

NIETZSCHE'S THIRST FOR INDIA:  
SCHOPENHAUERIAN, BRAHMANIST, AND BUDDHIST  
ACCENTS IN REFLECTIONS ON TRUTH,  
THE ASCETIC IDEAL, AND THE ETERNAL RETURN

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*Abstract:* This essay represents a novel contribution to Nietzschean studies by combining an assessment of Friedrich Nietzsche's challenging uses of "truth" and the "eternal return" with his insights drawn from Indian philosophies. Specifically, drawing on Martin Heidegger's *Nietzsche*, I argue that Nietzsche's critique of a static philosophy of being underpinning conceptual truth is best understood in line with the Theravada Buddhist critique of "self" and "ego" as transitory. In conclusion, I find that Nietzsche's "eternal return" can be understood as a direct inversion of "nirvana": Nietzsche celebrates profound attachment to each and every moment, independent from its pleasurable or distasteful registry.

*Introduction*

Theravada Buddhism, specifically, and Indian philosophy, generally, were biographically and intellectually relevant to Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical contributions. Nietzsche's views on truth, the ascetic ideal, and the eternal return are inseparable from his exposure to and reflections on Vedic and Theravadin scripture.

Two critical topics in Nietzsche's deliberations, truth and the inversion to supposedly selfless disinterestedness, are closely related to key Indian themes, not just in an abstract philosophical fashion, but directly—so directly, in fact, that Nietzsche himself acknowledged as much. Theravada Buddhism is a philosophical network which from its earliest inception determined to overcome identity thinking. The relationship of identity is codified in the rule of logic which holds that A equals A, only A, and always A. This logic underlies the philosophy of being, of stable, reified entities and concepts. The key insight Theravada Buddhists harness to undermine identity thinking is the realization that the "self," "ego," or "I" is an artificially derived unity which is better regarded as a shifting pattern, or an unstable, changing composite. The ancient Indian Buddhist scripture posits that, just as "I-ness" frequently is deemed to characterize the self, so it is projected onto the world which, subsequently, also is understood to be composed of stable, enduring entities. Nietzsche would arrive at a similar conclusion in his grand synthesis of "How the 'Real World' at Last Became a Myth."<sup>1</sup> Significantly, among the Buddhist texts Nietzsche had in his personal Orientalia collection was the famous dialogue between the first century

B.C.E. Ionian king Milinda and the Indian saint Nagasena, which refuted the notions of both self-identity and the identity of objects supposedly inhering in the world under the auspices of humanly derived conceptual frameworks.<sup>2</sup>

As germane as Theravada Buddhist philosophy was to Nietzsche's thought regarding truth, the Theravadin Nirvana was similarly generative for Nietzsche's invention of the eternal return. Nietzsche consciously developed his conception of the eternal return as the polar opposite of the Buddhist Nirvana: In opposition to the relinquishment of the thirst for being and permanence through self-renunciation, detachment, and extinction of the will, Nietzsche advocates radical attachment to all moments of existence, regardless of personal liabilities or consequences.

In the burgeoning literature about Nietzsche's life and philosophy, discussion of Indian thought is noticeable largely for its absence. Western commentators unfamiliar with Indian philosophy are not likely to recognize the deeply embedded Indian themes running through the most Nietzschean of conceptions. Graham Parkes's welcome contribution of an edited collection entitled *Nietzsche and Asian Thought* (1991) goes a long way toward summarizing the state of the art scholarship addressing Nietzsche's encounter with Indian philosophy. Although the book emphasizes the Nietzschean reception in Asia, it includes essays concerning the insights Nietzsche drew from Indian philosophy which indicate that the extent to which he developed his thought in dialogue with the East is almost wholly unacknowledged. Another tack to Nietzsche and Asia, adopted by Frey Mistry in his *Nietzsche and Buddhism* (1981), rescues the image of Buddhism in Nietzsche's writings by arguing that, notwithstanding the fact that Nietzsche constantly impugns Buddhism, his thought is consonant with it nonetheless. This approach is meritorious in eliciting the unappreciated affinity between Nietzsche's philosophy and Buddhism—especially Mahayana Buddhism, of which Nietzsche was unaware. However, it does little to assess the relevance of Buddhist ideas to Nietzsche as he worked. In contrast, this paper will carefully and explicitly chronicle how Hindu and Buddhist themes figured into Nietzsche's ruminations on truth, the will to truth, and the eternal recurrence of the same. Robert Morrison has written an important new study, *Nietzsche and Buddhism: A Study in Nihilism and Ironic Affinities* (1997). Morrison finds that Nietzsche's understanding of the "Buddhist nothing" informed his writings on nihilism, but that Nietzsche wrongly—due to limitations of nineteenth-century scholarship—understood nirvana to signify a passive nihilism that ultimately should be overcome. Morrison proposes that had Nietzsche had the resources to properly understand Buddhism, he may have found the historical Buddha to be an incarnate version of his hypothetical *Übermensch*.

Nietzsche's *oeuvre* is at the center of the currently raging debate over the possibility of knowledge in the postmodern era. Both interpretations of the philosophical basis of his radical critique of truth, and attempts at making sense of his ultimate position regarding truth, continue to evoke heated controversy. An Indic-inspired reading of Nietzsche has much to contribute. Most obviously, picking up the thread of India which is woven throughout Nietzsche's writings acknowledges a crucial set of themes which Nietzsche actively wrestled with. In addition, paying attention to Brahmanical and Buddhist themes offers supporting evidence for the claim that Nietzsche came to associate truth exclusively with a philosophy of being; that for Nietzsche, truth is restricted to being. Furthermore,

this attention lends insight into the philosophical basis for Nietzsche's radical critique of truth as dependent on being. Finally, this reading makes apparent that Nietzsche's analysis of the nihilism inherent in the ascetic ideal, and development of the eternal return, both grow out of his study of Buddhist writings. It is ironic that Nietzsche, who is often given credit for the opening salvo in the total critique of the canonical Western philosophical commitment to truth and morality, was aided in his critique by Asian philosophical systems, and yet that many Western philosophers continue to ignore the vast untapped resources of philosophical wisdom which the East has to offer. This irony is especially poignant in the midst of the contemporary preoccupation with determining how knowledge and morality are possible given the absence of foundations.

### *I. Suffering and the Oriental Nothing*

Indian philosophy was both personally and intellectually relevant to Nietzsche. The resonance of ideas between Nietzsche's writings and Indian doctrine is not merely coincidental; instead this confluence results from Nietzsche's deliberate incorporation of Indian insights into his work. Arnold Schopenhauer's Hindu-inspired world system, presented in *The World as Will and Representation*, whetted Nietzsche's appetite for Indian philosophy, and was a point of departure for Nietzsche's philosophy of aesthetics as put forth in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche's enthusiasm for Indian philosophy is evident in his personal Orientalia collection which included Vedic and Theravada Buddhist verses and commentaries.<sup>3</sup> In addition to his own collection, Nietzsche took advantage of the Indian texts available through the Basel University library during his teaching career, and borrowed others from his friends' collections. Nietzsche's personal friends involved in Indian studies include Paul Deussen, renowned for his Upanishadic studies, and the Buddhistologist Ernst Windisch.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps most significantly, Nietzsche's personal experience of intense existential angst led him on occasion to peruse Buddhist scripture as a potential source of inspiration and relief. Vedic and Buddhist philosophy, which is founded on the premise that life is suffering, afforded Nietzsche therapy for his psychological and physical afflictions. Of course, it must be remembered that Nietzsche's absorption of Buddhist writings must be viewed within the context of nineteenth-century European scholarship which glossed over subtle and not-so-subtle distinctions, and permitted the otherwise inconceivable lumping together of Buddhist and Brahmanist philosophies.

Perhaps no other thinker's life is as amply marked by suffering as Nietzsche's. Although the etiology of his varied illnesses remain unclear, he complained throughout his life of severe headaches, blindness, and bouts of vomiting, which often kept him in bed for days at a time. In 1889, at the age of 45, Nietzsche suffered a final mental breakdown, which rendered him "mad" until his death in August 1900. Peter Gast, writing to their mutual friend Franz Overbeck of Nietzsche's April 1884 visit, comments that his predominant mood reflected "a distress so profound that I am wondering whether anyone has ever suffered so much. Indeed, who else has had the experience of feeling with every fibre in his body that 'the values of all things must be reassessed.'"<sup>5</sup> For Nietzsche, physiological discomfort was interwoven with his philosophical project to reappraise the significance of existence. Ronald Hayman, whose biography of Nietzsche is devoted to chronicling Nietzsche's deteriorating health as a manifestation of profound existential crisis, argues

that, "One of the reasons his case history is important is that with his headaches, his vomiting and his madness, he was, more directly than any other thinker, living out the consequences of losing faith in a system of belief which is now generally discredited."<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche seemed aware that his physical distress was a manifestation of psychological turmoil and anxiety.<sup>7</sup> On at least two occasions, the death of Richard Wagner and Nietzsche's friend Erwin Rhode's extreme ambivalence over leave-taking at a train station, Nietzsche manifested physical ailments as a result of his own emotional distress, and again was confined to bed for days.<sup>8</sup> In any case, whatever the diagnosis of Nietzsche's infirmity, it is clear from his correspondence and his own accounts of his bedridden periods that he felt himself to be suffering incarnate. In his 1880 New Year's greeting to Dr. Otto Eiser, Nietzsche writes,

My existence is a fearful burden. I would have thrown it off long ago if I had not been making the most instructive tests and experiments on mental and moral questions in precisely this condition of *suffering and almost complete renunciation*. . . . On the whole I am happier than ever before. And yet, continual pain; for many hours of the day a feeling closely akin to sea-sickness, a semi-paralysis which makes it difficult to speak, alternating with furious attacks. . . . My consolation is my thoughts and perspectives. I write nothing at a desk, but on my way here and there I scribble on a scrap of paper.<sup>9</sup>

As Hayman convincingly argues, Nietzsche's suffering was at least in part a manifestation of mental anguish triggered by profound existential crisis. The nineteenth-century unraveling of the Christian theodicy, which Nietzsche epitomized, raised uncomfortable questions about the worth and significance of existence in a yawning, indifferent universe. In his early 1873 essay, "Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense," Nietzsche locates bipeds in a disenchanting and senseless void:

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. . . . After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the cleverest of beasts, Nietzsche himself must come to grips with a post-Darwinian cosmology. Thus he takes up the challenge of reestablishing meaning in a universe conspicuously devoid of inherent or intrinsic significance.

Nietzsche's familiarity with pain and his fascination with renunciation resonates with the Vedic Hindu and Theravada Buddhist preoccupation with life as a path of decay leading to death. Theravada Buddhism is a life-philosophy centrally concerned with the problem of suffering. The nineteenth-century commentator Oldenberg, represented in Nietzsche's *Orientalia* collection, reported:

All life is suffering: this is the inexhaustible theme, which, now in the strict forms of abstract philosophical discussion and now in the garment of poetical proverb, evermore comes ringing in our ears from Buddhist literature.<sup>11</sup>

According to Buddhist texts, all suffering has its root in attachment to a grasping after objects in the world, including loved ones, oneself, or physical belongings, which are

impermanent and will therefore always disappoint human hopes and expectations. The Buddhist response to suffering is that of expunging one's cravings and attachment to stability, to entities of one's liking, and to "being" in contrast to "becoming." Oldenberg translates Buddha's famous original sermon at Benares, given just after Sidhartha Gotama attained "enlightenment," or entered into the state of "nirvana":

This, O monks, is the sacred truth of suffering: Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, to be united with the unloved is suffering, to be separated from the loved is suffering, not to obtain what one desires is suffering, in short the five-fold clinging (to the earthly) is suffering.

This, O monks, is *the sacred truth of the origin of suffering: it is the thirst (for being)* which leads from birth to birth, together with lust and desire, which finds gratification here and there: the thirst for pleasures, the thirst for being, the thirst for power.

This, O monks, is the sacred truth of the extinction of suffering: the extinction of this thirst by complete annihilation of desire, letting it go, expelling it, separating oneself from it, giving it no room.

This, O monks, is the sacred truth of the path which leads to the extinction of suffering: it is this sacred, eight-fold path, to wit: Right Faith, Right Resolve, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Living, Right Effort, Right Thought, Right Self-concentration.<sup>12</sup>

Attachment to the self and to "things" leads people to have unfulfillable expectations, and therefore to suffer. People are attached to "being," to permanence. Only through relinquishing thirst for being can humans attain peace and serenity. Nietzsche would similarly conclude that people seek permanence, stability, and cognitive security. Nietzsche's critique of truth as limited to being, and motivated by a thirst for being, can be thought of as an extension of the Buddhist analysis of human psychology to encompass the category of truth. In addition, Nietzsche directly responded to what he took to be Buddhism's fatal blunder of negating life. Instead of extinguishing attachment, Nietzsche proposed radical and total attachment to each moment, pleasurable or not.

If we accept that Nietzsche personally sought to alleviate his own suffering through reading Vedic and Buddhist texts and commentaries, it can be concluded that Buddhist themes played a significant role in his existential ruminations. Supporting this supposition, on December 8, 1875, Nietzsche complains to his friend Rhode,

Each two or three weeks I spend about thirty-six hours in bed in real torment of the sort you know. . . . With new courses etc. the day is so exhausting that by the evening I have no appetite left for living, and feel surprised at how hard life is. It really does not seem worthwhile all this torture.<sup>13</sup>

Following this malaise, Nietzsche sought relief from a book of Indian proverbs sent to him by Baron Carl von Gersdorff, and from an English translation of a Buddhist book lent to him by a friend.<sup>14</sup> Five days later, Nietzsche reported to Gersdorff, "Honestly, I admire the beautiful instinct of your friendship—hopefully the expression does not sound too bestial to you—that right now you had to hit upon these *Indian* sayings while in the past two months I looked around at India with a kind of growing thirst." He continued,

I borrowed . . . the English translation of the *Sutta Nipata*, something from the Buddhist scriptures, and have already made domestic use of one of the refrains from a *Sutta*: "Thus I wander, lonely as a rhinoceros." The rendering of the unworthiness of life and of the deception of all goals often impresses itself upon me so strongly, particularly when I am lying ill in bed, that I long to hear something more of it, unadulterated, however, by Jewish-Christian idioms. . . . The will to cognition may remain as the last domain of the will to life, as a kind of interim realm between willing and willing-no-more, a kind of *purgatory* in so far as we look back upon life with dissatisfaction and contempt, and a piece of nirvana in so far as the soul approaches therewith the state of pure vision.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, Indian philosophy in the form of Buddhism had captured Nietzsche's imagination and provided him with an alternative to faith-based Christian theology.

It is one thing for a philosopher to make a reference in private correspondence, and quite another for him to make a similar reference in a formally published work. Thus it is even more significant that in the preface to *The Gay Science* Nietzsche lauds the Buddhist response to the human condition: self-overcoming and self-mastery implicit in relinquishing attachment to the self. Nietzsche autobiographically comments,

Whether we learn to pit our pride, our scorn, our will power against it, equaling the American Indian who, however tortured, repays his torturer with the malice of his tongue; or whether we withdraw from pain into that Oriental Nothing—called Nirvana—into mute, rigid, deaf resignation, self-forgetting, self-extinction: out of such long and dangerous exercises of self-mastery one emerges as a different person, with a few more question marks—above all with the *will* henceforth to question further, more deeply, severely, harshly, fully and quietly than one had questioned heretofore.<sup>16</sup>

Nietzsche, at the least metaphorically, and possibly even literally, regards his own attempts to surmount suffering in the Buddhist terms of disciplined self-oblivion.

## II. Early Nietzsche: Truth as Aesthetic Revelry

A tremendous evolution occurs from the early Nietzsche's attempt to apprehend truth via a route of selflessness to the mature Nietzsche's conclusion that truth and being are projected onto the world as a function of a misconstrued selfhood. The basis of Nietzsche's questioning shifts from the traditional Western predilection for discovering, if not truth itself, then at least the philosophical basis of truth, to the position that the entire philosophical apparatus requisite for truth-seeking is driven by a deep-seated desire for certainty, permanence, and cognitive security.

For the young Nietzsche, truth—or accurate knowledge of the world—divided into two sets of issues, those relating to the status of truth claims, and those relating to the supposed objectivity of the truth-seeker; the question of truth is an intricate interplay between the condition of the knower and the status of the truth claim. Nietzsche asks how disinterested truth can be attained by living entities with objectives and ambitions. He is concerned not only with the manner in which perspectives slant truths, but also how individuals' drives and aims intercede in their appraisal of "truth."

Nietzsche resided in a post-Darwinian world and had deeply imbibed Schopenhauer's purposeless cosmology. From his earliest published writings of the 1870s, he regarded the status of knowledge in terms of the history of the human species and its struggle for survival. Knowledge has served the function of enabling humans to master their environment and to dictate more effectively their living conditions. However, the early Nietzsche holds out the hope that some sort of divestment from practical consequences could be a criterion for a more genuine appraisal of truth. This early hope creates a tension and leads Nietzsche relentlessly to pursue the possibility that such a divestment, or inversion of survival imperatives, exists.

Nietzsche's narrative about truth and knowledge is developed in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." He states that the human intellect has aided human beings in their livelihoods, but at first it does so via deception; individuals compete with one another to gain the upper hand and find it convenient to prevaricate in order to achieve their ends. Truth emerges only as a criterion of sociability. Humans are social creatures, and in order to coexist, uniform standards for the use of words are agreed upon: "That is to say, a uniformly valid and binding designation is invented for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth."<sup>17</sup> Truth becomes a tautological system of manufactured conventions of word usage in which words have no meaning outside of agreed upon definitions. As such, "truth" contains a basic deception about its nature: mere social convention masquerades as profundity, all the while solely functioning in a life-preserving capacity. Not only do conventions serve as the currency of social exchange, but they also serve to delimit the universe in such a way that it becomes familiar and secure, again serving practically to aid humans in eking out their meager existences. Thus original metaphorical expressions deriving from rich sensory input have ossified into a consistent, undifferentiated conglomeration of syllabic exchange units which delimit a safe and thoroughly familiar environment for people yearning for cognitive security in an awesome and mysterious universe: "Only by forgetting this primitive world of metaphor can one live with any repose, security, and consistency. . . . [O]nly by forgetting that he himself is an *artistically creating* subject, does man live with any repose, security, and consistency."<sup>18</sup>

However, Nietzsche remains unsatisfied that the measure of truth could be stated wholly in terms of convenience and survivability. As he continues to toy with the idea that there is indeed a superior "intuitive" faculty for interpreting the world, he preserves an insight worked prominently into Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. In Schopenhauer's elaborate schema, a hierarchy of conscious states characterizes the world as we know it, with the inorganic chemical world at the base and with science art, and ethics occupying the apex. Schopenhauer, restructuring Kant's philosophical edifice, places rational knowledge of the world under his rubric, "the principle of sufficient reason," which assumes the role of the twelve Kantian forms of understanding in a greatly simplified form. According to Schopenhauer, rational knowledge is governed by the principle of causation, which forges links between our experience of the world and the world itself. As in Kantian philosophy, this principle of causation is purely *a priori* and cannot be experienced. The more astounding aspect of Schopenhauer's thinking however, is that all rational knowledge is in the service of a subliminal, primitive "will,

and unknowingly serves it by drawing rational connections, guiding strategic actions, and serving to realize motives. Therefore, all reasoned knowledge is impure, tainted, and generally suspect because it is subservient to a blind will and only serves to accomplish practical ends in the world.

For Schopenhauer, artistic contemplation surpasses rational knowledge precisely because it affords moments of escape from “the will”—that blind, purposeless, aimless force comprising existence. The artist in contemplation can achieve a state of objectivity and universality free from the ceaseless strivings characterizing will. This state reaches its apogee in the sublime: artistic contemplation of an awe-inspiring event which actually threatens the life of the beholder. Here the will is subverted because the human subject, the loftiest manifestation of the will, dissolves itself first through attaining objectivity and universality in contemplation, and finally through offering itself up in an unaffected and self-sacrificial gesture signaling the overcoming of its phenomenal, singular selfhood. With his notion of the individuated self dissipating into the all-encompassing and all-embracing oneness of existence, Schopenhauer follows the Hindu thought which he so admired. More precisely, Schopenhauer actually straddles Hindu and Buddhist philosophy. In Hindu thought, salvation—or release from the differentiated phenomenal world—comes through relinquishing singular existence and melting away into the all-embracing, undifferentiated Oneness comprising absolute reality. While Schopenhauer adopts the notion of individuality yielding to undifferentiated universal objectivity, he also lifts a leaf from Buddhist philosophy, holding that the final result of such unindividuated contemplation is not unity with the absolute substratum of existence, but instead resembles the Buddhist Nirvana which transliterates as “extinction,” and can be rendered as nothingness.<sup>19</sup> Thus Schopenhauer works a double inversion into his metaphysical edifice. First, the intellect, instead of being a governing property of mind over matter which grants humans freedom and agency, is instead unconsciously subservient to a subliminal and primitive will. Second, it is possible to “undo” this regrettable state of affairs by exiting the circuit of interminable willing through keen discernment and passive subversion of the will through self-renunciation.

In both “Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” and his first book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche embraces Schopenhauer’s double inversion, aware on the one hand that knowledge is motivated and serves practical ends, yet pursuing the hope on the other that it may be possible to subvert interestedness and egoism by overcoming survival imperatives. This double play continues to be manifest in Nietzsche’s writings through *The Gay Science* (1882), persistently resulting in a paradoxical tension between the vestedness of all action, and the inversion of escaping from embodiment, vestedness, and incorporation by negating self-serving impulses.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, and “Truth and Lies,” Nietzsche is squarely in his Schopenhauerian phase, mimicking the master in his postulation that the will can be nullified, and that objective contemplation is attainable. In “Truth and Lies,” Schopenhauer’s exemplary saint, artist, and philosopher are held out as those who can perform the double inversion requisite for circumventing subservience to will, drives, and impulses. The average man is driven to his everyday truths by the need to take charge of the plethora of sensations he experiences and to carve out a cognitively safe and secure niche. However, the art-

ist, saint, and philosopher can infiltrate illusion by recognizing that truths are illusions fabricated to subjugate the world. “Thus art treats *illusion as illusion*; therefore it does not wish to deceive; it is true.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, these extraordinary few are also able to overcome drives and impulses: “Only a person who could contemplate the entire world *as an illusion* would be in a position to view it apart from desires and drives: the artist and philosopher. Here instinctive drive comes to an end.”<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche suggests that pure knowledge is wholly unmotivated, that “[p]ure knowledge has no drive.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, for the young Nietzsche, a counter-pragmatic inversion continues to insert itself between deceptive truth and true deception. The threshold into free and honest creativity can only be crossed by first yielding attachment to individual security. The artistic route quashes the subject yet provides a sphere of unparalleled free play in true illusion. Self renunciation, an unselfed-self, inherited from Schopenhauer, remains a possibility for Nietzsche, and stands as the fulcrum on which any notion of truth or objectivity must be founded. Nietzsche would soon distance himself from Schopenhauerian-style grandiose aesthetic contemplation, and would look to scientific objectivity to provide leverage on truth. This transition from a lyric, metaphysical aestheticism to paradoxical scientific skepticism is discussed next, en route to Nietzsche’s radical critique that all truths are predicated on a philosophy of being.

### III. Mid-Nietzsche: Scientific Skepticism

Nietzsche, commenting on his own intellectual development, would later observe of his 1878 book *Human, All Too Human*, that he was ferreting out the contradictions in Schopenhauer. In particular, he sought to challenge Schopenhauer’s assumption that disinterested states are achievable or valuable.

The point at issue was the value of the non-egotistical instincts, the instincts of compassion, self-denial, and self-sacrifice, which Schopenhauer above all others had consistently gilded, glorified, “transcendentalized” until he came to see them as *absolute* values allowing him to deny life and even himself.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, in *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche sets out to debunk any notion of selflessness or altruism by detailing how all apparently egoless states have powerful self-serving motivations. The impossibility of attaining disinterested states has crucial implications for humans’ accessibility to truth. Nietzsche reasons, “Knowledge can allow as motives only pleasure and pain, utility and injury: but how will these motives come to terms with the sense for truth?”<sup>24</sup> Notwithstanding his conclusion that selfless states are chimerical, a peculiar tension is sustained during this period because Nietzsche is also working to censure metaphysical thinking, relying on science to do so. Science, with all its skepticism and distrust, proffers a superior vantage point from which to challenge metaphysical world views. However, Nietzsche is then caught in the bind of accounting for how science could afford superior intelligibility; he is simultaneously suggesting that science is just an interpretation, and yet that it is somehow better. He holds that people actually gain a truer appreciation of the world through science, and only falsely believe they do through art and religion.<sup>25</sup> Science is capable of exploding mythologies:

[T]he steady and laborious process of science . . . will one day celebrate its greatest triumph in a *history of the genesis of thought*. . . . Rigorous science is capable of detaching us from this ideational world only to a limited extent—and more is certainly not to be desired—inasmuch as it is incapable of making any essential inroad into the power of habits of feeling acquired in primeval times: but it can, quite gradually and step by step, illuminate the history of the genesis of this world as idea.<sup>26</sup>

Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* is Nietzsche's specific target here, as he narrates the manner in which science will one day explain how the world as idea (Schopenhauer's original thesis) was devised. But in a broader sense, Nietzsche is also opposing any metaphysical or religious interpretation of the world. Still, he retains the dilemma of explaining what attribute of science permits it to provide more valid answers.

Nietzsche's rather unstable equipoise of wanting simultaneously to both have and eat his cake is perpetuated in *Gay Science* (1882), representing the far limit of his so-called positivist period. The dual dilemma of granting scientific inquiry an edge in its world-comprehending properties, and yet denying it the grounds for such potential is nowhere more evident than in his aphorism on "The Origin of Knowledge." According to this aphorism, Nietzsche suggests that somehow truth may subsist as an independent category, even if it is ultimately inseparable from self-interest and self-preservation. "A thinker is now that being in whom the impulse for truth and those life-preserving errors clash for the first fight, after the impulse for truth has proved to be also a life-preserving power." Nietzsche is actively engaged in determining what this sort of vested or embodied truth might consist of. He deliberates, "To what extent can truth endure incorporation? That is the question; that is the experiment."<sup>27</sup> How can truth, traditionally independent from vested concerns, be accessible to beings whose only business is their livelihoods?

By the time he wrote *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche would plumb the "ascetic ideal," as he came to call attempted disinterestedness, or apparently life-negating contemplation, for all it was worth, and would become thoroughly convinced of the unattainability of such states: truth cannot endure incorporation. However, through the writing of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche remains tantalized by the possibility of an unselfing inversion which yields some sort of superior comprehension. Thus he is caught in the paradox of scientific skepticism: the ascetic ideal of ruthless scientific inquiry, supposedly prosecuted independently from the life interests of the knower, simultaneously grants world-apprehending leverage and fulfills a self-serving hunger for stasis and certainty.

#### IV. Mature Nietzsche: Truth and the Philosophy of Being

Toward the end of his sanity, Nietzsche was able to draw together many of the themes he had been developing over his writing career. These themes include truth, disinterestedness, the real and apparent worlds, subjects and predicates as inherent in language, identity thinking, will and willing, and the self. Nietzsche's queries culminate in his story about truth and being, in which he concludes that a philosophy of being is requisite to support the concept of truth. He further examines the motivations leading intellects to pursue "truth," and concludes that the pursuit of truth is an expression of the "ascetic ideal," or of the practice of feigning disinterestedness in the effort to achieve certainty

and tranquility. Thus, at the limit of his philosophical journey, Nietzsche steps out of the Western truth-seeking tradition.

The dominant thread in Nietzsche's story of truth and the philosophy of being is the theme of "willing." "Willing," understood as the complex psychology that motivates—among other activities—truth-seeking, is paramount in Nietzsche's mature writings. It is from his analysis of willing that Nietzsche draws the crucial insights which lead him to circumscribe truth by wholly associating it with a philosophy of being. The story unfolds first with Nietzsche taking issue with Schopenhauer's understanding of "the will" as the single *ding an sich* of existence. Nietzsche determines that to start with, "willing" is a complex, poorly understood process, which has been severely anthropomorphized. Next, he proposes that humans' simplified self-understanding of willing, and of agency, lead people to think that an intact and integrated self or ego is responsible for causal efficacy in the world. The human agent as a monolithic, permanent subject is invented. Once the subject is deemed an enduring structure, it is easy to endow entities in the world with a sense of inviolable consistency as well. Nietzsche hypothesizes that a reified notion of self is projected onto the world such that human perception of the world becomes governed by static grammatical relationships characteristic of a philosophy of being. Nietzsche himself recognizes the parallel between his critique of the philosophy of being and, as he puts it, the "Indian critique" of notions of permanent and stable self-hood which similarly are projected upon the world to erect a philosophy of being in opposition to one of becoming. Finally, Nietzsche assesses the motivation behind humans' pursuit of truth, finding that truth is motivated by a craving for unadvertent cognitive security.

#### A. Schopenhauer's Argument

One weakness of Schopenhauer's thought that Nietzsche was keen to avoid concerned the nature of the will. For Schopenhauer, the human agent is not an autonomous willing entity, but rather a manifestation of the *principium individuationis*, and in effect subsists as an illusory phenomenal entity by which the will is able impersonally to perpetuate itself in a more singular, rarefied manner than in plants or rocks. For Schopenhauer, the sole redemption from this ceaseless striving comes through knowledge of this state of affairs and harnessing the knowledge to regain a state of undifferentiated Oneness, "seeing through," as it were, the veil of Maya comprising the differentiated illusions of phenomenal reality. But, since this process necessitates escaping from the will, it is necessarily an entirely passive, unwilled process. Thus, Schopenhauer's ticket out of the worldly state of suffering and ceaseless striving is purely an erudite one of passively yet knowingly ending the striving process and canceling out the will: "*denial of the will-to-live* . . . appears after the complete knowledge of its own inner being has become for it the quieter of all willing."<sup>28</sup> The will characterizes all existence, and the only release is into the void of nothingness, wherein the manufactured illusion of the self ceases to exist; the self is no longer the surface phenomenon of an underlying blind motive force harnessing the individual in its aimless and constant motion, nor is it any primal substance.

Over the years, Nietzsche grew increasingly uncomfortable with Schopenhauer's elaborate metaphysical schema. Specifically, he criticized Schopenhauer's notion of the will until, gradually, he had finally turned it completely inside out. The weakness that

Nietzsche actively exploited to perform the maneuver was Schopenhauer's continued reliance on the *a priori* principle of causality, which supposedly governed phenomenal reality, and which human beings comprehended by applying the principle of sufficient reason. According to Schopenhauer, the will constitutes the thing-in-itself, which we are all privy to through our inner-most experience of it; we have direct contact with the sole thing-in-itself of existence, the will, which manifests itself through Maya, illusions of the phenomenal world and individuated existence. When we rationally comprehend the world, we harness an *a priori* instilled precept of causality with which to order our understanding. According to Schopenhauer, causality actually inheres in the world and governs its progression.

### B. Nietzsche's Response

Nietzsche derides what he takes to be Schopenhauer's simplistic interpretation of the will, which doubles as the thing-in-itself of his cosmology. For Nietzsche, our misapprehensions of our experiences are codified and then translated into an elaborate metaphysical scheme: My arm moves and lifts a glass of water. I project backward and conclude that *I caused* the glass to rise since I desired a drink of water. From this I extrapolate that a) I exist as a cause, as a willing free agent; and b) that events in the world likewise unfold due to causes. Nietzsche holds Schopenhauer's metaphysical will to be an artificial anthropocentric composite derived from human beings' imagined perception of willing. Furthermore, he holds that Schopenhauer's principle of sufficient reason, with its two-fold causality reigning in understanding and in phenomena, is actually a projection derived from an unexamined "willing." If we would take the time to investigate what we experience as "willing," we would find that it has been reified, and that we are in a state of delusion about its nature. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche observes, "Now man believed originally that wherever he saw something happen, a will had to be at work in the background as a cause, and a personal, willing being." Denouncing his former mentor's naive view of willing, Nietzsche continues,

When Schopenhauer assumed that all that has being is only a willing, he enthroned a primeval mythology. It seems that he never even attempted an analysis of the will because, like everybody else, he had *faith* in the simplicity and immediacy of all willing—while willing is actually a mechanism that is so well practiced that it all but escapes the observing eye.<sup>29</sup>

Nietzsche is dissatisfied with Schopenhauer's enshrinement of "the will" as a metaphysical entity, and he rejects the naive sense people have that willing is a straightforward process wholly described by intention and causality.

Nietzsche goes on to propose his own preliminary sketch of the will, which connects it with notions of pleasure and displeasure. Nietzsche's reflections on the "will" eventually result in the total dissolution of an autonomous willing self which is instead discovered to be a plurality of drives and impulses. In opposition to Schopenhauer, this plurality comprising willing does not constitute a thing in itself. Nietzsche moves on to a dual critique of the concept of cause, which, he suggests, we extrapolate from our misapprehension

of experience, and the notion of the subject, or the I, holding that each is a manufactured composite considered to be a single entity.

"Subject," "object," "attribute"—these distinctions are fabricated and are now imposed as a schematization upon all the apparent facts. The fundamental false observation is that I believe it is *I* who do something, suffer something, "have" something, "have" a quality.<sup>30</sup>

Numerous passages indicate the prominence of the themes of the will, the subject, and causality for Nietzsche. He writes,

We have absolutely no experience of a cause; psychologically considered, we derive the entire concept from the subjective conviction that *we* are causes, namely, that the arm moves. . . . There is no such thing as "cause"; some cases in which it seemed to be given us, and in which we have projected it out of ourselves in order to understand an event, have been shown to be self-deceptions. Our "understanding of an event" has consisted in our inventing a subject which was made responsible for something that happens and for how it happens. . . . The thing, the subject, will, intention—all inherent in the conception "cause."<sup>31</sup>

Nietzsche deems that our holding onto a composite self leads to the illusion that the world is causally governed; and he thinks further that once the self is recognized to be a composite, many things follow: "When one has grasped that the 'subject' is not something that creates effects, but only a fiction, much follows."<sup>32</sup> Specifically, the consequences of this acknowledgment inform Nietzsche's musings about knowledge and truth. He continues,

At last, the "thing-in-itself" also disappears, because this is fundamentally the conception of a "subject-in-itself." But we have grasped that the subject is a fiction. The antithesis "thing-in-itself" and "appearance" is untenable; with that, however, the concept "appearance" also disappears.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, truth and falsehood as opposites have their origin in a fictional subject that appraises itself as an enduring stable entity, and further projects this sense of permanence onto things in the world. "Truth" as a category is dependent upon regarding the world as made up of "things" which subsist in time and can be referred to with unchanging verbal denotations. I am arguing that the catalyst leading to Nietzsche's insight into truth as dependent upon being is an insight which he self-consciously shared with Buddhist philosophy: the self regarded as a stable, enduring entity is an artificial construct from which permanence is foisted onto the world of flux.

In order to reconstruct Nietzsche's story about being and the philosophy of becoming, I have relied on his notes posthumously published as *The Will to Power*. Essentially, Nietzsche is continuing to expand upon insights which permeate his earlier and contemporaneous writings, so that these notes contain no surprises or apparent bastardizations of published works. In the *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), Nietzsche fully articulates his account of how the "real world" became a myth, or of how people dissatisfied with the world as change, decay, suffering, and death, constructed a superior world which is permanent, unchanging—and is modeled after the misapprehended autonomous self.

Man projected his three "inner facts," that in which he believed more firmly than in anything else, will, spirit, ego, outside himself—he derived the concept "being" only from the concept "ego," he posited "things" as possessing being according to his own image, according to his concept of ego as cause. No wonder he later always discovered in things only *that which he had put into them!*—The thing itself, to say it again, the concept "thing" is merely a reflection of the belief in ego as cause.<sup>34</sup>

Perusal of Nietzsche's works rapidly indicates the extent to which he concentrated on the issues of the self, the ego, willing, and free will. Nietzsche's conclusion that the self is an artificially constructed composite, an amalgamation of deluded notions of willing, serves as a linchpin to his anti-philosophical enterprise. Willing and popular prejudices concerning the self take up much of his discussion in the opening section of *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). Whereas Nietzsche's initial fascination with "willing" stems from his determination to overcome Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will, his language concerning the self and willing continues to evolve throughout his work, acquiring a life of its own.

It is noteworthy that references in his 1887–1888 writings, shortly preceding his eclipse into incommunicative insanity, take on a tone highly reminiscent of Buddhist descriptions of the self. Even more significantly, Nietzsche himself acknowledges that his assessment of the human tendency to seek truth and being is directly related to the Indian apprehension of the self:

Man seeks "the truth": a world that is not self-contradictory, not deceptive, does not change, a *true* world—a world in which one does not suffer; contradiction, deception, change—causes of suffering! He does not doubt that a world as it ought to be exists; he would like to seek out the road to it. (Indian critique: even the "ego" as apparent, as not real.)<sup>35</sup>

As Nietzsche acknowledges, with Indian philosophy he shares the insight that in opposition to the impermanence characterizing dynamic sensory input, humans fabricate an abiding "ego." Similarly, impermanence in the world which threatens the self and triggers suffering is avoided by the manufacture of an artificial, constant world which can be apprehended as "true."

### C. *Being versus Becoming*

At this point the narrative of truth and the philosophy of being must bifurcate into two tracks, which, although intertwined, must be separately pursued. The first track completes the tale of the significance of having foisted being onto the world as a consequence of misappropriated subjectivity. The second track, addressed in the next subsection, seeks to understand the impetus for being to have been foisted upon the world.

As argued above, Nietzsche's thesis is that from an ossified understanding of the "I," being is projected onto the world. "Being" for Nietzsche incorporates an entire category of erroneous abstractions, including that there are things, identical things, things-in-themselves, objects, stable entities, laws, concepts and purposes. A philosophy of being, such as Aristotle's, sees the world as composed of stable entities—leaves, chairs, trees, houses. However, in effect, this visage is only a means of making sense of the barrage of sensory information humans encounter at any given moment.

In his *Nietzsche* lectures, Martin Heidegger has pointed out that in Nietzsche's writings, the philosophy of being, or the codification of enduring objects, employs as its logical foundation the law of non-contradiction.<sup>36</sup> According to Heidegger, the postulate of non-contradiction is the central tenet of Aristotle's logic, which forms a pillar of Western metaphysics. It postulates that A equals A, always A, and only A. Non-contradiction underpins being-thinking because it applies artificial, immutable categories to things which can then be dealt with as changeless, equivalent, stable entities. As Heidegger points out, Nietzsche considers this process duplicitous in the sense that whereas philosophers and average individuals employ identity thinking, they are unaware that their activity is an artificially imposed choice. In other words, being-thinking is a projection of a framework upon the world of sensations that ultimately does the injustice of taking itself to be the actual measure of reality. And, consistent with Nietzsche's earlier surmise in "Truth and Lies," this reifying activity is little more than the attempt to make the world familiar and safely knowable:

The fictitious world of subject, substance, "reason," etc., is needed—: there is in us a power to order, simplify, falsify, artificially distinguish. "Truth" is the will to be master over the multiplicity of sensations—to classify phenomena into definite categories. In this we start from a belief in the "in-it-self" of things (we take phenomena as *real*).<sup>37</sup>

In effect, Aristotle's logic and the philosophy of being are arbitrary intercessions we make in apprehending the world. The postulate of non-contradiction is not a dictum handed to humans by the ultimate nature of existence; instead it is an adoption only made in so far as it affords assurances of the world's knowability and subjugation. In Nietzsche's words,

If, according to Aristotle, the law of contradiction is the most certain of all principles, if it is the ultimate and most basic, upon which every demonstrative proof rests, if the principle of every axiom lies in it; then one should consider all the more rigorously what *presuppositions* already lie at the bottom of it. Either it asserts something about actuality, about being, as if one already knew this from another source; that is, as if opposite attributes *could* not be ascribed to it. Or the proposition means: opposite attributes *should* not be ascribed to it. In that case, logic would be an imperative, not to know the true, but to posit and arrange a world that shall be called true by us.<sup>38</sup>

Nietzsche finally draws the conclusion that truth and knowledge, at least as people know them, are wholly dependent upon non-contradiction and identity thinking, which is to say, "knowledge and becoming exclude each other."<sup>39</sup> It is crucial to understand that once Nietzsche has eclipsed truth and knowledge, he does so specifically on the basis that these terms have heretofore been associated with the philosophy of being, built on the premise of non-contradiction governing identity thinking.

### D. *Ascetic Ideal and the Will to Truth*

Thus, for Nietzsche, truth and being are apparitions which in effect signify the worship of a ghostly, devised reality—not perhaps necessarily condemnable insofar as they are interpretive frameworks—but wholly condemnable because they are artificial frameworks



assembled out of human insecurity. Nietzsche holds that the common-sense thinking represented as being philosophy is one means by which a "real," perfect world is heralded above and beyond an ephemeral, transitory, "apparent" world. In fact, Platonism, Christianity, and modern science are all manifestations of the same urge to rise above the supposedly evil, contemptible, and corrupted world in order to reach a good, perfect, or changeless realm promising salvation, redemption, or certainty.

Nietzsche refers to the human tendency to seek the cognitive security of being as "the will to truth." In Nietzsche's terminology, the will to truth is an expression of the "ascetic ideal," by which he refers to truth-seekers' progress under the mantle of disinterestedness, objectivity, and self-renunciation. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche hypothesizes that the ascetic ideal, the centerpiece of all decadent religio-metaphysical attitudes, is a gross perversion of passive nihilism in that the human being "would sooner have the void for his purpose than be void of purpose."<sup>40</sup> Platonism, Christianity, even science, are decadent in that they prove themselves inadequate to the task of accepting the inherent meaninglessness of existence, opting instead to posit an ideal, true, meaningful world. The ascetic ideal as expressed in the will to truth is degenerate first because ascetics seek respite from the world of becoming, decay, and death, and second because ascetics delude themselves as to their own nature by affecting disinterestedness and self-negation. At the root of Nietzsche's distrust of the claim to disinterestedness is truth-seekers' keen motivation to counter instability, change, and meaninglessness with permanence, order, and purpose.

So, in the end, "truth" is doubly suspect for Nietzsche. It is based upon an artificially abstracted view of the world which may be due to a biological compulsion to avoid contradiction, but "[n]ot being able to contradict is proof of an incapacity, not of 'truth.'"<sup>41</sup> In addition, hankering after truths and ideal worlds is a sign of a negation of life, change, and becoming. Truth and ideality, for Nietzsche, stem from an inability to affirm existence.

Nietzsche's critique of the philosophy of being and the will to truth, then, as he himself readily acknowledges, resembles the traditional Buddhist critique he was familiar with: dissatisfaction with the impermanent realm of becoming and suffering motivates humans to artificially construct a true world composed of enduring human subjects and immutable objects which become represented in grammatical constructions dependent upon the identity logic of non-contradiction. As truth-seekers, people don the cape of disinterestedness and objectivity, however worship of being is motivated by yearning for peace and stability.

#### V. Nietzsche's *Eternal Return as the Inverse of Nirvana*

As previously recounted, Nietzsche undermines the status of truth claims by arguing that truths are by their nature limited to being tautological identities set in abstract grammatical expressions which have reified the sensory flux characterizing human existence. As well, he is intent upon refuting the notion that disinterested states are achievable. Nietzsche goes on to contend that asceticism represents one of the *most* interested states because the greatest motive propelling it is that of coping with existence. Human existence is characterized by impermanence, suffering, disease and death. One profound mystery of existence is the question "why do I suffer?" Traditionally, the ascetic priest answered this grand query, responding, "you are to blame for your suffering; you are the cause."<sup>42</sup> Individuals

were held responsible for their own pathetic condition, and the path out of suffering was that of escape from change, decay, and death through self-conquest. "In other words, the goal is to utilize the evil instincts of all sufferers for the purposes of self-discipline, self-surveillance, self-conquest."<sup>43</sup> In the case of Platonism, Christianity, and modern science, the preferable world of being was constructed, purposely free from becoming. The ascetic ideal in the form of the will to truth was a hypothetical means of crossing out of the realm of flux and change to that of stability, permanence, truth, and being. However, according to Nietzsche, Hinduism, Schopenhauerian philosophy, and Buddhism are *also* expressions of the ascetic ideal because the latter, too, turn their backs on existence by promulgating self-extinction and self-abnegation. As Nietzsche understood them, Vedic Hinduism and Indian Buddhism preached a "nihilistic withdrawal from . . . [existence], a desire for nothingness or a desire for its antithesis, for a different mode of being."<sup>44</sup> Platonism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism all, according to Nietzsche, employ an ascetic negation of life and plot a course out of the "apparent world." "Redemption itself, that final, complete hypnosis and tranquility . . . is viewed as a return to the ground of being, a deliverance from all illusion, as 'knowledge,' 'truth,' as a release from all objects, desires and acts, a state beyond good and evil."<sup>45</sup>

Thus, for Nietzsche, the ascetic ideal represents a doubly-twisted perversion. It is a supposedly disinterested negation of life, all the while actually being in the service of life. In the dizzying emptiness of purpose, the human will opts to will nothingness rather than succumb to suicidal nihilism. "The fact that the ascetic ideal can mean so many things to man is indicative of a basic trait of the human will, its fear of the void. Our will requires an aim; it would sooner have the void for its purpose than be void of purpose."<sup>46</sup> According to Nietzsche, the will or life impulse in human beings puts forth a null-zone to strive toward in the form of the ascetic ideal, because the realization that there is no inherent purpose to life is unbearable. The null-goal, negating actual existence, is posited because the ceaseless striving characterizing living entities and the phenomenal world is devoid of significance other than that with which humans endow it. Suffering is inherently meaningless. Instead of acknowledging this state of affairs, human beings would rather seek what they take to be a realm of ultimate meaning and salvation, or even vapid nothingness, because at least it provides the life impulse with an objective—even if this objective is a chimera. Nietzsche condescendingly regards Platonism with its ideal forms, Christianity with its other-worldly salvation, Brahmanism with its "desire for *unio mystica* with God," and Buddhism with its "desire . . . for nothingness, Nirvana," as escapes from the province of vitality into a willed nothing.<sup>47</sup>

Textual evidence suggests that Nietzsche regarded the evolutionary progress of the various religious responses to the human condition in a hierarchy of accomplishment. On the highest level, he tended to credit Schopenhauer, Vedantic thought, and Buddhism with having plumbed deeply the depths of human existence. On a lower plane he placed the Platonic, Christian tradition which recently gave birth to skepticism and science. In concluding *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche introduces his plan to write *The Will to Power*, and the chapter to be titled, "Concerning the History of European Nihilism."<sup>48</sup> He writes of atheism as an evolutionary phase succeeding Christianity. He refers to "[h]onest and intransigent atheism" as "the catastrophe, inspiring of respect of a discipline in truth

that has lasted for two millennia and which now prohibits the lie implicit in monotheistic belief."<sup>49</sup> He goes on to recognize that this same evolution had already occurred in India five centuries prior to the birth of Christ, "with Buddha, or more accurately, with the Sankhya philosophy, later popularized by the Buddha and codified into a religion."<sup>50</sup> Nietzsche credits Brahmanism and Buddhism with surpassing the credo of monotheism, with being beyond good and evil, and for proposing a more fundamental skepticism.<sup>51</sup>

Despite placing Indian philosophies on a privileged plane, however, Nietzsche did not fail to critique them fully. In his mind, even though Brahmanical thought, Schopenhauerian philosophy, and Buddhism have surpassed Christianity by repudiating a philosophy of being, they still remain life-negating insofar as they, too, are dissatisfied with the impermanence, flux, and suffering characterizing human life. While they do not postulate a perfect realm of true being, they do advocate a form of passive nihilism in their solution of self-extinction and willed nothingness. For Nietzsche, ancient Indian philosophy in its Brahmanist and Buddhist expressions presents an advance over its Western counterparts with respect to the self-mastery implicit in its rendition of the ascetic ideal, and in its repudiation of truth and being. Nevertheless, its various forms are ultimately life-negating. In Nietzsche's words, "Buddhism and the like" represent "nihilistic withdrawal from . . . [existence in general], a desire for nothingness or a desire for its antithesis, for a different mode of being."<sup>52</sup>

Nietzsche introduces his invention of the eternal return as a direct response to the passive nihilism he believes to be characteristic of the Brahmanist, Schopenhauerian, and Buddhist posture of self-cancellation. Nietzsche specifically gives Schopenhauerian philosophy and Buddhism credit for pushing the envelope of skeptical pessimism which, in its extreme, opens up the possibility of a thoroughgoing life-affirming philosophy which has come to be denoted as the "eternal return." Instead of the total detachment and renunciation associated with Asiatic metaphysical systems, Nietzsche advances the challenge of radical attachment to and rapture in each and every moment:

[W]hoever has really, with an Asiatic and supra-Asiatic eye, looked into, down into the most world-denying of all possible ways of thinking—beyond good and evil and no longer, like the Buddha and Schopenhauer, under the spell and delusion of morality—may just thereby, without really meaning to do so, have opened his eyes to the opposite ideal: the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity.<sup>53</sup>

In opposition to the self-denial and willed-nothingness posited by Schopenhauer and the Buddhists as the solution to earthly ills and suffering, Nietzsche proposes a radical inversion in his challenge to grasp and revel in each sand grain of existence in its passage through the hourglass. For Nietzsche, the Asiatic and supra-Asiatic eye presented the portal through which he could reach his opposite ideal of the eternal return of the same.

Thus, in response to self-extinction and a canceling out of willing, Nietzsche performs his final and grandest inversion on life-denying metaphysical systems. With his notion of the "eternal return," he puts forth the challenge to say yes to every aspect of existence if confronted with the idea of reliving every moment of it:

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 once more and 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. . . .

If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and, innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and life to *crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?"<sup>54</sup>

The totality of Nietzsche's inversion is immeasurable. Rather than seek refuge in a fantastic, static, imaginary realm, and rather than spurning life in will-less negation, Nietzsche counters that the honest test of vitality is to welcome and embrace all existence regardless of its mundane registry of pluses and minuses. This is in stark opposition to selfless transcendence which, as Nietzsche understands it, signifies an emphatic "No" to corporeal sentience. And regardless of appearance, Nietzsche still manages to retain a deft self-effacing inversion because by the same but opposite principle of the ascetic ideal's "no," Nietzsche's "yes" is unequivocally uttered regardless of the personal consequences of infinitely repeatable events. This smuggled-in self-overcoming yet life-embracing twist must be grasped to fully appreciate Nietzsche's eternal return. Affirmation is granted, completely independently from any personal stake. The individual is insignificant as a reified, ego-filled entity, and yet is wholly significant as an experiential nexus. The individual measures life not according to mundane good or evil, or personal likes and dislikes, but instead sets sail by the larger compass of decentered embrace and creative play. The overman is beyond good and evil because these values are products of narrowly construed individuality. Instead of projecting meaning and values as a consequence of narrowly defined selfhood, the overman does so passionately, according to all-embracing life-affirmation.

Thus, for Nietzsche, nihilism signifies "[t]hat the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer." While less courageous souls pursue the null objective of a true, nonexistent, world, or of self-renunciation, so at least they will something, Nietzsche proposes that the free spirit can thrive in a world of no meaning precisely because it furnishes the greatest opportunity for creation. Passive forms of nihilism, such as those of Schopenhauer, the Brahman, and the Buddha, while a necessary step on the path to the transvaluation of all values, are indicative of the lack of creative power at which the reveler scoffs. The free spirit is not discouraged by the lack of meaning but seizes the opportunity to create meaning like an artist with a blank canvas.

Nietzsche's eternal return can be considered a direct response to the willed nothingness or self-extinction characteristic of Indian philosophy which he both admired yet ultimately found lacking. Arguably, for Nietzsche, the eternal return represents the inverse of the Buddhist Nirvana. Nietzsche himself introduced it as the opposite of "the most world-denying of all possible ways of thinking," referring to Schopenhauerian philosophy and Buddhism. Regardless of the fact that Nietzsche may have mal-appropriated the

Theravada Nirvana, and was unaware of its Mahayana counterpart, acknowledging that Nietzsche drew insight into his most life-affirming existential posture from the ancient Indian Nirvana affords crucial insight into the philosophical status of this most elusive Nietzschian concept.

### VII. Conclusion

Nietzsche developed his philharmonic yet discordant philosophical opus in dialogue with all of the world's major existential, religious, or metaphysical systems as available to him in nineteenth-century Germany. Nietzsche's writings concerning truth, the ascetic ideal, and the "eternal return" are best understood when it is appreciated how significantly Indian philosophical systems stretched the range of philosophical possibilities available to him and kindled his imagination. The Buddhist critique of the self and being as reifications stabilized in linguistic expressions provided a catalyst for Nietzsche's analysis that "truth" requires a philosophy of being dependent upon the Aristotelian postulate of non-contradiction. Nietzsche concluded that the will to truth, which characterized Platonism, Christianity, and modern science, were expressions of the ascetic ideal, motivated by a longing for permanence, stability, and certainty. He also recognized that Brahmanist thought, Schopenhauerian philosophy, and Buddhism were alternative expressions of the ascetic ideal, which surpassed the former. The latter approaches to existence were not mired in a philosophy of being; they had advanced "beyond good and evil"; and they required an unrelenting skepticism and self-mastery in that they plumbed the depths of the human existential experience without relying on faith. Nonetheless, according to Nietzsche, Vedantic thought, Schopenhauerian philosophy, and Buddhism, with their emphasis on self-renunciation either through mystical union with God, or through the self-cancellation of Nirvana, are still symptomatic of passive nihilism. In response, Nietzsche envisaged the eternal return of the same, which, by his own admission, stands in total opposition to the willed-nothing he thought representative of the Asiatic philosophies. Instead of the total detachment and self-extinction he took as emblematic of Nirvana, he introduced the eternal return as its radical inverse: fundamental commitment to an all-encompassing embrace of each and every moment of life, regardless of its pleasurable or unpleasurable registry.

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### Notes

I am pleased to acknowledge Bernie Lightman, Hee Jin Kim, and Marty Jay for their roles in the development of this essay.

1. Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*.
2. Hermann Oldenberg, *Buddha*, pp. 252–262, esp. see pp. 254–257.
3. Books in Nietzsche's Orientalia collection included Otto Böhtlingk's *Indische Sprüche*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1870/73); Paul Deussen's *Die Elemente der Metaphysik* (Aachen, 1877);

*Das System des Vedanta* (Leipzig, 1883), with marginalia; *Die Sutras des Vedanta aus dem Sanskrit übersetzt* (Leipzig, 1887); Max Müller's *Essays, II. Beiträge zur vergleichenden Mythologie und Ethnologie* (Leipzig, 1869); Jacob Wackernagel's *Über den Ursprung des Brahmanismus* (Basel, 1877), with the personal dedication of the author; Hermann Oldenberg's *Buddha. Sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde* (Berlin, 1881); and Louis Jacolliot's *Les législateurs religieux. Manou-Moïse-Mahomet* (Paris, 1876). See Freny Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), pp. 16–17.

4. Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, p. 16.
5. Hayman, *Nietzsche* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 274.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
7. See preface to second part of Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); for discussion see Hayman, p. 299.
8. Hayman, *Nietzsche*, p. 260.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 219, emphasis added.
10. Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies," p. 79.
11. Oldenberg, *Buddha*, pp. 221–223.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 211, emphasis added.
13. Hayman, *Nietzsche*, p. 182.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Mistry, *Nietzsche and Buddhism*, p. 17; italics original.
16. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Preface, #3.
17. Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies," p. 81.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
19. Nineteenth-century European commentators debated whether "nothingness," or even nihilism, were accurate readings of the elusive Buddhist "nirvana." See Oldenberg, *Buddha*, and Müller, *Lecture on the Science of Religion*.
20. Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies," p. 96. This and following two quotations from "On Truth and Lies" were notes Nietzsche personally added to von Gersdorff's copy.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
23. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Golffing, V, pp. 153–154.
24. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, #34.
25. *Ibid.*, #29.
26. *Ibid.*, #17.
27. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, # 110.
28. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, p. 383.
29. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, #127.
30. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #549 (1885); again, note Nietzsche's focus on suffering.
31. *Ibid.*, #551 (1888).

32. Ibid., #552 (1887).
33. Ibid.
34. Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 59–60.
35. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #585 (1887–1888).
36. Heidegger's Nietzsche lectures were given in 1939–1940; for the postulate of noncontradiction, see Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 3, part 1, sections 17 and 18.
37. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #517 (1887).
38. Ibid., #516 (1887–1888).
39. Ibid., #517 (1887).
40. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Golffing, p. 299 (III.28).
41. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #515 (1888).
42. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Golffing, XXVIII, p. 264 (III.15).
43. Ibid., p. 265 (III.16).
44. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Kaufmann, p. 92 (II.21).
45. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Golffing, p. 269 (III.17).
46. Ibid., p. 231 (III.1).
47. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Kaufmann, p. 32 (I.6).
48. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Golffing, p. 296 (III.27).
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., pp. 266–271 (III.17), pp. 286–289 (III.24).
52. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Kaufmann, p. 92 (II.21).
53. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #56.
54. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, #341.

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## KEEPING THE WORLD IN MIND: SCHOPENHAUER'S MISUNDERSTOOD REDUCTIO OF REALISM

Douglas McDermid

*Abstract:* In this essay, I focus exclusively on an ill-understood Schopenhauerian objection to realism, which I call the *Inconceivability Argument* (since its conclusion is that realism is inconceivable or unintelligible). The received scholarly view of Schopenhauer's supposedly conclusive disproof of realism is that it is nothing but a simple and familiar fallacy. I disagree; and in this paper I develop three ways of understanding the Inconceivability Argument, according to which Schopenhauer's *reductio* is not an insubstantial and worthless sophism but a solid construction in which some valuable philosophical insights are embedded.

[M]ost philosophical schools have more of the truth than one would have believed. . . . The commonest failing is the sectarian spirit in which people diminish themselves by rejecting others.—Leibniz (Ross 1984: 75)

[N]othing is so persistently and constantly misunderstood as idealism.—Schopenhauer (WWR II: I, 7)

### I

In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer champions a form of transcendental idealism according to which "this world is, on the one side, entirely representation, just as, on the other, it is entirely will" (WWR I: §1, 4).<sup>1</sup> His unique brand of idealism can thus be represented as a conjunction of the following two theses:

**[S1] The World as Representation:** To say with Schopenhauer that "the world is representation" is to say that "its existence hangs . . . on a single thread; and this thread is the actual consciousness in which it exists" (WWR I: §1, 3; WWR II: I, 3). All objects known via sense perception are mere phenomena or appearances conditioned by the knowing subject in two ways: materially (insofar as such objects are nothing more than mind-dependent representations) and formally (insofar as such objects must conform to certain a priori cognitive forms or principles contributed by the knowing subject).<sup>2</sup> Hence realism, which overlooks the extent to which the objects of perceptual knowledge are subjectively conditioned, "starts precisely from an arbitrary assumption, and is in consequence an empty castle in the air" (WWR II: I, 5).