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Three candidates for first philosophy in Nietzsche's *Beyond good and evil* 20–22

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ABSTRACT

Friedrich Nietzsche is not generally regarded as a "first philosopher", but rather as a radical critic of the traditional aspiration of philosophy to be a "master science", in relation to which the other sciences are subordinate or dependent. In this respect, he seems to have had more in common with the logical positivists and post-structuralists who came after him than with the whole galaxy of "first philosophers" who preceded him, from Aristotle and John Duns Scotus to René Descartes, Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. However, in a famous aphorism in *Beyond good and evil*, Nietzsche proposes that psychology ought to be recognised as "queen of the sciences", a traditional formula for first philosophy. Although this passage is well known, it is more often taken as a rhetorical flourish than as a serious statement of intent. In this article, I focus on the three aphorisms (*BGE* 20–22) that lead up to this statement. I argue that these aphorisms form an interconnected sequence, in which Nietzsche considers and rejects three traditional candidates for first philosophy — cosmology (*BGE* 20), theology (*BGE* 21) and general ontology (*BGE* 22). By rejecting these traditional candidates for first philosophy one by one, this sequence clears the way for Nietzsche's proposal in *BGE* 23 that psychology ought to be recognised as the true candidate for first philosophy. These aphorisms, then, form a crucial sub-section in the developing argument of the book as a whole, which is far more systematically organised than Nietzsche's aphoristic manner of writing would appear to suggest.

KEYWORDS

continental philosophy; post-Kantian philosophy; metaphysics; philosophy of religion

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INTRODUCTION

Friedrich Nietzsche is not generally regarded as a "first philosopher". On the contrary, he is more often seen as a radical critic of the traditional aspiration of philosophy to be a master science — or, in the medieval formula taken up by Kant in the *Critique of pure reason*, "the queen of the sciences" — in relation to which the other sciences are in some sense dependent or subordinate. In this respect, Nietzsche seems to have had more in common with the logical positivists and post-structuralists who came after him than with the whole galaxy of "first philosophers" who preceded him, from Aristotle and John Duns Scotus to René Descartes, Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Furthermore, Nietzsche seems to have been engaged far more seriously with questions of ethics and moral psychology than with questions of metaphysics, epistemology or "theoretical philosophy" in general. He seems to have been more concerned with "overcoming morality" than with addressing questions of first philosophy, whether in a constructive or even a purely critical spirit.

Now, it is true that Nietzsche's deepest concern was with the question of how one should live — and that for him, a truly radical approach to this question demands that one call into question what he called "the prejudices of morality". However, it would be a mistake to assume that for Nietzsche, the critique of morality is incompatible with a profound concern with the possibility of first philosophy. On the contrary, an important piece of evidence suggests that Nietzsche regarded the overcoming of morality as inseparable from identifying the proper candidate for first philosophy, i.e. the particular science that deserves this title.

In aphorism 23 of *Beyond good and evil* (henceforth *BGE*),[1] Nietzsche observes that "the power of moral prejudices has penetrated deeply into the most intellectual world" and "operated in an injurious, inhibiting, blinding and distorting manner" (*BGE* 23). Nietzsche's remedy for this problem is "a proper physio-psychology", which discloses the "reciprocal dependence of the 'good' and the 'wicked' drives", and thereby opens up an "immense and almost new domain of dangerous insights". If we enter this domain, Nietzsche declares, "we sail right over morality, we crush, we destroy perhaps the remains of our own morality by daring to make a voyage there". The aphorism concludes with the proposal that "the psychologist" who overcomes his innate resistance to making such a journey will thereby have gained the right to demand that psychology itself be recognised as "the path to the fundamental problems [*Grundprobleme*]" and "the queen of the sciences", for whose "service and

[1] I refer to the Walter Kaufmann translation (Nietzsche, 1966). I have occasionally modified the translation for greater accuracy. For the German text, I rely on the edition of Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Nietzsche, 1999). I refer to the text by aphorism number.

preparation the other sciences exist" — in other words, as the true candidate for first philosophy.

Although Nietzsche's proposal that psychology is "queen of the sciences" (*Herrin der Wissenschaften*) is well known, because he is not generally regarded as a first philosopher, this remarkable declaration, which opposes traditional conceptions of first philosophy as a metaphysical science of the whole and (more surprisingly) late modern positivist or empiricist rejections of the very idea of first philosophy in the same breath, is often treated as a kind of rhetorical flourish, rather than a serious declaration of intent.[2] However, much later in the book, in *BGE* 204, Nietzsche refers to the "masterly task" (*Herren-Aufgabe*) of philosophy, which he laments has been abandoned in modernity. Nietzsche observes that the extraordinary successes of modern natural science have given rise to the widespread, but mistaken conviction that philosophy ought to be subordinated to the latter, as a kind of epistemological appendix, just as it was subordinated to revealed theology in the medieval era, as its tool or "handmaiden". Provocatively, he also claims that the subordination of philosophy to empirical science satisfies the "plebeian" instinct of the modern scientific worker, who resents the "noble riches in the psychic economy of the philosopher" and therefore reaches eagerly for any excuse to denigrate philosophy or lower its status.

Taken together, *BGE* 23 and 204 clearly establish Nietzsche's intent to restore the idea of first philosophy, reconceived as a kind of psychology. But where and how does he accomplish this task? The first chapter of *BGE*, "On the prejudices of the philosophers", can be divided into aphorisms 1–10, where Nietzsche focuses on the motivations, drives and "values" of philosophers and metaphysicians, and aphorisms 11–23, where he focuses on more abstract, theoretical topics, such as the Cartesian *cogito* and the problem of free will. *BGE* 11–12 contrast the Kantian transcendental psychologist with "the new psychologist", who will discover the true nature of the soul as "subjective multiplicity" or "the social structure of the drives and affects", rather than as an indivisible substance or monad. *BGE* 13–16 address the proper method for philosophical discovery, which is neither that of modern physics, suitable for the technological transformation of the world, not for its philosophical explanation or clarification (*Welt-Erklärung*), nor that of metaphysical dogmatists who start from immediate certainties taken as intuitively given, but rather an "economy of principles" (*Principien-Sparsamkeit*). *BGE* 17–19 show the new psychologist in action. Applying Ockham's razor to the clarification of the soul or subject, Nietzsche argues that the ideas of indivisible thinking substance and free will in the radical voluntarist sense of spontaneous causal power are

[2] For a notable exception, see Robert Pippin's *Nietzsche, psychology, and first philosophy* (Pippin, 2010).

not genuine discoveries about the soul, but philosophically superfluous impositions on the relevant phenomena. *BGE* 19 is the longest and most important aphorism in the chapter. Nietzsche here argues that the human being, despite its unique complexity and reflexivity, its eccentric place in nature, can be understood as continuous with sentient life in general. The difference between human beings and other animals is one of degree, not kind.

Nietzsche, then, presents the core of his highly unconventional "physio-psychology", as he calls it, in *BGE* 17–19, after the proper preparation. But it is only when he reaches *BGE* 23, the concluding aphorism of the first chapter, that he declares that the new psychologist is entitled to demand that his discipline be recognised as queen of the sciences. The purpose of the intervening aphorisms 20–22 is initially unclear. But in a letter to Georg Brandes from January 1888, Nietzsche claims that *BGE* articulates "the long logic of a completely determinate philosophical sensibility" — it is not merely a loosely organised "mishmash" (*Durcheinander*) of "paradoxes and heterodoxies" (Nietzsche, 2003: 228–229; my translation). If we take seriously Nietzsche's claim that the book is carefully written, developing a consistent argument from aphorism to aphorism, the suggestion that *BGE* 20–22 are a mere digression, which are not in some way meant to prepare us for the identification of psychology as first philosophy in *BGE* 23, begins to seem implausible. But how exactly do they serve this function?

In this article, I argue that in *BGE* 20–22, Nietzsche considers and rejects three traditional candidates for first philosophy understood as a metaphysical science of the whole — cosmology (*BGE* 20), theology (*BGE* 21) and general ontology (*BGE* 22). The thematic concerns of these sciences are in different ways comprehensive — being or the cosmos as an ordered whole, the highest being or most truly real being (*ens realissimum*) and being qua being (*to on he on*) or what everything that is has in common merely by virtue of the fact that it is. They are all traditional candidates for the proper theme of metaphysics as the most fundamental or comprehensive science. Nietzsche's procedure in *BGE* 20–22 consists primarily in drawing conclusions about the whole from the account of the soul or subject which he has already presented in *BGE* 17–19 — or, more precisely, in showing what conclusions (if any) can be drawn in the domains of cosmology, theology and ontology on its basis. Unsurprisingly, these conclusions turn out to be primarily negative or problematic, although in different ways in each case. By rejecting these traditional candidates for first philosophy one by one, this sequence clears the way for Nietzsche's proposal that psychology, and no other, "higher" or more comprehensive science, is queen of the sciences. Far from being a mere digression, then, this sub-section of the book is an indispensable step in the development of its argument.

Nietzsche mentions none of these putative sciences by name in *BGE* 20–22. However, Nietzsche elsewhere claims that "for books of aphorisms like mine

[...] many lengthy forbidden things and chains of thought [*Gedanken-Ketten*] stand between and behind short aphorisms" (notebook entry from June–July 1885, cited in: Pippin, 2010: xiv), and emphasises that *BGE* in particular employs an "art of silence" (Nietzsche, 2007: 78), which intentionally leaves many of its most important thoughts unsaid. Nietzsche writes in a way that is designed to compel the reader to make explicit what he leaves implicit and thereby to uncover the deeper structure of a book which on a first reading appears to be unsystematic in its progression and rather loosely organised as a totality.

THE COSMOLOGICAL PROBLEM IN *BGE* 20

Nietzsche's psychology in *BGE* 17–19 prepares the way for the appearance of the cosmological problem in *BGE* 20. In *BGE* 17, Nietzsche proposes that human thinking is an instinctive, automatic "activity" (*Tätigkeit*) or "process" (*Vorgang*), which operates for the most part beneath the threshold of conscious awareness. For this reason, Nietzsche says, "a thought comes when 'it' wants, not when 'I' want". *BGE* 18 reminds us of an apparent counter-example to this general claim — voluntary deliberation aiming at intentional action, effected by the faculty of spontaneous, uncaused causal agency traditionally called free will. *BGE* 19 presents an argument, which relies on a phenomenological analysis of the experience of voluntary action, rather than on putative material or neurophysiological facts about the body or brain, that there is no such thing as free will in this sense. When *BGE* 19 reaches its conclusion, Nietzsche's claim in *BGE* 17 that "a thought comes when 'it' wants, not when 'I' want" is supposed to have been fully justified — not merely unconscious, pre-reflective thinking, but also self-conscious, seemingly voluntarily effected deliberation is an automatic or instinctive process, over which human rational deliberation has no effective causal control.

In *BGE* 13, Nietzsche had already claimed that method, which must be "economy of principles", requires that we do without "superfluous teleological principles", such as the "drive for self-preservation" (*Selbsterhaltungstrieb*). This claim is ambiguous. Nietzsche could be implying that teleological principles as such are superfluous and must be dispensed with; this is how Laurence Lampert interprets *BGE* 13, claiming that the will to power, which Nietzsche introduces in this aphorism as a novel explanatory principle, is not a teleological principle (Lampert, 2001: 44). On the other hand, Nietzsche could be implying that one must admit only those teleological principles that are necessary for explaining the phenomena in question, as the emphasis on "superfluous" suggests. Given that the will to power is surely teleological in the minimal sense of goal-directed, as Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick note (Clark & Dudrick, 2012: 214–216), the latter interpretation is more plausible.

BGE 19 is meant to show that free will is a superfluous teleological principle, because appeal to free will is unnecessary to explain the uniquely human phenomenon of (seemingly) voluntary deliberation. Rather, this form of goal-directed activity can be understood through the same principle as unreflectively instinctive activity, namely desire for "that feeling of power which accompanies all success" (*jenes Machtgefühls, welches alles Gelingen mit sich bringt*).

BGE 19 concludes by claiming that "a philosopher" has the "right" to include "willing in itself" (*Wollen an sich*) in "the sphere [...] of the relations of supremacy [*Herrschafts-Verhältnissen*] under which the phenomenon of 'life' comes to be". Human life is essentially continuous with animal life. But what about the question of origins? Where does human life come from and how does it emerge? And what about sentient life and life in general? The claim that human life is metaphysically or ontologically continuous with animal life raises the question of its historical and cosmological continuity with the latter and the nature of the whole to which humans and other animals belong. The concluding sentence of *BGE* 19 points to what Seth Benardete calls "Nietzsche's awareness of the cosmological problem that philosophy must face", whether or not it can resolve that problem (Benardete, 2012: 350).

BGE 20 begins with a reflection on the growth or evolution of "individual philosophical concepts", but in doing so, as Nietzsche's development of this theme gradually makes clear, it also points to the problem of the growth or evolution of the human species itself, our historical and cosmic origins, the problem raised by the concluding sentence of the preceding aphorism. Nietzsche's reflection on the systematic interrelatedness of philosophical concepts supplies his programmatic claim in *BGE* 17 that "a thought comes when 'it' wants, not when 'I' want" with a new, quasi-Hegelian layer of meaning. Unlike other concepts, philosophical concepts (e.g. substance or cause) are interrelated according to "a definite fundamental scheme" (*ein gewisses Grundschema*), however "capriciously" they appear "in the history of thinking". If I want to think philosophically, I must follow the "orbit" or "circular path" (*Kreisbahn*) in which philosophical thoughts themselves naturally "want" to appear, rather than trying to impose my own personal "critical or systematic will" on them. However, for Hegel philosophical thinking grasps the self-development of the Absolute Idea, which is radically autonomous of human physiology (this is part of what he means by "absolute"), even if the individual's capacity to think philosophical thoughts has physiological pre-conditions. Nietzsche by contrast claims that the intrinsic systematic interrelatedness of philosophical concepts is itself a manifestation of shared "physiological valuations" and "racial conditions" (*BGE* 20).

Although important, the implications of this qualification are less relativistic than Nietzsche's language seems to imply. For it is the human race which Nietzsche has in mind, not, e.g., the Caucasian or African race. "Philosophising"

(*Philosophiren*) always has the same underlying "systematic structure", whether it appears in India or in Europe, in antiquity or in modernity.[3] When Nietzsche then adds that it is "highly probable" that "philosophers" in the "Ural-Altaic language zone" have a fundamentally different way of looking "into the world" than "the Indo-Germanic peoples" or "the Muslims" (even though Turkish-speakers are usually Muslims, as Nietzsche surely knew, and it is inappropriate to contrast a group of language-speakers, not with a different group of language-speakers, but with the adherents of a particular religion), I suggest that he is being wryly ironic, distracting us from his deeper point by adopting the pose of a fussy professor, the kind of modern "scholar" who "talks about" philosophy self-importantly from out of his "nook" despite lacking all comprehension of philosophy itself (see *BGE* 213, 204). Although Nietzsche recognises that different languages have a certain influence on the ways in which different groups of language-speakers think about the world, his deeper point is that authentic "philosophising" always reflects the structure of the common human perspective on the world, irrespective of the differences among races, languages and religions. Nietzsche claims that philosophical concepts always exhibit the same systematic structure and interrelatedness, regardless of the culture or time period they appear in. This point coheres with remarks in *The gay science* and *Twilight of the idols* about the existence of "fundamental errors" (*Grundirrthumer*) common to the human species, which include the belief "that our will is free" (Nietzsche, 1974: 169; see also Nietzsche, 1997: 30–37), itself a major theme of nearby aphorisms (*BGE* 18, 19, 21). When Nietzsche emphasises the "marvelous family resemblance" among the forms of philosophising that have appeared in many different cultures, it is the human family, and its origins, with which he is concerned. The phrase "the history of thinking" is an oblique way to refer to the history of the human species, the thinking animal.

The deeper meaning of *BGE* 20, then, is virtually the opposite of the initial rhetorical impression which it gives — but not quite. For in this aphorism, Nietzsche indicates his awareness of a real difficulty for his general philosophical approach. Even if there is a common human perspective on the world, if the fundamental concepts inherent in that perspective aren't radically independent of our physiology and history, but rather reflect the contingent way in which we have gradually evolved from pre-human life-forms, such that "philosophising" itself is a kind of "recollection" of the collective inheritance of our species, "a homecoming to a remote, primordial and inclusive household

[3] In *On the genealogy of morals*, essay three, section seven, Nietzsche refers to "India" and "England" as "polar opposites" with respect to "the talent for philosophy", clearly favoring India over England (Nietzsche, 1994: 81). While Nietzsche's acquaintance with Indian philosophy was very limited, he praises Indian philosophers highly partly in order to emphasise the trans-cultural aspect of his conception of philosophy itself.

of the soul", how can he account for the validity and autonomy of philosophical truth-claims? Nietzsche says here that philosophising is "less a discovery" than a kind of recollection; i.e. properly conducted, such "recollection" does indeed involve an element of genuine "discovery" or insight. But how can Nietzsche reconcile the claim that genuine insight into the world is possible with the claim that such insight consists in the "recollection" of the contingent way in which we have evolved to think about the world — even if the "we" in question is not "we Germans" or "we Europeans", but "we human beings"?[4] Because my concerns here are primarily interpretive, I restrict myself to noting that this is a genuine difficulty for Nietzsche's enterprise, arguably a fatal one. A philosopher such as Frege or Husserl would contend that he falls prey to a self-vitiating "psychologism", i.e. a reduction of claims about the world to claims about how we cannot help but think about the world given the psychological constitution with which we have contingently been endowed.

If philosophising is a kind of "atavism", as Nietzsche says here, a return to the "household of the soul out of which concepts grew originally", what is the character of this primordial "household"? In *BGE* 2, Nietzsche proposed that there are two possible kinds of answer to the question of origins, the "metaphysical" and the naturalistic or immanent. Each kind permits of many variants, but the primary alternative Nietzsche has in mind is free creation by God on the one hand and a natural process of evolutionary transformation on the other: Did God create the human species and endow us with the capacity for philosophical thinking (the image of the primordial "household" in *BGE* 20 calls to mind Adam and Eve sharing the garden with God the Father) or did we develop this capacity through an evolutionary process?[5] If philosophising is a recollection of origins, the character of those origins will determine the character of the "recollection" itself. If philosophising is a recollection of what we learned in a past life when we enjoyed a direct vision of the Platonic Ideas, or what it was like to enjoy direct communion with God before we were separated from Him by original sin, such "recollection" will have a very different character to a "recollection" of the evolutionary process through which we first developed the capacity to think philosophically or (put differently) through which we first acquired our very humanity.

In describing philosophising as a return in thought to the original experiences of the human species, Nietzsche seems to presuppose knowledge of human

[4] For a recent argument by a practicing empirical scientist that the evolutionary origins of our capacity for thinking render all truth-claims we make about the world doubtful, see Donald Hoffman's *The case against reality* (Hoffman, 2019).

[5] Nietzsche, like most of his contemporaries, saw Biblical faith and evolution through natural selection (and other natural mechanisms) as irreconcilable alternatives. He likely would have regarded the *rapprochement* between these alternatives offered by such concepts as "guided evolution" as obscuring the fundamental issue.

origins. How else could he be in a position to describe philosophical thinking as a recollection of these primordial experiences? He seems, then, to assume that he possesses an account of our evolutionary origins which renders those origins intelligible as origins. But does he ever provide us with such an account, in *BGE* or elsewhere? Or does he rely on the empirical work of Darwin and his followers, whom he describes in *BGE* 253 as one of those "respectable but mediocre Englishmen" who was "particularly skillful at determining and collecting many small and common facts and then drawing conclusions from them"?

I want to make two suggestions about the implications of *BGE* 20 for the question of our ultimate cosmic origins. First, in pointedly raising the question of origins (the primordial "household of the soul") without addressing it directly, Nietzsche indicates that it is impossible to render directly intelligible the original emergence of the human out of the pre-human or non-human. Neither the theologian nor the evolutionary biologist can intelligibly reconstruct ("recollect") the process by which God created human beings instantaneously out of nothing or, alternatively, by which human beings gradually emerged from pre-human ancestors into a recognisable human shape. In this sense, the question of origins transcends the limits of our knowledge. But it could be answered indirectly, through the demonstrative exclusion of one alternative — either the theological or the naturalistic and evolutionary. Accordingly, in the next aphorism, Nietzsche will turn to the question of theology. To anticipate, Nietzsche will argue that the theological alternative can be excluded on the basis of what the philosopher can know about the human being, i.e. the account of the human soul or subject which he has already presented in *BGE* 17–19. Accordingly, the philosopher (not the empirical scientist qua empirical scientist) can know that the human species must somehow have evolved or emerged from the pre-human, through the demonstrative exclusion of the alternative. However, all attempts to capture this process in thought or render it intelligible will have an unavoidably problematic and mythical-imaginative character. This applies no less to Nietzsche's attempts (e.g. in the second treatise of *On the genealogy of morals*) than to those of the Darwinists, the difference being that Nietzsche is aware of the philosophically problematic character of such an enterprise, but empirical scientists who not also philosophers often take for granted a dogmatic nominalism and materialism, as if such a stance makes the epistemological issues disappear.

Secondly, this qualification need not vitiate Nietzsche's description of philosophy itself as a recollection of original experiences. Unlike the Platonic doctrine of *anamnesis*, to which he alludes, Nietzsche's description of philosophical thinking as a kind of 'atavism' isn't meant to answer the question of how knowledge is possible — an answer which in the Platonic case provokes an inescapable circularity objection: How was knowledge of the Ideas possible for pre-existent souls in the first place? Rather, Nietzsche's proposal is meant

as a further elaboration of the nature of philosophical thinking, the very possibility of which he already takes himself to have established in *BGE* 17–19 (I note in passing the intimation that the Platonic doctrine, when freed of its mythical trappings, may have been meant to serve the same purpose[6]). The philosopher renders self-conscious and explicit the process by which concept-formation takes place in every recognisably human soul, a reflective "recollection" of a process which takes place for the most part in an unreflective fashion. Such recollection is analogous to a historical-cosmological recollection of the childhood of the human species, even if the light it sheds on the latter is unavoidably limited and indirect.

In *BGE* 23, Nietzsche says that psychology is the path to the "fundamental problems", which surely include the cosmological problem. *BGE* 20 addresses the problem of human origins, which is in a certain sense cosmological, even if it is not quite identical to the problem of cosmology itself. However, Nietzsche's point is that one can't go any further than this — dogmatic knowledge of the cosmos as an ordered whole of the kind that, e.g. the Stoics or the Epicureans claimed to possess is unavailable to us, but we can have knowledge of the cosmological problem as a problem. This knowledge is virtually identical with the (indirect and problematic) knowledge we can have of human origins. Later in the book, in *BGE* 36, Nietzsche will offer us a dogmatic cosmological doctrine (the cosmos as will to power), while indicating by means of scare quotes, subjunctives and question-marks that this doctrine is a playful thought-experiment, not a seriously intended metaphysical teaching.

THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM IN *BGE* 21

BGE 20 concludes: "So much by way of rejecting Locke's superficiality regarding the origin of ideas". Nietzsche is about to supply us with an account of the origin of the idea of God, the ultimate origin or first principle, in the human psyche.

The question of cosmology leads naturally to the question of theology, the question of the first, highest or most perfect being in (or beyond) the cosmos, upon which all other beings are causally or metaphysically dependent. As we have come to expect, Nietzsche introduces his theme obliquely. In a manner which has perplexed commentators,[7] in *BGE* 21, Nietzsche returns abruptly to the theme of free will, as if he suddenly remembered, having just written *BGE* 20, that he hadn't refuted it thoroughly enough in *BGE* 19. Nietzsche already warned us in *BGE* 18 that this "theory" provokes refutation after refutation.

[6] For an interpretation of Plato's *Phaedrus* along these lines, see Charles Griswold's *Self-knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (Griswold, 1986).

[7] For example, see Lampert's *Nietzsche's task* (Lampert, 2001: 52).

However, there is a crucial difference between *BGE* 19 and 21. While *BGE* 19 presents a detailed argument against free will, *BGE* 21 doesn't argue against free will, but takes as evident or proven that this notion doesn't make sense. Because *BGE* 21 does not advance Nietzsche's argument against free will, its function in the developing argument of the book must lie elsewhere.

The first sentence of *BGE* 21 does not refer explicitly to free will, but rather to the *causa sui*, something which is its own cause: "The *causa sui* is the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far, a kind of logical rape and un-nature [*eine Art logischer Nothzucht und Unnatur*]", a form of "nonsense" (*Unsinn*) in which the human being has profoundly entangled itself. It is only in the second sentence that Nietzsche mentions freedom of the will "in that superlative metaphysical sense" (*in jenem metaphysischen Superlativ-Verstande*), and he relates free will to the *causa sui* in a rather odd, indirect way. Nietzsche doesn't quite identify the idea of free will with that of a *causa sui*. Rather, what he claims explicitly is that "the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one's actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance and society is nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui* [*ist nämlich nichts Geringeres, als eben jene causa sui zu sein*] and, with more than Münchhausean audacity, to pull oneself out of the swamp of nothingness [*aus dem Sumpf des Nichts*] by the hair into existence [*in's Dasein zu ziehn*]". Walter Kaufmann's understandable translation of "is" (*ist*) as "involves" obscures Nietzsche's intentionally awkward formulation, in which the subject 'desire' is identified with the predicate clause. Nietzsche doesn't say that the desire for free will is the desire to be "that very *causa sui*" — rather, he says that merely to desire free will is itself "nothing less than to be that very *causa sui*".

What could Nietzsche mean by claiming that to desire to have free will in the metaphysical sense is actually to be "that very *causa sui*", the self-contradictory idea *par excellence*? To make sense of this bizarre suggestion, we must first bring into focus what Nietzsche means by *causa sui* in this aphorism.

In a note to his English translation of *BGE*, Kaufmann claims that the formula *causa sui* was "traditionally applied to God" (Nietzsche, 1966: 23, translator's footnote 20). Nietzsche's attack on the *causa sui* in the first sentence of *BGE* 21 can therefore be taken as an oblique suggestion that the idea of God is an inherently self-contradictory idea. Indeed, in a kind of backhanded compliment, Nietzsche suggests that God is "the best self-contradiction", one might say the most perfect and exemplary self-contradiction, which human beings have come up with throughout the entire "history of thinking" (see *BGE* 20).

However, although it is true that philosophers and theologians as different as Aquinas, Descartes and Spinoza have described God as *causa sui*, matters are complicated by the fact that Nietzsche here identifies the *causa sui* with the idea of something which brings itself into being out of "the swamp of nothingness", i.e. something that is its own efficient cause. Traditional theology understood

God not as the efficient cause of His own existence, but rather as the necessary and thus uncaused being in whom existence and essence are identical and who is therefore according to the classic Thomistic doctrine not strictly speaking "a being" but rather Being Itself,[8] the "absolute act" of "pure being". No less than Nietzsche, a scholastic theologian such as Aquinas or Scotus would have rejected the idea of something that is its own efficient cause as nonsensical. Thus Aquinas writes, "Being itself cannot be caused by the form or quiddity of a thing (by 'caused' I mean by an efficient cause), because that thing would then be its own cause and it would bring itself into being, which is impossible" (Aquinas, 1968: 56). Aquinas did use the formula *causa sui* in a different sense, in the maxim *liber est causa sui*, "the free is the cause of itself". But he did not mean this in the radical sense of self-creation. As Jamie Anne Spiering writes, "Thomas's meaning of *causa sui* is more limited: what is free does something for itself, but it does not make itself exist. In fact, Thomas makes clear in several explanatory notes that the free is not the cause of itself in being, but the cause of itself in acting: the free thing acts 'out of' itself (*ex se*) or 'from' itself (*a se*)" (Spiering, 2011: 351–352). The notion of a *causa sui* in this limited sense is derived from the Latin translation of a Greek formulation in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle describes the free man, in contrast to the slave, as a man who exists "for his own sake and not for another's" (*hautou heneka kai me allou*), in order then to describe first philosophy by analogy as "the only free science, for it alone exists for its own sake" (*Metaphysics* 982b25–27). For Aquinas, the notion of *causa sui* as acting for one's own sake and thus freely can be applied both to human beings and to God, however great the difference between human and divine freedom and agency. In the early modern period, Spinoza famously characterised God (or Nature) as *causa sui*, but although Spinoza's theology was radically innovative in many ways, he also didn't mean that God was the efficient cause of God's own existence. Rather, Spinoza meant that God (in contrast to the finite "modes" of God or Nature understood as the one substance) is uniquely self-necessitating because God's essence involves existence and thus cannot be conceived of as not existing (see *Ethics*, book one, definition one and proposition seven), a notion which is clearly distinct from that of self-causation in the sense of efficient causal power. The only canonical thinker in the history of philosophy who characterised God as *causa sui* in the radical sense of self-creation was Descartes, who claimed that God derived His very existence from Himself out of "the immensity of his power" (Descartes, 1984: 80), a radically voluntarist proposal which has found little support among later theologians. In attacking the idea of something that is its own efficient cause as nonsensical, Nietzsche seems to be engaging in a polemic with a very

[8] In chapter four, section six of *On being and essence*, Aquinas writes, "There can only be one reality that is identical with its being" (Aquinas, 1968: 56).

limited range of application. It is not his characterisation of the idea that something can be its own efficient cause as nonsensical (in the first sentence of *BGE* 21), but his association of free will with the *causa sui* in the radical sense of a self-creating being (in the second sentence of *BGE* 21), where Nietzsche introduces a truly controversial and thus philosophically interesting claim.

However, the refutation of free will that Nietzsche already presented in *BGE* 19 didn't rely on the association of free will with the *causa sui*, but rather on a phenomenological analysis of the experience of successful agency, which we habitually interpret as voluntary, uncaused causation. Nietzsche tried to show that this habitual interpretation of our experience is a simplifying misinterpretation of "a complex of feeling and thinking", motivated by the desire to enhance our "feeling of power" (*BGE* 19). For Nietzsche, the belief that we are metaphysically free can be refuted quite independently of any reduction of this belief to a nonsensical belief in self-creation.

If we follow the opening argument of *BGE* 21 step-by-step with these considerations in mind, the following movement of thought emerges. First, Nietzsche characterises the *causa sui*, an idea applied paradigmatically (although not exclusively) to God in "the history of thinking" (although in a variety of senses by different thinkers), as the self-contradictory idea *par excellence*. Nietzsche implies that God is impossible, not necessary — without yet providing an argument for this suggestion. It is only in the second sentence that he explicitly introduces the idea of free will, as a way of supplying a genetic (psychological, not historical) account of the origin of the idea of God in the creative human imagination. When Nietzsche claims that to want to think of oneself as metaphysically free is "to be that very *causa sui*", he cannot possibly mean that we actually bring ourselves into being, as he has just made clear that he regards such a postulate as absurd. Rather, he suggests that the idea of divine freedom, however exactly it might be understood, is a projection into the infinite of a certain human desire, the desire to think of oneself as absolutely free and responsible for one's actions, and a certain self-misinterpretation that accompanies that desire. We are self-causing or self-creating beings only in the sense that our experience is structured and organised by habitual self-misinterpretations which we call into being through our creative imagination then "immediately forget that we have done so", just as we conduct ourselves when dreaming (see *BGE* 138). Nietzsche has already supplied us with a comprehensive refutation of the conception of the human being as metaphysically free in *BGE* 19; here, he merely draws the conclusion that we subsequently create God in our own distorted image. While Feuerbach had famously argued that human beings project onto God their own real characteristics, thereby diminishing themselves,[9] Nietzsche suggests that human beings form the idea

[9] See Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das wesen des christentums* (Feuerbach, 1909).

of God by projecting their imaginary characteristics, in particular the capacity for freedom in the "superlative metaphysical sense", onto the image of their hypothesised creator. Nietzsche's purpose in *BGE* 21 is not to complete a refutation of free will left unfinished in *BGE* 19, as Lampert claims (Lampert, 2001: 52), but rather to exclude the possibility of genuine theological knowledge by showing where the idea of God comes from and at the same time why it doesn't make sense.

Nietzsche's refutation of theology whether natural or revealed is very simple — if the mere idea of free will in the "superlative metaphysical sense" is demonstrably incoherent, the postulate of God as an absolutely free creator who endows human beings with an analogous capacity for free agency is demonstrably false, however great the difference between God's infinite freedom, and the freedom possessed by finite human beings created in the image of such a God, is supposed to be. But what about Spinoza's doctrine of God (and its "Averroist" antecedents), according to which divine freedom consists only in wholly unimpeded but inexorably necessary causal agency, in contrast to the gratuitous act of love through which the Christian God brings the world into being "out of the swamp of nothingness"? The rest of *BGE* 21 is devoted to showing that the idea of deterministic causality is no less "mythological" than the doctrine of free will, as a reification and partial negation of the latter: "One should not wrongly reify 'cause' and 'effect,' as the natural scientists do (and whoever, like them, now 'naturalises' in his thinking) [...] one should use 'cause' and 'effect' only as [...] conventional fictions for the purpose of designation and communication".

The preceding aphorism *BGE* 20 presented us with the alternative of theological and naturalistic, evolutionary answers to the question of the origin of the human species. Having excluded the theological alternative by showing that the only thing which the idea of God as absolutely free creator could possibly mean is the projection onto the "in itself" (*an sich*) of the human being's self-misinterpretation as metaphysically free, Nietzsche implicitly answers the question left unresolved in *BGE* 20 — our cosmic origins must be evolutionary, not the product of special creation, even as we cannot render intelligible the process by which "the original human shape", as Kant called it, emerged out of pre-human life-forms (Kant, 2007: 95). The best we can do is to "recollect" the process through which concept-formation originally takes place in every recognisably human soul, as Aristotle sought to do in the famously obscure account of "induction" (*epagoge*) in *Posterior analytics* II.21.

Naturalistic, evolutionary hypotheses about human origins always take for granted some conception of nature. The rest of *BGE* 21 argues that deterministic conceptions of nature (nature as a closed causal network), even if they represent in one respect an advance on theological metaphysics, are themselves a kind of "mythology". Because the very idea of efficient causality derives

psychologically from the belief in free, voluntary causality, the only thing that deterministic or necessitarian causality could mean is the projection onto the "in itself" of the idea of free causality accompanied by an implicit qualifying marker which insists that in this case (even if it is posited as the only real case) effect follows necessarily from cause, rather than voluntarily and spontaneously. The idea of effective causal power, whether "determined" or "free", is read into, not read off, the phenomena. Accordingly, Nietzsche says that "unfree will" is no less a form of "mythology" than "free will". Although Nietzsche's primary concern in *BGE* 21 is to exclude the possibility of theological knowledge (as opposed to knowledge of the theological problem), he also wants to show that an important corollary of his argument is that causality itself is an inherently theological concept. Our illusory image of ourselves as spontaneously initiating causal chains is a kind of "god", a being no less supernatural than Zeus or Apollo, with "powers" no less miraculous than Zeus's capacity to shape-change or to hurl lightning-bolts at those who have displeased him. But the idea that causality is at work in nature is ultimately no less "mythological" or "fictional" than the idea that it is at work among the gods. Accordingly, naturalistic doctrines of purely deterministic causation involve a kind of disguised or truncated theology.

THE ONTOLOGICAL PROBLEM IN *BGE* 22

Having excluded the possibilities that we can "know the whole" in the sense of acquiring a comprehensive picture of our cosmic origins or "know the whole" in the sense of knowing God or the causal origin and first principle of the cosmos, Nietzsche turns to the question of whether we can "know the whole" in the sense of "knowledge of being as such" — knowing what everything that is has in common merely by virtue of the fact that it is.

Once again, Nietzsche approaches his theme obliquely. At first, *BGE* 22 appears to be concerned with the metaphysics of modern natural science. However, rather than contrasting different interpretations of the metaphysical or ontological implications of modern natural science, Nietzsche interprets modern natural science itself as one possible interpretation among others of "nature" or "the phenomena". He contrasts this interpretation with his own interpretation of nature as the tyrannical enforcement of the will to power and claims that neither is better or worse than the other, philosophically speaking (they might be better or worse from a political or aesthetic point of view). Although Nietzsche clearly distinguishes between "text" and "interpretation", in this case (in contrast to other places where he makes this distinction, e.g. with respect to human nature in *BGE* 230 or the French Revolution in *BGE* 38) he suggests that the very nature of the "text" is such that no interpretation could

be better or worse than any other, because the level of generality ("nature" or "the phenomena" as a whole) doesn't permit us to make the requisite distinction with sufficient determinacy.

Addressing modern physicists directly ("you physicists"), whose doctrine of natural law he has just argued in *BGE* 21 involves the dogmatic use of the concept of causality, he opposes his own interpretation of nature or being as a whole as will to power to their conception of nature as lawlike regularity, only then to retract his proposal by acknowledging that the doctrine of will to power is also "only interpretation". Modern physicists share Nietzsche's "atheism", his denial (established in the preceding aphorism) that the cosmos was created by a God who rules freely over His creation as a benevolent king rules over his kingdom, and his concomitant denial that God created human beings in His own image, endowing them with free will. They are "proud" of their doctrine of "nature's conformity to law", their version of the disenchanted conviction that all natural events (and there are only natural events strictly speaking) follow a "necessary and calculable course". However, Nietzsche suggests that their proudly anti-anthropomorphic stance in fact involves an anthropomorphising interpretation of the available phenomena, which reflects their "modern" and "democratic" egalitarian morality. If traditional theology involves a kind of cosmic monarchism, the modern conception of nature as lawlike regularity involves a cosmic republicanism motivated by a "plebeian antagonism to everything privileged and autocratic": "Everywhere equality before the law — nature doesn't have it any different or better than we do" (*BGE* 22).

In *BGE* 14, Nietzsche had already contrasted Platonic sophistication and delicacy with the philosophical coarseness of modern physicists, citing a passage from Plato's *Laws*, whose title might also be translated *Conventions* (*Nomoi*).[10] But if the idea that natural events "conform to laws" (or "conventions", *nomoi*) is a "naively humanitarian dressing-up and contortion of meaning" with unconscious moral-political motives, what about Nietzsche's alternative interpretation? Nietzsche writes, "But, as said before" — he refers back to *BGE* 14, where he had already characterised modern physics as a mere interpretation of the world — "that is interpretation, not text; and someone could come along who, with the opposite intention and art of interpretation, would be able to read out of the same nature [*aus der gleichen Natur*] and with regard to the same phenomena [*Erscheinungen*] rather the tyrannically inconsiderate and relentless enforcement of claims of power — an interpreter who would bring the invariability and unconditionality in all 'will to power' so vividly before his eyes that almost every word and even the word 'tyranny' itself would finally seem unusable or even seem to be a weakening and attenuating metaphor — being too

[10] In *BGE* 14, Nietzsche refers to, "'the mob of the senses,' as Plato said". The formula "the mob of the senses" occurs in Plato, *Laws* 689a–b.

human [...] Supposing that this also is only interpretation — and you will be eager enough to make this objection? — well, so much the better" (*BGE* 22).

BGE 22 contrasts "text" with "interpretation", a contrast akin to the Platonic distinction between nature and convention, the crucial difference being that a text is itself a human construct, reliant for its unity on the conventions of language. Nietzsche's concession that the doctrine of nature or being as "will to power" (in scare quotes) is also "only interpretation" suggests that this doctrine is in some sense an exoteric teaching or, if one prefers, a thought-experiment. But the more interesting implication concerns his approach to the question of ontology itself. Nietzsche also thereby indicates that the concept of nature or being is primarily a concept of distinction. As Leo Strauss puts it, "The philosophic quest for the first things is guided by that understanding of 'being' or 'to be' according to which the most fundamental distinction of manners of being is that between 'to be in truth' and 'to be by virtue of law or convention' — a distinction that survived in a barely recognisable form in the scholastic distinction between *ens reale* and *ens fictum*" (Strauss, 1953: 91). The concept of nature or being serves to make distinctions within nature or being, e.g. between different species of animal, or different psychological types of human being endowed with different "natures" (such as the philosophers and the *homines religiosi* — see *BGE* 45), but it serves above all to distinguish nature from convention or that which is from that which merely pretends to be. In the preceding aphorism, Nietzsche suggested that God exists only by convention — the effectual truth of this *ens fictum* is a certain kind of human desire which gives rise to a certain metaphysical illusion or self-misinterpretation which the theologian projects onto the "in itself". But if one asks what being as such is or what nature is, no longer in contrast to "conventional fictions" like "free will" or "unfree will" (as in *BGE* 21), but rather in itself, there is no longer anything determinate to say or think, because there is no longer any determinately accessible "text" with which one might contrast competing interpretations. Rather, there is only a blank conceptual canvas, onto which human beings cannot help but project their desires, whether unreflectively, as in the case of the modern physicists, or self-consciously, as in the case of Nietzsche himself.

CONCLUSION

Although Nietzsche concludes that cosmology, theology and ontology are not real sciences — note the distinction he makes in the Preface to *BGE* between "a genuine science" and one which is not — he doesn't dismiss the concern with the "fundamental problems" that these sciences address. Rather, Nietzsche implies that reflection on the cosmological, theological and ontological problems

is indispensable for the philosopher, even as the proper comprehension of these problems as problems shows that (for different reasons in each case) scientific knowledge of the cosmos, God or being qua being is not available to us.

Cosmological knowledge is unavailable because it outstrips the limits of our cognitive faculties; it is impossible for us to render the ultimate cosmic (superhuman or subhuman) origins of the human species intelligible to ourselves, whether by means of supernatural origin stories or naturalistic, evolutionary hypotheses. Theological knowledge is unavailable because the idea of God is not just a fiction, but an incoherent fiction; traditional theology regards God as the necessary being, whose essence is identical with His existence, but Nietzsche regards God as the impossible being, the very idea of which implies its non-existence. Ontological knowledge is unavailable because our thinking operates by making distinctions among phenomena, e.g. between *nomos* and *physis*, and the concept of being qua being is so general that there remains nothing against which we can contrast it, so there is no longer anything determinate which can be said about it. For this reason, in *Twilight of the idols*, Nietzsche says that "being" (*das Sein*) is an "empty fiction", which belongs among the "most universal" and "emptiest" of concepts, "the final wisp of evaporating reality" (Nietzsche, 1997: 19). Nietzsche would agree with Hegel that "pure being" and "pure nothing" are indistinguishable (Hegel, 2010: 59–60), but there is no suggestion that the distinction that we try to make between them sets in motion a systematic process of dialectical thought which culminates in "the Absolute Idea". Rather, the indistinguishability of these abstractions compels us to return to their origin in the domain of psychology, which we are now in a position to "'recognise" as queen of the sciences, because all the other sciences prepare us for psychology or lead us back to it (*BGE* 23). Although knowledge of the cosmic whole, God or being qua being is unavailable to us, knowledge of the cosmological, theological and ontological problems as problems can be acquired, and this knowledge is psychological because it concerns the human meaning of these fundamental problems (our need for them, their inescapability for us) and their cognitive structure in human consciousness or the human soul (*psyche*) itself.

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