The Madman and the Masters: Nietzsche

1. Orientation

As a way of orienting ourselves within this chapter’s concern with Nietzsche but also within the broader concerns of the book as a whole, I would like to cite two closely linked passages from two rather different sources in the writing of Stanley Cavell. The first is taken from an early essay on one of Kierkegaard’s less well-known works, On Authority and Revelation (perhaps better known by its subtitle, The Book on Adler); the second comes from the fourth part of Cavell’s magnum opus, entitled The Claim of Reason, from a point at which his concern with questions of privacy, self-expression, and self-knowledge allow him to return to Kierkegaard and to link that return with a return to Nietzsche, who is a much-underestimated presence in this concluding portion of the book.

Nothing an outsider can say about religion has the rooted violence of things the religious have themselves had it at heart to say: no brilliant attack by an outsider against (say) obscurantism will seem to go far enough to a brilliant insider faced with the real obscurity of God; and attacks against religious institutions in the name of reason will
not go far enough in a man who is attacking them in the name of faith.¹

You may battle against the Christian’s self-understanding from within Christianity, as Kierkegaard declares, or from beyond Christianity, as Nietzsche declares. In both cases, you are embattled because you find the words of the Christian to be the right words. It is the way he means them that is empty or enfeebling. Christianity appears in Nietzsche not so much as the reverse of the truth but as the truth in foul disguise. In particular, the problem seems to be that human action is everywhere disguised as human suffering: this is what acceptance of the Will to Power is to overcome.²

I find that these quotations suggest two interlinked questions, one for Nietzsche and one for the Christian, from which I propose to begin this inquiry. The question for Nietzsche is this: When we read his many-faceted critiques of Judaeo-Christian morality and culture, should we think of him as speaking from within or from without Christianity? For if, as Cavell suggests, the Christian’s words are, from Nietzsche’s point of view, the right words—if the critical task he sets himself is not to eliminate the Christian vocabulary but rather to recover it for a more human, a less life-denying, use—then he cannot simply abandon them. But how can he retain them and still succeed in speaking from beyond Christianity—from a perspective that can genuinely claim to have overcome the Christian inheritance?

The question for the Christian is this: Is there a perspective available to the defender of Christianity from which Nietzsche’s words of criticism, however radical and devastating in intent, can in fact be seen as the truth in foul disguise? After all, if Cavell is right in suggesting that Nietzsche can only achieve his purposes by retaining the Christian vocabulary, then what he has in mind to say with those words—his attempts to mean them otherwise than the Christian—might well appear to the Christian as an enfeebling use of the right words, as going less far than one can go within Christianity. In other words, is there a way of understanding Christianity that would allow the Christian to think of Nietzsche’s critique as insufficiently radical and insufficiently violent—as failing to see the truly radical violence that the Christian’s words are capable of doing to the purportedly Christian culture and institutions (what Kierkegaard calls the domain of Christendom) in which they are uneasily domesticated?

2. PRONOUNCING THE DEATH OF GOD

In order to begin collecting the material for an answer to these questions, I want to examine in some detail one of the most well-known (perhaps, by now, rather too well-known) facets of Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity—his claim that God is dead and, in particular, the way in which that claim is articulated in his parable of the madman, as recounted in The Gay Science:

The madman.—Haven’t you heard of that madman who in the bright morning lit a lantern and ran around the marketplace crying incessantly “I’m looking for God! I’m looking for God!” Since many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then, he caused great laughter. Has he been lost, then? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding?
Is he afraid of us? Has he gone to sea? Emigrated?—Thus they shouted and laughed, one interrupting the other. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Where is God?” he cried; “I’ll tell you! We have killed him—you and I! We are all his murderers. But how did we do this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren’t we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn’t empty space breathing at us? Hasn’t it got colder? Isn’t night and more night coming again and again? Don’t lanterns have to be lit in the morning? Do we still hear nothing of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we still smell nothing of the divine decomposition?—Gods, too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it? There was never a greater deed—and whoever is born after us will on account of this deed belong to a higher history than all history up to now!” Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; they too were silent and looked at him disconcertedly. Finally he threw his lantern on the ground and it broke into pieces and went out. “I come too early,” he then said; “my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, wandering; it has not
yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder need time; the light of the stars needs time; deeds need time, even after they are done, in order to be seen and heard. This deed is still more remote to them than the remotest stars—and yet they have done it themselves!” It is still recounted how on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there started singing his requiem aeternam deo. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but, “What then are these churches now if not the tombs and sepulchres of God?”

The first thing to note about this passage is that the claim that God is dead is not made by Nietzsche in propria persona, but is, rather, put into the mouth of a madman; the ironic possibilities here are obvious and multiple, but they suffice at the very least to raise the question of how far Nietzsche himself thinks that one might succeed in meaning what the claim appears to say and still remain recognizable as a potential interlocutor (as, say, a writer for whom the acquisition of a readership remains something for which he can coherently hope). The second thing worth noting is that Nietzsche’s madman addresses his claim to two audiences: to the atheists in the marketplace, and to the theists who call him to account from within the churches he visits. It seems fair to say that critical commentary has tended to concentrate on the first audience rather than the second. Perhaps this is because most such commentators would regard themselves as members of that first audience, and hence as most directly addressed in that stretch of the text; perhaps it is because of the undeniably striking fact that Nietzsche’s madman appears to think that it is the atheists rather than the theists who stand most (or, at least, first) in need of the news that God is dead, when one might rather think that making such a claim

to an atheist could not, logically speaking, be meant to convey a piece of information (if anyone knows this, surely the atheist does). But this preponderance of attention directed at the inhabitants of the marketplace has by now, in my experience, reached the point at which it can become hard to remain open to the presence in this parable of the inhabitants of the churches—hard to hold onto the knowledge that its final two sentences actually exist. My reading of the parable is an attempt to work out the consequences of assuming that Nietzsche is equally concerned with both audiences, and that his aim is to reinterpret the self-understanding of both of them.

2.1. The Atheists: Blood, Light, Falling

To think of God as dead is not to think of him as simply non-existent; if God is now dead, then, to be sure, he no longer exists, but he was previously alive—hence, his corpse may still exist and be the subject of a search. But the marketplace atheists mock the madman’s claim to be seeking God by the light of his lantern in the sunny town square; how can anyone think that God might be found in our daylight world? All right-thinking people have long known not only that there is no God but that there never was; belief in His existence was a childish superstition, a cognitive error revealed as such by advances in our understanding of the world, and human maturity requires that we learn to live in the clear, invigorating light of that knowledge. This is why the atheists variously compare God to a lost child, a sailor, and an emigrant in their mockery of the madman; these comparisons betray their underlying assumption that God is an entity of some kind (even if a supernatural one), and hence one whose removal from our list of what there is in (or within and without) the universe leaves the rest of that universe entirely unchanged.
But the madman finds this conception of God as an (illusory) entity to be far more childish than the religious faith it claims to have outgrown. His contention is that our perception of God as nonexistent does not amount to the transcendence of an illusion; it is not a discovery but a deed, and a bloody, terrifying one at that, for which we must take responsibility. We are God’s murderers. His presence was real, part of the living tissue of our culture, our responses, our most intimate self-understanding. His destruction is therefore a radical act of violence, not only against Him but also against ourselves. Hence, the madman compares the death of God to the wiping away of our horizon, to the swallowing up of an ocean, to a loss of spatial orientation; such comparisons assume that God is not so much an entity as a medium or a system of coordinates, and thus that a belief in God is best understood not as the addition of one supernatural item to the supposed furniture of the universe, but rather as an atmosphere or framework that orients us in everything we say, think, and do.

Furthermore, God’s corpse is as yet unburied; the stench of His putrefying culture still lingers in the madman’s nostrils—in, for example, the instinct (perhaps already decaying, if the atheists’ contempt for the madman is any indication) of compassion for the weak and the vulnerable that continues to direct our moral responses even after we discard what we think of as its theistic underpinnings. For the madman, as long as we continue to take our bearings—however roughly—from the values of Judaeo-Christian morality, we maintain the life of Christianity against the decomposition of the grave. Hence, the madman declares that he has come too soon, that his search for God’s genuinely lifeless corpse is premature; the news he brings is not news but a prophecy. For the realization of what we have really done is yet to dawn on us; and only when it does can a higher human history truly unfold.

Beyond the madman’s implicit critique of the marketplace atheists’ superstitious conception of God, and therefore of their
self-deluding conception of themselves as deniers of God, his rhetoric activates three other thematic or allusive registers that help to fill out our understanding of the significance of his pronouncement of God’s death. The first of these turns on his deployment of the image of blood—blood as welling from God’s corpse, as coating not only the knives with which we killed Him but also the hands with which we clutched those knives, and hence as needing to be cleansed from us; but with what water (a question that recalls us to his earlier talk of the sea, and of our taking a sponge to wipe away the entire horizon)? In certain moods, I find that these turns of phrase bring passages and themes from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* irresistibly to mind—as, for example, when Lady Macbeth declares: “Out, damned spot! Out, I say! . . . Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? . . . What, will these hands ne’er be clean? . . . Here’s the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand . . . Wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so pale, I tell you yet again, Banquo’s buried; he cannot come out on’s grave” (5.3. 37–71). Or again, when Macbeth asks: “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red.” (2.2.60). If we were to take seriously the thought that Nietzsche’s words might be intended to activate such an allusion, what would follow?4

First, Shakespeare’s play presents a murder committed by someone who is both prompted to it and punished for it by

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4 William Desmond’s essay “Sticky Evil: *Macbeth* and the Karma of the Equivocal” in D. Middleton, ed., *God, Literature and Process Thought* (Ashgate: London, 2002) links Nietzsche and *Macbeth* in a number of interesting ways, some of which intersect with the issues I go on to raise. For those with an interest in Cavell, it is worth pointing out that his recent essay “Macbeth Appalled” forges links between this play and a number of themes at work in the passage from *The Claim of Reason* that I quoted earlier; cf. the updated edition of *Disowning Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2003).
witches, so that superstition appears as at once facilitating murderous deeds and ensuring that deeds so prompted turn upon the doer, as well as offering human beings a way of sloughing off ultimate responsibility for what they do. These are all aspects of the madman’s understanding of the superstition-filled relation between God’s murder and the marketplace atheists who committed it. Second, Duncan’s murder turns out to be the beginning of a sequence of deaths (those of Banquo, Macduff’s wife and children, Lady Macbeth herself, and so on), just as the death of God is understood by Nietzsche to herald the death (however long drawn-out) of other aspects of Western culture—not only of Judaeo-Christian morality, but also of certain closely related conceptions of science and philosophy. We will look more closely into this matter later in this chapter.

But the link with Macbeth also takes us beyond points we have already established about the madman’s purposes. For example, that link also suggests that we consider the murder of God as the killing of a king; the play repeatedly links the political disorder of Macbeth’s treasonous deed with a disorienting or disorientation of the cosmos, and it thus follows that we should think of life after God’s murder as requiring that we establish a new, decentred mode of inhabitation of the natural world, one founded on a conception of nature as lacking any inherent, extrahuman structure of meaning, and hence requiring a conception of ourselves (understood as simply part of nature) as embodying only the significance we can confer on ourselves (perhaps through festivals of atonement, perhaps through holy games). The task God’s death sets us is thus in part one of overcoming any conception of the natural world as dark, cold, and disorienting, since it can appear to us as such only by contrast with our previous conception of it as embodying an intrinsic order and significance, and so that appearance indicates a lingering nostalgia for a living God, which will hinder rather than help the beginning of our higher history.
Macbeth’s vicissitudes and fate suggest further layers of significance in the madman’s conception of our responsibility for God’s death. For whilst he begins by aiming to transpose himself (he imagines himself in another’s place, and hence imagines the murder of that other purely as a means of achieving this displacement), he ends by losing himself. To be sure, Macbeth ultimately ascends the throne; but he always appears, in others’ eyes as well as his own, not so much as the king but rather as the king’s murderer—as the illegitimate usurper of authority, rather than its wielder. And under this self-description he no longer recognizes himself as continuous with the person who originally chose to implement this murderous plan, since the act of murder was meant only to be a temporary stopping-place on the journey to the throne, not a deed that would permanently mark and alter the identity of its doer to the point of preventing him from becoming—from really inhabiting the role of—king. The means to his chosen end thus obliterate the end, and render him incomprehensible to himself; since the deed has not achieved the goal that motivated it, and indeed now appears incapable of doing so (in part because the witches’ prophecy always contained the undoing of Macbeth’s intentions, in part because committing a murder necessarily makes a man a murderer, and hence could never have simply made Macbeth king in Duncan’s place), the doing of it lacks any sense, even to him. Transposed to the parable of the madman, this structure of thought suggests that those who want to live in a world without God must accept that they can do so only if they can accept and even welcome a conception of themselves as God’s murderers. The applicability of that self-description is not an essentially transitory fact, a simple condition that prepares the way for inhabiting a world in which God is simply absent; rather, it travels with us into that higher history, and its continued applicability to us grounds our claim to be living in that new dispensation of human culture. The challenge is for
us to accept this self-description without thinking that it de-
prives our self-understanding of any substance.
But, of course, that is the fate that awaits Macbeth—more
precisely, this murderer is driven mad (and then driven to his
death) by his deed. And this raises the question of whether we
should imagine Macbeth as representing not marketplace
atheism but the madman himself. If so, we would have to regard
the madman as God’s murderer, and the atheists he accuses of
the deed as at best accessories after the fact; after all, if God
has been murdered but only the madman knows this, then who
else could have done the bloody deed? Or perhaps, given his
parting charge that “they have done it themselves,” the mad-
man instead intends the atheists to enact (or reenact) it on his
behalf, their receipt of his prophecy then being the means of
its fulfilment.
Either way, the sense in which the madman can or should be
thought of as Nietzsche’s proxy here becomes a pressing issue;
for insofar as we are prepared to regard his utterances as
Nietzsche’s way of getting a hearing for his own thoughts, his
way of admitting his authorship of them without exactly au-
thorising them—as if so that we might confront them, and thus
our responsibility for evaluating them, in the absence of first-
person authority—then we might ask whether the madman is
imagining or prophesying his own murder, even digging his
own grave. Does Nietzsche expect his words not only to be
dismissed as the ravings of a lunatic, but also to cause his own
persecution unto death—to put him in the position of the sacri-
ficial scapegoat upon whose corpse the human future might be
constructed? After all, his madman does at least ask whether we
do not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy
of our deicidal deed; but claiming divinity is the charge under
which Christ is condemned to death by the Sanhedrin, and the
death Christ suffers is understood by Christians not only as that
of a scapegoat, but as the indispensable foundation for a fully
human future.
We shall return to the issue of scapegoating more than once in the pages to come; but now, I would like to turn to the second of the three rhetorical registers I mentioned earlier—that of light, which I suggest is internally related in Nietzsche’s thinking here to that of Enlightenment, and more specifically to the question: what is true Enlightenment? For the atheists, bright morning—the dawn of human maturity from the black night of religious superstition—is given by the light of the sun, and the clear perception it affords; to bring a lantern is insanely superfluous. But in the light of the madman’s lantern, the sun takes on a rather different significance, particularly when we bring the images of light and enlightenment in section 125 of *The Gay Science* into conjunction with their inflections in section 108 of that work, which constitutes the beginning of the book that contains the madman’s tale:

_New battles._—After Buddha was dead, they still showed his shadow in a cave for centuries—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow. And we—we must still defeat his shadow as well!

This conjunction of passages suggests the following ways of understanding the image of the sun as Enlightenment in section 125. First, the sun is Plato’s sun: it may suggest a conception of goodness not underwritten by a conception of god (or at least not by the Christian conception of God), but it remains for Nietzsche a privileging of Being over Becoming, and so a valuing of stasis over change as well as a commitment to the idea that the true meaning of experience lies hidden behind its superficial flux; as an extrahuman, invisible condition for the possibility of human vision, it constitutes a way of systematically denigrating the everyday, despite its repeated claims to be doing otherwise. The problem with bright mornings is that they make for long and deep shadows. Second, the sun is God’s Son: His
death at our hands unchains the planet from its star, thereby prefiguring and fulfilling the vision of Copernicus, and making it—and us—truly wanderers, strays, errants; but this is precisely the disoriented, groping status that the marketplace atheists refuse to acknowledge as their own. And does not the brightness of the morning underwrite their refusal? But if, third, the sun is Copernicus’s sun, it must be understood as a star whose light needs time to reach us. Hence, our present, illuminated state can prove only the past reality of their sun; its light might outlive, and so conceal, the death of its Platonic-Christian source. For Nietzsche’s madman, then, true Enlightenment remains to be achieved. The bright morning of Enlightenment atheism is in fact dead light, and we men and women of knowledge will remain unknown to ourselves for as long as we continue trying to draw sustenance from it.

The third rhetorical register I mentioned earlier connects with the image of the earth as wandering unchained from its sun; it concerns the madman’s inherently ambivalent sense of us as falling. For “falling” suggests uncontrolled movement, but in a definite spatial direction; whereas the madman talks, rather, of our falling as continuous, as moving us in all directions and none, as amounting to a complete loss of any sense of direction, and in particular any sense of higher and lower—and he thinks of this straying or erring as brought about by our dispossessing ourselves of that which is most holy. If the death of God precisely deprives us of a framework within which to locate and track ourselves, why characterize its loss in terms which presuppose its retention? Nietzsche’s choice of imagery here prevents us from regarding the condition he describes simply as a state of disorientation; it suggests instead the very specific kind of disorientation that Christianity calls “the Fall”—a conception of human beings as originally sinful. Is not the madman’s pronouncement of God’s death verging dangerously closely here (and not here alone) upon a resurrection of Christian words,
a way of meaning them that is not sufficiently unchained or
dislocated from their origin to achieve the kind of human future
that could be called genuinely higher?

2.2. The Theists: Easter Saturday

It may seem obvious that the madman’s address to the theists,
when he forces his way into their churches and sings his requiem
to God, constitutes a straightforward act of blasphemy—
the turning of a liturgical form of appeal to God into an insult.
But in fact, every element of the madman’s proclamation to the
atheists (what one might think of as the prose version of his
song) can be seen as internal to orthodox Christian belief; more
precisely, it amounts to a call (to believers as well as unbelievers)
to remember that Good Friday and Easter Sunday are con-
joined by Holy Saturday—that the cross and the resurrection
are held together by the grave.

It might be worth spelling out this point in a little more de-
tail, by recalling the central elements of the Christian creed and
the corresponding elements of the madman’s discourse. Ac-
cording to their creed, Christians believe that Christ was cruci-
fied (the blood from His crown of thorns mingles with that
from His nailed hands and feet); He died and was buried (the
lance pierces His side to bring forth blood and water, ointment
against decomposition is applied to the body, and it is placed in
the grave); He descended into hell (the utter absence of God,
echoing His cry of Godforsakenness on the cross); He rose
from the dead (the breath of the cold, empty tomb on the disci-
plies’ faces indicating that the Risen Son is bright morning); and
this Good News is to be preached until He comes again (by
prophets seeking a God whose time is both already gone and
yet to come). And underlying each element of this litany con-
cerning God’s death is the idea that we killed Him, that His
death was at our hands, that we are His murderers. One might well wonder: What atonement is possible for us after such a deed? And how could it possibly presage a higher human history? And yet both are promised or prophesied to us.

In other words, the three interrelated core ideas of the madman’s proclamation—the idea of God’s present absence, understood as the result of His death, which is understood in turn as the result of our killing Him—are also central to the Christian proclamation of Good News. Once Jesus is understood as Christ, as fully human and fully God, then the unrestrictedness of His Incarnation requires that He not only be born but that He die; the meaning of His death (its salvific significance) turns upon His willingness to take upon Himself without resistance or complaint the worst that human beings can do to one another, and hence the worst that they can inflict upon their relationship to God, which requires that He suffer murderous victimization; and the hiatus between the Resurrection and the Second Coming presupposes at the very least that the Christian church conceive of itself as relating to God as absent from the world (as well as accepting, if only from Christ’s enduring of it Himself, that human beings can be forced to understand themselves as utterly, but not unremittingly, Godforsaken). Of course, this idea of Godforsakenness and Godlessness as internal to the life of Christ and thus as internal to the life of God can be accommodated only in a Trinitarian context, which allows for the idea of Father against Son within Spirit; but then, without such a sense of internal differentiation-within-wholeness in the divine, the very idea of Incarnation would make no sense either.

It follows, then, that the idea of the death of God is absolutely integral to—although, of course, not absolutely exhaustive of—Christianity. Hence, carrying out funeral rites for God is both an essential moment of any liturgical acknowledgement of Easter, and the most apt expression of the Church’s present experience of God (as absent, because He is between Resurrection
and Second Coming and because He is capable of appearing to forsake utterly even those He loves). So, to say, as the madman does, that Christian churches should be God’s tomb and sepulchre is not to blaspheme against Christianity, but rather to recall believers to an aspect of their faith that is absolutely essential, but often either underplayed or repressed altogether. Seen from this angle, the madman’s attack on faith could as easily be made in the name of faith as in the cause of its overcoming; to use once more a central Kierkegaardian distinction, it confronts Christendom in the name of Christianity.

If, then, we are to make good this version of the possibility I sketched in at the outset of this chapter—that of finding Nietzsche’s way of appropriating the words of Christianity to be less distant from orthodox ways of meaning those words than one might imagine—we must acknowledge that such orthodoxy is not always as current, or as dominating, in the Church’s present self-understanding as it might be. In fact, one might argue that the recovery of this aspect of Christian faith by theologians over the course of the twentieth century—a project whose main stages might be associated with the work of Barth, Moltmann, and Jungel—was itself in large part a response to Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity, and to its impact on thinkers such as Heidegger and Sartre. But the fact remains that this project must nevertheless be understood as a recovery, or perhaps more precisely as a redistribution, of emphasis; even if it took the madman’s critique actually to generate those versions of contemporary Christian theology that can accommodate the central elements of his reinterpretation of the self-interpretation of nineteenth-century Christianity, the (theo)logical space for such internal recountings was always already present in the core doctrines of the Christian faith.

For a detailed and immensely thought-provoking account of this project and its implications, see Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich., 2001).
3. The Genealogy of Humanity

A few years after imagining a madman prematurely in search of God’s corpse, Nietzsche published what one might think of as a prophetic autopsy of that divine body—an attempt to disarticulate or decompose the cadaver whose stench had yet to carry to other men’s nostrils. In On the Genealogy of Morality, entirely in accordance with the madman’s rejection of marketplace atheism’s superstitious conception of God as an entity, and hence of faith in God as fundamentally a belief in the existence of an entity, from which certain moral principles can be established, Nietzsche critically considers Christian religion and morality primarily as a form of life—one in which a certain set of values orients everything one thinks, says, and does. The question he poses in that book is: what is the value—not the truth-value, but rather the real meaning or significance—of these values? The answer that emerges conjures the smell of hypocrisy.

For Nietzsche, the truth of Christianity lies in its veneration of the cross. For it is central to the self-understanding of Christian morality that it commit its followers to a life of altruism and self-sacrifice, in which the self becomes as nothing in order that the well-being of others (particularly the weak and vulnerable) become our exclusive concern. Furthermore, such selflessness is seen as the immutable essence of anything deserving the name of a moral system or code; the image of these values being delivered to us on tablets of stone precisely captures our sense of them as making timeless and absolutely authoritative claims upon us, as manifesting something about what it is to be moral that is ultimately a given, beyond question.

By arguing, in contrast to this, that such morality is possessed of a genealogy, Nietzsche puts in question every aspect of this
If morality has a genealogy, then it has a history; it exists—like any other intraworldly phenomenon—in time, and hence not only had a point of origin (before which it did not exist at all) but also was subject to development and alteration. More specifically, that development displays a fissiparous form; like the genealogy of an individual, morality turns out to have branched in various directions, to have grafted itself onto other cultural strands, and thus to be internally differentiated—to have what one might call a family resemblance structure. And insofar as these variations and graftings are responsive to morality's historical contexts, its identity over time is fundamentally constituted by contingencies—by the vicissitudes of time, by forces and factors that might have been otherwise, and without which it might have been otherwise. Most importantly, if morality has a history, and hence a point of origin, then it might also have an end; other historical developments might spell not only its further alteration and fission, but also its destruction or overcoming.

As well as putting in question the idea that morality has an immutable, authoritative essence and the related idea that it is something to which we are fated beyond question, Nietzsche also assumes that the way to understand its significance is to grasp its purpose or function. This is not in itself an attack on Christian morality’s self-image—its defenders might talk of it as serving God’s purposes for the human race, or as a way of maintaining social harmony; the critical edge in Nietzsche’s perspective here turns instead on his willingness to allow that the function of any morality might serve to drive a wedge between the meaning that morality appears to have (the self-understanding it presents to its defenders and opponents alike) and its true or underlying significance. It is his deployment of this distinction, as well as his emphasis upon the historicality and contingency of the phenomenon under analysis, that most closely connects Nietzsche’s genealogical method with the
various hermeneutics of suspicion practised by Darwin with respect to animal species, Marx with respect to economic and social systems, and Freud with respect to the structure of subjectivity.

Nietzsche’s sense of the contingency of our familiar moral system allows him to take seriously the thought that not only might there be other possible ways of evaluating the phenomena of life, but that at least one of those alternative moral systems had a genuine historical reality (traces of which are to be found in etymological studies, as well as in our inherited conceptions of the ancient world). This is what he calls “master morality”—a system which contrasts good with bad rather than with evil, and which understands as good precisely that which is condemned as evil by its more familiar alternative. Master morality celebrates as good those “noble” souls who can spontaneously and courageously impose their will on the world, achieving their goals and directly translating their desires into effective and satisfying action; and it condemns as bad those persons who lack the greatness of soul needed to achieve such remakings of the world in their own image—the timid, the feeble, the weak, those who defer to the wants and needs of others. What we think of as true morality is a mirror image of these valuations; it transposes their positive and negative poles, and it gives primary emphasis not to the celebration of what it deems good, but to the condemnation of what it deems evil.

This doubled opposition within the moral domain between master morality and its counterpart is explained by Nietzsche not as a sheer accident, but as the result of a historical development. More specifically, Christian morality is a belated and secondary cultural phenomenon; its origin lies in a certain responsiveness, indeed a very powerful negative reaction, to the historically prior value system of master morality. And what in turn explains the reactive ressentiment of Christian morality is that it is designed to serve the specific function of protecting and advancing the interests of those in society who suffer most from the hitherto-unquestioned prevalence of master moral-
N I E T Z S C H E

ity—the feeble, the timid, and the weak (those Nietzsche thinks of as nature’s slaves). Life for them in a society governed by the values of master morality is not just one in which they are as a matter of fact pushed around by nature’s masters, but in which their culture praises these natural nobles for so doing and condemns them for being the kind of people who allow it to happen. If, however, society’s modes of evaluating human action and personality could be inverted, so that the kinds of behaviour that at once characterize and benefit nature’s nobles could be condemned, and the kinds of behaviour that come naturally to the slavish, and that redound to their advantage, could be celebrated; then the lives of the slaves would not only become worth living, but would be reconceived by one and all as the pinnacle of human fulfilment.

Already, then, the overt meaning of slave morality—its espousal of selflessness—stands revealed by Nietzsche as in the service of self-interest. Christian altruism is not just a moral code that comes naturally to the naturally weak and feeble; its function is to serve their own interests against those of others, as a weapon in the war between nobles and slaves. Indeed, insofar as it inculcates a system that punishes the naturally noble for giving expression to their greatness of soul and invites us to take pleasure in the infliction of that suffering, it encourages and rewards an essentially sadistic aspect of our personalities. At the same time, however, it caters to our masochistic impulses, in that it encourages us not only to condemn and repress any behavioural manifestation of such noble impulses of self-expression and self-imposition that might arise in us, but also to root out even their internal (purely mental or imaginative) expression—to scour and scarify our souls as well as our lives. In other words, the inherent cruelty of slave morality turns inward as well as outward. And of course, in condemning any expression of the human capacity to impose one’s will upon the world, as well as any desire to enhance that capacity, slave morality amounts (in Nietzsche’s eyes) to a condemnation of the basic
principle or impulse of life—what might be called the will to power; it therefore constitutes a denial of life, a refusal of the vital core of our own existence and that of existence as such.

For Nietzsche, then, the true meaning of Christ’s cross is not only contrary to, but radically subversive of, its overt significance; Christian morality’s apparent commitment to self-sacrifice is in fact an expression of a fundamentally self-interested, sadomasochistic denial of life. Little wonder, then, that the corpse of the Christian God reeks of hypocrisy; for Nietzsche, Christianity is a whited sepulchre, but what matters most is that it is essentially sepulchral, centred on the tomb of a stigmatized human body. To affirm it is to affirm death against life; and this recounting of the morality of self-denial is aimed not at demonstrating the falsity of its claims but rather at rendering them definitively repellent.

However, to understand the full complexity of Nietzsche’s diagnosis here, we need to recall that his autopsy of the divine comprises in part a disarticulation of it—an acknowledgement of the internal complexity of its skeleton, the sheer variety of its constituent elements and the particularity of their development over time. To take one example: Nietzsche argues that the internalization of sadomasochistic cruelty that is effected through the Christian conception of conscience, and institutionalized in the practice of confession, is the historical seed of a broader cultural asceticism that he labels “the will to truth.” This stance or attitude has its religious and moral inflections, in which extremes of self-imposed suffering are licensed by the invocation of an underlying internal reality that must be sought out despite the punishment that the search inflicts on the seeker; but the same ascetic conception of truth-seeking also finds expression in science (insofar as the scientist conceives of himself as a monk of knowledge, making himself as nothing in order that reality reveal itself to him as such, and conceives of reality as having an essence or rational order that lies behind and hence devalues
the flux of appearances—a reality of Being rather than Becoming), and in philosophy (with its Socratic commitments to the intelligibility of the real, to the search for rational order—whether written into the world or imposed upon it, to the idea that our moral status is immune to contingency, and so on). From this perspective, the body of Christianity has rather more limbs and members, and hence is articulated rather more intensively and extensively, than one might imagine; consequently, its full decomposition will constitute a pervasive transformation of Western culture. Fully acknowledging the death of God will involve far more than endorsing atheism, and far more even than an overcoming of nonreligious versions of the Christian moral values of altruism and self-sacrifice; it will mean scouring science and philosophy of its inherent asceticism.

Another important disarticulation is the one Nietzsche attempts to effect upon the concept of conscience itself. From within slave morality, the possession of a conscience is internal to one’s status as a human being; but Nietzsche claims that the Christian conception of what it is to possess a conscience is a specific, complex inflection of a structure of subjectivity that might be and has been inflected otherwise. He sees the origin of conscience in the human animal’s capacity to see itself as indebted—that is, as legitimately subject to the claims of creditors as a result of its previous actions, and thus as capable of being held responsible in the present for what it did in the past. This is Nietzsche’s basic conception of humans as those animals capable of making promises (and hence of keeping them, or failing to do so)—as binding themselves over time, and thus constituting themselves as one and the same subjectivity despite time’s vicissitudes.

The idea of bad conscience emerges from this more basic idea of indebtedness when the individual comes to reinforce the creditors’ external exaction of responsibility with an internal counterpart, one that is constituted by the subject’s turning its
instinctual cruelty on itself, and thereby establishing an inner, self-punishing voice. But Nietzsche sees a further element in the Christian notion of conscience—an absolutizing of our indebtedness, a searing and relentless sense of guilt, one that conjures and constitutes a sense of ourselves as not just guilty of specific transgressions but as fundamentally and structurally reprehensible and inadequate beyond or before any specifically reprehensible thoughts or deeds for which we might be responsible. On this reading, the distinguishing mark of the distinctively ascetic form of bad conscience is the despairing, masochistic, life-denying conception of human beings as originally sinful creatures.

The point of this disarticulation of the concept of conscience is thus to contest the Christian conception of human beings as necessarily, essentially guilty before God—as sinful simply by virtue of being human. For Nietzsche, that identification of humanity and sinfulness—the burden of the Christian conception of the Fall—is not only a contingent, but also a reactive and secondary episode in our development; it is not just that it could in principle be otherwise, but that in fact it was otherwise, before human beings turned away from an interpretation of themselves in the terms of master morality, and reconceived the necessary indebtedness of their subjectivity in terms of an absolute, self-annihilating guilt. This does not in itself show that Christian values are false, and nor did Nietzsche think that it does; but it certainly shows that Nietzsche’s genealogy of Christianity embodies its own myth of the Fall. For Nietzsche, that profoundly determinative human perversity of the human is to be found in our acceptance of the Christian myth of the Fall; that is, our acceptance of the doctrine of human nature as Fallen is itself the moment of our true Fall, a falling away from celebrating natural nobility and life itself and a turning toward a reactive condemnation of nobility and life as evil. Our Fall does indeed lie in our catastrophic awakening to a knowledge of existence as evaluable in terms of good and evil, our eating of the
fruit of that tree; but since that event is presented to us in
Nietzsche’s recounting of it as essentially historical, and hence
contingent, it necessarily appears as dismantlable, alterable, ca-
pable of being overcome. This is Nietzsche’s way of attempting
to make the words of the book of Genesis mean otherwise.

But does he succeed in his attempt? Our doubts about this
might be encouraged when we come to see that his counter-
myth of our Fall from a paradisal state is ineradicably ambiva-
lent about the value of the target of his genealogical critique.
To begin with, if we accept Nietzsche’s own conception of life
as essentially will to power, and of this will as finding human
expression in our ability to deploy and cultivate a capacity to
remake the world in our own image, then the slave revolt in
morality—its transformation of indebtedness beyond good bad
conscience to guilt and original sin—cannot but appear as one
of the most successful expressions of the will to power in human
history. For human weaklings, lacking any direct physical and
psychological resources to fight the nobles on their own terms
and oppressed as much by the expression of that nobility in
their system of valuation as by their courage and willpower—
for such creatures so completely to revalue those values as to
subject the naturally noble to punitive social critique, to the
internalization of those self-critical values, and thereby in effect
to enslave them to the purposes and interests of nature’s slaves,
is surely more than enough to identify these supposed weak-
lings as eagles in lamb’s clothing.

Nietzsche’s counter-myth thus appears to imply that the life-
 denying asceticism of Christianity must be regarded as itself an
expression or affirmation of life; it posits a conception of life as
will to power according to which life feeds on its own negation,
enhancing itself not despite denials of it but most spectacularly
and decisively through those denials. And this suggestion of
something inherently perverse in Nietzsche’s conception of life
is reinforced by his genealogy of the Christian will to power in
its deflected expressions as various forms of the will to truth.
For if the will to truth is itself an inflection of the Christian ascetic impulse, and if Nietzsche’s genealogy of that impulse culminates in his discovery of the true meaning not only of slave morality and asceticism but also of the will to truth, then Nietzsche’s own analysis is at once a radical unmasking of that impulse and a further expression of it. Even the genealogical method cannot shake off its indebtedness to the historical formations and reformations of the very life-denying, sadomasochistic impulse it aims to uproot; its subversive purpose is essentially a further step in the unfolding of the perverse form of the will to power that is Christian asceticism. Hence, Nietzsche finds himself in the perverse position of criticizing (as inherently perverse) the condition for the possibility of his own critique; and at the very least, this raises the question of whether his conception of life as will to power is not just such that it can find perverse, self-subverting forms of expression, but is in reality incapable of finding any other form of expression. We shall return to this.

Nietzsche’s own understanding of what constitutes an affirmation of life, as well as the indebtedness of his own project to the Christian asceticism it analyses, therefore gives him two strong reasons to celebrate slave morality at least as strenuously as he condemns it. But the entanglement of his own criticisms in the value-system they aim to criticize in fact goes far deeper than this; for the central elements of his genealogical counter-myth run the risk of simply reiterating the Christian myth they overtly deplore. For example, if Nietzsche is to maintain his claim that the true Fall is our world-historically significant but nevertheless dismantlable revaluation of ourselves as fallen, then we must regard the slave revolt against master morality as an event in human history, and hence regard the reign of master morality as itself a historical episode. This reading of Nietzsche’s tale is reinforced by his talk of etymological traces of a human culture in which the familiar words of morality were meant otherwise, and of his citation of ancient Greek literature
as exemplifying the form of life against which the Pauline revaluation of Judaism is a reaction. But it is hard to avoid a sense that Nietzsche’s descriptions of his nobles attain a mythic as well as an archaeological register; their instinctive self-confidence, their willingness directly to impose their will upon the world, the joy they take in one another’s natural nobility, and their equally untroubled contempt for those who are not their peers—these evoke a prelapsarian paradise in which the will to power finds straightforward expression and achieves apparently effortless dominance. By contrast, the vicissitudes of the will to power after the slave revolt suggest an ineradicable perversity, a sense of life as inherently tending toward its own denial, its inner teleology always already awry, beyond hope of correction even by the analyst who most clearly sees the pervasiveness of its deflection from its own fulfilment.

For the mode of existence of the prelapsarian nobles to constitute a genuine, historically realizable alternative to Christian asceticism, we would have to be able to recognize a form of life untouched by the various expressions of slave morality’s denials of life as nevertheless human. But on Nietzsche’s own account, Western culture’s institutional expressions of philosophical, scientific, religious, and moral impulses are pervaded by asceticism; and it is hard to see how human life in society (hence, any human life) would be possible without at least the internalization of the structures of the good bad conscience, and thus a willingness to repress the direct external expression of instinctual cruelty by deflecting it back upon oneself. Indeed, it is hard to see how anything resembling human subjectivity as such would be recognizable without that capacity to introduce systematically a hiatus between an impulse and its external expression; for the concept of subjectivity seems internally related to the idea of consciousness of oneself as possessed of an inner as well as an outer life—a life or stream of thought and desire that can continue to flow in the absence of its external manifestations. But Nietzsche’s rhapsodies about the wholly spontaneous
instinctual life of the nobles have an inveterate tendency to sug-
gest that for them there is no hiatus between impulse and ex-
pression—between conceiving a desire and acting to satisfy it;
the distinction between an event in their interior lives and one
in their exterior lives barely gets a grip. In other words, the
very features of their mode of existence that most encourage
Nietzsche’s inclination to think of it as paradisal are just what
give us grounds for doubting that it counts as a human form of
life. Nietzsche’s repeated resort to descriptions of them as
blond beasts, and beasts of prey, inadvertently reinforces the
suspicion that he is imagining a stage of human prehistory,
a kind of animality, and thereby asking us—in just the way
the author of the book of Genesis asks us—to think of the pre-
lapsarian state as at once a fulfilment of human nature and a
freedom from it.

The endlessly shifting, duplicitous status of the nobles is
epitomized in the peculiar role Nietzsche assigns to the priests
in his account of the slave revolt. For of course, there is a central
opacity in that account, understood as the chronicle of a histori-
cal event. Whilst his analysis makes it crystal clear why such a
revolt would be much to the slaves’ benefit, and hence one they
would want to bring about, it remains unclear how they
could actuate it, when their pre-revolt state is one of physical weak-
ness and cultural condemnation. Nietzsche’s apparent answer
to this question is to invoke the influence of a priestly caste; its
members are sufficiently intelligent to see the usefulness of the
slaves as a means of achieving power for themselves in and over
society, and hence to lead or manipulate them into the revolt
and into an acceptance of the structures of guilty conscience,
confession, and ecclesiastical hierarchy, which will achieve that
goal. But of course, on pain of endless regress, these priests
must be understood not as a species of slave, but as a species of
noble—a branch of the natural aristocracy who happen to see
the slaves as a means of achieving power over their peers.
The problem with this apparently neat solution to Nietzsche’s analytical problem is that this internal branching or self-differentiation of master morality requires that these priests be both recognizably noble and fundamentally distinct from other nobles. To begin with, they plainly possess in the highest degree a capacity to use thought to interpose between desires and action, and to find extremely indirect ways in which those desires might come to be satisfied; in short, they possess a complex interior life of just the kind that it is the natural glory of the nobles, as Nietzsche so often presents them in their unselfconscious, unmediated expression of self-aggrandizing impulses, to lack. And in acting on their plans to enhance their own capacity to impose themselves on the world, they create and defend a value system and a culture that give expression to a pervasive denial of life. In other words, in order to explain the emergence of the perversely life-denying expression of life that is slave morality, Nietzsche has to attribute the impulse that defines it to a branch of the family of natural aristocracy whose status is defined by the lack of that impulse. In short, in recounting his version of the human fall from paradise, Nietzsche has to impute fallenness to some of those who dwell in paradise—exactly the offence to reason with which the Christian myth of the Fall is repeatedly charged.

What I have argued thus far is that, precisely because a number of considerations deriving from his own self-understanding force Nietzsche to conceptualize our emancipation from the Christian myth of our need for redemption as a kind of redemption from it, central aspects of that myth perversely persist even in his ferociously radical attempts to free himself (and us) from it. And it is worth asking, in conclusion, whether these reiterations of the pivotal, and pivotally objectionable, elements of the myth that Nietzsche is attempting to displace with his own counter-myth are not themselves caused by a certain blindness on Nietzsche’s part to another, generally discounted element of that model.
The Genealogy’s fundamental aim is to re-present our slavish self-interpretation in terms of original sin as not necessary—as the outcome of ultimately contingent historical happenstance rather than as a revelation of our immutable essence—and thereby to open the possibility of our existing otherwise, as redeemed from a sense of ourselves as requiring divine redemption. But the doctrine of original sin is always already self-subverting in exactly this sense. For the Christian perception of humanity as originally sinful is inseparable from its perception of humanity as not only redeemable but as redeemed. The shocking, incomprehensible idea that human nature is such that we are in the wrong before God beyond any specific wrongdoing for which we could be held accountable is itself conveyed (and is in fact only conveyable) to us by Christ, by God Incarnate in human form; and that same Incarnate deity embodies the possibility of our redemption from the structurally perverse state He reveals us to occupy. In other words, in showing us to be originally sinful, Christ simultaneously shows that our sinful nature can be overcome or reborn, and hence reveals our fallenness as contingent, as no longer necessary.

Once again, then, Nietzsche’s apparently heterodox project of aiming to redeem us from our conception of ourselves as structurally perverse turns out to reproduce rather than transcend a paradoxical structure of Christian thought. It therefore returns us to the second question with which we began: does Nietzsche’s genealogy of the human amount to anything more that the Christian truth in foul disguise? Now, however, we are in a position to sharpen the question by rephrasing it thus: does his genealogy of morality constitute a recounting of our fallenness and our redemption, which works essentially by transposing Nietzsche himself into the role occupied in the Christian tale by Christ, and hence achieve nothing more than a further exemplification of the perennial human desire to be god—to deny the human? This was, after all, an implication
glanced at by Nietzsche’s madman, when contemplating the magnitude of the deicidal deed for which he claims that we are responsible: “Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?” If so, then Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity’s so-called libel against ordinary, embodied, historical human existence is in fact a further expression of that libel.