a broad sense) and (4) a *telos* – what one is to be transformed into (for example, something pure, beautiful, free or immortal) (FR: 352–55). The thing to notice with respect to his own account of ethics, however, is that category (2) is absolutely empty. Time after time he insists that the kind of person I am to be is grounded in nothing other than, or beyond, my 'personal choice' (FR: 361).

But this returns us, once again, to Kierkegaard's problem of 'seriousness', that is, Sartre's problem of absurdity. Since I have no ground for preferring one choice to another *it does not matter* which choice I make. And since whatever choice I did make (by, in effect, tossing a coin) did not matter, it does not matter, either, whether or not I stick with my choice if and when it calls for perseverance and sacrifice. In other words, as we have observed before, groundless choice cannot provide a basis of *commitment*. No one dies for ungrounded choices.

My second criticism is, then, that, like all thinkers in the Nietzschean tradition, Foucault cannot provide an account or explanation of ethical commitment. But commitment is a salient feature of the ethical life. People are, to varying degrees, *committed* to their ethical codes. Commitment, indeed, is the point of ethics – if 'duty' never required the overcoming of 'desire', never required 'self-mastery', there would be no point in having a sense of duty. Something, therefore, is missing from Foucault's ethics, something to do with grounding ethics in something other than personal choice.

In sum, then, my second criticism is that Foucault cannot deal with the problem of seriousness, the problem of finding an *authority* for one's ethics, which he himself recognises as an essential aspect of any genuine ethical code. And the third criticism is that, with nothing to add to Nietzsche's account of living one's life as an artwork, he cannot deal, either, with, as I called it, 'the problem of the immoral script' (p. 123). If there is nothing to ground the living of one life rather than another apart from 'personal choice', then there is no reason to prefer the life of a saint to that of a sinner, the life of the mafia-busting judge to that of the mafia chief.

Foucault is a major thinker. In an age in which all our electronic communications (that is, most of our communications of any sort) are monitored by the NSA and GCHQ (among others), his observations on panopticism and on hidden forms of normalisation are ones we need to read and reread. The inept complacency of even the supposedly 'liberal' press in the face of the 2013 Edward Snowden revelations shows how much we need him.

On the question of the meaning of life Foucault is, however, a disappointment. His answer is essentially a repetition of Nietzsche, and, being of this character, it is inadequate in the same ways.

## Notes

- 1 He says this in the course of an interview conducted at Berkeley, with Paul Rabinow and Hubert Dreyfus, and picks on 'California' almost certainly as a friendly winding-up of his Californian interviewers. Since Dreyfus at one stage wrote a programme for Werner Erhard's *Est* self-help group (which later mutated into 'The Forum'), that might have provided an additional basis for the wind-up.
- 2 Jünger 1982.
- 3 At Saltaire, near Bradford, UK, in the nineteenth-century workers' estate surrounding the cotton mill, each row of terraced houses contains one house a story taller than the rest so that the foreman could observe the activities of the workers under his charge. (Saltaire is now a World Heritage site. The former cotton mill is now the David Hockney museum.)
- 4 Foucault is thinking, here, of the philosopher-king of the *Republic*, rather than the more retiring philosopher of the *Phaedrus*. Like every genuine thinker, Plato changed his mind from time to time.
- 5 Foucault 1984–85, 51–52.



## 16 Derrida

Jacques Derrida was born in 1930, like Camus in Algeria, and died in Paris in 2004. His influence within the contemporary university, sometimes over philosophers but most decisively within literature departments, has been enormous. More than anyone else he was responsible for 'postmodernism' becoming the dominant fashion in those departments from the 1970s onwards and 'deconstruction' the most frequently used word. Extremely good-looking and media savvy, he became a 'star' even outside the university. His influence has not, however, been universally welcomed. In 1992 the proposal to offer him an honorary degree at Cambridge University (normally an entirely pro forma affair) was vigorously and publicly opposed by a sizeable number of members of the university. By the end of this chapter it will be obvious how I think the members of the university should have voted.

I propose to discuss two themes. First, '*différance*' (spelled with an 'a' instead of the 'e' usual in both French and English), something Derrida identifies as his greatest claim to importance in the history of philosophy, and then 'deconstruction'.

### Différance

The concept of *différance*, as Derrida acknowledges, grows out of the 'semiotics' (theory of signs) of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). Its meaning consists in a number of claims Derrida makes about it which can be set out in the form of an extended series of inferences. I shall give numbers to the individual steps in this series.

(1) As Saussure shows, says Derrida, difference (with the usual 'e') is the condition of any sign's (word's) possessing meaning. The meaning of a word is not, as the 'classical' view holds, atomic, but is, rather, holistic. The meaning of a word is determined by its interaction with other meaningful words, by the role it plays in language as a whole. And, of course, to possess a distinctive meaning, the word must have a distinctive role, one that is *different* from the role played by every other word. *Différance*, says Derrida, embraces difference in this sense. It is, therefore, the fundamental presupposition of all meaning, 'the movement according to which language, or any code or system of referral in general is constituted' (D: 12).

Thus far, *différance* seems to embody good, if not particularly original, sense. (Analytic philosophers such as Frege, Wittgenstein, Quine and Sellars have each, in their own way, emphasised that meaning is holistic; in fact one would be hard

pressed to find anyone at all, writing after about 1950, prepared to defend the so-called 'classical' view.) The basic point is that a child who reliably utters the sound 'rabbit' in the presence of rabbits but has no mastery of, say, 'animal', 'fur', 'food' or 'pest', as well as more remote expressions like 'not' and 'if ... then', has not yet learnt the meaning of 'rabbit'. If she does not understand 'A rabbit is an animal', which in turn requires understanding 'an animal is not a plant', and so on, she has yet to master the word.

(2) Language, Derrida now claims, produces that which is 'present' (D: 13). Specifically, since to be something present is to be different from everything else, language 'spaces' things out, puts gaps or boundaries between them. (A boundary is where an entity *starts*, not where it stops, remarks Heidegger.) Language, that is to say, supplies the identity – and therefore difference – conditions for what presences, tells us, for example, what is figure and what background.

But, Derrida now claims, since *différance* produces language, it follows that it produces the things that presence, i.e. that it 'spaces' them out as the things they are. 'Spacing' is one of the central functions of *différance*.

(3) To be a present thing is to have a past and a future. (To be present, for example, as a sapling is to be something that was a seed and will be a tree.) So language, as an essential part of its production of what is present, 'temporalises' (i.e., 'temporalises') what is present. It 'defers' part of its being to the past and part to the future. (Derrida puns here, in a rather obscure way, on the French verb *différer*, which can mean both 'to defer' and 'to differentiate'.) Language, therefore, temporalises what presences. And since *différance* is what produces language, fundamentally it is *différance* which temporalises that which presences. This is another essential characteristic of *différance*: not only does it 'space', it 'temporalises' too.

Hence,

(4) *Différance* is the origin of space and time.

What are we to make of this conjuring of a very large rabbit out of what looks to be a rather small hat? On a certain reading, the movement of thought from (2) to (4) is perfectly in order. It is, that is to say, *true* that the world shows up, 'presences', differently to different linguistic communities. And it is true that, without the 'spacing' and 'temporalising' effect of language, reality would not show up as a space-time world at all. So it is true that the fact that things presence to us and the way they presence is dependent on our language. Hence, if Derrida is right about the relation between language and *différance*, the spatio-temporal organisation of reality is dependent on *différance*.

Of course, the fact that the that and how of reality's *presencing* to us is dependent on language does not at all mean that reality itself is. The latter claim would be absurd since it would entail that nothing at all existed prior to linguistic humanity's appearance on the scene.

We need, then, to make a sharp distinction between

(a) Language produces the spatio-temporal organisation of reality

and

(b) Language produces space and time.

Which of these does Derrida mean to claim? It is, I think, impossible to tell. He often produces the language of (b) (e.g. at D: 13) – revelling, one suspects, in the grand effect it produces – but it always remains open to him to say that (b) is only intended as an elliptical way of saying (a).

What, now, about (1) in the foregoing chain of reasoning, the claim that it is *différance* which produces ‘language, or any code or system of referral in general’? What is *différance*?

Once again, I think, a ‘deconstruction’ (of which more shortly) of Derrida’s writings discloses two views, which I shall call (A) and (B):

(A) *Différance* is, says Derrida, ‘older’ than Heidegger’s ‘Being’ (D: 26). It is the origin of space and time. So, really, it is God, the god of numerous creation myths who creates the world through difference, through setting things apart: earth and sky, dry land and sea, and everything that lives on the land, in the sky, or in the sea. It is, in fact, Heraclitus’ *polemos* (strife or war – or ‘differing’). (That *différance* so strongly calls to mind Heraclitus’ fragment 53, ‘strife is the father of all ...’, can hardly be accidental.) Of course, this God of *polemos* is a god about whose intrinsic nature nothing can be said. As the presupposition of all language, *différance* is ‘unnameable’ in language (D: 18). (This is actually a terrible inference – grammar is a presupposition of all language, as are people, but a language can, of course, talk about its own grammar and about people – but let us not dwell on this point.) So *différance* is ineffable, the object of a kind of ‘negative theology’ (D: 6).

(B) Having raised the idea of a negative theology, Derrida, at a different point in ‘*Différance*’, denies he subscribes to one. *Différance*, he says, is not an origin or cause of anything. It is not an authority, for Derrida is, he says, devoted to abolishing all authority. *Différance* is not at all like Heidegger’s Being: there are ‘no capital Bs’ for us, says Derrida. We *accept* the ‘death of God’ (D: 21–22).

But what then, on this deflationary account, is *différance*? Let us return to its Saussurian kernel. Following Saussure, Derrida observes that the existence of meaningful words depends on difference: on there being differentiation, differences, between the roles played by words within the network of language. This is true. Equally true, however, is that semantic difference depends on there being meaningful words. For, in general, ‘there is difference’ entails ‘there are things that are different’. This means that ‘there is (semantic) difference’ and ‘there are meaningful words’ are *equivalent* statements. Semantic difference, therefore, is not temporally or causally prior to language. It simply *is* language, with one of its essential features selected for special attention. *Différance*, then, on this second account, does not designate an origin of language but rather simply highlights an important feature of anything that is to count as a language. Account (A), when the chips are down, is not an account Derrida really wishes to subscribe to. For what it amounts to is metaphysics of the grandest sort, and ‘metaphysics’ is absolute anathema to Derrida. (In *On Spirit* he claims that what got Heidegger into Nazism was the ‘metaphysical’ character of his earlier philosophy.) One can only conclude that the hints of account (A) are present

purely for reasons of showmanship, to provide Derrida's writings with a lustre of rhetorical brilliance, an air of quasi-Greek profundity. (It is said that what is really important in the French educational system is to be, not right, but rather brilliant.)

Given this, what, finally, does the claim that since (i) language produces space and time and (ii) *différance* produces language, it follows that (iii) *différance* produces space and time, really amount to? It amounts to the claim that language, the essential feature of which is the differentiated roles for the words it contains, produces our spatiotemporally organised *experience* of the world. This is true but hardly original, hardly justifying entry to the pantheon of great philosophers. Long before Derrida, Heidegger put the insight into one sentence: 'When we go to the well we go through the word "well".' And long before Heidegger Kant pointed out (in a nutshell) that the medium determines the message.

## Deconstruction

What, to turn now to the second major term in Derrida's philosophy, is 'deconstruction'? The notion is based on a view about the meaning of words which Derrida calls 'dissemination'. Dissemination is more than mere 'polysemy'. Polysemy is 'a multiplicity of meaning, a kind of ambiguity' which nonetheless belongs to a given 'regime of meaning'. Dissemination includes that kind of multiplicity of meaning but also another kind: that which transcends any given regime of meaning (FP: 97–98). So, for example (I think), while the difference in the meaning of 'cut' in 'cut the cake' and 'cut the cards' exhibits polysemy – both meanings operate within that 'regime' which has to do with dividing up physical objects; the occurrence of 'cut' in 'to cut a former friend' exhibits the dissemination of the word's meaning, since we have moved to the 'regime' that has to do with human relations. The essential thing about dissemination is, then, as I shall put it, multidimensionality. The claim that the meaning of a word or text is disseminated is the claim that it has many *trans*-dimensional meanings – indefinitely many, since, claims Derrida, a word's meaning exceeds not just a single regime of meaning but any finite set of such regimes (FP: 98).

The meaning of a word is, we saw earlier, constituted by its role in language. But what we now see is that that role is indefinitely multidimensional. Since texts are made up of words, it follows, therefore, that any text is indefinitely multidimensional in meaning. And what follows from that is that any interpretation which claims to present *the* unique and complete meaning of a text is mistaken. Deconstruction, the deconstruction of a particular text, is the demonstration of this general thesis in a particular instance.

At first sight, the general thesis looks to be absurd since it seems to entail the impossibility of communication. King Edward I was known as 'the hammer of the Scots'. And Nietzsche spoke of himself as 'doing philosophy with a hammer'. So, it seems, when Bert, on the building site, says 'Pass the hammer, Jim', Jim has no idea whether he wants a king, a pen or a thing for knocking in nails. This of course is ridiculous. Normally, human conversation is smooth and unproblematic, untroubled by any kind of ambiguity. But – this is Derrida's point

– the reason it is so is that it generally takes place against a shared, but unspoken background ‘regime of meaning’ (elsewhere Derrida calls it a ‘centre’) which blocks out all other regimes. Bert and Jim communicate without difficulty because they share the unspoken assumption that their discourse occurs (not within the dimension of English history or German philosophy but rather) within the dimension of equipment.

Derrida says that ‘deconstruct’ is ‘intended to translate a word such as *Abbau* [literally, “unbuild”] in Heidegger ... it’s a matter of gaining access to the mode in which a system or structure, or ensemble, is constructed or constituted’ (FP: 97). So what deconstruction does is, in particular, to disclose the particular ‘regime’ or ‘centre’ on which a discourse is based but which normally escapes attention. Speaking of Western science and philosophy, in particular, Derrida says that it always presupposes a ‘centre, which is, by definition, unique and constitutes the very thing within a structure which, while governing the structure, escapes structurality’<sup>1</sup> and usually, therefore, articulation.

Deconstruction, then, articulates a ‘regime’ or ‘centre’. And by making us aware of the possibility of other ‘centres’, it makes us aware of the possibilities of meanings within the text other than the ostensible, received or socially sanctioned meaning that is ascribed to it. What is the point of this?

One of Derrida’s famous (or infamous) remarks is, ‘There is nothing outside the text.’<sup>2</sup> As before, let us assume that Derrida is not asserting that nothing existed before human, text-making creatures came into being. What he is emphasising, then, is, as we might call it, ‘linguistic Kantianism’: there is nothing *in our experience* save that which is determined by language. The way reality shows up for us is entirely determined by the language we speak. But, having understood dissemination, we now know that our language is inexhaustibly rich. So, therefore, is our world. Deconstruction thus calls us away from the claustrophobic ‘logocentrism’ (FP: 104) of supposing that we (or natural scientists) possess, or might possess, complete and final knowledge of reality. ‘Deconstruction’, claims Derrida, is ‘a means of carrying out ... [a] going beyond being, beyond being as presence, at least’ (FP: 97). It is a means, that is to say, of overcoming the idea that the world as it is ‘present’ to us in everyday experience or in natural science constitutes the totality of what there is.

To escape the claustrophobic illusion of completeness, to realise what Derrida calls our ‘non-knowledge’, opens us up to the infinite wonder of things and is, therefore, no doubt, spiritually improving. Yet Derrida claims more than this for deconstruction. He claims that it is ‘political’, ‘transgressive’ and ‘dangerous’ (FP: 95). There must, therefore, be more to deconstruction than we have yet discovered.

I think that when Derrida calls deconstruction ‘dangerous’, etc., he is speaking of it, not in general, but specifically in its application to major, life-shaping texts belonging, mainly, to literature, the human sciences and philosophy. Like all texts, texts such as these possess a hidden ‘centre’. But with respect to many, and perhaps all, of the texts belonging to this genre, something else is true: the centre involves a pair of opposite terms, where one is valued positively and the other negatively. Thus, in Plato, for example, one finds being opposed to becoming, in Christianity spirit opposed to flesh, in Kant the intellectual opposed to the sensory, in Marx the worker opposed to the capitalist, in Schopenhauer the male

opposed to the female<sup>3</sup> – with, in each case, the first valued positively, the second negatively.

Derrida suggests that to deconstruct a philosophical text is to ‘reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed’ (D: 17). As with the deconstruction of any text, one articulates the hidden centre, which in this case involves articulating the hidden opposition and hidden valuation. And then one ‘reconsiders’ it. With regard to Plato, for example, one might point out that the negative evaluation of ‘becoming’ involves focusing on its association with ‘instability’, ‘disorder’, ‘imperfection’ and shutting out that alternative centre – or perspective – in terms of which ‘becoming’ connotes ‘excitement’, ‘growth’, ‘development’, while ‘being’ stands for ‘tedium’, ‘stiffness’ and ‘decline’. Deconstruction of a philosophical text is a matter, then, of (a) exposing the hidden centre, with its hidden opposition and valuation, on which the text rests, and (b) constructing an alternative centre according to which the valuations are reversed. One does not, it seems to me, have to affirm this new centre as *the correct* centre – if one does one becomes a target for deconstruction oneself. One rather inhabits it ‘playfully’, as a temporary device for exposing the centre to be deconstructed.

Let me give an example of what I take to be deconstruction at work. One prevalent narrative – i.e. ‘text’ – has it that parents are boring, oppressive, conservative and unadventurous. (This was a particularly powerful narrative in the 1960s when, following Abbey Hoffman’s advice, one never trusted anyone over thirty.) It is against this background that Milos Forman, a recent and grateful immigrant to the United States after the 1968 Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia (as it then was), made his film *Taking Off* (1971). In the film, the Middle American parents of runaway teenagers (teenagers who have run away from home, no doubt, because they understand their parents to be boring, oppressive, etc.) form a kind of support group. Initially, suited and tied, twin-setted and pearled, they appear just as the narrative says. But then, having decided that to understand their children they need to sample marijuana, they turn out to be amazingly unconventional, given to free love, all-night parties, naked dancing, in general to much wilder adventures than anything one imagines their runaway children (about whom they have by now completely forgotten) to have got up to. This, if I understand Derrida, is a perfect example of the disclosure of a suppressed level of meaning belonging to the word ‘parent’ (parent, thus human being, thus *homo ludens*, the man who plays), which results in an inversion of the opposition on which the adolescent narrative depends.

So why, then, when applied to the right kinds of texts, is deconstruction ‘dangerous’, ‘transgressive’? Because, in a word, it reduces what presents itself as the complete and final truth as a mere ‘take’ on things, a perspective in relation to which there are indefinitely many alternative perspectives. The difference between ‘the truth’ and ‘a perspective’ is that whereas it is *compulsory* to adopt the former (‘I know it’s true but I don’t believe it’ makes no sense) it is *optional* whether or not one adopts the latter (‘I know that’s a possible interpretation but it’s not mine’ makes perfect sense). Deconstruction can be dangerous because it can destroy the power of a narrative, the power of a text.

## Deconstruction as a way of life

I have included Derrida in this study because he is the most famous philosopher of the late twentieth century – he has been the subject of over 600 book-length studies – with a reputation for great profundity. So surely, one would think, Derrida has something important to say that bears on the question of the meaning of life. The question is: what?

The answer lies, if anywhere, in the notion of deconstruction, something Derrida tends to present as an ongoing task, a way of life, a warrior existence devoted to overcoming ‘logocentrism’ in all its forms, which include ‘European ethnocentrism’ and ‘phallogentrism’ (FP: 104). The deconstructive life is, then, devoted to resisting oppression, the root of which has to do with ‘texts’ rather than the police: referring to the 1968 student revolution, Derrida was heard to remark that deconstruction is more important than taking to the streets.

Like Foucault, then, Derrida is concerned with resistance to oppression, the repression exercised by, in Foucault’s language, ‘regimes of knowledge’ of which we are normally unaware. But what are we to do with our freedom, once achieved? Foucault has, at least, a kind of answer to this question: we are to construct ourselves as works of art, choose, in Sartrean terms, a fundamental project to live by. As Sartre emphasises, however, choosing a project is choosing a ‘world’ – a world impregnated with evaluative oppositions. If, for example, I commit myself to environmentalism then tree-preservers are valued positively and unbridled forest-loggers negatively. Hence there arises, in Derrida’s language, a ‘text’, in other words, something ripe for deconstruction. But if it is deconstructed then my life loses its meaning. (Notice that deconstructive theory is *itself* a text with its own oppositions: ‘logocentrism’ versus multiplicity of interpretation, for example. If *every* life-shaping text can and should be deconstructed, then the warrior existence of the deconstructor itself loses meaning.)

The moral of this is that deconstruction cannot contribute to a meaningful existence, since meaningfulness starts only where deconstruction ceases. This is not to say that *attempted* self-deconstruction cannot be incorporated into a meaningful life. Avoiding two-dimensional stereotypes, considering alternative points of view (the timber-logger does, after all, have a family to feed) is clearly all to the good. But the fact is that one’s life is meaningful only to the extent that one’s personal narrative together with its oppositions *retains* its power over one, only to the extent that it *resists* deconstruction.

Derrida’s philosophy is devoted to the deconstruction – destruction – of the power that ‘texts’ have over us. But life is meaningful precisely to the extent that some ‘text’ has such power. His philosophy is, therefore – for all its reputation of significance and profundity – not merely unhelpful to the quest for a meaningful life but positively antithetical to it. Derrida’s philosophy, far from being an antidote to the nihilism of postmodernity, is a manifestation of it. Derrida belongs to the problem, not its solution.

## Notes

1 Rice and Waugh 1996, 150.

2 Derrida 1998, 158.

- <sup>3</sup> This is somewhat hard on Schopenhauer. For all that he finds women rather tiresome creatures, he holds them to be superior to men in compassion. And since compassion is, for him, the *totality* of moral virtue, he therefore regards women as *morally superior* to men.



## 17 Later Heidegger

Grand-narrative, end-of-history, 'true-world' philosophies offered, as we saw, a meaning of life that is universal, the same for all human beings at all times and places. Though there is no necessary reason why this should be so – nothing in logic says that a universal meaning to life can be provided only in terms of a grand-narrative, end-of-history structure (a point to which I shall return) – the death of God, in all his forms, has, de facto, meant the death of the attempt to discover a universal meaning, the abandonment of the quest to discover anything that could count as *the* meaning of life. With the exception of posthumous Nietzsche's view that the meaning of life is power (which doesn't really count since posthumous Nietzsche never existed), post-death-of-God philosophers are generally agreed that there is no meaning of *life*, that life as such is meaningless – 'chaos' (Nietzsche), 'absurd' (Camus).

Given this agreed point of departure, the most common response to the resulting threat of, as Nietzsche calls it, 'nausea and suicide' (GS 107) is to suggest that the fact that *life* is meaningless in no way entails that *my life* is meaningless. A distinction is drawn, that is, between *universal* meaning and *personal* meaning, and the suggestion is made that the absence of the former does not entail the absence of the latter. It is further suggested that while it is indeed true that life needs meaning to be worth living, personal meaning will do just as well as universal meaning to secure such worth. (The exception here is Camus, who, as we finally understood him, argues – in the end, unconvincingly, I suggested – that a worthwhile life can't have any meaning (either universal or personal), since any meaning cuts one off from the vibrant joys of just being in the world.) This is the position adopted by both (later) Nietzsche and Foucault. It is, moreover, the position of those Sartreans who choose to sanitise Sartre by ignoring the darkness in his thinking, his nihilism. One is to give personal meaning to one's life by, in Nietzsche's language, creating oneself as a work of art, in Sartre's language, by choosing oneself as a 'fundamental project'.

Early Heidegger takes a different tack. The meaning of one's life, for him, is established not personally but communally. Nonetheless, he, too, joins in the general consensus that there is no such thing as a universal, community-transcending, meaning of life, no meaning written into the condition of being a human being as such. In effect, then, post-death-of-God philosophy's response to the question 'what is the meaning of life?' is, not to answer it, but rather to claim that (like, for example, the question 'How old is your hippopotamus?') it contains a false presupposition: the presupposition that there is such a thing as '*the* meaning of (human) life'.

The exception to this rule of modern, ‘continental’ thinking is the later Martin Heidegger. (As already mentioned, Heidegger speaks of a radical ‘turn’ in his thinking that began in about 1930, about three years after the publication of *Being and Time*, so by ‘later Heidegger’ I mean his writings from 1930 until his death in 1976.) For Heidegger, as I read him, there *is* such a thing as the meaning of human life. This is why I have reserved this final and concluding chapter for him. Though chronologically prior to Foucault and Derrida – as we progress, the reader may recognise the origin of some of the ideas that appear, albeit through a glass, darkly, in the latter’s work – Heidegger, it seems to me, has something unique to say about the meaning of life, something which sets him apart from – and above – all the other post-death-of-God philosophers we have considered.

## Ancient technology

Later Heidegger’s thinking begins – this, at least, is one point of entry – with a discussion of technology, with, in particular, a contrast between ancient, paradigmatically Greek, technology, on the one hand, and modern technology, on the other.

Compare and contrast the old wooden bridge, which lets the river run its course, lets it remain a river, with the modern hydroelectric dam which turns it into a reservoir. Or compare the ancient farmer who harvested those crops that were natural and native to his region with the modern agribusiness which, through the use of artificial fertilisers, pesticides and genetic engineering, compels the land to yield whatever the market demands. Or compare the ancient woodcutter, who took what he needed but allowed the forest to remain the forest, with the modern timber company which clear cuts the native, deciduous forest and replants with fast-growing, exotic pines. It seems that whereas ancient technology lived in respectful rapport with nature, modern technology is a kind of ‘setting upon’,<sup>1</sup> a rape or violation of nature. It seems that whereas ancient technology had a kind of gentleness to it, modern technology is, as E. F. Schumacher has called it, ‘violent’ technology.<sup>2</sup>

What explains this contrast between Greek technological practice and that of modernity? Fundamental to any kind of technology is the notion of causation. In its modern conception, Heidegger points out, causation is *making happen*, centrally, *manufacturing*. For the Greeks, on the other hand, causation, being responsible for the existence of something, is ‘bringing forth’, ‘bringing forth out of concealment, into unconcealment’ a letting of what is not yet present arrive in its presencing’ (QCT: 10–11). Thus the ancient woodturner, for example, required himself to ‘answer and respond to all the different kinds of wood and the shapes slumbering within the wood’, the ancient sculptor thought of himself as ‘releasing’ the figure already present within the marble.

Greek technology was, then, not the self-assertion of ‘making’ but rather the gentleness of ‘bringing forth’. What, however, to repeat the question, is the ground of this gentleness?

A fundamental Heideggerian axiom, roughly put, is that how you see the world is how you act: ‘He who knows what is ... knows what he wills in the midst of what is’ (PLT: 67). How, then, did the ancient Greeks experience the

world?

At the basis of the Greek understanding of reality is the notion of *poiesis*, a word which is the origin of our word 'poetry' but means, in Greek, 'bringing forth'. The Greeks distinguished two types of bringing forth. First, *physis*, unaided bringing forth, as when a bud bursts into flower. Second, *technē* (the origin of our word 'technology'), which occurs when nature's 'blossoming' is aided by the hand of the craftsman or artist – the Greeks drew no distinction between the two, classifying both as *technē*.

In the Greek experience of reality – or 'Being' as Heidegger calls it – the relation between natural and human activity looked, then, like this (Figure 17.1). The question remains, however, as to *why* the Greeks saw their own technological activity as – when conducted in a proper manner – continuous in the above way with nature's own creative activity. Why did the Greeks understand their own 'building', understood in the widest sense of the word, as continuous with, and a completion of, nature's own 'building'?

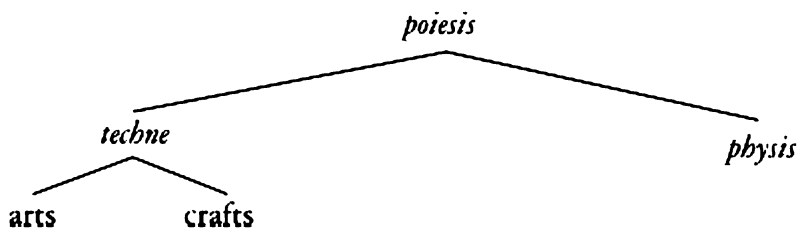


Figure 17.1

The model for *poiesis* is *physis*, the rising forth of the spring from out of the rock, the plant from the seed, or the blossom from out of the bud. But while the flower bud is, of course, visible and known, the, as it were, 'world bud' is utterly mysterious, incomprehensible. And in virtue of its creative power breathtakingly awesome.

The Greeks, then, experienced their world as the self-expression of an incomprehensible, but overwhelmingly powerful force. More exactly, they experienced it as the self-display of the simultaneously self-concealing divinity, 'earth', referred to by Sophocles as 'the most sublime of the gods'. The Greek cosmos was 'touched by the exciting nearness of the fire from the heavens'. It was a numinous world, a holy place.

With respect to Greek technological practice this had two consequences. First, since the fundamental order of things is divine, one's attitude to that order is one of respect and reverence. Towards, that is, the major, structural features of 'the Origin's' self-expression, towards great rivers, forests, mountains, species of animal, and cultures ('peoples', Heidegger calls them), one's fundamental stance will be one of conservation. Second, where (as is inevitable) one does produce changes to the way things are, such changes will be the gentleness of 'letting what is coming arrive' rather than the violence of making. Better put, they will be a matter of allowing the divine Origin of things to complete its creative self-disclosure *through* one's own creative activities.

In a word, the gentleness of the Greeks' technology was grounded in the fact that their world disclosed itself to them as a sacred place.

\* \* \*

Before proceeding with the exposition of Heidegger's philosophy, it will be as well to confront a criticism that is commonly raised against his portrait of the Greeks. The criticism is that it *sentimentalises* them. In reality, it is claimed, far from being the nice bunch of 'Greens' of Heidegger's myth, the Greeks were very like us, their technology every bit as violent, though of course on a smaller and less powerful scale.

The issue, here, is an historical one. Fortunately, however, it is not necessary to enter into a (probably irresolvable) historical dispute. For the fact is that Heidegger's 'Greeks' can fulfil the role they are required to perform in his thinking even if they are partially, or perhaps totally, mythical. They are introduced, that is, (a) to provide a contrast that will highlight the violence of modern technology and (b) to provide an intimation of the kind of world-experience that is necessary to overcome such violence. And these functions they can perform even if they are entirely fictional. All that is required is that they should represent a *possible* community and a *possible* form of technological practice, not that this possibility has ever been historically realised. What is really important about Heidegger's Greeks is that they represent a possible *future*, not that they represent an actual past. I shall continue to speak as if Heidegger's Greeks actually lived. It should be born in mind, however, that remarks of the form 'the Greeks did such and such' are always translatable into statements of the form 'We could become a community who do such and such.'

## Modern technology

Greek technology was, then, a conserving and bringing forth of nature. Modern technology, by contrast, is a 'setting upon', an attack upon, and violation of, nature. Many thinkers, both lay and professional, have looked with disquiet on the violence of modern technology. What is unique to Heidegger, however, is his identification of the 'essence' of modern technology (and of the modern age as such), the fundamental explanation of its being the way it is. As the essence of Greek technology is a mode of world-understanding (a 'metaphysics' one might say, though Heidegger would not wish to use this word) so, too, is the essence of modern technology. Heidegger calls this mode *das Gestell*, which, because it is very hard to translate, I shall leave untranslated. ('Enframing' is the standard translation but it misses the definite article, *das*; 'the set up' or 'the frame up' would be better but is still not quite right.)

*Gestell*, says Heidegger, is that mode of world-understanding in which 'the real reveals itself as resource [*Bestand*]' (QCT: 23). 'Resource' ('standing-reserve' in the standard translation) is used, here, in an unusually broad way to cover not just things like oil, water or electricity, but also the machines that operate on, and are powered by, such resources. Not just the machines, but also the beings that operate such machines: already in 1946 Heidegger noticed with dismay the appearance in the language of the phrase 'human resource' (PLT: 111). *Gestell*, then, is that mode of world-understanding in which everything – human beings

included – shows up as resource, as, again in a very broad use of the word, ‘equipment’ to be deployed in technological activity.

## Work

There is, however, something missing from the characterisation of *Gestell* as it has been presented to date. The issue concerns the topic of work.

Work conceived not as the opposite of leisure but in a broad, philosophical sense as any kind of intentional production of change in one’s natural or human environment, is the human condition. All humans, Heidegger observes, of whatever culture or historical epoch, work. Not only do human beings work, they work nearly all of the time (except when they are asleep, and sometimes even then). ‘Doing’, as opposed to simply ‘being’ is, as Heidegger puts it, the ‘everydayness’ of human existence. But work requires that the world be experienced in work-appropriate ways – as resource. As we learn from *Being and Time*, you cannot knock in a nail unless the wood–steel combination is grasped as a hammer, you cannot build a Greek temple unless the side of the hill is grasped as a potential quarry of stone, and neither can you organise the building of the temple unless your masons, sculptors and painters are grasped as human resources. The trouble with *Gestell*, as we have so far described it, is, in short, that it characterises *every* historical epoch, ancient Greece included. Heidegger, on the other hand, offers *Gestell* as the essence, *uniquely*, of modernity. There must, therefore, be more to *Gestell* than has so far met the eye.

Heidegger says that when *Gestell* ‘holds sway’ it ‘drives out every other possibility of revealing’ (QCT: 27). What this suggests is that *Gestell* is not just the disclosure of things as resource: it is their disclosure as *nothing but* resource, *pure* resource. The Greek architect saw the hillside as a potential quarry. But he *also* understood it as a hillside and, as such, part of the divine order of nature’s *poiesis*. Hence he was careful, in determining the site and scale of the quarry, to allow the hillside to remain itself. But where the hill shows up as *nothing but* a quarry, or as, let us say, a piece of ‘real estate’ ripe for ‘development’, there is nothing to slow, limit or guide the, as Heidegger puts it, ‘unconditional self-assertion’ (PLT: 111) of the technological will. Modern technology is, then, violent technology. It violates both non-human and human nature, not because modern humanity (or some self-serving elite within it) is especially wicked, but because, as a culture, it is afflicted by a peculiarly one-dimensional way of experiencing reality.

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Lying before us now is a contrast between the ‘gentleness’ of Greek (or ‘Greek’) technology and the violence of modern technology. But why should we be interested in it? No doubt to some, already Greek, eyes there is something very attractive about Heidegger’s Greeks and something very unattractive about the modernity of Heidegger’s portrait. But attractiveness is not a philosophically significant quality – *truth* is what we are interested in.

Heidegger, however, argues more than the attractiveness of Greek

technological practice and the world-experience on which it is based. He argues, in effect, its *correctness*. The Greek experience of nature as *poiesis* is based on 'insight into that which is' (QCT: 46), while the technological practice of modernity is based on a kind of blindness or illusion. To follow the argument for this, we have to enter the seemingly forbidding domain of Heidegger's philosophy of truth and 'Being'.

## Truth

What is truth? According to both philosophical tradition and common sense, truth is 'correspondence', correspondence to 'the facts'. 'Bridget is a nurse' is true if and only if it is indeed a fact that Bridget is a nurse. What, however, tells us what the facts are? The traditional answer is that you just look and see. Let us then apply this simple procedure.

I say, pointing to the river, 'You'll never bathe in that again.' You, having bathed there every summer and firmly intending to continue the practice, dispute this. Actually, however, what I was referring to was, not the river, but the particular body of water in front of us which is about to move off downstream and into the world ocean and be replaced by a new body of water. This example may seem far-fetched – as it is. But it makes the point that simple word-object correlation, pointing, is not sufficient to establish what is being talked about, and hence not sufficient to establish what the relevant facts are against which statements are to be checked for correctness. Normally, of course, conversation flows entirely smoothly, but that is because there is a (usually unnoticed) background assumption as to the kinds of entities – for example, objects rather than the ever-changing stuffs that make them up – that are under discussion. Heidegger calls such inconspicuous background assumptions 'horizons of disclosure', or occasionally, following Nietzsche, 'perspectives'.

Heidegger does not deny that truth is correspondence. His point is that the possibility of the world's showing up in such a way that true or false statements can be made about it – the possibility of its being, as I shall say, 'intelligible' – depends on horizons of disclosure, depends on, as Heidegger puts it, 'truth as disclosure'. (From now on when I talk about 'truth' without modification I mean truth as disclosure.)

Disclosure, says Heidegger, is always simultaneously 'concealment' (PLT: 53–54). Horizons conceal the intelligibility that would be revealed by other horizons. That, after all, is their point – how they make unambiguous communication possible. (The paranoia towards 'regimes of knowledge' or 'regimes of meaning' displayed by Foucault and Derrida seems to miss this entirely necessary and legitimate function of horizons of intelligibility.) Heidegger calls that which truth conceals 'the mystery'. Because of its hidden depth, because behind truth is concealed a hidden 'reservoir of the not yet revealed' (PLT: 60), truth is 'uncanny', 'awesome' (PLT: 68).

Initially, this is a puzzling inference. For although, for example, the object (river) horizon occludes the constituent-stuff (water) horizon for the time being, the latter is certainly a horizon I can come to inhabit if I choose. By 'horizon', however, Heidegger means *ultimate* horizon. This, embodied in the language we speak, represents the ultimate limit of what, to us, is intelligible. It is, so to speak, the horizon of all our horizons.

Since it would be mere arrogance to assume that the limits of intelligibility for my historical-cultural epoch constitute the limits of intelligibility per se, we are forced to conclude that, in addition to what is intelligible to us, reality – ‘Being’ – possesses an infinite ‘plenitude’ of ‘facets’ (PLT: 124) which would be intelligible to us were we to inhabit horizons beyond our ultimate horizon, but which, in fact, are entirely unintelligible to us. This is what makes Being an unfathomable ‘mystery’.

One further point. The language we speak, together with the horizon of disclosure it embodies, is no human creation. It cannot be, since we need to possess language *already* in order to think, plan, to form intentions – in short, to create.

Language happens through human beings but not by human intention. Hence it, and the world it discloses, is something we *receive*, something, as Heidegger puts it, ‘sent’ to us. By what? All we can say is that it is sent by the real, by, that is to say, ‘Being’. Being gives birth to a language and a linguistic community and so, as it were, kindles itself a light, enters the realm of intelligibility.

Being, then, has two essential characteristics. First, it discloses itself, becomes intelligible as a world (the world of the Greeks, the world of the Jews, the world of the Middle Ages and so on) by ‘sending’ language. But second, it conceals itself, remains, though ‘near’, at the same time infinitely ‘far’. (Being is, as the title of Wim Wenders’ 1993 film puts it, *Faraway, So Close*.) These two characteristics, however, creative self-disclosure and self-concealment, are precisely the two essential characteristics of the Greek understanding of their world as nature’s *poiesis*. The conclusion is, therefore, that, intuitively and poetically, the Greeks achieved a fundamentally *correct* understanding of truth and Being.

What this means is that Greek technological practice, ‘guardianship’ Heidegger calls it – bringing forth (*techne*) contained within the fundamental limits of conservation – is not just attractive. It is, further, the *correct* way for human beings to be in the world, the way they would be if they were free from illusion. Since the world *is* the holy place the Greeks took it to be, then, whether we realise it or not, respect and reverence, guardianship, is the correct way of being in it.

## Metaphysics

How, then, did we fall into modern technological practice, into the practice of violating, desecrating nature? Heidegger’s answer is contained in one word, the word ‘metaphysics’, a word he chooses with an eye to the traditional metaphysician’s claim to have discovered *the* nature of ultimate reality.

What is ‘metaphysics’? One way of describing it is to say that it consists in thinking – either explicitly or implicitly – that there is no more to truth than correspondence. It is the failure to realise that the world as one experiences it is disclosed and conditioned by a particular horizon of disclosure, a horizon that simultaneously occludes indefinitely many other horizons and conceals, therefore, indefinitely many other worlds. Metaphysics is, as I shall call it, the ‘absolutisation’ of some particular horizon of disclosure into *the* (one and only)

way that reality is. Otherwise put, metaphysics is ‘oblivion’ to ‘the mystery’, oblivion to the awesome darkness that is the other side of our illumination of Being. To use an image Heidegger himself deploys at one point (PLT: 124), the illusion that is metaphysics is like the illusion that the moon is a flat, illuminated disk.

\* \* \*

Heidegger’s choice of the term ‘metaphysics’ is in some ways unfortunate, since it makes it look as though the phenomenon it describes is a philosopher’s vice, confined to a few professional ‘metaphysicians’. In fact, however, a powerful tendency towards the ‘oblivion’ of metaphysics is inherent in all human beings. There are two reasons for this. First, that, as we have seen, work is the normal, the ‘everyday’ state of human beings. And second, that *Gestell*, the reduction of things to *nothing but* resource – in other words, *a form of ‘metaphysics’* – is the natural horizon that one inhabits during the process of work. This is a point Heidegger had emphasised in *Being and Time*. Let us distinguish the ‘being-in-itself’ of things – those properties they have independently of us and our technological activities – from their ‘being-for-us’, those properties (being a hammer) they have which are dependent on our technological activities. *Being and Time*’s point is that, in normal technological activity, only the being-for-us of things shows up. The carpenter, for example, is unaware of the type of wood used in the shaft of his hammer, unaware of the pattern formed by the grain, unaware of the shiny coolness of the head, unaware of the faintly acrid smell of the steel in the head. All he is normally aware of is ‘the thing for knocking in nails’. In normal technological activity, as Heidegger puts it in a later work, the being-in-itself of things, the stone of an axe-head, ‘disappears into usefulness’ (PLT: 46).

## The festival

The *threat* of *Gestell*, of ‘metaphysics’, then, surrounds every historical epoch. Why then is its ‘world-historical’ takeover unique to modernity? What saved the Greeks? In a word, according to Heidegger, ‘the festival’, the authentic ‘holiday’ (holy-day).<sup>3</sup> What is that?

First, a break from work. The modern holiday is typically not really a holiday at all, but belongs to the work-world as regular maintenance belongs to the car-world. Typically, the modern holiday is a period of stress relief (‘R&R’) designed to return one to the workforce as a maximally efficient productive unit. The authentic holiday, on the other hand, is genuine time out from work, a genuine stepping out of the ‘every-dayness’ in which things show up as pure resource.

A stepping out of everydayness into what? Partly, when he talks of ‘the festival’ Heidegger has in mind the gathering in the Greek temple, at the Olympic Games or in the medieval cathedral. Principally, however, what he is interested in is the mood or mode of world-disclosure<sup>4</sup> that may well be inhabited by many of the participants on such occasions but is, in fact, independent of them. The, as I shall call it, ‘festive’ mood is something one may, as an individual, inhabit on any occasion but, equally, something one may never inhabit, whatever communal gatherings one participates in. In this mood man steps, says Heidegger, into ‘the



full breadth of the space proper to his essence' (QCT: 39).

This stepping out of the narrowness of *Gestell* and into the breadth of a proper space involves two things. First, instead of being shut down to their being-for-us, things show up in their 'ownness [*Eigentlichkeit*]', in other words, their being-in-itself. In the festive mode of disclosure, therefore, we step into the *fullness* of the world that is disclosed to us by the language, by the 'clearing of Being', that we inhabit. The wooded hillside, that is, shows up not merely as a store of building material but also as a hillside that is home to the flora and fauna that inhabit it. Second, we step into an intuitive sense of our world as nature's *poiesis*. We step, that is, out of 'the dull overcastness of the everyday' and into 'the radiance' that comes from an intuitive apprehension of the infinite depth, the boundlessness of Being. And we step, too, into 'the wonder that around us a world worlds, that there is something rather than nothing, that there are things, and we ourselves are in their midst.' We step, in other words, into an apprehension of our world as something *granted* to us, something which, rather than being *of course* there, is something which *might not have been*, something fragile and precious. As a result, we experience a profound sense of 'gratitude', gratitude for the 'clearing', for illumination, for light, gratitude that there is something rather than nothing. This is what makes the festive *state festive* – a celebration.

Both aspects of this stepping out of *Gestell* and into a proper spaciousness are important to being a 'guardian'. That things show up in their being-in-itself is essential to our knowing *how* to care for them: unless something shows up in its 'ownness', as a forest rather than as a mere supply of timber, one cannot possibly care for it as a forest. And unless something shows up in the holy 'radiance' of *poiesis* one will not be *motivated* to care for it. (One may, of course, be moved to preserve a forest for the sake of the tourist dollars it represents, but that is merely a subtle form of exploitation, not genuine guardianship.)

What, then, we lack, and what both as a culture and as individuals we need to recover, is the festive mode of world-disclosure. (According to Heidegger, art, art that renders the world transparent to the blue depths of *poiesis* has, here, a crucial role to play.)<sup>5</sup> Until we cease to be 'workaholics' we will continue to be imprisoned by *Gestell* and will continue with our violation of nature.

## Guardianship as the meaning of life

To summarise and make explicit the relevance of the foregoing discussion to the main theme of this book. In distinction from all the other post-death-of-God philosophers we have discussed, Heidegger does think that there is a meaning to life as such, a task which belongs to, constitutes the 'essence' of (QCT: 28, PLT: 147), the human being as such.<sup>6</sup> This is the task of being the 'guardians' of our world, of living in such a way that the changes we make to it are 'bringings forth' rather than violations, bringings forth that are always circumscribed by the will to conserve the fundamental order of things that is granted to us. (Of course, the ways in which different human beings can best be guardians are as diverse as the different facticities in which they find themselves.)

The human being as the guardian of its world stands in the starkest of

contrasts to modern man as it exploits. This is why Heidegger speaks of the transition of our culture as a whole from exploitation to guardianship as 'the turning' (QCT: 36ff.). The transition of our culture as a whole from violence to guardianship is a turning from modernity to a *genuinely* post-modern age.

Many of us, as individuals, have already understood something like guardianship as the meaning of our lives. We already recycle, refuse, oppose genetically engineered food, oppose World Bank-funded irrigation schemes that destroy valleys and villages, oppose IMF schemes that turn Third World farmers into slaves of First World multinationals, make our houses, in Frank Lloyd Wright's words, 'of' rather than 'on' the hill. But what is important about Heidegger is not that he believes in these things too. What is important and unique about him is that he enables us – given the correctness of his philosophy of Being and truth – not merely to *believe* guardianship to be the meaning of life, but rather to *know* it.

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In Chapter 13, at the end of my discussion of Sartre, I left hanging in the air a fundamental problem. Sartre argues, remember, that who I am, my fundamental 'project' or set of fundamental values, is the product of my free but groundless choice. As groundless, however, that choice and the life that flows from it are, he says, 'absurd', meaningless.

If we are to escape this depressing conclusion, I suggested, then one's fundamental project needs to be given to one *in and with* one's facticity. Rather than 'existence' being 'prior to essence', essence must be inseparable from existence. To avoid meaninglessness, our existence must be, as one might put it, always already 'essenced'.

Early Heidegger, the Heidegger we met in Chapter 11, seemed, initially, to offer the promise of showing this to be the case. I do not choose (and hence do not groundlessly, absurdly, choose) my fundamental project, he seemed to demonstrate, because that project is constituted by my 'heritage', a heritage I find myself '*already* in' as I grow to adulthood within a given culture. This, together with the details of my particular facticity, gives me my fundamental project. In *Being and Time*, '*Wesen*' really is '*gewesen*'.

Yet Sartre, as we saw (p. 183) has a simple but telling objection to this claim. That I am born into a fundamental set of values does not, of necessity, make them *my* values. Though brought up in France, someone who thinks New York to be 'where it's at' may feel herself thoroughly alienated from the French cultural and ethical tradition. To be or not to be (in a more than legalistic sense) French is, therefore, inescapably a matter of choice.

The question that is now before us is: does later Heidegger do any better than earlier in resisting the argument for Sartrean absurdity? Does he have any greater success at showing that we have an 'essence' that is given to us *along with* our 'existence', an essence that we possess completely independently of any choices we might or might not make?

Later Heidegger, as we have seen, claims that we all, simply in virtue of being human beings, have, in Sartre's language, a fundamental project: to be guardians of our world. This – Heidegger even uses Sartrean language to make the point – is our 'essence' (QCT: 28). To a Sartrean, of course, this claim is as a red rag to a

bull. Guardianship, she will respond, like any other fundamental project, is a matter of foundational *choice* (and therefore groundless choice – though she may choose not to dwell on this point). Whether I am to be a conservator of things or an exploiter of resources is absolutely up to me. To pretend otherwise is nothing but ‘bad faith’.

In considering this response, let us ask, first of all, what this ‘world’ is of which human beings are to be, according to Heidegger, the guardians? It is, first of all, the fundamental order of things, natural and human, in the midst of which I find myself. Heidegger calls this fundamental order ‘the fourfold of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals’ (PLT: 149–50, 178–79) – roughly speaking, land, climate, ‘divine’, ‘heritage’-embodying and so community-creating figures (the reappearance of *Being and Time*’s ‘heroes’ (p. 147 above)), and ourselves, distinguished from other beings by the inescapability of being-towards-death.<sup>7</sup> But world is something else, too, something the Greeks indicated by calling it nature’s *poiesis*, and Heidegger by speaking of it as the self-disclosure of the self-concealing ‘mystery’. The world is, we have seen, a holy place. We might put this by saying that it has five dimensions: the four dimensions of the fourfold plus the dimension of the holy. (Heidegger actually uses the metaphor of ‘dimension’, here, a metaphor which he takes over from the poet Friedrich Hölderlin (PLT: 221).)

But since the world is a holy place, it follows that *we have no choice* but to stand to it in a relation of respect and reverence. For the holy simply *is* that before which one bows down in awe. If, in one’s actions, one does not reverence the world, then one simply *does not understand* its holiness. If one becomes its exploiter rather than guardian, then, as we have seen, one is a victim of that intellectual and spiritual blindness which Heidegger calls (in his special sense of the word) ‘metaphysics’.

Another word Heidegger uses in place of ‘metaphysics’ is ‘forgetfulness of Being’; forgetfulness of the depth, power, might, majesty and mystery of Being. (Forgetfulness of Being, to repeat the metaphor Heidegger takes over from Rilke, is like taking the moon to be a flat, illuminated disk.) Sartre’s philosophy – though he does not always highlight this characteristic – is profoundly nihilistic, a philosophy of despair. We now understand why this is so, what it is that is the source of Sartrean despair. It is precisely ‘forgetfulness of Being’. The reason, that is to say, he thinks we cannot escape the absurdity of basing our lives on groundless choice is that – archetypal modern man that he is – he has lost the feeling of awe: the understanding of reality as so awesome as to take our breath away. Less metaphorically, he has lost the sense of the world as a place whose sacredness deprives us of both the necessity and possibility of *choosing* whether or not to become its guardian.

Bismarck (of all people) once said one should never trust a man who is insensible to the wonders of nature. What he had in mind, I think, is the fact that for post-death-of-God humanity nature represents one of the few avenues to the experience of awe that still remains open. But Sartre, like Socrates (though profoundly unlike Camus), hated nature. The edges of his world were the edges of Paris. Heidegger, on the other hand, lived his entire life in and around the Black Forest, and wrote much of his philosophy in a simple ski hut in a clearing in its midst. This, I think, explains a lot. Philosophy is usually autobiography.

## Religiousness A again

Earlier, I referred to Heidegger as, along with all the other figures discussed in Part II of this book, a 'post-death-of-God' philosopher. But, it might be asked, isn't Heidegger's 'Being' – particularly when it is written with a capital 'B' – actually just another name for God? Isn't, in fact, the fundamental difference between Heidegger and the Nietzscheans that whereas they think that God is dead, he believes him to be still alive? Insofar, then, as the truth about the meaning of life is to be found in Heidegger, doesn't that truth really consist in the discovery that, after all, God *didn't* die?

Yes and no. Heidegger denies many times that Being has anything to do with the God of traditional Christian theology. He has nothing but scorn for a theology that seeks to diminish God's majesty and mystery by endowing him with a nature determined by 'articles of faith and Church dogmas' (being a first cause, being wholly benevolent, being an intelligent designer, being intensely interested in human beings and so on). On the other hand, as we have seen, Being is clearly, for Heidegger, an object of reverence and awe, the object of *religious* feeling. So Being surely is *some* kind of a God, a fact confirmed by the title of Heidegger's final address to the public at large (a 1966 interview with the German magazine, *Der Spiegel*), 'Only a God Can Save Us'. Since he argues, as we have seen, that only the overcoming of 'oblivion of Being' can save us, 'Being' and 'God' must be the same.

Specifically, I think, what Heidegger believes in is, not the 'god of the [Christian] philosophers' but rather the 'God of the poets'. He believes, in particular, in Friedrich Hölderlin's 'unknown God' who approaches us in the sight of 'familiar' things (PLT: 225): a God who, unlike the God of traditional Christian theology, is genuinely mysterious and so genuinely 'far away', but one who is also, again unlike the Christian God, 'the nearest of all', immanent in the world, 'so close' to us. It is with this God, Hölderlin's and Wim Wenders' God, that Heidegger identifies Being.

But this is not the God we have been discussing so far. Throughout this book, 'God' has been used as a synonym for 'true world'. To affirm a God in this sense is to affirm a true world and the grand, apocalyptic narrative of which it is the conclusion.

This, it is important to see, Heidegger does *not* do. Although he affirms a meaning of life that is both universal and discovered (rather than chosen), it is not a grand-narrative meaning. There is no 'end of history' in Heidegger, no crossing the rainbow bridge into a final paradise. Rather, the task of guardianship is ongoing and endless.

Earlier, in discussing Schopenhauer (p. 62 above), I suggested that the penalty for defining one's life in terms of a goal that is extinguished by its achievement is boredom. But to define human life in terms of a goal that constitutes an 'end to history' is, surely, to define it in terms of such a goal. It would seem, then, that the 'end of history' means, in fact, not entry into paradise but rather entry into boredom. Hence the fact that Heidegger is no grand narrator, that, in *this* sense, God is dead for him, too, speaks in an important way in favour of his philosophy.

\* \* \*

One final remark. In Chapter 3 we noted Kierkegaard's distinction between

‘religiousness B’, whose object is the supernatural God of traditional Christianity, and ‘religiousness A’ (pp. 42–3 above). A way of expressing Heidegger’s rejection of the ‘God of the philosophers’ (Kierkegaard being one of those philosophers) is to say that he rejects religiousness B. On the other hand, awe before a God which reveals itself as the world, and in that sense *is* the world – the religiousness that, if Heidegger is right (as I believe he is), represents the correct attitude to Being – is an instance of Kierkegaard’s ‘religiousness B’. It is, that is, a form of pantheism. Heidegger’s philosophy thus represents a reversal of Kierkegaard’s views on the relative merits of the two forms or religiousness.

Kierkegaard’s central argument against religiousness B was, we saw (p. 43), that it cannot ground ethics, cannot ground a distinction between good and evil. But this, we have now seen, is profoundly not the case. Guardianship, in all its forms, represents the good; violence, in all its forms, evil.

## Notes

- 1 QCT: 16. Since they are drawn from a wide variety of sources, I have, in this chapter, not always given references for quotations. For a list of the full range of texts on which the chapter is based see the Abbreviations page of Young 2002.
- 2 Schumacher 1974.
- 3 Heidegger’s discussion of ‘the festival’ is almost entirely confined to texts which have not been translated into English. For references, see those given in Young 2002, 55–62.
- 4 One of Heidegger’s insights is that moods are not inner sensations but rather the way the world as a whole is disclosed. Boredom, for example, is the disclosure of everything as drab and dead, joy the disclosure of everything as sparkling, fresh, newly minted. We are always, he argues in *Being and Time*, in some mood or other. Even in purely theoretical observation one is, and indeed must be, in the mood of ‘tranquil tarrying alongside’ (B&T: 138). Artworks, too, he argues, have a distinctive *Grundstimmung*, a fundamental mood.
- 5 See Young 2001, ch. 4.
- 6 Charles Larmore correctly describes the foundation of liberal political thinking as the assumption that people must live together in spite of the fact that ‘there are many valid forms of human self-realisation’. This, he says, is because ‘man’s essence does not provide any firm point of reasonable agreement on which a universal ethics can be founded’ (Larmore 1996, 122, 54). If Heidegger is right, therefore, there is something deeply wrong with modern liberalism and with the foundations of liberal democracy.
- 7 For a full discussion of the fourfold see Young 2002, chapters 7 and 8.

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