
Nihilism and Power: Identifying the Problematic

When texts long outlive their author, it is often because they formulate a problematic, a set of interrelated questions that capture the movement of an epoch, or cause us to think about ongoing human concerns in ways we had not done so before. Knowing a thinker's problematic is perhaps the most important thing we can know about this person's thinking as a whole. Without knowing a thinker's questions, of course, we can make little sense of his answers. Less obviously, the way a thinker formulates his questions often anticipates a way of thinking that transcends his own. Both considerations apply to Nietzsche: knowing what he meant by the problematic of "nihilism" is the most important thing we can know about the nature and implications of his thought.

Nihilism is usually understood as a philosophical doctrine (there exist no objective grounds for truth) from which follows an ethical doctrine (there exist no objective grounds for moral judgment). It follows from these doctrines that the world offers no guidance or limits to human activity. Accordingly, a nihilist usually is taken to be one living a life without intellectual grounds of conduct, a life in which "everything is permitted." For these reasons, those who are concerned about nihilism generally also concern themselves with questions about the presence or absence of metaphysical standards of truth and right conduct.

These understandings of nihilism miss Nietzsche's problematic. Theodor Adorno once noted that Nietzsche was the first to use the term "nihilism" in such a way that he questioned the question itself—namely, the problem of metaphysical standards to which nihilism seemed linked.¹ Rather than understanding the root cause of nihilism

to be the loss of a metaphysically grounded realm of truth, Nietzsche saw it as a symptom of dissolving subjectivity, of disintegrating power, and of a failing mode of living and acting. The failure of metaphysical truth expresses this deeper problem: nihilism is a symptom of an increasingly untenable relation between basic tenets of Western culture and modern experience. Nietzsche did not see the doctrine of nihilism as a necessary or even possible “truth.” Indeed, he did not view nihilism as something that could be discussed on its own terms. The philosophic position of nihilism defies the possibility of rational discourse. For these reasons, he approached nihilism not as a doctrine, but as an attitude, as a symptom of a deeper pathology in Western ways of living and acting. For Nietzsche, we shall see, the nihilist’s psychology and conduct point to more fundamental issues that eclipse the nihilist’s intellectual polarity of truth and nothingness, however acutely conceived it may be. These oppositions of thought in nihilistic doctrine raise the problem of the totality of practical and intellectual relations that make up a form of life.

With the exception of Adorno, commentators have failed to notice what is distinctively original about Nietzsche’s approach to nihilism, namely, his deconstruction of nihilistic doctrines into questions about how subjectivity is organized. Stanley Rosen argues, for example, that nihilism is an intellectual position that fails to recognize moral laws discernible by reason, a position he ascribes to Nietzsche.² But Rosen fails to see that Nietzsche’s problem is not about whether or not moral laws exist, but what subjects are like so that they could act in accordance with moral laws. Nor could nihilism be primarily a crisis of the correspondence theory of truth, as in Arthur Danto’s reading of Nietzsche.³ While Danto raises philosophical questions that are important in their own right, he sees Nietzsche’s primary concern as an epistemological one. Because Nietzsche rejects what is often called the “correspondence theory of truth” (the doctrine that truth consists in a correspondence between beliefs and facts), Danto concludes that at the core of his philosophy is the doctrine of nihilism. In arriving at this conclusion, however, Danto relies on a problematic that Nietzsche sought to repudiate, namely, the question of how a pre-given, knowing subject conceptually maps a world of objects. It is only if one sees this problematic as fundamental that rejecting the correspondence theory of truth leaves no good reasons for any claims whatsoever.⁴ The reason it makes little sense to see Nietzsche as

addressing questions of truth and right conduct is that he is interested in a prior question of what knowing subjects and moral agents are like, such that these could be problems.

Perhaps ironically, the seemingly more radical interpretations of Nietzsche by deconstructionists such as Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man revolve in this same universe.⁵ They rightly assert that Nietzsche is beyond the polarity of a metaphysics of subjectivity and nihilism: questions such as Danto's and Rosen's can only be asked from standpoints Nietzsche rejects. But Derrida and de Man do little to tell us why Nietzsche's deconstructions of metaphysical questions are not precisely the kind of nihilism that more traditional philosophers deplore. They accept the popular notion that Nietzsche lacked a theory of truth, that Nietzsche believed all truth claims to be interpretations without foundation. Thus while more traditional philosophers view Nietzsche's supposed nihilism with apprehension, Derrida and de Man celebrate it. In their concern to deconstruct metaphysical questions, they take us only halfway to Nietzsche's positive, postmodern offerings. What they miss is that although Nietzsche rejected the correspondence theory of truth, his philosophy does include criteria that suggest good reasons why we might want to accept one interpretation of the world rather than another.

Nihilism and the Human Condition

Nietzsche's positive offerings (which I discuss in subsequent chapters) will make little sense, however, without a precise account of what his problematic of nihilism does involve. His problematic is complex and multifaceted, ultimately drawing a picture of how acting, knowing, culture, language, experiences of power, and historicity are intertwined with subjectivity. The existential predicament and historical movement Nietzsche identifies as "nihilism" requires him to go behind modern conceptions of the knowing subject and moral agent, *since it is the very possibility of goal-directed, meaningful action that nihilism draws into question.*

For Nietzsche, the classical symptoms of nihilism—the "feeling of nothingness," the "pathos of 'in vain,'" and meaninglessness⁶—express a failure to relate interpretations of self and world to possibilities of practice. This view of what nihilism is presupposes a view of humans as beings who produce and reproduce both their conditions

of existence and themselves by means of the constraints and resources of history. If one experiences nihilism first as a failure of meaning, Nietzsche understands this failure in terms of an underlying failure of those capabilities by means of which human beings constitute their surroundings, social relations, and selves. In our highest potential, writes Nietzsche, we are creatures possessed of both *vis contemplativa* and *vis creativa*: “We who think and feel at the same time are those who effectively and at all times *fashion* something that had not been there before.”⁷ As I shall detail in chapter 4, for Nietzsche our reflexive sense of subjectivity emerges out of practices that are enabled and constrained by experiences and interpretations. Experiencing the world as a meaningful and valuable place unfolds within this engagement. “We are neither as proud nor as happy as we might be,” he argues, because we have failed to understand the nature of our self-constituting activities and their worldly conditions of possibility.⁸

Nietzsche suggests a structural formulation of the problem in a note defining nihilism as “the opposition of the world we revere and the world we live and are.”⁹ The “nihilist” is “one who judges the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist. According to this view, our existence [*Dasein*] (acting, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning: the *pathos* of ‘in vain’ is the nihilist’s *pathos*.”¹⁰ Nihilism, Nietzsche is saying here, signifies a situation in which our *Dasein*—our “being there” in the world through acting, suffering, willing, and feeling—appears so unrelated to anything we know, think, or value that an orientation toward existence becomes impossible. Hence “radical nihilism is the conviction of the absolute untenability of existence [*Dasein*] when it comes to the highest values one recognizes.”¹¹ The most “extreme” nihilism “places the value of things precisely in the lack of any reality corresponding to these values and in their being merely a symptom of strength on the part of the value-positors.”¹²

The fundamental structural contradiction in nihilism, then, is between humans as sensuous, worldly beings who suffer, feel, and act, and humans as conscious, cultural beings who constantly interpret and evaluate the world and themselves. Individuals lose their orientation and become nihilistic when they cannot fit experience and interpretation together to form a “will” to act: that is, when they fail to organize their powers as agency. Nietzsche is suggesting that this

practical dislocation causes existence *as such* to seem to lack value, solidity, and truth. It is precisely the fact that nihilism denotes an untenable relation between culture, experience, and self-reflection that highlights the peculiar—and in Nietzsche’s view as yet unconceptualized—nature of human agency.

Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism can be structurally defined, then, as referring to *situations in which an individual’s material and interpretive practices fail to provide grounds for a reflexive interpretation of agency*.¹³ Many of Nietzsche’s descriptions of nihilism bear out such a definition; most others presuppose it in one way or another. “The most universal sign of the modern age,” he writes in a note, is that “man has lost dignity in his own eyes to an incredible extent.” Man no longer sees himself as “the center [*Mittelpunkt*] and tragic hero of existence [*Dasein*] in general.”¹⁴ He writes in another that “we are losing the center of gravity [*Schwergewicht*] that allowed us to live.”¹⁵ Viewed in light of the above definition, these comments suggest that nihilism expresses a failure of the powers of human agency.

The above definition, we shall see, provides a systematic sense to Nietzsche’s many apparently unsystematic comments on nihilism. These include his claims that nihilism is

- a. an *experience* of lost meaning;
- b. a condition or *situation* that one is in, regardless of what one thinks about that condition;
- c. an attribute of certain *values* or cultures that provides an illusory sense of power as agency; and
- d. an attribute of the *historical development* of Western culture, regardless of whether those who orient themselves by means of that culture experience the loss of meaning.

For Nietzsche these are not different understandings of nihilism, but different facets of the same crisis of human agency as it has developed in Western history.

The Genealogy of Nihilism

The possibility of nihilism exists wherever human practices have come to depend on evaluations of both the world and the self’s place within it. But only certain historical configurations of experience and

culture cause this possibility to become a problem. Moreover, it is in Nietzsche's genealogical detailing of these conditions that we find that the story of nihilism is also a political story about the relation between oppression, culture, and the constitution of subjects. Nietzsche was particularly interested in two historical outbreaks of nihilism, dividing Western history into three grand epochs. The first instances of nihilism occurred during the transition from premoral to moral culture (c. 500 BC–200 AD), while the modern occurrences mark the end of the period of what Nietzsche broadly refers to as “Christian-moral” culture and the beginning of some new—as yet unknown—“extramoral” period.¹⁶ Nihilism not only marks the transition points between these epochs but also characterizes in latent form the entire Christian-moral period.

The causes of emergence of nihilism at each transition, Nietzsche's analysis suggests, are to be found in the characteristics of the preceding epoch. Consistent with this, Nietzsche makes a little noticed yet politically consequential distinction between the ancient *original* outbreak of nihilism (*die erste nihilismus*) and the specifically modern *European* occurrence.¹⁷ The distinction provides a further elaboration of Nietzsche's structural definition of nihilism as something that results from disjunctions between experiential and interpretive conditions of acting. Theoretically, a disjunction might be caused by changes in experience. Or it might result from failures of an interpretive schema. Or it might be caused by some combination of the two. On Nietzsche's account, original nihilism stems from the first possibility, resulting from rapid changes of experience, while European nihilism stems from the second and third possibilities, that is, from an internal crisis of interpretation such that it becomes inappropriate to experience. Original nihilism is “original” in the sense that European nihilism could only have developed because of its prior occurrence. This structural sequence underlies Nietzsche's genealogical hypothesis about the history of nihilism, a hypothesis most fully developed in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

The political and cultural content of Nietzsche's distinction shows up in the kinds of experiences and interpretations related to each kind of nihilism. He traces the causes of original nihilism directly to the slave's experiences of oppression in ancient class society. Original nihilism would have been the result of an increase in politically perpetrated suffering. Thus Nietzsche claims that “it is the experience

of being powerless against men, *not* against nature, that leads to the most desperate embitterment against existence.”¹⁸

Nietzsche finds the modern, European case of nihilism in an entirely different source. Here, the cause is not any radical alteration of experience by political oppression, but rather the evolution of Christian culture up to the point at which it finally becomes quite inappropriate to the world of which it is a part: “Nihilism now appears *not* because the displeasure with existence has become greater than before, but rather because one has come to distrust any ‘meaning’ in suffering, indeed, even in existence. One interpretation has collapsed; but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain.”¹⁹ European nihilism results from a divorce between those intellectual demands created and legitimized by Christian culture and modern experience. Any account of European nihilism, Nietzsche argues, must look for the causes of this divorce in a dynamic peculiar to the interpretive dimension of human agency, a dynamic borne historically by Christian culture.

Nietzsche structurally interrelates the two kinds of nihilism, and finds the key to the dynamics and necessity of European nihilism in original nihilism.²⁰ The relation results from the refraction of original nihilism—the nihilism of political experience—into the interpretive structures of Christian-moral culture. On Nietzsche’s account, this could occur because Christian-moral culture interpretively suppressed original nihilism by lending a vicarious meaning to suffering. He writes that the great advantage of the “Christian-moral hypothesis” was its provision of “the great *antidote* against practical and theoretical *nihilism*.”²¹ In the Christian “revaluation of values,” Nietzsche writes elsewhere, the will was “saved,” the dignity of man reasserted, and “the door was closed to any kind of suicidal nihilism.”²² The Christian-moral world view solved the problem of original nihilism—the nihilism of political experience. But it did so at the price of recasting the identities of subjects “beyond” the realm of suffering, in what Nietzsche thought of as the purely imaginary “backworld” of Christian ideals.

For reasons of the conditions under which it was born, then, Christian-moral culture retained within itself the structure of original nihilism, but sublimated into culture. Owing to its interpretive structure, Christian-moral culture in turn produced the crisis of European

nihilism. Because Nietzsche finds the source of European nihilism in this inverted image of original nihilism, he is able to relate the ancient and modern instances of nihilism dialectically through the epoch of Christian-moral culture. During this epoch the individual stood in a contemplative relationship to his own practice, taking guidance from a God and nature created out of political duress.

Original Nihilism and Ancient Class Society

The reason that the structural relation between original and European nihilism warrants special attention, then, is that it provides Nietzsche with his genealogical hypothesis about contemporary crises of subjectivity. His account traces a myriad of relations between political experience, culture, and subjectivity, and it turns out to be a story about how culture can refract oppression and perpetuate domination. His argument in the *Genealogy* suggests that original experiences of meaninglessness—with their correlative bad conscience and *ressentiment*—can only be explained as psychological residues of political oppression. His critique of Christian-moral culture in terms of the situation of the slave presupposes a background understanding of how power permeates culture, and how both affect the constitution of subjects.

Indeed, only in terms of this background can we see how Nietzsche develops his own peculiar brand of materialism regarding culture. New interpretations, he suggests, become a part of culture because there is a need for them, often a need that is a result of political experience. New interpretations are “practical” in the sense that they speak to the “human, all-too-human” motive to understand oneself as the subject of one’s present and future. Thus Nietzsche looks upon the psychological residues of violence with great interest: they provide the soil that gives rise to moments of great interpretive creativity under pressures of the need for a “will”—that is, for a reflexive interpretation of agency.²³

Still, the constraints of political experience dictate that cultural creativity cannot assume just any form. Nietzsche finds this particularly significant for explaining why Christian-moral culture developed the kinds of interpretations it did. Experience acts as a constraint on possible interpretations, and violent experience so constrains the possibilities of meaningful interpretation that the oppressed

are driven to find meaning outside of experience altogether: they take flight from experiential reality into an imaginary world. As Nietzsche explains it, sometimes whole classes of people are confronted with situations in which they must “will nothingness” or not will at all.²⁴ Nietzsche’s account of modern, European nihilism will make most sense, then, on the assumption that he construes the political experiences that generate original nihilism as the pervasive events of Western history. Like Hegel (and partly in parody), Nietzsche casts these events as a dialectic of master and slave.

Because Nietzsche’s typology of master and slave has implications for his account of nihilism, it is important to notice that it is more subtle than most commentators appreciate. The concepts do not, for example, denote different kinds of natures from which different political consequences flow. Gilles Deleuze makes this mistake when he equates mastery and slavery with “active” and “reactive” types of forces, from which he then deduces Nietzsche’s critique of slave morality.²⁵ But for Nietzsche, positing originating principles from which empirical consequences might be deduced is a kind of uncritical metaphysics, and Deleuze’s “types” of forces are no different in this respect than any other kind of originating idea.²⁶ Nor does Nietzsche’s use of the typology of mastery and slavery signify sociological classes, at least not in the first instance. Rather, Nietzsche is interested in the typical *experiences* attaching to the class situations of master and slave, since these experiences are the raw material of emergent interpretive schemas. By structuring experience, social situations also structure a range of possibilities for interpretive schemas. We find this assumption, for example, in Nietzsche’s general claim that cruelty became progressively inverted and embedded in Western culture: The “ever-increasing spiritualization and ‘deification’ of cruelty . . . permeates the entire history of higher culture (and in a significant sense actually constitutes it).”²⁷

Out of such relations between culture and cruelty Nietzsche understands certain “types” of human psychologies to emerge, and this is what forms the psychological context of original nihilism. The psychological configuration emerging from the slave’s situation he termed “bad conscience.” As Nietzsche considered mastery and slavery to be the primal social relations of Western society, he considered bad conscience to be Western man’s most primal psychology. His anthropological hypothesis—one intended more as a theoretical

claim than as a historically accurate account—is that bad conscience is the psychological moment of the first society. This first society Nietzsche took to be identical with the first *class* society and with the first *state*, both created by a “master” class capable of forging and maintaining these political relations. All of these moments—as Nietzsche’s hypothesis runs—appeared suddenly and simultaneously, as different moments of the birth of civilization: “The welding together of a hitherto unchecked and shapeless populace into a firm form was not only instituted by an act of violence, but also carried to its conclusion by nothing but acts of violence The oldest ‘state’ thus appeared as a fearful tyranny, as an oppressive and remorseful machinery, working until this raw material of people and semi-animals was at last not only thoroughly kneaded and pliant but also *formed*.”²⁸ The origins of the first state, Nietzsche argues—contrasting his view to historically literal contract theories of the state—were not in a “contract,” but rather in the dominion of warrior peoples over peaceful ones. The word “state” once signified a situation where “some pack of blond beasts of prey, a conqueror and master race that, organized for war and with the ability to organize, unhesitatingly lays its terrible claws upon a populace perhaps tremendously superior in number, but still formless and nomad.”²⁹ Moreover, all legal and contractual relations that came to be a part of civil society Nietzsche understands to have originated in violence and to have been enforced by threat of punishment. Behind all institutions of state and economy—at least in their origins—were classes of “masters” capable of imposing them by force.³⁰

The historical accuracy of Nietzsche’s genealogical hypothesis—that societies and states emerged from warrior peoples conquering peaceful ones—is probably quite limited. But historical accuracy is not really the point. Rather, Nietzsche’s narrative makes a theoretical claim about the *psychological* and ultimately *cultural* effect of class society, an effect that he sees as coextensive with civilization, at least through the modern period. The theoretical point has to do with the interrelations between the experiences of oppression and the formation of particular kinds of agents. His claim is about what is presupposed *socially* and *politically* in those several psychological attributes that make society in general and class-society in particular possible, attributes like memory, guilt, conscience, and the senses of duty and obligation.³¹ Thus, “Perhaps there is nothing more fearful

and uncanny in the whole prehistory of man than his *mnemotechnics*. ‘If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory’—this is the main clause of the oldest (unhappily also the most enduring)—psychology on earth.”³² Bad conscience is the pervasive psychological effect of violent social existence. These effects, Nietzsche carefully points out, originated *only* among the oppressed. It was not in masters that bad conscience developed, “but it would not have developed *without them*. This ugly growth would be lacking if a tremendous quantity of freedom had not been expelled from the world, or at least the visible world, and made latent, as it were, under their hammer blows and artist’s violence.”³³

Bad conscience, then, is the psychology of class society that comes to pervade Western culture. In terms of the problem of nihilism, we might say that bad conscience is psychological evidence of a *de facto* inability to will, indicating the loss of the natural ground of meaning in practice. On Nietzsche’s account, the shattering of the will can be seen, symptomatically, in the ideals of Christian-moral culture that come to value selflessness, self-denial, and self-sacrifice.³⁴ Such ideals can be found coexisting with bad conscience wherever the “instinct for freedom” has been “pushed back and repressed, incarcerated within and finally able to discharge itself and vent itself only on itself.”³⁵ The will of the oppressed must become a “will to self-denial” and a “will to nothingness” simply because the worldly avenues for experiencing oneself as an agent are blocked.

Bad conscience is intimately related to, although not identical with, original nihilism in the structure of Nietzsche’s argument. Original nihilism grows out of bad conscience, and all bad conscience is potentially nihilistic, since it indicates that the ground of meaning in self-constituting practices is absent. But original nihilism is a unique moment of bad conscience. It is not suffering, Nietzsche points out, but the “meaninglessness” of suffering that engenders the tendency toward “suicidal nihilism.”³⁶ The movement from a nihilistic situation where purposeful willing is impossible (signified by bad conscience) to a self-awareness of this situation (signified by the nihilistic attitude) has ramifications for the origins of cultural change beyond anything that could come of bad conscience itself. In the case of original nihilism, Nietzsche directs our attention to a moment of

self-awareness that oppression leads to a life lived in vain, a moment when suffering is senseless and has yet to be given meaning.³⁷

Bad conscience produces original nihilism, then, only where it cannot be integrated into some interpretive schema. For original nihilism to emerge out of bad conscience, some existing culture would have had to fail, unable to make coherent existing levels of suffering. One should note here—lest Nietzsche seem to be an egalitarian political thinker—that he did not think it possible to abolish socially engendered suffering. He saw domination as natural and inevitable (see chapter 7). Nonetheless, in his early *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche did hold that suffering could be given a vicarious meaning through tragic drama, so that a class society might also attain cultural unity in spite of the powerlessness of the lower classes. As Tracy Strong has noted, the early Nietzsche's ideal culture would be strong enough, and of the right type, to conceal ideologically the foundations of the state in oppression (see chapter 2).³⁸

But Nietzsche's early assessments of the ideological possibilities of tragic culture fell victim to his later analyses of the effects of suffering on the structure of culture. To be sure, he would have liked to see these possibilities realized, since he had a conservative's view of the desirability and necessity of class hierarchies in society. But he later became less optimistic that a cathartic identity of classes could be achieved in the way he had once thought possible. He pointed out in the *Genealogy* that dominant cultures generally follow dominant power relations, excluding precisely those classes that experience the ill-effects of these power relations. Master cultures tend to be class-exclusive in nature and to interpretively affirm what is already true in practice. "It is a rule," writes Nietzsche, "that a concept denoting political superiority always resolves itself into a concept denoting superiority of the soul."³⁹ Nietzsche's analysis of this resolution of power into culture is perhaps the best-known aspect of the *Genealogy*: master classes tend to affirm actions emanating from themselves as "good" and "noble," while they designate enslaved or lower classes as "bad," "impure," and "immoral."⁴⁰

In such situations the process of oppression is twofold, for a *de facto* oppression is buttressed by cultural exclusion. It is exactly this situation, suggests Nietzsche, that would bring one who is oppressed face to face with the meaninglessness of life, by exposing to consciousness his lack of selfhood, power, and recognition by others. According to

Nietzsche's analysis, a master culture is rarely capable of endowing experiences of oppression with meaning. It is this lack that turns bad conscience into original nihilism.

While Nietzsche's portrayal of the slave in ancient class society is his paradigmatic example of original nihilism, it leads to a more general claim. One can conclude that original nihilism will manifest itself wherever political oppression is coupled with cultural exclusion. Or, more abstractly, original nihilism will result wherever a dominant class imposes its power without a cross-class rationalization of its power.⁴¹ Within the structure of Nietzsche's world view, one can further conclude that original nihilism is a transhistorical possibility for humans *just insofar* as one understands the social and political relations that generate experiences of oppression to be transhistorical. Thus it is incorrect to assert, as Michel Haar does, that Nietzsche understands the first expressions of nihilism to have been caused by an impotent will as such recoiling against "life." Rather, individuals recoiled against particular kinds of social relations, in terms of which they were relatively impotent. In chapter 7, I shall suggest that the political significance one ascribes to original nihilism will to a large extent depend on this specificity.

Original Nihilism and Cultural Creativity

Nietzsche's own interest in original nihilism is even more specific. His construction of the problem clearly suggests a link between original experiences of nihilism and cultural creativity. He wishes us to notice that precisely such experiences give rise to creative alterations of interpretation, since this is an option that can be exercised when goal-oriented actions cannot. Thus explaining the refraction of political experience into culture requires that we consider those moments of original nihilism that Nietzsche thought to be rife among the oppressed during certain periods of history. These moments sometimes led to suicide, but more often to new ways of giving "meaning" to suffering, and finally to the deification of cruelty in Christian-moral culture.⁴²

Before looking more closely at original nihilism and the creativity it engendered, however, let us step back to speculate on what kind of link must exist between the two. Nietzsche hints that it is not only in the ancient situation that nihilism is linked to cultural creativity.

Contemporary revaluation of values, he writes, presupposes “perfect nihilism . . . logically and psychologically, and certainly can come only after and out of it.”⁴³ This claim makes sense if we recall that manifest nihilism occurs whenever there is a disjunction between one’s experience of the world and one’s culturally available interpretation of it. Similar disjunctions are at work in any thought process oriented toward making sense of experience. Nietzsche’s constructions suggest that these creative processes of disjunction and intellectual adjustment include nihilism because they include the moments of disorientation when previous interpretations lose their meaning. These experiences, Nietzsche seems to suggest, can be powerful stimuli toward creative thought and/or action, according to circumstances. Such reasoning is probably behind his claim that European nihilism could be seen as a good thing—even a “divine way of thinking.”⁴⁴ Commentators often argue that this kind of text shows that Nietzsche affirms the doctrine of nihilism, and that he thought of himself as a nihilist.⁴⁵ But such claims miss Nietzsche’s point: he is arguing that nihilism as an *experience* is an inevitable aspect of any creative *process* of thinking, simply because these processes include moments of interpretive disorientation. In comments such as these, Nietzsche is more interested in how thought and experience relate to action and selfhood than he is in the truth status of nihilism as a doctrine.

These general considerations help to make sense of Nietzsche’s explanation of the birth of the Christian-moral world view out of original nihilism. What is decisive for his explanation is the occurrence of political violence coupled with the victims’ attempts to make sense of their suffering. Specific interpretations of suffering are, of course, the acts of individuals, such as religious prophets and ascetic priests. But for a prophecy to become a *cultural* phenomenon, it must speak to a field of needs that have heretofore gone unsatisfied.⁴⁶ Thus, in the *Genealogy* Nietzsche explains why one such field of needs should have come into existence by looking at the political experiences of “slaves.” In so doing, he can account for both the motivation and the content of the slave’s cultural creativity. He can make sense of the motive because original nihilism had to signify an intolerable situation for the slave’s self-identity. Because of its intolerability, the situation was also unstable, dynamic, and potentially creative. The slave, having experienced powerlessness, would have been left with only two paths of action: “suicidal nihilism” or “revaluation” of the

experience of suffering. This is why Nietzsche thought that the psychological residues of violence—bad conscience generally, and the nihilism and *ressentiment* of the slave particularly—must eventually become creative elements in Western culture. Nietzsche can account for the content of the slave's creativity in the same way. Constrained by violent experience, only some kinds of interpretations will accomplish the illusory resolution of the slave's need for meaning, namely, those that reject experience and reconstitute self-identity in some nonworldly sphere.

Although Heidegger and others have carefully examined Nietzsche's conception of the structure of nihilistic values, they consistently miss his explanation of why this structure came to be, and thus its political content. They trace nihilistic values to a "mistaken turn" in philosophical and religious interpretation, without seeing how this "mistake" addressed the kinds of needs generated by oppression. Stated somewhat cryptically, they do not see that Nietzsche's claim that "man would rather will *nothingness* than not will" presupposes a politically significant background of limited options. In this sense, the "philosophical errors" that produce the nihilism of Christian-moral culture are a residue of political oppression.⁴⁷ Nietzsche, in other words, focuses on the interpretive activities of the victims. It is worth noting in this regard that Nietzsche's understanding of the relation between political oppression and cultural creativity is not without consequences for theories of ideology (see chapter 2). His formulations suggest that an ideology is as likely to be produced by victims attempting to make sense of their actual social situation as by a dominant class attempting hegemony. Power is decisive for the origins of ideologies, but often only indirectly, through an experiential structuring of the interpretative options of the oppressed.

Nietzsche's analysis of the psychology of *ressentiment* in the *Genealogy* underscores the pivotal nature of the relationship between violence and interpretation in explaining the origins of the Christian-moral world view. The slave's *ressentiment* was precisely the species of original nihilism that could become creative rather than suicidal. Nietzsche says that *ressentiment* develops in those "natures who are denied true reactions, those of deeds."⁴⁸ *Ressentiment* psychology is thus a species of bad conscience. But Nietzsche's descriptions of *ressentiment* suggest that it is distinguished by a consciousness of loss, the loss of the relationship between goals and actions necessary to a sense of agency.

Thus one who experiences *ressentiment* also directly confronts his predicament, places the blame on the oppressor, and finally asserts the evil nature of life under these conditions while projecting a situation in which life is better.

It is in this sense that *ressentiment* is a special and uniquely creative case of original nihilism. While it signifies a movement toward self-awareness of a nihilistic situation, and while it signifies a loss of self-constituting practice, it nonetheless rests on a retention of self-identity sufficient to recast interpretively the meaning of one's situation. The difference between an outwardly directed nihilism of *ressentiment* and outright despair—a self-destructive, suicidal nihilism—is the degree to which some cultural avenue exists for understanding and identifying oneself outside the culture of the dominant class. This can be inferred from Nietzsche's comments on the situation of the ancient Jews. The ancient Jews were the one group, in his estimation, who experienced slavery and nonetheless deepened their culture over and against that of their oppressors.⁴⁹ This is why among the Jews original nihilism became creative, deepening the Jewish sense of selfhood in the face of oppression and the cultural imperialism of the "master" class. For Nietzsche, the ancient Jews' struggle was the most important event leading to the Christian-moral world view: they introduced into history a cultural horizon that retained the structure of the original nihilistic situation.

But the Jewish "revaluation of values" remained nihilistic because *ressentiment* creativity was only an interpretive solution to a practical problem. Any resolution to suffering that is solely interpretive must move away from experience if it is to solve in the imagination the problems presented by experience. As Weber was later to note, Nietzsche saw in this sort of confrontation with suffering the root of all other-worldly religion and philosophy.⁵⁰ "Who alone has good reason to lie his way out of reality?" asks Nietzsche. "He who suffers from it. But to suffer from reality is to be a piece of the reality that has come to grief."⁵¹ Any interpretive resolution to suffering without a practical resolution retains the mark of suffering in its movement away from the world. The "price" paid by the ancient Jews for their survival "was the radical falsification of all nature, all naturalness, all reality, of the inner worlds as well as the outer."⁵² Yet Nietzsche clearly admired their creativity: "placed in the impossible circumstances," they could survive only through a revaluation of values.

Because the inversion stemmed from a struggle for life, the ancient Jews were “the antithesis of all decadents.” The Jewish inversion of values, as a cultural logic taken over by Christianity, *became* decadent when wedded to new conditions and new people.⁵³ Christianity attained a structure and an internal logic that set the course of Western culture as a whole—thus achieving an importance far beyond its origins. Even so, it retained the imprint of original nihilism.

How Is Nihilistic Culture Possible?

That original nihilism *could* lead to a structurally nihilistic culture once again tells us something of Nietzsche’s view of human agency—this time, something about how the fragile relation between self-interpretation and worldly practices might sustain nihilistic values. In the first aphorism of *The Gay Science*, he writes that “gradually, man has become a fantastic animal that has to fulfill one more condition of existence than any other animal: man *has* to *believe*, to know, from time to time *why* he exists. . . .” Like Hegel, Nietzsche understands our experiences of value to flow from the confirmations of selfhood that result from worldly engagement. Our sense that the world is an ordered and meaningful place follows from our abilities to situate ourselves in relation to the world, to reproduce the continuity of ourselves in time, and to know ourselves to be doing so. Nihilistic values emerge from situations—those, for example, of a politically oppressive nature—that frustrate practices that confirm the effectiveness and continuity of the self in time. Such situations negate, but do not alter, the *need* humans have for self-confirmation, and this is why nihilism can occur. Nietzsche sees this need as a motivating force, one that leads to assertions of the identity of the will even under conditions that defy all possibilities for achieving this identity in practice. In a well known remark, Nietzsche puts it this way: “The basic fact of the human will is its *horror vacui*: it *needs a goal*—and it would rather will *nothingness* than not will.”⁵⁴

What Nietzsche means by “willing nothingness” is that—under conditions in which goal-directed actions are difficult—the will creates meanings that fail to relate to and even negate goal-oriented practices. In the process of endowing the life-world with meaning, the power of interpretive delusion takes over when self-constituting practices fail. The resulting ungrounded values Nietzsche calls *nihil-*

istic values, and Christian values are his most important examples. He understood Christianity to have created a nonpresent, nonexistent, “antinatural” world of meaning—what he calls “nothingness”—as a necessary condition for “saving the will” over and against its actual impotence. Christian values are “nihilistic in the most profound sense” because they exhibit the fundamental structural contradiction of nihilism.⁵⁵ “When one places life’s center of gravity [*Schwergewicht*] not in life but in the ‘beyond’—in *nothingness*—one deprives life of its center of gravity altogether.”⁵⁶

Nietzsche’s use of the term “nihilism” to cover certain cultural values as well as overtly nihilistic attitudes suggests the importance of his implicit distinction between interpretations of the world that are directed toward the experiential world and those self-interpretations that constitute the identity of the agent. With this distinction, it becomes clear how Nietzsche can, with consistency, use the concept of nihilism to refer to both the nihilistic attitude (or sense of meaninglessness) and certain kinds of values (like Christian values). Nihilistic attitudes and nihilistic values share an incapacity of goal-oriented consciousness. Both are unable to attain self-reflective goals through an interpretive and potentially practical orientation toward the present world. But nihilistic values are distinguished from the overtly nihilistic attitude by the self-understanding one has in relation to practices. If the world can be creatively engaged, then one’s sense of self-certainty flows directly from this engagement. While the Christian attains a self-identity in spite of and against the failure of engagement, the overt nihilist is in some sense conscious of this failure and experiences a corresponding lack of value.⁵⁷ The attitude of the nihilist is a reflection without delusion of the failure of power in practice. But nihilistic values such as Christian ones are self-delusions: they veil without changing situations that produce a nihilistic attitude.

Nihilistic Values and Decadence

Because they were nihilistic, Christian-moral values were a pathological antidote to the suffering of the slave. They both affirmed his condition and perpetuated the fragmentation of practice from self-constitution—a situation that Nietzsche refers to as one of “decadence,” a situation of deterioration and decline. The ancient Jews, on Nietzsche’s account, provided the cultural “formula” for decadence.

But it was in Christian-moral culture that these values reflected and affirmed decadence.⁵⁸

Decadence, for Nietzsche, consists in the collapse of this-worldly willing and even this-worldly *ressentiment* itself.⁵⁹ While the Jews retained the reality of themselves as a “people,” the first Christians detached themselves even from this social reality, and all new feelings of selfhood were attained only through a negative relation to reality. A central message of the *Genealogy* is that interpretive structures are closely related to social relations of power. For the powerless this relation occurs through an active process of inversion according to self-constitutive needs. Thus Christian values, especially of the ascetic type, were brought about through a denial of the “natural” world of experience. And the unity of the will was gained through the projection of a “beyond.” Existence was justified only to the extent that it served as a means to this projected end. But existence *as such* remained without value, reflecting the incapacity of the self in original nihilism.⁶⁰

Christian-moral culture comes to affirm decadence because it turns this inverted reflection of violence into a valuative stance. It places a value on the lack of power of the slave and affirms passivity as a means to dignity in an afterlife. Any “feeling of power” achieved by these means is, in Nietzsche’s view, only an imaginery one. The unity of the subject is vicarious, because it is gained solely by interpretation and remains ungrounded in practice. Meanings come to depend on moving away from experience, and on devaluing experiences that are “natural,” sensuous, changing and transitory, and “instinctual.” Hence meaning is gained at the expense of engagement of experience, driving a wedge between Christian values and the ground of meaning in practice. Mind and body become a duality in conception because they are split in everyday life. This is why Nietzsche accuses Christian-moral values of lacking any “contact with actuality [*Wirklichkeit*]” and of substituting a “world of pure fiction” for the world that presents itself in everyday life.⁶¹

Such values undermine the conditions for willing in the process of “saving” the will. It is not that one who lives decadently does not engage in daily activities, but rather that, at least in the limiting case, these behaviors are not properly *actions*, for they are not the result of an intentional agent possessing the resources to direct behavior toward goals. Instead, the decadent reacts adaptively to experienced

powers in accordance with an interpretive orientation “outside” himself—in a God- or abstraction-centered “other world,” for example. This results, in Nietzsche’s language, in the kind of will that increases its “feeling of power” through obedience.⁶² The Christian slave, for example, obeys the master in practice as a condition for attaining a “feeling of power” in his imagination. At the same time, this practice becomes a negative point of reference for interpretation: suffering sustains the split between the actual capacity to act and the vicarious feeling of power, which is attained through values that project consciousness away from the experienced world, and toward God with His promise of a life better than this one. For Nietzsche, then, what is definitive of Christianity in particular and nihilistic culture in general is that they institutionalize horizons of consciousness in which one condition of willing—the “natural” world of experience—is hidden from view.

Nihilism, Metaphysics, and Heidegger

Because Nietzsche extracts this deeper structural contradiction as definitive of nihilism, he can apply the term to all ways of thinking that exhibit this structure. Indeed, *any* values that negate the world of experience, appearance, sensuousness, and change and in so doing remove one essential condition of power as agency are nihilistic in this structural sense—whether these are the values of Platonism, Stoicism, categorical morality, or the Cartesian ideals of modern science.⁶³ Nietzsche argues that one can generally characterize nihilistic values by their polarities of appearance and essence, the “apparent” and the “true” worlds, the world of the senses in contrast to the world of Reason, the real versus the ideal worlds, and so on.⁶⁴ Through recourse to a quasi-Hegelian logic, Nietzsche argues that once such interpretive polarities occur, all categories of “being”—like the true, essential, and eternal—resolve into “nothing.”⁶⁵ “Logical world denial and nihilation,” he writes in a note, “follow from the fact that we have to oppose nonbeing with being and that the concept of becoming is denied.”⁶⁶ Where value is understood to reside in categories of “being,” we are led to judge negatively the changing, the sensuous, the differential, and appearances generally. When categories of “being” are seen as true in themselves, they do not permit the engagement of present conditions, precisely because,

in contrast to presence, these truths are unconditional.⁶⁷ Where there is no way of valuing changing life-worlds, then humans cannot organize their powers as agency.

Without a doubt, the commentator who has done most to illuminate the implications of Nietzsche's claims in this regard is Heidegger.⁶⁸ Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism, he argues, points toward a general critique of metaphysical philosophy from Plato through Nietzsche's own concept of will to power. Heidegger sees "metaphysics" (or "metaphysical humanism") as any way of looking at the world that makes the human subject in one way or another the ground of its objectivity. Metaphysics endows the world with objectivity to the extent that the world fits human values and designs—hence, its "humanism." In this way, the world's objectivity comes to depend on a previously existing knowing subject or moral agent. Although this essence of metaphysics only becomes clear with modern philosophy, especially in Descartes' grounding of existence in the thinking "I," Heidegger argues that it was present even in Plato's claim that the Good is the highest truth, since this claim identifies the world's essence according to the moral values of humans. Along Nietzschean lines, Heidegger points out that the hidden logic of metaphysics is nihilism, since the world exists only to the extent that it reflects human values and designs. But this logic equally threatens human subjects: if the world is nothing in itself, humans lose their place in the world, and ultimately lose themselves.

What is missing from metaphysics, according to Heidegger, is the ability to ask questions about the *possibility* of subjectivity. As he so nicely puts it, the fact that man "becomes the executor and trustee and even owner and bearer of subjectivity in no way proves that man is the essential ground of subjectivity."⁶⁹ Or, to put the same point into a Heideggerian formula, because of the subjective presuppositions of metaphysical thinkers, they can only think about the objective "being of beings," but not about Being—the world that makes subjectivity and objectivity possible. In metaphysics, subjectivity is simply posited; it remains impossible to show how subjectivity could exist at all, and this is why metaphysics must ultimately resolve into nihilism.

The irony of Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche is that, although he relies heavily on Nietzsche for his account of nihilism in metaphysics, he characterizes Nietzsche himself as the last metaphys-

ical philosopher in his own “metahistory of philosophy” from Plato to Nietzsche.⁷⁰ Nietzsche, according to Heidegger, diagnosed the nihilism of metaphysics, but failed to overcome the same nihilism in his own thinking. Nietzsche still asked his questions in metaphysical ways, and for this reason his philosophy became the ultimate expression of nihilism in metaphysics.

The root of Heidegger’s assessment is his claim that Nietzsche’s concept of will to power is the final (that is, self-destructive and nihilistic) expression of metaphysical humanism. He interprets the will to power as an ontological doctrine of becoming and overcoming: in order to overcome itself, the will to power posits values in the form of aesthetic illusions. In this way, it organizes and evaluates the world as a condition of its own expansion.⁷¹ But because all that is true is man’s willful activity, the world turns out to be an aesthetic fiction. In itself, it is nothing, and the doctrine of will to power must therefore collapse into nihilism.

There are three points that are significant about Heidegger’s interpretation in this context. First, the difficulty with his interpretation is not so much his critique of metaphysics, at least as far as it goes, but rather his view of how Nietzsche fits into it. Nietzsche had already produced a similar critique of metaphysical humanism and nihilism. While it is not as systematically portrayed as Heidegger’s, its substantive points are much closer to Heidegger’s own position than Heidegger admits. Indeed, by constructing a Nietzsche that is distant and distinct from himself, Heidegger buries a much more interesting and critical Nietzsche.⁷²

Second, Heidegger interprets Nietzsche’s concept of will to power in a way that is alien to Nietzsche’s problematic. If the will to power were a metaphysical concept in the sense that Heidegger suggests, Nietzsche’s thought would indeed be essentially nihilistic—not only in Heidegger’s terms, but also Nietzsche’s. In chapter 4, I shall argue for what is essentially a nonmetaphysical, and critical interpretation of the concept of will to power. Nietzsche’s concept of will to power includes some very Heideggerian claims about the kind of world that could produce subjectivity. Moreover, his concept is best understood as having a critical epistemological status, one based on the Kantian distinction between the use of general claims as intellectual presuppositions of explaining things about the world and dogmatic uses of general claims to denote underlying essences or attributes of the world.

Third, Nietzsche is not simply a precursor of Heidegger, but beyond him in many respects. Heidegger's own approach to the question of nihilism is idealistic in a way that misses the political content one finds in Nietzsche. In focusing on nihilism as "history," Heidegger is concerned primarily with the inner contradictions of metaphysics as they veil the existence out of which they emerge. But concrete political practices—indeed practices of any sort—rarely touch Heidegger's notion of what history is. To some extent, this is why Heidegger does not develop the facets of Nietzsche that are central to problems of critical postmodernism in political thought.

The Evolution of European Nihilism

In contrast to Heidegger, then, it is well to keep Nietzsche's account of the political background of metaphysical ideas in mind when we look at his account of how Christian-moral culture could produce its own seemingly independent historical logic. Cultures have their own cunning. The cunning of Christian-moral culture, in Nietzsche's view, was to refract the effects of political violence far beyond its actual occurrences. This is why Nietzsche does not trace the immediate origins of modern "European" nihilism—the second major outbreak of manifest nihilism in Western history—directly to political experience. In contrast to original nihilism, he finds European nihilism to be the effect of those interpretations bearing the imprint of original nihilism: "Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests? Point of departure: it is an error to consider 'social distress' or 'physiological degeneration,' or, worse, corruption, as the *cause* of nihilism. Distress, whether of the soul, body, or intellect, cannot of itself give birth to nihilism. . . . Such distress always permits a variety of interpretations. Rather: it is in one particular interpretation, the Christian-moral one, that nihilism is rooted."⁷³ Nietzsche considered it unlikely that nihilism induced by distress would appear in the modern period. Rightly or wrongly, he viewed social life in late nineteenth-century Europe as relatively pacified compared to ancient experience. "Actually, we have no longer such a need of an antidote to the *original* nihilism [*den ersten Nihilismus*]: life in Europe is no longer that uncertain, capricious, absurd. Such a tremendous increase in the value of man, the value of trouble, etc., is not so needful now. . . . 'God' is far too extreme a hypothesis."⁷⁴

It is important to understand that Nietzsche is making a relative claim here: he believed that violence is intrinsic to the social and political world, and that it could not be removed. His claim is simply that violence in the modern era is something less than that of the early Christian era. Since violence is decreasing, Nietzsche reasons that it could not be an *increase* in violence that has produced European nihilism, as it was in the case of original nihilism. At least this is his claim: in chapter 7, I criticize his idea that situations that would produce original nihilism (in general, those of powerlessness) tend to decline in the modern era.⁷⁵ Here, however, it is enough to note Nietzsche's view that any account of European nihilism must be in terms of the tendencies brought to self-constituting practices by their interpretative rather than experiential aspects: "One interpretation has collapsed, but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain."⁷⁶

It is also important to understand that Nietzsche is not working with an idealistic view of historical determination when he claims that nihilism occurs when the "highest values devalue themselves."⁷⁷ Heidegger and many others give an idealistic reading of statements such as these.⁷⁸ But Nietzsche's uniqueness stems from the way he explains the power of ideas in terms of the way in which humans produce and reproduce their lives. Nihilism could never be embodied *solely* within the structure of an interpretation. It must be something we are, in terms of the way we make our life in the world under specific material as well as cultural conditions.

That nihilism is a condition of the total organism comes through even in the fact that Nietzsche used psychological and biological language to write about nihilism.⁷⁹ Still, it is clear that in his use of psychological and biological language, Nietzsche did not mean to suggest that cultural ideas merely reflect what we are biologically or psychologically.⁸⁰ Although nihilistic values may first *express* a (politically formed) psychological need where they serve as an antidote to original nihilism, they later come to *generate* new needs, because interpretations enter into the manner in which practices constitute the self. In this way, Nietzsche understands culture to become a "second nature" and nihilistic culture to cause a nihilistic will. The cultural continuity of nihilistic values, as I shall suggest, stems from the fact that interpretations are embedded and historically trans-

mitted within shared contexts of meaning.⁸¹ Only by viewing cultural evolution as an aspect of “life” in this sense can we understand how original nihilism, refracted into nihilistic culture, could reappear as a crisis of culture in the modern period.

The Two Crises of European Nihilism

Consistent with his view of cultural determination, Nietzsche locates two different processes of breakdown that cause the latent nihilism of Christian-moral culture to become a manifest crisis of individual power. The first occurs within the culture as a system of ideas: for reasons unique to theoretical world views, Christian-moral culture comes to require a certain internal consistency. At some point, in Nietzsche’s account, the Christian-moral world view can no longer maintain its internal consistency and becomes irrational as a system of ideas. The second process runs deeper, and consists in a disjunction between the entire system of ideas and modern experience that leads to a loss of ability to orient toward the world. The modern crisis of nihilism, then, proceeds not only from the increasing *incoherence* of the Christian-moral world view, but also from its increasing *inadequacy* to the world of everyday practice. We find Nietzsche’s account of these two kinds of tensions and their interrelations in what is certainly one of his best notes on nihilism:

Among the forces cultivated by morality was *truthfulness*: this eventually turned against morality, discovered its teleology, its interested perspective—and now the recognition of this incarnate mendaciousness that one despairs of shedding becomes a stimulant. Now we discover in ourselves needs implanted by centuries of moral interpretation—needs that now appear to us as needs for untruth; on the other hand, the value for which we endure life seems to hinge on these needs. This antagonism—*not* to esteem what we know [*erkennen*], and not to be *allowed* any longer to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves—results in a process of dissolution [*Auflösungsprozess*].⁸²

This note contains Nietzsche’s best formulation of the two crises. The contemporary crisis, he is saying, occurs because of a conjunction between our being unable any longer to find a way to “esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves” without hitting upon intolerable contradictions combined with our being unable to find a way to “esteem what we know” or recognize to be a part of experience. I shall call the first antagonism a *crisis of rationalist metaphysics*, or, more

simply, a *crisis of rationality*. The second I shall call a *crisis of legitimacy*. Together they are sufficient, at least from Nietzsche's perspective, to explain the dissolution of the Christian-moral world view in particular, or *any* rationalized ideology in general.

The Crisis of Rationalist Metaphysics

On Nietzsche's account, the crisis of rationality could not happen without a simultaneous development of a specific kind of need for meaning, a kind formed within Christian-moral culture. Christian-moral meanings arise from a need to provide a self-interpretation of agency in spite of practical failures. Once detached from practice, needs for subjective identity appear as needs for meaning guaranteed by other-worldly concepts, theories, and beings; that is, meanings guaranteed *metaphysically*. But since metaphysics is inherently incapable of providing meaning, this kind of demand must eventually be disappointed and result in nihilism.

The reason that metaphysics must fail is that it involves the attempt to find meaning in truths *about the world as such*—as a natural or God-given order—rather than understanding meaning as a product of processes of cultural, material, and self-reflective intercourse with the world. As I shall argue in chapters 3 and 4, for Nietzsche, interpretations of the world can be called “true” in a meaningful sense only insofar as they have the ability to serve as conditions for self-constituting practices within the context of a world with irreducibly cultural-linguistic and Dionysian qualities. The “truth” of interpretations resides in their roles in human life-activities and they cannot be divorced from this context without losing their meaning and value. This is what the metaphysical tradition misunderstood.

Still, such metaphysical needs have lasting cultural effects. Not unlike Hegel, Nietzsche understands the need for meanings that attach to metaphysical truths (what he often calls the “will to truth”) to have deepened and spiritualized consciousness, to such a degree that “truth” in the Christian-Platonic sense becomes a world unto itself. While the unconditionality of Christian-Platonic truth marks its separation from practice, the same unconditionality allows this culture to attain its own logic and rationality of evolution, detached from the conditions of its genesis. A crisis of rationality occurs when conflicts develop between the various claims that the system of inter-

pretation holds to be true. When Nietzsche refers to nihilism as a situation in which “the highest values devalue themselves,” he is referring to these conflicts.⁸³

Especially in its Platonic and Judaic aspects, Nietzsche saw the Christian-moral world view to be subject to an increasing rationalization, even in Weber’s sense of the term.⁸⁴ Nietzsche considered rationalization to have its own teleology of development just insofar as metaphysical “truth” is understood to coincide with “meaning”—that is, insofar as individuals attempt to satisfy needs for subjectivity in contemplation, but not in practice. The slave introduced into history a “need” for truth that had never before existed, since his experience dictated that he look for meaningful truth outside of worldly practices. When this need was exploited and institutionalized by priestly types (see chapter 7), the pursuit of truth acquired a sanctity. Indeed, it became what Weber and Husserl later referred to as a “calling” or “vocation” (*Beruf*), justifying and giving meaning to the unlimited accumulation and systematization of knowledge. Nietzsche refers to this “calling” as the “will to truth.”

The peculiar passion acquired by the will to truth is fueled by another unique and remarkable characteristic of the Christian-moral world view. Because this world view has a split structure, it generates the need for a *specifically* intellectual defense of itself. In *The Antichrist* and elsewhere, Nietzsche emphasizes that the Christian-moral universe holds itself to be true in relation to experience only in a negative sense. It posits a realm of truth over and against experience, one possessing the meaning that is absent in experience. But for the same reason, the truth of this new world is not self-evident in experience. Indeed, it is—as Nietzsche puts it—ultimately imagined, unknowable, and unprovable in relation to experience.⁸⁵ Thus he suggests that one will hold the Christian-moral universe to be true only insofar as it forms, articulates, and consolidates a complete and coherent *conceptual* universe.

It is the coincidence of this drive toward intellectual coherence with the Christian-Platonic equation of truth and value that exposes the intellectual limits of the Christian-moral universe: “You see what it was that really triumphed over the Christian god: Christian morality itself, the concept of truthfulness that was understood ever more rigorously, the father confessor’s refinement of the Christian conscience translated and sublimated into a scientific conscience, into

intellectual cleanliness at any price.”⁸⁶ For the Christian philosopher and scientist especially, Christian dogma comes to contradict the high moral evaluation that the dogma itself places on the quest for truth. By legitimating the quest for truth, Christianity endangers itself as a system of faith. Nietzsche speculates that once the linchpin of Christianity—the concept of God—is removed by truth-seeking activities, the coherence of the entire world view is irreparably damaged: “Christianity is a system, a whole view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one’s hands. Christianity presupposes that man does not know, cannot know what is good for him, what is evil: he believes in God, who alone knows. Christian morality is a command; its origin is transcendent . . .—it stands and falls with faith in God.”⁸⁷ Without God, the entire Christian-moral world view loses its internal coherence, engendering a crisis of rationality.⁸⁸

The Crisis of Legitimacy

As I have suggested, it would be a mistake to read Nietzsche as saying that the occurrence of European nihilism can be explained *solely* by the crisis of rationality. To do so would be to miss the distinctive way he relates ideas and practices. Heidegger makes this mistake by emphasizing Nietzsche’s claim that nihilism occurs *because* the “highest values devalue themselves.” But while the crisis of rationality is necessary to explain European nihilism, it is not sufficient. Nietzsche understands meaning to dissolve only when a world view is no longer adequate to the “facts” of experience in terms of reflexive needs for subjectivity. This is true whether the adequacy is negative (as in the slave’s need to reject the harsh facts of experience to sustain his other-worldly belief) or positive (where interpretation engages the facts of experience as a means to practice). Moreover, a world view need not be “rational” to be adequate to experience. Magical and mystical world views, for example, may be adequate to experience without having a rationalized structure. And, in Nietzsche’s view, even an irrational Christianity can remain adequate to the degree that it maintains its meaning through what he calls “orgies of feeling” rather than through appeals to intellectual coherence.⁸⁹ Nietzsche seems to suggest that a world view like the Christian-moral

one could not fail simply owing to its internal inconsistencies. Ultimately, it fails because of an inadequacy to self-constitutive needs in relation to modern experiences. Thus nihilism can surface only where the Christian-moral world view becomes incoherent within itself *and* fails to provide plausible subjective identities in relation to everyday life.

Nietzsche formulates the crisis of *legitimacy*, then, by asserting that the Christian-moral world view does not permit us to “esteem what we know [*erkennen*].”⁹⁰ The word he uses, *erkennen*, denotes one’s recognition that some essential aspects of modern existence cannot be expressed in the Christian-moral world view. Here, *erkennen* seems to refer to an awareness of the world of everyday experience. It is a kind of knowing of the “world we live and are,”⁹¹ which is in some sense different from and even prior to rationalized interpretation.⁹² Nietzsche is very likely referring to a “tacit knowledge,” to borrow Michael Polanyi’s term, a cognition of the Dionysian world of experience, a world always richer, deeper, and more chaotic than the interpretive system into which it is appropriated.

Nietzsche is saying that a world view is in trouble when it cannot account for most of what we *erkennen* in terms of our need to live, to act, and to situate ourselves as agents. Because it relies on negative references to what we recognize about our experience, a world view like the Christian-moral one can remain intact only so long as experience is a source of otherwise intolerable suffering. But should experiences change and no longer need to be avoided, then the “truths” of such a world view are no longer insulated from comparison with experience.⁹³ Hence “God” becomes “far too extreme a hypothesis” for the relatively pacified life of the nineteenth century: “Life in our Europe is no longer that uncertain, capricious, absurd.”⁹⁴

These points underscore the fact that Nietzsche’s account of cultural evolution is never purely structural. Culture refracts experience, and experience is appropriated within culture. In the case of European nihilism, the link between experience and cultural structure stems from the fact that the experiential content of original nihilism was refracted into the structure of Western culture. For Nietzsche the modern crisis of legitimacy reflects the same aspect of Christian-moral culture that had accounted for its success as an antidote to original nihilism—namely, its distance from and denial of violent experience.

Its legitimacy had rested upon its ability to explain suffering in terms of guilt, sin, redemption, and the afterlife. As Nietzsche points out at length in the *Genealogy* and *The Antichrist*, otherwise senseless suffering made sense when understood as punishment for sins for which the individual was deemed ultimately responsible, while the resulting bad conscience became explicable as guilt. The same logic occurs in the Christian attempt to make such experience coherent by seeing it as a negative referent to a metaphysical world that compensates the individual with a sense of dignity. Thus Nietzsche understood the Christian-moral world view to have maintained its legitimacy on the basis of a fundamental but delicate contradiction: while it ascribed free will and responsibility to the individual as his greatest potential, it denied him the understanding of experience and selfhood necessary for free will and responsible action.⁹⁵

The Christian-moral contradiction is stable under some experiential conditions but not under others. Practical engagement of experience is continuous in Nietzsche's understanding of life; more, it is *definitive* of life. If one interpretively hides this engagement because of its intolerability, then continuing to hide the engagement depends upon its continuing intolerability. Changes in situation can invite direct comparison of the Christian-moral world view with experience by reducing the motive to escape. Comparisons stimulated by situational changes eventually undermine the legitimacy of the Christian-moral world view and lead to European nihilism.

Nietzsche viewed the surfacing of European nihilism as a catastrophic yet not an entirely undesirable event. To the degree that the Christian-moral world view is undermined by the absence of experiences supporting the notions of sin, guilt, judgment, and God, man becomes more "natural," closer to the "basic text of *homo natura*."⁹⁶ With modern science came the modern acceptance of the "testimony of the senses."⁹⁷ Nietzsche considers the dissolution of the Christian-moral world view through recognition of the claims of experience to be the genuinely progressive aspect of European nihilism, opening the possibility of a practice-oriented culture.

The Political Consequences of Nihilism

Along with the progressive side of the crisis of legitimacy to which Nietzsche looks forward, there is also a regressive side he believes will

give rise to wars and violence. These can be expected where the crisis is politicized through applications of Christian-moral ideals to political practice. While modern science tends to measure the actual world against the metaphysical one to the detriment of the latter, Nietzsche understood much of modern politics—especially liberal democratic politics—to be based on a demand that the actual world embody the Christian-moral promise—that is, on a politicization of the ideals of brotherhood, equality of rights, happiness, and peace. Nietzsche believed that nihilism would affect politics through the practical failures of these ideals. In contrast to modern politics, feudal politics maintained a strict separation of Christian promise and worldly actuality—the City of God and the City of Man in Augustine’s formulation. The separation sustained Christianity as a sphere of hope precisely because it could not be acted upon. But when, as in the case of the French Revolution, the Christian-moral promises become interpretive points of reference for social change, Nietzsche believed they must contradict the nature of the political world.⁹⁸ The political world, in Nietzsche’s view, was necessarily and inevitably a hierarchy of classes involving a domination of the stronger over the weaker. As I have indicated, the meaning and assumptions of these claims will be addressed in the final chapter of this book. But insofar as he believed that this was the case, it made sense to conclude that Christian ideals applied in practice would literally *demoralize* themselves. Nietzsche thought that the Terror was a case in point.⁹⁹ Modern attempts to take seriously and apply in practice aspects of the Christian-moral world view must finally expose the fundamental incompatibility of practice with the *kind* of world view founded on the annihilation of practice. European nihilism as a psychological condition occurs only after every aspect of the Christian-moral world view has been found to be illegitimate in this sense.

More generally, in Nietzsche’s usage, European nihilism is ideologically significant because it expresses at the individual level a dissolution of dominant forms of social consciousness. Individuals are situated in society insofar as the dominant form of social consciousness permits a self-identity corresponding to social experience. But where the dominant culture becomes illegitimate and no longer provides a vicarious feeling of selfhood, individuals are thrown into a state of extreme and helpless isolation, losing their sense of direction and selfhood. At this point the ideological cement of a society dissolves,

and nihilism once again becomes an overtly political category.¹⁰⁰ Through the cunning of culture, the modern politics of nihilism involves an inversion and return of the ancient politics of original nihilism.

The “great politics” of the future that Nietzsche refers to in *Beyond Good and Evil* is a shorthand for political struggles engendered by cultural transitions with their shifting definitions of selfhood.¹⁰¹ Thus, for example, “great politics” occurs when issues arise that go behind the questions of interests and obligations that define much liberal politics, and challenge the very conception of a subject-citizen who has interests and obligations in the liberal sense. This is why the problematic of nihilism is ultimately about how political subjects are formed, even though Nietzsche himself only touched on these implications.

Nihilism and the Future

From this survey, I think we can see that Nietzsche’s problematic of nihilism is precise in its formulation and far reaching in its implications. It is most striking, for example, that he intends to incorporate yet goes beyond epistemological and ethical problems as they are traditionally understood. Crises of “truth” are symptomatic of deeper crises—crises of entire cultures, crises of entire modes of living and acting. The moral problems commonly associated with nihilism are seen by Nietzsche as central, but in such a way that they are not bracketed from “life” or credited with independent meaning. By redefining what nihilism is about, Nietzsche could return in a radical way to the issues associated with the birth of political philosophy—issues of the relationship between knowledge, power, and living a good life.

In a broad, historical perspective, Nietzsche thought nihilism would make it possible—perhaps for the first time—to address in a new way the radical issues raised by the ancient Greeks. The surfacing of nihilism marks a cultural upheaval. But it also gives rise to the possibility that we, as the inheritors of many kinds of possibilities, could become conscious of the problem and reorder the fragments of our culture by utilizing their potentials. Many interpreters of Nietzsche have argued that he understood nihilism to mark the end of the Western world and to require, literally, something

beyond what Western man is now. One commentator writes, for example, that "Nietzsche did not think, as did Marx and the liberals, that our present condition contains the conditions of its own self-transcendence."¹⁰² As I shall argue in chapters 3 and 5, however, such views overstate the discontinuity at the expense of the continuity of past and future. Even more, they fail to understand that for Nietzsche discontinuity is an essential part of growth and development. From an individual perspective, nihilism signifies a dissolution, a loss of power, and the ultimate alienation of man from his creative capacities. From a functional perspective, this same decline signifies an intimate relationship between crisis and creativity, power and knowledge, willing and truth. This is why Nietzsche views European nihilism as a "sign" of "crucial and essential growth, of transition to new conditions of existence."¹⁰³ Western man is at a turning point in history marked by the "sickness" of nihilism, but it is a sickness linked to the development of *vis contemplativa*. Modern nihilism is an opportunity to relate *vis contemplativa* to *vis creativa*. It is only necessary for the Christian-moral world view to draw "its most striking inference, its inference *against* itself; this will happen, however, when it poses the question '*what is the meaning of all will to truth?*'"¹⁰⁴ This question coincides with the emergence of nihilism, but it is also an imperative for humans to know how their *vis contemplativa* and *vis creativa* produce their historical existence. In this sense, we might see Nietzsche's problematic of nihilism as a way of elaborating Marx and Engels' famous comment on the revolutionary qualities of bourgeois society in the *Communist Manifesto*: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new formed-ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."¹⁰⁵