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Thinking Through the Phenomenon of Trust: A Philosophical Investigation

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Emmanuel Levinas


OB  Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence. trans. Alphonso Lingis. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997)


Knud Ejler Løgstrup


Friedrich Nietzsche


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INTRODUCTION

The term “trust” is an ubiquitous part of everyday speech and linguistic expression. A simple “I trust you” is a common declaration of confidence that the trustee will act and behave in such a way that will not violate the truster’s expectations. Such an expression also functions to both reinforce and acknowledge a certain character of a relationship. The trust-character of a relationship is a qualitative measure of the fitness of a particular relationship. The various uses and senses of the term “trust” as well as the specific situations, occurrences, and referents to which the term applies are too diverse and pervasive to begin to analyze here, nor is it evident that such an analysis would be of any help in determining a proper understanding of trust.\(^1\) What is important to note, however, is that the word “trust” almost always signifies a quality or trait or characteristic of a relation or a relationship.

In her book Lying, the moral philosopher Sissela Bok writes, “Whatever matters to human beings, trust is the atmosphere in which it thrives.”\(^2\) Bok’s metaphorical use of

\(^1\) Thus, a ‘philosophy of language’ approach to trust via an analysis of linguistic and logical criteria of its use is neither productive nor particularly insightful for this project. Olli Lagerstæz puts it nicely when he writes, “It is probably neither realistic nor helpful to look for a definition of ‘trust’ in terms of sufficient and necessary conditions. That is seldom a fruitful approach when words having to do with everyday life are at issue. Nor does it seem to be the case that a proper understanding of a word must involve the ability to state the sufficient and necessary conditions for its application; this is shown graphically in the fact that the words we are the most comfortable with are the ones for which we could not give such definitions! . . . There will always be a variety of uses for the word ‘trust’, and new usages may develop in the future” (Lagerspetz 1998, p. 4).

\(^2\) Sissela Bok (1978), p. 31. Note: Commenting on this passage, Annette Baier notes that there are many cases in which it would be right to say that what thrives and what matters in certain relationships of trust ought not to be encouraged to thrive. Instances of exploitation and manipulation are cases in point (Baier 1995, p. 95).
the term “atmosphere” to describe trust is apt, for it captures the sense in which trust is an inescapable and pervasive part of human existence. Who could deny that the phenomenon of trust shows up in one form or other in virtually every interpersonal relationship or interaction? For example, consider how vital trust is to the health of a friendship or how crucial trust is to the growth of intimacy between two loving partners in a romantic relationship. Perhaps not so readily apparent are those myriad ways that trust is manifest in non-interpersonal relationships—such as our relationships to our natural environment, social milieu, technology, to ourselves, and so on. Yet, surely there is some meaningful sense in which one can speak of trust as being at work even in those relations.

For every relationship that can be found to manifest some level of trust, there are those relationships that cannot be called “relationships” in any strong sense because trust is minimal or lacking in them. Think of a subject living under a totalitarian regime who fears that she is constantly being watched and that every “friendly” neighbor could report her to the secret police. This subject cannot trust even her own neighbor under such a regime. Is it too much to say that the quality of this subject’s life is poorer and less desirable in a condition of constant distrust? It is not that her life is less valuable than that

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3 Examples of a relationship with oneself include: subjective self-identity or one’s sense of personal worth or the relation of one’s judgment to one’s mental or bodily capacities and abilities (I trust that my legs will not buckle as I climb the stairs).

4 Consider also the necessity of trusting in the testimony of others, of experts, and the vital role that such trust plays in enabling scientific research and creating a community of researchers. To recognize the power and importance of the role that trust plays in supporting human life, it is necessary only to experience the way in which a betrayal of trust corrodes, even destroys, the fabric of the relationships and institutions sustained by trust. As Sissela Bok explains, “trust in some degree of veracity functions as a foundation of relations among human beings; when this trust shatters or wears away, institutions collapse” (1978, p. 31).
of another, but that what she values cannot thrive without trust. Indeed, certain human
goods (friendship, communal solidarity, etc.) are rendered inaccessible or are stunted
without trust. Nonetheless, even in such a condition, the life of a subject ruled by a
totalitarian regime may well be supported by certain trust-relationships that attend those
interpersonal relationships that are not themselves characterized by trust. It is quite
feasible to suppose that the subject has a certain degree of trust in close familial
relationships, in her education (limited though it may be), in the powers of democracy,
the international community, and so on. These trust-relationships help to sustain at least a
minimal level of flourishing and they support the thriving of certain human goods in the
life of our subject. However, and this is a crucial point, trust is, to some extent, achieved;
for in any interpersonal relationship, the full presence of trust requires acceptance or
affirmation of the demands and requirements of trust. This affirmation and acceptance
need not be conscious (in fact, it most often is not), but it must be enacted at some level
of one’s being. Failure to enact acceptance or repeated violations of trust lead to the
atrophy of trust, which in turn can mean the diminishment of good in a life. It is a major
concern of this dissertation to show that and why trust is an important phenomenon and
an overall good.

Another goal of this dissertation is to get clear on what trust is—that is, what its
defining characteristics are. Wittgenstein, in his Philosophical Investigations, wrote that,
“The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their
simplicity and familiarity.”\(^5\) The phenomenon of trust is no exception to the truth of this
statement. Despite its pervasive presence and the vital role that it plays in human

\(^5\) Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958), §129, p. 50.
relationships of all sorts, we seem not to notice or to pay much attention to trust until it is betrayed or called into question. As a consequence of such invisible familiarity, trust is very difficult to define or explain. We all seem to know what trust is, but when asked to define or explain it, we are often at a loss for words. When it comes to the matter of trust, the Western philosophical tradition has been similarly tongue-tied until quite recently.6

Though the recent work on trust is invaluable, I can’t help but agree with the viewpoint of the late Robert Solomon when he states, “My concern is that the phenomenon of trusting is often distorted as much as it is clarified when it is opened up to philosophical examination” and that most accounts of trust are “‘thin’ as opposed to the rich, dynamic, and multi-dimensional phenomenon itself.”7 According to Solomon, most contemporary accounts reduce the phenomenon of trust to a cognitive state (of belief) or an affective attitude (usually non-cognitive) that one individual has toward another individual. By situating trust at one or the other pole, these accounts forfeit the ability to explain the global character and pervasive presence of the phenomenon of trust because they unnecessarily limit its scope and ignore the extent to which trust is manifest in both interpersonal and non-interpersonal human relationships.

The Neglect of Trust in the History of Philosophy

If the assertion that trust is an important component of a good human life is true, and this dissertation will seek to establish and elaborate upon this claim, then it would seem that no account of human life and relationships would omit a phenomenon of such

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6 Several contemporary philosophers have noted the fact that trust is a historically neglected topic in the Western tradition, and until certain, predominantly feminist, philosophers paid attention to it, philosophical treatments of trust would have remained few and far between indeed. To list but a few: Virginia Held (1968), Lars Hertzberg (1988), Lorraine Code (1991), Annette Baier (1995), and Trudy Govier (1998) have all done significant work on trust.

crucial importance. However, this phenomenon is largely omitted from Western philosophical accounts of human nature, existence, and ethics. For the most part, from the beginning of the Western philosophical tradition with Plato to the contemporary period, there is infrequent and underdeveloped mention made of trust in the literature. When trust is explicitly mentioned, it is usually brought up only in passing or in order to dismiss it as particularly injurious to the pursuit of knowledge and truth. The exception to this exclusion is the treatment of faith in medieval philosophy. Insofar as trust was conceived of as an essential ingredient, even the foundation, of faith, then the recognition of the importance of trust for medieval philosophers cannot be underestimated. The medieval philosophical literature, however, tends to emphasize the role of trust in the vertical relationship of the human being with God, or the necessity of trust in Scripture and church doctrine. This tendency and emphasis is perfectly acceptable and understandable, but it is not clear that the fundamental and constitutive function of trust for human life is explicitly addressed in such literature.

Generally, when trust is or has been treated at all in Western philosophical literature (with the exception of medieval philosophy, as noted above), it is in relation to some aspect of a philosopher’s thought that takes priority and precedence over a sustained inquiry into the nature of trust itself; as when, for example, trust is assigned a functional, yet ancillary, role as a condition for the constitution of the political state (as in Locke) and its meaning is almost always assumed rather than defined or grounded in an accurate description of the phenomenon of trust itself.

This pattern of neglect of trust in the Western tradition of philosophy has been well documented by several contemporary philosophers who are working on the issue of
trust. Annette Baier, a moral philosopher, notes that “there has been a strange silence on the topic in the tradition of moral philosophy,” while treatments of trust abound in the work of psychologists, sociologists, political scientists and philosophers, and lawyers. The virtue ethicist, Nancy Nyquist Potter, reiterates and elaborates upon Baier’s claim, putting it in the following terms, “Trust . . . is a topic that, until fairly recently, has been largely neglected in moral philosophy. Plato and Aristotle merely mention it, although the virtues of justice and friendship, as both philosophers define them, seem to rely upon background conditions of trust. With some exceptions, such as discussions of trust in God (Aquinas) or trust in governments (Locke, Dunn), the moral significance of trusting relationships has not been directly addressed in philosophical discourse.” Extending this philosophical myopia regarding trust beyond the domain of moral philosophy, Olli Lagerspetz notes that while the “notion of trust is a point at which several branches of philosophy meet—philosophical psychology, epistemology, political philosophy, moral philosophy,” the topic of trust “has remained something of a blind spot in the mainstream of analytical philosophy” and that “most of what has been written on the notion of trust fails to give a just account of the reality of human experience.”

Why does such inattention to the notion of trust exist in Western philosophy? Why would such a crucial and important component of human life and experience as trust be passed over in silence by the philosophical tradition? I think that there are two plausible reasons for this widespread dearth of sustained philosophical treatments of

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trust; however, I must offer a disclaimer. As it is impossible to know the unconscious
prejudices and psychological motives behind a given thinker’s decisions to include a set
of phenomena and exclude another, the explanation for the neglect of consideration of
trust must be inferred or diagnosed on the basis of probable reasons for such neglect.
Hence, what follows is merely a probable or plausible explanation for the philosophic
inattention to trust, made on the basis of an interpretation of certain signs and indications,
tendencies and trajectories of thought.

*Plato’s “Divided Line” Image*

To begin with, it is quite plausible that the possibility of investigating the nature
of trust “got off to a bad start,” as it were, right at the inception of Western philosophy as
we know it, when Plato consigned “trust” or *pistis* to the lower “visible” section of the
“Divided Line” in Book VI of *The Republic*. Not only did this seem to indicate a
dismissal of trust on Plato’s behalf, it also came to signify the “blindness” of trust and the
necessity of leaving it behind in the ascent to truth and the “ideas” (*eidē*). Similarly, when
Timaeus, in Plato’s *Timaeus*, pronounces, “just as Being is to Becoming, so is truth to
trust” (29c)

11, then the parallel between the constantly changing process of becoming
(*genesis*) and the inferior nature of trust as opposed to truth diminishes the possibility of
any positive function that trust might play in the quest for wisdom that defines
philosophy. The famous Cave image of the *Republic* (Book VII), if read in light of the
Divided Line, situates the human condition within the cave of shadows and artifacts,
puppeteers and prisoners. Socrates explicitly identifies the cave with the realm of the
visible and the shadows as copies of copies of reality. *Trust*, then, would name the

condition of the prisoners who, being bound with their head facing toward the back of the cave where the shadows flicker and show up, mistake the shadows for reality. In other words, knowing no different reality from the cave and ignorant of their error in judging the shadows to be real, the prisoners’ trust is a confidence in what is comfortably familiar to them. The philosopher, on the other hand, must leave the comfort of the visible and of becoming, and ascend, via a painful process of progressive illumination, to the ‘real’ world of being and the ideas. The implication appears clear on this reading: The philosopher must leave trust behind in the search for truth and knowledge.

Such a reading of Plato’s Divided Line and Cave images from the Republic is fairly prevalent in the secondary literature and commentaries on Plato. Furthermore, there is a tendency to read these images as representations of distinct and qualitative (lower to higher) stages on the path leading from ignorance to enlightenment rather than as interrelated and progressively unfolding modes of disclosive and properly receptive engagement with reality. I will argue that the reading of Plato that finds him dismissive of and antagonistic toward the phenomenon of trust is mistaken. Specifically, such interpretations are mistaken in that they neglect to consider Plato’s positive understanding of trust in the Phaedo. An examination of the Phaedo and the importance of “trust in logos” therein, will allow a more faithful reading of the conception of trust in Plato’s thought to emerge.

I will address the question of trust in Plato’s Phaedo by breaking down my reading of this famous dialogue into three chapters, each of which treats a distinct understanding of the role of trust in the philosophical life. Chapter One focuses on the question of how and why Socrates appropriates the teachings about life and death in the
religious Mysteries, according to which human beings are placed in life as in a garrison by the gods, such that we are duty-bound not to run away from our post or abandon our position of service (by committing suicide or neglecting our duties). Socrates, I argue, is offering an existential understanding of the phenomenon that the Mysteries interpret religiously: As human beings, we sense or feel that we are entrusted with life, that we are somehow given life on trust, and that we must do something with ourselves because of it. The philosophical way of life is the way of life that, according to Socrates, is the best and most enriching way of taking up the life with which we feel entrusted.

Chapter Two investigates the way in which Socrates subtly weaves a tale of two contrasting ways of life, each of which constitutes an answer to the question of how best to live. Or, better yet, he asks which way of life (with its correlative attitudes, virtues, values, and practices) is most trustworthy? The majority of the chapter is spent examining Socrates’s presentation of the way of life of the “genuine philosopher,” which, as it turns out, is a bankrupt attempt to “cheat” on life and on the necessity of achieving harmonia between body and soul. The genuine philosopher teaches philosophy as the practice of death—the separation of the soul from the body as much as possible in this life—in order to achieve oneness with Being in the afterlife. The problem with this ascetic viewpoint is that it slips into a kind of naïve distrust of the body and of earthly life such that leads to a nihilistic denial of any meaning and significance in life. The other form of life that functions as a counterpoint to the ascetic one, is the somatic way of life of the “body-lover.” The body-lover also fails to lead a trustworthy way of life and ends up pursuing pleasures at the expense of properly caring for his or her soul. Both the ascetic body-hater and the hedonistic body-lover fail to achieve a trustworthy way of life.
Chapter Three takes up Socrates’s injunction midway through the *Phaedo* to “trust in logos.” Here I show that Socrates must combat the most dangerous tendency of human beings: to fall into an “artless” and nihilistic distrust of arguments (misoLOGY) when one argument or other disappoints or fails to make good on the naïve trust one has invested in it. Socrates is clear: As human beings, we *must* trust in the truth and stability of those things that are of ultimate concern to us (fellow human beings, truth, goodness). However, as is befitting the critical bent of philosophy, we must understand the limits and nature of that in which trust is placed. Socrates’s account of the art of arguments demonstrates something essential to the phenomenon of trust, that though it involves risk and vulnerability, trust also confers a kind of soundness and stability. Proper trust, then, is a trust that is more sound, more stable, and hence, safer, than improper trust. Trust is a kind of groundedness, and thus admits of degrees of durability, safety, security, and steadiness. The misologist discovers (rightly or wrongly) that an argument he or she once trusted was safe and secure is not, and thus comes to regard all arguments as insecure and unsafe rather than seeking a more trustworthy argument. The Socratic philosopher, on the other hand, acknowledges a certain amount of uncertainty in the pursuit of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, but he or she also recognizes that there are safer and more trustworthy values, practices, arguments, and capacities, and that these must be sought and enacted.

Chapters One through Three tackle the question of trust in Plato’s *Phaedo*, but there is another source of what one could call “postmodern” suspicion and distrust: Friedrich Nietzsche. In Chapter Four, I select a few passages from Nietzsche’s texts in which trust is mentioned in either a positive, negative, or a neutrally assertive way, and I
show how these explicit mentions of trust point us toward the meaning of trust for Nietzsche. On the one hand, he advocates distrust and scorns a certain form of trust in life; while, on the other hand, he laments the loss of a certain trust in life and asserts that human beings need to trust in life. These disparate evaluations of trust are shown to depend upon Nietzsche’s principle of evaluation whereby he distinguishes between healthy and strong values and weak and decadent values. Accordingly, I determine that Nietzsche believes a form of trust in life to be necessary—a form that I call vital trust—but that he condemns and combats a form of trust in life that I call pathological.

Chapter Five is concerned with demonstrating that Nietzsche regards pathological trust to be a symptom of decay and decadence precisely because it distrusts this life and places trust instead in the antithesis of earthly life, a purely spiritual realm purged of all that is associated with suffering. Furthermore, after I distinguish between three meanings of “nihilism” in Nietzsche—incipient, radical, and active—I proceed to show that Nietzsche regards pathological trust in life to be correlative with incipient nihilism, whereas radical nihilism (which Nietzsche considers the “greatest danger”) constitutes the possibility of a loss and absence of trust in life altogether. Active nihilism, on the other hand, is a technique that involves suspending one’s trust in life as a step in transitioning from pathological trust to a vital, life-affirming trust in life.

Vital trust is the theme of Chapter Six, and there I set up the account of vital trust in Nietzsche by examining the relationship between life, nature, and will to power in his work. I then proceed to show that the recovery of a vital trust in life is an important part of Nietzsche’s philosophy of life-affirmation and that it is the meaning of Zarathustra’s injunction to remain “faithful to the earth.” Vital trust in life is linked to the cultivation of
certain vital affects and practices that involve grounding values in the body and the “earth.” Finally, I argue that Nietzsche regards the culmination of life-affirmation and the highest expression of vital trust to be a “Dionysian religiosity.”

The first six chapters, then, develop the idea that the two thinkers whose work might feasibly be blamed for the historical neglect of trust in the philosophical literature, Plato and Nietzsche, actually have interesting and positive things to say about trust. This is not the whole account of how trust has been misunderstood by philosophers, however.

*The Epistemological Turn in Philosophy and the Consequent Misunderstanding of Trust*

The second likely source of prejudice against trust in the philosophical tradition can be found in Descartes and the “epistemological turn” in Modern philosophy that he helped initiate. A cursory glance at the primary definitions of trust in dictionaries and in contemporary analytical treatments of it illustrate the Cartesian bias toward an epistemological understanding of trust as well as the underlying negative associations perhaps left over from the reading of Plato summarized above.

Consider the following dictionary definition of ‘trust’:

*Trust*—n. firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something.

1.a. acceptance of the truth of a statement without evidence or investigation

This definition of “trust” is commonly accepted and reproduced, and it exhibits two noteworthy and revealing features. First, trust is *epistemologically* delimited as a mode of “belief.” It is a “firm” belief to be sure, and a belief that is invested in “trustworthy” attributes of another person or thing, but what this definition fails to capture is the *pre-cognitive* and *pre-conscious* forms and enactments of trust (e.g., bodily trust,

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interpersonal trust, existential trust). In fact, as conscious subjects, we rarely become aware of our trust or trusting beliefs until we perceive that our trust is betrayed or find our “firm belief” questionable or doubtful in some way. Hence, defining trust in terms of ‘belief’ is both problematic and misleading, for a basic form of trust precedes and directs belief and is a condition for the possibility of both belief and knowledge, as will be argued in later chapters.

Secondly, the narrower, more specific definition provided expresses a prevalent prejudice against (paradoxically) the “trustworthiness” of trust. Again, the term “acceptance” in conjunction with “the truth of a statement” signals the epistemological designation of trust. This time, however, trust is the (presumably) cognitive “acceptance of” or assent to “the truth of a statement without evidence or investigation” (emphasis added). In other words, trust is an intentional act of will or cognitive act of mind (or both) which either uncritically affirms the truth of a statement sans sufficient evidence to support it, or it assents to the truth of a proposition despite the impossibility of being able (even if one wanted to) to justify the truth of the matter (e.g., think of the epistemological status of Kant’s “ideas of reason”—the ideas of God, immortality of the soul, and freedom). Quite apart from the objections briefly outlined above in reference to the definition of trust as a kind of belief, this additional qualification of trust as uncritical belief without evidence or investigation seems questionable since basic trust is itself a condition for the manifestation and presentation of evidence.

A scientist, for example, must trust in the methods of experimentation by which a hypothesis is tested and the material organized; the interpretation of the scientist’s findings must proceed from trust in his or her own cognitive capacities, in prevalent and
accepted theories, and in the reliability of the tools, instruments, and formulas used to measure and evaluate the evidence. When the experiments, empirical findings, and the results of repeated analysis confirm the working or revised hypothesis, it is not that the scientist’s trust is superceded by a belief *with* sufficient evidence; rather, the scientist’s belief regarding this specific hypothesis has become more trustworthy, more trusted, than before. In other words, the scientist’s trust has only *deepened* and *intensified*; it has not been *surpassed* or *eliminated* in the dawning “light” of certainty.

Though it is clearly the case that trust *can* be spoken of in terms of belief and of intellectual assent to propositions, it is nonetheless reductionistic if not downright fallacious to conceive of trust as *solely* or *primarily* an epistemological phenomenon. This tendency not only closes off the interpersonal, existential, and vital dimensions of trust, but it inhibits the manifestation of the primacy and importance of the role that basic trust serves in human life. In other words, the epistemological *bias* in conceiving of trust (as a kind of “belief”) and the consequent *prejudice* toward trust (as “untrustworthy,” as “unfounded belief”) is symptomatic of a way of thinking that does not—and indeed, *cannot*—remain faithful to the depth and profundity of the phenomenon of trust; for the chain of trust reaches all the way to the ground of human life. Hence, the phenomenon of trust encompasses the domain of knowledge proper to epistemology, while remaining stubbornly irreducible to it.

Though ‘trust’ has increasingly become an object of philosophical inquiry in the Anglo-American tradition of philosophy, the fact remains that for the most part, the accounts of trust given by these philosophers are unequivocally situated within the domain of epistemological considerations and thus fall prey to the broader historical *bias*
(though not necessarily the prejudicial tendency to regard “trust” as “untrustworthy”) which determines the scope and definition of trust primarily or exclusively in terms of “belief.” For example, such accounts commonly determine trust in terms of “warranted/unwarranted belief”; the “reliability of intellectual faculties and opinions”; a “capacity to rationally self-govern”; a “disposition to engage in social exchanges that is grounded upon a belief in the trustworthiness of the specific agents with whom we interact”; etc.\(^\text{13}\)

Though such work is laudable in its effort to counteract the epistemological prejudice against and the consequent traditional neglect of trust, the problem with these approaches, as I have already stated, is their presupposition that trust is either primarily or exclusively a matter of belief or of intellectual assent to a proposition. To reiterate: Though it is certainly the case that the phenomenon of trust is manifest in the domain of belief, knowledge, and intellectual faculties, it is nonetheless necessary that the thinking of the phenomenon of trust cannot and should not be relegated either solely or primarily to the epistemological domain, especially as basic trust constitutes a condition for the possibility of such a domain in the first place.

There are exceptions to the tendency to understand trust as either a primarily or exclusively epistemological phenomenon in the contemporary philosophical literature. One exception (Knud Ejler Løgstrup) will be discussed in some detail in Chapter Eight of this dissertation. However, for the purposes of this introduction, a brief summary of the final two chapters will suffice.

\(^{13}\) For a sampling of accounts based upon the epistemological definitions of trust, see: Edward S. Hinchman (2005); Cristina Bicchieri, John Duffy, and Gil Tolle (2004); and Richard Foley (2005).
Most contemporary philosophical treatments of trust are modeled on forms of trust that are confined to intersubjective relationships thereby failing to either appreciate or accommodate the way in which trust can be both *global*, encompassing the whole network of relations that compose existence, and *pervasive*, manifest to some degree in virtually every human transaction, engagement, and relation. Chapter Seven is concerned with remedying this lack by providing a sketch of the phenomenon of trust in its most comprehensive and diffuse manifestation as *existential trust*. Drawing on suggestions made by Robert C. Solomon and Adriaan Peperzak, I unpack this idea of existential trust by drawing out its (four) essential characteristics (features that are present in most derivative manifestations of trust, not just its existential form). I then argue that in order to explain its global and primordial character, existential trust should be conceived of on the model of Heidegger’s discussion of *situatedness* (*Befindlichkeit*) and *mood* (*Stimmung*) in *Being and Time*. This allows me to define *existential trust* as a primordial mood (global and diffuse) with a distinct *affective* character or ‘feel’ that arises on the basis of one’s situatedness in the nest of relationships that constitute existence. The affective character specific to existential trust is an overall effect of four characteristics: *supportive upholding, vulnerable openness, attuned orientation, and demand*.

In Chapter Eight, I return to the question of interpersonal relationships and the ethical demand implicit in trust in order to show that a relationship between two persons involves a call to trust—that is, a demand that one be trustworthy and that one take up the trust of another in order to care for him or her. In order to substantiate this thesis, I turn to the work of Emmanuel Levinas who asserts the primacy of ethics over ontology, the primacy of the claim of the Other (person) in the interpersonal encounter. When I
encounter another person, according to Levinas, I am called to responsibility for and to
the other person before any acceptance or refusal of the ethical demand that he or she
places upon me. Keeping this in mind, I then explicate the work of Løgstrup who writes
that human beings approach one another in “natural trust,” a function of being “held
open” toward one another, our lives partially surrendered into the other person’s care.
Though I criticize Løgstrup’s insistence that we always approach each other with natural
trust (I argue that one accepts the demand to care for the other and that trust is
instantiated with this acceptance), his ideas about the nature of trust and its relation to
ethics help to situate my understanding of existential trust in the context of Levinas’s
insistence on the radical responsibility to the Other (person).
CHAPTER ONE:

TRUST IN PLATO’S PHAEDO (I): THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRUST, CARE FOR THE SOUL, AND THE SOCRATIC MUSIC OF PHILOSOPHY

Though pistis (trust) most famously plays a prominent role in Plato’s Divided Line image in the Republic, I want to suggest that Plato’s understanding of the nature and function of trust in human life is best gleaned from a close examination of the Phaedo. The understanding of trust that emerges in the Phaedo is located at the intersection of Socrates’ demand to care for the soul and his attempt to “turn around” and convert his interlocutors to a better and more trustworthy way of life. Furthermore, in the Phaedo, Plato accomplishes a transformation of several crucial terms and the phenomena they denote (such as “death,” “life,” “body,” “soul,” “Hades,” “purity,” “hope,” etc.) from a “deathbound” (somatic) meaning to a hopeful and trustworthy (philosophical) meaning and significance.

In many ways, it is apparent that the Phaedo represents Plato’s literary paean to his beloved teacher and friend Socrates, a celebration of his deeds (erga) and words (logoi). In a more existential sense, however, the Phaedo is Plato’s answer to the specter of nihilism, for here Socrates crafts a dramatic contrast between three distinct ways of life. Two ways of life are shown to fail in answering the question of how human beings can live a good and meaningful earthly life. The third way of life, the philosophical life, is subtly and indirectly enacted by and represented in the figure of Socrates, who not only
embodies the way of life proper to human existence in speech (logos), but in deed (ergon) as well.

The central question that the *Phaedo* asks and answers is this: Given the inevitability of death (which represents an ultimate limit to human, “earthly” life), how can a human life be valuable and existence worthwhile? Further: Which account of or guide to the good life can we trust? Ancillary questions tackled in the *Phaedo* include the following:

- How is it that *this* life, a life defined by finitude and the “limitation” of embodiment, can prove significant, purposeful, and fulfilling not in spite of death, but because of life itself?
- How can somatic existence be transformed into a psycho-somatic existence that is ultimately more satisfying, sound, and complete than a life spent in bondage to the body?
- How is it that we can pass from a “deathbound” existence (in bondage and confined to the “place” (topos) of shadowy, transient, and “unfree” existence) to a “soulful” existence in which we can truly “live life to the fullest,” exercising the highest and best capacities in us and with which we are entrusted?
- Are there different and better ways to live with the limits of time, body, death, others, and self?
- Are there different and better ways to approach the limitations of finite life, ways which take up these lived limitations in better or worse ways?
• Can we speak of “taking up” one’s life, death, embodiment, finitude in a proper vs. improper way?

• Are there more fulfilling and “truer” ways to be “in touch” with, disposed by, and receptive toward phenomena, a world, others, and self?

• Can we develop and cultivate the intensity and earnestness of our trusting engagement in life and world and with others? Does this cultivation of trust involve properly directing and orienting our trust? If so, then how?

I will show how these questions all relate to the issue of trust and significance in the face of death, that terrifying “Minotaur” that confronts each every human being in the labyrinth of life, and against whom, it seems, no mere mortal can prevail. The Phaedo is centrally concerned with this mighty monster and with how to overcome it, to transform it by understanding it, and thus with how to subdue it. This Minotaur, a specter of Death, confronts all human beings with the possibility of senseless and purposeless existence, the possibility of the annihilation or extinction of the self. Ultimately, as Socrates will subtly demonstrate, death is to be understood neither as the cessation of physical life (and hence the loss of the self), nor as the separation of the soul from the body (and, by extension, the confinement of the soul to the body, the enslavement of the spirit to the flesh). Rather, death is more profoundly accomplished by succumbing to nihilistic despair that stems from or leads to carelessness of the soul. The specter of nihilism looms large in the Phaedo, as Socrates’ interlocutors pass from an initial state of despair at the inevitable loss of a beloved teacher, to a state of anger and frustration at Socrates’ apparent calm and lack of concern in the face of death, to a condition of mistrust of logos.
(which here represents the possibility of truth, meaning, and immortality), and to the consequent fear that this life has no meaning, truth, or significance if there can be found no indubitable and absolute guarantee that the soul continues on after the death of the body.

This amounts to an admission that the primary concern of the Phaedo is not the demonstration of the immortality of the soul. Nor does it seek to advocate a certain form of philosophical asceticism (which admittedly can be a temptation for the philosopher). Rather, the entire dialogue wraps itself around the figure of Socrates in such a way as to focus the reader’s attention less on the literal meaning of the words he speaks in the dialogue and more on his actual enactment of the philosophic logos in deed (ergon). It is Socrates’s character, his attitude, and ultimately, his way of life that is on trial here. Faced with the horrific finality of Death, how is it that Socrates can say what he says and do what he does? Can we trust the firm and unwavering stance that he takes toward that which is truly important and significant in life and death—a stance that is fundamentally at odds with the usual way of thinking about such things?

The Contrast Between Ways of Life in the Phaedo

In the two chapters that follow, I hope to show that Plato ingeniously contrasts two possible, yet “human, all too human,” modes of existence in the Phaedo, and that he ultimately shows how both existential options fail to overcome the Minotaur of death and the possibility of nihilism because both are founded upon inappropriate and “careless” responses to life. Because of this failure, both ways of life are revealed to be untrustworthy, and part of Socrates’s task in this dialogue is to lead his interlocutors to
assume an attitude of distrust toward these ways of life.1 These two “deathbound” and “nihilistic” modes of life are the *life-denying ascetic* mode of existence and the *somatic-hedonistic* mode of existence. The dialogue makes it apparent that a third ‘way of life,’ a *Socratic* way of life, is the only truly viable means of overcoming the fear of death and of transforming the fact of death into an affirmation of life, and not only of life, but of life “well lived”—a *worthy* life.2 This interpretation of the *Phaedo* must be demonstrated through a close-reading of certain key passages, since this interpretation is contestable. Interestingly, it is Nietzsche who most vividly articulates the common and still persistent misinterpretation of Socrates’ purpose and words in the *Phaedo*. In a chapter of his *Twilight of the Idols* entitled “The problem of Socrates,” Nietzsche writes:

In every age, the wisest have passed the identical judgment on life: *it is worthless* . . . [ . . .] Even Socrates said as he died: ‘To live—that means to be a long time sick: I owe a cock to the savior Asclepius’. Even Socrates had had enough of it.— What does that *prove*? What does it *point to*?

To have to combat one’s instincts—that is the formula for *décadence*: as long as life is *ascending*, happiness and instinct are one.—

—Did he himself grasp that, this shrewdest of all self-deceivers? Did he at last say that to himself in the *wisdom* of his courage for death? . . . Socrates *wanted* to die—it was not Athens, it was *he* who handed himself the poison cup, who compelled Athens to hand him the poison cup . . . ‘Socrates is no physician,’ he said softly to himself: ‘death alone is a physician here . . . Socrates himself has only been a long time sick . . .’ (§§1, 11, 12)

Does the Socrates of Plato’s *Phaedo* really represent such a denial of life, and do his words and actions imply or suggest a judgment that ‘life is worthless’? Is Nietzsche

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1 Both constitute extreme (in the sense of residing at opposite poles) modes of response to the givenness of life and of reactivity to death. Both fail to acknowledge the existential demand to live a worthwhile life, but in different ways. Both fail to affirm or comprehend life as a *whole*, preferring instead to select only parts in terms of which to live. Both fail to “take up” this life and its possibilities and struggle (they are either in the world and of it, or in the world and in denial of it), though, again, they fail in different ways.

2 This distinction is stated in both the *Apology* (38a: “the life which is unexamined is not worth living”) and the *Crito* (48b: “the most important thing is not life, but the good life”).
correct in interpreting Socrates’ final words to be a pronouncement of his self-diagnosis ("I live, therefore I am sick"), with death the final remedy or cure for the affliction, or infection, of life? Does the *Phaedo* condemn this life to being a protracted terminal illness and disease?—Not at all! On the contrary, the figure of Socrates embodies and endorses a decidedly “this-worldly” attitude and direction of the soul.³

Nietzsche is right to focus on the view of life endorsed by Socrates, on the existential import of Socrates’ words, actions, and manner of living. As I have said, *it is not primarily* the (in)famous arguments for the immortality of the soul, or the metaphysical system of thought that underlies the arguments, or the epistemological scheme or the mind-body problem, or the body-hating ascetic conception of philosophy that drives the action and situates the concern of the *Phaedo*. Rather, it is the view of life, the presentation of “existential options,”⁴ the question of how to live life, of why life is worth living, with which the *Phaedo* is concerned. Who is Socrates and what attitude and response toward life and finite human existence does he embody?—These are the important questions, and Nietzsche, with his usual acumen, goes right to the heart of what is really at issue in the *Phaedo*. Socrates’ answer to these questions is given in his very way of life, his *logoi* (words) and *erga* (deeds). Life is worth living, but it is worth living only in a certain way or in terms of a specific existential choice. True and genuine life is

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³ Nietzsche is correct, however, to point out that it was Socrates who “handed himself the poison cup,” not Athens. He freely chose to live a certain kind of life, a way of life that was opposed to the cultural norm and which called this “norm” into question in a radical way. Socrates was *atopos*, “out of place,” and *xenos*, “strange.” He perplexed and provoked others, especially those in power. His life and words disrupted, unsettled, and disturbed the status quo.

lived in a stance of openness toward the call of others and phenomena, a stance that takes its ‘bearings’ from being rightly oriented toward the goodness and beauty of the Whole.

The *Phaedo* shows that though the ancient religious ‘mysteries’ and ‘stories’ all testify to the importance of leading a certain kind of life, Socrates must modify and ‘redeem’ these accounts in philosophical terms in order to lead his interlocutors to a proper understanding of how and why ‘care of the soul’ is to be achieved. *Certainty* concerning the afterlife and the consequences of one’s conduct in this life cannot be achieved; however, the religious accounts of the afterlife and of the proper ethical conduct in this one must be held onto, says Socrates, for despite our inability to know in the absolute sense whether such things are true, they point to a basic experience and phenomenon in life which is undeniable: that we are *given over to life* and *entrusted with life*. In other words, given what we can ‘know’ in the sense of what we allow to show itself to our soul, the call and demand structure of phenomenality and our relation to the world manifests the truth of ethics and the necessity of proper conduct.

Now I want to show how the *Phaedo* revolves around the question of a properly oriented way of life, a way of life that opens itself toward the call and givenness of beings at the same time that it finds itself at-home in and familiar with a world newly redeemed from the instability and insecurity of desire gone awry and appearances taken as truth. I will go further and argue that this way of life, a life engaged in the constant task of self-examination and care of soul, is intimately related to a primordial and fundamental dimension of trust—a basic trust that is vulnerable to the demand of life, opened toward the call of phenomenal givenness, grounded in a relational familiarity or at-home-with-
ness, and secured by a deep en-rootedness in earthly life. Given that we are always already given over to a condition of trust, how is it that we can ‘take up’ our lives in (or ‘on’) trust, receive life as a trust? It is a fact that life imposes upon each human person a demand or responsibility; however, Socrates implies that there is a best way to undertake fidelity to the demand of life, and thus a best way to confront and tame the Minotaur of death. How does Socrates do this?

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates tames the terrifying countenance of the great Minotaur that stands in the path of human achievement of lasting happiness and significance—the Minotaur representative of our inevitable self-annihilation in death—but he does this by countering our fear with the musical charms of an alternative and higher source of meaning and significance: the stable and unchanging reality of the *eide* and of being, governed by that which orders and infuses measure into all things, the Good.

*The Perplexity of Pleasure and Pain*

The dramatic action of the *Phaedo* places us in Socrates’ prison cell just after he has instructed Crito to have his wife and young son taken away, and after his bonds have been removed. After Xanthippe has been led away, “wailing and beating her breast,” an obvious sign of grief at her husband’s impending death, Socrates sits up and wonders aloud, “How absurd a thing this seems to be, gentlemen, which human beings call ‘pleasant!’ How wondrously related it is by nature to its seeming contrary—the Painful—in that they’re both willing to be present with a human being at the same time; but if somebody chases the one and catches it, he’s pretty much compelled always to catch the other one too, just as if the pair of them—although they’re two—were fastened by one
head!” (60b-c). These words are startling, for, on the one hand, Socrates has just been freed of painful bonds, and the only reaction he has is one of wonder and perplexity at the apparent contradiction of two contrary physical states being present at the same time. On the other hand, such a reaction is typical of Plato’s Socrates and perhaps implies that philosophy always begins in wonder mixed with perplexity at some experience that calls into question our comfortable assumptions and inherited opinions regarding some thing or event. In setting up the events and discussion of the entire dialogue with Socrates’ exclamation of wonder and perplexity at a physical and bodily experience, Plato has ingeniously forecast the tone and set forward the problematic that will occupy the rest of

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5 It is interesting to note that Phaedo makes a special point of saying that “when Xanthippe saw us [enter the cell], she cried out and then said just the sort of thing women usually say: ‘Socrates, now’s the last time your companions will talk to you and you to them!’” (60a). That Xanthippe’s response of grief, sorrow, and perhaps, a bit of frustration at Socrates’ implacability, at the impending loss of her husband, is derogatorily characterized as “the sort of thing women usually say,” is extremely hypocritical (not to mention misogynistic) of Phaedo, for he and the others—all of whom are men—will also respond in the same way, perhaps even more inappropriately as their response of grief is initially confused with anger and self pity at Socrates’ apparent willingness to leave them behind. This contradiction between Phaedo’s dismissive words and his actual behavior might suggest that Xanthippe’s grief is a perfectly appropriate and human reaction to immanent loss that the patriarchal ‘virtue’ of emotional detachment and calm, disinterested rationality, betrays and fails to achieve. Xanthippe is, of course, absolutely realistic and literally correct in her exclamation, for it is true that this will be the last bodily conversation with Socrates, a fact that the interlocutors cannot initially come to grips with. At least Xanthippe has Socrates’ genetic inheritance, their son, to carry on the brute physical ‘form’ or ‘spirit’ of Socrates. Phaedo and the others, however, will have to inherit Socrates’ spirit in some other, non-corporeal, way: namely, by inheriting his way of life and method of inquiry, and making it each one’s own.

6 Regarding the frequent appeal to Aristotle’s characterization of the beginning of philosophy in wonder, it must be understood that wonder here should not be understood solely in a Romantic or affirmative sense. Wonder can have negative connotations, such as in cases of wonder at the propensity of human beings toward committing acts of violence and hate on one another, wonder and astonishment at the terrifying power of destruction contained in a natural force like a tornado or hurricane. The fact that the experience of ‘wonder’ is an ambivalent expression should give one pause, especially considering the context in which Socrates expresses wondement at the joint feelings of pleasure and pain. Wonder is the consequence of beholding ugliness as much as beauty, evil as much as goodness, chaos as much as order. This is why wonder and perplexity, desire and strife, belong together at the beginning of philosophy. One need only look at the preponderance of philosophical responses to genocide and the Holocaust in the twentieth century to see that the experience of wonder that is the beginning of philosophy is not always or even primarily a positive experience, rather, wonder should be understood as an ‘unsettling’ and ‘disruptive’ experience leading to perplexity.
the *Phaedo*: the perplexity that plagues human beings upon the realization of their finitude, and the lived contradictions and coincidence of opposites that accompany human life.⁷

Faced with this perplexing and wondrous experience of contradictory sensations, Socrates offers a quick and ready solution to the problem. Putting words in the mouth of Aesop, he gives a poetic and religious account of how the opposites of Pain and Pleasure come into being together: “it seems to me . . . that if Aesop had noticed this, he would’ve composed a story [*muthon*], telling how the god wanted to reconcile them in their war with each other, but when he wasn’t able to do that, he fastened their heads together at the same point, and for that reason, when the one’s present with somebody, its other follows along later” (60c). Of course, Socrates is being playful here, for he distances himself from Aesop’s poetic explanations for things by saying that if Aesop would have noticed this problem, he might have created a story about it in order to explain how such an experience is possible. Of course, this Aesopian resolution to the perplexing experience of opposing sensations is as unsatisfactory an explanation as it is a widespread human practice. An appeal to “the gods made it so” as a reason for a given occurrence or the resolution of a perplexing problem is philosophically insufficient to answer the question of why or how a thing is the way it is.

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⁷ Perhaps it also the case that Socrates’s words and actions here prefigure the attitudes toward death that will emerge in the dialogue, between, on the one hand, pain at the thought of the release of the soul from the body in death (the somatically-oriented view), and pleasure, on the other hand, at the thought of release from bondage to the body and to earthly life (the ascetic view).
Perplexity Concerning Socratic Practice: Is Socrates a Writer of Demotic Poetry?

Socrates’ interlocutors pick up on his playfulness and Cebe is emboldened to ask about the rumors that Socrates has been writing poetry in prison. Thus, at the very start of the dramatic conversation of the *Phaedo*, Plato has us move from one contradiction (the co-presence of contradictories Pleasure and Pain) to the next (Socrates, the consummate critic of the poets, is now a composer of poetry), from perplexity and wonder at a physical experience to perplexity and wonder at Socrates’ actions and behavior. The shift between an experience that concerns physical and embodied existence to a problem that is related to a way of life, behavior, and existential choice is carried throughout the *Phaedo*, and Plato’s subtle inclusion of this shift of emphasis here is important. How is it that Socrates, who has waged a long battle against the poetic mode of imitation and the unexamined presumptions of the poets, is now engaging in the very practice that he so vociferously attacks in other dialogues? Has his antagonistic attitude toward poetry changed? Was his invocation of an Aesopian mode of explanation made in seriousness?

Cebe and the other interlocutors are understandably puzzled by these rumors for they imply a contradiction in Socrates’s position and practice. What is interesting about Socrates’ answer is that it is at least as puzzling and provocative as the initial rumor. In response to Cebe’s inquiry, Socrates claims that a certain “dream” has recurred throughout his life, “appearing sometimes in one aspect and sometimes in another,” in

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8 As David Roochnik explains, “Cebe has heard that Socrates had been setting the tales (*logous*, 60d1) of Aesop into a metrical scheme and doing the same with the hymn to Apollo. Naturally, this puzzles those who know Socrates; after all, the philosopher, the champion of rationality, seems to have been the dire enemy of poetry throughout his career. As ‘recently’ as the *Apology*, Socrates had condemned the poets for not being able to give an account of the meaning of their beautiful poems. They had, he concluded, composed their works not by any rational expertise, but, like prophets and seers, by some natural gift and inspiration. As a result, they could not explain what their own compositions actually meant (*tō legoien*), and thus did not know what they claimed to know (22b-c)” (2001: pp. 239-240).
which a certain voice addresses Socrates and commands him to “‘make music and work at it [mousikēn poieī kai ergasdou]’” (60e). So, in order to “test” what these dreams (enupniōn) “might be saying” and in order to “acquit” himself of “any impiety, just in case they might be repeatedly commanding [him] to make this music,” Socrates decided to set the hymn to Apollo and several of Aesop’s stories to verse. It is not merely the fact that Socrates is writing poetry in response to a dream that is so startling here, it is the kind of poetry that he is writing that appears to conflict with his former criticism of the poets. Socrates says that he is writing demotic poetry, poetry for the masses; as he puts it, he is making “popular music,” not philosophical music. Why is this?

Socrates offers the following account of how he came to experiment with popular poetry:

Now at least in former times, I assumed that it [the speaker in his recurring dream] was exhorting me and urging me on repeatedly to the very thing I was doing, and that just as people encourage runners, the dream kept urging me on to do what I was doing—to make music—since philosophy, in my view, is the greatest music and that’s just what I was doing. But now, once the trial had taken place and while the festival of the god prevented me from dying, it seemed that if the dream had indeed often ordered me to make this popular music [dēmōdē mousikēn], I shouldn’t disobey but should make it; for it seemed safer not to go away before acquitting myself of any impiety by making poems and obeying the dream (61a-b).

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This passage is puzzling for several reasons, the first of which is Socrates’ description of his recurring dream and his interpretation of it. Upon close examination, several features of Socrates’ description of and response to his dreams stand out in this passage, and though it highlights Socrates’ eccentricity and idiosyncrasies, his response by no means constitutes an anomaly in his modus operandi. First, the special characteristic that isolates this set of dreams from other recurrent or random dreams is the single command that emerges from out of a multiplicity of aspects at some point during Socrates’ dream state. It is evident that Socrates has submitted his dreams to the gathering and distinguishing power of logos, sorting through the fluctuating appearances and diverse ‘aspects’ of his dreams into order to isolate a single selfsame feature that consistently occurs in some dreams but not in others.

Secondly, Socrates does not concern himself with what he sees in the dreams, for the visual imagery and possibly the speaker of the command appear in diverse and shifting aspects, rather he is solely concerned with what the dream is saying to him. This emphasis on what is said or heard rather than what is seen marks a shift from the primacy of visual and optic metaphors, which designate acts of comprehension and apprehension, to otic and auditory metaphors, which signify acts of reception and
It is evident that Socrates presents his dream in a way that makes its message sound like a *divine imperative*. Furthermore, he implies that a correct interpretation of

listening, address and response. The constant “saying” of these dreams takes the form of a command or imperative issued in the mode of direct address. The content of that command is what Socrates interprets, or “tests.” As usual with Socrates, however, the proper testing of a “saying” is not merely a matter of what the literal *logoi* (words) that are said might mean or refer to, but whether the meaning can be enacted in deeds and actions (*erga*). Socrates does not merely ignore the dream nor does he take it at face value; instead, he “tests” and interprets it using philosophical *logos* to investigate the deeper significance and “reason” for it.

The final feature of Socrates’ response to his dream is that he takes it seriously, going so far as to act upon and enact the meaning of the dream in his words and deeds, at the risk of having misunderstood or misapplied the message (which he now claims might be the case). But why does Socrates take this dream so seriously? What is it about this dream and its message that demands seriousness to the point of living one’s entire life in the light of it? One reason for Socrates’ earnest appropriation of the dream’s command is that it “visited him” or came to him frequently in the past, a fact that indicates the source of the dream is not Socrates’ own desires or self, but a source from outside of himself. In other words, it is evident that Socrates takes the source of his dream and its recurrent command to be divine in nature. On this point Roochnik comments, “Socrates attributes an external source to the dream; it comes ([phoítôn], 60e4) to him. This source seems divine, since responding to the dream properly is a matter of purification (60e2) and getting it right is a matter of safety (61a8)” (Cf. Roochnik 2001, p. 241). Socrates clearly indicates that the dream represents a divine imperative, for adequately obeying the command is a first and foremost a matter of ‘piety’ (60e, 61b) and thus also of ‘safely’ fulfilling that which is required of him in this life (61a-b).

What is the nature of this imperative however? Is it prohibitive like Socrates *daimon*? Is it asking Socrates to *do* something? To *go* somewhere? To *reveal* something to the Athenian *polis*? To speak on a specific subject?

The first thing that one notices about the imperative is that it requires Socrates to *do* something; it requires that he take action in response to it. Recall the command itself: “‘Socrates,’ it said, ‘make music and work at it!’” (ὁ Ὀσκράτης, ἐφῆ, μούσικὴν ποιεῖ καὶ εργασίαν; 60e; alternatively, Eva Brann renders this line: “O Socrates, make music and let that be your work!” See Brann 2004: p. 153). In particular, the dream commands Socrates to *engage in or work at* (*ergasíâ*, “work, be busy; do, perform, accomplish; effect, cause”) a certain kind of *activity* (*poiei*, from *poieî*, “make, do, produce, bring about, cause, effect; create, compose”) with a specific *end* (*mousikê*, from *mousikos*, “music; of the Muses”) to be achieved.

Secondly, the command to act is *positive* in that it tells Socrates what he *is* to do rather than telling him what *not* to do or refrain from. This feature is what sets this particular instance of a divine command apart from Socrates’ famous *daimon*, the characteristic activity of which he describes in *Apology* 31c-d:

Perhaps it may seem peculiar that I go about in private advising men and busily inquiring, and yet do not enter your Assembly in public to advise the City. The reason is a thing you have heard me mention many times in many places, that something divine and godlike comes to me—which Meletus, indeed, mocked in his indictment. I have had it from childhood. It comes as a kind of voice, and when it comes, it always turns me away from what I am about to do, but never toward it. That is what opposed my entering public life, and I think it did well to oppose (Plato 1984: p. 94)
the imperative’s content is a matter of ‘safety’ with regard to the state of his soul, and thus a proper response is a matter of piety and obedience.

Judging by his light-hearted manner of speech and his very late and rather trite attempt to remedy a possibly mistaken understanding of the divine command to write demotic verse, I would argue that Socrates is not poetically rendering the hymn to Apollo and Aesop’s fables into a popular form out of a serious concern for the safety and piety of his soul. Rather, instead of reading his poems or speaking in a popular way about popular subjects, Socrates will spend the rest of the dialogue in philosophical discussion about the highest and most “divine” topics (logos, death, immortality of soul, misology, eide, etc.). The reason why Plato might have presented us with a Socrates who writes poems in prison, is indicated by the fact that he begins to supposedly reevaluate the meaning of the dream’s injunction to make music only as a consequence of his trial and the delay of

Socrates’ daimon is characterized here as generating negative or prohibitive commands—that is, his daimon issues prohibitions and warnings that tell him not to do what he is about to do. As Socrates explains in the Phaedrus: “that daimonic spirit and its customary sign came to me; it always restrains me when I’m about to do something wrong. And I thought I heard some voice all of a sudden which would not allow me to go away before I purified myself, as though I had committed some offense or other against the divine” (242b-c; Plato’s Phaedrus 2003, pp. 21-22). In contrast to the prohibitive function and negative form of Socrates’ daimonic sign, the function and form of the recurring dream of the Phaedo is constructive, it tells Socrates to engage in a specific kind of activity, and positive, in that it asserts or posits that Socrates is to do or accomplish something.

Finally, we must notice that Socrates has begun to question his interpretation of the dream and whether he has engaged in the right kind of activity. There is no question that Socrates has made his entire adult life a response to this demand, only whether he has wrongly interpreted what the dream means and is telling him to do, and as a consequence whether he must reevaluate the kind of “music” he has spent his life making. Originally, Socrates explains, these frequent and recurrent dreams seemed to him to be “exhorting,” “urging,” and “encourag[ing]” him to do the “very thing” he was doing, making music; and since Socrates regards “philosophy” to be “the greatest music,” then he believed the dream to be effectively encouraging him to ‘keep the faith’ as it were, and to continue doing philosophy (61a). However, once he was found guilty of impiety and corruption by the Athenian court and was put in prison to await his execution, and while the “festival of the god prevented [him] from dying,” Socrates began to reevaluate his former position. He admits that “it seemed that if the dream had indeed often ordered me to make this popular music [dēmōdē mousikēn poiein], [then] I shouldn’t disobey but should make it” (61a, emphasis added). Given the tone of his language, Socrates does not seem to be seriously critical of the fact that he has spent the majority of his life prior to prison in pursuit of philosophy; for he still insists on his view that philosophy is the greatest music.
execution following it. Thus, Plato could be making an ironic and satirical point about the *polis* that found his teacher guilty and sentenced him to death. In other words, because Socrates refused to act, speak, and behave in the customary and culturally expected way, he was judged as “dangerous” and “impious” by the Athenian Council. Precisely because Socrates did not make “popular music” (i.e., *demotic* music, music for the *demos*, the “common people; popular assembly”) and adamantly maintained that his god-given task was to practice the philosophical way of life, Plato here presents a Socrates who questions whether he should have ‘made music’ that was acceptable to the public. It is evident, however, that Socrates cannot and does not desire to make popular music, asserting that he is “not a storyteller” (61b) himself and thus he can only playfully experiment with the works of others.

*Piety and Death: Socrates’s Dream and His Injunction to Practice Dying*

Though I don’t think that Socrates is being entirely serious in giving his defense for writing poetry, it is nonetheless the case that the *demand and response* element of his defense prefigures several themes that will be taken up in the subsequent conversation of the *Phaedo*. Though Socrates may not be taking the task of writing demotic poetry seriously, it is clear that he takes the injunction to “make music,” specifically, philosophic music, very seriously; so much so, in fact, that he is willing to submit to an unjust execution rather than give up his philosophical way of life. Indeed, Socrates regards the practice of philosophy as a matter of *piety*, as the only proper response to the command of the god.11

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11 The debate concerning whether or not Socrates actually believed in or worshiped a deity (or deities) is largely irrelevant and beside the point here. Regardless of the notion of divinity that Socrates actually
After giving an account of his dream, Socrates enjoins the sophist and poet Evenus (who, though not present, had originally inquired into the nature of Socrates’ poetic ‘turn’) to “follow me as quickly as possible,” “if he’s soundminded,” that is (61b-c). Given the context, it is apparent to the interlocutors that Socrates means that Evenus should “follow” him into death “as quickly as possible,” and Simmias responds with surprise, exclaiming that Evenus would never willingly desire death.12

One can question, however, whether Simmias’s confusion stems from a misunderstanding of what Socrates is actually saying. Given what Socrates implied in his defense of writing poetry, it would be more accurate to interpret his words as exhorting Evenus to obey the divine call to make that “greatest music”—philosophy—and to “follow” him in leading the philosophical way of life. Simmias’s understandable espoused, here in the Phaedo (and elsewhere in the dialogues), Plato presents a Socrates who firmly believes that the imperative to practice philosophy is an imperative that is just as holy, authoritative, and transcendent as that which a god could give. In other words, the call to live the life of philosophy, a life spent in pursuit of truth, justice, beauty, and goodness is as divinely sanctioned as any exclusively religious understanding of divine commands. Whatever he believed about the ultimate source of this call to truth and philosophy, Socrates certainly regarded the proper response to this call as a matter of ultimate and grave concern, of piety. Additionally, it is a noteworthy fact that Socrates rarely engages in a theoretical discourse about the nature of the source of this demand or call, choosing instead to focus on the necessity of continually obeying and struggling with what this call to the good life entails. The fact that Socrates eschews abstract theorizing about the source of the demand, of the divine imperative, in favor of ethical considerations regarding the appropriate response at the level of practice and one’s existential choice of life is important to recognize.

The perplexing nature of Socrates’ brief turn to demotic poetizing, and his defense of it, is partially resolved in his acknowledgement of the ‘divine’ call to a particular way of life and to the activity—doing philosophy as making music—that constitutes the core of that way of life. Socrates’ ironic and doubting bent leads him to “test” what the call might mean, but Plato nowhere suggests that he doubts either that the call has occurred or that it is authoritative. Rather, testing what his dreams might be saying to him or calling him to do, is part of Socrates’s understanding of piety. Socrates’ music-making, his philosophical way of life, is his pious submission and obedient response to the demand placed upon his life by (purportedly) ‘the god.’

12 The shocking nature of this exhortation is obvious, and it immediately provokes an incredulous response out of Simmias. Simmias’s response plays directly into Socrates’s maenetic birthing of opinion. For Socrates to suddenly make such a statement, seemingly “out of the blue,” is indicative of his method of controlling the discourse, of initiating genuine philosophical dialogue through provocation and thus inducing the potential participants to give birth to their “stillborn” opinions so that they become invested in the conversation.
confusion indicates a failure to understand the true import and significance of Socrates’s way of life, for he remains focused on the perceived tragedy of Socrates’s death rather than on the celebratory affirmation of existence that his life represents.

Socrates indulges Simmias’s interpretation of his exhortation and generalizes it, proclaiming, “Evenus and everybody who takes a worthy part in this business [of philosophy] will be willing to take my advice. Though perhaps he won’t do violence to himself—they say it isn’t lawful,” after which Phaedo (the narrator) makes the significant observation that “with these words, he [Socrates] put his feet down on the earth and for the rest of the time conversed sitting in this way” (61c-d).

There are a few noteworthy comments to make here:

First, Socrates is clearly (and playfully) perpetuating the impression that he advocates the necessity and desirability of death for the philosopher. Much hangs here on what Socrates means by ‘death’ or ‘dying,’ but at this juncture, he allows the literal meaning to dominate the discussion.

Second, Phaedo’s narrational observation that Socrates “put his feet down on the earth” is significant for its symbolic connotations. On the one hand, it signifies that Socrates is “getting down to business,” so to speak. He is ready to dialogue about serious matters. On the other hand, Socrates’ simple act symbolizes his desire to plant the ensuing conversation in stable, firm, and trustworthy ground. Though the conversation appears to turn on the necessity of escaping this life, defined by the limitations and temptations of the body, in actual fact, Socrates will lead the participants and the logos
back down to “earth,” to this life, and to the question of how to enact the demands for
truth and goodness in finite existence.¹³

Finally, Cebes immediately recognizes the logical contradiction in Socrates’s
claim that it would not be “lawful” for the philosopher to take his or her own life (61c).
Cebes asks: “What are you saying, Socrates: It isn’t lawful for him to do violence to
himself, but the philosopher should be willing to follow after somebody who’s dying”
(61d)? Quite rightly, Cebes perceives a paradox here: On the one hand, the philosopher
ought to die as quickly as possible, on the other hand, the philosopher must not bring
about this death by his or her own hands. How is a philosopher to die as soon as possible
if he or she cannot commit suicide? It appears that a philosopher must wait, like everyone
else, for fate to decide how and when death will come.

Socrates responds by redirecting Cebes’s question, and, appealing to their tutelage
under the Pythagorean teacher Philolaus, he asks, “Haven’t both you and Simmias heard
about such things, you who’ve spent time with Philolaus?” “At any rate, nothing sure,
Socrates,” answers Cebes. To which Socrates responds, “Now certainly I too speak of
them only from hearsay. What I happen to have heard, however, I don’t begrudge telling.
For perhaps it’s especially fitting for somebody who’s about to emigrate to that place to
examine and also to tell stories [mythologein] about the emigration There—what sort of

¹³ This interpretation of Phaedo’s passing remark, seemingly so trite and banal, goes completely against the
grain of all those readings of the Phaedo that consider it to be an extended attack on the body, bodily or
“earthly” existence, and on the necessity of ascetic denial or withdrawal from this life in favor of a pure,
uncontaminated ‘realm’ that only the philosophically inclined soul can access. Instead, as we will
discover, Socrates sets up this other-worldly view of philosophy for a dramatic fall.
thing we think it is” (61d-e). There are several points to consider when interpreting this passage:

1. Socrates suggests that Philolaus talked about this prohibition against suicide, most likely in the form of an exposition of Pythagorean doctrine. This reference signals that the discussion that ensues develops a Pythagorean perspective, not merely on the matter of suicide, but on the philosopher and death as well.

2. Socrates, like Cebes, admits that he has heard about these things from “hearsay,” and thus, his subsequent recounting of these teachings is neither definitive nor authoritative. This admission suggests a lack of certainty concerning the account that follows, and it clearly displaces the responsibility for the truth of this teaching from Socrates to whatever source he “happen[s] to have heard” it from.

3. Socrates finds it only “fitting” that he “tell stories” (mythogenein) about the “emigration There”—that is, Hades—and yet, when accounting for his dabbling in poetry, he asserts, at 61b, that “a poet, if he’s to be a poet, has to make stories [poiein mythous], not arguments [logous], and . . . I myself [am] not a storyteller [mythologikos].” Note that here, at 61b, Socrates claims that a poet makes stories, whereas at 61e, he says that he will examine and tell stories. There is a fundamental difference between making and telling, and Socrates is well aware of the distinction. This is problematized however, by Socrates’ further claim at 61b, that he is not a storyteller. Why then does he find it fitting now that he engage in storytelling? At the risk of overanalyzing what may be a trivial looseness with language, I would submit that Socrates is hinting that the account that follows, indeed, the entire discussion of the
philosopher’s practice of death and denial of body, is but the *telling of a story*, perhaps even a likely one. In other words, Socrates will construct a *caricature of the Pythagorean account of death, philosophy, and the ideas of soul and body*; and not only will he tell this Pythagorean ‘story,’ he will force the interlocutors to *examine* it. Thus, what follows is not Plato’s manifesto against the body and earthbound life, but rather, a Socratic re-telling of a distinctly Pythagorean story. The account is told in Socrates’ voice and with his words, but it is hardly *his own* belief or story. Rather, the majority of the discussion that follows in the *Phaedo* constitutes a distinctly *Pythagorean* perspective on death, dying, Hades, the relationship between body and soul, and philosophy. Therefore, the viewpoint expressed from 61d-69e is not Socrates’ (or Plato’s) own, but rather his characterization of the Pythagorean account transmitted from hearsay. This means that the particularly harsh and derogatory language directed toward the body and bodily, “earthly,” existence for which the *Phaedo* is (in)famous, should be taken with a grain of salt.

*This Life With Which We Are Entrusted: The Distinctly Religious Account of Life Given in the Mysteries*

Now that Socrates has playfully hinted that the account to follow, an account of the proper attitude of the philosopher toward death, is a re-telling of a “story” not his own, he returns to a discussion of the paradoxical claim that death ought to be a desideratum for the philosopher at the same time that the most logical means of achieving this desideratum, suicide, is prohibited. He restates this paradox in the most logical way
possible to allow the full import of it to sink in (and spur the power of reason and argument in the interlocutors):

“And yet, it will perhaps appear wondrous to you, if this case alone among all the others is simple—if it never turns out for humankind, as it does in other cases, that sometimes and for some men it’s better to be dead than alive, and in the case of these human beings for whom it’s better to be dead, perhaps it appears wondrous to you that it isn’t pious for them to do themselves good, but instead they must wait around for another benefactor.”

And Cebes, with a gentle laugh, said, “Doan Zeus knowet!,” speaking in his own dialect (62a).

There are two basic premises here, and they lead to a paradox: First, it is better to be dead than alive in certain instances and for certain human beings. In other words, Socrates is saying that it would ‘appear’ to be “wondrous” if it were not true that, for some human beings, death is a greater good than being alive. Second, though it would be better for some human beings to die than to be alive, it is not “pious” for them to do themselves good by actively bringing about this good for themselves, i.e., committing suicide. The latter premise does not cancel out the truth of the first premise, but it does cancel out one means of acting out the truth of the first premise: taking one’s own life.

Ronna Burger notes an interesting problem with Socrates’ paradoxical statement. She comments, “Precisely because it is a prohibition . . . the law against suicide presupposes the possibility of the human desire for death. But this admission is a puzzling one: there seems to be no standpoint from which one could make the judgment that it is better to be dead, since it is a judgment that can only be made by one who is alive, and it is for himself, presumably, that he determines what is preferable. Socrates
thus indicates a tension . . . within the human desire for death.”\textsuperscript{14} In a footnote, Burger quotes from ‘The Problem of Socrates’ section of Nietzsche’s \textit{Twilight of the Idols}, where he writes, “Judgments, value judgments concerning life, for or against, can in the last resort never be true . . . \textit{the value of life cannot be estimated}. Not by a living man, because he is a party to the dispute, indeed its object, and not the judge of it; not by a dead one, for another reason.”\textsuperscript{15} Burger makes an important point here, one that suggests that Socrates’ exhortation to Evenus, to all philosophers, to follow him into death, might not be speaking of death in a commonsense way. For how can any living human being judge that life is not worth living and thus death is better?

The second point that Burger makes with regard to this passage is that one (and only one) of its clauses, i.e., “in the case of those human beings for whom it’s better to be dead,” is an \textit{unconditional} claim. This unconditional claim “could be accepted, without contradicting that which precedes or follows,” says Burger, “only if those for whom or that for which it is better to be dead is not a man [and] Socrates is about to argue that it may be better if one is a philosopher—not for the man himself, however, but only for his \textit{psyche};” thus, the “kind of ‘death’ that is preferable, consequently, may not be the physiological phenomenon that constitutes the ordinary understanding of the word.”\textsuperscript{16} In other words, Socrates hints that our common understanding of death is going to have to be transformed if we are to overcome our fear of death, and that, for the philosopher, it is

\textsuperscript{14} Ronna Burger (1999), p. 31.

\textsuperscript{15} Nietzsche, \textit{TI}: “Problem of Socrates,” § 2.

\textsuperscript{16} Ronna Burger (1999), p. 31.
better to be dead only insofar as this transformed understanding of death and its relation
to the soul is concerned.

Picking up on Burger’s suggestions, I want to propose that Socrates has already
put certain tensions into motion that will prove decisive in later sections of the *Phaedo*.
First, Socrates no doubt recognizes the impossibility of passing judgment on life from a
perspective outside of human finitude, and yet this is precisely what the “genuine”
philosophers he is going to describe tend to do. They pass judgment on the body, evaluate
it as worthless, even evil, and are led to conclude that this life is also worthless and
untrustworthy due to its carnality and finitude. It appears, then, that Socrates will not and
cannot endorse this stance toward life—it is irrational! Secondly, as Socrates is wont to
do, he will transform our understanding of death and re-evaluate its relation both to
philosophy and to the soul in such a way as to actually *redeem* and *recover* the beauty
and goodness of life.

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17 As Nietzsche writes, “One would have to be situated *outside* life, and on the other hand to know it as
thoroughly as any, as many, as all who have experienced it, to be permitted to touch on the problem of the
*value* of life at all: sufficient reason for understanding that this problem is for us an inaccessible

18 Furthermore, there is an interesting correlation to be made between this passage and that of the *Republic*
VII, where Socrates demands that the philosopher return to the very cave of shadows and false images of
the truth from which he or she was freed. This is contradictory for Glaucon, who immediately denounces
this necessity as a grave injustice. After which, Socrates justifies this unwanted necessity in political
terms, as a necessary evil that the philosopher must undergo for the greater good of the *polis*. In this case,
he claims, the common good must trump the private good in the name of justice. Socrates’ claim in the
*Republic* mirrors his statement here in that, in both cases, it is a matter of a greater ‘divine’ or ‘common’
good trumping the private good of the individual. In the *Phaedo*, piety trumps personal good, and in the
*Republic*, the justice of the city trumps personal justice. Both instances demand the subordination of
individual interests to a good that transcends and takes priority over the individual.
After establishing the priority of pious obedience to the prohibition against suicide, Socrates offers an account of why refraining from suicide is pious, by appealing to “the Mysteries”:

“For it would seem,” said Socrates, “to be unaccountable if put this way. And yet just maybe it does have an account. The account that’s given about these things in the Mysteries—that we humans are in a sort of garrison [phroura] and one is bound not to release oneself from it nor to run off—appears to me a grand one and not easy to make out. And yet this, at any rate, seems to me to be well put, Cebes: The gods care for us, and we humans are one of the gods’ possessions [ktēmatōn]. Or doesn’t it seem so to you?”

“To me it does,” said Cebes.

“Now if one of your possessions [ktēmatōn] were to kill itself, when you didn’t signal that you wished it to die,” he said, “wouldn’t you be harsh with it, and if you had some means of punishing it, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course,” he said.

“‘Well then, perhaps in this way it’s not unaccountable that a man’s bound not to kill himself before god sends some necessity—like the one that’s now upon us’” (62b-c).

Socrates admits that the paradox he voiced above is inexplicable and “unaccountable” when stated in logical terms with no explanation or reason offered for why it is pious and best not to commit suicide if death is clearly a good. Hence, he offers the “grand,” yet “not easy to make out,” account given in the Mysteries. The account of human life given in the Mysteries is important for several reasons, which must now be stated and explained.

On the face of it, Socrates’ retelling of the account given in the Mysteries does nothing to alleviate the need for a rational argument for why the philosopher should refrain from suicide, rather it merely offers a way to understand the prohibition that appears to resolve the paradox (which is irresolvable if stated in logical form). However, an appeal to a religious account does not of itself give the kind of rational justification
needed to determine why this prohibition is either true or good. There is no argument or exercise in dialectic here, there is only a statement of religious doctrine or creed. Clearly Socrates is endorsing something in this religious account, but what? One must again suspend the question of the exact nature of Socrates’ relation to religion here, and focus instead on what he understands to be the point, the moral motivation, behind this religious account, and why it adequately grasps or captures an important aspect of human life and experience. In other words, regardless of whether this account is literally correct (in which case, the gods exist, we are placed into life by the gods, and they are our masters), Socrates would have us focus on what truth of human experience it allows us to behold, what phenomenon is revealed to us such that its manifestation in life can be responded to in a religiously way. The question is: Is this account faithful to the phenomenon of which it is the religious response?

Understood differently, Socrates gives us an image, a specifically religious image. The reason that he offers this image is that though it cannot adequately contain the whole of that of which it is the image, it nevertheless points beyond itself to some fundamental event or reality to which it attests or bears witness to. The fact that humans might take the image as the reality of which it is but a partial, single ‘look,’ is not in itself a reason to dismiss it as false and unworthy of philosophy. Rather, Socrates would have us understand that this religious account does constitute a response to a certain reality of human experience and existence, and furthermore, that as an image, it points beyond itself to a phenomenon of which it may be a faithful, if only partial, manifestation. So,
then, one must ask: To what fundamental aspect does this account attest? To which phenomenon in human life does it bear witness?

The “account that’s given about these things in the Mysteries” is that human beings are placed into life as in a “garrison,” and that we are placed under an obligation not to leave or escape. It is further explained that while assigned to this garrison that is life, we are placed under the care of the gods as their possession. The sense in which human beings are given over to life as to a position of service, a task of watchful guardianship, and under orders to protect and defend, is undeniable in Socrates’ version of this account. In what sense, then, does Socrates take this account to be both “grand” and “well put”?

We must recall the call and demand structure that lay at the root of Socrates’ account of his dream and its command to make music if we are to gain access to the phenomenon to which this account bears witness. First, this religious account states that human existence is experienced as a kind of “garrison” into which we are placed by the gods in a condition of service. The gods care for us, and we are the possessions or property of the gods. If life is a kind of “garrison” for human beings, then we are

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19 The Greek term translated here as “garrison” is phroura, which, in addition to “garrison,” also means “watch,” “guard,” “prison,” and “enlistment.” Many translators and commentators choose to interpret this passage as a prelude to Socrates’ own understanding of philosophy as the practice of death in the sense of denying the body and eschewing engagement in earthly life; and thus translate phroura by “prison.” Harold North Fowler, for example, translates phroura as “prison” (“we men are in a kind of prison”), and instead of translating kēmatōn as “possessions” or “property,” he chooses the term “chattels” (“we men are one of the chattels of the god”) which possesses a more negative connotation to the modern ear. Of course, to be charitable, Fowler is probably using “chattels” in the legal sense of a piece of property or a good, however, in conjunction with his use of “prison,” he clearly favors a harsh picture of the account Socrates offers (Cf. Plato I 1914: p. 217).

Such a translation (and the interpretive decision that motivates it) clearly fails to capture the context in which this passage occurs. The military connotations of “garrison” are far more faithful than the penal connotations of ‘prison’ to the immediate context, in which it is said that “the gods care for us,” as well as the subsequent statements about the gods as “caretakers” (62b, d) and human beings as being in “a position of service” (62d).
assigned life as a kind of *task*: we are to protect, defend, and be stewards of our lives. We are given no choice in the matter: As human beings, we are given over to life, and in being given over, we are under orders to protect, defend, and care for this life. In being *entrusted to* life, we are also *entrusted with* life, with taking up life as a *task*, a property of the gods placed into our care. Just as it would have been impious of Socrates to ignore or defy the demand to “make music,” so too, “running away” from the task and duty with which we are entrusted by the gods is impious.

In Socrates’ case, it was evident that the task entrusted or divinely appointed to him was to make philosophic music—that is, to pursue wisdom and to live philosophy as a way of life—whereas here, in the religious account, it is claimed only that human beings generally and universally are placed in a position of service and trust with regard to life, a position which we are ordered to defend and protect regardless of whether we chose it or not, and regardless of the amount of suffering and evil that this life may bring. It goes almost without saying, however, that Socrates will, in fact, bring his interlocutors (and us, the readers) to a point at which the philosophical way of life is recognized as the only way of life that is adequate to the care of life to and with which we are entrusted.

Could we perhaps say that Socrates implies that the phenomenon of entrustment that this religious account is responsive and attentive to is the founding principle of ethics? The existential and metaphysical root of all ethical tasks and duties—of normativity as such? Perhaps, but this would be premature, as Socrates does not here identify what it is exactly that we are sworn to protect and defend nor does he elaborate on how we are to philosophically comprehend what it means that we are always already
entrusted with life as a task. Despite the silence on such issues in this religious account, it provides the key to understanding the rest of the *Phaedo*: For the Socrates of Plato’s *Phaedo* is concerned with giving his friends the means of combating the Minotaur of death (and the specter of nihilism this represents) by transforming the accepted meaning of death into a meditation on what it means to truly *live*, to take up one’s life as a task *to* and *with* which we are entrusted, to “turn” away from a deathbound life (a life of shadows, where stability is fleeting and satisfaction transitory) to an existence imbued with significance, beauty, truth, and goodness.
CHAPTER TWO:

TRUST IN PLATO’S PHAEDO (II): CONTRASTING THE SOMATIC AND THE ASCETIC WAYS OF LIFE

While Socrates may have offered a religious account of the prohibition against suicide, he has not addressed his own willingness to die nor has he defended himself against the charge that in being so unconcerned with his own death, he is violating the very principle behind the prohibition. Recognizing this, Cebes pounces on the contradiction between the philosopher’s willingness to die and the claim “that god is our caretaker and we are his possessions,” and exclaims,

> it’s not reasonable for the most thoughtful men [phronimōstatus] not to make a fuss when they leave behind this position of service, in which the best overseers there are, the gods, watch over them. For at least the thoughtful man does not, I suppose, imagine that he’ll take better care of himself once he’s become free. . . . the mindful man would, I suppose, always desire to be with somebody better than himself. And yet, put this way, the contrary of what was said just now is likely—that it’s fitting for the thoughtful to make a fuss when they die and for the thoughtless to rejoice (62d-e)

Cebes interprets Socrates’ re-telling of religious account quite literally, as making the claim that this life is better than death because the gods positioned us in this life as in a garrison and they watch over us (or possess us) only while we live. If this is the case, then of course only the thoughtless and foolish person desires death, for death represents the termination of our terms of service and thus of our condition of being cared for by the gods. Such an interpretation makes sense only if death is the extinction of the self, or if the gods have no dominion over the realm into which we enter after death (such that they
could not care for us). Cebes does not appear to entertain the possibility that the soul could pass into a state after death over which the gods still govern—i.e., the afterlife, Hades. Of course, Simmias recognizes that the motive behind Cebes’ objection has little to do with the logic of Socrates’ argument and much more to do with personal disappointment and frustration with the fact that Socrates seems to take his imminent death so lightly. Simmias says, “Well, Socrates, right now I myself also think there’s something to what Cebes is saying. For why would men who are truly wise want to flee from masters who are their betters and readily get free of them? And I think Cebes is aiming his argument at you, because you’re so ready to abandon us and the gods, who, as you yourself agree, are good rulers” (63a).

Simmias’ accusation brings this argument down to the personal level as he refuses to allow their discussion to remain abstract and detached from the circumstance—emotional and visceral—in which it takes place. Socrates recognizes this, and offers to give a “defense against these charges,” charges which include rational inconsistency and a contradiction between his words (logoi) and his deeds (erga).¹ Socrates claims that he will give a defense of the thesis that genuine philosophers have no reason to fear death, that they in fact practice dying whenever they practice philosophy. First, however, Socrates offers Cebes and Simmias a quick answer to their concerns and a subtle

¹ Note that Socrates has accomplished a twofold maeutic birthing: on the one hand, he has secured the engagement of Simmias’ and Cebes’ beliefs and convictions on the matter of death and philosophy; on the other hand, he has elicited the expression of their personal emotions and feelings regarding his death. Personal investment, at both the level of emotion and reason, is a necessary condition for worthwhile dialogue—and Socrates has successfully pulled his interlocutors (with the exception, it seems, of Crito, cf. 63d-e) into a space in which genuine dialogue and insight can occur.
corrective to their interpretation of his previous endorsement of the “account given in the Mysteries.” He admits,

if I didn’t think, Simmias and Cebes . . . that I was going to come, first of all, among other gods who are wise and good, and secondly among human beings who’ve met their end and are better than those here, I would’ve done injustice not to make a fuss about death. But as it is now, know well that I hope [elpisdō] to arrive among good men. I wouldn’t altogether insist in this; nevertheless, if there were any such thing I would insist on, know that it’d be this—that I was going to come among gods who are completely good masters. So for these reasons, not only am I not making a fuss, but I have high hopes [euelpis] that there’s something for those who met their end, and just as it’s been said of old, something far better for the good than for the bad (63b-c).

Socrates’ brief and provisional reply to Cebe’s and Simmias’ objections accomplishes two things. First, it both posits a third option beyond the either/or implicit in Cebe’s position on the state of the self in death (either the self is extinguished in death or it enters a realm devoid of the presence and governance of the gods); this third option is that the self will “arrive” among “other gods who are wise and good” and “human beings who’ve met their end” after death. Thus, the possibility of an afterlife inhabited by gods and human souls is explicitly raised for the first time in the dialogue. Secondly, Socrates employs a term, “hope” (elpis), that he will use many more times in the Phaedo, and in so doing he indicates his confident expectation that he will both arrive among good men and gods after death, and that there “is something for those who’ve met their end,” something good for those who have lived a good life and something bad for those who haven’t. Though Socrates admits that he cannot be certain about such matters, he nevertheless feels confident insisting that this is the case, thereby capturing the element of trust that lies at the heart of hope. But what reason does he have to trust that his hope is true?

Socrates does not provide his reasons here, but he will suggest that elements of
transcendence call to us, that we gain intimations of order and can glean the fruits of trusting in the good of that order, and that these experiences ground such hope and expectation.\(^2\)

Like most human beings, Simmias and Cebes conflate the immortality of self, the individual identity of this or that embodied human person, with the immortality of the soul, the element of the “divine” in the human being. But, as Socrates is at pains to show, we cannot know with any certainty at all whether the self persists beyond death. What we can believe, or better, trust, is that the element of divinity in the human being, the soul that animates the highest human capacities, that participates in the life of the unchanging, unseen nature of truth, will continue to endure beyond the life of the individual self who remains a composite of this soul and body, whose selfhood is the result of the conflict and struggle between the somatic and the divine. As Socrates puts it so poetically in the *Phaedrus*:

I am still not able to ‘know myself,’ as the Delphic oracle inscription enjoins, and it seems laughable for me to think about other things when I am still ignorant about myself . . . For me, the question is whether I happen to be some sort of beast even more complex in form and more tumultuous than the hundred-headed Typhon, or

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\(^2\) Socrates’ introduction of the possibility of an afterlife and his expression of hope is fascinating given his clear indication in the *Apology* (40c) that he can only believe one of two things concerning what happens after death: either the soul is extinguished and enters into an eternal state of sleep, or it enters Hades. Doesn’t his emphasis on the latter option here contradict his supposed insistence that he does not fear the first possibility in the *Apology*?

No. The true logos here is Socrates’ attempt to wean the interlocutors from their fear of death, more specifically their fear that after dying, the self (autos) perishes along with the body. This talk of soul, therefore, must be distinguished from talk of the ‘self’. The self cannot survive the separation of soul and body, the definition of death about to be given. So, then, how can we reconcile Socrates’ hope to arrive among good men and other gods who are good after his self perishes, and his assertion in the *Apology* that if death is the complete extinction of self-existence, then such death is good? This conflict is resolved by understanding that Socrates’ hope is that the logos, the soul, of his conversations will continue past his death. Hence, the universal and undying love of wisdom and the logos that strives for truth will continue to arrive “among good men” and “other gods who are good.” Philosophy, the very soul of Socrates’ life, will continue on beyond his death.
whether I am something simpler and gentler, having a share by nature of the divine and the unTyphonic (229e-230a).

The fear of death, on this view, is really a fear of self-annihilation, a fear derived from a deep desire that the self persist in being beyond the extinction of the body. Hence, the desire for immortality is a desire to be what I, an individual and embodied being, am not.

A human self is an *embodied* being, and though the fact of embodiment allows for the possibility of individuality, it also means that our activity is fueled by self-interest. If, on the other hand, a human being is not just concerned with the body and with the satisfaction of bodily demands, but can engage in the so-called “higher” activities of reasoning, thinking, and conversation, then the possibility of the “divine” within opens up, and engaging in such activities is only possible if human beings have “a share by nature of the divine,” i.e., soul. As Seth Benardete claims, “two aspects of the soul . . . have to be put together in order for it to be understood—soul as the source of life, and soul as the source of knowledge or awareness.”³ The soul as source of life indicates that dimension of human existence that finds itself placed in life, *entrusted* to it. Conversely, as human beings, we also are aware that we are alive, aware that we desire to live, and that we thirst to understand life and our place within it. Something in us compels us to seek understanding, so that we will not merely live, but live well and meaningfully⁴. This desire for understanding transcends the needs of mere physical or biological existence, and goes beyond the recognition that we are given over to life, and seeks to understand in what sense we are called to take up life as a *task* with which we are *entrusted*. Though his

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⁴ See Plato’s *Crito* 48b.
interlocutors remain unaware of the difference between soul and self, and the relation of soul and body, Socrates will proceed initially by indulging their assumptions about death (and life), assumptions common both to the Many (hoi polloi) and to the “genuine” (ascetic) philosophers, and he will progressively call these assumptions into question, ‘turning’ his interlocutors toward a truer, more trustworthy, opinion.

The Traditional Interpretation of the Phaedo: Plato’s Socrates as a Body-hating Ascetic Philosopher

According to the traditional (and perhaps, most straightforward) interpretation of the discussion at 64a-69e of the Phaedo, Plato presents a Socrates who enthusiastically endorses and defends what Nietzsche would call an “ascetic” view of the philosophic task according to which the “true” or “genuine” philosophers are those who “devote themselves to nothing else but dying and being dead” (64a), where death is understood as “the freeing of the soul from the body” (64c). Because the “genuine” philosopher links the body to all of the irrational and anti-philosophical vices that stand in the way of attaining wisdom, then she or he “stands apart from it [i.e., the body] and keeps turned toward the soul,” recoiling and fleeing from the body as much as possible and striving in every activity, whether of thought or earthly necessity, to ‘die’ to the body and disdain its demands (to the extent possible). On this traditional reading of the Phaedo, Plato gives voice to the ascetic prejudice that would dominate philosophical thought in the West for millennia to come: The body, with its insatiable appetites and irrational drives, impedes the progress of the soul or mind toward wisdom, and its carnality, linked to our bestial and ‘earthly’ nature, actively strives against the realization of the ‘divine’ activity of reason; thus, philosophy, by its nature, is (and ought to be) anti-somatic and un-earthly.
The body is the sign and source of our enslavement to “earthly” life, to the conditions of corporeality and material existence, and thus the body is what condemns us to falsehood, deception, unfreedom, illusion, and the vicissitudes of becoming. Hence, the *Phaedo* represents Plato’s clearest and surest statement of pessimism concerning the trustworthiness of this life at the same time that it represents his most virulently ascetic denial of the body, the very symbol of human wretchedness and slavery.

It is Nietzsche who most eloquently suggests this ascetic reading of the *Phaedo* when he wrote, concerning its final scene at Socrates’s deathbed, “Whether it was death or the poison or piety or malice—something loosened his [Socrates’s] tongue at that moment and he said: ‘O Crito, I owe Asclepius a rooster.’ This ridiculous and terrible ‘last word’ means for those who have ears: ‘O Crito, *life is a disease,*’ and thus Socrates was the first “philosopher” to pass that “judgment on life” that has constituted the “*consensus sapientium*” of Western thought ever since: “it is worthless.” Such is the traditional interpretation of Plato’s *Phaedo,* perhaps Nietzsche’s own interpretation, and it expresses a philosophical asceticism that has not only exercised a considerable amount of influence over the subsequent development of Platonism but has dominated the historical approach to Plato’s philosophy right up to the present. As Laurel Madison remarks, “This commonly accepted interpretation reinforces the view that Socrates and


7 I wholeheartedly agree with Laurel Madison when she writes, “Nietzsche might be surprised . . . to discover just how many readers ‘have ears’ to hear the pessimism and resentment in Socrates’ voice as he bids farewell to his life. Indeed, this interpretation has become standard among both Plato scholars and non-scholars, taking on the air of orthodoxy. . . . Not only is this ‘Nietzschean’ reading widespread, it also has a significant impact on how we understand Plato’s project in general and, ultimately, whether or not we believe that Plato still has something to teach us” (Madison 2002: 421-22).
Plato were ascetics of the worst kind, hostile to life and the body in particular. As a consequence, significant portions of Plato’s thought are treated as woefully unenlightened. Indeed, how can we take seriously the views of such a dualist who denigrates our earthly existence and urges us to deny and repress our passions, instincts, desires, and drives—i.e., to live for death?”

But is this ascetic interpretation, no matter how widespread and influential it is, correct? Do Socrates’ final words signify that “life is a disease” from which only death guarantees the cure? Are we to read the Phaedo as Plato’s assertion that the body is a “prison” for the soul, an “illness” or “disease” that philosophy, truly understood and genuinely practiced, seeks to diagnose as “impure” and withdrawal the soul from as much as possible in this futile earthly life, but the final cure for which is guaranteed only by the savior of death? I will argue that Nietzsche’s charge of ascetic nihilism accurately describes Socrates’s account of how and why the “genuine philosophers” devote themselves to death and dying; however, Socrates does not unproblematically adopt this view for himself, rather his account constitutes a kind of parody of a specific mindset, an exaggerated tendency toward asceticism on the part of certain ‘philosophers’.

Why the Traditional Interpretation Mistakenly Conflates the Ascetic Nihilism of the “Genuine” Philosophers with that of Plato’s Own View

If one pays attention to what Socrates actually says and does in the Phaedo, one finds that his speech, particularly in the first half of the Phaedo, operates at the metaphorical level of meaning as much as at the straightforwardly literal level. This is due to Socrates’s particular mode of philosophical discourse: in order to goad, cajole, and

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entice his interlocutors to give “birth” to their opinions and emotive reactions, he must allow them to project their own understanding of the meaning of his words onto the discussion in order that their usual horizons of understanding can be disrupted. Plato gives both subtle and blatant indications that this ascetic account of philosophy is neither his own nor was it Socrates’s. In other words, Plato takes care to distance himself and the character of Socrates from the ascetic perspective of philosophy, and he does so by means of a few important hints:

1. Plato makes a point of mentioning that he was not present when the dramatic events of the dialogue take place. According to Phaedo, “Plato was sick, I think” (59b). This absence allows Plato to establish a distance from the views and events that take place.

2. At 60a, Socrates is said to have a “little boy” (paidion)—and at the age of seventy! This seemingly unimportant fact calls into question the assumption that the philosopher does not and should not engage in bodily, sensuous, and pleasurable activities. Thus, Socrates’ own actions do not accord with the ascetic view of philosophy and the body that he puts forth.

3. Perhaps the clearest indication that Socrates establishes distance from the ascetic view of philosophy is to be found in his admission at 61e that he will speak of these things “from hearsay,” and that instead of giving his own account of things, he will

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9 Brann, et. al., in their introduction to Plato’s Phaedo (1998), mention this startling admission (and gives other examples) in order to support the conclusion that “the Pythagorean guise of the philosopher in the Phaedo, the ascetic depiction of philosophy as the practice of death and hatred of the body, is perhaps more caricature than characterization. If philosophy is hatred of the body, how do we account for the fact that Socrates at the age of seventy has a baby son (60a)? Or that, as Alcibiates tells us in the Symposium, Socrates, when pressed, always out-drinks everyone else, never gets drunk and seems to enjoy himself more than other people (220a)? Or that, as we discover in the Phaedo, Socrates enjoys playing with Phaedo’s beautiful hair?” (p. 4).
“examine” and “tell stories about the emigration There.” This means that the ascetic account of philosophy and death (and perhaps the entire *Phaedo*) has the status of a “story” (*mythos*), not the status of a rational argument or logical account that a Socratic philosopher would endorse. Rather, argument and logic will only enter into the conversation as tools with which to “examine” these “stories,” or, more specifically, Socrates will adopt certain hypotheses furnished by these mythical accounts, and force his interlocutors to examine what follows from them. At no point will he explicitly engage in dialectic, preferring instead to employ the “art of logos” he will introduce as part of his “second sailing.”

4. The “story” that Socrates tells is based on certain *Pythagorean* assumptions and doctrines. In the context, these “stories” are identified with Philolaus and thus, by proxy, with Pythagorean religious teachings. Therefore, this ascetic account plays to Pythagorean sentiments and takes up a distinctly Pythagorean understanding of death, soul, body, and philosophy.

5. After Socrates declares that he will “render [his] account” to his judges (Simmias and Cebes), and tell them “why it appears reasonable to me that a man who’s genuinely spent his life in philosophy is confident when he’s about to die and has high hopes that when he’s met his end, he’ll win the greatest goods There” (63e-64a), he makes a curious statement: “Just how this could be so, Simmias and Cebes, I shall try to tell you” (64a, my emphasis). By means of such heavily qualified language, Socrates intimates that the account to follow is *hypothetical*, this account “could” possibly true (without deciding whether it is the case), and that he might not be capable of maintaining or conveying its possibility, but that he will “try” to do so.
What does any of this have to do with Plato’s view of trust in the *Phaedo*? I will argue that the reason Plato does not and cannot endorse the story of death and philosophy that Socrates tells is that such a view entails an ascetic perspective on the body and earthly life that leads to a form of nihilism that strips life of its meaning and value, making it not worth living. In vilifying the body and understanding death to be the extinction of the body (as well as the singular self), the “genuine” philosopher undermines trust in a meaningful existence by eliminating the demand implicit in being entrusted to life (as though we are in a garrison). Any meaning and all significance is to be found in the withdrawal (i.e., practicing death) and eventual separation of the soul from the body (i.e., actual death) and the annihilation of the self as the singularity dependent upon the body is destroyed and the soul achieves union with or absorption into Being. This ascetic viewpoint expresses an extreme distrust of this life and thus fails to confront the challenge of taking up life as a task. The ascetic way of life endorsed by these Pythagorean “genuine” philosophers is based on a practice that involves withdrawal from the body, with the result that its trust is misdirected and blind, closed off to life and unresponsive to its demands. Because of this blind trust, the ascetic philosopher cannot truly “care for his soul” and can only live a partial and incomplete life. This means that the ascetic philosopher’s way of life is unreasonable and dangerous to the soul.

In order to support this reading, I will analyze Socrates’s account of philosophy as the practice of dying.

*The Ascetic Account of Philosophy as the Practice of Dying*

Socrates opens his account of the ascetic view of the “genuine” philosophers by saying, “Others are apt to be unaware that those who happen to have gotten into touch
with philosophy in the right way devote themselves to nothing else but dying and being dead” (64a). Apart from its shock-value, there are several noteworthy features of this claim.

First, there is the admission that those who are philosophers became philosophers through chance, a kind of blind accident: they “happen” to have become philosophers. This admission, of course, contradicts Socrates’s numerous statements in other dialogues that the path to philosophy is that of the proper education (paideia) and guidance of souls (psychogogia). Even if one takes a more cynical view that Plato asserts a strict gap between the inborn philosophic natures of a few and the many who can never become philosophers, Socrates here suggests that those who are philosophers came to philosophy not through inborn nature, teaching, desire for wisdom, use of reason, or the process of properly orientating the soul, but by fortunate happenstance. Thus, “right” philosophy is not brought about through learning or practice, it is not a way of life that one must actively strive to maintain, rather it is a “lucky hit” or accidental occurrence. Either one happens to “get in touch with philosophy in the right way,” or one happens not to get in touch with philosophy in the right way. Practicing philosophy “rightly” as opposed to “falsely” or “wrongly” is purely a matter of chance.

Secondly, one cannot help but notice the explicitly haptic nature of the metaphor that Socrates uses: “those who happen to have gotten in touch with philosophy in the right way.” How intriguing it is that preceding the characterization of philosophers as despisers of body, Socrates must define them in terms of bodily contact and tactility! This suggests that language itself, the very symptom of the human capacity for reasoning and the communication of unified designations and concepts, cannot bear the divorce between
body and soul, between intuition and concept, or between concrete bodily experience and the universalizable and intelligible ideas sought by the intellect. The impossibility of divorcing thought and the higher activities of the soul from the concrete desires, actions, and phenomena of bodily, “lived” experience will become even more evident in Socrates’ account of *phronēsis*, or “thoughtfulness” a little later.

After Socrates makes this startling pronouncement, Simmias laughingly states that the “many” (*hoi polloi*) would not only agree with Socrates’ characterization of philosophers, but would add to it the claim that “those who philosophize are genuinely ripe for death” and that philosophers “deserve this plight” (64b). Socrates responds, “And they’d be speaking the truth, Simmias, except of course about their [i.e., *hoi polloi*] not being unaware. For they’re unaware of this: in what way those who are truly philosophers are ripe for death and in what way they are worthy of death and of what sort of death” (64b-c, my emphasis). Socrates’ claim that the Many (*hoi polloi*) are unaware of the “sort of death” of which “those who are truly philosophers” are worthy indicates that there are different meanings of death in play, and that these senses of death are distinct in kind from one another.

Of course, this immediately raises the question: What other “sort” or kind of death is there apart from the physical conception of death? Socrates’ answer is puzzling as it appears to fall in line with the common sense understanding of death to which even the Many (*hoi polloi*) would ascribe. Is death, asks Socrates, “anything but the freeing of the soul from the body? And is this what it means to have died: for the body to have become separate, once it’s freed from the soul and is itself all by itself, and for the soul to
be separate, once she’s freed from the body and is herself all by herself? Death couldn’t be anything other than this—could it?” (64c).

This definition takes the existence of a soul for granted, certainly, but, presumably, so did Socrates’s contemporaries. The difference between the ordinary understanding of death and that of the ascetic “genuine” philosopher seems to amount to a difference among conceptions of “soul” and “separation.” One finds, however, that the ascetic “genuine” philosopher’s conception of soul and that of the Many share more in common than either one or the other thinks: both conceive of death as the extinction of the idiosyncratic and individual “self” of embodied personal identity. As Burger notes, “To clarify what kind of death it is that philosophers desire, they must ‘bid farewell’ to the many, Socrates recommends, and speak only among themselves; yet the account that follows betrays a harmony between the opinion of the many and that of the true philosophers, which Socrates indicates only by implying his distance from both.”

The so-called “genuine philosophers” desire this kind of death because they assume that the soul that is sufficiently purified in this life will survive death and become one with the “True” (67a-b). The implication of this desire and self-conception is obvious: The self-styled “true philosophers” seek the annihilation of “self” or personal identity through becoming one with the “pure beings” that inhabit the realm of the True.\(^{11}\)

\(^{10}\) Ronna Burger (1999), p. 38.

\(^{11}\) Again, Burger is instructive here. She writes:

It is striking, then, that Socrates calls them “the true philosophers,” or a little later “the genuine philosophers.” He gives them a name that reflects perfectly their own self-understanding. Each identifies himself with the pure psyche, which will reach its goal when it is released from the body at death and reunited with the “true” (66b). Given this interpretation of truth, “true lover of wisdom” looks like a contradiction in terms. Yet it is in accordance with this self-understanding that the true philosophers construct their understanding of the “pure beings” to which the pure psyche is thought to
The problem with the self-conception of the “genuine” philosophers is that it violates the prohibition against suicide in a peculiar way. Instead of annihilating the self by actively bringing about the death of one’s body, the “genuine” philosopher lives life in such a way that he or she can achieve absolute self-annihilation by becoming one with pure being such that the soul loses all singularity and individuality. The “genuine” philosophers advocate a form of psychic suicide that is far more thorough and complete than physical suicide (traditionally understood). This suggests that the “genuine philosophers” practice impiety at an even higher level of violation than that of physical suicides.

Nietzsche is correct to identify this view with a kind of ascetic nihilism, for in life, the ascetic philosopher strives to eschew the body, a necessary condition of personal identity and source of individuation, and looks forward instead to the complete negation of selfhood through an identification with pure being that becomes possible in death. On the other hand, the Many (hoi polloi) fear death precisely for the same reasons that the ascetic “genuine” philosophers desire it: death represents self-annihilation. The ascetic philosophers and the Many represent two sides of the same coin. Neither perspective, neither way of life, will ultimately prove compelling to Socrates’s interlocutors nor will philosophical asceticism fit the picture of Socrates on his last day of life that Plato provides. Hence, right at the beginning of Socrates’ account, we must ask who these be akin. If the union of these assumed kindred were realized, the psyche of the philosopher would be indistinguishable from its object of knowledge. In fact, if each true philosopher actualized his nature as a pure psyche, none could be distinguished from any other: Socrates does not arbitrarily refer to them in the plural. The traditional reading of the Phaedo takes the following account to be a genuine formulation of the Socratic-Platonic view of the “ideas” and the way they are known; it naturally turns Socrates, therefore, into one more indistinguishable member of the class of genuine philosophers. But Socrates fails to breed true to this genos. If he shares with the genuine philosophers in the practice of dying and being dead, he will eventually disclose his own unique interpretation of it. (Burger 1999: p. 38-39.)
“genuine” philosophers are and what way of life, what existential self-understanding, they represent.

The “Genuine Philosophers” as Caricatures of Pythagoreanism

The link between Pythagoreanism and Socrates’s account of the genuine philosophers has already been suggested by his appeal to the teachings of Philolaus on suicide. This link becomes much stronger however, when Socrates’s audience, Phaedo’s narrative context, and the language of purification, *katharsis*, is recognized.

First, note that Socrates’ two main interlocutors here are Cebes and Simmias, both of which have received a Pythagorean-based education. However, even this identification is problematic, for as Gadamer notes, “Simmias and Cebes . . . in no way represent a religious group of the sort established by the forefather of the Pythagorean sects [but rather] stand for that particular sort of mathematical investigation, theory of music, and cosmological knowledge which has, as not the least of its sources, Pythagorean teachings.”\(^{12}\) If Simmias and Cebes are *not* Pythagorean in the *religious* sense, they nevertheless prove responsive to Socrates’ appropriation and use of distinctly Pythagorean concepts and doctrines (such as *katharsis*, *metempsychosis*, *mousike*, etc.).

Second, Phaedo himself is recounting the discussion in a city, Phlia, known for the influence of Pythagoreanism, in addition to addressing the dialogue to an audience acquainted with Pythagoreanism. Laurel Madison explains: “both the primary audience (Simmias and Cebes) and the secondary audience (Echecrates et al.) are familiar with, if not adherents of, Pythagoreanism . . . [and] because the audience on both the primary and

secondary levels is Pythagorean, the discussion is directed in such a way that it will speak to their Pythagorean sentiments.‘’

Finally, the language and terminology that Socrates employs in his account of “genuine” philosophy is replete with distinctly Pythagorean themes and concepts, such as “purification” (katharsis) and the denigration of the body. The use of Pythagorean imagery and language does not end with Socrates’s summary of the “genuine” philosophers’ devotion to dying and being dead, however. He will go on to argue for the immortality of the soul via the Pythagorean doctrine of the transmigration of souls, metempsychosis (69e-72e), and argue against the doctrine of the soul as a “tuning,” or harmonia (91b-95a). One can argue, of course, whether or not Socrates remains true to the Pythagorean conception of philosophy in his account, but the fact that the perspective of the “genuine” philosopher that he adopts is meant to be a characterization, or caricature, of the Pythagorean understanding of death, purification, and philosophy is undeniable.

The Contrast between Socrates’s Way of Life and That Endorsed By the “Genuine” Philosophers

Returning to the section of the Phaedo at hand, the account that follows Socrates’s startling pronouncement that the “genuine” philosophers “devote themselves to nothing else but dying and being dead” is based upon a distinctly Pythagorean-like vision of philosophy, a vision that explicitly demands a severe attitude toward bodily life in addition to requiring a set of practices that can best be characterized as a kind of “philosophical asceticism”. Furthermore, this account has the status of a “story” that

Socrates recounts from “hearsay,” a “story” of philosophy, it turns out, that contradicts and proves inferior to the “story” of philosophy centered on Socrates’ life, words, and deeds, that is told us by Plato. The Socratic vision of philosophy is both distinct from and critical of the account of “genuine philosophy” put forth here, and this is due, in part, to the nihilism towards which this Pythagorean asceticism tends. Socrates’s practice of philosophy neither withdraws from nor ignores the body, it does not fall prey to the illusion of the possibility of absolute coincidence of the human soul and deathless being, it takes this life and earthly existence seriously, and it does not pretend to knowledge that it does not possess (such as certain knowledge of what awaits the soul in the afterlife or whether there is an afterlife at all). In short, in order to understand what Socrates is about here, we must look to his exhortatory reply to Crito’s request for “last instructions” at the end of the *Phaedo*: “By caring for yourselves, you’ll be doing whatever you do as a favor to me and to mine and to yourselves, even if you don’t agree to anything now. But if you’re careless of yourselves and aren’t willing to live, as it were, in the footsteps of the things said now and in the time before, no matter how many agreements you may make at present, and how emphatically, you won’t be doing much” (115b). Proper “care for the soul” is the goal of Socrates’s speech in the *Phaedo*, and the philosophical way of life is Ariadne’s guiding thread. Socrates’s focus, then, is on *practice*, the practice of properly caring for oneself, on *trust* in logos, and on the revelation that the only way of life in which one can properly care for the soul is that of philosophy.

*The Somatic Way of Life of the Many*

The Pythagorean-ascetic “story” told by Socrates here is perhaps a tempting story for the aspiring intellectual and philosopher. However, as a way of life, it is founded upon
impious and false assumptions, and it cannot, therefore, properly fulfill the demand to which life and the divine call us. The way of life to which this philosophical asceticism stands in apparent contrast, however, is just as false and even more “careless.” Peperzak calls this way of life “somatic,” defined as “not only eating, drinking, and sexual activity but equally eroticism, diverse sorts of fear and images, greed, laziness, idle chatter (phluaria), and misplaced ambition (philotimē),” a way of life “opposed to a life of the mind, as oriented toward kalokagathia [the ‘good-and-beautiful’] and philosophy.” The somatic way of life is a life that involves misplaced trust, a trust that is grounded on a one-sided relation to the body and to bodily things. The somatic truster is someone whose trust is unstable, insecure, and whose way of life reflects this instability and lack of confidence in reason and philosophy. Of course, the apparent opposition in Socrates’ account is that between the somatic way of life and the philosophical ascetic, neither of which adequately understands death nor how to practice philosophy. Both are “unmusical” in that they set the body in stark opposition to the soul and thus fail to achieve a harmonic self. Socrates, on the other hand, represents an understanding that begins with, in Peperzak’s words, “acceptance of a death that kills the triviality of somatic existence,” a way of life that “demands conversion, a new rootedness, askēsis, practice,” “a spiritual ruling of somatic life [such that] the life of the spirit must penetrate and rule the body in order to make it good and beautiful.”

15 Ibid., p. 141.
16 Ibid., p. 141.
Thus, Socrates’s “tale” of two ways of life operates at two levels: As a caricature or parody of a particular conception of philosophy, and at a metaphorical level, the contrast between somatic-hedonism and philosophical asceticism suggests two warring tendencies of the human soul, a struggle between two factions which must be navigated and transcended, but not unified, if proper care for the soul is to be achieved.

*The Somatic Way of Life Contrasted with the Ascetic Way of Life of the “Genuine” Philosophers*

After describing “those who have gotten in touch with philosophy in the right way” as “devoted to and desirous of dying and being dead,” and following upon the definition of death as the separation of body and soul, Socrates turns to the matter of the “philosophical man’s” attitude toward the gratification of bodily pleasures. The “philosophical man” is not “serious about the so-called pleasures . . . of food and drink [sitōn te kai potōn],” nor the “pleasures of love-making [aphrodisiōn],” holding these and “other servicings of the body” in dishonor, “except insofar as there’s an urgent necessity for him to have his share of them” (64d-e). Notice, as has already been addressed, Socrates himself loves to drink (*Symposium* 223b-d) and obviously indulges his desire for “love-making” even at an advanced age (he has a “little boy,” 60a). Does Socrates not enjoy such bodily pleasures as drinking wine or making love? Does he only indulge in these “pleasures” out of necessity? One must answer in the negative, for Socrates quite clearly does not regard all bodily pleasures to be dishonorable nor does he deny the satisfaction of such pleasures. Socrates’ own actions belie his words here and thus open up the possibility that there is much that is questionable in the attitude he is describing.
On the other hand, Socrates goes on to lump “body-related beautifications,” such as the “attainment of diverse cloaks and sandals” in with what could be called the vital needs of nourishment, drink, and sex. This correlation is not legitimate since acquiring a variety of diverse clothes can hardly be compared to satisfying basic and vital needs. In the Republic, Socrates contrasts vital and necessary needs with what could be called the unnecessary and “luxurious” needs of human culture. Contented satisfaction of the former kinds of needs can lead to a peaceful, “healthy” existence, whereas satisfying the latter becomes a source of war, violence, poverty, and hate. In the context of the Republic passage at 372a-373e, Socrates asserts that the desire for “luxurious” needs is indicative of a “feverish” and “diseased” soul, not the body. At 66c-d of the Phaedo, on the other hand, Socrates generalizes and claims that “nothing other than the body and its desires produce wars and factions and battles; for all wars come about for the sake of getting money, and we’re compelled to get money for the sake of the body, to whose service we’re enslaved.” This oversimplification is the product of a mistaken view of the body and its relationship to the soul, and Socrates is undoubtedly aware that this ascetic account of the body is too simplistic.

Though the Pythagorean ascetic “story” of philosophy may already be problematic from a Socratic point of view, there are still several additional parts of this story that must be examined in order to gain a fuller picture of exactly how this account fails. At 65b, Socrates describes how, according to the ascetic perspective, the “body is an impediment” to the “attainment of thoughtfulness [phronēsis].” How is the body an “impediment”? Because “sight and hearing” are untrustworthy sources of truth, “we neither see nor hear anything precise,” and “if among the bodily senses seeing and
hearing are neither precise nor clear, the rest scarcely are, for . . . these are all inferior.”

The soul, therefore, is deceived “when she attempts to look at something along with the body,” and only achieves clarity and truth regarding the “things that are” in “her act of reasoning [logisdesthai]” (65c). Because reasoning is exclusively an activity of soul, and “the soul reasons most beautifully” when the senses and needs of the body do not give it pain, “when instead, bidding farewell to the body, she comes to be herself all by herself as much as possible and when, doing everything she can to avoid communing with or even being in touch with the body, she strives for what is” (65c).

Socrates reinforces this argument against the body by introducing the ideas or forms (eide) at 65d-e, arguing that if “we claim that there is some Just Itself,” “some Beautiful and Good,” and we never grasp these eide, including (curiously) “the Being of all such things, [such as] Bigness and Health and Strength,” using our eyes (or any other bodily sense), then it is purely through the use of “thought itself,” dianoia, that the eide are “hit upon” (66a). From this it follows that the person “that most purely . . . approaches each thing as far as possible with thought itself, and who neither puts any sight into his thinking nor drags in any other sense along with his reasoning; but instead, using unadulterated thought itself all by itself, he attempts to hunt down each of the beings that’s unadulterated and itself all by itself, and once he’s freed himself as far as possible from eyes and ears and, so to speak, from his whole body, because it shakes the soul up and doesn’t let her attain truth and thoughtfulness when the body communes with her—isn’t this the man, Simmias, if anyone, who will hit upon what is?” (65e-66a).

Simmias accepts Socrates’ introduction of the eide unhesitatingly and without questioning what the relation is between the Just, Beautiful, and Good, much less the
connection of this eidetic triad to that of “Bigness and Health and Strength,” each of
which would seem to be necessarily linked to bodily perceptions and attributes of bodies.
Of course, though size, health, and strength seem necessarily connected to body, is it not
also the case that the Just be related to an embodied individual’s actions with regard to
others, the Beautiful related to aesthetic apprehension, and Goodness related to embodied
practice?

It is interesting that Socrates acknowledges that the philosopher strives to divorce
thought and reasoning, functions of the soul, from the activities and desires of the body,
“as much as possible”—an admission that as long as we are bound to a body, we can’t
fully avoid employing our senses nor can our reasoning achieve the ideal level of purity
from the body that the ascetic philosopher desires. Of course, this perspective rests on the
assumption that the body is somehow actively responsible for the human tendency for
deception, that the body is not a mere physical fact nor the senses simply neutral modes
or organs of receiving phenomena, but that the body and its senses are liars and brigands.
In other words, the body is the sole culprit and criminal perpetrator of deception and
impurity, not something that the human soul or self contributes. In fact, the body is here
conceived as all but an active agent of evil, falsity, and distraction. If most human beings
are, by and large, found to be impious, untruthful, and immoral, then the body is to blame
and they are leading a somatic way of life. Implicitly, therefore, the soul is assumed to be
a slave of the body, and because the body is master, then we can hardly avoid falling into
error. The ascetic philosopher imputes the power of deception to the body and thus finds
the body guilty of perjury with regard to knowledge and truth, thereby absolving the soul
or human self of responsibility for wrongfully employing the body or for failure to
properly care for the body. In this sense, then, the ascetic philosopher is again *impious* in that he or she *fails to take responsibility for his or her life*, for the actions and attitudes that are the product of a curious mixture of body and soul that is the human personality. They simply do not or cannot accept that the soul may have its own desires, passions, and characteristic dispositions.

Because the ascetic philosophers fail to investigate the connection between body and soul, between practical and intellectual life, they prefer instead to simply place a negative value on the body and a positive value on the soul, and thus radically misunderstand what it means to “care for the soul” and for one’s life; therefore, they end up taking the easy route of oversimplified opinion to a conclusion. Socrates even labels the ascetic philosophers’ opinion a “shortcut”! This passage is worth an extensive quotation, for it contains the “punchline,” so to speak, of the “story” given by these ascetic philosophers (notice how Socrates is careful to distance himself from the “opinion” of the “true-born philosophers” by placing the words in their mouths, not his own):

“Therefore it’s a necessity,” he said, “that for all these reasons the true-born philosophers would be won over to some such opinion as this and so would say something like the following to one another: ‘It looks like there’s a shortcut that brings us to this conclusion—that as long as we have the body accompanying the argument in our investigation, and our souls is smushed together with this sort of evil, we’ll never, ever sufficiently attain what we desire. And this, we affirm, is the truth. For the body deprives us of leisure on thousands of occasions through the necessity for food. And what’s more, when it comes down with certain diseases, these get in the way of our hunt for what is. And it fills us up with erotic loves [ερωτημένον] and with desires [ἐπιθυμία] and terrors [φόβος] and all manner of images [ἐιδήλων] and lots of nonsense, so that because of the body it becomes truly and genuinely impossible, as the saying goes, for us to be thoughtful about anything at all ever! [. . .] if we’re ever going to know anything purely, we’ve got to free ourselves from the body and behold things themselves [τὰ πράγματα] with the soul herself. And then, as it seems, the thoughtfulness we desire and whose lovers we claim to be will be ours—when
we’ve met our end and, as the argument shows, not while we’re alive. For if it isn’t possible to recognize anything at all purely when in company with the body, one of two things must follow. Either there’s nowhere to attain knowing, or else it’s only possible for those who’ve met their end . . . And in the time we’re alive here’s how we’ll come closest, it seems, to knowing: if as much as possible we in no way consort with the body or commune with it—unless it’s an absolute necessity—or fill ourselves up with its nature, but purify ourselves from it until the god himself should release us. And when, in this way, we are pure and free of the thoughtlessness of the body, we shall, as is likely, be in the company of things that are pure as well and, through our own selves, shall recognize everything unadulterated—and this, no doubt, is the True. For it isn’t at all lawful that the not-pure should touch the pure.’ That’s the sort of thing, Simmias, all who rightly love learning will, I think, necessarily say to each other and hold as an opinion.” (66b-67b)

This is the “opinion” of the “true-born philosophers,” Socrates says, and yet one cannot help noticing that it is Socrates’s account of the opinions of these “true-born philosophers.” These ascetic philosophers attribute thoughtfulness to the soul and evil to the body, which leads via a “shortcut” to the conclusion that the absolute knowledge the philosophers desire cannot be had in this life so long as the soul’s investigation of “what is” is accompanied by the body. Only with death, the separation of soul and body, will the soul be able to achieve direct and unmediated contact with the “things themselves” (ta pragmata, 66e) and thus achieve communion with, even become one with, the pure things themselves as they are by themselves.

By making a scapegoat of the body, the ascetic philosopher can claim that he or she is truly soul, that as soul, he or she is destined to achieve pure contact with the things themselves, that this contact results in absolute and certain knowledge of things themselves, and thus, that the conditions of “this life”—finitude, distractions, embodiment—are a merely temporary evil, an obstacle to be overcome, but also an evil that absolves one from taking responsibility for one’s life and thoughtlessness in this life.
If it is impossible to be fully thoughtful, then one can only ascribe this failure to the body, not to a failure of the soul. At all costs, it would seem, the “genuine” philosopher must never acknowledge that thoughtfulness involves the recognition that one doesn’t know, that human wisdom involves the humble recognition of finitude, that god-like certainty is impossible. Instead, the pretension to absolute knowledge is preserved in the abstract denial of human embodiment, that the body has anything to do with what and who one really is. The ascetic philosophers claim to know that which they don’t know: that the soul is capable of and destined to attain absolute knowledge, even if this must wait until death. In the meanwhile, we must strive as much as possible to achieve this pure and absolute truth, somehow purifying ourselves in the process.\(^\text{17}\)

The ascetic philosophers refuse to acknowledge the extent to which trust accompanies thoughtfulness. Their trust is directed away from the soul’s relationship with the body, away from earthly life, and toward a rarified view of the realm of the True so that the actual nature of the soul is missed. Their trust is incomplete and one-sided, for they suffer from the body and from their earthly limitations and thus the whole enterprise of life is rendered an evil necessity. The trust of the ascetic philosopher is irresponsible because it is unresponsive to the demands of finite and embodied life, it is unreasonable.

\(^{17}\) Ronna Burger points to the discrepancy between Socrates’ practice of philosophy and the ascetic view of philosophy in her comments:

The genuine philosophers seem to have misdirected their anger and resentment. They are eager to cast blame on the body not only for the distractions of the senses and the passions, but also for political opinions and economic conditions. They have mistaken all internal dissensions within the psychē for dissension between the pure psychē and the alien body...Reducing every obstacle to a corporeal one, while identifying the self with the psychē, the genuine philosophers absolve themselves of all responsibility for their inability to obtain the phronēsis they desire. But this is precisely the condition for what Socrates will latter attack as the greatest evil: to maintain a false standard of absolute wisdom, while refusing to acknowledge one’s own deficiency, results in that resentment against logos through which one deprives oneself of the very possibility of seeking truth and knowledge of the beings (cf. 90c-d). (Burger 1999: p. 43).
because it fails to acknowledge and affirm the nature and limitations of human existence.

In blaming corporeality for human evils, the ascetic philosophers ignore the demand to take up this life as a task, excusing their shortcomings and earthly impurities by demeaning and vilifying the body rather than examining themselves in order to discern whether their soul’s motives and passions are pure.

Paradoxically, these “genuine” philosophers ascribe too much power to the body, investing it with the means and power to “enslave” the soul. The ascetic “practice of dying” amounts to nothing more than a resentful reactivity to embodied life. As Burger puts it, “When Socrates concludes his imitation by attributing these opinions to all ‘correct lovers of learning,’ he ironically casts judgment on their position: between a lifetime of deception guaranteed by communion with the body and an afterlife of wisdom guaranteed by separation of the psychē, why should learning be necessary, and how could it be possible at all?”18 Indeed, along with his characterization the ascetic philosophers as lovers of learning, Socrates’ further designation of them as “lovers of wisdom” (68c) or lovers of thoughtfulness (66e) is problematic, for how can they truly love wisdom if one resigns oneself to the fact that wisdom and thoughtfulness is impossible in this life and is possible only in death, after which the soul that is the self becomes one with its objects? The answer is found in the ascetic philosophers’ definition of wisdom and thoughtfulness: they are conceived in terms of absolute knowledge of or direct contact with or pure communion with being.

The Ascetic Desire to Achieve Union with the True and the Risk of Soul-blindness

The soul, when she dwells “herself by herself” is a pure being, synonymous with and identical to all the other pure beings dwelling in themselves by themselves—i.e., the eide. There is no distinction between the soul and its object, “the True,” at this level of being, and thus there is no striving and no real distinction between subject, or “self,” and object, or the “things themselves.” Paradoxically, the ascetic understanding of death is the very same possibility of death that is so feared by the somatically-oriented Many (hoi polloi): the extinction of the self. If death is the separation of the body and the soul, then each and every human death results in the same coincidence of soul and pure being, no matter how one has lived one’s life. Because the body is the one and only source of evil and impurity, then every soul, once freed from the defilement to the body, achieves the same level of “purification.” “Purification,” according to the ascetic philosopher’s definition, is merely another way of designating self-annihilation. Why would it matter whether one occupied oneself, as the ascetic philosophers demand, with “separating the soul from the body as much as possible and habituating her to gather and collect herself all by herself out of all the sites of the body and to dwell [. . .] alone by herself,” and making “dying [one’s] care,” if the soul was, of necessity and by nature, going to “dwell . . . alone by herself” in “the time to come” anyway?

In contrast to the ascetic view, Socrates hints as to his own practice at 65e-66a, where he appears to implicate himself in the claim that “he among us who best prepares himself to think through [dianoëthēnai] most precisely each thing he investigates—that man would come closest to recognizing [gnōnai] each thing” as he “attempts to hunt down each of the beings that’s unadulterated and itself by itself.”
down beings is far more uncertain and qualified a process than the kind of immediate and absolute grasp of being the ascetic philosopher desires and hopes to attain after death. Furthermore, as Burger notes, Socrates replaces “soul” (psyche) with “thought itself” (dianoia) as the agent of the encounter with beings. This replacement of soul with thought is significant in that it heralds Socrates’ description of his “second sailing” and his turn to logoi at 99d-100a, where, in order to avoid suffering being “soul-blinded,” Socrates decides he “should take refuge in accounts [logoi] and look in them for the truth of being” (99e).

Whereas the ascetic philosopher conceives of wisdom as the soul’s “getting in touch” with the things themselves, the pure beings, a process that culminates in the absorption or assimilation of the soul with its “pure” objects, Socrates, we discover, sees this notion of wisdom as akin to “looking at the sun during an eclipse,” an attempt to gain certain and absolute knowledge of the things themselves, an attempt that leads to one’s “eyes destroyed” (99d-e). Presumably, to look at the sun directly (not during an eclipse) is the ultimate desideratum of the ascetic. However, the ascetics blame the body for the soul’s inability to gaze directly into the “sun” of “the True” (inhabited by “pure beings”), and hence believe that, in this life, while imprisoned by the body, the “true” philosopher must strive to separate the soul as much as possible from the body and “look” upon the sun during an eclipse. It is the evil of the body, of our carnality, that prohibits the soul from becoming one, in vision, with its object, it is the body that eclipses the sun. According to Socrates, even this is dangerous in that it presumes that the soul is simple, that the self is one with the soul and that the body, not the soul, is the exclusive source of evil and deception. The ascetic philosophers, with their simplistic understanding of the
soul, and their pretension to absolute truth and certain knowledge of the “things themselves,” are “blinded” and deluded into a false sense of hope that deters them from self-examination and the proper care for their souls in this life, and thus they trade in their responsibility in and for earthly life for the security of the next life.

Rather than cultivating proper forms of trust in proper relationships, the ascetic “genuine” philosophers both teach and practice distrust of life and any earthbound or corporeal relationships. The ascetic philosopher does not want to trust, but to know with certainty. Such absolute knowledge is not possible so long as the soul is joined with the body, therefore, the best that we can do is to “practice death,” which effectively means practicing an extreme hostility towards and distrust of the body, corporeality, the pursuit of human wisdom, and earthly life. The ascetic philosopher would like to take a short-cut, to cheat on life and thus to deny the necessity of trust. This life, this existence, are stripped of any possibility of meaning and significance. Because the ascetic philosopher cultivates the practice of distrust, he or she cannot take up life and relationships as responsibilities. It is as if one viewed all potential lovers as untrustworthy and thus refused to enter into any romantic or erotic relationships. In order to eliminate the risk involved in love, one refuses the meaning and significance that could enrich one’s life if one were to enter into a trusting love relationship.

Socrates, on the other hand, suggests that in order to thrive, in order to live a full and enriching life, one must take up life as a responsibility to which one is entrusted.

Thus, the difference between Socrates and the ascetic position of the “true-born” philosophers is found in their distinct interpretations of the “account that’s given about such things in the Mysteries”—that we humans are in a sort of garrison and one is bound
not to release oneself from it nor to run off” (62b). In particular, the decisive difference is to be found in their respective understandings of *phroura*. Socrates understands *phroura* in the sense of a “guardhouse” or “garrison,” and thus understands this earthly and finite life in terms of humble and grateful service or response to the demands involved in the finite existence with which we are entrusted. On the other hand, the ascetic philosophers interpret *phroura* in the sense of “prison” and more specifically understand the body to be the prison of the soul. Life, then, consists in trying to escape from this “prison” as much as possible. The demand to which we must devote our lives is the demand to “purify” or keep the soul apart from the body as much as possible. The demand is *negative*: Do not indulge the body, negate this life. Socrates, on the other hand, conceives of this demand in positive terms: *Take up one’s life as a task.*

*The Fragile Trust of the Ascetic Philosopher*

Socrates has established the trust of the ascetic philosophers upon an either/or: “if it isn’t possible to recognize anything purely when in company with the body, one of two things must follow: Either there’s nowhere to attain knowing, or else it’s only for those who’ve met their end—for then the soul will be herself all by herself separate from the body” (66e-67a). Of course, nowhere does Socrates provide any argument or compelling reason to hold that the first proposition (“there’s nowhere to attain knowing” in the purest possible sense) isn’t true. Instead, the ascetic philosopher *must* trust that death brings release from the body and that only then shall the soul achieve the full recognition of the pure objects. The other possibility, that human beings are “selves” only because they are embodied, and thus absolute knowledge or a perfect grasp of pure beings is *impossible* for human beings—this would spell doom to the understanding of meaning and
significance to which the ascetic clings. The ascetic trust is a desperate and fragile trust, a trust founded upon a claim to know that which cannot be known: that this life, defined by corporeality, embodiment, and sensual desire, is worthless, evil, a prison, and the only possibility of meaning and truth resides in the necessity of an afterlife, a higher, truer life after death. Hence, this trust is founded upon a nihilistic and unfounded presupposition: that this life is worthless, therefore, only death will bring freedom of the soul. The claim that “this life is worthless” must be complemented by its correlate proposition, “only knowledge in the purest and highest sense is of value”; the conjunction of both together leads to one of two possible conclusions: either pure knowledge (and thus, any genuine meaning and value) is impossible, or pure knowledge is only achieved upon the release of the soul from the body in death. This is why “those who philosophize rightly make dying their care,” for only death offers the possibility of meaning and value (67e).

Socrates makes the tenuousness and fragility of the ascetic position evident when he says “wouldn’t it be great unreason if they were terrified and made a fuss when [death] happened, and weren’t pleased to go There, where there was hope for those who’d arrived to get what they’d been in love with throughout life—and they were in love with thoughtfulness” (67e-68a); and “[we] must suppose that this is so . . . whenever somebody’s a genuine philosopher. For this will definitely be his opinion: He’ll encounter thoughtfulness purely nowhere but There” (68b, my emphasis). Socrates’s distance from the ascetic position is clear here: one must “suppose” that the genuine philosopher’s opinion is that “pure” thoughtfulness can only be achieved “There” because it can’t be achieved here. The ascetic is certain that pure knowledge and genuine thoughtfulness cannot be achieved in this life (which is reasonable), but they cannot say
with any certainty whether pure knowledge and thoughtfulness is possible at all or ever. In order to have hope in the possibility of pure knowledge, the ascetic must espouse a vehemently antagonistic position with regard to the body and corporeality must be seen as the sole obstacle to knowledge, as tainted and adulterated.

Ascetic trust is clearly weak and fragile, grounded as it is upon the mere negation of finite embodied life and corporeal experience. The uncertainty of sense perception is negated and resolved into its opposite: the certainty of a non-sensual mode of knowing. The “impurity” of carnal desire is traded for the pure communion or identity of soul with pure being. The constant work of satisfying the frenetic and multiple needs of the body is replaced by the restful repose and eternal calm of a soul purged of all movement, striving, and need. The evil and suffering of corporeal existence is replaced by the purity and fulfillment of a “spiritual” non-existence, the loss of “self” to the pure coincidence of soul with object.

Though the ascetic “genuine” philosophers acknowledge that one of two possible consequences are true—either absolute knowledge and unity with pure beings is achieved after death, or there “is nowhere to attain knowing”—they cannot realistically entertain the consequence that absolute knowledge and a complete grasp of the truth of being is impossible for the human soul. Because the ascetic’s trust is invested in the necessity of negating finite human life, this trust must be based upon a negation of life’s demand to care for the soul.

Now, it is true that Socrates entertains the claim that, in contrast to the body-lover, only the “genuine” philosopher is truly virtuous for both the honor-lover (philotimos) and the money-lover (philochrēmatos) are fundamentally body-lovers
(philosōmatos) and thus fear death because they value their somatic identity (68c). Even the most courageous of the body-lovers will only face death “through terror at greater evils” (68d), and they “master some pleasures only because they’re mastered by other pleasures” (69a). In other words, the body-lover can only overcome his or her fear of death through fear of a greater evil (punishment in the afterlife, protection of family, friend, or polis, etc.). “Therefore all but the philosophers are courageous by fearing and by fear. And yet it’s certainly unreasonable for somebody to be courageous by fear and cowardice” (68d).

Of course, this argument presupposes that the ascetic philosopher genuinely fears nothing. This is blatantly false, for the ascetic philosopher can fear nothing more than the possibility that direct contact with the pure beings is impossible. They can fear nothing more than the thought that their attitude toward this life and the responsibilities that come with it are unjustified and untrustworthy. In a sense, it is precisely the ascetic who is cowardly, for he or she fails to confront the terrifying fact that this life matters, that withdrawing from earthly life and denying the body is irresponsible and impious, that the need to possess certainty and absolute knowledge of things themselves is dangerous and leads to misology and nihilism. For the ascetic “genuine” philosophers, life is an all or nothing proposition.

Socrates recognizes that this understanding of genuine virtue is false and that the propagation of such a falsehood is wrong, for he suddenly interjects, “Bless you, Simmias, maybe this isn’t the right way of making exchanges for virtue, by exchanging pleasures for pleasures, and pains for pains and terror for terror and the greater for the less, as if they were coins; but maybe this alone is the right coin for virtue, the coin for
which all things must be exchanged—thoughtfulness” (69a-b). In offering this corrective, Socrates makes it clear that the matter of virtue is not a quantitative issue, but a qualitative one. Similarly, we must extrapolate that Socrates is here correcting the view of philosophy put forth by the so-called “true-born philosophers.” Rather than exchanging the body for the soul, earthly life for the afterlife, sense perception for absolute knowing, or corporeal striving for incorporeal rest, the philosopher must, as Socrates does, thoughtfully and continually examine herself to see whether her priorities are right, her actions in accord with her words, and her soul properly related to the body as a ruler to the ruled. As Socrates suggests, “maybe courage and moderation and justice and true virtue as a whole are only when accompanied by thoughtfulness . . . and maybe moderation and justice and courage and thoughtfulness itself are nothing but a kind of purifier” (69b-c). The ascetic position on virtue and purification amounts to nothing more than a kind of nihilism, for courage is merely the cancellation of somatic fear, moderation a kind of noncommittal inactivity, and thoughtfulness unattainable in this life, but a kind of direct contact with the pure beings in the next.

The Socratic Understanding of Purification and the Interpretation of the Mysteries

I have argued that Socrates would have his interlocutors understand that the ascetic way of life is impious and untrue, for it confronts the problems, conflicts, and obligations of this life by withdrawing from them, denying them, refusing to engage. Indeed, the ascetic philosophers believe this life to be a prison to which human beings have been condemned by the gods. Rather than a task to and with which we have been entrusted by the gods, life is judged inferior and unworthy of living. Instead of being given life as that for which we are to care, to safeguard, the ascetic denies that this life is
even worth caring for. Life is not a gift from the gods, or even an assignment, it is a curse, anathema, an illness from which one must escape. Socrates offers an alternative, more meaningful, account of the significance of this life, by appealing (again) to the “mystic rites”:

it looks as if these people who instituted our mystic rites weren’t a bunch of bunglers but spoke with a genuine hidden meaning when they said long ago that whoever arrives in Hades ignorant of the mysteries and uninitiated will lie in Muck, but that he who arrives There purified and initiated will dwell with the gods. For as they say about the mysteries: ‘Many the wand-bearers, but the celebrants few.’ And these celebrants are in my opinion none other than those who’ve philosophized rightly. Now I too, as one of them, have left nothing undone in my life that was in my power, but have put my heart into becoming one of them in every way. But whether I’ve put my heart into it rightly and whether we’ve accomplished anything, we shall know for sure, as it seems to me, only when we’ve gone There (69c-d).

The implication of the saying, “Many the wand-bearers, but the celebrants few,” in conjunction with the statement that thoughtfulness and virtue is a “purifier,” is that one’s conduct in and care for this life matters, and that it matters absolutely. Though Socrates characterizes the “celebrants” in Hades as “those who’ve philosophized rightly” (apparently referring to the ascetic “genuine philosophers”) and identifies himself as “one of them,” he sets both himself apart from both the life-denying “genuine philosophers” and the body-lovers, the somatic hedonists, for he insists that he has “left nothing undone in my life that was in my power”—a claim that reflects a serious concern with this life and with the way that he has conducted himself here.

Socrates’ appeal to the “sayings” and “stories” of the Mysteries is most telling in that they provide a counter-perspective to both the life-denying tendencies and “will to nothingness” of the ascetic philosophers and to the futility and dissatisfaction of the life of the philosōmatos. In the fecund implications of the Mysteries, Socrates retrieves an
understanding of human life and existential meaning that provides a more accessible entry-point into the philosophical way of life. In Socrates’s hands, the “hidden meanings” of the Mysteries are taken up and transformed into directives for behavior, incentives for action, and material for thought. Far from advocating withdrawal from life or a fruitless attitude of hatred toward the body and corporeality, the Mysteries teach that this life is to be regarded and lived as a serious task with which we have been entrusted, that purity and piety has more to do with proper care of the self and others than with a pure state or condition of the soul divorced and purged from the adulteration and evil of the body after death. Socrates has already signified the fact that his is a this-worldly concern, indicating that the so-called “genuine philosophers” believe they will achieve knowledge and truth “There,” whereas he has made it his “constant business” here, in this life, to be sure that his “thinking has been prepared by being, as it were, purified” (67b-c, my emphasis). By inserting this little admission—“as it were”—Socrates signals the difference between his understanding of “purification” of thinking, and that of the ascetic with regard to the purification of the soul. Burger comments, “Socrates believes that he has prepared his thought as if having been purified, and he referred previously to that knowledge of the beings that is ‘most purely’ pursued by one who attempts to hunt each with thought alone (65e-66a).”19 The conditionality and character of striving (without completing) of this kind of ongoing purification of thought and the continuous hunt for the beings conflicts with the way in which, “as,” Socrates reminds them, “was said way back in the argument” (67d), purification was said “to consist in the separation of the psyche from the body, ‘habituating itself to collect itself together from everywhere in the body’,” and

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as Burger notes, “Katharsis is the activity of ‘collection’ and ‘division’; but the very terms that could describe the practice of ‘dialectics’—which might indeed constitute the ‘preparation of dianoia’—are now applied to the psyche, in its attempt to release itself from the body ‘as from prison,’ and to be alone by itself, both now and hereafter.”

Socrates goes on to repeat the earlier definition of death here, but he qualifies it by saying, “Isn’t this what goes by the name of death—the release and separation of the soul from body,” and in “emphasizing . . . that the question concerns what we call death, Socrates indicates his exploitation of its ambiguous meaning: the name that refers, on the one hand, to a physiological phenomenon, the destruction, namely, of the living being, has been applied, on the other hand, to the way of investigation practiced by the philosopher throughout his life.” Socrates, in fact, transforms many of the terms of the religious account, including “Hades,” “death,” and “care” as the Phaedo unfolds.

**Chapter Summary**

I have argued that difficulties emerge when we conflate Socrates’s recounting of a distinctly Pythagorean view of philosophy from “hearsay” with Socrates’s own view. Indeed, more than logical difficulties arise if we take his references to the body literally, not the least of which is the way in which anti-somatic asceticism conflicts with the accounts of the soul and the body given in the other dialogues. Laurel Madison helpfully delineates the various ways in which this ascetic conception of body and soul is problematic from a Socratic point of view:

First, it is not the body itself that causes war and civil discord, but rather a life governed by superficial and material interests. The enslavement that Socrates speaks

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21 Ibid.
of, therefore, is not an enslavement to the body, but an enslavement to a particular way of life. Second, our “wants, desires, and fears” do not belong only to the body; in the Republic, for instance, they are attributed to the soul: “We’ll call the part of the soul with which it calculates the rational part and the part with which it lusts, hungers, thirsts, and gets excited by other appetites the irrational appetitive part, companion of certain indulgences and pleasures” (439d5-8). Third, as Socrates clearly states in the second argument, our pursuit of knowledge begins with our sensible interaction with the world. It is precisely this sensible interaction that sparks our recollection of the truth of things and thereby plays an essential role in our pursuit of knowledge . . . Furthermore, in the Timaeus, for instance, sight is declared to be a gift from the gods and the source of philosophy [at 47a1-b3] . . . And finally, again in the Republic, Socrates remarks that training for philosophy requires the care of the body, for the body is “a helper for philosophy” (498b4). All of this serves to indicate that the extreme disdain for the body that is typically perceived in the preparation for death passage is arguably uncharacteristic of Socrates (and Plato).22

It is this “extreme disdain for the body” that characterizes the ascetic philosophers’ account of philosophy as dying and being dead, and in fact, it is characteristic of their view of life generally and of our responsibility in life specifically. The ascetic philosopher exercises an extreme distrust of the corporeal conditions that define bodily and earthly existence: conditions such as sensation, sense perception, place, time, bodily dependence upon food, drink, and sex, and even the dependence upon our fellow human beings. All of these conditions of human existence are seen not just as limitations (which they are), but as painful bonds that enslave us to becoming, change, uncertainty, contingency, and transience. Nietzsche, noting that this negative and ascetic tendency is typical of the majority of Western philosophy, claims that ascetic philosophers are really nothing more than “mummifiers,” taking “dead” concepts, that is, ideas that are created out of the act of negating life and its conditions, and preserving them in the wrappings of immortality, unconditionality, certainty, and being. Nietzsche writes:

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You ask me about the idiosyncrasies of philosophers? . . . There is their lack of historical sense, their hatred of even the idea of becoming, their Egyptianism. They think that they are doing a thing honour when they dehistoricize it, *sub specie aeternitas* [“from the viewpoint of eternity”] -- when they make a mummy of it. All that philosophers have handled for millennia has been conceptual mummies; nothing actual has escaped from their hands alive. They kill, they stuff, when they worship, these conceptual idolaters—they become a mortal danger to everything when they worship. Death, change, age, as well as procreation and growth, are for them objections—refutations even. What is, does not *become*; what becomes, *is* not. . . . Now they all believe, even to the point of despair, in that which is. But since they cannot get hold of it, they look for reasons why it is withheld from them. ‘It must be an illusion, a deception which prevents us from perceiving that which is: where is the deceiver to be found?’—‘We’ve got it,’ they cry in delight, ‘it is the senses! These senses, *which are so immoral as well*, it is they which deceive us about the real world. Moral: escape from sense-deception, from becoming, from history, from falsehood—history is nothing but belief in the senses, belief in falsehood. Moral: denial of all that believes in the senses, of all the rest of mankind: all of that is mere “people.” Be a philosopher, be a mummy, represent monotono-theism by a gravedigger mimicry!—And away, above all, with the body, that pitiable *idée fixe* of the senses! infected with every error of logic there is, refuted, impossible even, not withstanding it is impudent enough to behave as if it actually existed!’ 23

There is nothing objectionable in and of itself in theorizing abstractly about the possibility or even feasibility of a realm that is the obverse of this life. The problem, according to Nietzsche, is that this view is expressive of a need, a *moral* need to denigrate and negate the very conditions within which we live and move as human beings. It is not the ascetic philosopher merely entertains the thought of what life would look like if opposite conditions were to obtain, it is the need, the desire, to make such a world real in contradistinction to this, false and evil, existence, and to lead a way of life founded upon such a distinction that is so problematic. The ascetic philosopher must believe, must place his or her trust in the thought that this life is not real, that the body is the source of irreality, and that only death brings release. As Nietzsche writes, “The criteria which have been bestowed on the "true being" of things are the criteria of not-being, of

23 *TI*: ‘Reason in Philosophy’, §1.
nothingness, the "true world" has been constructed out of contradiction to the actual world: indeed an apparent world, insofar as it is merely a moral-optical illusion,” and the ascetic must “invent fables about a world "other" than this one has no meaning at all, unless an instinct of slander, detraction, and suspicion against life has gained the upper hand in us: in that case, we avenge ourselves against life with a phantasmagoria of ‘another,’ a ‘better’ life.”24

The ascetic philosophers must regard this life as a “prison” and the body as the chains that bind us to this prison in which we are incarcerated for some unknown reason by the gods. It is not that human beings are entrusted to this life or even with this life, instead the ascetic must mistake the “divine” call to responsibility as pertaining to another life, another mode of being in which the soul is by itself with the pure beings in the True. In this way, the ascetics delude themselves into thinking that the call to thoughtfulness and purity comes from beyond, from a realm that only the soul inhabits, and thus they fail to be thoughtful in this life, to take up this life as a responsibility, to make good on that to which and with which we are entrusted here and now. The only “care” of the ascetic philosophers is to absolve themselves of any this-worldly responsibility (toward the body, thoughtful humility, self-examination, and ethical obligations toward others) in the “hope” of emancipation from the “pain” of vital life, in the hope of absolute and certain knowledge in communion with “pure” beings, in separateness and withdrawal from the chains that enslave us to this world. The so-called “courage” of the ascetic philosopher is merely cowardice in the face of the conditions of this life and of the demand to take up this life as a care to and with which he or she is

entrusted. The so-called “hope” of the ascetic philosopher is the product of a reactionary despair at the uncertainty and vicissitudes of life, a nihilistic despair in the face of the possibility of a meaningless existence. The ascetic conception of death as an “escape” or “release” from corporeal and earthly “bondage” is thoughtless and irresponsible for it fails to consider that true freedom is found, as Madison says, in “the conversion to a philosophical way of life, a life characterized by justice, purity, and understanding.” The ascetic philosopher, then, fails to confront the Minotaur of death, representing both the fear of death and carelessness with the soul, instead ignoring it by closing his or her eyes to life and imagining a “pure,” deathless life of the soul “freed” from the body and existing in a state of genuine “thoughtfulness” or epistemic certainty free from the necessity to strive for truth, enact goodness daily, and the perpetual need for self-examination and the constant and lifelong work of properly caring for the soul.

The ascetic philosopher, in other words, longs for a deathless life in which, paradoxically, there is no need for philosophy, where one does not desire wisdom but is wisdom, where erotic striving comes to rest in the soul’s pure vision and grasp of the True. Such philosophers truly are, as Nietzsche claims, “idolaters” in that they see themselves as gods temporarily fallen from grace, gods waiting to be freed from the prison of the body. In Socrates’s view, the pretensions of the ascetic philosophers are no better than the pretensions of the sophists and politicians: they claim to possess knowledge of that which they do not know, and thus they lead hopeful and idealistic youth astray by lulling their souls into a false sense of superiority over life, of complacency and apathy toward the “care of the soul” demanded by our position of

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“service” to the good and true here on earth, and a dangerous reliance upon the absolute certainty of unconditional knowledge as the sole criterion of truth, meaning, and thoughtfulness. The ascetic insistence upon absolute truth and certainty concerning what is or can be known is dangerous precisely because it can lead to misology, hatred of argument—a condition that results from misplaced and wrongly directed trust.

Paradoxically, the problem with the ascetic viewpoint is that it places too much trust in the human capacity to divorce or separate reason from desire, intellect from instinct, necessity from contingency, the soul from the body. Which is to say that the ultimate trust of the ascetic is that human beings are meant to transcend the necessity of trust and achieve a state of trustlessness in which knowledge and certainty replace opinion and uncertainty. When this ascetic trust is called into question, when for instance, an argument against the immortality of the soul proves convincing, then one’s trust in ultimate meaning, purpose, and truth is destroyed, hope is replaced by despair, and love for wisdom (philosophy) turns to hatred of argument and account-giving, for arguments and accounts are given out of a desire to know, a desire for truth, and knowledge and truth conceived as certain and infallible are now impossible. From a Socratic perspective, it turns out, the ascetic way of life is not trustworthy nor is it genuinely philosophical as it claims, for the ascetic fails to realize that eris (strife) and eros (desire) are necessarily bound together in the philosophical way of life, just as he or she fails to understand that soul and body are entwined in the self, that understanding and trust must accompany one another in the search for truth, and that this-worldly responsibilities (toward others and the self) and transcendent possibilities are bound together in the demand to care for the self.
In sum, in the beginning sections of the *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates assume the guise of the ascetic philosopher in order to contrast one way of life and one mode of response to the call-demand structure of human existence with another. The ascetic viewpoint responds to the fact of a deathbound somatic existence by negating it and positing as the object of its desire the unification of a pure soul with the deathless beings. Thoughtfulness, though the goal of the ascetic way of life, cannot be achieved until the soul is separated completely from the evil body after death. Further, thoughtfulness is thought in complete abstraction from bodily conditions, purified of all contingency and passion, and is seen as consisting in the pure and unconditional contemplation of the beings. The somatic hedonistic way of life, on the other hand, seeks the instant gratification of ceaseless pleasure-seeking desires and strives to avoid pain and suffering at all costs. Thoughtfulness is thought to be unnecessary except as a means of avoiding pain or achieving pleasurable gratification.
CHAPTER THREE:

TRUST IN PLATO’S PHAEDO (III): THE NECESSITY OF TRUST IN LOGOS

Socrates has told the story of the ascetic “genuine” philosophers view of philosophy as a practice of dying and being dead. This story, however, fails to convince Cebes, who admits that though Socrates’ account was “beautifully put,” what was said about the soul nevertheless “induces a lot of distrust in human beings,” for “they fear that the soul, once she’s free of the body, is no longer anywhere and is destroyed and perishes on that very day when a human being dies; and that as soon as she’s free of the body and departs, then, scattered like breath or smoke, she goes fluttering off and is no longer anywhere” (69e-70a). In other words, Cebes gives voice to the fear that upon the death of the body, the soul is extinguished forever. The soul does not survive the death of the body. Though Cebes identifies this “fear” with “human beings,” it is clear that this very fear underlies the ascetic philosophers’ hope that the soul persists after separation from the body, for only then can “we know anything purely” (66e). The fear that death spells the end of the self, of the soul, is the fear that drives the ascetic philosopher to hope that the soul will achieve union with pure being upon separation from the body.

This fear, the fear that the soul is not after death, represents the possibility of nihilism, the possibility that existence has no meaning, my life no significance, that the cosmos is purposeless and empty, and thus, all action, desire, striving, suffering, and “knowledge” is void of content and substance. This is the mighty Minotaur that Socrates
must combat, the fearsome “boogeyman” that threatens the human being with nothingness and meaninglessness. In the last chapter, I argued that the ascetic “genuine” philosopher’s answer to the threat of nihilism is insufficient and self-defeating, for in negating the conditions of corporeality and earthly responsibility and positing the obverse in the afterlife, it fails to account for how and why we can trust in truth and meaning in existence. Effectively, the ascetic philosopher suffers from life, and therefore avenges him or herself upon it by positing a life “beyond” in which genuine knowledge is achieved, communion with being entered into, and the final purpose and end of humanity affirmed. The ascetic philosopher, therefore, attempts to evade nihilism by ignoring it, the cost of which is a lapse into nihilism. Cebes has clearly understood that the ascetic account of hope and dying is insufficient to dispel the fear of death. Turning one’s back to the Minotaur does not make it go away; rather, it exposes one to attack from behind, it makes one even more vulnerable and insecure.

This fear of meaninglessness, of the full and complete annihilation of self in death, appears monstrous and insurmountable for human beings. Such fear leads readily to despair and distrust of philosophy, for philosophy is the love of wisdom and truth, and if there is no meaning or purpose, then such love and the constant striving and care it demands, is empty. Yet, after Socrates has led the interlocutors through a series of arguments designed to “demonstrate” the existence of the soul after death (70b-77b), he calls this very fear “childish,” nothing more than an imagined “hobgoblin” (77e). Indeed, Socrates remonstrates Cebes and Simmias, saying, “you have the fear of children—that in truth the wind will blow the soul away and scatter her in all directions as she departs from
the body” (77e). Cebes laughingly responds that perhaps there is, in each of them, a “little child who’s terrified by such things,” and that Socrates should “try to persuade him not to fear death as if it were a hobgoblin” (77e). In order to cure the fear of our inner child, we must, Socrates asserts, “sing him incantations each day until you sing away his fears” (77e). What does this mean? The metaphor of singing incantations to oneself in order to dispel nihilistic fear of death seems both absurd and inexplicable. Yet Cebes immediately acknowledges that this is just what Socrates himself has been doing in the first half of the Phaedo: “Then where, Socrates . . . are we to get hold of a good singer of incantations, since you, . . . are abandoning us?” (78a). Socrates has been “singing incantations” to his interlocutors in the form of logoi, “arguments” and “speeches,” and mythoi, “stories” and “myth.”

Given that we can understand Socrates’s mythoi and logoi as “incantations,” how can we understand Socratic logoi as incantatory? What kind of charming power is manifest in the giving of accounts and arguments? The arguments for the immortality of the soul that Socrates offers are not completely satisfactory and they do not withstand rational scrutiny as stated. Even Socrates admits that the arguments are “open to suspicions and counterattacks” “in many ways” (84c). What then is their function and purpose? Are they nothing more than temporary charms or illusory spells designed to dupe the participant?

Socrates’ use of arguments for the immortality of the soul, whether they are unsatisfactory or not, is incantatory in that argumentation and rational speech invoke the unseen reality of truth and beauty in order to soothe the “inner child” within us. This inner child is easily frightened because it is without reason—or at least, without a developed
sense of reason. Perhaps this easily frightened inner child refers to the childish soul ruled by desires of which Socrates speaks in the Republic? In order for the soul to be turned toward the True and the Good, the fearful inner child composed of desires must be tamed and soothed so that reason can rule.\(^1\) Socratic *logoi* make manifest the order and goodness of the whole for they enable the human soul to respond to the call of the good that shines through the phenomena under investigation. Laurel Madison characterizes Socrates’s purpose in offering arguments in the following way:

If “there is no greater evil one can suffer” than to abandon philosophical activity out of distrust in arguments, it would make sense for Socrates to devote a great deal of time to showing his friends (and the reader) how to deal with arguments that are not entirely satisfying, as is the case with most, if not all, of the arguments offered. Socrates is well aware of the insufficiency of these arguments . . . but in the course of the discussion he is able to demonstrate to his friends something of enormous value: how to continue to pick up the inquiry and move it forward when previous arguments have failed. Through his action, he teaches them how to live philosophically, i.e., how to care for their souls—even in the face of discouragement.\(^2\)

In order to counter the fear of death and the temptation to nihilism that asceticism represents, Socrates must induce *trust in* logos in his interlocutors; and this is indeed the intent behind the arguments for immortality of the soul that occupy the *Phaedo*. The point is not to definitively and finally prove the immortality of the soul, but to guide Simmias and Cebes through the practice of argumentation with the goal of converting them to a way of life that *essentially* involves singing the incantations of *logoi* to oneself and “in company with others” (78a) so that proper care is taken for the soul. Trust in *logoi*, and more specifically, in what is made manifest through *logoi*, is, in the final

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\(^1\) Just as the population of the *politeia* founded in speech in the *Republic* must be told a “noble falsehood” if the Many are to accept the rule of the philosophers.

analysis, a proper response to the demand to care for ourselves to and with which we are entrusted. It is an essential component of faithfully and piously taking up life as a task, a position of service entrusted to us and a trust that our entire lives are to be spent “making good” on.

Of course, properly directed and placed trust is crucial to the investigation. By directing his or her trust toward the perfection of knowledge accomplished in another, completely pure life, the ascetic philosopher places trust not in an ongoing striving for the true and engagement with others in this life, but in an in-human condition of pure knowledge. In this way, the ascetic misinterprets the demand to care for life with which we are entrusted as a demand to negate any meaning or truth that finite and corporeal existence might have or achieve, effectively evading any and all responsibilities that may be contaminated and infected by bodily and earthly concerns, and thus forever putting off and forestalling the necessity to examine oneself and to care for life in the here and now. In desiring the unachievable, the ascetic fails to achieve anything significant and cannot enact meaning in either words or actions. In their pretension to know what is not known, the ascetics neglect the very starting point of knowledge: the acknowledgement that one does not know. In trusting that the meaning of human existence is to be attained by extinguishing the necessity for trust, the ascetics fail to pay heed to the demands of trust issued from our relations to others, oneself, a world, and things. The significance of trust for philosophy cannot be underestimated. In the Phaedo alone, the dialogue about ultimate matters of significance to human life, Kenneth Dorter notes that pistis and peitho are used over fifty times in the dialogue.³

Misology as the Greatest Danger

Near the end of the first half of the *Phaedo*, Cebes and Simmias offer their arguments for why fear that the soul does not survive the death of the body is justified. These arguments are so convincing that Phaedo himself confesses, “once we’d heard what they said, we all felt ill at ease . . . they now seemed to shake us up again and cast us back into distrust,” after which Echecrates breaks in and exclaims, “as I myself listen to you, it occurs to me to say something like this to myself: ‘What argument will we trust from now on? The one that was so powerfully trustworthy—the argument that Socrates gave—has now fallen into discredit’” (88c-d). Phaedo and Echecrates give voice to the despair of the interlocutors at the apparent failure of the Socratic logos to persuade them of the trustworthiness of the arguments for the immortality of the soul, and even more devastatingly, it appears that Cebes and Simmias’ *logoi* have (paradoxically) cast a shadow over the power and security of argumentation as such.

Socrates does not immediately address Simmias or Cebes, nor does he engage their arguments right way; instead, he strokes Phaedo’s “beautiful” hair and warns, “let’s be on our guard so that we don’t undergo a certain experience,” which he then identifies as the experience of becoming “haters of argument, as some become haters of human beings; for it’s not possible . . . for anybody to experience a greater evil than hating arguments” (89c-d). That “hating arguments” is the greatest “evil” is a strong claim to make, and we must ask how and why one would come to hate arguments, how misanthropy and misology are analogous conditions, and why misology is the greatest evil.
Earlier, at 83c, Socrates had already asserted that a certain experience leads human beings into “the greatest and most extreme evil of all,” an experience identified with the observation that “every human being’s soul is compelled, at the very moment she’s violently pleased or pained at something, to regard what above all brought about her suffering as both most manifest and most true—although this isn’t the case. And these are above all visible things.” What Socrates designates as the greatest evil here seems distant from his description of misology as the greatest evil. However, the connection between them is far stronger than it appears at first glance.

The case of believing the source of pleasure and pain to be most true and manifest is so dangerous and evil precisely because it points to the tendency of the human self to trust only in what is most immediately manifest, visible, and visceral, which, in most cases, is bodily and corporeal. This trust is symptomatic of those selves that live to serve the body, and this service can be characterized in terms of temporal honors, wealth, and the identification of self with bodily desires. Hence, the soul, together with its powers of reasoning, desiring, decisiveness, choice, and imagination, becomes “body-like.” The “body-like,” Socrates would have us understand is “oppressive and heavy and earthy and visible”; and the soul that is “always with the body and [gives] it lots of care” (81c), that “was always having intercourse with the body and servicing it and loving it and being bewitched by it and its desires and pleasures,” comes “to the point that nothing else seemed true to her but what’s body-like (which one can touch and see and drink and eat and use for the pleasures of love-making),” and the soul gives into “the habit of hating and trembling at and fleeing what’s shadowy to the eyes and unseen but is intelligible and seized on by philosophy” (81b).
The great evil of this condition is not due to the body or embodiment as such. Rather, the evil is found in the soul’s exclusive concern for and service of the body, in enslavement to and obsession with the body. This enslavement to bodily pleasure (and avoidance of pain) leads to a mistaken notion of truth and being, as well as to the closing-off of the “higher” powers of the soul to the call and demand of the intelligible, unseen, and divine-like truth of being that shines forth in the phenomena. The body-like soul fails to understand that “whenever soul and body are in the same place, nature ordains the body to be a slave and to be ruled and the soul to rule and be master” (80a). What is truly at issue here is an improper and unnatural submission of the soul (and thus, of the self) to the body and to bodily pleasures and pains. Both the body-lover and the ascetic body-hater “suffer” (in the broad sense of paschein) from the corporeal aspect of life, whether in pleasure or pain, and thus regard as true and worthy of pursuit either the immediate gratification of somatic pleasure (body-lover) or the negation of the body-like, imagined in terms of the coincidence between a pure soul and the pure beings (the ascetic “genuine” philosopher).

Socrates makes an implicit claim about the nature of human beings here: The human condition is such that we desire and strive to achieve the stable, the secure, the “true” in the sense of the trustworthy. Recall the image of human life as phroura, a “garrison,” from 62b, the sense of this image is that we all have a primordial, precognitive, or vital understanding or awareness of being entrusted to life, placed within it, a part of it, at the same time that we sense that we have been entrusted with life, given life as a task, that a particular way of life is demanded of us. In one sense, therefore, we are always already undergoing life, suffering or being affected by life (again, recall the
scope of the term *paschein*), placed within and firmly grounded in it. On the other hand, we cannot merely live, subsist, or let be; instead, we must strive, desire, and seek greater security and stability in life, sensing that we must not only undergo life, but must take it up and orient, direct, and comport ourselves toward it in a certain way. Unfortunately, on Socrates’s view, many to most human beings never adequately recognize the truth of this demand of entrustment and thus fail to trust properly.

Properly placed and cultivated trust is crucial to living well, and Socrates, after he has characterized the misologist, exhorts his interlocutors, saying, “let’s be on our guard against this condition [of misology] and not admit into the soul that the realm of arguments risks having nothing sound in it. Instead let’s far rather admit that we’re not yet sound but must act like men and put our hearts into being sound—you and the others for the sake of your whole life hereafter, and I for the sake of death itself” (90e). In exhorting his interlocutors in this way, Socrates acknowledges the finitude of human beings, that it is soundness that we must seek, not an ultimate state of certitude beyond soundness. At the same time, Socrates indicates that *logos* is the path we must pursue if we are to properly satisfy the demand of life with which we are entrusted. Furthermore, “being sound” is not solely nor even primarily a matter of making sure that one’s arguments are *logically sound*; rather, Socrates indicates that the deeper meaning of “being sound” is *existential*, having more to do with one’s *stance* toward life and existence, i.e., existential comportment and engagement, than with the giving of strong arguments. The misologist, the ascetic philosopher, and the body-lover, all fail to recognize the necessity of “being sound” because they fail to understand or acknowledge what they themselves, as human beings, truly *are*. Socrates, because he is humbly aware
of his own ignorance, an ignorance that is a constitutive component of the human condition, pursues philosophy because it is the only way (or the best way) to secure soundness in life.

*Artless Trust, Misology, and the “Art of Arguments”*

Without a doubt, section 89a-91c of the *Phaedo* contains an abundance of trust language; and, considering the subject matter and its seriousness, this is no mistake, for here Socrates must combat the most dangerous tendency of human beings: to fall into an “artless” and nihilistic distrust of human beings and arguments when one or the other disappoints or fails to make good on the naïve trust one has invested in them. Socrates is clear: As human beings, we must trust in the truth and stability of those things that are of ultimate concern to us (fellow human beings, truth, goodness). However, as is befitting the critical bent of philosophy, we must understand the limits and nature of that in which we place our trust. We must begin by understanding ourselves, by understanding our limits as finite human beings.

The reason why distrust that leads to the hatred of arguments is so dangerous is that it also leads to nihilism. Those who pretend that “they’ve become the wisest of men” because they have trusted an argument to be true that later “seems to him to be false, as it sometimes is and sometimes isn’t,” come to believe “that they alone have detected that there’s nothing sound or stable—not in the realm of either practical matters or arguments—but that all things that are simply toss to and fro . . . and don’t stay put anywhere for any length of time” (90b-c). This is a nihilistic perspective: that there is nothing stable, lasting, or sound in human affairs, and thus there is and can be no stable meaning, significance, or purpose in existence. Hence, all trust is ultimately ill founded
and irrational. The only thing we can trust as human beings is that there is nothing trustworthy. The only truth is that there is no truth. Such relativism contradicts itself however, for it illegitimately trusts in itself and in its own knowledge, a knowledge that it has no right to claim. Instead of regarding the failure of certain arguments as an opportunity to revise, redirect, and rebuild these arguments on better, surer, and more sound foundations, the misologist and nihilist deny that arguments as such are capable of being truer, better, and more trustworthy. By denying the ability of arguments to lead to truth and knowledge of the things they are about, the misologist lapses not only into a logical contradiction, but also jumps to an illicit and dangerous conclusion: that there is nothing sound or stable at all, that “all the things that are simply toss to and fro.” One should pay strict attention to the parallel between the misologist and the ascetic philosopher discussed earlier: Both presuppose an impossible notion of truth (and thus of meaning) as the complete and absolute grasp of the things that are by the mind or soul, resulting in the kind of certainty that can only be achieved if the human soul were to become one with and identical to the highest objects of truth. The misologists, because they do not possess the art of arguments, claim to know that “knowing is impossible” and that nothing has any substance or stable being. Of course, the ascetic philosophers simply deny or willfully ignore the possibility that knowing in the purest and most absolute sense is impossible, and instead posit the afterlife as the site of meaning and fulfillment, truth and knowledge.

*The Proper Role of Trust in the Art of Arguments*

If both the ascetic philosophers and the misologists fail to possess the “art of arguments” due to a faulty view of knowledge and a misplaced trust, then what does an
“art of arguments” and a proper trust of arguments involve? What would it look like to properly place one’s trust in and thus possess the art of arguments? Socrates himself not only models and embodies such an artisan of arguments, but he enacts this art throughout the *Phaedo*. Argument after argument for the immortality of the soul fails or is discovered unsound due to some flaw or failure in its premises or the assumptions upon which it is founded. Socrates never admits defeat, however, and instead picks up the argument and redirects it, changes its terms, or reevaluates its foundational presuppositions. All the while, he encourages critical evaluation of the arguments at the same time that he insists that the argument be renewed again and again out of a desire for truth and knowledge, a desire that manifests itself in the continual effort to make one’s arguments trustworthy, stable, and sound. It is this very process of argumentation, account-giving, and self-examination that constitutes the task of caring for the soul.

Socrates’s account here tells us something about the phenomenon of trust itself, that it involves soundness and stability in some way. Proper trust, then, is a trust that is more sound, more stable, and hence, safer, than improper trust. Trust is a kind of *groundedness*, and thus admits of *degrees* of durability, safety, security, and steadiness. The misologist discovers (rightly or wrongly) that an argument he or she once trusted was safe and secure is not, and thus comes to regard all arguments as insecure and unsafe rather than seeking a more trustworthy argument. It is not that Socrates claims that all instances and investments of trust are securely grounded—not at all!—for it is part of the human condition that we never come to know the absolute ground of knowledge and truth in a complete and final way. This does not mean, however, that one cannot seek and find the marks and manifestations of such a ground in a qualified way. This is why, in fact, the
philosopher never leaves trust behind in the quest for knowledge and truth. The
philosophic way of life consists in the constant struggle (eris) and desire (eros) to “stand”
upon and “open” oneself toward the safest and most secure ground possible, to engage in
perpetual examination of one’s life and actions to see whether they are trustworthy; hence
the need for argument, the means whereby the philosopher establishes or denies the
security and trustworthiness of claims to truth, justice, and meaning.

The clear implication of Socrates’ warning against and analysis of misology is
that no matter how much one distrusts all claims to trustworthy knowledge, no matter
how vehemently the possibility of truth is denied, and no matter the degree to which one
rejects that there is anything sound or stable in existence and being, one cannot ultimately
live “trustlessly,” without investing trust in anything or anyone whatsoever. The human
condition is such that each one of us is placed into a relation of trust in the very event of
being entrusted with life in the first place. The question is how best to take up and engage
our relations of trust. The ascetic philosopher makes the mistake of closing his or her soul
to the demands of these trust relations. Even the nihilistic misologist trusts, for he or she
trusts in the very conception of knowledge and truth that he or she denies exists, and in
the final analysis, the misologist places trust in an erroneous judgment of his or her
capacity to discern what is or is not the case. In other words, to put it in terms of
Nietzsche’s analysis of “unconditional honest atheism” (GM III, §27), the misologist
possesses a will for the kind of truth that is denied human beings, and this will leads to a
blindness of the soul derived from an inability to acknowledge the limitations of our
humanness and from a closed and unreceptive stance toward those elements of life that
demand an attentive and careful response.
Socrates’s “Second Sailing” (96a-102a)

So what would Socrates have us understand by this “art of arguments”? His answer is indirectly contained in his autobiographical account of his “second sailing” at Phaedo 96a-102a, the purpose of which is to direct Socrates’ interlocutors toward his own use of logoi and the way in which the Socratic art of logos is a response to the demand of trust.

Socrates begins by recounting how, “as a young man,” he was “wondrously desirous of that wisdom they call ‘inquiry into nature’,” a desire “to know the causes of each thing, why each thing comes to be and why it perishes and why it is” (96a), and he explored the possibility of understanding such causes of natural things and processes in terms of the elements (air, fire), the confluence of opposites (hot and cold), and physiological characteristics (the brain causes sensory stimuli which then produces memory and opinion). This mode of inquiry, that of mechanistic and empirical explanation, Socrates confesses, resulted in perplexity and blindness: “I was so intensely blinded by this ‘looking’ that I unlearned even what I thought I knew before about many other things and about why a human being grows” (96c). Here it should be recalled that Socrates was accused of this very sort of inquiring “into heaven and earth” in the Apology, and that there, he defended himself by denying that he ever claimed to be investigating such things much less that he possesses knowledge of such matters⁴. The problem with this sort of inquiry, it would seem, is that it investigates visible phenomena using the senses, and thus results in a kind of blindness. Regardless, the impact of Socrates’ initial mode of inquiry was profound in that it called his previous opinions

⁴ Apology 18a-d.
about things into question to such a degree that what he thought he previously knew regarding the nature of number, addition, and division, became problematic.

After the failure of his materialistic and empirical investigation into causes (*aitía*), Socrates turned to Anaxagoras for answers, for he found an initial plausibility to the Anaxagorean claim that “it is in fact Mind [*nous*] that puts the world in order and is responsible for all things” (97c). This claim “pleased” Socrates, for he supposed that “if this is the case, then Mind at least, in ordering the world, would order all things and position each thing in just that way which was best,” and thus, all one must do in order to “discover the cause concerning each thing,” is to discern “in what way it’s best for it either to be or to undergo or to do anything whatsoever” (97c). There are several problematic assumptions here. First, Socrates fallaciously infers the conclusion that Mind orders each thing according to what is best from the premise that Mind is the responsible agent for the ordering of the cosmos. Nowhere does he indicate that Anaxagoras claimed that Mind orders only what is best, instead he assumes it. Second, Socrates assumes that “the best” and “the necessary” are one—a problematic claim at best! Finally, Socrates did not seem to recognize the jump from the claim that Mind orders all things according to what is best to the claim that human minds can ascertain the purposes, intent, or power of cosmic Mind.

Whatever its problems, Socrates was attracted to the Anaxagorean thesis that Mind orders all, and he expected Anaxagoras to explain all phenomena in terms of Mind as cause, and “once he’d given the cause for each one and for all of them in common . . . he’d go on to take me through the best for each and the good common to all” (98a-b). However, Socrates’ expectations were defeated the more he read of Anaxagoras, and he
testifies, “as I went on with my reading, I saw a man who didn’t hold any causes responsible for putting things in order, but instead put the blame on air and ether and water and other things many and absurd” (98b-c). Anaxagoras would, for example, claims Socrates, wrongly attribute the cause of his sitting in prison to material processes and empirically visible observation and the bodily make-up of Socrates, instead of “taking care to assign the true causes” for his being there, i.e., to Socrates’s judgment that it is “more just and beautiful” to “endure whatever penalty the city should order” rather running away out of a desire to preserve his life (98e-99a). In other words, Socrates’s physical make-up is certainly a necessary condition for his sitting in prison rather than escaping, but it is hardly the primary or sufficient condition for his doing so. Anaxagoras succumbs to the same blindness that Socrates fell into with materialistic explanation.

Those who employ a materialistic or body-oriented method of investigation “are groping around as if in the dark,” i.e., they suffer from a form of blindness, because they are unable “to distinguish that it’s one thing to be genuinely the cause [both necessary and sufficient] and another to be that without which the cause wouldn’t be a cause [necessary, but not sufficient]” (99b). This is the kind of blindness suffered by those whose thought and way of life focuses on the “body-like” and “visible” accessible through the senses and about which one can have only opinion. Such blindness is the product of misplaced, misdirected trust—a trust that is unstable and unsound because it is invested in things that are unstable and unsound. For these sorts of inquirers (including, in the end, Anaxagoras), Socrates laments, “the power of placing things as they are now situated—in the best way possible” is not even an issue or matter worthy of pursuit, for “they don’t at all suppose it’s the Good-and-Binding that truly binds (sundêo) and holds
things together” (99c). To put this point in colloquial language: The materialists “fail to see the forest for the trees.” They examine the ever-changing parts and not the stable whole. This kind of methodological narrowness leads to an epistemic blindness that parallels the existential comportment of the somatic hedonist.

Socrates admits, however, that though “it’d be a pleasure to become anybody’s student” who could explain how the Good-and-Binding as a cause works, he himself “never became capable of discovering it” nor of “learning it from another” (99c). In making this admission, Socrates is acknowledging his ignorance concerning the exact nature and power of the cause of being and truth. This admission sets the Socratic philosopher in stark contrast to those who would claim to possess knowledge of the ultimate nature of reality (the misologist) as well as those who claim that such knowledge will be perfected and realized upon the separation of soul from the body (the ascetic philosopher). Because Socrates came to profess his ignorance concerning the nature of such a cause (implicitly recognizing the limits of the human psyche), he set out on a “second sailing in search of the cause” (99d). In his words,

“Well then after these experiences,” said he, “since I had had it with this looking into beings [ta onta], it seemed to me I had to be on my guard so as not to suffer the very thing those people do who behold and look at the sun during an eclipse. For surely some of them have their eyes destroyed if they don’t look at the sun’s likeness in water or in some other such thing. I thought this sort of thing over and feared I might be totally soul-blinded if I looked at things [ta pragmata] with my eyes and attempted to grasp them by each of the senses. So it seemed to me that I should take refuge in accounts and look in them for the truth of beings [tôn onton tēn alêtheian]” (99d-e).

This passage is rather confusing due to the fact that Socrates uses the example of looking at the sun during an eclipse as a cause of having one’s eyes destroyed. How can one go
blind or damage the eyes from looking at the sun during an *eclipse*? If we take the analogy seriously, than the sun corresponds to the ultimate cause, the eyes to the powers of the human soul, and blindness to a condition of epistemic failure or the incapacity to properly comprehend. Perhaps we should take Socrates’ admission that he “had had it with this looking into beings” to be signifying that the attempt to directly “look” or “gaze” at beings is doomed to failure since the human soul is incapable of achieving direct contact or apprehension of beings in themselves. The reference to looking at the sun during an eclipse then, could quite feasibly refer to those who would claim that they apprehend the cause of all things *directly*, when in actuality, they fail to recognize that the “sun” is covered over and obscured by darkness. John Sallis notes this, and comments, “it is not insignificant that Socrates speaks of those who look at the eclipsed sun: the very connection under which one can undertake to observe the sun and can remain more or less oblivious to the danger that is precisely that in which the sun is ‘covered over,’ so that, as always, it is primarily the light and not its source that is available to one’s view.”⁵ I take it that Sallis is pointing to the danger of attempting to directly comprehend the source of being, the ultimate cause, by looking at it ‘covered over,’ eclipsed, as it were, and thus with the ‘light’ or truth provided by such a source obscured, dimmed, and darkened. But what is it that obscures the source or cause of beings in this way? I would suggest that Socrates implies that the eclipse of the sun and the consequent dimming or extinction of its illumination, is due to human prejudice, opinion, and misplaced or misdirected trust.

If investigating “the beings” (*ta onta*) directly results in blindness of the soul regarding its limits, then looking at “things” (*ta pragmata*) with the senses in an attempt to comprehend them in terms of their visible appearances, and then conflating their true being with their physical (in the broad sense) characteristics, also results in blindness. Again, Sallis writes, “The primary reference of Socrates’ statement is, however, not to a course on which one would gaze at the sun but to a course on which one would remain completely attached to visible things and would attempt to grasp them by the senses alone, oblivious to that source and even that illumination that lets them be manifest. Here too the final result is blindness. That is, if one seeks to grasp beings directly and in that way that is most immediate, if one seeks a grasp on things as they are most immediately manifest to all men, then, to the extent that one remains within such a comportment, one’s soul grows blind to beings.”

6 This form of blindness, an affliction or disease of the soul, particularly affects those who investigate reality using materialistic methods. Interestingly, despite the way in which this mode of investigation (through the senses and directed toward visible, material characteristics) calls into question formerly held beliefs and opinions about what is, it nevertheless results in the same form of blindness that inflicts the “many.” Presumably, of course, Socrates has nothing against natural science and its mode of studying physical phenomena via empirical method. This mode of investigation and its fruits are useful and necessary for medicine, biology, and other “arts.” A problem emerges, however, when the physical scientist goes beyond knowledge of visible, physical bodies, and attempts to claim knowledge of being and the source of

6 Ibid.
being on the basis of his or her knowledge of physical processes and attributes. The soul-blindness of the materialist is caused by the same source as the blindness of the ascetic: a failure to acknowledge one’s ignorance, an ignorance that is constitutive of the human being, a being whose power of knowing is by definition, finite, whose existence is defined by trust, not by the possibility of an immediate and absolute grasp of the source of all things. Sallis summarizes this point beautifully:

Both kinds of seeing end in failure and blindness—unless, as in the case of Socrates, the pursuit of such seeing somehow issues in the awareness of the danger . . . only if it leads into a more acute awareness of ignorance . . . More precisely, what is required is an awakening to an ignorance intrinsic to oneself—an ignorance which is not an ignorance with regard to this or that but which, rather, is a constituent in man’s comportment to everything, an ignorance which, as a result, holds man at a distance from total and immediate revelation of beings. 

Socrates’ message, a message that he drives home time and time again throughout the dialogues, is that knowledge of ignorance is the necessary precondition for the philosophical way of life, and not only the philosophical way of life, but a meaningful and worthwhile way of life as such. Knowledge of ignorance, as the conversation undertaken in the *Phaedo* demonstrates, involves a recognition of the extent to which we exist from trust, in an existential mode of trusting comportment. Such knowledge does

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7 Burger comments: “Visual blindness thus serves as an image for noetic blindness, but the image for ‘noetic vision’ cannot be aesthetic vision, since the latter, or at least a certain attitude toward it, is in fact the cause of noetic blindness: the danger of blinding one’s psyche arises precisely from looking at things (*pragmata*) with one’s eyes and trying to grasp them with one’s senses . . . those who will be psychologically blinded by their unwillingness to rely on reflections, in accordance with the analogy, mistake the *pragmata* for the beings themselves. If these *pragmata* were simply perceptible beings as such, the sense would be the source of the eclipse, and the body the only obstacle to direct contact of the psyche with the beings. But that is precisely the belief against which Socrates’ image is meant to be a warning. It is the belief that Socrates ascribes to the genuine philosophers (cf. 66e). But Socrates’ indications of his own distance from them suggests a very different understanding of the cause of the eclipse: it is not the body, but the needs and desires, and hopes and fears of the psyche—our attachment to the ‘visible for example (cf. 83c-d)—that lead us to mistake the pragmata for the beings themselves” (1999: p. 145).

not stop with recognition of the fact of trust however, but, for the philosopher, involves a continual striving to discover the truth of what one should trust and how to best enact this properly oriented trust in *logos* (word) and *ergon* (deed), thereby satisfying the demand *with* which we are entrusted in always already being entrusted to life.

The Socratic method, the “second-best” alternative undertaken in order to avoid the danger of blindness of the soul, begins from knowledge of ignorance and acknowledgement of trust, and looks for the “truth of beings” in *logoi*, “accounts” or “arguments,” rather than seeking truth in either the direct comprehension of the good, or through the immediacy of sense perception. Socrates swiftly denies that “somebody who looks into beings in accounts [*logoi*],” looks at “likenesses” of beings any more than “one who does so in actions [*erga*]” (100a). In other words, just as the truth of someone’s personality and character traits are manifest though their deeds and actions, so too is the truth of beings manifest in *logoi* about them.

In his *techne of logos*, Socrates found the most trustworthy and secure way to study “beings.” Socrates describes this *techne of logos* as follows:

“On each occasion I put down as hypothesis whatever account I judge to be mightiest; and whatever seems to me to be consonant with this, I put down as being true, both about cause and about all the rest, while what isn’t I put down as not true . . . And I’ll go back to those much-babbled-about things and take my beginning from them, putting down as hypothesis that there’s some Beautiful Itself by Itself and a Good and a Big and all the others . . . it appears to me that if anything else is beautiful besides the Beautiful Itself, it’s not beautiful because of any other single thing but this: because it participates in that Beautiful . . . Therefore I no longer understand,” he said, “nor am I able to recognize the other causes—those wise ones. But if somebody should tell me why anything is beautiful by saying it has a blossoming color or shape or anything else of that sort, I bid farewell to all that, since I’m discombobulated by all these other things, and simply and artlessly and perhaps naively, I hold this close to myself: that nothing makes a thing beautiful but the presence of or communion with that Beautiful—or however and in whatever way you say it happens. As for that, I don’t yet make any definite assertion, but I do assert that it’s by the Beautiful that all
beautiful things are beautiful. For that seems to me to be the safest way to answer for both myself and another. And by holding tight to this, I think I won’t ever fall down, but it’ll prove safe for myself and anyone else” (100a-e).

Those who are familiar with the Platonic dialogues immediately realize that Socrates’s description of his method here, which can best be characterized as a “hypothetical method,” differs in significant respects from his description of the “dialectical method” in other dialogues (notably the Philebus and the Republic). Socrates implicitly acknowledges this distinction when, after describing his account of cause in terms of the participation of pragmata in the eide, he admits, “I don’t yet make any definite assertion” (my emphasis). That is, Socrates will not here, at this stage in the dialogical conversation of the Phaedo, make any “definite assertion” about how the pragmata are related to the eide by a relation of participation—the argument for how this occurs and the defense of its veracity is reserved for the path of dialectic.

The logos of the materialist and that of the ascetic are clearly distinguished from the Socratic logos. In reply to the question of what causes a thing, X, to be beautiful, a materialist might answer that X is beautiful because “it has a blossoming color or shape” (and might further explain how the human brain is stimulated by the presence of this or that a color or shape in the corporeal body in question, and that this stimulus is pleasurable for the brain, hence the predicate of beauty is said of the subject, X), thereby reducing the beautiful to a visible or sensible characteristic of the physical object. The ascetic might reply that no “bodies” or corporeal pragmata can be considered beautiful as no corporeal thing, process, or event is perfect, complete, or pure, thereby denying that
any truth, beauty, goodness, or justice can be said of “earthly,” corporeal, and finite things at all.

In contrast to both the materialist and the ascetic, Socrates acknowledges that the phenomena can manifest the truth of their being to the properly receptive and oriented soul, and that the philosopher must strive to remain faithful to the truth of this manifestation in his or her logoi. That, in fact, logos is the means, the medium, whereby the being of the phenomena can manifest the truth. The logos is, as it were, the way or trail upon which the spoor, the telling remains, of beings appear, providing the signposts whereby the philosopher tracks and hunts down the truth of beings (to recall Socrates’s own metaphor at 63a, 66a). As Sallis exclaims, “On this way it is logos which serves as the medium in which the images of beings can be safely studied . . . this is to say that the way of logos is such as to ‘mediate’ the difference between the things that can be manifest and that which lets them be manifest, i.e., that it is such as to let man maintain himself within the dispersion of this difference; it is to say also that the way of logos is such as to institute the appropriate restraint against seeking a grasp on things as they are immediately manifest, i.e., that it is such as to open up that distance in which things can become more truly manifest, that is, manifest in their proper being.”\footnote{Sallis (1996): p. 42.} Burger gives further insight into the nature of Socrates’ second sailing when she says, “To pursue the Socratic second sailing is to replace investigation of the beings themselves with investigation of their truth. Like the light, in Socrates’ image, that serves as a bond between the eye and the visible object, the truth must be the bond between the mind and the noetic object. Just as the light makes possible the visibility of the phenomena, as well as the capacity of the
eye to see, truth makes possible the knowability of the beings, as well as the capacity of
the mind to know: investigation of the truth of beings is investigation of what makes
knowledge possible."^10 Socrates recognizes that direct apprehension of, much less the
human soul’s self-identification with, the source of being and truth, i.e., the Good, is
impossible: as finite embodied beings we cannot transcend our condition of space and
time, and the first step toward philosophy involves an awareness of and
acknowledgement that we are always already entrusted, given over, to life along with its
conditions and limitations. On the other hand, Socrates stakes his whole life on the claim
that, although we are incapable of direct noetic vision or psychic identification with the
Good (despite pretensions to the contrary), the illumination of the Good, i.e., truth, shows
up in images and reflections, and that the logos is where such truth, manifestation, can
“happen”; and, in fact, that the truth of beings calls out to us, demanding our attention to
its happening or occurrence.

Following the autobiographical account of his “second sailing” and his
characterization of his way of logos, the hypothetical method, Socrates offers Cebes his
final argument, reasoning from the hypothesis of the *eide*, for the immortality of the soul.
And yet, when Cebes finally proclaims his satisfaction with the conclusion (“nor do I in
any way distrust our arguments,” 107a), Simmias is still forced to admit, “I’m
compelled—both by the bigness of what our arguments are about, and because I hold our
human weakness in dishonor—to have some lingering distrust within myself concerning
what’s been said” (107b). Socrates’ reply is most telling for it suggests that Simmias is
awakening to his own ignorance, recognizing the necessity of properly directed and

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invested trust, and beginning on the journey of philosophy: “Not only that, Simmias, . . .
What you say is good, but also our very first hypotheses—even if to all of you they’re
trustworthy—must nevertheless be looked into for greater surety . . . And should this very
thing become sure, you’ll search no further” (107b). Of course, Socrates has already
made clear the fact that absolute guarantees, complete and infallible knowledge, are
impossible for human beings. What he indicates here is that the philosophic search for
truth is a search for what we can trust, for the trustworthy and the sound.

*Trust, the ‘True Earth,’ and Care for the Soul*

Philosophy, on Socrates’ understanding, is a way of life, a way of life that
acknowledges and accepts that human beings have been given over to life, entrusted to it,
intact with its limitations, frustrations, and dependencies. Thus, philosophy begins with
knowledge of one’s ignorance. On the other hand, in achieving this self-knowledge, the
philosopher also becomes *receptive* to the call and demand structure of existence,
attentive to the way in which in being *entrusted to* life, one is *entrusted with* life, with
one’s life as a task. In the metaphysical fact of being-in life, is contained the ethical
demand to undertake the living of life properly—and this is the reason why the
philosopher must continually strive to enact truth in both word and deed. This is the
deeper meaning of the myth of the “True Earth” told by Socrates near the end of the
*Phaedo*, after all the arguments for immortality of the soul have been given and the
interlocutors have been exhorted to critically examine all that has been said.

Socrates, after he has recounted the myth of the “True Earth” (110b-114c),
asserts:
Now to insist that all this holds in just the way I’ve described it, isn’t fitting for a man with any mind. Nevertheless, that this or something like it is the case regarding our souls and their dwelling, since it’s apparent that the soul is in fact something deathless, does seem to me both fitting to insist on and worth the risk for one who thinks it’s so—for a noble risk it is! And he should sing, as it were, incantations to himself over and over again . . . Yes, it’s because of this that a man should be confident on behalf of his own soul—the man, that is, who in his life bade farewell to the other, body-related pleasures and ornaments as something alien to him, considering them more likely to do him harm than good, and who seriously pursued the learning-related pleasures, and who, having adorned his soul not with something alien but with the soul’s own adornment—moderation and justice and courage and freedom and truth—awaits the journey to Hades like one who means to journey wherever fate should call (114d-115a).

This final exhortation, following as it does the telling of a myth, allows us to look back on the conversation and events that take place in the Phaedo, and understand what it is really about. Socrates is not primarily concerned about what may or may not be true or possible in the life hereafter, or Hades; for the arguments about the existence of the soul after death function as exercises in the proper art of reasoning intended to inspire trust in logos. Rather, the entire dialogue, and in fact the spirit of the other dialogues, is focused on what can be said or understood to be true for this life, here and now, on earth, during this life (at 61d, in an important symbolic gesture which points to things yet to come, Socrates places his feet solidly on the earth “and for the rest of the time conversed sitting in this way”). For this reason, metaphors, images, and the language of “safety” and “hope” (elpsis) abound throughout the dialogue. It is not a matter of grounding or securing the uncertainties and finitude of this life in the surety and guarantee of a good life hereafter; rather, it is a matter of achieving proper harmonia in the Greek sense of a “tuning” within the soul in this life. It is a matter of what we can achieve in this life, the
kind of safety, assurance, and hope that philosophy offers for our existence here and now—i.e., what we should trust.

Following Hadot, one could say that Socrates is inducing the kind of practices of thought and deeds that make up the philosophic way of life in the souls of his interlocutors through conversation and dialectic. But it doesn’t stop here: for Socrates also tells myths, “stories,” in the *Phaedo*, which invoke a sense of safety and hope in this life with regard to death and the afterlife. The function of these *mythoi* is to compel one to reflect upon one’s present state of soul, to call one to thoughtfulness in one’s way of thinking and actions, and to impel and direct one’s *eros* toward wisdom and *logos*. In order to accomplish such a task, however, it is necessary for Socrates to challenge the ever-present fear of death, which is really a fear of what one thinks one knows but does not know (see *Apology*), to counter it with logos and myth, and to replace the fear of death with a fear of misology and the fear of the unexamined life.

Thus, Socrates’ use of myth in the *Phaedo* and elsewhere suggests that myth functions not only to present reality, life, and human existence, as infused with significance and meaning, but also that myth is a response to the demand inherent in being entrusted with a life. In other words, using the language of entrustment, Socrates sees myths as stories that explain the sense of demand and givenness that so pervades human existence. They constitute our attempts to make sense of what we are always already given over to, our inhabitance—a universe, nature, others, communities, phenomena, etc.—at the same time that myths are accounts of why we feel an inexplicable, but omnipresent, demand to care for this life to which we are given.

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Echoing Socrates’ interpretation of the myth of the True Earth at the end of the *Phaedo* and the exhortation to philosophy contained therein, Plato, in his *Seventh Letter*, writes, “None of us can avoid death, nor if any man could would he be happy, as people think; for there is nothing worth mentioning that is either good or bad to creatures without souls, but good and evil exist only for a soul, either joined with a body or separated from it. And we must always firmly believe the sacred and ancient words declaring to us that the soul is immortal, and when it has separated from the body will go before the judges and pay the utmost penalties. Therefore we must count it a lesser evil to suffer great wrongs and injustices than to do them” (334e-335a). How can we understand Plato’s words here in light of the *Phaedo*?

No matter what else could be said of Socrates’ arguments for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*, what is indisputable is that he never demonstrates with absolute certainty the immortality of the soul nor that, once separated from the body and entering the afterlife, the soul will “go before the judges and pay the utmost penalties” for evils committed in this life. Rather, the message of the *Phaedo* concerning the immortality of the soul and its motivation to do good in this life amounts to this: Regardless of the fact that such things cannot be proven with absolute certainty, there is something basically right and true about the religious “stories” or *mythoi* prescriptions and accounts concerning such matters and that we must investigate such accounts using the art of arguments in order to harvest what is true and good in them.\(^{12}\)

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\(^{12}\) What is right and true about them? Such myths provide images and accounts that constitute expressions or interpretations of certain phenomena that are so basic and fundamental to human nature and being that we all adopt and appropriate certain understandings of it in our actions and thought without calling such understandings and modes of engagement into question.
Summary of My Interpretation of the Phaedo

My reading of the *Phaedo* takes its lights from the suggestion that the *Phaedo* is really about what the philosopher should trust and how to lead the philosophical way of life (these interpretations are expressed by Madison, Peperzak, and Brann et al.). In other words, much of the philosophically curious language of the *Phaedo*—the mythic, Pythagorean, and notions of body and soul—should be taken as designating the characterization of distinct ways of life, distinct modes of living this life, of the proper way to care for the soul. Thus, the constant use of “Hades” (the Beyond) should be taken less as a term for the afterlife (with all of its presuppositions and assumptions) and more as a symbol of the possibility of living this life in a kind of transcendent mode. Similarly, the whole myth of the True Earth found at the end of the *Phaedo* (107c-114c) functions as a metaphor for this life, for the process of living in this world under finite conditions. Indeed, I would argue that the ‘Earth’ is really a metaphor for the various existential options and the consequences of choosing these options in this life (again, these options are the somatic life, the ascetic life, and the philosophic life). On this interpretation, then, such terms as Hades, Earth, soul, body, Heaven, Death, Life, as well as traditionally

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What is one example of a fundamental phenomenon that is so basic to human existence and being that it defines the very essence of our humanness? I have been arguing that one such fundamental phenomenon is manifest in the way in which humankind always already “finds” itself responsible in this world, with others, and in relations. Not only do we possess the amazing ability to actually become aware of the world to which we are given, to ‘wake up’ and ‘find’ ourselves within it, but we also find this world and our relation to it and others manifests a demand.

So then, why does Socrates tell a myth and enact religious principles in the *Phaedo*? Why, as Plato asserts in his *Seventh Letter*, must we “always firmly believe the sacred and ancient words declaring to us that the soul is immortal, and when it has separated from the body will go before the judges and pay the utmost penalties”? Precisely because the mythic and religious traditions offer responses to the fundamental phenomena described above. Both the danger and the power of myth is the fact that it offers a complete interpretation of this basic phenomenon and it universalizes the proper response to the phenomenon. The philosopher must continually interrogate myth to discover what is false about it, at the same time that he or she adopts the basic truths of myth as the “axioms of reason” (Cf., Luc Brisson 1998: p. 3).
Pythagorean and religious terms like purity, transmigration, tuning, etc., are all transformed into metaphors for phenomena with this worldly significance.

The *Phaedo* is about the necessity and possibility of gaining ever greater trust concerning the matter of one’s life, how to live it and how to live it in the best possible way. Proper care of the soul is at issue here, and proper care of the soul entails a genuine receptivity toward the good and the establishment of a firm footing in life (a strong rootedness). So much of the *Phaedo* consists in developing the contrast between various modes of life and the importance of caring for and about what one places one’s trust in. The Pythagorean ascetic places his/her trust in the afterlife and in the abilities of a disembodied soul. The somatic-lover places his/her trust in the compulsive bodily desires and in the temporary pleasures related to sensuous fulfillment and/or the opinions of others. Though the ascetic longs for death and the somatic-lover fears death, both mistake the true meaning of death for the physical expiration of the body. In other words, both ways of life, though seemingly opposite, share a conception of death as the termination of the physical life of the body. Because of this (materialistic) understanding of death, the ascetic craves and needs the afterlife, whereas the somatic lover fears and suffers from the idea of an afterlife. It is this definition of mortality and death that Socrates subtly destroys and transforms into a thoroughly philosophical notion of death, a notion of death that involves a renewed understanding of life and more fulsome and meaningful existence.
CHAPTER FOUR:
LOCATING THE FORMS OF TRUST IN NIETZSCHE’S PHILOSOPHY:
LAMENTING THE LOSS OF VITAL TRUST AND OVERCOMING
PATHOLOGICAL TRUST

The more mistrust, the more philosophy.

—The Gay Science §346

To be sure, if this pithy and straightforward quote is any indication, then it appears that my attempt to recover a positive sense of trust in Nietzsche’s philosophy is both dubious and wrong-headed. It looks like Nietzsche’s attitude toward trust is quite clear: Trust is a fool’s game. One might add that Paul Ricoeur’s famous designation of Nietzsche as a “master of suspicion”\(^1\) —to the extent to which this designation is considered apt—further dooms the enterprise of recovering a positive sense of trust. These indications lead one to assume that Nietzsche’s assessment of trust is clearly negative and his denial of the value of trust for philosophy is unequivocal. Despite the apparent validity of these assumptions, I will demonstrate that Nietzsche does not simply dismiss trust as one more decadent trend of Western thought, but that, like many other traditional Western concepts, he revalues and transfigures trust. Just as Nietzsche demands that traditional philosophical concepts and values like “human nature,” “being,” “truth,” and “spirit,” be “revalued” and “transfigured” for the task of life-affirmation, so

too ought “trust” and the family of terms surrounding it (e.g., “faith”) be redeemed and recovered.

No doubt the attempt to track down and pinpoint a precise and comprehensive definition of trust or to uncover an extensive analysis of the phenomenon of trust and its role in human life in Nietzsche’s oeuvre is fraught with difficulty. For an investigation into the nature of trust in Nietzsche’s philosophy must immediately confront a twofold problem. First, as was noted above, there is the problem of demonstrating that Nietzsche thought that trust can and should be an affirmative and positive phenomenon rather than simply being a life-denying attitude or disposition. There is no question that there exist several passages that either explicitly demand that the philosopher adopt an attitude of mistrust and practice suspicion or else they imply that Nietzsche himself assumes an attitude of distrust, an implication suggested by the tone and tenor of his language. Second, since Nietzsche rarely uses the term ‘trust’ in either a positive or descriptive sense, the problem arises of how to approach the question of the meaning and role of trust in Nietzsche’s thought without distorting the sense of the text or illegitimately reading into his work or extracting out of it what is not actually there.

I want to suggest that the first problem is resolved as soon as one takes Nietzsche’s critical method seriously. He is not concerned to dispense with concepts or values as such, any more than he is concerned with destroying philosophy, religion, morality, or science as such. The target of Nietzsche’s critique is the mode of life and direction of the “value-positing eye” that such products of Western culture betray: a life-negating and decadent stance toward life. Nietzsche’s true enemy is nihilism, and
Western philosophy, religion, morality, and science fall under the scalpel of critique only
to the degree that they tend toward nihilism. Nietzsche himself emphasizes the
“strangeness” of his critical approach to moral, religious, and philosophical judgments:
“The falseness of a judgment is to us not necessarily an objection to a judgment: it is here
that our new language perhaps sounds strangest” (BGE 4). Rather than the traditional
philosophical approach to judgments whereby propositions, concepts, and arguments are
evaluated in terms of their veracity, logical validity, or apodictic certainty, Nietzsche
advocates an altogether different sort of hermeneutic principle: “The question is to what
extent it is life-advancing, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-
breeding; and our fundamental tendency is to assert that the falsest judgments (to which
synthetic judgments a priori belong) are the most indispensable to us . . . that to renounce
false judgments would be to renounce life, would be to deny life” (BGE 4). What this
principle of critique amounts to is a revaluation of all values in terms of whether said
values and value-systems are life-advancing or life-denying, and whether the needs that
compel the creation of said values are symptoms of enervated will, of weakness and
decadence, or vital strength and health. We must keep this critical principle in mind, then,
when examining Nietzsche’s statements regarding trust, even those that seem highly
dissemissive in tone and negative in connotation. In such cases, more often than not
Nietzsche is demanding that the philosopher distrust those ideas and values that are
symptoms of ascetic and nihilistic tendencies.

With regard to the second problem, that of the relative scarcity of Nietzschean
texts that explicitly address trust, the highly stylized and aphoristic nature that marks his
work makes the activity of interpreting his philosophy in a systematic way and in terms of well-developed explanations of central concepts impossible. Nietzsche speaks of his love of “masks” frequently, and his writing clearly reflects this. Given this difficulty, our task becomes a matter of carefully reconstructing a coherent account of a given concept or idea in a way that remains faithful and true to the contours of thought and content in Nietzsche’s philosophy. An investigation that purports to examine the nature of trust in Nietzsche is no exception here. To the extent that Nietzsche pays attention to those phenomena that emerge at the root of human life and thought, it can be assumed that he will have something to say or suggest about the phenomenon of trust. Furthermore, there are numerous terms that bear a family resemblance to trust (terms like “faith”) and correlates that are dealt with in some detail by Nietzsche that will need to be examined.

*The Double Bind: Lamenting or Praising the Loss of Trust in Life?*

Though passages that explicitly mention trust are rare in Nietzsche’s work, the few that do offer telling hints and signposts for how Nietzsche understands trust. However, these passages are ambiguous since Nietzsche’s tone shifts between negative criticism, approbation, and descriptive (neutral) analysis when he mentions trust. On the one hand, some passages dismiss trust as a symptom of decadence that must be overcome by suspicion. On the other hand, there are other passages that lament the loss of trust in life (a trust that is usually associated with a “noble” trust, praiseworthy for its healthy relationship with life). Additionally, particularly in *The Gay Science* §1, Nietzsche offers a sometimes dispassionate description of the distinctly human need for trust in life and the means whereby it is historically destroyed, revised, and renewed. Is Nietzsche
equivocating here? Is he using the term “trust” in multiple senses without signaling a shift in sense and scope? The simple answer is “Yes,” Nietzsche definitely does use the same term in different passages without signaling the change in sense. Of course, for any reader of Nietzsche, this practice and the confusion it brings come as no surprise. Nietzsche commonly uses a term, such as “will,” “spirit,” “reason,” “truth,” or even a proper name like “Socrates,” in such a way as to critically undermine its traditional scope and meaning. At the same time, he will later appropriate the very same terms for his task of overcoming by revaluing and then using them in a new, life-affirming sense. What is clear from the passages in which trust is mentioned and discussed is that trust is a symptom of a specific relationship with life, a type of configuration of the will to power, and that the phenomenon of trust is both manifest and functions in certain discernable ways. As always, the criterion of value by which a given form of trust is to be judged is the extent to which it is “life-advancing, life-preserving, species-preserving” (BGE 4).

All of this is to say that though Nietzsche thoroughly disapproves of a certain kind of trust (and the relationship with life of which it is a symptom), he also advocates another kind of trust, lamenting the loss of this trust in modern culture and seeing the restoration of it as crucial to his project of life-affirmation. In order to support this contention, I will now turn to a sampling of passages in which Nietzsche explicitly brings up trust in both an affirmative and negative sense, and show how they can be tied together into a coherent view by his descriptive analysis of trust in life from The Gay Science §1.
What is the True Target of Nietzsche’s Practice of Suspicion?

There is no doubt that statements such as “The more mistrust, the more philosophy” (GS 346), “Only great pain is the ultimate liberator of the spirit, being the teacher of the great suspicion that turns every U into and X” and “Only great pain . . . compels us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths and to put aside all trust” (GS P 3), lead us to assume that Nietzsche has no taste or use for trust. When such statements are brought into connection with the frequently acerbic tone and caustic nature of Nietzsche’s treatment of the ideals and values of Western culture, it becomes all the more clear that he adopts a suspicious and mistrustful attitude toward everything sacred and thought most trustworthy in this tradition. Yet even Nietzsche’s most virulent criticism and vitriolic condemnation of the “eternal idols” of Western culture masks a positive insight into the affirmative aspect of Nietzsche’s thought.

It bears repeating that Nietzsche’s final criterion of value is whether or not a given concept, practice, or value judgment enhances and affirms life or whether it diminishes and denies life (BGE 4). Thus, when interpreting and evaluating those statements that advocate suspicion and distrust, two principles of interpretation are imperative. First, the context in which such statements are situated must be sifted and carefully examined in order to excavate both the sense and scope of the passage. Second, the target of Nietzsche’s critique as well as the positive content and intent of the statement must be determined. In this regard, Nietzsche’s standard of value (life-affirming vs. life-denying) must be kept in the foreground if the strength and content of his critique is to be ascertained.
Only on the basis of these two interpretative principles can those statements advocating mistrust and suspicion be comprehended and connected to the whole of Nietzsche’s philosophical project—both critical and positive. With regard to the statements that most explicitly endorse suspicion and mistrust, both from *The Gay Science*, the context reveals the true target of Nietzsche’s suspicion: an existential form of trust that is the product of an unhealthy and decadent relationship with life. However, as is the case with the entirety of his *critical* philosophy, the ultimate and final target of Nietzsche’s concern is *nihilism*—whose spectral presence haunts Western culture like a shadow cast from its holiest and greatest creation, God. For Nietzsche, God constitutes a monstrous *telos* from which the greatest philosophical and religious values draw their strength and legitimacy, and by means of which they tend towards an inevitable demise. Nihilism represents the tragic necessity of a void, a complete lack of value, meaning, and trust in existence. All that was considered sacred become nothing more than useless compasses without the magnetic poles by which to direct human thought and effort, they become broken artifacts of past glory. Nihilism, therefore, marks the end game of Western culture and history, the final move that eliminates the rules in terms of which the players, purpose, and movement of the game was defined, thereby destroying the game itself. The long history of life-denial from which the *ascetic* ideals of philosophy, religion, and morality derived their force and strength for the preservation of human life and meaning culminates in the complete evisceration of the very vitality and life that it once sustained. I will show that nihilism, on Nietzsche’s view, is so devastating precisely because it represents the possibility of a complete lack or *absence of trust* in life.
Nietzsche’s project, his self-defined “task,” is to diagnose the nihilistic roots of Western culture, demonstrate why they are unsustainable and enervating, and to suggest a way forward and out of nihilism, a way that restores trust in life by affirming even the suffering and tragedy that is a part of it.

Nihilism will be analyzed in more detail in the next chapter, for now I will turn to the passages that explicitly endorse mistrust in order to show how Nietzsche advocates mistrust to be sure, but it is a mistrust of certain Western standards of value that are symptoms of life-denial and ressentiment that he demands.

“We Are Not Thinking Frogs”: Situating Suspicion in the Context of the ‘Preface’ of The Gay Science

The set of statements that advocate an attitude of “suspicion” on the part of “philosophers,” those who Nietzsche claims must “put aside all trust,” come from §3 of the Preface to the second edition (published in 1887) of The Gay Science (1882, Preface and Books 4-5 written in 1887). In order to contextualize the passage, it helps to understand the overall sense and direction of the Preface. First, Nietzsche describes the physical and psychological state that produced The Gay Science as “the gratitude of a convalescent” (P 1). At the time of its writing, Nietzsche had (temporarily) recovered from a severe attack of the illness that would plague him to his death. Describing on the feeling of gratitude that followed his recovery and that prompted him to write the book, Nietzsche writes:

‘Gay Science’: that signifies the saturnalia of a spirit who has patiently resisted a terrible, long pressure—patiently, severely, coldly, without submitting, but also without hope—and who is now all at once attacked by hope, the hope for health, and the intoxication of convalescence . . . This whole book is nothing but a bit of merry-
making after long privation and powerlessness, the rejoicing of a strength that is returning, of a reawakened faith in a tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, of a sudden sense and anticipation of a future, of impending adventures, of seas that are open again, of goals that are permitted again, believed again (P 1).

This last bit about a “reawakened faith,” “anticipation of a future,” “goals” that are both “permitted” and “believed again,” seems strikingly at odds with Nietzsche’s sanction of the “great suspicion” and “mistrust” so crucial to the emancipation of the philosophic spirit in section 3 (just two sections later). In order to resolve this difficulty it is necessary to proceed further in the contextualization of this passage, for the whole idea animating the ‘Preface’ is the theme of rejuvenating philosophy by countering the traditional animosity toward the body and affectivity with a renewed understanding of the intimate “relation of health and philosophy” (GS: P, 2).

Nietzsche’s emphasis on the necessity of sensibility as a condition of intelligibility, of body as condition of spirit, of instinct and drive as conditions of ideas, and of affective physio-psychology as a condition of ethics and philosophy, is well known, and this “Preface” constitutes an exemplary declaration of this view. Here the emphasis is on the role of physiological and psychological health and sickness in the production of philosophical ideals and value judgments. After asserting the intimate link between the person and the philosophy specific to that person, Nietzsche makes a generalization that forms a guiding principle for his evaluation of different philosophies: “In some it is their deprivations that philosophize; in others, their riches and strengths. The former need their philosophy, whether it be as a prop, a sedative, medicine, redemption, elevation, or self-alienation. For the latter it is merely a beautiful luxury . . .
the voluptuousness of a triumphant gratitude that eventually still has to inscribe itself in cosmic letters on the heaven of concepts” (\textit{GS}: P, 2). The essential point that Nietzsche makes here is that one philosophizes either from lack and deprivation or from overflowing strength and fecundity of spirit. The philosopher who \textit{needs} a philosophy in order to fill what he or she lacks does not thereby bring to fulness what is lacking. In such a case, a philosophy functions as a “prop” or “sedative” that covers over and veils the absence of what is originally desired. These “philosophers by lack” are “more common” and “more numerous in the history of philosophy,” Nietzsche insists, than those who philosophize spontaneously and freely out of a feeling of over-fullness and strength. Hence, the healthy, rich thinkers are the exception to the far more common “sick thinkers” that populate the Western philosophical landscape (\textit{GS}: P, 2). But what has this to do with the body and with health?

The measure of the lack or the fecundity from which one philosophizes is located in the relation of thought and values to one’s body and spirit, which themselves are to be evaluated in terms of an even more fundamental relation of the human organism to vital life. This idea emerges clearly in the following passage:

The unconscious disguise of physiological needs under the cloaks of the objective, ideal, purely spiritual goes to frightening lengths—and often I have asked myself whether, taking a large view philosophy has not merely been an interpretation of the body and a \textit{misunderstanding of the body}.

Behind the highest value judgments that have hitherto guided the history of thought, there are concealed misunderstandings of the physical constitution—of individuals or classes or even whole races. All those bold insanities of metaphysics, especially answers to the question about the \textit{value} of existence, may always be considered first of all as the symptoms of certain bodies, . . . of [the body’s] success or failure, its plenitude, power, and autocracy in history, or of its frustrations, weariness, impoverishment, its premonitions of the end, its will to the end.
what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all ‘truth’ but something else—let us say, health, future, growth, power, life. (GS: P, 2)

If we follow Nietzsche in regarding the “objective, ideal, and purely spiritual” truths and “value judgments” as merely the products or “symptoms” of a certain “interpretation” of the body that somehow misunderstands the body (by perhaps denying or seeking to eliminate it), then it becomes clear that the philosopher who bases his or her thought on a need for that which is lacking is obeying the impulses and demands of a body or embodied psyche that stands in a particular relation to life—a relation that is not a healthy one, but constitutes a “weary” and “impoverished” relation to life². Such an impoverished relationship is especially clear, Nietzsche thinks, when one craves relief from physiological or psychological suffering, pain, and sickness. In such a state, the whole of life and existence takes on a certain tone and pallor. What does one desire when one is sick or in pain? Naturally, one seeks restoration to health or alleviation of pain. Nietzsche feels that literal and figurative conditions of illness and/or pain are particularly instructive in determining the suffering thinker’s relation to existence and vital life: “what will become of the thought itself when it is subjected to the pressure of sickness?” (GS: P, 2).

Speaking autobiographically, Nietzsche insists that if a “psychologist” (i.e., a philosophical psychologist in the mold of a Socrates) “should himself become, ill, he will bring all of his scientific curiosity into his illness” in order that “one can infer better that before the involuntary detours, side lanes, resting places, and sunny places of thought to

² The class of philosophers who misinterpret the body can be understood to include the ascetic “genuine” philosophers spoken of in the Phaedo (see Chapter Two).
which suffering thinkers are led and misled on account of their suffering; for now one knows whether the sick body and its needs unconsciously urge, push, and lure the spirit—toward sun, stillness, mildness, patience, medicine, balm in some sense” (GS: P, 2). Of course, Nietzsche himself was physically (and psychologically, perhaps) ill before writing *The Gay Science*, and so he claims to have conducted an “experiment” that he demands of all philosophical psychologists: “we philosophers, if we should become sick, surrender for a while to sickness, body and soul—and, as it were, shut our eyes to ourselves. And as the traveler knows that something is not asleep, that something counts the hours and will wake him up, we, too, know that the decisive moment will find us awake, and that something will leap forward then and catch the spirit in the act: I mean, in its weakness or repentance or resignation or hardening or gloom, and whatever other names there are for the pathological states of the spirit” (GS: P, 2). This “experiment” functions to enhance one’s understanding of the conditions of sickness, impoverishment, lack, and pain that compel the traditional (“sick”) philosopher to impose negative “value judgments” on existence, to actively abstract from vital life and the body when creating concepts, and to erect values and ideals that fundamentally misunderstand the body and our relation to life. Furthermore, pathological states of the spirit are commonly “lured” and “pushed” to find solace and comfort in a realm that is “purely spiritual” (purged of body and sensibility), membership in which one is guaranteed upon flight from or transcendence of these “mortal coils” that bind us to earthly life.

In other words, the temptation of the sick philosopher is to *metaphysics*, to a withdrawal from suffering compelled by *ressentiment* toward life, withdrawal into the
very antithesis of life, into a stable and painless world of eternal truths and comfortable certainty. As Nietzsche puts it, “sick” thinkers will “withdraw from pain into that Oriental Nothing—called Nirvana—into mute, rigid, deaf resignation, self-forgetting, self-extinction” (GS: P, 3), thereby facilitating the process of diagnosing a given philosophy in terms of the sickness or lack that inspired it: “Every philosophy that ranks peace above war, every ethic with a negative definition of happiness, every metaphysics and physics that knows some finale, some final state of some sort, every predominantly aesthetic or religious craving for some Apart, Beyond, Outside, Above, perhaps permits the question whether it was not sickness that inspired the philosopher” (GS: P, 2). Each of these philosophies is created in response to the problem of pain and suffering, and they are symptomatic of a need to find some meaning, some existential comfort, that the sick thinker lacks. In other words, the “sick” thinker’s trust in life is paradoxically a function of a pathological denial of this life, of painful, disease-ridden, and suffering life. Trust is invested in a false realm of the true, the good, and the divine—each of which is merely the negation of the harsh reality from which the thinker suffers. On Nietzsche’s understanding, such a “trust in life” constitutes what I call pathological trust.

Pathological trust is a kind of autoimmune response to what the sick thinker (oftentimes quite unconsciously and pre-reflectively) perceives as a threat, as the source of suffering. The body is one such source of suffering and pain since it constitutes the site of vulnerability and affectivity at the physical and organic level. Sensibility is another source of pain—the pain of uncertainty and fallibility—as it is unavoidably open to affectation and the vicissitudes of sense perception. The need to escape such a condition

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3 To adopt the language of GM I, such an autoimmune response is ressentiment—i.e., essentially reactive.
prompts a sick thinker to react to the vital demands from which he or she “suffers” by muting the instincts and drives, and by creating an “objective, ideal, and purely spiritual” (purged of all body and sensibility) realm invested with all the stable, absolute, and permanent characteristics that this life, natural life, lacks.

*Nietzsche on the Value of Undergoing Pain and Suffering and What He Learned From It*

What does all this mean for section 3 of the Preface to *GS* where Nietzsche explicitly recommends suspicion and distrust of life? First, he thinks that pain and suffering are useful tests for the philosopher in that they can liberate the spirit from its comfortable, mild, and unproblematic trust in the very same anti-natural values and goals that sustain the sickness that inflicts the “sick” thinker. When Nietzsche says that the “trust in life is gone: life itself has become a problem” (*GS*: P, 3), he is speaking of the necessity of purging oneself of pathological trust in an *ideal life* that is “Apart, Beyond, Outside, [and] Above” this life—which is a life marked by the contradiction, pain, and uncertainty from which one suffers. In other words, pain and suffering can and should call into question any metaphysical or religious interpretation that offers a stable yet disembodied meaning and purpose that is constructed in opposition to the reality of change, flux, impermanence, dissatisfactoriness, and question marks to which physical and psychological pain and suffering returns the sufferer. In some sense, Nietzsche sees the occasion of sickness as useful and potentially liberating to the extent that it can plunge the philosopher into a *temporary* state of nihilism (the “trust in life is gone”) that awakens the desire to overcome meaninglessness by opening up the possibility of creating new values and purposes.
Nietzsche’s thought operates at two levels in the “Preface”: (1) as a psychological observation of sickness and (2) as a practical principle of experimental methodology. The first operation is evident from the fact that he himself was severely ill and he is now in a position to describe his personal experience of being ill and to extrapolate general insights about the condition. When one becomes seriously sick, one’s energy and strength are diminished. The intimate reliance of one’s sense of identity and its operations (consciousness, lucidity, mental coherence, idea of self) on the health and strength of the body is put into stark and traumatic relief in the experience of illness. The feeling of life and vitality that accompanies and supports one’s most basic activities and self-assertiveness is muted by variable degrees (depending upon the severity of illness) to the point at which one may experience a certain loss of “self,” an experience akin to a kind of death. For Nietzsche, sickness can lead to despair, to a distinctly psychological experience of meaninglessness, purposelessness, and finitude that is contingent upon physiological conditions of flourishing beyond one’s control. The comfortable feeling of security and the psychological confidence that are taken for granted in everyday life are shaken and uncertain in a condition of illness since the pretensions to freedom from bodily disruption and physiological determinations are shattered upon the reality of pain and our fleshly being. Debilitating bodily illness, then, can lead to psychological despair (or more precisely, disrepair) at the breakdown of everyday trust in a meaningful existence, a trust that is as forgetful of the contingencies of the body as it is repressive of the harsh necessities of vital life.
On the basis of his observations of the psychology of sickness, Nietzsche extracts an experimental method by means of which a philosopher can (a) free him or herself of life-denying modes of thought and (b) diagnose the pathology of “sick” thinkers and the metaphysical pretensions that support them in their denial of life. By submitting oneself to sickness, “body and soul,” the visceral suffering of the body in pain is experienced in its fullness. The inclination to hate the body and loath sensibility, to resent earthly life and to fear death, is allowed to naturally arise. One indulges the temptations to “escape” into some “beyond,” to seek solace and comfort in life-negating ideals, to condemn and heap spiteful judgment upon the conditions of this world. The value of giving in to sickness, with all of its temptations to curse the body and life, is that it is instructive and helpful. For, as Nietzsche confidently asserts, “the decisive moment will find us awake” and “something will leap forward then and catch the spirit in the act: I mean, in its weakness or repentance or resignation or hardening or gloom, and whatever other names there are for the pathological states of the spirit” (GS: P, 2). The value of self-consciously submitting to pain and sickness is found in its ability to offer the occasion to observe and understand the temptation to pathological trust; and it does this by forcing a confrontation with our complete dependence upon the body and the vital forces that determine it. In enabling “philosophers to descend to our ultimate depths and to put aside all trust, everything good-natured, everything that would interpose a veil,” pain and sickness free the philosopher from a condition of pathological trust in the very antithesis of life and to open up the possibility of recovering a healthy form of trust through the revitalization of the philosopher’s relationship with life. As an additional benefit,
undergoing sickness allows a psychologist such as Nietzsche to better examine and comprehend the root causes of *decadence* in the thought and behavior of those “sick” thinkers who have shaped and guided Western culture. This experience gives Nietzsche the diagnostic tools, as it were, by which to read the symptoms of decadence in modern culture.

**GS §346: The Relationship between Distrust and Philosophy**

Nietzsche’s adage from *GS* §346—“the more mistrust, the more philosophy”—is closely connected in both theme and content to *GS P* §3, in that it too constitutes a call to question and assume an attitude of distrust toward any view of life, any value or ideal, any conception of purpose or origin, that *devalues* this life and its conditions in an attempt to escape or withdraw from it. This same passage further elaborates and develops the idea that a pathological “trust in life” is no trust in *life* at all, that such a trust emerges as a *reactive response* to pain and suffering that seeks to flee from the life that afflicts it—in short, pathological trust constitutes a protective measure against life on the part of a sick and weak organism. To quote Nietzsche:

> We know it well, the world in which we live is ungodly, immoral, ‘inhuman’; we have interpreted it far too long in a false and mendacious way, in accordance with the wishes of our reverence, which is to say, according to our needs. For man is a reverent animal. But he is also mistrustful; and that the world is not worth what we thought it was, that is about as certain as anything of which our mistrust has finally gotten hold. The more mistrust, the more philosophy. (GS 346)

If the “reverent animal,” the human being, has “interpreted” the world in a “false and mendacious way,” such an interpretation is merely a product of a reactive *need*—a need that generates the desire for precisely what *this* life, *bare* life, *lacks*: i.e., being, absolutes,
certainty, eternal security, stable meaning, and final purpose. However, Nietzsche believes that we have come to suspect that “the world is not worth what we thought it was”; in other words, the life-negating values and supra-natural characteristics in terms of which existence was rendered meaningful have been exposed as either inherently self-contradictory or as illusory projections of wish-fulfillment with no basis in reality.⁴

Nietzsche goes further and insists that he is “far from claiming that the world is worth less” than the value that the anti-natural interpretation conferred; instead, “it would seem laughable to us today if man were to insist on inventing values that were supposed to excel the value of the actual world” (GS §346). In so far as it constitutes a condition defined by a fragile sense of security and confidence, pathological trust in life is symptomatic of the need for a stable, orderly, eternal, and absolute “world” on the part of a will that suffers from life, a will that is “sick” of life and must negate or suppress the very conditions that sustain and enhance life. Such trust, along with the pretentious stance against life and the artificial interpretation of existence that it represents, sickens Nietzsche: “The whole pose of ‘man against the world,’ of man as a ‘world-negating’ principle, of man as the measure of the value of things, as judge of the world who in the end places existence on the scales and finds it wanting—the monstrous insipidity of this pose has finally come home to us and we are sick of it.”

The Characteristics of Pathological Trust

In the passages analyzed thus far (GS Preface §3 and GS §346), Nietzsche’s use of the term “trust” has had negative connotations since “trust in life” is understood to be a

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⁴ On Nietzsche’s view, the death of God was brought about by the very will to truth that the virtue of honesty before God brought into being; c.f. GS §357, GM III §27.
function of a certain relation with life: a relation defined by the needs of a type of human being that is sick of life and thus lashes out at it. This is the trust of a will that is too weak to do anything but react to suffering and to try to preserve itself by denying or suppressing the conditions of life—i.e., a will that suffers from life and wants to escape from it. Thus, the form of trust that Nietzsche finds problematic and worthy of suspicion is a pathological trust in an ideal, disembodied, and purely spiritual life that is precisely the antithesis of life as it actually is, whole and intact with all of its becoming, pain, and contradiction.

Pathological trust, then, can be defined in terms of three descriptive characteristics.

1. Pathological trust is an affective condition in which one feels secure and safe from the vicissitudes of uncertainty, change, and becoming. Thus identity and meaning in existence are secured in a transcendent realm characterized by unchanging essence, certain truth, and eternal purpose. This transcendent realm is the creation of a life-denying mode of valuation (religious or metaphysical).

2. Pathological trust is anti-natural mode of attunement whereby one takes up a stance against this life as a response to suffering and pain. This stance is turned away from the features and conditions of bodily and sensible life and is directed instead toward some realm “Apart, Beyond, Outside” this life.

3. Finally, pathological trust constitutes a reactive and resentful denial of fleshly vulnerability and exposure to the vicissitudes of vital processes and the reality of suffering. Hence we create a whole host of concepts and values that reflect a refusal to
acknowledge, much less affirm, the reality of suffering and pain, change and flux, becoming and death. Such concepts include identity, ego, consciousness, heaven, Nirvana, and ultimately, God.

_The Necessity of Trust in Life: GS §1_

While Nietzsche’s negative assessment of a certain _kind_ of trust in life has been examined, the general account of trust given in _GS_ §1 remains to be considered. What does “trust in life” involve? Why is trust in life _necessary_ for human beings?

In _GS_ §1, Nietzsche places the “teachers of the purpose of existence” under scrutiny. Given that all human beings are instinctually “concerned with a single task,” “to do what is good for the preservation of the human race,” Nietzsche focuses attention here on the “founders of moralities and religions,” those “tragedians” who “promote the life of the species, _by promoting the faith in life_.” These tragedians announce that “‘Life is worth living,’ every one of them shouts; ‘there is something to life, there is something behind life, beneath it; beware!’” Because bare life, the mere act of living, is devoid of meaning and purpose, these founders and tragedians must invent a reason for living. As Nietzsche writes, “In order that what happens necessarily and always, spontaneously and without any purpose, may henceforth appear to be done for some purpose and strike man as rational and an ultimate commandment, the ethical teacher comes on stage . . . and to this end he invents a second, different existence and unhinges by means of his new mechanics the old, ordinary existence.” This sounds very much like the mechanism behind pathological trust in that it is a function of the creation of an ideal existence in which the purpose, certainty, and security that is lacking in this “old, ordinary existence”
is provided. Yet, as we shall see, it is not the case that the invention of a “second, different existence” is necessarily a reactive and life-denying response to suffering on the part of a weak will.

Though meaning is conferred upon this existence by locating existential purpose in an anti-natural and transcendent reality “behind” or “beneath” this one, Nietzsche says that such purposes are eventually overcome by the “eternal comedy of existence.” The “eternal comedy of existence” is understood in a twofold sense of (1) the necessity of change and destruction that is part of life itself and (2) the realization that these “systems” of purpose conflict with life as given. Even so, Nietzsche insists, “human nature has nevertheless been changed by the ever new appearance of these teachers of the purpose of existence: It has now one additional need—the need for the ever new appearance of such teachers and teachings of a ‘purpose’.” A condition of the preservation and growth of the human species is the constant need to have a purpose in terms of which life can be made meaningful and worth living. This is why the human being 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; his race cannot flourish without a periodic trust in life—without faith in reason in life.” Here is the clue to the meaning of “trust” where it explicitly occurs in Nietzsche’s work. In both GS §1 and its ‘Preface’, “trust in life” is identified with “faith in reason in life,” and “reason in life” further designates the imposition of a purpose onto bare life; it offers an answer to the question “why exist?” or “to what end—life?”
In short, Nietzsche conceives of “trust in life” as a function of the distinctly human need for existential purpose and meaning that goes beyond what is given in life itself. Existential trust, as “faith in reason in life,” is perhaps akin to the Kierkegaardian “leap” in that involves a will to move beyond what is the case, what is given—i.e., beyond the purposeless, fluctuating, and transient nature of the life-process—to a “reason” for existing, an answer to the “why” of existing. Such an understanding of trust, that it is a function of the need to impose a purpose and structure upon life, is borne out by several passages in Nietzsche’s oeuvre, including the following: “Not ‘to know’ but to schematize—to impose upon chaos as much regularity and form as our practical needs require” (WP §515); “To impose upon becoming the character of being—that is the supreme will to power” (WP §617); “In man, creature and creator are united: in man there is matter, fragment, excess, clay, mud, madness, chaos; but in man there is also creator, sculptor, the hardness of the hammer, the divine spectator and the seventh day” (BGE §225). Such passages call attention to the fact that the most “fantastic” of animals, the human being, must impose a certain structure, purpose, and meaning on life as a condition of its flourishing, and at the very least, its preservation. This is the distinctly human power of creation: to be able to exercise its will to power in such a way as to overcome the formlessness and meaninglessness of bare life, to take up a perspective on life and to interpret it in accordance with a need for meaning.

To expand upon this preliminary conception of trust: trust in life involves a mode of existential assent to or affirmation of life. It is an assent to existence that imposes reason and order onto life in an act of the will to power. Why is such existential assent
necessary? Why the need for trust in life? Why isn’t it enough to merely live life without
the need to find it meaningful? Nietzsche’s answer is that the human animal, unlike any
other animal or organism, is affected by life and its conditions in a specific way. We feel
life as a demand for a meaning that exceeds what life gives. Hitherto, Nietzsche claims,
humanity has responded to this demand by creating what Nietzsche calls an “ascetic
ideal” that offers an overall sense and purpose to our existence in terms of which both life
and ourselves are justified. As Nietzsche writes,

> Apart from the ascetic ideal, man, the human animal, had no meaning so far. His existence on earth contained no goal; “why man at all?”—was a question without an answer; the will for man and earth was lacking; behind every great human destiny there sounded as a refrain a yet greater “in vain!” This is precisely what the ascetic ideal means: that something was lacking, that man was surrounded by a fearful void—he did not know how to justify, to account for, to affirm himself; he suffered from the problem of his meaning. He also suffered otherwise, he was in the main a sickly animal: but his problem was not suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, “why do I suffer?” (GM III, §28)

It is not primarily bodily suffering and physical pain that the human animal finds
unbearable; rather, it is existential suffering, suffering without a “why,” that we find
unbearable. Human beings feel horror at undergoing an existence without purpose or
direction, and so we create an ideal by which to orient, secure, and limit our painful
vulnerability in existence. In short, we must be capable of trusting that life has a meaning
and purpose. Furthermore, note that Nietzsche claims that the “ascetic ideal” has guided
humanity thus far. The ascetic ideal “offered man meaning,” “the only meaning thus far,”
such that “suffering was interpreted” and “the door was closed to any kind of suicidal
nihilism” (GM III, 28). In the end, however, this ascetic ideal is expressive of a deep
“aversion to life” and “will to nothingness” that functions to weaken the human animal
by turning it away from this life and against the conditions of vital health and flourishing. Hence, the ascetic ideal opens once again the very door that it had once closed: the door to nihilism. Trust based on the ascetic ideal is a trust that turns against life and thus it is a *pathological* trust.

Not all types of trust are symptomatic of a relationship of antipathy toward life, however, just as not all ideals are life-denying and nihilistic in the way that the ascetic ideal is. The fact is that, according to Nietzsche, some form of trust and some type of ideal or “reason in life” *is* necessary for human life. Though the ‘reason’ or ideal that allows one to trust in life *exceeds* life, for brute life has no reason (which is precisely the tragic fact from which we suffer), it remains that some reason or ideal must be created and imposed upon life.\(^5\) Brute life affects the human animal as burdensome, painful, and purposeless, inherently dissatisfactory. Thus, the ideal is technically a “lie” in that it does not and cannot hold true for reality. However, it is a necessary lie or falsification of reality for the purpose of human flourishing or preservation.

As has been shown, according to *GS* §1, the discovery of a reason to live produces a “trust in life” that allows the human “race” to “flourish” and thus this requirement is a condition not only for sustaining life, for the preservation of the species, but also a condition for life-advancement and life-enhancement (recall Nietzsche’s evaluative criteria for judgments in BGE 4). If Nietzsche’s advocacy of suspicion in *GS P* §3 and of mistrust in *GS* §346 is related to the description of trust in *GS* §1, then we can understand why he calls upon philosophers to give up a certain *kind* of trust. Trust in the

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\(^5\) Of course, it must be understood that ‘reason’ in this context is not reason as a faculty of mind or intellect; rather, “reason in life” means “reason for living” in the sense of the orienting and securing ideal cited above.
context of the latter passage is understood as a kind of existential security made possible by an overarching interpretation of the meaning of life that is itself a function of a deeper and more fundamental vital condition: the need for a “reason in life.” The problem emerges in the form of trust involved with any interpretation of meaning that is decidedly turned against this life and its conditions. It is this form of trust—pathological trust—that Nietzsche disdains and calls upon the philosopher to mistrust and approach with critical suspicion.

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that Nietzsche does not advocate the elimination of the fundamental “need” for a “periodic trust in life”; in fact, he seems to genuinely regard it as an inescapable necessity since it is, after all, a “condition of existence.” The specific content of this “faith in reason in life,” the orientation of thought and practice that it represents, the particular interpretation of why and how life is worthwhile, on the other hand, is to be called into question; particularly if this interpretation is the product of an anti-natural and ascetic ideal that is prompted by the need to escape, and thus negate, this (earthly) life. Along with the prevailing interpretation of meaning in life, the trust that enables that interpretation must be overcome. This is why Nietzsche says “the more mistrust, the more philosophy” (GS 346) and why he can say that the problem of pain “compels” the philosopher to “put aside all trust” (GS Preface 3). For precisely the experience of pain or of suffering, whether physiological or psychological, calls into question the prevailing meaning of life by confronting the sufferer with another condition of life, a condition that undermines the illusion of security: the fact of pain and suffering as a condition for the growth of life.
The experience of pain and suffering undermines the prevailing interpretation of life’s reason due to its evocation of vital processes in which change, becoming, creation and destruction are the rule. Suffering is produced (or better, induced) at a basic level in that the living organism itself is affected by its being bodily situated in vital life, open and vulnerable to contingent factors of environment, forces, and “external” or “internal” processes. Out of revulsion at its sensual, fleshly, and sensible vulnerability, the decadent human being reactively seeks to escape to a dis-embodied, purely spiritual, and secure “Beyond,” a world of eternal truth and unchanging being. Hence, the decadent individual’s trust in life is restored atop the ruins of the very conditions of its vitality and flourishing. It is this trust that is pathological: the effect of a diseased and debilitated will to the denial of life. But what of an existential trust that is directed toward this life? A trust that takes up its vulnerability and affirms it? A trust that is secure precisely because it is anchored in life and not in its negation? In other words, if existential trust in life is a basic need and necessity for the human animal, and GS §1 suggests that this is the case, then does Nietzsche conceive of a healthy and vital form of trust?

*Nietzsche’s Diagnosis of Pathological Trust and His Embrace of Vital Trust*

There are numerous indications that Nietzsche does, in fact, conceive of a positive and healthy form of trust. In section §49 of *Twilight of the Idols* (‘Expeditions’), Nietzsche praises Goethe as a “European” event in that he represented “a grand attempt to overcome the eighteenth century through a return to nature.” Furthermore, Goethe “did not sever himself from life, he placed himself within it,” for the ideal that he “aspired to was totality” and that which he “strove against” was “the separation of reason, sensuality,
feeling, will” so characteristic of decadent Western culture. By means of this effort, Nietzsche approvingly asserts that Goethe “created himself.” After offering this list of Goethe’s life-affirming virtues and accomplishments, Nietzsche gives a panegyric salute to the type of vital spirit that Goethe embodied so paradigmatically: “A spirit thus *emancipated* stands in the midst of the universe with a joyful and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only what is separate and individual may be rejected, that in the totality everything is redeemed and affirmed—*he no longer denies* . . . But such a faith is the highest of all possible faiths: I have baptized it with the name *Dionysos.*—“ (*TI: ‘Expeditions’ §49*). Here Nietzsche presents us with a vision of his ideal of the “free spirit”: one who affirms the whole of life, the necessity of history, and the inevitability of fate. Furthermore, Nietzsche’s ideal spirit is completely free of *ressentiment* toward life, for its “trusting fatalism” embraces this life and affirms all of the pain, suffering, and happiness that it brings. In *GS P §3*, Nietzsche prescribes “great suspicion” as the means of liberating the philosopher from the constraints of ideals and values that inhibited him or her from affirming pain and suffering. Here, on the other hand, Nietzsche describes a further and more progressive step: the ideal of the truly liberated and free spirit who no longer denies, but affirms from a position of strength derived from a vital trust-relationship with the whole of life.

In another passage from *The Genealogy of Morals*, Essay One, §10, Nietzsche speaks glowingly of the “noble” type of human being, who “lives in trust and openness with himself.” Presumably, and this will be verified later, the noble type of human being affirms his or her bodily being and the vulnerability to pain and suffering that inevitably
accompanies vital affectivity. Later in the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche laments the fact that it is the “weakest” human types, what he calls the “slave” type, “who must undermine life among men, who call into question and poison most dangerously our trust in life, in man, and in ourselves” (GM III, 14). The juxtaposition of the “noble” and the “slave” types and their relation to trust, evinces a recognition that both types exist in a condition of trust, but the crucial difference between them is that between a pathological trust in the antithesis of life on the part of the slave type, and a vital trust in this life on the part of the noble type. It is the “weakest” who diminish life precisely by undermining and poisoning a healthy trust in life. If, as Nietzsche maintains, Western culture has been created, sustained, and dominated by the “weak,” slave types (anti-natural moralists, ascetic priests, etc.), then it follows that the gradual dangerous poisoning of trust in life has further weakened and diminished humanity’s capacity to exist in a healthy and vital relationship with life. The great danger is that the possibility of a vital trust in life has been so poisoned that a healthy trust may be impossible. In other words, the possibility of a complete absence of trust in life has become all too real. This possibility is, of course, the possibility of nihilism: a condition of complete lack of meaning, the loss of trust in life.

In the two chapters that follow, I will examine the concepts of pathological trust and vital trust in Nietzsche’s philosophy. First, in the next chapter, I will explore the link between nihilism and pathological trust, showing how Nietzsche’s work suggests that nihilism is so dangerous precisely because it constitutes the loss of trust in life. In other words, nihilism represents the possibility of the absence of trust altogether. The
pathological trust that develops in the service of the ascetic ideal is directly connected to nihilism. I will show how pathological trust, because it is the symptom of a decadent and weak relationship with life, leads inexorably to nihilism.

In the sixth chapter, I endeavor to sketch a concept of vital trust on the basis of Nietzsche’s positive philosophy. The concept of vital trust relates to distinctly Nietzschean concepts such as the Dionysian, the will to power, and the eternal recurrence, but it most closely relates to Nietzsche’s emphasis on life-affirmation and the creation of life-affirming values as well as the concepts of the “earth” and “body.”
CHAPTER FIVE:
BETRAYING LIFE:

NIETZSCHE ON NIHILISM AS RADICAL LOSS OF TRUST IN LIFE

The previous chapter explicated the meaning of Nietzsche’s endorsement of distrust in the *Gay Science* “Preface” §3 and §346. Additionally, *GS* §1 was analyzed in such a way as to bring to light a preliminary definition of trust that can consistently be applied to those cases where Nietzsche explicitly uses the term. *Trust in life* is identified with a certain kind of “faith,” a faith in “reason in life.” This “faith in reason in life” is not to be understood as intellectual or cognitive assent to a conception of overall purpose for existence, but rather as an existential pre-understanding that affirms a specific meaning in life and that enables human beings to deal with suffering. Further, “trust in life” is not to be merely conflated with “faith in reason in life” since trust implies a certain primordial situation or condition from and in which faith is situated, directed, and embedded. Hence, in a preliminary sense, trust is something like an existential assent to life, an assent that involves vulnerable openness to vital forces and affects, a sense of security and groundedness, and an orientation and disposition. From this condition of basic trust, value can be conferred upon life by a “reason” and purpose can be imposed upon existence.
Insofar as this “reason” or purpose is created with the aim of escaping this life and denying those conditions that the “fantastic” animal, the human being, finds painful and burdensome, the purpose of existence is projected beyond this life in such a way as to negate it. Thus, the trust in life that prompts this escape is nothing other than a trust that can only assent to the antithesis of this life, seeking consolation in being, heaven, in a rarified and anti-sensualistic “spiritual” realm of eternal truth, pure goodness, and transcendent beauty. I have designated such trust pathological in that Nietzsche finds it symptomatic of a sick and weak will, a will exhausted and spent in its struggle with the vital forces and conditions that “afflict” it.

All too frequently, what has gone under the guise of “philosophy” in the West, has, according to Nietzsche, placed its faith and trust in ideals that directly deny and negate life and its conditions. “The history of philosophy is a secret raging against the preconditions of life, against the value feelings of life, against the partisanship in favor of life” and the philosopher “invents a world so as to be able to slander and bespatter this world: in reality, he reaches every time for nothingness and construes nothingness as ‘God,’ as ‘truth,’ and in any case as judge and condemner of this state of being” (WP §461). The true philosopher, the “free spirit,” Nietzsche insists, will see such an anti-natural ideal for what it is: a reactive struggle against the “preconditions” and “value feelings” of life—a flight from a painful world into nihilistic ideals and values. Pathological trust produces an enervated and enervating faith in an anti-natural meaning in life that proffers a false sense of security and a dangerous feeling of calm and rest that is merely the product of denial and fatigue.

1 That is, “spiritual” in the sense of removed from the sensible, the organic, and the bodily.
In contrast to this *pathological* trust in life, Nietzsche indicates the possibility, even the necessity, of what I have named a *vital*, or life-affirming, form of trust. Indeed, such a vital trust could be described as an intimate, overarching and global feeling of and for life that encompasses all of the vital affects that Nietzsche values in the “noble man” who “lives in trust and openness with himself” (*GM* I, §10), for as we shall see, trust is an expression of the way in which one is held open toward vital conditions and affects at the same time that trust designates the active integration and incorporation of vital conditions and affects whereby one’s place in life is affirmed. To put the point differently: The free spirit’s “faith in reason in life” is a faith that is securely rooted in life and directed toward it, and this is accompanied by the recognition that life itself is purposeless, valueless, and a ceaseless process of struggle. Vital trust, then, is a certain mode of inhabiting life that enables one to finds value in the conditions of life that “afflict” or affect the human organism, rather than seeking value in the antithesis to the very conditions that allow for growth and health.

If faith in reason in life (i.e., finding a reason for living that makes life worthwhile) is based on trust, and if creating a reason for living has truly become an ineradicable necessity for human life and endeavor, then it follows that Nietzsche regards this *vital* form of trust to be crucial for his project of life-affirmation. Given the distinction between a *pathological* kind of trust, the kind that functions as a balm and salve for the wounds that life inflicts upon the resentful and sick type of human being, and a *vital* form of trust that is expressive of a strong and healthy will, it stands to reason that only vital trust remains true to Zarathustra’s injunction to “remain faithful to the earth” (*Z*: ‘Prologue’ §3). Zarathustra, and thus Nietzsche, is, in a certain qualified sense,
a philosopher in the mould of Socrates: He does not regard life as such (mere living) to possess worth and value in itself, but regards a certain *mode or form* of life to be better and more worthwhile than certain other modes of life. In other words, it is not enough to merely live or to live in bondage to a false or “faithless” ideal. Rather, life ought to be lived *well*—that is, with strength and vitality—and for this, one must *affirm* life rather than deny it. One’s trust in life must remain “faithful to the earth,” embracing the question-marks and contradictions of existence, cultivating and fostering an openness to the conditions of vital life and affectivity, and actively recognizing and valuing the body and other capacities that life gives.

For Nietzsche then, a certain “falsification” of life, the creation of a “reason” for living, *is* necessary, as this is a basic need of the “fantastic animal,” the human being. This “falsification” is a *transfiguration* of life and existence that accords worth and value to life or else removes such value from life. The latter option leads, via the hold and sway of the “ascetic ideal,” to *nihilism*, what Nietzsche calls “the dead stop” of the “will turning against life” (*GM*: P 5). It vilifies and devalues the very conditions that enhance life and stimulate growth: the body, the drives, instinct, the senses, pain, affectivity, change, becoming, and power. Thus, nihilism represents a “will to nothingness,” the complete removal of value from life *in toto* in the wake of the collapse of the anti-natural interpretation of purpose and meaning (which must, like all “living” or created things, rise and fall with the inexorable process of constantly changing life). To some extent, nihilism represents the possibility of a *complete absence* of trust, with the consequent extinction of value and thus the extinction of human life itself. Perhaps this is why Nietzsche dubs this extreme possibility: “suicidal nihilism” (*GM* III, 28).
If a certain kind of faith or trust is necessary in order to preserve and enhance human life, the fact remains that Nietzsche clearly distinguishes between a life-affirming trust that remains “faithful to the earth” and a damaging and impoverished trust that turns against life by “unfaithfully” falsifying life, a faith that undermines itself and eventually collapses, leaving the will too sick and exhausted to create anew. As this impotence of the will leads to the “great danger” of nihilism, it is essential to determine how Nietzsche conceives of nihilism and how he demonstrates that Western culture and thought (his preference is to call Western culture: “Europe”) has both cultivated and been sickened by nihilistic tendencies.

What Is Nihilism? A Preliminary Investigation

The popular imagination defines nihilism as a belief in nothing, an ideological tenet of faith which asserts that life has no meaning. Though Nietzsche does use terms such as “belief” and “nothingness” to describe nihilism, the popular definition fails to capture the profound sense in which nihilism is the expression of a certain mode of existence with far-reaching and powerful consequences. On Nietzsche’s understanding, nihilism is not a temporary “existential” crisis that teenagers assume as a fashionable guise. Nor is nihilism (primarily) a matter of intellectual consent to a proposition about reality. Rather, nihilism is an expression of a certain status or condition of the organism: it is a consequence of diminished health and power, and as such, it further inhibits and mutes the ability to act, to incorporate, and thus to live. It involves affects (muted feelings, sense of loss, disorientation, nausea), existential moods (despair, anxiety, impoverishment and disenchantment of the world), and modes of relating to values and meaning. Most importantly for Nietzsche, nihilism signifies a devastating and crippling
loss of trust in life that results in the incapacity to create new values and the degeneration of the will.

Nietzsche’s use of nihilism in his work is hardly this straightforward, however. As Alan White points out, Nietzsche appends a plethora of adjectives (such as “active,” “passive,” “radical,” “Christian,” etc.) to the term “nihilism” such that it becomes difficult, though not impossible, to discern any univocal definition or conceptual unity among the profusion of distinct varieties. Various instances of the term “nihilism” in Nietzsche’s work (occurring with the highest frequency in The Will To Power notebooks) are differentiated and organized by commentators in different ways. Alan White, for example, distinguishes three basic varieties of nihilism: religious, radical, and complete nihilism.

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2 C.f., “ Appropriately, the term [nihilism] is prominent in the version of The Will to Power that become standard. That version not only contains various definitions of ‘nihilism’ per se, it also introduces bewilderingly many specific types of nihilism” (Alan White 1990, p. 15).

3 Religious nihilism, according to White, is an “unconscious nihilism,” for it involves the “judgment that the existence of our world of becoming would be justified only through a purpose that guides it, through an ‘infinitely valuable’ unity that underlies it, or through another world, a ‘true world’ or ‘world of being’ that is accessible through it (WP 12)” (1990, pp. 16-17). This kind of nihilist is a nihilist precisely because (a) they judge of the world that is that it ought not to be and (b) they locate the source of value outside of or beyond this world in a world that is “fabricated solely from psychological needs.” Furthermore, White identifies these nihilists as “religious” because “their affirmation of another world or source of value is a consequence of their denial of our world as bearer of its own value” (1990, p.17). I find no justification for calling this form of nihilism “religious,” for it could just as easily be called “metaphysical” or “moral” given that, for Nietzsche, this kind of nihilism is just as symptomatic of Platonic philosophy and secular morality as it is expressed in Christian religiosity. After all, “Christianity is Platonism for ‘the people’” (BGE: Preface) and “every fruitful and powerful movement of humanity has also created at the same time a nihilistic movement” (WP 112). It is not just the Christian religion that negates this world and affirms another world and source of value.

4 Radical nihilism is born when nihilism becomes conscious; “judgment that the sources of value are absent, that the three categories of value (purpose, unity, and truth) remain uninstanitated”; i.e., the highest values themselves are not denied or devalued, it’s just that nothing in this world corresponds to them. The radical nihilist thus retains belief or conviction in the highest values, but must see reality as lacking any such grounds (White 1990, pp. 17-18).

5 Complete nihilism obtains when, “in denying that the world requires ‘purpose’, ‘unity’, or ‘truth’ of the sort posited by religious nihilists and despaiired of by radical nihilists, one may regain the world of
Bernard Reginster, on the other hand, pits what he identifies as the prevalent view of Nietzsche scholarship, the view that nihilism is a product of the devaluation of all values that results in radical “disorientation,” against his own view that nihilism results from the conviction that the highest values simply cannot be realized in this world, not that the highest values devalue themselves. In other words, the nihilist retains his or her belief in the highest values (i.e. they remain not only the highest values, but the sole values), but experiences despair at the realization that said values can never be realized in this world.  

In his seminal and influential work on Nietzsche, Wolfgang Müller-Lauter argues that nihilism is first and foremost a physiological phenomenon because it is “detectable even prior to all reflection and speculation,” adding that “Nietzsche sums up the various ‘symptoms of sickness’ under the name of nihilism” and “that the birth of moral man marks the beginning of Western nihilism.” Müller-Lauter correlates nihilism with the physiological disintegration (Disgregation) of the drives, or what Nietzsche calls decadence. Nihilism, as the logic of decadence, is “a particular mode of physiological ‘releases of energy’. The wills to power, previously held together in a unity, now strive to separate. Nietzsche describes this centripetal tendency as the ‘disintegration becoming in its original innocence’” (White 1990, p. 21). The complete nihilist acknowledges that our highest values do not correspond to the world as it is and “this acknowledgement is paired with the denial that any other world ‘ought to be’, and that our ‘world of becoming’ ought not to be.” Hence, White observes, the complete nihilist “thus returns to the position abandoned with the step to religious nihilism: the complete nihilist ‘deifies becoming and the apparent world as the only world, and calls them good’ (WP 585)” (White 1990, 22).

6 C.f. Bernard Reginster (2006), pp. 27-28. As I will show, nihilism in its radical form does in fact result in disorientation as well as despair. If disorientation and despair are comprehended existentially and in terms of a loss of trust, then both are compatible features or conditions of nihilism.

Disgregation of the instincts’ (TI 9:35).”

Nihilism, then, amounts to a process of disintegration, a subjection of the drives to the will to nothingness. As a process, nihilism cannot be definitively divided up and categorized into discrete stages or types, but Müller-Lauter does identify a “decisive stage” in the “process” according to which the nihilistic mechanism “reaches its extreme realization” in the “self-destruction even of the will to truthfulness” from which “it becomes clear that nihilism is the ‘ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals’” and results in “their devaluation.”

This culmination of the nihilistic process presents two possibilities: passive nihilism, which is too weak to “attack” and overcome the former goals and values, and active nihilism, which is sufficiently strong and healthy to destroy the former values, but which must be surpassed in order to create new goals and values.

Another insightful interpreter, Michel Haar, views nihilism as a process of disintegration along with Müller-Lauter, but identifies four distinct “stages” of nihilism: latent or “larval” nihilism, incomplete nihilism, complete nihilism, and consummated or “ecstatic” nihilism. According to Haar, nihilism has a twofold meaning, designating both the (a) distinctly contemporary situation where “the ‘highest,’ i.e., the absolute, values are rendered null and void,” a disease peculiar to the modern condition of humanity, and (b) referring to the unfolding of Western ‘European’ history according to which nihilism is always already at work in and endemic to the institution of values and

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8 Ibid., p. 43.
9 Ibid., p. 63.
10 Ibid., p. 64.
thus implicated “with the very humanity of man,” “man’s ‘normal condition.”  

I will turn to Haar’s discussion of the four stages of nihilism in my discussion of the varieties of nihilism below.

While I agree with some of the interpretations cited above (namely, Müller-Lauter and Haar) that nihilism unfolds as a historical and physiological-psychological process, I nonetheless contend that, for the sake of simplicity, the varieties of nihilism in Nietzsche’s work can be subsumed under three basic categories: *incipient* nihilism, *radical* nihilism, and *active* nihilism. Employing his genealogical method of critique, Nietzsche discovers *incipient* nihilism at work in virtually all cultural forms and values of the West since the time of Socrates (and perhaps before). It is this *incipient* form of nihilism that is an expression of the *pathological trust* analyzed in the last chapter. *Radical* nihilism, on the other hand, is the cumulative effect of the intensification and historical development of incipient nihilism, the culminating condition in which the life-denying nihilistic tendencies of Western culture come to fruition in an apocalyptic crisis of radical nihilism in which humankind can no longer create values because it can no longer locate meaning or purpose in life. Nietzsche’s entire philosophical project revolves around the issue of nihilism, but he is particularly concerned with the possibility of this *radical* nihilism. It is radical nihilism that represents the total loss of trust in life and which Nietzsche identifies as “the great danger to mankind” (*GM*: P, 5) The possibility of moving forward and out of this condition of radical nihilism lies in learning to affirm life by actively destroying the previous values and then passing beyond destruction (and hence beyond nihilism altogether) to the creation of new goals and values that affirm the

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12 Ibid., p. 10.
very features of life that the former values negated and that the decadent will feared. An
important step, then, toward such life-affirmation is to embrace an active nihilism—that
is, a transitional mode in which the traditional “higher” values are devalued and
destroyed because the vital nature of life as becoming is affirmed. This active nihilism is
merely transitional, however, as Nietzsche demands that nihilism be overcome altogether
and new values and goals (and hence, new meaning) created and conferred upon life by
sheer strength of will and out of a “new health.”

In what follows, I will offer a sketch of Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism in its
three basic manifestations—as incipient, radical, and active nihilisms—and demonstrate
how these manifestations are related to the issue of trust.

*Situating Nihilism through The Gay Science §125: The Event of the ‘Death of God’ and
the Eclipse of Meaning*

Nietzsche’s famous pronouncement of the death of God constitutes one of the
most vivid and suggestive descriptions of nihilism as an event in the entirety of his work.
Unfortunately, though the passage from *The Gay Science* in which this pronouncement is
first found is one the most frequently cited passages in Nietzsche, it also remains one of
his most frequently misunderstood passages. Is Nietzsche making an argument here? Is
he merely declaring that that God does not exist? Why does Nietzsche put this declaration
in the mouth of a “madman”? The popular and rather uninformed view of the passage
from *The Gay Science* §125 proclaims that it is the classic statement of “postmodern”
atheism (whatever this might mean or be said to entail). This view, however, is not
substantiated by the text itself nor does it gain support in the rest of Nietzsche’s writings.
For one thing, this passage is most fruitfully and faithfully interpreted as a prophetic
declaration of the advent of nihilism that involves a rather poetic description of a crucial event in Western culture: The collapse of the values and ideals in terms of which we understood, oriented, and grounded ourselves in existence for millennia.

Now The Gay Science §125 is noteworthy for many things, but the metaphors employed in this passage by Nietzsche’s character, the “madman,” are particularly poignant. These are metaphors of profound crisis and they help to situate the advent of radical nihilism in the event of the death of God; and further, they serve to indicate the way in which radical nihilism is the consequence of a profound loss of trust in life. It is imperative, therefore, to carefully track and explicate the metaphors used throughout.

Though the “death of God” is announced earlier on in The Gay Science (“God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.—And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too”13), the “madman” passage from §125 still remains the finest and most decisive formulation of this thesis in Nietzsche’s corpus. Here the “death of God” is only announced after Nietzsche’s figure of the “madman” has run into the midst of a group of mocking and disdainful onlookers, those “who did not believe in God,” and has cried out “I seek God! I seek God!” Following this enigmatic and rhetorical plea the madman begins to decry and condemn the apathy of “those who did not believe in God” by forcefully driving home the consequences of this event of divine death:

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. ‘Whither is God?’ he cried; ‘I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all

13 Nietzsche GS §108
directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as though through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? (GS §125)

The first thing to notice here is the textual context in which the action takes place. The action unfolds in “the market place,” alluding to the privileged site of political, social, philosophical, and religious deliberation and discourse in ancient Greek culture: the agora. Apart from paying homage to his beloved Greeks, here Nietzsche establishes an important analogy to modern Europe, whose religious, philosophical, and secular culture he regards as the direct successor to the Western culture initiated by Socrates and Plato. The “madman” appears at the cusp of a crisis of modern European culture, just as Socrates arrived on the scene of a degenerate and devolving Greece in order to “treat” the anarchy of the instincts threatening the extinction of Greek culture altogether. “The same kind of degeneration was everywhere silently preparing itself: the old Athens was coming to an end.—And Socrates understood that all the world had need of him—his expedient, his cure, his personal art of self-preservation . . . Everywhere the instincts were in anarchy” (TI: ‘Socrates’ 9). Socrates’ expedient, Nietzsche suggests, was “to make a tyrant of reason,” to “be absurdly rational” (TI: ‘Socrates’ 10), and thus to introduce an incipient Western culture to a “cure” that was also a poison (pharmakon): an instinct, reason, that would turn against and subdue the disordered and chaotic demands of the vital drives and forces that “were becoming mutually antagonistic,” that no longer obeyed a dominant drive or alliance of drives, but rather threatened to tear the will asunder.
Ultimately, according to Nietzsche, Socrates’s expedient of reason does nothing to cure the human will of its decadent anarchy, but only redirects and diverts its expression into an other-worldly “Beyond” in an act of denial of the worth and value of this life.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus, at the very beginning of what has been understood to be the history of Western civilization, Socrates sets the precedent for the creation of a new set of values directed toward a new ideal: that of a realm of being, ruled by the Good, that resides beyond life, change, death, and time, an ideal in which humanity finds its raison d’être. This ideal reaches its zenith in the Judeo-Christian God, the final guarantee of genuine meaning and worth in terms and by means of which this life is judged, measured, and found wanting.\textsuperscript{15} The God-ideal represents the antithesis to life in that it promises eternity where this life offers only transience, being rather than becoming, truth and certainty in place of deception and inconstancy, stable purpose instead of chance fate, salvation of the soul from the carnal body, good rather than evil. “The concept of ‘God’,,” Nietzsche insists, is “invented as a counterconcept of life—everything harmful, poisonous, slanderous, the whole hostility unto death against life synthesized in this concept in a gruesome unity” (\textit{EH}: ‘Destiny’ 8). Life is devalued in favor of a Beyond: a true life that is obscured as if “seen in a mirror darkly”\textsuperscript{16} by this one.

Like Socrates, the madman also goes into the marketplace to proclaim a message, but his is a message of the demise of the Socratic-Platonic interpretation of meaning and value that eventually found its highest expression and consequence in the creation of the

\textsuperscript{14} C.f., \textit{TI}: ‘Socrates’ 1-2.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{GM} II, 21-22.

\textsuperscript{16} I Corinthians 13:12
Christian God-ideal (whether Plato or Socrates would sanction this or not). The necessary consequence of the Platonic escape into a “Beyond,” into a realm expressive of the denial of life and of the vital conditions of life, is radical nihilism, for the Platonic movement of life-negation produces an incipient nihilism. Nietzsche describes this situation of radical nihilism in metaphors of loss and crisis, more specifically with metaphoric expressions that signify disorientation, lack of direction, de-centering, groundlessness, insecurity, and confusion. It is as if, he says, the earth had been “unchained” from the sun, as if there were no horizon, as if we exist in an empty void with no stable point by which to anchor or orient our place in existence. Existentially speaking, there is an abyss of meaning, no standard by which to measure our actions, no ideal in terms of which to understand ourselves, and certainly no final purpose or goal to give us direction and motivation in life. As Nietzsche puts it in *Will to Power* §30: “The time has come when we have to pay for having been Christians for two thousand years: we are losing the center of gravity by virtue of which we lived; we are lost for a while.” The God-ideal is the product of pathological trust—which can only be explained in terms of a prior distrust of life. This distrust of life is itself an expression of distrust of the body, of the senses, of pain, of becoming—in short, of all that defines and characterizes life itself.

As the “counterconcept of life,” the concept of God encompasses all subsidiary counterconcepts to life, all (reactive) acts of hostility toward and distrust of life, including the Platonic invention of a “true” world and the religious conception of the soul. In Nietzsche’s words, “The concept of the ‘beyond,’ the ‘true world’ invented in order to devaluate the only world there is—in order to retain no goal, no reason, no task for earthly reality! The concept of the ‘soul,’ the ‘spirit’, finally even ‘immortal soul,’
invented in order to despise the body, to make it sick, ‘holy’; to oppose with ghastly levity everything that deserves to be taken seriously in life, the questions of nourishment, abode, spiritual diet, treatment of the sick, cleanliness, and weather” (EH: ‘Destiny’ 8). All the so-called “higher” concepts and values were grafted together and woven into a unity with the “invention” of God. It is quite easy, then, to understand the severity of the madman’s description of the consequences of the event of God’s death. If there is no sovereign concept in which the value and priority of the “higher” concepts (“true world,” “soul,” “free will,” etc.) are completed and invested with ultimacy, then the entire structure collapses and one loses all trust in the “higher” (but nihilistic) meaning of existence (just as trust in the earthly and this-worldly meaning of existence has long since gone). The metaphorical images that the madman offers here are crucial for understanding what “trust in life” entails for Nietzsche.

1. The madman asks how we, the “murderers” of God, could “drink up the sea.” At a literal level, the “sea” is a large body of water and as water is a necessary condition for life, the loss of the sea signifies the destruction of the source of a vital necessity that sustains life. With the death of God, and with the extinction of meaning and value that this event signifies, it is as if we have become deprived of vital nourishment. Similarly, trust functions to nourish us existentially, i.e., to make life worth living, just as the sea gives us the means (water) of nourishing ourselves. To put it succinctly: Just as the sea is a source of vital fluids for the sustenance of organic life, so is trust a source of existential nourishment or sustenance for human life.

2. The madman asks, “Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?” The “horizon” means both the line at which earth and sky meet and the limit-point of
human perception or experience. Of course, the more philosophical sense of “horizon” is that of a background (interpretive framework, conceptual categories, implicit understanding, experiential matrix, perception) against which “things” (defined broadly, so as to encompass objects, others, actions, events, etc.) make sense and take on determinate form. A “horizon” then, operates as a kind of interpretive backdrop against which things “show up” and mean something to and for us. Hence, the perspective within which things make sense and are determinate, is “erased” with the death of God. Trust also functions as a “horizon” against which things (including ourselves) take on a meaningful arrangement within a context, thereby allowing things to possess a certain sense and value.

3. The madman continues: “What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns?” This line of questioning clearly invokes Plato’s ‘Sun’ image from Republic, Book VI, and the ‘Cave’ image from Book VII. Plato has us imagine the “sun” as the source of light by which the objects of sight are illuminated, showing up their sensible qualities and features, and the “Good” as analogous to the sun in the realm of the invisible and intelligible. The “Good” is the source of knowledge for the intellect, illuminating the true ideas (or forms) of things whereby their true nature is discerned. Also, the revolution of the earth about the sun conjures Copernicus’s heliocentric conception of cosmology as well as the idea that the days, times, and seasons of the earth (i.e., its cyclical regularity) are dependent upon this revolution around the sun. Taking all of these images together, the madman indicates that the death of God is analogous to “unchaining” the earth from its sun, thereby unmooring us from the source of knowledge and truth (illumination),
radically de-centering existence, and destroying the means by which order and rhythm are introduced into the process of life. Analogously to the earth’s relation to the sun, human existence and knowledge are given a center, intelligibility, and a certain order by trust. Trust directs and orients, disposes, and provides a pre-understanding of phenomena, for the human being.

4. Finally, the madman inquires, “Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as though through an infinite nothing?” These images evoke a dramatic sense of groundlessness and radical instability. Without a God-concept, we find ourselves without a secure ground on which to stand, without a stable footing upon which to move, from which to comport ourselves in the world. Trust designates this stabilizing ground, this force of affirmation. Trust makes firm in that it supports us in existence in a fundamental way.

The madman’s metaphors for the consequences of the death of God vividly and poetically describe the very “truths” that the radical nihilist can neither accept or deny. The critical condition of de-spiritualization, of a horizonless, groundless, and directionless existence, is the very picture of the nihilistic view of a meaningless existence. However, the radical nihilist is the one who believes that life is not worth living because the values and goals prescribed by a pathological trust in (anti-)life are refuted and defunct. Does this mean that the radical nihilist no longer exists in trust? Not according to Nietzsche, for the radical nihilist still trusts in truth: the same will to truth that, as will be seen, Nietzsche claims “killed” God in the first place!
The Death of God at the Hands of The Will To Truth

If the will to truth drives the radical nihilist to this fateful and “terrifying Either/Or” as Nietzsche claims, then relinquishing this will to truth is necessary in order for nihilism to be overcome. One of the more shocking and counter-intuitive claims that Nietzsche makes is the idea that the will to truth is the primary culprit in the murder of God. He writes:

[The event of the death of God,] being the most fateful act of two thousand years of discipline for truth that in the end forbids the lie in faith in God.

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. Looking at nature as if it were proof of the goodness and governance of a god; interpreting history in honor of some divine reason, as continual testimony of a moral world order and ultimate moral purposes . . . that is all over now, that has man’s conscience against it (GS 357)

The will to truth is the last vestige of the fundamental presupposition of the concept of God, for the nihilist, in the name of truth, holds that this life does not have value or meaning in itself, that it is essentially valueless and—here is the malicious moral inference—because it is meaningless, this life and its conditions are “evil,” hence one must deny and negate this life. Once the “truth” of God is questioned and eventually denied, “a new problem arises: that of the value of truth” and this problem requires that “the value of truth must for once be experimentally called into question” (GM III, 24).

What is interesting about this is that Nietzsche repeatedly associates the atheist and (naturalistic) scientist with a “faith in truth.” Though they say “No” to God and certain otherworldly ideals, they retain a will to truth founded upon the very premise that leads to radical nihilism: the ascetic ideal. The ascetic ideal is simply the product of a
need to respond to the suffering produced by life by negating life’s conditions and elevating the negations themselves to ideals. “These Nay-sayers and outsiders of today who are unconditional on one point—their insistence on intellectual cleanliness [. . .] all these pale atheists, anti-Christians, immoralists, nihilists . . . they certainly believe they are as completely liberated from the ascetic ideal as possible [and yet,] this ideal is precisely their ideal, too [. . .] for they still have faith in truth” (GM III, 24). The atheist and/or scientist, according to Nietzsche, is a kind of radical nihilist, for she or he still believes in a “true” or “real” world behind this “false” and “apparent” one and thus fails to escape the charge of both falling prey to and perpetuating nihilism.

The radical nihilist recognizes that the former interpretation of life and meaning is no longer valid—i.e., it was untrue to the evidence—and yet cannot conceive that any other interpretation of the world can be given. The sole mode of trust that the radical nihilist sustains, her or his will to truth, is the last vestige of the pathological trust in the life-negating values and ideals of the Platonic-Christian-moral interpretation of the world. Nietzsche seems to indicate however, that even the will to truth cannot ultimately sustain the radical nihilist, for he writes:

Have we not exposed ourselves to the suspicion of an opposition—an opposition between the world in which we where at home up to now with our reverences that perhaps made it possible for us to endure life, and another world that consists of us—an inexorable, fundamental, deepest suspicion about ourselves that is more and more gaining worse and worse control of us Europeans and that could easily confront coming generations with the terrifying Either/Or: ‘Either abolish your reverences, or—yourselves!’ The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be—nihilism?—This is our question mark” (GS 346).

This passage indicates the impossibility of living a completely valueless life for human beings. Once the radical nihilist discovers that the “world consists of us” (that we
‘invented’ it and infuse it with the values and characteristics that we need), the will to truth confronts the horrifying reality that it too is a “reverence,” an invention that no longer has any sanction. Upon this realization, either the nihilist will be too weak to create values and meaning that make life worth living and must go extinct, or she or he must enter a stage of active nihilism whereby the former values are dismantled and destroyed and then pass beyond nihilism to the creation of new values and meanings. It is simply not possible or desirable, Nietzsche thinks, for human beings to live without any value or meaning in life whatsoever. This would mean an existence without trust to direct, affirm, and hold us open toward life—and this, Nietzsche claims, is not living. “Is living not valuating, preferring, being unjust, being limited” (*BGE* 9), Nietzsche asks, further asserting that “without a continual falsification of the world . . . mankind could not live” (*BGE* 4) and “the value of the world lies in our interpretation” (*WP* 616). This is the meaning of the madman’s words when he expresses hope toward the end of *The Gay Science* §125: “What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? . . . Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?” This is Nietzsche’s way of affirming the necessity, as quoted from *The Gay Science* §346, of creating an existence in which we are “at home” in life.

Trust, as the fundamental mode of inhabiting a place in life, or of being-at-home in existence, is as necessary for our spiritual-existential life as nourishment and breathing are necessary to sustain our organic life; though ultimately, as will be shown in the next chapter, Nietzsche would regard trust to be grounded in organic and “physiological” (to use Nietzsche’s preferred nomenclature) conditions and relations. Of course, Nietzsche is vehemently opposed to the conception of a proverbial human “home away from home”
(i.e., a meaningful existence in a realm beyond this “false” and “evil” world from which we suffer) created by Platonic metaphysics, Christian religiosity, and the morality of pity. Such a negative mode of being-at-home in life is untenable and nihilistic since it is founded upon a negation of this life and thus denies the human will of the very means of strength and vital health. The key to overcoming nihilism is to overcome the denial of life at the heart of the Platonic-Christian-moral interpretation of meaning and value in existence—this pathological trust in anti-natural values.

**Active Nihilism: The Means of Combating Pathological Trust and Resisting Nihilism**

We have seen that the madman’s poetic list of consequences of “the most fateful act of two thousand years of discipline for truth that in the end forbids the lie in faith in God” (GS 357) informs us of the necessary and essential role that “trust in life” (GS 1) plays in constituting and shaping human existence. In its most basic form, trust, even in its pathological form, functions to secure, orient, and hold the human being open toward a world, others, and things in existence. Even though pathological trust is the symptom of a weak will—a will defined by its inability to cope with the vital conditions that “assault” it and which must reactively withdraw from and deny life—it nonetheless secures meaning and orients the will in existence. As Nietzsche puts it, “the ascetic ideal offered man meaning,” for “[i]n it suffering was interpreted; the tremendous void seemed to have been filled; the door was closed to any kind of suicidal nihilism” and “man was saved thereby, he possessed a meaning” such that “he could now will something” even if it is a “will to nothingness” expressive of “an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life” (GM III, 28). The only meaning that remains in the wake of God’s death is a negative one: as the meaning accorded life by the Platonic-
Christian-moral interpretation is built upon false premises and is thus not real. This “false” meaning of existence was supported by values and ideals that negated life and “the most fundamental presuppositions of life,” and the cleanliness of the intellect fostered by Christian morality’s emphasis on honesty before God discovers that this anti-natural meaning is not “true” to reality as it is—i.e., the meaningless flux of becoming—and thus the only meaning available, the nihilist thinks, is neither real nor possible (and hence “untrue”). Of course, once the radical nihilist’s will to truth draws one conclusion more, it comes to see that even its “truth” is not true to reality and is “false,” and the nihilist is forced to confront an existence that is meaningless, valueless, and groundless—an existence that a will weakened by millennia of nihilistic values and pathological trust is simply incapable of re-valuing and re-creating. “The end of Christianity—at the hands of its own morality (which cannot be replaced), which turns against the Christian god (the sense of truthfulness, developed highly by Christianity, is nauseated by the falseness and mendaciousness of all Christian interpretations of the world and of history; rebound from ‘God is truth’ to the fanatical faith ‘All is false’; Buddhism of action——)” (WP 1). This condition is “suicidal nihilism” precisely because it denotes an inability to will any new values or ideals at all, and this devastating condition bespeaks a radical loss of trust. Nietzsche regards the possibility of radical nihilism as the “greatest danger” to the future of humanity, for it signifies that “together with the fear of man we have also lost our love of him, our reverence for him, our hopes for him, even the will to him” (GM I, 12).

In order to combat radical nihilism, Nietzsche demands a “revaluation of all values,” a destruction of all former values and ideals in the name of life-affirmation rather than life-negation. This stage in the overcoming of nihilism demands an initial
stage of active nihilism whereby the value of all former values and ideals is called into question via a genealogical critique such that the root of such values in the infertile and corrupt soil of decadence is severed. As Nietzsche writes, “why has the advent of nihilism become necessary? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequence; because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals—because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what value these ‘values’ really had” (*WP*, Preface). Nietzsche’s Zarathustra prefigures the active nihilist when he speaks of the spirit of a “lion who would conquer his freedom and be master in his own desert,” for though the lion cannot “create new values,” he can and must be involved in the “creation of freedom . . . for new creation” by offering “a sacred ‘No’ even to duty.” Zarathustra acknowledges that though the active nihilist “once loved ‘thou shalt’ as most sacred,” he must now “find illusion and caprice even in the most sacred” (*TSZ*: 3, “Metamorphoses”). Similarly, the “madman” acts as an active nihilist when Nietzsche relates that he “forced his way into several churches and there struck up his requiem aeternam deo” and, when “called to account, he is said to have replied nothing but: ‘What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?’” (*GS* 125).

Active nihilism is “a sign of strength” in which “the spirit [has] grown so strong that previous goals (‘convictions,’ articles of faith) have become incommensurate (for a faith generally expresses the constraint of conditions of existence, submission to the authority of circumstances under which one flourishes, grows, gains power)” and it becomes “a violent form of destruction—as active nihilism” (*WP* 23). The opposite condition, that of “weary nihilism” (or, what I have been calling radical nihilism) is “a
sign of the lack of strength to posit for oneself, productively, a goal, a why, a faith,” and is a result of the process whereby “the synthesis of values and goals (on which every strong culture rests) dissolves and the individual values war against each other” as is the case with the values of “truthfulness” and “God” \( WP \ 23 \). In order to secure the freedom necessary “to posit” a “goal, a why, a faith” “for oneself,” active nihilism engages in destruction of the former life-denying values, and only after its work is accomplished can nihilism be overcome and the strength to create new values given free rein. It is with regard to this stage of active nihilism that Nietzsche advocates suspicion and distrust. In other words, Nietzsche \textit{does} advocate distrust, but only with regard to the former life-negating values and ideals that were symptoms of the condition of pathological trust.

\textit{The Limitations of Active Nihilism}

Just as the distrust and destruction of the active nihilist is necessary to \textit{overcome} and \textit{pass beyond} nihilism (after which one is a nihilist no longer, but a creator of new values and meanings), so also it is necessary to \textit{pass beyond} the distrust and suspicion that enabled one to overcome \textit{pathological} trust, in order to enter into a \textit{new} trust relationship with life. Exactly what this “new trust relationship” entails will be the subject of the next chapter; suffice it to say, that it involves a particular physiological, psychological, and “spiritual” accord with and attunement toward life and its conditions. Nietzsche offers provocative insights into the \textit{physiological basis} of those values, ideals, and purposes that constitute and shape human existence, and these insights, if taken seriously, allow us to gain an understanding of trust that is rooted in a certain bodily and sensible affectivity and engagement with life. Insofar as “man has become a fantastic animal” that “cannot flourish without a periodic trust in life” \( GS \ 1 \), it is imperative to
know how Nietzsche conceives of a vital and healthy form of trust and why he thinks we need it. It is to be hoped that some answer to these questions has already been given; however, as has been demonstrated, a robust account of Nietzsche’s view of trust involves understanding the three basic types of nihilism as rooted in a specific relation of trust.

The incipient nihilism that lurks beneath the “highest” values of Western culture is rooted in the inevitable self-disintegration of the pathological trust relation with life that defined human existence under the sway of the Platonic-Christian-moral interpretation of existential meaning. Once the highest ideal and ultimate guarantor of meaning and value, God, is undermined by the very will to truth it fostered, pathological trust is called into question and becomes tenuous, sustained only by a faith in truth at any cost. This will to truth is destined, however, to self-destruct once its anti-natural pretensions are comprehended and its value questioned, leaving behind an existence void of a “why” or a “wither,” without rhyme or reason, and hence, ushering in the reign of radical nihilism. Radical nihilism is so dangerous precisely because it constitutes a radical nihilation, an act of negation that is the “last gasp” and “sigh” of a will too weak and powerless to create the values and goals necessary to affirm life by trusting in it. The radical nihilist, then, represents the loss of the very trust in life necessary to preserve the human animal in existence, and what is more, to enhance human life. In order to pass from nihilism to affirmation, the mechanism of negation must be turned toward the life-denying relationship of pathological trust, the weak will, and the negative mode of valuation that grew out of it. Active nihilism is the means of accomplishing this task as its tools of destruction and distrust are turned toward the decadence values of Western
thought, religion, and morality. The intent of active nihilism is not to eradicate values and existential meaning altogether, for this would be the radical nihilism that Nietzsche so vehemently attacks, but to employ suspicion and destruction as tools for the task of restoring a vital and affirmative relationship of trust with life. In order to track this correlation between the forms of nihilism and the forms of trust, I will offer a concise treatment of Nietzsche’s account of the genealogy of nihilism, how it functions, and how he critiques and undermines the so-called “highest” values of the Platonic-Christian-moral view of existence. This genealogy of nihilism, however, will first be situated within Nietzsche’s thinking about the body and his diagnosis of Western culture in terms of the denial of the body.

The Primacy of the Body in the Creation of Values

One of Nietzsche’s more radical innovations in the Western history of philosophical thought is his emphasis on “physiology” (connoting the corporeal, organic, affective, and sensible dimensions of life) as the foundation of thought, morality, and action. In opposition to the Platonic tradition’s demotion of the body to the source of “evil,” “distractions,” and “falsehood,” Nietzsche insists on the absolute primacy of the body and the “physiological” as conditions for the possibility of psychological and spiritual phenomena such as the “soul,” “thinking,” “consciousness,” “concepts,” “truth,” “knowledge,” etc. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra offers a scathing diagnosis of the way in which the Platonic-Christian conception of the body operates as a pretext for a negation of life:

Once the soul looked contemptuously upon the body, and then this contempt was the highest: she wanted the body meager, ghastly, and starved. Thus she hoped to escape it and the earth. Oh, this soul herself was still meager, ghastly, and starved: and cruelty was the lust of this soul. But you, too, my brothers, tell me: what does your
body proclaim of your soul? Is not your soul poverty and filth and wretched contentment? (TSZ I, Prologue §3)

The devaluation and denigration of the body in Western culture is a symptom of a weak, “meager, ghastly, and starved” soul; a soul that wants to “escape” the body (and hence, life) at all costs. Zarathustra demands that the body evaluate the soul rather than the other way around, thereby restoring the body to primacy in the determination of the value of the “soul” and “spiritual.” Whereas Plato’s Socrates taught that genuine happiness and truth is determined by the degree to which the soul (psychē) is purified (cleansed or purged) of the body (soma)\(^\text{17}\), Nietzsche’s Zarathustra teaches that flourishing and health in life is dependent upon the degree to which the body and its vital relationship with life is purified of the escapist and decadent tendencies of the anti-natural soul and its concepts. Zarathustra calls such life-deniers as Socrates “despisers of the body,” and he asks that they do everyone a favor and “merely say farewell to their own bodies—and thus become silent” (TSZ I,4 ‘On the Despisers of the Body’). Moreover, speaking of the representatives of Western intellectual, religious, and moral culture, Nietzsche writes:

They despised the body: they left it out of the account: more, they treated it as an enemy. It was their delusion to believe that one could carry a ‘beautiful soul’ about in a cadaverous abortion—To make this conceivable to others they needed to present the concept ‘beautiful soul’ in a different way, to revalue the natural value, until at last a pale, sickly, idiotically fanatical creature was thought to be perfection, ‘angelic,’ transfiguration, higher man. (WP 226)

In contrast to the life-denying view of the “despisers of the body,” Zarathustra informs us that the truly “awakened and knowing say: body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body” (TSZ I, 4). This is not to say, of course,

\(^{17}\text{C.f., Plato’s Phaedo.}\)
that Nietzsche holds the soul or “spirit” (and the phenomena related to them) to be nonexistent, but he does insist that the soul is subordinate to and an instrument of the body. “The body is a great reason, a plurality with one sense, a war and a peace, a herd and a shepherd. An instrument of your body is also your little reason, my brother, which you call ‘spirit’—a little instrument and toy of your great reason” (TSZ I, 4).

If the “spirit” (“your little reason”) is but an “instrument” of the “body” (“your great reason”) and “spiritual” phenomena such as thought and values are determined and conditioned by physiological processes and demands, then it follows that a “sick” body will produce a “sick” spirit. In order to evaluate a given philosophy in terms of its relationship with life, one must know “whether the sick body and its needs unconsciously urge, push, and lure the spirit—toward the sun, stillness, mildness, patience, medicine, balm in some sense” (i.e., whether the body craves escape from life), for Nietzsche postulates that the “unconscious disguise of physiological needs under the cloaks of the objective, ideal, purely spiritual goes to frightening lengths” (GS: P, §2). Indeed, “All those bold insanities of metaphysics” (such as Plato’s apparent denigration of the body and the physical realm), “especially answers to the question about the value of existence” (such as the notion that existence isn’t worth living if we are our bodies and the Platonic-Christian-moral interpretation of meaning and purpose is no longer valid), “may always be considered first of all as the symptoms of certain bodies . . . as hints or symptoms of the body, of its success or failure, its plenitude, power, and autocracy in history, or of its frustrations, weariness, impoverishment, its premonitions of the end, its will to the end.” Rather than ignoring the body and its central role in determining the creation of concepts, values, and meaning, Nietzsche insists that “philosophers are not free to divide body from
soul as the people do; we are even less free to divide soul from spirit,” and in conformity with this principle, it is necessary to conceive of a Nietzschean idea of trust in terms of the body and its place amid vital processes, relationships, and conditions in life (GS: P, §3). Moreover, nihilism, in its incipient form, is to be comprehended physiologically as a symptom of the body, more specifically, of a sick body, or, as Nietzsche prefers to call it: decadence. The “despisers of the body” that have guided and shaped Western culture hitherto, the so-called “wisest” of Western history, have “passed the identical judgment on life: it is worthless . . . Everywhere and always their mouths have uttered the same sound—a sound full of weariness with life, full of opposition to life” (TI: II ‘Socrates’, §1). More specifically, Nietzsche identifies “the great sages” as “declining types,” a diagnosis that extends to his recognition of even “Socrates and Plato as symptoms of decay” (TI: II ‘Socrates’ §2). The fact that the “wisest men” all agreed with Socrates and Plato that “life is worthless” and the body is to be despised, proves not that they were right, but that “these wisest men, were in some way in physiological accord since they stood—had to stand—in the same negative relation to life.” It is this physiologically “negative relation to life” that is expressive of decadence, of a nihilistic will that is “full of weariness with” and “opposition to life.” It is this analysis that prompts Nietzsche to ask, “What? and all these great wise men—they have not only been decadents, they have not even been wise?”

The Role of Decadence in the Creation of Nihilism

That Nietzsche regards nihilism to have developed alongside the mechanism of decadence is evident when he writes, “The nihilistic movement is merely the expression of physiological decadence” (WP §38). Though decadence is first and foremost a
physiological phenomenon, it has determinate psychological and “spiritual” effects, and it is these effects that lead to the negative value judgments involved with radical nihilism. As Nietzsche puts it, “Nihilism is no cause but merely the logical consequence of decadence” (WP §43). Nihilism originates with decadence, but what is decadence exactly? What does Nietzsche mean by it?

The clue to understanding Nietzsche’s use of decadence is found in the passage from *Twilight of the Idols* discussed above. The consensus of the “wisest men,” the “teachers of the purpose of existence” who guided and shaped the course of Western history and culture (GS 1), was achieved through agreement on one point: They “passed the identical [value] judgment on life: it is worthless” (TI: ‘Socrates’ §1). However, this negative value judgment was itself merely a symptom of the kind of life that “the great sages” represented, “declining types” of life (TI: ‘Socrates’ §2). Furthermore, “these wisest men,” these “declining types” and “symptoms of decay,” were not merely in agreement with regard to their negative value judgment about life (reflected in their philosophical, religious, and moral teachings about what is and is not valuable in existence), more significantly, they were in “physiological accord” with one another.

That is, the value judgment that “life is worthless” along with its accompanying entourage of beliefs and values (such as “The body is the source of evil” and “The senses lie”), was made on the basis of a particular relation to life that the “wisest” all shared: a “negative relation to life.”

What a negative relation to life entails was addressed in the previous chapter, where, essentially, a negative relation to life was understood as one in which the life form in question cannot cope with suffering and reacts by denying and negating life and its
conditions to the extent possible in order to preserve itself\textsuperscript{18}. Here, however, it becomes all the more clear that Nietzsche regards this negative relation to life as fundamentally a \textit{physiological} phenomenon, a relation to life defined by a specific condition and comportment of embodiment, corporeal drives, affectivity, and vital processes. Decadence is associated with a certain weakness and impoverishment of vitality in the organism. Nietzsche frequently contrasts the \textit{weak} type of human being with the \textit{strong} as seen in the following passage:

As opposed to those who, from the fullness they represent and feel, involuntarily give to things and see them fuller, more powerful, and pregnant with future—who are at least able to bestow something—the exhausted diminish and botch all they see—they impoverish the value: they are harmful.— [. . .] Those poor in life, the weak, impoverish life; those rich in life, the strong, enrich it. The first are parasites of life; the second give presents to it. (\textit{WP} 48)

As this passage makes clear, an “impoverished” view of life, the judgment that “life is worthless,” is a \textit{symptom} of the “exhausted,” those who are “poor in life,” the “weak.” Because the “wisest” are weak and poor in life, they must impoverish it. Nietzsche describes this negative relation with life as a “general type of decadence” according to which one “longs for a condition in which one no longer suffers: life is actually experienced as the ground of ills” (\textit{WP} \$44).

The decadent, then, is one who suffers from life, who experiences life as “the ground of ills” because he or she is too weak and “poor in life” to incorporate suffering and see it as a means to enhancing life. Decadence, as a negative relation to life, constitutes a certain \textit{response} to life’s demands, and this response is, Nietzsche indicates, constituted initially at a physiological level of the \textit{body}. The body, as the locus of

\footnote{\textsuperscript{18} Cf. \textit{GM} III, 28.}
affectivity and vital processes, is affected by vital conditions of nourishment, procreation, sensibility, and drives. The decadent experiences this affectation as painful suffering and is prompted, at the psychological and spiritual level, to blame the body and life generally as the cause of suffering. All organisms must respond in some way to the demands of life, but it is necessary to distinguish between different modes of response that correspond to different ways of being in relation with life. Nietzsche’s analysis of ressentiment in *On the Genealogy of Morals* fulfills this necessity by distinguishing between two human types, “noble” and “slave,” who are defined by their mode of response to vital conditions.

*Slave Morality and Decadence*

Early on in the ‘First Essay’ of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche categorizes cultures according to the type of class that rules. In general terms, there are two basic types of ruling classes: (1) a “priestly” noble class, characterized by its “unhealthy” “antisensualistic metaphysic” and the ascetic practices based on this metaphysic (fasting, abstinence), and (2) a “knightly-aristocratic” class defined by its “pathos of distance” from all that is “low” and “base,” a distinction that is made on the basis of the “noble” type’s own feeling of vital strength, superiority, physical prowess, and power.¹⁹ Whereas the “knightly-aristocratic value judgments presupposed a powerful physicality, a flourishing, abundant, even overflowing health, together with that which serves to preserve it: war, adventure, hunting, dancing, war games, and in general all that involves vigorous, free, joyful activity” (*GM* I, 7), the “priestly-noble mode of valuation presupposes” certain ruling “habits,” “the habits ruling in them which turn away from action and alternate between brooding and emotional explosions, habits which seem to

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have as their almost invariable consequence that intestinal morbidity and neuroasthenia which has afflicted priests at all times” (GM I, 6). Above all, Nietzsche writes, the priestly types “are the most evil enemies” for they are the most “impotent” and this impotence gives birth to the most “spiritual and poisonous kind of revenge” (GM I, 7). It is important to note that Nietzsche grounds the defining spiritual attitude or character of both the knightly-aristocratic noble class and the priestly noble class in physiological and bodily conditions. Hence the “spirit of priestly vengefulness” out of which the anti-sensualistic values and behaviors of the priest are born is itself a product of a certain physical impotence and a reactive and inconstant affectivity. The priestly type’s relationship with life and its conditions is characterized by impotence and reactivity, and it is, Nietzsche claims, a “dangerous” form of life precisely because it is so apparently antithetical to the conditions of vital health and flourishing. However, Nietzsche makes certain that we understand that he does not advocate a return to the simple and unthinking condition of the purely “knightly-aristocratic” mode of existence, for “it is only fair to add that it was on the soil of this essentially dangerous form of human existence, the priestly form, that man first became an interesting animal, that only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire depth and become evil—and these are the two basic respects in which man has hitherto been superior to the beasts!” (GM I, 6).

Clearly, without the creation of certain oppositions, an opposition between this (earthly) life and its antithesis (a purely spiritual “Beyond”), or that between health of the body and that of spirit, or even the conflict between reason and instinct, and the consequent possibility of judging between them by means of the fundamental antithetical values of good and evil, human cultural “achievements” (in, for example, the arts,
religion, technologies, philosophy, and dominance over “nature”) would seem to have been impossible. In fact it is not unreasonable to believe it likely that the human race could very well have gone extinct if we had not been “decadent” enough to turn against the situation in which we find ourselves (as finite organisms) and to create valuations, goals, and ideals that were falsifications and antitheses of life’s character and conditions. Nietzsche traces the development of consciousness, of reason, of logic, of categories, of other-oriented behavior to the developments of decadent or slave morality, and he hardly thinks that we should revert to a pre-conscious, irrational, illogical, and undistinguishing mode of life (though he does want us to be honest about the source and value of such phenomena).

Perhaps the greatest feat in human history is the revaluation of “noble” (animal) values, values based on natural, physical realities, and the introduction and dominance of priestly, anti-sensual, anti-natural values over Western culture. Nietzsche claims that this revaluation of and victory over “natural” or “noble” morality was accomplished by the “priestly” people par excellence: the Jews.

All that has been done on earth against “the noble,” “the powerful,” “the masters,” “the rulers,” fades into nothing compared with what the Jews have done against them; the Jews, that priestly people, who in opposing their enemies and conquerors were ultimately satisfied with nothing less than a radical revaluation of their enemies values, that is to say, an act of the most spiritual revenge [. . .] It was the Jews who, with awe-inspiring consistency, dared to invert the aristocratic value-equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of God) [. . .] saying “the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God, blessedness is for them alone—and you, the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless to all eternity; and you shall be in all eternity the unblessed, accursed, and damned! . . . One knows who inherited this Jewish revaluation . . . (GM I, 7)
Putting aside the questionable treatment of the ideals and values of the Jewish people in the above passage, it is evident that the types of human beings considered “good” in the Jewish valuation differ considerably from Nietzsche’s characterization of the “noble” mode of valuation whereby the “good” are those who are powerful, full of life and the feeling of flourishing life. The noble type is full of a feeling of power and strength that that the slave type does not possess, and because the noble is capable of demonstrating his or her strength in action in a way that the slave type is not capable of, the slave type is regarded by the noble as powerless and weak, and therefore “bad” (see *GM* I: 2, 4-5).

Nietzsche provides a brief etymological treatment of the terms “good” in both the noble cultures and the slave cultures, but the real question for him is why it was necessary for each type to create such values at all. The answer, it turns out, is found in the fundamental relationship of each type with life and its conditions. Even more specifically, it is the kind of will to power that each type embodies that determines the mode of valuation that they embrace. Nietzsche analyzes the slave type’s relation with life in terms of an affective condition that he names *ressentiment*, and that of the noble type in terms of the affect of overflowing *vitality*. Both affects are preconscious and vital modes of will to power that occur at the most basic physiological and psychological levels, what I have been calling the *vital* level.

**Ressentiment as an Affective Condition**

Nietzsche has claimed that the spirit of priestly revenge propelled the slave value-equation into dominance over the noble value-equation, essentially redefining and redirecting not only the values of the “strong,” but elevating a certain type of relation to
life (a decadent, weak, and sick one) over another (the strong, healthy, and affirmative mode of the noble type). He elaborates on this thesis in the following way:

The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge. While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is “outside,” what is “different,” what is “not itself”; and *this* No is its creative deed. This inversion of the value-positing eye—this need to direct one’s view outward instead of back to oneself—is of the essence of *ressentiment*: in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world; it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is fundamentally reaction.

The reverse is the case with the noble mode of valuation: it acts and grows spontaneously, it seeks its opposite only so as to affirm itself more gratefully and triumphantly—its negative concept “low,” “common,” “bad” is only a subsequently-invented pale, contrasting image in relation to its basic positive concept—filled with life and passion through and through—“we noble ones, we good, beautiful, happy ones!” (*GM* I: 10)

There are several claims of note in this passage and they provide a nice summary of Nietzsche’s grounding of the noble and the slave forms of existence in their two specific modes of relation to life and its conditions.

The slave inversion of noble values is the creation of *ressentiment*, which itself is an *affective* state induced by the slave-type’s need for “a hostile external world,” for “external stimuli,” against which it can react. *Reaction* is the slave-type’s sole mode of action and Nietzsche explicitly situates this defining reactivity at the *physiological* level as the need “physiologically speaking” for “external stimuli in order to act at all.” This is an important point, for Nietzsche claims that *physiological* processes and phenomena
precede and condition such secondary phenomena as culture, the social, the conscious, and valuation.\textsuperscript{20}

I have been arguing that “the physiological” is the term that Nietzsche uses when he wants to designate the vital or the organic level of life—i.e., the realm of the organic, affectivity, corporeality, and sensibility. Of course, famously, Nietzsche postulates a still more fundamental and basic level than that of the vital—the will to power—and it comes into play in this passage with the distinction between the reactive will to power which drives the slave-type and the active will to power that drives the noble-type. Speaking of the sanctification “of revenge under the name of justice,” Nietzsche distinguishes between “reactive affects” (examples include “hatred, envy, jealousy, mistrust, rancor, and revenge”) and “truly active affects, such as a lust for power, avarice, and the like” \textit{(GM II, 11)}. These active affects are, Nietzsche suggests, “of even greater biological value than those reactive affects,” and ressentiment, as the fundamental reactive affect and the source from which the other reactive affects are derived, is of less biological value precisely because, as Nietzsche says, “life operates essentially, that is in its basic functions, through injury, assault, exploitation, destruction” \textit{(GM II, 11; cf. BGE 269)}.

The slave-type, motivated by ressentiment against the noble-types, feels happy and content only when it feels safe and secure from external threat, that is, when it is able to rest from the suffering induced by a “hostile external world”. Nietzsche describes how “‘happiness,’ at the level of the impotent, the oppressed, and those in whom poisonous and inimical feelings are festering,” “appears as essentially a narcotic, drug, rest, peace, ‘sabbath,’ slackening of tension and relaxing of limbs, in short passively” \textit{(GM I, 10)}.\textsuperscript{20} See \textit{BGE} §36; also \textit{GS}: P §§2-3 makes the dependence of ‘spiritual’ phenomena like thought, ideas and values upon the body and physiological mechanisms explicit.
Furthermore, whereas the noble-type does not feel happy except when engaged in action (and “action” is here defined in terms of vital life as exploiting, destroying, and “becoming master”\textsuperscript{21}), the slave-type feels happy only when passive, inactive, at rest, and ultimately, only when its feeling of life (which is essentially injury, exploitation, etc.) is muted to the point of passivity. *Ressentiment*, then, is the slave-type’s affective mode of existence and it feels and experiences life and power as painful, threatening, and hateful. Hence, because *ressentiment* prompts the creation of values whose function is to subdue and eliminate injury, assault, exploitation—i.e., all forms of struggle—from “external forces,” it is associated with a de-intensification of the “feeling of life” and it is a symptom of a negative relation to life.

In sum, the slave-type cannot act on his or her own without an external stimulus that moves it to (re)act. Effectively, this means that the slave-type’s creative act of valuation is prompted by events or forces outside of itself and the consequent values are not spontaneous, but dependent upon external conditions. Not only is the slave-type’s creative act a reaction, but it is characterized as *negation*: “slave morality from the outset says No to what is ‘outside’” and “this No is its creative deed” (*GM* I, 10).

*The Function of the Ascetic Priest and How He or She Undermines Vital Trust in Life*

Nietzsche’s figure of the ascetic priest promises to treat the “poisonous and inimical feelings” produced by *ressentiment*, the feelings that eventually lead to nihilism, and he does so by several means of which I will focus on just two.

1. The ascetic priest seeks to combat the “dominating sense of displeasure” at “the feeling of physiological inhibition” (remember that *ressentiment* is a reactive affect) “by

\textsuperscript{21} *GM* II, 12.
means that reduce the feeling of life in general to its lowest point. If possible, will and desire are abolished altogether” (GM II, 17). Why would the ascetic priest seek to diminish the feeling of life even further? Precisely because it is life (and the meaning or value of life) from which the “weak” (i.e., the decadent, the slave-types) suffer and which causes them pain. The result of this “treatment,” Nietzsche continues, “expressed in moral-psychological terms, is ‘selflessness,’ ‘sanctification’; in physiological terms: hypnotization—the attempt to win for man an approximation to what in certain animals is hibernation . . . the minimum metabolism at which life will subsist without really entering consciousness” (GM II, 17). In other words, the ascetic priest, by means of the (ascetic) ideal he serves and the means (practices) he employs seeks to weaken and extinguish the patient’s relationship with life. In an attempt to mute and suppress the feeling of life in the decadent sufferer, the ascetic priest effectively closes off, as much as possible, the human being to the vital affects that connect it to life (i.e., the “animal” instincts, the bodily drives, the body itself). Instead of re-habilitation, restoring the decadent to trust in life by teaching her or him how to affirm the vulnerability by means of which we are held open toward life, the ascetic priest teaches mistrust of life and its affects.

2. The ascetic priest prescribes a “regimen” of “mechanical activity” that “alleviates an existence of suffering.” As Nietzsche tells it, “The alleviation consists in this, that the interest of the sufferer is directed entirely away from his suffering” (GM III, 18). A list of “mechanical” activities would include: “absolute regularity, punctilious and unthinking obedience, a mode of life fixed once and for all” (GM III, 18). Such an existence is relatively void of stimulants, creativity, or disruptions. It is a predictable, clear cut, routine, and simplified existence—all characteristics that allow the decadent to
forget that this life is unpredictable, chaotic, and continually in flux. The ascetic ideal alleviates suffering because it offers meaning in suffering and it makes life worthwhile—if only by muting, falsifying, and alleviating it. The ascetic priest seeks to “alleviate” suffering by ideals and practices that subdue and slow down the tempo of life processes.

The human being is situated in life, and life is defined by contingency, flux, plurality; hence, the human being “suffers” from life merely by “undergoing” (the classical sense of suffering) it. If the type of human being who cannot handle this suffering (the slave-type, decadent, the weak), who experiences it as painful, is to survive (and recall that Nietzsche claims life and suffering must have a meaning if we are to live), then a means of turning the sufferer away from finite life must be employed. And this “turning away,” this reorientation, is precisely what the ascetic priest accomplishes by means of the ascetic ideal: he directs the sufferer away from the “cause” of suffering, that is, away from life itself.

The ascetic priests, or the “teachers of the purpose of existence” (of GS §1), of Western culture, actively and successfully teach humankind to mistrust life and its conditions, to hate those persons and forces that are powerful and strong in vital terms but which are reactively viewed as destructive causes of suffering and revalued as “evil.” In order that the weak should be preserved in this life from which they suffer and which they are “doomed” to inhabit, the ascetic priests must further unravel the bonds of trust that tie humanity to its place in life. The ascetic ideal accomplishes this destruction of trust by closing off the vulnerable openness of the body and senses toward vital forces; by orienting us away from the brutal yet invigorating conditions of vital flourishing (such as our body, sensibility, affectivity, perspective) and toward a world that is the antithesis
of this one; and finally, by eroding the support and security of strength and power that
our vital relationship with life can afford. The ascetic ideal, because it is created out of
ressentiment directed at life, an affective state that is itself a reactive response to
suffering in life or to life as suffering, is an expression of the “will to nothingness” (GM
III: 28). As such, the ascetic ideal is a symptom of a sick, decadent, slave-type of will at
the same time that the ascetic priest, the interpreter and administrator of the ascetic ideal,
serves to further impoverish, weaken, and sicken the decadent will. What we have,
Nietzsche fervently insists, is a dire situation: an open door to radical nihilism that will
make the creation of new meanings and values impossible because vital trust in life has
been undermined. Nietzsche states the prognosis in the following way:

Broadly speaking, it is not fear of man that we should desire to see diminished; for
this fear compels the strong to be strong, and occasionally terrible—it maintains the
well-constituted type of man. What is to be feared, what has a more calamitous effect
than any other calamity, is that man should inspire not profound fear but profound
nausea … The sick are man’s greatest danger; not the evil, not the ‘beasts of prey’… it
is they, the weakest, who must undermine life among men, who call into question and
poison most dangerously our trust in life, in man, and in ourselves. (GM III: 14).

The ascetic priest though an “apparent enemy of life,” is, Nietzsche insists, “among the
greatest conserving and yes-creating forces of life” It is clear, however, that the ascetic
priest, one of the prime perpetrators of decadence, by “call[ing] into question and
poison[ing] most dangerously our trust in life, in man, and in ourselves” has actually
“conserved” only the means of surviving life in a weak and sick condition. For “the
ascetic ideal springs from the protective instinct of a degenerating life” and when the
ascetic ideal is destroyed (“God is dead”) by means of its own weapon of withdrawal
from life (uncompromising and unconditional truthfulness), all that is left is a will too
weak and devitalized to destroy and create anew, a will so practiced in negation and
denial that it can no longer overcome, “become master,” and affirm this life.

Nietzsche offers a succinct summary of the devastating consequences of the ascetic
ideal at the end of *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

We can no longer conceal from ourselves what is expressed by all that willing which
has taken its direction from the ascetic ideal: this hatred of the human, and even more
of the animal, and more still of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself,
this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from all appearance,
change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself—all this means—let us dare to
grasp it—a will to nothingness, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most
fundamental presuppositions of life; but it is and remains a will! … And, to repeat in
conclusion what I said at the beginning: man would rather will nothingness than not
will.—(GM III: 28)

The last sentence nicely encapsulated the predicament that nihilism poses. For, to
paraphrase *The Gay Science* §346, life offers us an ultimatum: “Either abolish your
reverences and create new ones that are ‘faithful to the earth’ or—abolish yourselves!”

To the question of how to restore vital trust in life, how to create values that are “faithful
to the earth,” the passage above would indicate that an answer lies in reversing the
negations performed upon life and its conditions by the ascetic ideal. Thus, instead of
revenging oneself on life by creating values, ideals, and moralities that turn against the
human, the animal, the senses, etc., one should seek to affirm life and even suffering in
life by saying Yes and reinterpreting to the human, the animal, the material, the senses,
appearance, change, becoming, death, in short, by affirming the undeniable
characteristics of the life that we inhabit. Nietzsche himself suggests certain possibilities
for creating values that are directed, open, and secure toward life. Such distinctly
Nietzschean tropes as Dionysus, the Overman, Zarathustra, the Eternal Recurrence, Will
to Power, and his repeated emphasis on restoring the body, senses, appearance, joyous affects, and tragedy, constitute attempts to think values, ideals, and practices that are life-affirming, that are grounded in vital trust.
CHAPTER SIX:

NIETZSCHE AND VITAL TRUST

Remain faithful to the earth, my brothers, with the power of your virtue. Let your gift-giving love and your knowledge serve the meaning of the earth. Thus I beg and beseech you. Do not let them fly away from earthly things and beat with their wings against eternal walls. Alas, there has always been so much virtue that has flown away. Lead back to the earth the virtue that flew away, as I do—back to the body, back to life, that it may give the earth a meaning, a human meaning.

—Thus Spoke Zarathustra (I: ‘On the Gift-Giving Virtue’ §2)

What are we to make of Zarathustra’s prophetic pronouncement to “remain faithful to the earth”? To devote both our “gift-giving love” and our “knowledge” to serving “the meaning of the earth”? How to lead “virtue” “back to the earth,” which is to say, according to Zarathustra, “back to the body, back to life, that it may give the earth a meaning”? Furthermore, how can we understand Zarathustra’s plea in the light of Nietzsche’s task, a task that demands that “we complete the de-deification of nature” and “naturalize’ humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature” (GS 109), a task that involves an effort “to translate man back into nature” (BGE 230)?

Chapter V sketched Nietzsche’s critical efforts to uproot and expose the pretensions behind the metaphysical effort to deny and evade the conditions that reign over what might be called “earthly” life, that is, conditions such as suffering, tragedy, becoming, change, and the inherent meaninglessness of the world. Moreover, what
Nietzsche truly fears and seeks to overcome is the possibility of nihilism, the product of the ascetic need to believe in an absolute, eternal, and life-denying interpretation of the meaning of existence coupled with the gradual weakening of the human will that follows in the wake of several millennia of training and conditioning under such an ascetic ideal.

Nietzsche’s philosophy amounts to an attempt to diagnose what he calls “the sickness” at the root of Western culture and to restore humanity to a healthy relationship with life. Traditionally, religion and philosophy have been concerned with the task of elevating and grounding the value of existence beyond and in opposition to “earthly” life. Such “elevation” however, is purchased at the expense of a denial of “earthly” life and its conditions. Meaning in existence and the value of human life is affirmed only on the basis of a fundamental negation of the “earth” and its meaning. In this way, to use Zarathustra’s language, Western metaphysics and religion have betrayed the earth and sinned against it. Our guiding concepts, ideals, values, and modes of thinking along with the practices and habits based upon them, have constituted "anti-natural" attempts to purge human existence of its uncertain, corporeal, and tragic character. Nietzsche's task is a physician’s task: He observes and describes the symptoms of modern Western humanity, diagnoses its sickness (decadence values), offers a dire prognosis (nihilism), and seeks a way to restore us to health and strength. The road to recovery, however, is not for everyone (hence, Zarathustra’s frequent mention of the “overman”) and it involves an overhaul of the most “natural” habits of thought and behavior. The new reorientation and road to convalescence can only be traveled by reevaluating all our highest values in an
effort to "affirm," do, and say "Yes!" to life rather than seeking only to negate and say "No!" to life. In short, we must learn how to trust in life again.

It is evident, therefore, that Nietzsche’s work contains a positive component in that he suggests what a life-affirming way of life, an “earthly” way of life, might look like and involve. Certainly Zarathustra’s call to “remain faithful to the earth” reflects Nietzsche’s emphasis on bringing the powers, capacities, activities, and domains of human life back to earth rather than seeking respite by investing all meaning and value in a spiritual and metaphysical world that is stripped of earthly finitude, corporeality, sensuality, and becoming. This part of Nietzsche’s task involves a revaluation of all values and a proposal for a healthier, stronger, and more trustworthy way of life.

Nietzsche’s philosophy is protreptic in that it represents an attempt to exhort the reader to a better way of life, urging one forward toward the future possibilities of human life, and turning one’s thought, will, and powers away from a pathological trust to a vital trust in life. For, much like Plato, Nietzsche conceives of philosophy as an exhortation to a certain way of life, a way of life that involves a set of practices, a conception of meaning and value, and an understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. In other words, Nietzsche’s philosophy offers a certain conception of the good life, a life that he thinks, just as Plato argued, very few people know how to live. Rather, on Nietzsche’s view, Western culture and history has gradually undermined the possibility of living well to the point of actually damaging the entire species. This is clear when, in speaking of the Platonic-Christian influence on morality, Nietzsche rhetorically asks, “What if a symptom of regression were inherent in the ‘good,’ likewise a danger, a
seduction, a poison, a narcotic, through which the present was possibly living at the expense of the future? . . . So that precisely morality would be to blame if the highest power and splendor actually possible to the type man was never in fact attained?” (GM Preface, 6).

Philosophy and religion since the time of Plato have offered many conceptions of the good life for human beings, but they are all products (on Nietzsche’s view) of one basic and damaging need: The need to alleviate the burden and suffering of this life by vilifying it and its conditions in order to turn to another, “truer,” realm as the source of the good life. Nietzsche, in large part, blames Plato for this move, claiming that “it certainly has to be admitted that the worst, most wearisomely protracted and most dangerous of all errors hitherto has been a dogmatist’s error, namely Plato’s invention of pure spirit and the good in itself” (BGE: Preface). Christianity, of course, shares the blame with Platonism since it radicalized and propagated this conception of the “good life” and the form of existence it demands to the masses. Christianity is, after all, “Platonism for ‘the people’” (BGE: Preface). Only now, in modern Western culture, through the influence of science and an ever more stringent (moral) “will to truth,” has this conception of the good life been called into question and its basis refuted. Though there are many different lived interpretations of existence, Nietzsche sees their basic differences to be derived from a distinction between two forms of life: a life-denying or ascetic form and a life-affirming or vital form.

In the Phaedo, Plato, according to Peperzak, calls for a “conversion” from a “somatic’ existence” to a “life of the mind,” calling “the whole of this process
‘katharmos, purification’ and interpreting it ‘not as a rejection, but as a spiritualization, a spiritual ruling of somatic life: the life of the spirit must penetrate and rule the body in order to make it good and beautiful.’

Nietzsche, on the other hand, calls for a ‘naturalization’ of human existence, a conversion from an ascetic, life-denying way of life (with its allegiance to a mind or spirit or soul purged and ‘purified’ of its carnal and bodily characteristics) to a vital, life-affirming way of life. In contradistinction to Plato’s demand that ‘the life of the spirit must penetrate and rule the body,’ Nietzsche demands that we ‘remain faithful to the earth’ and allow the body to permeate the spirit. He calls this the ‘spiritualization of sensuality’ (TI: “Morality”, 3) and has his Zarathustra declare, “body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body” (Z: I “On the Despisers of the Body”). Such a reversal of priorities indicates that Nietzsche feels that the key to a fecund, rich, and affirmative life is to be found in responsiveness toward and obedience to vital and ‘earthbound’ imperatives.

The Role of Vital Trust in Achieving a Healthy Relationship with Life

As I discussed in Chapter IV, Nietzsche thinks that human beings cannot live without trust in life (GS 1). In the most primordial sense, such trust is a function of our relationship with life, and our place in this relationship is defined by dependence, the necessity of vital support, and our adoption of an attuned stance—all of which conspire together to confer a value and meaning on life and ourselves. So, trust in life is basic for a distinctly human life. There are, however, different forms, configurations, and intensities that may define this trust relationship with life; and, according to Nietzsche, such differences ultimately alter the makeup of the human organism such that the health and

viability of its way of life is either compromised or enhanced. To put it more succinctly:

Variation in the nature and composition of the vital trust relationship produces variation in the quality and viability of a way of life. A pathological trust relationship with life, for example, will weaken and devitalize the human being, but because this type of human being has such an attenuated relationship with life, Nietzsche entertains the possibility that it is not capable of a stronger relationship with life. It is simply too devitalized. This is why it is perhaps more Nietzschean to reverse the priorities in the perennial philosophical question, “Is this life worth living for me?,” and ask instead, “Am I worthy of this life?” For Nietzsche, it is not at all clear that most human beings should answer the latter question in the affirmative.

On Nietzsche’s account, the combined influence of Platonism and Christianity has served to expunge the most life-affirming instincts, drives, and affects from the human being and society and has instead carefully developed and cultivated only the weakest, most life-denying instincts. In doing so, the human type of life form was weakened and the already devitalized and “least valuable” types honored and preserved. Such an effort was not without cost, for the engineering of a life form that denies life forced the human will to turn against itself, to attack its most vital drives, and to find pleasure only in inflicting the pain of sin and guilt upon itself. The weak are only going to feel that life is worth living if (a) this life is only temporary and a “truer” and “higher” life purged of all the undesirable aspects of this life is guaranteed and (b) if they can be trained to feel ‘happy’ only in the most restful, passive, and nonsensual states of being possible (i.e.,
cultivate the soul and ignore or discipline the body to dull its pleasurable and painful affects). This way of life inevitably ends in nihilism and the despair that induces it.

Nietzsche’s philosophy of life-affirmation demands that we “trust in life” in a way that “remains faithful to the earth,” but what does a faithful trust in life involve? What would a way of life founded in a healthy and vital trust in life look like? Though he does not directly address these questions himself, I think that we can reconstruct Nietzsche’s answer, in a manner that is faithful to his overall philosophy of life-affirmation. A Nietzschean account of vital trust can be sketched on the basis of his fecund phenomenological descriptions, his revival of mythical and cultural paradigms and figures, his many metaphorical gestures and physio-psychological analyses, and the occasional hypothetical thought experiment. I will argue that, for Nietzsche, a vital trust in life involves the following three elements:

(a) Recognition of one’s dependence on life and our vulnerability to its conditions and forces. On the basis of this recognition, Nietzsche demands that one actively take up this dependence in such a way as to become open to the demands of life, its resources of strength and health, and the possibilities for flourishing that it presents.

(b) Recovery of the sense in which our relationship with life and its conditions provides the only “ground” from which to establish meaning and a viable way of life. Life provides both the impulse and the canvas on which and against which to project, artistically render, and interpret meaning and sense in existence.
(c) Recognition of the fact that we inhabit a certain *stance* toward and *orientation* within life. We are not neutrally-positioned (this would be to occupy a no-place), but are always already directed by and toward life and a world in a certain way.

Nietzsche calls this *perspectivism*, the necessity of taking up and interpreting the world through a personal perspective provided by our relationship with life. Hence, it is necessary to cultivate an orientation, to take up a stance—along with our practices of value-creation (and destruction), interpretation, thought, and signification that define that perspective—that is directed *toward* life instead of *away* from it. This involves becoming attuned to life’s demands and our situatedness in life such that we can affirm the totality of life (hence, the use of such expressive formulations as “amor fati” and “eternal recurrence”).

*The Meaning of the Term “Life” in Nietzsche’s Work*

It is all well and good to *say* that Nietzsche’s philosophy is *protreptic*, directed toward urging the reader to a way of life that is “faithful to the earth” and exhorting us to a healthy and vital trust in life. However, this claim is rather obscure if we don’t know what Nietzsche means by “life,” especially as this concept pertains to *human* life. The first task, then, is to grasp how Nietzsche conceives of life and how this conception operates throughout his work. Nietzsche qualifies his understanding of the term “life” by making three distinctions: (1) “Life” must be distinguished from “nature”; (2) human and organic “life” involves evaluating, preferring, and interpreting according to vital needs and instincts; and (3) “life” is “will to power.” I will treat the three distinctions in order.
Nietzsche on the Need to Distinguish between “Nature” and “Life”

First, life must be distinguished from what Nietzsche, in Beyond Good and Evil §9, calls “nature.” “Nature” appears in the context of the passage to mean something like “nature” in the crude sense of an external “reality” or “world” that is “out there” apart from human interpretations and appropriations of it as well as apart from organic life. This is a highly subtle distinction as “nature” is sometimes used in the sense of a distinctly human or organic nature, as opposed to an external reality. As Michel Haar warns, “the world” as a “natural totality” should not be conflated with “life” as the realm of the organic, for Nietzsche rejects “the organicity of the world,” meaning that the natural totality that is “nature” (as used in BGE 9) needs to be distinguished from organic nature. Nietzsche, as he does so often, does not always signal in what sense he is using a term so that it becomes necessary to glean the sense from the context; so that, for example, in The Gay Science §109, he speaks of the necessity of naturalizing humanity whereas in Beyond Good and Evil §9, he faults the Stoics for thinking that human life could possibly be lived in accord with a “prodigal” nature.

In Beyond Good and Evil §9, Nietzsche writes of the folly and absurd pretense of wanting to “live ‘according to nature’” as the Stoics wanted to do. Nature, according to Nietzsche, is “prodigal beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without mercy or justice, at once fruitful and barren and uncertain.” Furthermore, he asks us to “think of indifference itself as a power—how could you live according to such indifference?” The point here is that ‘nature’, in being wholly indifferent, is completely devoid of purposes, of order, of aims, and of meaning—all necessary components of what it means to “live”

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for human beings. Nietzsche elaborates at *The Gay Science* §109: “The total character of the world, . . . is in all eternity chaos—in the sense not of a lack of necessity but a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms . . . it does not by any means strive to imitate man” and “None of our aesthetic and moral judgments apply to it.” In other words, there is no way to infer from *our* perception of order and purposes, from *our* interpretation of value and meaning, that “nature” or “the world” (thought as a totality) contains such attributes. On the contrary, and here is where Nietzsche diverges from Kant’s transcendental perspective, a little introspection and observation of our own lived experience testifies to the fact that nature itself possesses none of attributes that living (valuating, aestheticizing, and interpreting) beings such as ourselves instinctually need and hence impute to nature. For example, Nietzsche praises Heraclitus for trusting and accepting the “evidence of the senses because these showed plurality and change”; for, the senses “do not lie,” but it is “what we make of their evidence that first introduces a lie into it . . . In so far as the senses show becoming, passing away, change, they do not lie” (*TI*: ‘Reason’ §2). Indeed, the “total character of the world . . . is in all eternity chaos” and the “astral order” that allows for the “formation of the organic” on Earth is “an exception,” and thus, Nietzsche warns, “Let us beware of thinking that the world is a living being” (*GS* §109).

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3 Cf. Michel Haar: “the Stoic does not love the world; in his claim of a *fatum*, he asserts nothing but a series of abstractions: order, goodness, beauty, reason, providence . . . The ideal of . . . individual existence fusing with the totality, can be meaningful, according to Nietzsche, only if this totality has been stripped of its ‘moral’, i.e., anthropomorphic, attributes” (Haar 1996, 114).

4 I agree with Haar that “these two terms”—“nature” and “the world”—are “not . . . really distinguished in his [Nietzsche’s] lexicon” (Haar 1996, p. 115).
Hence, we must distinguish between the “world” or “nature” in the sense of a natural totality and “life” in the sense of the domain of the organic. Nature—i.e., the “total character of the world”—is defined as “chaos” (GS §109), and thus is “prodigal beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without aims or intentions” (BGE §9). Life, on the other hand, the domain of the organic, is defined in terms of “wanting to be other than this nature,” as a “valuating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different” that is ultimately rooted in a need, a desire, a compulsion to demand that nature “exist only after [one’s] own image” (BGE §9). Whereas chaotic “nature” is indifferent, “life” is defined by an inherent interestedness, the insatiable imposition of forms and auto-images on “nature” in an effort, a “struggle,” to assimilate and incorporate both organic and inanimate material and forces into itself.

**Defining Organic and Human Life**

If Nietzsche defines “life” as other than “nature” or “the world,” and correlatively, if “living” is “wanting to be different” than “nature” and the Stoic (as the “type” of living being in question) demands that “nature should be nature ‘according to the Stoa’,” then it is in the nature of the Stoic philosopher, as a living thing, “to prescribe your morality, your ideal, to nature, yes to nature itself, and incorporate them in it” (BGE §9)—i.e., to falsify nature and the world. The living thing falsifies nature and lives in terms of certain lies or fictions about the world it lives in (and lives upon). The honest philosopher must “recognize untruth as a condition of life” (BGE §4). The defining activity of the organic is “unjust” to nature in that it forces nature to conform to its needs, it imposes a tyrannical drive to incorporate, valuate, and limit according to the dictates of
the organism’s needs and its narrow perspective. The struggle and striving that moves and pervades the organism compels it to impose a perspectival interpretation upon the “fruitful and barren and uncertain” world, hammering order out of chaos, concentrating and molding the diffuse and changeable.

This is what Nietzsche means in the famous passage from *Twilight of the Idols*, 'How the “Real World” at last Became a Myth': The concept of the “real” world is merely the product of the imposition of an utterly ‘false’ and self-serving interpretation on chaos, on the “total character of the world” (*GS* §109), and this imposition was in turn compelled by our human, “all too human,” need to “revenge ourselves on life by means of the phantasmagoria of ‘another’, a ‘better’ life” (*TI*: ‘Reason’ §6), our need to expose nature, *this* world, the world that shows plurality and change,⁵ as a merely “apparent” world. Having traced the development and gradual devolution of the idea of a “real” world, and thereby exposing the pretension and deception behind it, Nietzsche asks, “what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? . . . But no! with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!” The only “world,” the only “nature,” that is left apart from the interpretative and falsifying imposition of perspective values and forms is a world of semblance, a world of “life-advancing, life-preserving, species-preserving” fictions (*BGE* §4).

Nietzsche makes this point abundantly clear in the passage under consideration, *Beyond Good and Evil* §9, when he writes: “Stoicism is self-tyranny—nature too can be tyrannized over: for is the Stoic not a piece of nature? . . . But this is an old and never-ending story: what formerly happened with the Stoics still happens today as soon as a

⁵ *TI*: Reason, §2.
philosophy begins to believe in itself. It always creates the world in its own image, it cannot do otherwise; philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to ‘creation of the world’, to *causa prima.*” Why is Stoicism “self-tyranny”? Precisely because it acts tyrannically by imposing its own need, its own will to power, on the world. It creates the world in the image of its own constraint and drives just as does every organism.

According to Nietzsche, the organic realm demonstrates a drive to be “different” from an indifferent natural totality, and “to live” by definition means to impose a perspective interpretation upon the inorganic world. There are several passages where Nietzsche insists on this equation of perspective and life: Perspective is “the basic condition of all life” (*BGE*: Preface). He speaks of “the perspective optics of life” (*BGE* §11) and claims that “there would be no life at all if not on the basis of perspective evaluations and appearances” (*BGE* §34). The link between the necessity of perspectival interpretation and the organism’s tyranny over nature is elaborated upon in *Genealogy of Morals*: “all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation” (*GM* II. §12). Two passages from Nietzsche’s notebooks help to make the connection between perspectival interpretation and organic life clearer. One note, written between 1885 and 1886, claims that “what is essential about organic being is a new interpretation of what happens, the perspectival” (*WLN* §1[128], p. 64). The other note (1885) states, “Men and all organic creatures have done more or less the same thing: they have arranged, thought, devised the world to fit, until they could make use of it, until it could be ‘reckoned’ with”
The organic—i.e., vital life generally—is defined by a certain tyrannical imposition of a perspectival interpretation, an order and will, on the world, on “nature.” This is the basis for the distinction between life and the world/nature: Nature is indifferent and chaotic, whereas living involves “wanting to be different” and other than nature by forcing perspective, order, values, and meaning on what does not possess such attributes.

It follows, therefore, that as a type of living thing, the human being also engages in the same tyranny of perspective (as is the case with the Stoic). Human beings are organisms, and thus they engage in the same fundamental activity of tyrannical imposition of interpretation that describes the organic. The human type of organism, however, is more complex in that it, more than any other organism, must “lie” to itself about the world. As “the basic condition of all life,” “perspective” is taken up and imposed upon the world, on existence, and upon life itself, by human beings in a decidedly distinct way from other organisms. Human beings have developed capacities and organs of interpretation that no other organisms have, such as consciousness, logic, morality, imagination, religiosity, and so on. Nietzsche is clear, however, that though human beings are different in terms of their organs and modes of the interpretation of the world, all of these seemingly distinctly human phenomena are derived from and subject to the very same impulse, needs, and processes that drive the organic as such. Speaking of that most distinctive of human capacities (according to Descartes and certain idealists)—consciousness—Nietzsche writes, “Consciousness is the last and latest development of the organic” (GS §11), and “the greater part of conscious thinking must
still be counted among the instinctive activities,” with these “instinctive activities” merely obeying “physiological demands for the preservation of a certain species of life” (BGE §3). In a passage from his 1885 notebooks, Nietzsche helpfully elaborates on the organic necessities that drive consciousness: “in our conscious mind there must be above all a drive to exclude, to chase away, a selecting drive—which allows only certain facts to be presented to it. Consciousness is the hand with which the organism reaches out the furthest: it must be a firm hand” (WLN §34[131], p. 9). In other words, consciousness is a product of instinctual interpretations. Just as the artist selects, excludes, and imposes an image, tone, color, line, etc., on the narrow aspect of the world that she or he is painting, so too is consciousness driven by the same impulse to interpretation, to tyranny, that drives the organic. This prompts the question: If consciousness (and in fact, all human capacities and powers) is traceable to the same tyrannical drive to imposition, interpretation, and incorporation as all other organic functions, then how can Nietzsche criticize certain (dominant) interpretations (i.e., Western Christian-moral) and praise others (pre-Socratic Greeks; Goethe)?

Nietzsche’s answer takes the form of a critique of those features of life and world that are excluded and selected, and why. That is, what need compels certain types of human beings to select one feature of life and reject another? What relationship to life does this interpretation and valuation bespeak? Over time, Nietzsche thinks, Western humanity has come to be defined by the compulsion to exclude those features of the world and of life that cause them pain and suffering and to select and invent features that sooth, placate, and promise peace from the vicissitudes of organic existence. Gradually
Western humanity became all but unable to incorporate the painful, harmful, and tragic elements of life—the very elements that, as Nietzsche tells us, are essential to growth and health—into our interpretation of the world. Those organic instincts to be different or other than a chaotic and indifferent nature become reactive and closed off to the very demands of vital life, as painful as those demands may be to undergo. Yet, this is what the flourishing and enhancement of life demands, it is precisely the ability—nay, the need, the instinct—to incorporate, select, and assimilate the ‘tragic’, painful, even chaotic elements of life, that is the mark of a healthy and strong will to further humanity. This is what Zarathustra means by remaining faithful to the earth, and it is what is involved in restoring a vital trust in life. Life is interpreting and incorporating what is different, and ultimately indifferent; however, life is also a kind of striving, and this striving is itself produced by what Nietzsche names the “will to power”. It is to the topic of the will to power as the basis for both organic life and inorganic world that I will now turn.

The Will to Power and Life

No single idea in all of Nietzsche’s thought has created as much of a stir as the “will to power.” Many, following Heidegger, see it as the central and defining moment of Nietzsche’s thought, the basis of his philosophy (or metaphysics, as Heidegger would have it). Others, noting that the “will to power” is never used in a consistent manner throughout Nietzsche’s published works, dismiss it as an aberration or as an illogical and incoherent concept or as a failed thought experiment.

What is clear is that Nietzsche does not mean by ‘will’ anything like a unified cause or faculty of a human subject. “Willing seems to me to be above all something
complicated, something that is a unity only as a word” (BGE §19). Nietzsche wields his concept of the will to power as a weapon against the traditional metaphysical conceptions of reality and the self. Philosophers, Nietzsche notes, “are give to speaking of the will as if it were the best-known thing in the world,” when in fact, “[w]illing seems to me to be above all something complicated, something that is a unity only as a word” (BGE §19).

In other words, as he so often does, Nietzsche blames the falsifying and prejudicial nature of language for conceiving of the will as a known (or “knowable,” at any rate) substance, a given (see *TI*: ‘Reason’ 7).

Nietzsche proceeds to offer a kind of phenomenological description of what occurs when we “will” in BGE §19; observing, first of all, that “in all willing there is . . . a plurality of sensations”: “[1] the sensation of the condition we leave, [2] the sensation of the condition towards which we go, [3] the sensation of this ‘leaving’ and ‘going’ itself, and then also [4] an accompanying muscular sensation.” Secondly, these sensations (of which Nietzsche describes four), now called “feelings,” are themselves accompanied by a certain “commanding thought” (what Kant might call the “maxim” of the will, or subjective principle on which one acts). Thirdly, “will is not only a complex of feeling and thinking, but above all an affect: and in fact the affect of command.” It seems that what Nietzsche has just described is the feeling of success, the feeling of superior command over something, that is the basis of the many sensations and complex feelings and thoughts that are named by one term, “the will”. This helps to explain why the idea of the “free will” is so powerful and apparently real, precisely because it is “essentially the affect of superiority over him who must obey: ‘I am free, “he” must obey’—this
consciousness adheres to every will.” But notice the implied duality here. On the one hand, when one exercises “free will,” one feels real in the sense that an ego, an “I,” commanded an it or he or she that is external to the ego and separate from the “I.” The very “man who wills—commands something in himself which obeys or which he believes obeys” and yet, in actuality, “we at the same time command and obey.” It is our “habit of disregarding and deceiving ourselves over this duality by means of the synthetic concept ‘I’” that results in a “whole chain of erroneous conclusions” about the will.

“Freedom of the will,” Nietzsche concludes, “is the expression of pleasure of the person who wills, who commands and at the same time identifies himself with the executor of the command—who as such also enjoys the triumph over resistances involved” and the accompanying “sensation of power which all success brings with it.” Furthermore, “He who wills adds in this way the sensations of pleasure of the successful executive agents, the serviceable ‘under-wills’ or under-souls—for our body is only a social structure composed of many souls—to his sensations of pleasure as commander.”

The experience of willing and acting upon the dictates of the will amounts to experiencing feelings and sensations, but especially the affects, that accompany commanding and obeying. Additionally, if the body is a social structure composed of many “wills”—commanders and executors—as Nietzsche suggests, then the consciousness of having willed a given action is a late side-effect of a few pre-conscious components and structures: (1) the complex of sensations, feelings, and thoughts

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6 See Nietzsche BGE §21: “It is we alone who have fabricated causes, succession, reciprocity, relativity, compulsion, number, law, freedom, motive purpose; and when we falsely introduce this world of symbols into things and mingle it with them as though this symbol-world were an ‘in-itself’, we once more behave as we have always behaved, namely, mythologically. ‘Unfree will’ is mythology: in real life it is only a question of strong and weak wills.”
surrounding the phenomenon of “willing” are rooted in a primordial affect, the “affect of command”; (2) a hierarchical chain of command among commanding and obeying wills; (3) a certain organization and relationship among the various “wills” that compose a body (whether physical or social); and finally, as Nietzsche suggests, (4) a kind of “morality” that is in play within the social structure, a “morality understood as the theory of the relations of dominance under which the phenomenon ‘life’ arises.” This last feature of Nietzsche’s description of the phenomenon of “willing” in BGE 19, that the activity of “willing” is grounded in the relations of dominance that define life, is essential to the connection between his theory of the will to power and the determinative function it plays with regard to life.

That the will to power is determinative of life for Nietzsche is evidenced in several passages throughout his published writings (not to mention the multitude of passages dealing with this idea in the unpublished notebooks). Zarathustra associates the “will to power” with “the unexhausted procreative will of life,” and, as he further explains, “Where I found the living, there I found will to power; and even in the will of those who serve I found the will to be master . . . Only where there is life is there also will: not will to life but—thus I teach you—will to power” (TSZ II, ‘Self-Overcoming’). This passage indicates that, against Schopenhauer, the will that characterizes life is not “will to life,” but “will to power” which, confusingly, Zarathustra had just identified with “the unexhausted procreative will of life.” Recall Nietzsche’s claim about the phenomenon of willing in Beyond Good and Evil §19: that willing is grounded in an affect of command. Here he extends the analysis of will in terms of obeying and
commanding to will to power understood as a “will to be master”. If life expresses will to power in all things and events, then all living is motivated by a will to be master, to command, to overcome (indeed, the entire section. entitled ‘On Self-Overcoming’, is about “overcoming”). This understanding of will to power as a will to overcome, to gain mastery, is further clarified at *Beyond Good and Evil* §13, where Nietzsche writes, “A living thing desires above all to vent its strength—life as such is will to power.” So, life is to be understood in terms of will to power, which itself is understood as a “will to be master,” the will behind a living thing’s “desire to vent its strength.” A desire to vent one’s strength seems to mean an impulse or will to expend energy or force over or upon something external to the organism. However, as *Beyond Good and Evil* §19 made clear, Nietzsche does not think of an organism as a unitary “thing”, as a single, self-same substance that engages in relations with other “things” and substances. Rather, the body itself is a “social structure” composed of many “souls” or “wills.” Hence, the organism itself is a product of a struggle among a multitude of wills, each of which wants to become master over the others. Will to power is not just a theory of *external* “relations of dominance” among life-forms, but of processes and dynamics of power *internal* to organisms as such. Further clarification can be gained from an examination of *Beyond Good and Evil* §259.

In *BGE* §259, Nietzsche is examining the democratic assumption that “the fundamental principle of society” is grounded in the imperative to “refrain from mutual injury, mutual violence, mutual exploitation.” Such an assumption is an indication of the “will to the denial of life” for within one “body” politic, this mutual suspension of
aggression may be possible in the name of gathering power in order that it may dominate and exploit other societies (social bodies). “Even that body within which, as was previously assumed, individuals treat one another as equals—this happens in every healthy aristocracy—must, if it is a living and not a decaying body, itself do all that to other bodies which the individuals within it refrain from doing to one another.” Why must a social body (one that is “living” at any rate) violate the (moral) assumption of the social contract theorists? Because the fundamental principle of society—the will that governs the formation of a social body—is the same as that which governs all of life: the will to power. As Nietzsche elaborates, “it will have to be the will to power incarnate, it will want to grow, expand, draw to itself, gain ascendancy—not out of any morality or immorality, but because it lives, and because life is will to power.” The features of growth, expansion, assimilation, and overcoming in which the will to power is recognized, are the same features that characterize life itself. For, according to Nietzsche, “life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and, at the least and mildest, exploitation” (see also AC §6). Such features ought not to be moralized in the traditional moral sense, so that they can be thereby condemned. Rather, any of the characteristics of life offered in Nietzsche’s list, “pertains to the essence of the living thing as a fundamental organic function, it is a consequence of the intrinsic will to power which is precisely the will of life.”

What does all of this mean for Nietzsche’s understanding of life? First, it implies that life is not to be understood as a static totality nor that an organism is to be understood
as a substance, but rather as a continually developing process of external and internal relations among constitutive forces. Second, every organism strives to express its strength or power over and against others—hence, life is “essentially” appropriation, exploitation, incorporation, and imposition of one’s own forms. The latter attribute of the living thing is the principle behind the organic need to impose an interpretation (i.e., one’s own, perspectival, form) upon the “world.” Nietzsche’s characterization of living as wanting to be other than a purposeless, meaningless, and formless “nature,” necessitating the imposition of an individual perspective upon this nature in accordance with fundamental needs—this is now explained in terms of the primordial mechanism of the will to power at work in and through life. Thirdly, the picture of organic life that Nietzsche paints is based on relations between forces—internal and external to the organism. Reality is explained, not in terms of unchanging and eternal “atoms” operating in accordance with a pre-established mechanism, but rather “the real” is a temporary constellation of forces-in-relation, a constellation that emerges on the basis of the will to power. Finally, life operates according to the will to power and the will to power constitutes a kind of primordial affectivity. In order to understand how life is based upon affectivity, we must turn to the crucial passage at BGE §36.

In this passage, Nietzsche asks us to assume that “nothing is ‘given’ as real except our world of desires and passions, that we can rise or sink to no other ‘reality’ than the reality of our drives.” Here Nietzsche is asserting that we can access no reality “out there” or “in here” except for the activities and events of desires, passions, emotions, and drives—i.e., the affects. Of course, what is interesting is that it seems that the “reality” of
our drives and passions is a felt reality, an affective reality, not an objective fact or ontological given. And, in fact, this interpretation of Nietzsche’s rather startling claim is supported by the following appeal to a kind of thought experiment (which Nietzsche thinks is demanded by a certain “conscience of method”): “is it not permitted to make the experiment and ask the question whether this which is given does not suffice for an understanding even of the so-called mechanical (or ‘material’) world?” It seems that even the “so-called mechanical (or ‘material’) world”—i.e., the inorganic—may be intelligible only as a kind of affective reality.

According to this “thought-experiment,” then, “mechanical” or “material” or “external” reality possesses “the same degree of reality as our emotions themselves.” By analogy, then, Nietzsche thinks that we can consider the material world “as a more primitive form of the world of emotions in which everything still lies locked in mighty unity and then branches out and develops in the organic process (also, as is only fair, is made weaker and more sensitive), as a kind of instinctual life in which all organic functions, together with self-regulation, assimilation, nourishment, excretion, metabolism, are still synthetically bound together—as an antecedent form of life?” At a minimum, Nietzsche is arguing that outer/external reality can be understood by analogy with the inner/internal reality of our affective life. His claim is much stronger however, for he declares that “it is not merely permitted to make this experiment: it is commanded by the conscience of method.” Hence, the claim is that all things and events in the world are synthetically bound together just as emotions pull together disparate sensations, body parts, thoughts, etc. and direct them toward one overall mood or feeling that affects and
saturates the entire organism. The organic process, then, develops out of this original bound-togetherness or integrative synthesis as an extension of it, but also in one direction and always in relation to another thing or event. To this point, then, Nietzsche has constrained the given to affective “reality” (inner and outer) and now he will elaborate, insisting that “one must venture the hypothesis that wherever ‘effects’ are recognized [i.e., events, things, movement, thoughts], will is operating upon will--and that all mechanical occurrences, in so far as a force is active in them, are force of will, effects of will.” In order to understand Nietzsche’s argument here, it helps to break it down into distinct steps as follows:

(1) If we recognize will as efficient—that is, that will causes effects, then we must posit the causality of the will as the only form of causality.

(2) (Assertion): Will can “of course” operate only on will.

Why is (2) necessary? Because by asserting (1) it follows that if X “operates” on or “moves” Y, then (1a) both X and Y must be “wills” due to the fact that only will can cause anything (any change?).

(3) On the basis of (1) and (2), it must be the case that “wherever ‘effects’ are recognized, will is operating upon will.”

(4) Given (3), all so-called “mechanical” occurrences and events in the world, “insofar” as a force of any kind is active in these occurrences, must be forces of will, “effects of will”.
(5) Our entire instinctual life (which is, as N. asserts at the beginning of this passage, all that is “‘given’ as real”) can be explained as the development and emergence of one basic form of will: *Will to power*.

(6) All organic functions (such as nourishment and procreation) can be explained as the development and growth of one basic form of will: will to power.

(7) If (5) and (6) are granted alongside (1) and (4), then it follows that *all* efficient force/causality is will to power. I.e., everything that “happens” (events) or “is” (things, occurrences) is an effect of will to power.

(8) Thus, if we were to describe the world from within, as parts and operatives of the world (hence, the givenness of our desires and affects), then all that is “intelligible” about the world is “will to power.”

To put Nietzsche’s conclusion (#8 above) in his own words: “The world seen from within, the world described and defined according to its ‘intelligible character’—it would be ‘will to power’ and nothing else.” This is a particularly strong statement about the character of the world and Nietzsche is often accused of violating his own critical approach toward traditional metaphysics. However, one need not read this as an ontological claim if, as Nietzsche insists, this is both an *interpretation* (hence, perspectival) and an observation-based *approximation* on the basis of what is “‘given’ as real” to the human organism: namely, *affectivity*. Notice that this interpretation, this “theory”, is faithful to life in that (i) it refuses to split the world in two, an apparent and a ‘real’ world; (ii) it strives to affirm vital processes and demands rather than interpret them
as insufferable and “immoral”; and (iii) it accounts for the diversity, plurality, and change that life shows.

*The Body as the Point of Engagement with Life*

Nietzsche’s account of the world in terms of will to power in the passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* §36 is extrapolated from his description of the affects (desires, passions, drives, and emotions). At the most basic level, the site of affective engagement in the human organism is the body. It is the body that marks the original site of an organism’s relationship with life, the locus where the organic functions—assimilation, incorporation, nutrition, metabolism, and exploitation—are affected by and consequently respond to vital demands (all of which can be characterized as “power-demands”).

Nietzsche stresses the importance of the body as the ground and starting point for thought in a passage from his notebooks: “Essential to start from the body and use it as a guiding thread. It is the far richer phenomenon, and can be observed more distinctly. Belief in the body is better established than belief in the mind” (*WLN* §40[15], p. 43). Why should we begin with the body and what does this more distinctly observable phenomenon show us? “Starting point the body and physiology: why? –What we gain is the right idea of the nature of our subject-unity—namely as rulers at the head of a commonwealth, not as ‘souls’ or ‘life forces’—and likewise the right idea of these rulers’ dependence on the ruled and on those conditions of order of rank and division of labor which make possible both the individual and the whole” (*WLN* §40[21], p. 43). So, again, Nietzsche traces the phenomenon of the body to will to power, just as Zarathustra anchors all “spiritual” phenomena to the body. “The body is a great reason, a plurality with one sense, a war and
a peace, a herd and a shepherd, An instrument of your body is also your little reason, my
brother, which you call ‘spirit’—a little instrument and toy of your great reason . . . The
creative body created the spirit as a hand for its will” (TSZ I, ‘On the Despisers of the
Body’). If it is true that “spiritual” phenomena (consciousness, intellect, and existential
meaning) are an extension of the body, and if the body is the originary site of relational
engagement with vital demands and process, then it would seem that trust in life as an
existential phenomenon is itself an extension of embodied life (which is itself based in
will to power). In other words, a trust in life that remains faithful to the earth is a trust
that is rooted in the vital life and processes of the body.

To put it more succinctly: According to Nietzsche, the body ought to be the
starting point for any philosophical examination of meaning, values, sense, thought, or
culture. The body is the primary site of our relationship with life and as such, the body
constitutes the primary conduit through which vital affects and forces pass, accumulate,
and direct engagement. The body is the “great reason” precisely because it is the
directing, experiencing, and valuating source of all meaning, purpose, and value in life.
The body is, of course, confined to a place, to a moment, at all times. A body inhabits a
vital place—or, as Nietzsche would have it, a dynamic position defined by the influence
of power demands, by responses to the vital demands that the body encounters as it
inhabits life. Thus, certain limitations of time, space, environment, action, possibility, are
imposed upon the body. The body, it might be said, is defined by its responses and its
responsivity to life’s demands. To put this in Nietzschean terms, the body is the ground
of our existence insofar as it is the site of the affective events that determine “reality” for
us”, and it is the “life-conditioning emotions” and affects that “must fundamentally and essentially be present in the total economy of life, [and] consequently, must be heightened further if life is to be heightened further” (BGE §23). All values, evaluative judgments, all sense and meaning, “in short, moralities too are only a sign-language of the emotions” (BGE 187), and Nietzsche asserts that “life itself evaluates through us when we establish values” (TI: ‘Morality’ 5). Life evaluates through us in the sense that the affects produce, direct, and impose values—i.e., interpretations—in accordance with and in response to the “power demands” of life (as will to power).

Though much more remains to be said regarding this idea, it appears that, on a Nietzschean view, the body is the site of affective engagement with life, a locus of receptivity to vital demands. Since life is will to power, then the will to power is the ground of the pre-conscious bodily and affective interpretations of life that ultimately determine values and meaning for human beings. The will to power is manifest in the feeling of power, of “intoxication,” that both enables and is product of the imposition of will over some obstacle or other. The fateful paradox of this picture is the fact that the human organism can, in a condition of diminished affectivity and devitalization, turn against life, against the feelings of vitality, and against the body, by expressing will to power against itself and against the conditions for its own flourishing. Such is the case with those who have a pathological trust in life, those who trust in the antithesis of life and thus feel life to be painful suffering and a great evil. For such decadents, as Nietzsche refers to them, vulnerability to vital demands and forces can only be painful and burdensome, and rather than affirming such vulnerability and harnessing the vital affects

7 See BGE §36.
for creation, the decadent will seek peaceful, devitalized states of being, actively
desensitizing itself to life and creating a purely spiritual, disembodied realm in contrast.
Because the decadent feels this world and this life to be painful, he or she places trust in
an ideal secure and safe world in which to anchor existential meaning. A life-affirming
“free spirit,” on the other hand, feels assured and secured by the feeling of life that he or
she experiences in a bodily way, and though Nietzsche’s “free spirit” feels life through
the body, this vital affect can and is frequently incorporated and transformed into a
“spiritual” meaning and sense of existence. Vital trust, as the trust in life characteristic of
a Nietzschean life-affirmer, is an affective condition of affirmation: affirmation of the
feeling of being upheld by and grounded in an intimate relationship with life, affirmation
of one’s vulnerability to vital demands and affects and the need to open oneself up to
such affects (no matter how painful), affirmation of a this-worldly, earthly orientation
toward life rather than denial and negation of it.

At this juncture, it is necessary to reiterate the fact that Nietzsche himself never
explicitly discusses the concept of vital trust being developed here. However, given his
insistence that “trust in life” is necessary for human existence, it is possible to extrapolate
a positive concept of trust, vital trust, from Nietzsche’s work. Central to this notion of
vital trust are Nietzsche’s claims about the primacy of the will to power, affectivity, and
the body.

I have shown that Nietzsche insists that life commands and affects us in numerous
ways. Human beings, however, experience vital demands on another level: that of a
higher meaning and overall purpose to existence. Hence vital demand can be sublimated
and transformed into an existential demand. For at the vital level, the body is affected by countless forces and processes. We could be said to “suffer” then, in the sense of being acted upon and affected by vital forces, both internal and external, and by processes over which we have no control.

At the level of existence, on the other hand, Nietzsche thinks that human beings suffer from life somewhat differently. At this level, being given over to life is experienced as demanding that we justify or give an account of ourselves in terms of meaning, purpose, and value. In On The Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche writes, “man was surrounded by a fearful void—he did not know how to account for, to affirm himself; he suffered from the problem of his meaning . . . Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does not repudiate suffering as such; he desires it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a purpose of suffering” (GM III, 28). Nietzsche’s claim here relates to the idea of trust that is found in Plato’s Phaedo (see Chapter I) in that he indicates that human beings cannot be satisfied with the mere fact of being alive, but need to respond to this fact as a demand for meaning in existence. Thus our being-given-over-to life affects us as an existential demand, as being entrusted to life for a purpose that is more than the mere activity of living.

To affirm vital trust is to cultivate one’s vulnerable openness in such a way as to incorporate the conditions of vitality (e.g, the senses, instincts, drives, body, will to power) into one’s practices, goals, ideals, values, and views of the world, self, and others. This is part of the meaning of Zarathustra’s demand to “remain faithful to the earth”; and one of the most effective and potent means of fulfilling this demand is through a specific
A Dionysian religiosity is the mark of a will strong and powerful enough to religiously affirm and even will the uncertainty, contingency, suffering, and tragic nature of life.

Now, religiosity is a specific mode of response to life and vital conditions, but it is a response that sublimates or spiritualizes the vital modes of inhabiting our “place” in life through trust. Specifically, religiosity involves taking up our de facto vulnerable openness and groundedness into a certain way of existing and mode of valuation. I will explore two basic features of a life-affirming “Dionyan” religiosity: 1) Its “affective affect” of gratitude for life and self; 2) Its active power of deification and sacralization of vital forces to the point of affirming the total character of life.

**Dionysian Religiosity as the Culmination of Vital Trust**

So, how does Nietzsche conceive of a “Dionysian” religiosity that “remains faithful to the earth,” that constitutes a vital and healthy response to the demand of life as it takes up and strengthens vital trust?

Nietzsche’s fascination with Dionysus goes as far back in his published works as *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Writing retrospectively about *The Birth of Tragedy* in his last published piece *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche claims that one of “the decisive innovations” of this book is “its understanding of the Dionysian phenomenon among the Greeks;” for, with this work, he “became the first to comprehend the wonderful phenomenon of the Dionysian,” the Greek symbol in which the “ultimate limit of affirmation is attained” and the means by which “the Greeks got over their pessimism” and by which they “overcame it” (*EH*, ‘BT’ §§1-2). As the “one root of the whole of Greek art,” the Dionysian
phenomenon provided the “formula for the highest affirmation, born of fullness, of overfullness, a Yes-saying without reservation, even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything that is questionable and strange in existence”; a formula that “requires courage” that must be derived from “an excess of strength” on the part of the Greeks (ibid.).

Thus, the Greeks provided the means by which to revalue decadence values and overcome the nihilism of Christianity: “Nothing in existence may be subtracted, nothing is dispensable—those aspects of existence which Christians and other nihilists repudiate are actually on an infinitely higher level in the order of rank among values than that which the instinct of decadence could approve and call good” (EH, ‘BT’ §2).

One of the specific characteristics of this ancient Dionysian religiosity that Nietzsche zeroes in on is described in Beyond Good and Evil §46: “What astonishes one about the religiosity of the ancient Greeks is the tremendous amount of gratitude that emanates from it—the kind of man who stands thus before nature and before life is a very noble one!—Later, when the rabble came to predominate in Greece, fear also overran religion; and Christianity was preparing itself.” Here Nietzsche directs attention to a life-affirming feature of any healthy religiosity: The stance of gratitude towards life and vital conditions. The same vital conditions that are experienced as painful and harmful, as sources of suffering, by Christianity—life as “appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker . . . incorporation and, at the least and mildest, exploitation” (BGE §259)—are precisely those conditions for which the Greeks felt thankful and celebrated religiously.
Gratitude is also identified with an affect or vital feeling, what Nietzsche calls “affirmative affects” and describes in his *Will to Power* notebooks §1033: “pride, joy, health, love of the sexes, enmity and war, reverence, beautiful gestures and manners, strong will, the discipline of high spirituality, will to power, gratitude towards earth and life—everything that is rich and desires to bestow and that replenishes and gilds and immortalizes and deifies life—the whole force of *transfiguring* virtues, everything that declares good and affirms in word and deed.” These affirmative affects produce an overabundance of energies, a rich fecundity of will and spirit, so powerful that life itself is transfigured and celebrated as divine.\(^8\) In response to the powerful and painful vital affects, i.e., in cultivating their openness toward the demands of vital life, the Greeks, as opposed to Christianity, directed their “idealistic tendency precisely toward the passions and loved, elevated, gilded, and deified them,” for the affirmative affects, the passions, “made them feel not only happier but also purer and more divine” (*GS* §139). The Greeks *deified* the vital, active forces, the “animal,” within them as an act of gratitude for and celebration of their own nature, of their own vital strength.\(^9\)

We see here one of the features of a religiosity that “remains faithful to the earth”: The way in which one’s vulnerable openness to vital affects can be actively affirmed and fostered into an intense feeling of gratitude for life.

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\(^8\) In *WP* §1047 [1887-88], Nietzsche writes, “Sexuality, the lust to rule, pleasure in appearance and deception, great and joyful gratitude for life and its typical states—these are of the essence of the pagan cults and have a good conscience on their side.—Unnaturalness (already in Greek antiquity) fights against the pagan, as morality, as dialectic.”

\(^9\) Nietzsche sensed that the decisive feature of the Greek religiosity was the concept of a god or gods made to *reflect* their own image, to mirror their own will to power: “There is in fact no other alternative for Gods: *either* they are the will to power . . . *or else* the impotence for power” (*AC* §16).
In the Greek form of religiosity, Nietzsche discovered the manifestation of a will to power strong and sure enough to deify both itself and life out of a feeling of overflowing gratitude towards life. In GS 370, Nietzsche strongly suggests that any healthy and vital religiosity will involve two essential elements of life-affirmation: (a) “the desire for destruction, change, and becoming” that is an “expression of an overflowing energy that is pregnant with future,” and (b) a “will to immortalize” that is “prompted by gratitude and love” for life, an “art of apotheoses.” This passage indicates that Nietzsche sought to fuse both the creative desire for becoming with the creative desire for being into a vital form of religiosity that combines the power of apotheosis and deification with the joyous affirmation of destruction, change, and becoming. Because life always has, and always will, involve struggle and growth, and thus always “presuppose[s] suffering and sufferers,” then the essential difference, Nietzsche claims, is found in the manner in which the sufferer takes up this suffering and in what direction the will creates, toward life or against it. I have shown that, for Nietzsche, there are the strong, healthy types of sufferers, those who “suffer from the over-fullness of life” and they “want a Dionysian art and likewise a tragic view of life, a tragic insight”; and there are the weak, decadent types of sufferers, or “those who suffer from the impoverishment

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10 The relation of this pagan, Greek religiosity to the creation of its gods bears a close resemblance to the compulsion and characteristics of the artist described in II, where Nietzsche explains that intoxication is the necessary condition for artistic creation: “In this condition one enriches everything out of one’s own abundance: what one sees, what one desires, one sees swollen, pressing, strong, overladen with energy. The man in this condition transforms things until they mirror his power—until they are reflections of his perfection” (‘Expeditions’ 9). ‘Intoxication’ is closely related to the ‘richness’ and intensity of feeling discussed earlier. Nietzsche defines the essence “the intoxication of the will, the intoxication of an overloaded and distended will” as “the feeling of plenitude and increased energy. From out of this feeling one gives to things, one compels them to take, one rapes them—one calls this procedure idealizing” (II, ‘Expeditions’ 8).
of life and seek rest, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and knowledge” (GS 370)\(^{11}\)

Nietzsche conceives of his Dionysian religiosity in terms of the vitality and strength of will necessary to sublimate one’s vital affects into gratitude and to transform all of life, especially its vital conditions of becoming, change, and suffering, into something divine and holy. Furthermore, Nietzsche argues that this form of religiosity is so powerful and life-affirming that it can sanctify the total character of life to the point of affirming eternal recurrence, “for ‘everything perfect, divine, eternal’ also compels a faith in the ‘eternal recurrence’” (WP §55).

Speaking of the ancient Dionysian cults in Twilight of the Idols (‘Ancients’ §4), Nietzsche claims that “the fundamental fact of the Hellenic instinct” was “its will to life.” The Dionysian mystery rites guaranteed its participants “[e]ternal life, the eternal recurrence of life; the future promised and consecrated in the past; the triumphant Yes to life beyond death and change; true life as collective continuation of life through procreation, through the mysteries of sexuality.” The Dionysian mysteries functioned as a religious celebration of life, of the eternal continuation of life realized in sexual procreation.

\(^{11}\) In his description of the psychological and physiological condition of the ‘Dionysian’ sufferer, Nietzsche explicitly draws an analogy with the divine: “He that is richest in the fullness of life, the Dionysian god and man, cannot only afford the sight of the terrible and questionable but even the terrible deed and any luxury of destruction, decomposition, and negation. In his case, what is evil, absurd, and ugly seems, as it were, permissible, owing to an excess of procreating, fertilizing energies that can still turn any desert into lush farmland” (GS 370). The ‘Dionysian’ type is ‘rich’ and ‘over-full’ with vitality; their ‘tragic’ view of existence not only takes in the sight of “the terrible and questionable,” but even enacts it in deeds. The vital energies, the feeling of plenitude, the strong drives, of the Dionysian are discharged in the form of the negation of ‘otherworldly’ comfort and the destruction of all means of weakness. Thus, Nietzsche likens the Dionysian type to a ‘god’: one who creates and recreates anew out of an excess of energy and gratitude for life.
The Dionysian spirit affirmed the *duration* of life “beyond death and change,” and death and change were themselves affirmed as part of the *total* character of life itself. The symbol of sexuality was venerated as representative of the most profound meaning of life—“Every individual detail in the act of procreation, pregnancy, birth, awoke the most exalted and solemn feelings” (*TI*, ‘Ancients’ §4)—for procreation is the participation of the finite, mortal, human creature in the infinite, eternal, and continual *process* of life. Thus, the Dionysian mysteries taught that the future is guaranteed and bought *only* through pain and suffering, and further—that this pain is to be *sanctified* and *joyously affirmed* as part of life itself. “In the teachings of the mysteries, *pain* is sanctified: the ‘pains of childbirth’ sanctify pain in general—all becoming and growing, all that guarantees the future, *postulates* pain” (*TI*, ‘Ancients’ §4).¹² Pain, suffering, agony in growth—all flourishing and future are postulated upon these as eternal necessities, as the law of life, as part of the eternal joy of creating, the *religious* affirmation of the will to life.

The sanctification of pain, the celebration of sexual procreation, the joy of creation through destruction, the unconditional will to life, all of this, claims Nietzsche, “is contained in the word: Dionysos”. The “symbolism of the Dionysian” is the highest *deification* and joyous affirmation of the “profoundest instinct of life, the instinct for the future of life, for the eternity of life” (*TI*, Ancients, §4).¹³ Nietzsche, therefore, found the

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¹² “For the eternal joy in creating to exist, for the will to life eternally to affirm itself, the ‘torment of childbirth’ must also exist eternally” (*TI*, Ancients 4).

¹³ Nietzsche perceived that the tragic feeling developed out of the fertile ground of the Dionysian condition: “Affirmation of life even in its strangest and sternest problems, the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the *sacrifice* of its highest types—that is what I called Dionysian” (*TI*: “Ancients,” §5). Hence, tragedy does not represent an “effort to get rid of pity and terror, [to] purify
highest affirmation of life among the Greeks, as the Dionysian condition of their will and religiosity. The Greeks, according to Nietzsche, embodied a will to life and strove to realize and affirm the truth of existence in themselves through the religious practice of Dionysian mysteries and rites that sanctified life, that celebrated the necessity of sacrifice and the whim of fate, culminating in the deification of this tragic principle as the god “Dionysos.”

What is this Dionysian religiosity that Nietzsche has described but the ultimate affirmation of trust in life—of vital trust as affirmation of life? Capable of inhabiting the primordial “place” of trust in life by affirming our openness and vulnerability to change, fate, and pain? Able to affirm our dynamic situatedness within life by actively striving to take up a healthy stance toward ourselves as a fecund site where vital processes and potent affects gather only to be discharged as creative acts of will? In sharp contrast to life-denying religions, a vital, Dionsyian religiosity affirms the body as a holy site and means whereby we participate in and partake of the organic and inevitable, yet sacred and divine, process of birth, growth, decay, and death.

Life needs no salvation or redemption, but the human being does need life to be redeemed and one’s trust in life sanctified. The religious affirmation of life is the highest form of such redemption as it sanctifies, glorifies, and divinizes the whole of life; spiritualizing the vital drives and instincts out of gratitude. For Nietzsche, then, the ultimate form of affirming our vital trust, the strongest and healthiest response to life’s

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oneself of a dangerous emotion through its vehement discharge;” rather, it derives from the Dionysian desire to “realize in oneself the eternal joy of becoming—that joy which also encompasses joy in destruction” (TI: “Ancients” §5)—i.e., to become divine, to take the eternal process of life into oneself, to become the truth that is named ‘Dionysus’.
demand, is a kind of “joyous and trusting fatalism” that he identifies with Dionysian
religiosity: “A spirit thus emancipated stands in the midst of the universe with a joyful
and trusting fatalism, in the faith that only what is separate and individual may be
rejected, that in the totality everything is redeemed and affirmed—he no longer denies . .
. But such a faith is the highest of all possible faiths: I have baptized it with the name
Dionysos” (TI ‘Expeditions’ §49).
CHAPTER SEVEN:
TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF TRUST AS AN EXISTENTIAL MOOD

What is familiar means what we are used to so that we no longer marvel at it, our everyday, some rule in which we are stuck, anything at all in which we feel at home. [...] What is familiar is what we are used to; and what we are used to is most difficult to ‘know’—that is, to see as a problem; that is, to see as strange . . .

—Nietzsche, Gay Science, §355

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.)

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §129

To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust.

—Henry David Thoreau, Walden

The phenomenon of trust touches upon almost every aspect of human life. Yet, trust is so familiar and pervasive that it remains implicit and hidden for the most part. We all seem to know what trust is, but when asked to define or explain it, the phenomenon of trust becomes evasive and slippery to thought, and words fail. As Nietzsche and Wittgenstein intimate in the quotes above, precisely because a phenomenon like trust is

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1 Thoreau (1904): p. 35.
so familiar and ubiquitous, it is hard to notice or grasp. One even suspects that trust is familiarity itself, the sense of the familiar in our lives. Quite apart from how pervasive it is, however, can we truly say with Wittgenstein that trust one of those simple and familiar things that are “most important for us”?

Without a doubt, trust plays an important and vital role in our lives. We say that trust defines our closest friendships, that it binds two lovers together in intimacy, and that trust infuses familial ties with strength. We trust complete strangers to dispose of our trash, to drive the bus that takes us to work everyday, to protect our investments, and so on and so forth. We can think of the constant need to trust in the testimony of others, of experts, and the vital role that such trust plays in enabling scientific research and creating a community of researchers. Trust also undergirds social communities. At the same time, we recognize that a betrayal of trust corrodes, even destroys, the fabric of these relationships. As Sissela Bok writes, “trust in some degree of veracity functions as a foundation of relations among human beings; when this trust shatters or wears away, institutions collapse.”² What about the role of trust in non-interpersonal relationships? Does it play an important role there? In a most basic sense, our ability to navigate fluidly in physical space and the relative ease with which we engage with things in a sensible world, is evidence of a certain implicit trust in our bodies, senses, and habits, without which physical agency and movement would be impossible. Indeed, a life without trust would not be a human life. Hence, there seems to be something at least intuitively true

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with Bok’s claim that “Whatever matters to human beings, trust is the atmosphere in which it thrives.”\footnote{Bok (1978), p. 31. Note: Commenting on this passage, Annette Baier notes that there are many cases in which it would be right to say that what thrives and what matters in certain relationships of trust ought not to be encouraged to thrive. Instances of exploitation and manipulation are cases in point (Baier 1995, p. 95).}

There appears to be occasion here for an objection: Though there may be countless examples and instances of the way in which trust operates in the background of our interactions, understanding, and relationships, it is nevertheless true that, for all the examples of trust that could be cited, a counter-example of the betrayal or illegitimacy of that trust could be offered. As a matter of fact, in our everyday experience, it is often the case that trust only shows up in its absence, so to speak—when trust has been betrayed. When someone betrays our trust, the dependence of the essential attributes of the relationship on trust are suddenly exposed and open to harm, and at its extreme, such exposure can result in the relationship becoming distrustful. Why is it that, by and large, the issue of trust only enters consciousness and the domain of judgment and decision when it is betrayed, when the circumstances of a relationship are altered in such a way as to bring trust to mind, or when the nature of trust is made a subject of deliberate reflection?

*The Widespread Caricature of Plato’s Account of Trust as a Possible Source of the Philosophical Bias against Trust*

Another objection to the thesis that trust is an important and essential component of human life would be that trust is notoriously risky, often unreasonable, and—perhaps paradoxically—untrustworthy. In other words, trust alone and in isolation lacks the ground of reason, a guarantee of certainty, and is all too frequently unfounded and bound
to erroneous opinion. This objection would seem to have a long history in the Western tradition of philosophy seeing as how the “good life” has been conceived in terms of the gradual diminishment of a reliance on trust in favor of knowledge and rational certainty.

Isn’t it the case, after all, that an imperative to doubt and distrust our everyday presuppositions and assumptions is a defining part of philosophical activity? As I have suggested in earlier chapters, perhaps this bias against trust could be traced to the influential caricature of Plato’s account of trust in the Divided Line image of Book VI of the *Republic*. According to this caricature, the Divided Line image primarily represents an *epistemological* account of the ascent of the soul toward the source of truth and knowledge, the Good. That is, the human soul can only achieve genuine knowledge (as opposed to mere opinion and hearsay) if it leaves behind the sensible and opinable realm of the visible by progressing *beyond* imagination and trust to pure intellection of the ideas (*eidē*) that reside in the intelligible and invisible realm of truth. This reading of Plato is both popular and widespread, and though it contains application to epistemology, I argue that a certain reading of the *Phaedo* better accounts for Plato’s attitude toward trust.

*The Cartesian Turn to Epistemology*

The pervasive nature of this widespread caricature of Plato’s account of trust might or might not be the reason why trust has been (a) epistemologically determined and (b) considered deficient or downright untrustworthy by the philosophical tradition. Trust’s fall from grace and its reputation as an illegitimate half-sibling of genuine knowledge was essentially sealed with the advent of the ‘epistemological turn’ that occurred during the Modern period of Western philosophy, when Descartes claimed that genuine and certain knowledge is secured through a method of doubt coupled with an
examination of the contents of the human mind. In other words, genuine philosophical inquiry involves methodological distrust of the most trusted opinions and principles so that the philosopher can “raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations” in order to build the temple of knowledge upon certainty and truth, rather than trust and opinion. The Cartesian revolution in philosophy ensured that trust, when discussed by philosophers at all, is understood epistemologically, as mental (or cognitive) assent to a (propositional) belief.

Now there is nothing wrong with offering an epistemological account of trust, but when trust is defined solely in epistemological terms as an almost exclusively cognitive or mental phenomenon, a cognitive state or mental item, such an account assumes that trust takes just one form and it unnecessarily and illegitimately restricts the manifestation of the phenomenon of trust in human life to one domain. When the traditional philosophical bias against trust—that it is dangerously deficient in rational justification or that it lacks sufficient evidence to guarantee the truth of a belief—is coupled with an illegitimate limitation of trust to one mode of manifestation (epistemic), then it becomes easy to dismiss trust as a tendency to naively accept the truth of a proposition about some state of affairs without ground or evidence. This bias enables an easy denial of the importance of trust for human life and its essential function in relationships.

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4 Descartes, Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy, 59 [17]. Of course, there is a way of reading Descartes’s Meditations that regards the alleged inconsistency in reasoning from the doubt of God’s existence to establishing God’s existence as the foundation of knowledge and reality as a matter of trust: Trust that my notion of myself as a thinking thing is sure and certain and trust that the existence of an omnipotent and perfectly benevolent God guarantees the surety and clarity of my idea of myself.
This understanding of trust—as a belief in the truth or reliance of something without evidence—is so widespread that it commonly shows up in some form or other in the definitions of trust in English dictionaries. For example, consider the following:

**Trust**—n. firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something.

1.a. acceptance of the truth of a statement without evidence or investigation

Here trust is defined in the first instance as a “firm belief,” thereby constraining the phenomenon to the domain of epistemology (as a matter pertaining to knowledge), and in the second instance, trust is determined to be a matter of assent to the truth of a proposition “without evidence,” thereby stripping trust of justification and implicitly diminishing its value for the pursuit of truth and knowledge. Trust becomes a matter of unwarranted, unjustified, and truth-deficient belief.

Several contemporary Anglophone philosophers have taken up the challenge of investigating the phenomenon of trust; and, in large part, they have succeeded in removing the stigma associated with trust in the philosophical tradition: that trust is important only to the extant that one should become aware of trusted beliefs so that one can surpass trust and replace it with rational evidence. Still, the specter of trust as an epistemological and cognitive phenomenon continues to haunt these accounts. Trust is variously defined in this literature as a “belief,” a “mental state,” an “affective attitude,” a (generally cognitive) “disposition,” or an “emotion.” It is my contention that an epistemological or cognitive understanding of trust is simply unable to account for the

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5 New American Oxford English Dictionary

6 There are notable exceptions. For example, Lawrence Becker (1996) defines trust in terms of “noncognitive security” about the motives of others. But even he ends up defining this noncognitive security as an “attitude” or “noncognitive disposition.”
diverse senses and manifestations of trust in human life. Instead, we need an account of trust that not only helps to explain the various forms that trust can take (legal, interpersonal, epistemological, subjective, etc.), but also makes sense of the way in which the phenomenon of trust actually plays a role in the constitution of human existence. In other words, the Anglophone philosophers’ emphasis on the cognitive and epistemological manifestations of trust excludes diverse instances of trust at work in concrete experience, thereby rendering such accounts inadequate to the phenomenon of trust itself. But, one can ask, how can we gather all of the senses and manifestations of trust in human life into one account? How can we explain trust such that every instance of trust can be understood in terms of our explanation?

The answer is: We should not start by attempting to explain the phenomenon of trust, rather we should proceed by first describing the phenomenon of trust as it shows itself in concrete, lived experience. Such a description could then disclose structures and features of trust that are common to the diverse experiences of it. The method, then, that is appropriate to the matter at hand is the phenomenological method.

*The Phenomenological Method*

Thus phenomenology means –ποϕαίνεσθαι τά ϕαινόμενα—to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself.

—Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §7

But philosophy is not a lexicon, it is not concerned with ‘word-meanings,’ it does not seek a verbal substitute for the world we see, it does not transform it into something said, it does not install itself in the order of the

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7 It should be noted that the Continental tradition of philosophy has, with a few exceptions, been remarkably silent on the matter of trust. Though Paul Ricoeur (1995) does speak of trust in the context of his important concept of attestation, it remains the case that this trust is confined to the domain of testimony and address. This is the case also with Derrida’s work on faith, testimony, and the address (Derrida 1998).
said or of the written as does the logician in the proposition, the poet in the word, or the musician in the music. It is the things themselves, from the depths of their silence, that it wishes to bring to expression.

—Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*

It is common in the current philosophical literature on trust to begin by presenting a definition of or proposition about trust before proceeding to problematize this definition or proposition through a set of counter-examples, and finally, to establish a definition of trust that covers the entire set of trust-phenomena explained in the prior definition as well as the trust-phenomena presented in the counter-examples. In this way, the philosopher selects a set of trust-phenomena, posits a definition or concept of trust, and proceeds to show how the definition or concept of trust explains the selected set of phenomena. The focus here is on the *why* of (a specific set of) experiences of trust and the *what* of the (narrowly circumscribed experience of a particular domain of the) phenomenon of trust. In the perspective of the phenomenologist, such a focus on explaining trust or inferring a definition of trust from a selective set of experiences of trust presupposes an interpretation of the meaning of the manifestation of the phenomenon of trust. Effectively, one has removed oneself from the concrete experience of trust in order to take that manifestation of trust up into thought as an object of theoretical reflection or conceptualization without first being able to describe *how* trust appears in experience and *how* it is given to us in the first place. The theorist of trust, then, will focus on one domain of experience, say, interpersonal trust, and then proceed to parse out the various senses and types of interpersonal trust—friendship trust, familial trust, trust between

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lovers, transactional trust—after which the theorist will pull out what is common to all of these different types of trust in order to arrive at a definition of interpersonal trust.

There are two problems with this theoretical approach: First, it cannot account for the diverse set of experiences of trust in domains other than the set of experiences specified. Hence, a definition of interpersonal trust, say, cannot stand as a definition of the structural features common to all experiences of trust. That is to say, one has still not gotten clear on what makes interpersonal trust a kind of trust at all. Rather, the meaning of a set of interpersonal experiences is already interpreted and assumed to be experiences of trust. The meaning of trust is assumed before the theorist even begins. Now, this problem of circularity is common to phenomenology as well: The phenomenon one sets out to describe is already meaningfully interpreted before one can describe the phenomenon under consideration. However, and this is crucial, the phenomenologist acknowledges this hermeneutical circularity from the start.⁹

Secondly, the theorist encounters the same problem that the scientist does when she seeks to explain the causal mechanisms behind a process or the physical properties of an organism—she proceeds to investigate on the basis of the assumption that she knows what it is that she is investigating. There is, of course, nothing wrong with the empirical sciences or with employing the theoretical approach; in fact, such investigation and methodology is both enormously insightful and helpful. The problem comes when the scientist or theorist assumes that she is not guided by presuppositions about the nature of the object under investigation, that there is an absolute distinction between the subject and an object, or that her method of experimentation and observation does not presuppose

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⁹ Heidegger makes much of this circularity in his ‘Introduction’ to Being and Time. See BT 1962: 27 [7], 194-95 [152-53], and 362-63 [314-315].
any preconceptions or pre-theoretical interpretations of the world, of herself, and of entities in the world. As Merleau-Ponty writes,

The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by awakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression. . . . Scientific points of view, according to which my existence is a moment of the world’s, are always both naïve and at the same time dishonest, because they take for granted, without explicitly mentioning it, the other point of view, namely that of consciousness, through which from the outset a world forms itself around me and begins to exist for me. To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the country-side in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.¹⁰

Though he may have overstated his case to an extent (all scientific points of view are “naïve” and “dishonest”?), Merleau-Ponty makes an important point: Our experience of a world, what Heidegger calls “worldhood,” precedes and grounds knowledge, whether scientific or theoretical. Before I can pull an event or thing out of my lived experience and make it an object of thought, I always already experience that event or thing as meaningful within the context of a world.

Rather than focusing on one form of trust, and narrowing down a set of experiences that illustrate that form, and finally extrapolating a definition of trust from that set or domain of experience, I want to describe trust as it manifests itself in concrete, lived experience. As Don Ihde puts it, phenomenological description “demands that we first look carefully at what is experienced, and how it is experienced,” since “[c]areful looking precedes classification and systematization, and systematization and

classification are made to follow what the phenomenon shows."\(^{11}\) In the case of trust, it would be a large task indeed if one were to examine every type of experience that typically manifests trust. This task is made even more difficult by the fact that trust is the sort of phenomenon that is rarely explicit, that tends to operate almost exclusively in the background of various types of human relationships (with oneself, with a world, with tools, with particular others, and so on).

Amidst our everyday absorption in life, we almost never attend to our experience of trusting unless (a) we are called upon to think about or reflect upon a particular trust relationship, (b) our trust is betrayed or we sense that it might be betrayed, or (c) something stops working the way we trusted it to. Hence, despite the everyday hiddenness of the phenomenon of trust, it does manifest itself vividly in its absence, or to be more precise, when the smooth operation of trust within a given relationship is disrupted, interrupted, or challenged in some way. Trust is not only manifest in its alteration or betrayal, however, for because trust is a meaningful and essential part of human relationships, its presence can be described, its operation felt. For trust is that special type of phenomenon that is a central and important ingredient in almost every sort of human relationship, and insofar as relationships (with a world, others, things, tools, events, etc.) compose human existence, then the phenomenon of trust must be evident in the existential structures that help to define a human life.

In order to make this point clear, I will offer some provisional (and simple) phenomenological descriptions of concrete experiences of trust in various human relationships. This is as close as this investigation will get to the employment of the

\(^{11}\) Don Ihde (1986), p. 32 (my emphasis).
“experimental” phenomenological method whereby one offers original phenomenological
descriptions of objects. The vast majority of the following investigation into the
phenomenon of trust and my description of it builds off from the original work of others:
phenomenologists which include the likes of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas,
Løgstrup, Casey, and Peperzak.

Provisional Phenomenological Descriptions of Everyday Experiences of Trust

“I trust you.” A simple utterance, and common enough. But what is happening
when one utters this statement to another? What is manifest in such a simple statement
and how does it manifest itself?

When I say, “I trust you,” to a friend, there is an illocutionary force to this
statement, something is enacted or performed in this declaration of trust. First, when I
declare my trust in such a way, I am usually speaking to another person and not a thing or
an event. Even when I whisper “I trust you” to myself, perhaps just before a phone
interview as part of a ‘pep talk’, it is the case that I am addressing myself as an other—
creating an artificial dualism for the sake of bolstering my confidence in myself.
Furthermore, when I mentally affirm my trust in a tool, let’s say, I am merely declaring
trust in my ability to use that tool for a specific end and affirming that this tool will work
properly in achieving that end. By no means am I saying that I trust the brute object
itself. So, when I say, “I trust you,” there is a conscious thought that finds expression in
speech, a thought that is expressed and directed toward an other person. However, as

12 This is characteristic of phenomenologists who carry out Husserl’s project (if not his principles) of
describing various aspects and objects of human experience. Such phenomenologists include Edward
Casey, Don Ihde, and Robert Sokolowski, for example.

noted above, this statement is not primarily a matter of the verbal expression of a thought, but rather, an illocutionary declaration that performs an action. But what action is performed or completed here?

When I say, “I trust you,” to the mechanic in whose hands I place the care of my car (and the cost of fixing it), I implicitly enact a certain relinquishment of power to the mechanic. I hand over a part of my care, a piece of my existential concern for my life, to the mechanic. Insofar as the car represents a form of mobility and enables certain projects or possibilities that define the trajectory of my life, I am essentially handing a part of my life over the mechanic’s care. If nothing else, I entrust the mechanic with the responsibility of saving me from the inconvenience, the disruption, of my car breaking down in the pursuit of the tasks that give shape to my existence (or, in Heidegger’s words, my “existentiell” projects and possibilities). When I say, “I trust you,” I acknowledge (though not always consciously) my dependence upon others and the vulnerability of my identity, my life-defining projects, to the influence of others.

Consider, however, that I could, upon leaving my car to the mechanic’s care, mutter to myself, “I don’t trust that mechanic. She’s a crook!” Notice that, even in this instance, I still implicitly hand over the care of a part of my life to the mechanic. Even at my most skeptical, I must enact my vulnerable dependence upon others. One could object: But then this is not trust, but the unfortunate necessity of relying on others who we consider untrustworthy. Though it may be true that I grudgingly rely on the mechanic to care for my car, it is nonetheless true that I have, in countless ways, entrusted parts of my concerns to the mechanic. In other words, I may consciously and explicitly distrust the auto mechanic with fixing my car properly, with charging the correct price, or with
finding something “wrong” with my car that isn’t truly a problem, but I have, without cognizing it, trusted the mechanic not to plant a car bomb, not to steal my car, and not to be a professor of philosophy disguised as an auto mechanic who has no actual expertise in fixing cars. When I hand my car keys over, I entrust the mechanic with numerous components of my life beyond the car itself.

In addition to the act of trust performed in its spoken articulation, then, a statement of trust expresses something much deeper than a conscious thought verbally expressed. Such a statement constitutes a specific mode or indication of the character of the relationship between you and I, a foundation of trust that underlies interpersonal relationships. Additionally, the fact that an explicit statement of trust manifests vulnerability and the character of entrusting part of one’s life to another, does not mean that this manifestation is confined to spoken declarations of trust. As the next chapter will show, trust is manifest to some degree in language, in the mode of addressing another or others. Some thinkers go so far as to claim that trust manifests itself as the condition for the possibility of addressing one another using language. Philosophers who do (or have done) work on testimony, address, and attestation demonstrate that trust enables meaningful discourse and language by pre-cognitively and pre-linguistically situating the speaker in a relationship with the other person, a relationship that is defined by responsibility. I too regard the phenomenon of trust to involve responsibility and ethical demand. However, I do not want to say that trust is the condition for the possibility of language as such since it would be odd to say that the torture victim who speaks to his torturer actually trusts him. Instead, I will argue that a minimal level of trust attends human relationships, but that trust does not necessarily characterize specific relationships.
In other words, the torture victim’s relationship with the torturer is not characterized by trust, but there is a sense in which trust can be said to characterize certain relationships that attend his relationship with his torturer (e.g., perceptual trust, self trust, trust in loved ones, trust in God, etc.).

There is an important sense, however, in which trust is something enacted, performed, achieved. I trust another because I implicitly accept, assent to, give myself to, and/or affirm the relationship. Consequently, it is quite possible that I withhold acceptance or assent from a relationship. I can refuse the vulnerable openness necessary to achieve trust. If this happens on a comprehensive enough scale, an individual’s existential concern for life, his or her will to live, is extinguished. In such an extreme case, the individual can live, but he or she will merely live. A life without trust is a life in which nothing can thrive. It is a bare and horrific life devoid of significance, an existence in which nothing matters to and for the individual. Most cases, however, are not so extreme, and it is often the case that an individual ought not to seek trust from certain relationships. In these cases, distrust is reasonable and sometimes even morally demanded (I can’t trust an S.S. officer to care for the lives of Jewish others). This does not change the fact that at least some relationships will have to be defined by trust in order for an individual to live even a minimally meaningful life (I need to assent to or affirm certain relationships in order for life to matter to me). These claims will be developed in more depth later in the chapter.
The Case of a Romantic Trust Relationship

Perhaps no other interpersonal relationship relies so evidently on trust for its continued sustenance, maintenance, and development as a “romantic” relationship between two lovers. It is not that a romantic relationship involves more trust, or that the quality of the trust involved is somehow more intense or necessary than other interpersonal relationships; rather, I am merely pointing out that the need for trust in a romantic relationship is generally more explicitly and more widely acknowledged in contemporary Western culture than other relationships. So let us look at how the phenomenon of trust is manifest in the romantic relationship.

A romantic relationship is defined, in part, by a certain erotic intensity and desire that seeks fulfillment and satisfaction through the joy of being intimately bound together, lives shared and intertwined. As Aristophanes tells it in Plato’s *Symposium*, this erotic desire is inborn in human nature since each of us is half of an original whole that was cut in two by Zeus, thereby creating the longing for that other half that promises to complete us and make us whole again. What Aristophanes’s account fails to mention, however, is that true lovers do not seek to become one out of two, but rather to be two together and

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14 This is a somewhat problematic term as the modern concept of a ‘romantic’ relationship is relatively new and varies widely from culture to culture. Perhaps ‘erotic’ is a better term, but ‘erotic’ has an even wider and more diverse signification than ‘romantic.’ For the sake of simplicity, I use ‘romantic relationship’ to mean a relationship between two partners who are intimately and erotically attracted to and involved with one another, and often, though not always, sexually involved with one another.

15 This is not necessarily true of non-Western cultures. It is conceivable, perhaps, that a given culture might regard familial relationships as more explicitly involving trust than other kinds of relationships. Also, one cannot ignore the class issue here. It is probable that relatively affluent members of an affluent society have more freedom to pursue and choose among a wide array of opportunities and possibilities than those of a less affluent person. Hence, a romantic relationship between affluent persons might involve more opportunities and possibilities for betraying trust than that between two less affluent persons. Similarly, the matter of gender is relevant here as it is historically the case that, even in affluent societies, a heterosexual romantic relationship generally affords the woman less power—and thus, less opportunities and possibilities—than the man.
thus to become one and complete in a way that each was not before, the idea being that a life shared in mutual intimacy and trust is more complete than a life without. Thus, because intimacy is impossible without vulnerability, it stands to reason that the intimate bond between two lovers is nourished and sustained by trust.

Vulnerability characterizes a flourishing romantic relationship (as opposed to a stagnant one); or to be more precise, vulnerability is a necessary condition for the possibility of a flourishing romantic relationship. It is not that two lovers are completely transparent to one another, for that would constitute a denial of the singularity of each. Rather, by means of a gradual, perhaps lifelong, emotional, bodily, and psychical exposure to one another, the lovers are held open toward each other in a way that is unique to their romantic relationship. Again, it is not the case that one could know one’s lover ‘inside and out,’ so to speak, thereby rendering the lover predictable, a mere reflection of one’s knowledge. This would no longer be a romantic relationship, but an egoistical relationship that reduces the “lover” to a manipulable reflection of a tyrannical consciousness. To love another is not to demand that his or her singular mystery be exposed.

In a romantic relationship, I hand over a part of my ownmost being to my lover in intimate vulnerability, in trust, asking (pre-linguistically) that she or he care for it so that we can exist in a new relation to each other and share a life, its projects and possibilities, together. In other words, the vulnerability of trust enables one to stand within and from the romantic relationship, attuned to existence together, but not as a selfsame and identical unity, but as two different persons in one relationship. After all, it is not that we say that two lovers think and act in the exact same way, as if they were carbon copies of
one another; rather, we say that they are like-minded or of “one mind,” by which it is understood that they share concern and care for their future.

In the case of romantic love, trust manifests itself in the vulnerability that is necessary in order to initiate and continue to sustain the relationship. This is why a betrayal of trust in a romantic relationship is so dire, it creates a rift in the relationship, draining it of its vitality and strength. If my lover cannot trust me, then there cannot be the mutual assurance necessary to nurture and cultivate the relationship, nor can each one of us exist in and from the relationship in a secure and free way; rather, the relationship becomes a symbol of bondage and diminishment. By “assurance,” I mean that each person feels assured in the relationship in such a way that trust \emph{ensures}, that is “makes sure,” secures firmly in place, or provides stable footing. What this means is that trust enables each lover to experience the relationship as stable enough to act freely, to perceive and pursue possibilities and potentials, on the basis of this relational stability and support. Trust allows lovers to be supportively upheld in and from the relationship.

Because of trust, each member of the relationship is free to comport themselves toward each other and a world. In being \emph{held open} toward one another in the \emph{vulnerability} of trust, the two lovers are \emph{assured, upheld}, in and from the relationship by trust, and thus, rendered capable of being \emph{directed} and \emph{oriented} toward each other and the world in freedom. To put this last point more clearly, trust opens up features and possibilities of the world, new ways of existing, and attunes us to certain aspects of ourselves, of each other, and the world that are not available outside of the romantic relationship. Perhaps one begins to seek, notice, and enjoy getting together with other couples; or maybe one becomes tuned in to the slightest gestures or changes in tone of voice in one’s lover such
that one can better pay heed to and care for his or her needs. One could list a virtually infinite number of ways in which trust attunes lovers to each other by enabling some features to stand out while some recede, by enacting new meanings and understandings of existence and existential possibilities.

This description of how trust shows itself in romantic relationships comes into sharper focus and achieves clarity when we consider what happens to a romantic relationship when trust is betrayed. Consider the following case: John and Amanda are in a committed romantic relationship. One night, at a gathering of Amanda’s colleagues from work and after having had a few alcoholic drinks, Amanda begins to loudly discuss some of John’s deep insecurities to a group of her colleagues, insecurities that he shared with her in the intimacy of trust. John is, of course, mortified by this and feels betrayed and harmfully exposed by Amanda’s public airing of his insecurities. Now, what effect is this likely to have on Amanda and John’s relationship? It is likely that it will have a profoundly negative impact on their relationship for a time. Upon John’s angry and hurt confrontation with Amanda at home later that night, Amanda might apologize sincerely and profusely, promising never to divulge such sensitive information again. Additionally, we can imagine that John forgives her, knowing that her apology is sincere. However, he still may distrust her with sensitive information, fearing that once Amanda has a few drinks, she could again violate his confidence and trust.

In this case, clearly John has experienced a violation of trust. Suddenly, Amanda appears to him as untrustworthy, at least with regard to protecting and caring for John’s vulnerability in sharing deep insecurities. Is it too much of a stretch to say that John will be more hesitant to open himself in certain ways to Amanda? Amanda’s betrayal of trust
in this instance will cause John to shut down a part of himself, to withhold intimacy, and
to close off Amanda’s access to a vital element of who he is. Vulnerable openness is
diminished. Furthermore, John will feel insecure, unsettled, and destabilized by the
betrayal of trust. It is as if the ground that used to be so firm is no longer solid enough to
walk upon without having to tread with care, and John is now unsteady on his feet,
unsure of his footing, and hence, unable to walk and move freely in and from his
relationship with Amanda. Finally, Amanda will have to confront the fact that she is no
longer tuned in to John in the same way since he now holds back a part of himself that he
used to share. Instead, she will face some situations in which she senses that he is holding
something back from her, withholding a meaningful piece of himself to which she used to
be attuned. In short, when trust is betrayed, distrust comes into being and begins to erode
the stability, close down the vulnerability, and disrupt or redirect the attuning and
orienting power of trust. John can no longer give himself over to his relationship with
Amanda in the same way and because of this, the goods that their relationship supported
and allowed to thrive, are no longer able to thrive.

At its extreme, such a diminishment and erosion of trust can lead to the
destruction of the romantic relationship as the character and tone of the relationship has
been irrevocably altered. (Perhaps a romantic relationship becomes one of estrangement.)
It is not, of course, that the individual is left with no trust at all, but that the specific
relationship in question has been overlaid and reconfigured with distrust such that the
strength and the quality of trust has been diminished and de-intensified to the point that
the relationship can no longer thrive or grow.
Application to Interpersonal Relationships

Now the general characteristics of the description of trust in romantic relationships can be extended to interpersonal relationships generally. In friendship, for example, one experiences the security, vulnerability, and attunement that is founded upon trust; it is just that the variables of quality, intensity, and meaning of trust in friendship are distinct from that of romantic relationships. Even a passing encounter with a stranger involves a relationship of some kind and, as will be shown in the next chapter, that encounter will manifest a basic trust unless one willfully withholds trust in advance. If one considers the various interpersonal relations that we experience everyday in human affairs, one can see trust manifest in that relationship in some form.

Human existence is formed, constituted, and given direction by a set of relationships—with others, a self, things, processes, events, a world, etc.—and this set of relationships and our existential engagement in and by means of them enables our pursuits and discloses meaning in life. A crucial component of these existentially constitutive relationships is trust. It is trust that grounds such relationships, that frees us for meaningful engagement within and by means of these relationships, and finally, it is trust that holds us open and renders us receptive to the senses of things, to the demands that existence makes of us.

Moving Beyond Interpersonal Relationships: The Case of Perceptual Trust

Now one might accept that trust is involved in interpersonal relationships, but deny that trust has meaningful application to those relationships that exist outside of interpersonal encounters and relations. Is trust manifest in non-interpersonal
relationships? If so, then how? Does trust manifest differently in interpersonal relationships as opposed to non-interpersonal relationships?

In order to approximate an answer to these questions, I will briefly examine an important relationship that helps to define human existence and that is intimately involved in our everyday lived experience. It will become clear that trust is not only involved in this non-interpersonal relationship but also that trust manifests itself similarly to the way it shows up in interpersonal relationships. The non-interpersonal relationship to be examined and described is that of our perceptual experience of the sensible world. Is there something like perceptual trust at work in perceptual experience?

When I walk outside on a rainy day, I perceive gray skies, heavy clouds moving swiftly across the heavens, lightning flashes; I hear the rumble of thunder and the light pitter patter of rain drops striking the ground and the roof of my house; I feel the diffuse sensation of hundreds of rain drops hitting my flesh with wet force; I feel the weight of humidity and breathe the damp quality of the air; I smell the drenched earth; and so on and so forth. My powers of perception allow me to engage in and become a part of the perceptible environment, to exist in an intimate relationship with the elemental forces of nature. Without perception, it would seem, there would be no world for me nor would I be part of the world. The question is this: Does my concrete perceptual experience of the rainy day and my perceptual relationship with the perceptible environment involve trust?

The preeminent philosopher of perception in the twentieth century, Merleau-Ponty, wrote that the “perceptual presence of the world” precedes and grounds the possibility of cognition, judgment, affirmation or negation, any conscious way of being
or existing. Why is this? Because as soon as one attempts to think about the world, about perception, or about embodied experience, one runs into difficulties due to the fact that one is attempting to take up a perspective from outside of the perceptible world while at the same time being wholly embedded within it, thereby guaranteeing that perception and the world are presupposed at every turn. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “beneath affirmation and negation, beneath judgment (those critical opinions, ulterior operations), it is our experience, prior to every opinion, of inhabiting the world by our body, of inhabiting the truth by our whole selves, without there being need to choose nor even to distinguish between the assurance of seeing and the assurance of seeing the true, because in principle they are one and the same thing—faith, therefore, and not knowledge, since the world is here not separated from our [perceptual] hold on it, since, rather than affirmed, it is taken for granted, rather than disclosed, it is non-dissimulated, non-refuted.”

In short, this faith is what Merleau-Ponty calls “perceptual faith” and it is “an adherence that knows itself to be beyond proofs”—i.e., prior to beliefs about the world or the existence of the world—a faith that expresses the fact that we always already have a certain hold of the world at the same time that it has a hold on us. To put it differently, we inhabit the world in a deeply familiar and meaningful way well before we can ask whether this world and things in it exist (thereby de-familiarizing it). When I take up a stance toward the world, I already inhabit a stance within and from the world. Perceptual faith is lived at each and every moment of our human existence.

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16 Merleau-Ponty (1968), p. 28.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
Anne Freire Ashbaugh equates this perceptual faith with perceptual trust, and claims that “Perceptual faith . . . is essential both to perception and to thought” in that “perceptual trust . . . makes thinking possible.”\(^{19}\) Ashbaugh employs the term “trust anchorage”\(^{20}\) to describe the way in which perceptual trust operates as our “wild link with the world” and how it “is there as the place on which we stand and from which we see all other places.”\(^{21}\) In other words, perception and perceptual experience manifest a deep and intimate sensual and elemental relationship with the world, a relationship of trust that can be characterized in terms of “anchorage,” “the place on which we stand,” and the place “from which” one perceives. Notice that these are the same characteristic manifestations of trust—being upheld, secured, and assured—that were described in the prior cases of interpersonal relationships. Also, when Merleau-Ponty describes perceptual faith in terms of our “openness upon the world,” this recalls the vulnerable openness of trust.\(^{22}\) Furthermore, perceptual trust orients or directs us in our perceptual experience and this is evidenced by the way in which we are tuned in to certain perceptual features of the world—colors, depth, movement, and so on—at the same time that we are positioned within the world in a certain way (most literally, in the manner whereby our bodily orientation delimits our perspective on and engagement with the world). So three characteristic manifestations of trust are present in our perceptual relationship with the world—secured upholding, vulnerable openness, and attunement—but what about the demand character of trust?

\(^{19}\) Ashbaugh (1978), p. 222.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 223.

\(^{22}\) Merleau-Ponty (1968), p. 28.
Trust’s demand is manifest in perceptual experience in the following way: What and how I perceive on a rainy day is largely a response to the solicitations of perceptible phenomena. On this point, Alphonso Lingis writes, “sensibility, sensuality, and perception [are] not reactions to physical causality nor adjustments to physical pressures, nor free and spontaneous impositions of order on amorphous data, but responses to directives . . . Though our eyes and hands are free to wander unhindered in the environment, they do not shape a drifting mass of tints and tones; things become visible and tangible as tasks and summons for sight and touch.” When I feel a rain drop on my arm, the slight weight as it hits my skin with falling force, a weight swiftly dispersed into a broader pressure of the water, my body senses the raindrop in accordance with the directives of shape, consistency, weight, and so on of the rain drop. To go even further, it is as if my perception and my body “reach out” towards and “open up” to the falling rain in response to its perceptual and sensual imperatives. The wetness and cold of the rain as it saturates my clothes and touches my body induces a sensate response, a perceptual sense, that is produced in accordance with the solicitation of the perceptual, sensible, and sensual environment that I inhabit in trust. This is an important point, for it says that the perceptual and sensual world that I inhabit and with which I engage has meaning for me to the extent that I exist in a trust relationship with it; and furthermore, that this trust relationship is marked not only by a supportive upholding, vulnerable openness, and attunement in perception and sensuality, but also by the imperatives that emerge with perceptual trust.

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Summary of Findings

The foregoing phenomenological descriptions of the illocutionary “I trust you,” of the romantic trust relationship, and of a perceptual (and sensual) trust relationship with the world, provisional as they might be, help to reveal several ways in which trust is manifest in everyday life.

1. Trust is manifest as a crucial component of human relationships. In fact, it makes no sense to speak of trust apart from relationships, for our experiences of trust, and the sense it has in these experiences, are always situated in relationships. Furthermore, insofar as meaningful experiences of trust exist outside of interpersonal contexts, say, the case of perceptual trust or my trust in the integrity of tools, then the experience of trust is not limited to interpersonal relationships. Indeed, if human existence, meaning, and identity can be shown to be relationally constituted, then it stands to reason that trust plays a central role in the constitution of human existence and meaning.

2. Trust involves vulnerability and openness in relation.

3. Trust involves security, being supportively upheld, and assured in relation.

4. Trust attunes, directs, and orients the truster in relation.

5. Trust involves a demand of some kind.

If trust manifests these features in a sampling of our concrete, everyday experience of relationships, then one is still faced with the question of what form of trust is fundamental, diffuse, and global. That is, these characteristic features of trust are common to different types and levels of relationship, so what type of relationship lends the most diffuse and global character to human existence and how is trust manifest in it?
Almost every kind of significant relationship that a human being can and, in some cases, must be a part of and engage in, involves trust in some way. As evidenced in the foregoing analysis of the linguistic statement of trust, the romantic relationship, and perceptual trust, trust can play a central role in defining, sustaining, and directing human relationships. In other words, without trust, we could not live good lives, lives in which those things that matter to us can thrive, as we could not form those relationships that define a properly human existence. Furthermore, it is clear that trust is of explicit and immediate concern in our everyday affairs, primarily in our interpersonal transactions and relations. Perceptual trust, for example, is rarely raised to the level of conscious concern (unless one is a philosopher), as our relationship with the perceptual world is taken for granted in virtually every act of perception and in that pre-conscious sense that the perceptible and sensate features of the world have for us. Finally, it was determined that the phenomenon of trust appears in our relationships in four characteristic ways: Trust supportively upholds and secures us, holds us open and vulnerable in relation, attunes and orients in and from relation, and finally, trust manifests itself as a demand, a call to appropriate response.

Of course, in order to truly demonstrate that these four characteristic features of trust manifest in every human trust-relationship in some form or other, one would have to examine and describe how trust appears in every human relationship. This is simply beyond the scope of this project. Instead, it will suffice to determine whether the phenomenon of trust is present in the most diffuse, global, and primordial human relationship: that of the human being with existence. If trust is present in the fundamental
existential relationship of the human being, then it can reasonably be inferred that trust is present to a degree in the most important of our secondary and derivative relationships insofar as these follow from or are based on this existential relationship. Furthermore, if the four characteristic manifestations of trust appear in this fundamental existential relationship, then it makes it more probable that most derivative relationships manifest these same four features in some form or other. Now, it is a separate matter as to what relationship constitutes the human being’s relationship to existence, and there is much disagreement in this matter. Is it an ontological relationship of the human being to Being as such (Heidegger)? Is it the human being’s relationship to eternity and God (Kierkegaard)? Is it the human being’s relationship to the Good (Plato)? Is it the relationship of the human being’s vital will to the will to power (Nietzsche)? Or might it be my relationship of responsibility to the transcendent Other (person) that defines existential meaning (Levinas)? My answer to this question will be formulated in more detail in the next chapter. Suffice it to say that I follow Levinas in positing the ethical relationship with the other at the root of the human being’s relationship to existence, though I will modify this understanding in a way that Levinas does not. At this point it will be adequate if the general structure of this existential relationship is described in terms of whether and how the phenomenon of trust shows up in it. As it is the basic relationship of the human being to its existence that is at issue here, I will call the form of trust manifest in this relationship, “existential trust” in order to signal its broad application to human existence and its global, diffuse, and fundamental nature as opposed to derivative forms of trust.
In what follows, I will briefly examine philosophical literature that speaks of a form of trust that is basic to human life—what I, following the lead of others, will call “existential trust.” Instead of developing an original existential-phenomenological approach, I will follow up on suggestions made by Adriaan Peperzak and Robert Solomon and adopt Heidegger’s analysis in *Being and Time* in order to describe and understand existential trust. It is hoped that the conception of existential trust that emerges from the following investigation will go some way toward understanding the nature of trust and the importance of the role that it plays in human life.

**Conceptions of Trust as Existentially Basic in Philosophical Literature**

Is there a form of trust that is basic to human life? In other words, is trust fundamental to our reality, identity, and meaning in some way?

*Anthony Giddens: Trust as Ontological Security*

According to the sociologist Anthony Giddens, a basic sense of trust as “ontological security” is necessary for the development of a human being’s sense of reality as well as his or her psychological grip on reality. He claims that this aspect of trust seems “to apply in all cultures, pre-modern and modern.”

> **Ontological security**, Giddens maintains, “refers to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action. A sense of the reliability of persons and things, so central to the notion of trust, is basic to feelings of ontological security; hence the two are psychologically closely related.”

Though Giddens’s distinction between the “notion of

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25 Ibid.
“trust” and “feelings of ontological security” may or may not be sustainable (and I do not think that it is, as I will argue later), surely he is right to call attention to the fact that we go about our day-to-day affairs feeling secure and confident in the “continuity” and “constancy” of ourselves, of one another, and of the social and natural world we inhabit. This feeling of ontological security pervades our engagements and provides a secure staging for our concrete actions and our pursuits, be they mundane or existential.

“Ontological security,” Giddens proceeds to clarify, “has to do with ‘being,’ or, in the terms of phenomenology, ‘being-in-the-world’.” However, this feeling of security in “being-in-the-world” is not a cognitive phenomenon, nor is its truth (that my existence really is secure and that reality is stable) able to be established with apodictic certainty. Rather, it is “an emotional phenomenon,” “rooted in the unconscious,” and though philosophers may “pose questions about the nature of being,” the truth is that in posing such questions, “they are not, we may suppose, ontologically insecure in their ordinary actions, and in this outlook they are in accord with the mass of the population.” Where does this feeling of ontological security come from? According to Giddens, ontological security originates in infancy, during the process of what the psychologist Erik Erikson described as the development of “basic trust” in childhood.

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 93. The exceptions to this rule, Giddens thinks, are the small number of persons who suffer from various forms of mental illness, particularly schizophrenics. These persons cannot inhabit the “same social universe as other human beings” and they are incapacitated by such existential insecurity. I tend to agree that schizophrenics suffer from a feeling of ontological insecurity at points, e.g., a lack of trust in others and regarding the status of others, but do they remain confident in their sense that the threat is real and thus retain a feeling of ontological security, of existential trust, beneath the perceived and felt uncertainty? This is a question that must be answered if Giddens’s claim is to be substantiated.
Giddens, then, offers an account of basic trust rooted in our experience of ontological security, a pre-conscious and pre-cognitive confidence in the continuity and constancy of our being-in-the-world, which grounds our existence. On this basis it can be extrapolated that trust as ontological security is necessary for human action and our interaction with others, things, and a world since it enables meaningful engagement and reveals our existential possibilities. In other words, without a basic form of trust in which our being-in-the-world is experienced as relatively stable or secure, human beings could neither act nor orient themselves in existence, for there would be no possibility of assuming an existential stance toward life, meaning, and possibility.

*Maurice Friedman: Trust in Existence*

Why do we need an ontologically secure *existential stance* in the first place? Maurice Friedman provides a helpful answer, when he writes, “What modern man needs is not ‘faith’ in the traditional sense but a *life-stance*—a *ground on which to stand* and *from which* to go out to meet the ever changing realities and absurdities of a techtronic age.”[^29] This description of a “life-stance” as a “ground on which to stand” and “from which to go out to meet” the challenges and realities of existence is important as it highlights the necessity of existential trust to human life. Without the feeling of ontological security provided by existential trust, the human being could not exist from a life-stance that grounds and secures it amidst a changing world and a fluctuating realm of possibilities. Thus, Friedman’s metaphor is apt: Without the life-stance provided by

[^29]: I find such explanations from the psychology of child development to be compelling, but ultimately philosophically inadequate as they posit a causal mechanism for trust that can neither account for how the phenomenon of trust manifests itself in the everyday experience of trust nor can it do the work of providing a reason or reasons why trust is what it is.

[^30]: Friedman (1972), p. 15 (my emphasis)
existential trust, there is no stable ground or secure footing on which to “stand” amidst the universe, from which to “move” toward one’s possibilities, on which to assume the orientational “posture” that is necessary if one is to venture forth into existence.

Friedman insists that trust is indispensable to human life, for “the trust in existence that enables us to live from moment to moment and to go out to meet what the new moment brings is the trust that makes it possible that in new meeting we again become whole, alive, present.” Following Martin Buber, Friedman feels that existential trust is a condition both for meeting the new moment and for meeting with the other person, essentially a condition of dialogue and thus of human life and meaning. It is not merely that existential trust supplies us with a life-stance, a stable ground and sense of security, it is also the case that existential trust enables us to be open to new and renewed encounters, moments, and possibilities in life. Why must we be opened by trust? Because trust allows us to hear and respond to the address, the demand, issuing from the encounter with a new (or renewed) situation, an encounter with the other, and with even our everyday encounters with the most mundane phenomena. As Friedman elaborates, “it is trust which enables us to remain open and respond to the new address of the new situation. . . . It is our existential trust that ultimately gives actuality and continuity to our discontinuous and often merely potential relationships to our human partners. And it is this trust, too, that gives continuity and reality to our own existence.” Friedman effectively reiterates Giddens’s point about basic trust providing our sense of ontological security in existence, but he adds the claim that existential trust enables the human being

31 Ibid., p. 319.
32 Ibid., pp. 319, 320.
to remain open and responsive to the world in a certain way. In exactly what sense existential trust holds us open and responsive to the world, and what it is that we are open towards, will be the theme of the next section. Suffice it to say for now that existential trust, in enabling vulnerable openness toward the world, discloses meaning in the world in response to the address of phenomena.

Robert Solomon: Cosmic Trust and Its (Paradoxical) Features

In Spirituality for the Skeptic, Robert C. Solomon maps out a concept of “cosmic trust.” Solomon draws upon the psychologist Eric Erikson’s concept of “basic trust” and existential psychologist R.D. Laing’s notion of “ontological security” in order to conceive of cosmic trust as a fundamental phenomenon of human existence that involves an “overarching emotional sense of being secure in the world.”\(^3\) That cosmic trust is roughly equivalent to what I am calling “existential trust” is made clear when Solomon describes, “Trust is more like an attitude or, I will suggest, a determined stance toward the world”; and “Trust is a way of being in the world.”\(^4\) As has been shown, Friedman has also said that existential trust involves a basic “stance” toward the world, and by describing trust as a “determined stance toward the world,” Solomon also emphasizes the manner whereby existential trust involves both a fundamental orientation, or directionality, and a sense of being securely upheld or supported in existence. Indeed, Solomon explicitly comments upon the latter feature of trust when he writes that trust concerns “security in one’s own existence and confidence in one’s place in the world,”

\(^3\) Solomon (2002), p. 45. Whereas Solomon relies on the existential psychologist R.D. Laing’s description of ontological security, I have focused on sociologist Anthony Giddens’s treatment of it. Both Laing and Giddens offer an account of the origin of ontological security in child development that is rooted in the work of Erik Erikson.

thereby reiterating both Giddens’s and Freidman’s views of the important role that trust plays in providing the necessary existential support for human life.\textsuperscript{35}

Solomon is right to note that “[o]ur concern about trust usually has to do with our immediate relationships—trusting or otherwise—with our fellow human beings, with friends and family, with business partners and colleagues, with the many people and enterprises we casually deal with over the course of a day, or years, or our lives,” for it is surely the case that our most immediate, everyday (and conscious) concern with trust usually takes place at the level of interpersonal relationships.\textsuperscript{36} However, Solomon goes on to say that “there is also that general sense of trust that has to do with our very being in the world” thereby highlighting the fact that the reach of trust both extends beyond our concern with interpersonal relationships and that—in its existential, most basic form—it constitutes the condition for the possibility of such concerns.\textsuperscript{37} Hence, existential trust, as a way of being in the world, concerns our relationship to the world and to life as such.

In my provisional phenomenological descriptions of trust as manifest in certain human relationships, the manner whereby trust involves vulnerable openness was emphasized. Solomon also lays stress on this feature of vulnerability, saying that “trust . . . implies dependency and vulnerability. Trust entails risk and a certain lack of control. We trust, in part, because we have to.”\textsuperscript{38} The point here is that, as finite beings, human beings can never have a complete, full, and wholly adequate grasp of everything that is, has been or will be. Rather, existential trust entails a pre-reflective confidence that

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 45 (my emphasis).

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid (my emphasis).

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid (my emphasis).
existence has meaning and a pre-conscious resolution to live amidst uncertainty. By “uncertainty,” however, we must understand a lack of complete and wholly adequate and comprehensive knowledge of the truth about something, not existential uncertainty. For existential trust can be understood as existential certainty in the sense that Wittgenstein speaks of certainty as a “form of life”: “I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. […] But that means I want to conceive it as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal.”39 Putting aside the question of whether non-human animals exist in certainty or trust as a form of life, surely what Wittgenstein indicates here is the fact that the kind of certainty he is talking about has little to do with epistemic certainty (which is attained only when strict conditions of justification are met), but rather has everything to do with lived certainty, the sense in which the meaning of things is affirmed at a basic, ground-level of existence. Calling attention to the animal, therefore, merely indicates the primordial nature of certainty as a form of life. Wittgenstein’s insight into certainty as a basic form of life agrees with the notion of existential trust as a primordial way of being-in-the-world. For existential trust is “certain” in the sense that it is an expression of the way in which human beings live affirmation or assent to the meanings or senses of things before being able to “know” anything.

Solomon has described three ways in which cosmic trust manifests itself—as a determined stance toward the world, as security and confidence in existence, and as vulnerability and dependence. He proceeds to name a fourth feature of cosmic trust, one that has already been mentioned earlier in this chapter: the element of demand. When

39 Wittgenstein (1969): §358, 359 (p. 46e-47e, my emphasis)
Solomon writes that “trust also entails responsibility, if not for the fate of the world then for our engagements in it,” he articulates the way in which existential trust involves a responsibility to take up one’s existence, one’s trust, in a way that is appropriate and responsive to the demands or solicitations of the phenomena that one encounters in the world. \(^{40}\) “What this means is that trust is neither an attitude, nor a feeling, nor a set of beliefs, but first of all a stance, the taking of a position, the resolution to conceive of the world or some aspect of it as trustworthy.”\(^{41}\) Because, to paraphrase Heidegger, I am the kind of being whose existence is at issue for it and because existential trust is a global, even primordial, way of being in the world, then I am always already taking a position on my existence and assuming a stance toward the trustworthiness of the world. Even in the depths of despair, I cannot eradicate the necessity of taking up a certain trust in the world and in the meaning of the world, even if I can only deprive existence of positive meaning and purpose. The opposite of existential trust, then, is not existential distrust for this would be the absence of an existential position or place, a refusal to take up an existential stance toward the world, and thus, existential distrust can only be a derivative way of being or a reflective attitude and never a primordial way of being.

*Adriaan Peperzak: Basic Trust as ‘Being At Home in Existence’ and Its Affective Character*

Solomon’s account of cosmic trust agrees with many of the points made in a suggestive, though brief, existential description of trust offered by Adriaan Peperzak in

\(^{40}\) Solomon (2002), p. 45 (my emphasis). Hence, Solomon articulates two important paradoxes of our experience of trust: That trust involves both an uncertain vulnerability and a kind of existential security; and that trust signifies a kind of vulnerable dependence alongside a responsibility to engage in response to trust. These paradoxes indicate that our experience of trust involves apparent contradictions which nevertheless are genuinely a part of the experience of trust.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.
Philosophy Between Faith and Theology. “So long as we continue to live,” claims Peperzak, “there is always some sort of basic consent and trust . . . Somehow we remain attached to our existence and confident that it is better to be than not to be.” Here again, the phenomenon of trust is regarded to be, in some sense, both fundamental and necessary to human existence. This “basic trust” is characterized as a mode of “being at home in the universe” or in “existence” in such a way that both the universe and “existence in it” is affirmed and accepted as meaningful. Furthermore, trust, as a mode of being at home in the universe and of being attached to existence, is “fundamental, supporting human existence as a whole, it permeates and colors all other dimensions. As such it decides about the meaning of human lives.” On Peperzak’s conception, then, as with Solomon, what I call “existential trust” constitutes a (i) fundamental or basic (ii) way of being and existing in the world, of inhabiting it, in such a way that one is (iii) supported or secured in existence. As such, trust is manifest as an affirmation or assent to existence that “permeates,” “colors,” and gives meaning to all other “dimensions” of human life. Peperzak feels that the importance of trust for human life cannot be underestimated, for it “decides about the meaning of human lives.” In this way, trust can understood to be a background condition for the emergence, enhancement, and enrichment of meaning and significance in existence. Trust enables existence to matter to us and grants our lives an overall sense and direction.

Elaborating upon the primordial function of this basic trust, Peperzak writes that basic trust is a kind of “self-awareness”: a “pre-predicative and pre-propositional, rarely

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42 Adriaan Peperzak (2005), p. 75.
43 Ibid., 74.
self-conscious experience with a primarily affective character: the dim awareness of a fundamental attunement, a basic ‘mood’. Though Peperzak distinguishes between “self-awareness” and “self-conscious” trust, taking care to describe this self-awareness as “pre-predicative and pre-propositional,” it must be understood that the “self” that is spoken of here cannot be a subject in the sense of either a “thinking thing” (cogito, or Cartesian subject) or a self-identical subject to and for whom all things appear and are constituted in consciousness (as with the German Idealists and Husserl’s transcendental ego self). This is a “self” that is always already situated in and involved with a world and network of relations, and hence a “self” at a pre-cognitive and pre-conscious level—the “self” for whom existence matters because it is already given over to a world, others, and things in trust. This is why this self-awareness is “dim” and why trust then can be understood in the Heideggerian terms of “attunement” and “basic ‘mood’.” In fact, the kind of awareness that existential trust enables is awareness in precisely the sense of attunement to the meaningful appearing or showing up of things and features of existence. I am aware of the world that I inhabit, for example, precisely to the extent that this world always already appears as meaningful to me and hence as primordially familiar.

Though Peperzak’s use of “assent” and “consent” to describe basic trust could easily be associated with consciously willful intent—thereby removing the implicit and pre-conscious character of existential trust—the reference to trust as a “fundamental

44 Ibid., 75.

45 On the face of it, this situation yields a paradox: Existential awareness is manifest in the way that I am unaware of or not focused upon the meaning of things. Of course, this paradox is merely apparent, constituted as it is by an equivocation between a pre-conscious, pre-reflective lived awareness and a conscious awareness of something as meaningful because I bring that thing to mind thereby situating it within a context of judgment and logical relations.
attunement,” a “basic ‘mood’,” removes those connotations. For trust as “mood” implies a primordial way of “being-in” or inhabiting the world, such that existence is always already “colored” by this mood, thereby enabling the disclosure of the world, my “self,” others, and things because I am attuned to them in trust. This is how Peperzak can say that “[w]e feel more or less at home in a specific mood. The universe can inspire awe, admiration, gratitude, anxiety; we can feel threatened, safe, secure, content, frustrated, nostalgic and so on.” It is not, of course, that I must first encounter this “universe” (as if I might just run into or trip over it) and only after “finding” it, be inspired or moved by it; rather, it is the case that the “universe” (or world) in which I am “at home” is awesome, fearsome, or bland and flat, because I already “find” myself inhabiting it, and inhabiting it in a mood of awe, fear, boredom, etc. It is crucially important to notice that both Solomon and Peperzak agree on a descriptive assessment of existential trust as an “overarching emotional sense of being secure in the world” (Solomon) and as having a “primarily affective character” (Peperzak). In other words, a significant aspect of existential trust is its affective character. But what does this mean? How is trust affective? If we can take ‘affect’ to designate a general category of phenomena that includes feelings, emotions, moods, and passions—then which kind of affect is trust?

These questions will be addressed a little later in this chapter, but for now I offer the following observations.

Trust is not an emotion, for the emotions (such as anger or grief) are generally temporary: they arise relatively suddenly, build in intensity, and abate in intensity until the emotion expires. When, for example, I witness a full grown man picking on a young

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46 Peperzak (2005), p. 75
child, I experience a sudden rush of anger upon realizing what is happening and recognizing the injustice in it. My anger might reach such a crescendo of intensity that I attack the man physically or verbally, after which, regardless of the outcome, my anger will diminish and recede over time as I attend to other matters in my life. Of course, when I recall this situation, the memory of it can induce a feeling of anger and outrage, but again, this experience will be fleeting. Thus, trust cannot be an emotion unless we needlessly broaden the concept of emotion to include those experiences that involve relatively stable and constant affects. Emotions can accompany trust, or, to be more precise, emotions are contingent upon trust, for, in the example above, my feeling of anger is contingent upon a perceptual trust in what I am witnessing, a trust in my moral instinct and sense of justice, and a deeper trust in a world in which such meanings exist.

Is trust a “mood,” then? I argue that it is closest in character to the affective phenomenon of mood rather than the other affects, for I follow Solomon and Peperzak in linking trust to affectivity, and mood is the kind of affect that is generally diffuse, global, background, and more long-term than emotion. Whereas emotions are almost always directed toward a definite object, they are intentional, “of” something or other, a mood is far more atmospheric, general, and inclusive. I am “in” a mood in a way that I cannot be “in” an emotion; rather, I “have” an emotion. When I am in a mood, I experience all objects, events, and feelings through this mood. In other words, moods are interpretive, disclosing the world and the things within it in a certain light and tone. Hence, the use of “color” terms to describe moods. When I am feeling “blue,” then the world and life generally appears in muted tones, depleted in energy and vitality.
Existential Trust as Mood: Heidegger

Solomon has characterized cosmic trust as a “way of being in the world,” and Peperzak suggests that basic trust is a “fundamental attunement” or “‘basic’ mood.” Both are alike in conceiving of a fundamental ground of trust at the root of human existence and both evoke Heidegger’s language from Being and Time when describing this fundamental phenomenon of existential trust. In particular, Peperzak’s choice of terms appeals to Heidegger’s concepts of Befindlichkeit (“attunement”) and Stimmung (“mood”) in describing existential trust. Can the phenomenon of existential trust be understood as a kind of “‘basic’ mood,” an “attunement,” as Peperzak suggests? If so, then this would account for the affective character of trust; but is it too much of a stretch to say that existential trust, like existential moods, reveals and discloses what matters to us? I will argue that Peperzak is right to notice the mood-like character of trust and that as an existential mood, existential trust does the work that Heidegger attributes to Befindlichkeit—that is, existential trust reveals our “thrownness,” the fact that we are always already thrown into a context of prior meanings, interpretations, and sense—and to its manifestation as Stimmung, for existential trust reveals what and how things “matter” to us. It has already been shown how trust involves a supportive upholding that “frees” us up to various possibilities of existing in and from a relationship. These matters will have to be pursued and developed in what follows starting with the question of what Heidegger means by Befindlichkeit (attunement) and Stimmung (mood) and how this understanding applies to existential trust.

47 This analysis is slightly complicated, however, for existential trust also appears to share certain features with Heidegger’s conception of “understanding” (Verstehen) in that trust enables us to do things in the sense of seize upon and take up possibilities that are disclosed by our thrownness.
Heidegger on Attunement and Mood in Being and Time

I will now offer a brief examination of Heidegger’s concepts of attunement (Befindlichkeit) and mood (Stimmung) in Being in Time so that we may gain an understanding of the phenomenon of existential trust and the fundamental role that it plays in human life. Ultimately, I will argue that existential trust is helpfully thought of as a “mood” in a Heideggerian sense, but that it is more fundamental than other existential moods.

In Being and Time, Heidegger is concerned with the task of elaborating a fundamental ontology. For this purpose, he develops an “existential analytic of Dasein” (BT 34/13) wherein Dasein represents human being as distinct from other beings, for Dasein, and Dasein alone is “distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it” (BT 32/12). In other words, in order to uncover the meaning of Being, one must inquire into the nature and existential-ontological structure of human be-ing as it is the only being that can ask the question of the meaning of being, whose being matters for it.

Having introduced the project of Being and Time, Heidegger proceeds to offer his existential analytic of Dasein, an effort that radically undermines the traditional philosophical understanding not only of Being, but of human beings as well. Dasein is found to be absorbed in the world, “in” the world, rather than opposed to the world as subject to object. As Guignon explains: “To be human, as the term Dasein suggests, is to

48 The numbers in parentheses refer first to the page numbers of Macquarrie & Robinson’s English translation of Being and Time (1962) and the second set of numbers correspond to the pagination of the German edition of Sein und Zeit which can be found in the margin of the English edition.

49 “But now it has been show that the ontological analytic of Dasein in general is what makes up fundamental ontology, so that Dasein functions as that entity which in principle is to be interrogated beforehand as to its Being” (35/14).
be ‘there’, caught up in the world, taking a stand on one’s life, active and engaged in ordinary situations, with some overview of what is at stake in living.” Furthermore, Dasein does not experience the world or things or others as “out there” and only comprehended or meaningful when brought “in here,” into my mind. Instead Heidegger argues that the being of Dasein is revealed in pre-cognitive, pre-reflective “moods.” Mood is basic, more fundamental than cognition and volition, mood is “a primordial kind of Being for Dasein, in which Dasein is disclosed to itself prior to all cognition and volition, and beyond their range of disclosure” (*BT* 175/136). In so far as moods disclose the way in which Dasein is always already situated or attuned, then it follows that “[Attunement] is a basic existential way in which Dasein is its ‘there’” (*BT* 178/139). Our fundamental moodiness is not immediately apparent to us, however, for though we will often say, “I am moody today,” we generally mean that this is an exceptional and temporary state. In fact, however, Heidegger claims that though we might not notice it, we *always* have a mood. “And precisely those attunements [Stimmungen, moods] to which we pay no heed at all, the [moods] we least observe, those [moods] which attune us in such a way that we feel as though there is no [mood] at all, as though we were not attuned in any way at all—these [moods] are the most powerful” (*FCM* 68/101).

Heidegger’s discussion of mood occurs near the beginning of a section in which he is investigating the three existential structures that make Being-in-the-world possible: “attunement” (*Befindlichkeit*), “understanding” (*Verstehen*), and “discourse” (*Rede*).  

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51 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (*FCM*).
Befindlichkeit can be translated “disposition” or “situatedness” and, as Guignon notes, it is a neologism derived from the German expression “Wie befinden Sie Sich?” (literally, “How do you find yourself?”), or “How are you?” Or, as Heidegger says, “A mood makes manifest ‘how one is, and how one is faring’. In this ‘how one is’, having a mood brings Being to its ‘there’” (BT 173/134; see also, FCM 67/101). What Heidegger is getting at here is the fact that we are always already situated or contextualized in the world in a certain way. We are attuned to our world just as a radio must be tuned into a station in order for us to hear anything that makes sense (rather than static noise). Hubert Dreyfus helpfully explains that Befindlichkeit is “Heidegger’s term for the receptive aspect of Dasein’s way of being, that it just finds things and ways of acting mattering to it.” The use of the term “receptive” should not be misunderstood here as a matter of a subject passively experiencing or feeling the pressure of something outside of it. Rather, attunement signifies the way in which Dasein always already finds itself receiving significance and meaning from a situation into which it is thrown and to and by which it is attuned. This “primordial” structure of attunement is manifest in everyday, concrete experience as the way in which “in every case Dasein always has some mood” (BT 173/134). “Attunements [Stimmungen, moods] are the fundamental ways in which we find ourselves disposed in such and such a way” (FCM 67/101) “Mood” translates Stimmung, and, as Guignon succinctly explains, it indicates the “particular way we are ‘tuned in’ to the world in our activities. For Heidegger, we are always in some mood or

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52 These three terms are all Stambaugh’s translations. Macquarrie and Robinson (1962) translate Befindlichkeit as “state-of-mind” which has unfortunate and inaccurate connotations of subjective mental or cognitive states.


other.”\textsuperscript{55} So, for example, when I am in the mood of fear, I might experience even the most familiar places, such as my house, as terrifying, full of danger, and threatening.

Because moods reveal the world in certain tones and colors, they are disclosive of what “matters” to us. Bruce Ballard explains that as “complex affective phenomena,” moods “generate interest in certain aspects of our surroundings; they reflect interpretations of ourselves and others; they supply purposes which set agendas for our action.”\textsuperscript{56} This is why Heidegger’s use of “mood” should not be confused with emotions or passions. As “tunings,” existential moods encompass our total outlook or perspective on the world rather than functioning like a transient emotion (like the onset of rage). Unlike other affects and manifestations of affective phenomena, “[m]oods are the most complete affects in their supplying us with a total orientation” and thus, “moods are more pervasive than feelings or emotions (which may be fleeting and tend to focus on this or that particular object).”\textsuperscript{57} Heidegger proceeds to isolate three characteristics of attunement (\textit{Befindlichkeit}) and the way that it discloses our Being-in-the-world.

First, “[A]ttunements\textit{ disclose Dasein in its thrownness}” (\textit{BT} 175/136); for, “[i]n having a mood, Dasein is always disclosed moodwise as that entity to which it has been delivered over in its Being” (\textit{BT} 173/134). Moods, then, disclose the primordial fact of our being “delivered over” to life, the manner in which I am always already “thrown” into existence, immersed and situated in the world, and embedded within a context of significance and meaning that is already there. Furthermore, because we don’t generally

\textsuperscript{55} Guignon (2003), p. 184.


pursue what is disclosed in our thrownness, we will instead turn way from or evade this fact. “[I]t is just as everyday a matter for Dasein not to ‘give in’ to such moods—in other words, not to follow up their disclosure and allow itself to be brought before that which is disclosed” (BT 173/134-135); which is why “[t]he way in which the mood discloses is not one in which we look at thrownness, but one in which we turn towards or away” (BT 174/135).

As a human being, I am confronted by facticity, the fact that I have been thrown or delivered over to a particular existential situation or way of being and hence, handed the task of taking up the past and projecting the future. This facticity can be burdensome and the manifestation of thrownness in attunement is often “thrust aside” (BT 174/135). “Being,” Heidegger writes, “has become manifest as a burden. Why that should be, one does not know” (BT 173/134). Moods disclose my facticity, my thrownness, and in so doing, they reveal an existential-ontological structure of attunement, a situatedness within a world and context into which I have been delivered over. In this being delivered over, I experience life as a burden, as a task, and seek to evade what is disclosed in mood.

Second, “The mood has already disclosed, in every case, Being-in-the-world as a whole, and makes it possible first of all to direct oneself towards something” (BT 176/137). A mood enables us to be in a world, in a meaningful context, in the first place; without a mood, I am not “in” a world at all. Only by being attuned to the world in a particular mood, can we see, engage, and encounter things and others that already matter to us. Moods, Dreyfus writes, “are all ontic specifications of affectedness [Befindlichkeit], the ontological existential condition that things always already matter.”

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It is not, of course, that moods disclose only how we find ourselves in a world of things that matter, but they also reveal possibilities of being that matter. As Guignon explains, “Moods enable us to focus our attention and orient ourselves . . . What we do encounter in our attuned situatedness is not just worldhood, but rather a highly determinate cultural world. Through our moods we discover the range of possibilities laid out in our world.”

The disclosure of our being-in-the-world through moods, therefore, constitutes the condition of the possibility of our being oriented in the manner necessary for meaningful engagement.

Third, “[ex]istentially, a state-of-mind [attunement] implies a disclosive submission to the world, out of which we can encounter something that matters to us” (BT 177/138). That is, only through moods can those things that Dasein “encounters in the world” show up as “matter[ing] to it”; for “the fact that this sort of thing can ‘matter’ to it is grounded in one’s state-of-mind [attunement]; and as a state-of-mind [attunement] it has already disclosed the world—as something by which it can be threatened, for instance” (BT 176/137). Only because the world is encountered as meaningful under the influence of a mood, can things matter for us. Only because we are already attuned to the world in a certain mood, can we encounter things, events, and others as significant, enjoyable, threatening, interesting, and desirable, as possessing a value. Or, as Heidegger puts it, “Dasein’s openness to the world is constituted existentially by the attunement of a state-of-mind [Befindlichkeit]” such that “entities within-the-world ‘matter’ to it in a way which its moods have outlined in advance” (BT 176/137, 177/137).

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Heidegger's conception of attunement as an existential-ontological phenomenon, as a constitutive way of being-in-the-world, challenges the traditional understanding of the affects and their role (usually disruptive and irrational). According to the traditional philosophical understanding, “affects and feelings come under the theme of psychical phenomena, functioning as a third class of these, usually along with ideation [Vorstellen] and volition” (BT 178/139). To understand the nature and function of affectivity as fundamental, as a condition for the possibility of encountering a meaningful world, is to take seriously the way in which the world, things, and events are “colored” by moods. Attunement, Heidegger concludes, “not only discloses Dasein in its thrownness and its submission to that world which is already disclosed with its own Being; it is itself the existential kind of Being in which Dasein constantly surrenders itself to the ‘world’ and lets the ‘world’ ‘matter’ to it in such a way that somehow Dasein evades its very self . . . in the phenomenon of entanglement” (BT 178/139). Attunement, then, not only provides us with a meaningful world, it also discloses the character of the relationships that constitute our identities, our existence, as human beings. This character is one of thrownness, of being “delivered over” to life and to our possibilities; it is a relationship of dependence, of dependency, but it also one of being-open-toward a world, of being exposed and vulnerable.

It is important to note that Heidegger does not conceive of moods as private, subjective phenomena; instead, following up on his analysis of the “they,” or das Man, character of Dasein, moods are considered public, the range of possible moods limited to what the “They”—the cultural world, the social realm into which Dasein is thrown—allows. “Publicness, as the kind of Being which belongs to the ‘they’, not only has in
general its own way of having a mood, but needs moods and ‘makes’ them for itself” (*BT* 178/138). “The dominance of the public way in which things have been interpreted has already been decisive even for the possibilities of having a mood—that is, for the basic way in which Dasein lets the world ‘matter’ to it. The ‘they’ prescribes one’s state-of-mind [attunement], and determines what and how one ‘sees’” (*BT* 213/169-170).

Guignon clarifies:

In everydayness, Dasein is the “Anyone,” and that means that its attunement is always a *shared, communal* way of being tuned in to the world. As we grow up in the social world into which we are thrown, we also become masters of a determinate range of possible moods that are “accepted” in our world.

. . .

Our moods are always regulated and generated by a shared attunement to public “forms of life” in our culture. 

. . .

In our everyday lives we are generally “delivered over to” the public way of interpreting things, “which controls and distributes the possibilities of average understanding and of the situatedness belonging to it” (167-168). From this standpoint our moods are not “private” or “personal”, but rather are essentially public, part of the “world” instead of something “in” the “self.”

This is of particular import for an understanding of existential trust. For if existential trust can be conceived in terms of an existential mood, then it would appear to be generated out of interpersonal or social relationality. A modified version of this view is, in fact, what will be argued for in the next chapter.

*Relating Heidegger’s Analysis of Moods and Attunement to Existential Trust*

Several important points have emerged in the discussion of Heidegger’s notions of *Befindlichkeit* and *Stimmung*. I would now like to relate these points to the claim that existential trust is a kind of fundamental mood.

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61 Ibid, p. 188.
1. Moods are pervasive and ubiquitous, so much so, in fact, that the most powerful moods are those of which we are unaware. Similarly, existential trust and its derivative forms (what Heidegger might call ontic-existentiell forms of trust) are so pervasive, so familiar, that we don’t know that we are trusting much of the time. We take trust for granted; particularly, existential trust, which is so diffuse, global, and primordial, that, for the most part of our lives, it does not appear for us as a matter of concern at all, providing as it does the background for our engagements. Only when trust is betrayed, disrupted, or reflected upon will its taken-for-granted character disappear such that its presence can be recognized. In other words, existing without existential trust is not a default condition, for I can only exist in a mood of distrust and suspicion if I have had express occasion to have my trust in existence shaken. Even in such a case, it is not the case that distrust necessarily displaces or eliminates existential trust—I do not pass from the mood of existential trust to a mood of existential distrust so much as modify my basic existential trust on the basis of some betrayal, dread, or disorder to include (consciously or unconsciously, willfully or in spite of myself), even pervasively and dominantly include, distrust as a mode of disclosure. In other words, distrust always comes too late to trust, it is always after the fact of trust.

2. Attunement is a primordial, fundamental way of being. Heidegger insists time after time that moods are fundamental ways of being-in-the-world. Existential trust too is fundamental to a meaningful human existence, for it enables us to act in the world and to exist in and assent to those relations that constitute meaning in existence. A modification to Heidegger’s analysis of moods is necessary, however, for existential trust seems to be more basic than the existential moods that he mentions. Existential trust provides the
background against which a given mood develops. Indeed, existential trust is how Dasein is held open toward its world and how Dasein is an opening or clearing within which things and a world come to be.

3. Moods are disclosive. Along with understanding (Verstehen), attunement (Befindlichkeit) discloses Dasein’s being-in-the-world, its openness in and toward the world. Existential trust is primordially disclosive in that it reveals a relational context in terms of which a human existence is constituted and upon which our existence depends. Additionally, we are always already surrendered to and concerned with these constitutive relationships in existential trust. Existential trust, then, involves a certain fundamental confidence or assurance in a world that shows up and matters to me. It expresses the way in which I find myself inhabiting a context of meaning at any given moment. Existential trust enables projection of possibilities, shows up things and projects that matter to me, discloses existence as a meaningful whole of determinate practices and modes of comportment, and tunes me into the world, things, and others in such a way as to count for me in my concern-ful engagements.

Existential trust is what allows the world, others, things, practices, possibilities, and my self to be given as intelligible and meaningful. It enables the things that one cares about, those things that matter to one, to show up and to thrive. Correlatively, existential trust is a manifestation of the manner in which I am given over to life, to existence, to a context of purposes and available possibilities. As human beings, we exist in a world to which we belong, we in-habit the world as a relational context of available, ready-to-hand intelligibility in which things matter for and are of concern to us, we are given over to
possibilities and projects that show up against a background familiarity—and existential trust is the basic mood that discloses this primordial being-in-the-world.

Heidegger has claimed that being as a whole and beings as such are given to Dasein. Part of how the world and beings are given to Dasein is through moods, which manifest primordial attunement (*Befindlichkeit*) and thus disclose our thrownness (always already delivered over to determinate ways of being and engaging with things), being in the world as a whole by means of which we orient ourselves within the world (worldhood as well as a determinate set of possibilities), and those things that matter to us, that have value for us. As the most basic of moods, existential trust is the name for that most originary openness toward the world, a certain familiarity and receptivity that is inhabited and within which we dwell. Existential trust designates the manner whereby, originary and for the most part, we implicitly accept, take up, and are familiar with the sense and contextual significance of things, a world, others, and possibilities.

Before I can consciously act or experience or think about anything, the world and existence must have a sense, a tone, a coloring, that is enabled by the mood I am in. Trust is the way in which I bring this sense of things, this mattering, into my everyday engagements and comportment. It is the sense of being secured and upheld, of being opened toward, directed within, and demanded of that is brought into our relationships and into the most simple and automatic of everyday acts. This indicates that existential trust (and trust generally) is not a passive and complacent resting-in the familiar, but rather an active responsivity toward the sense of existence and an intimate act of receiving what is given. Existential trust involves actively taking up possibilities and
meanings made available by the life into which one is thrown, a life with which one is entrusted.

Similar to Heidegger’s claim that “thrownness,” our facticity, is experienced as both a burden and a task, we can see how the human being, in being entrusted to life, also has a sense, a feeling, of being entrusted with her or his life. This primarily affective experience of being entrusted to and with life is that of having one’s life demanded of one in some way. To be sure, existential trust does involve a demand (just as my friendship with another involves a demand to be trustworthy and to care for my friend), a continually refreshed demand to take up one’s life as a task, a demand to which an ever-renewed response constitutes a person’s entire life.

Contra Heidegger: Existential Trust as the Most Basic Mood

Appropriating the insights of Peperzak and Solomon’s work on trust and Heidegger’s conception of moods, a phenomenological sketch of existential trust has emerged, a description of the root phenomenon of trust that helps to explain the pervasive and integral role of trust in human life. Existential trust, I maintain, is a kind of mood, but it is not just any mood, such as fear or anxiety, rather it is more diffuse and fundamental than the other moods: indeed, it often accompanies the other moods. Hence, it names the mode of being or existing in the world such that I find myself attuned to the world in a certain way at the same time that I am attuned from a certain lived place, perpetually responding to the way the world and the phenomena encountered in it affect me. This

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62 For a parallel account of this phenomenon, see Daniel Heller-Roazen’s discussion of the “feeling of existence”/“sensation of life” in The Inner Touch: Archeology of a Sensation, where he writes that the human being possesses a “sense of sensing, by which we find ourselves, . . . consigned, before or beyond all consciousness, to the omnipresent ‘life . . . through which and to which’ all animals come, ‘without ever knowing how’” (2009: p. 19; the quotes are from E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Opinions of Murr the Cat).
understanding of existential trust does not strictly correlate to Heidegger’s concepts of *Befindlichkeit* or *Stimmung*, for though existential trust operates as a mode of being situated and oriented, just as mood is a manifestation of *Befindlichkeit* (attunement, situatedness), it is nonetheless the case that basic trust operates as something like both *Befindlichkeit* and *Stimmung*, exhibiting something of the function of the former and something of the character of the latter.

To the degree that it frequently operates as the basis of other moods, existential trust enables existence to matter to me in the most basic manner so that I can then encounter things through other moods, the mood of fear, for example. For example, with the most common and mundane experiences of fear, it is only insofar as I am attuned to the world in the mode of existential trust that I can assume the mood of fear such that others and things can affect me as obtrusive and threatening, as impinging upon and disrupting my world, and I will respond to their threatening affectation with wariness and distrust. What of Heidegger’s contention in *Being and Time* that *Angst*, Anxiety, is the most basic, most revealing, mood because it concerns “*Being-in-the-world as such*” (230/186)?

According to Heidegger’s phenomenological description of the mood of anxiety, I feel anxious in the face of the world as such, being-in-the-world as such, and not this or that being among others. This is what differentiates anxiety from fear. Fear has a determinate object, whereas “[t]hat in the face of which one is anxious is completely indefinite,” so much so, in fact, that “entities within-the-world are not ‘relevant’ at all,” “the world has the character of completely lacking significance,” and one is “incapable of having an involvement” with entities (*BT* 231/186). As a mood, anxiety is disclosive; but
what anxiety discloses, by rendering “entities within-the-world” insignificant, is the “world in its worldhood” (BT 231/187). And this is the (authenticating) power of anxiety: It “discloses, primordially and directly, the world as world” and in so doing, strips away Dasein’s understanding of itself, the world, and things as “publically interpreted” (BT 232/187). As “[e]veryday familiarity collapses,” Dasein is individualized in such a way as to allow it to take up its possibilities in authentic freedom (BT 233/189). Though “it is essential to every state-of-mind [attunement] that in each case Being-in-the-world should be fully disclosed in all those items which are constitutive for it—world, Being-in, Self,” Heidegger grants anxiety a special priority and status in that “anxiety individualizes” and this “individualization brings Dasein back from its falling, and makes manifest to it that authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of its Being” (BT 235/190-191).

Without a doubt, Heidegger’s exploration of the phenomenon of anxiety is brilliant in its descriptive power; however, the claim that anxiety reveals the world most primordially and directly of all the moods is questionable. Furthermore, Heidegger’s later claim, in The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics, that the mood of boredom constitutes the “fundamental attunement” (Grundstimmung, ground-mood) of the age, implies that certain moods are primordial in their power to disclose being more directly and basically than any others. Heidegger’s choice of what constitutes the most fundamental mood, anxiety in Being and Time and boredom in The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics, does not determine the order of primacy among moods. Anxiety, by severing Dasein’s attachments and connections to everyday familiarity and absorbed activity in the world, cannot do the work of explaining the most fundamental characteristic of moods, for a mood, as Heidegger himself insists, “sets the tone for such
being, i.e., attunes and determines the manner and way of [Dasein’s] being,” constitutes “the fundamental way in which Dasein is as Dasein,” and, as the “originary way in which every Dasein is as it is,” a mood is “that which gives Dasein subsistence and possibility in its very foundations” (FCM 67/100-101). Rather, the mood that most primordially discloses the “fundamental ways in which we find ourselves disposed in such and such a way” in the world, is existential trust—for existential trust names the way in which a human being is supportingly upheld in openness toward a world, others, things, and possibilities, actively responding to their imperatives in taking up its existence as a task.

This description of the phenomenon of existential trust will be unpacked in more detail below; the point that I wish to make at present, however, is that the mood of existential trust is more fundamental and primordial than any other mood. In order to give further support for this claim, I will briefly consider passages from Alphonso Lingis’s Sensation and Adriaan Peperzak’s Elements of Ethics.

Expanding upon Heidegger’s analysis of thrownness and the They (das Man, the One, Anyone) in Being and Time, Lingis writes, “One is born with forces that one did not contrive. One lives by giving form to those forces. The forms one gets from the others.”63 In being thrown into a world, into a context of already available possibilities, meanings, activities, and perspective, one finds oneself in the “forms” that are publicly generated and made accessible to one. Hence, “One makes oneself someone by giving oneself form. One acquires a gender, a function, a solidity. . . . The forms of one’s movements and postures, of one’s gaits and gestures, of one’s conversations and thoughts, and of one’s

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feelings and one’s perceptions one picks up from others, passes on to others.”

In other words, by and large I form and maintain an identity that is sanction and generated by the They. The basic fact of our thrownness revealed in attunement, finding ourselves already amidst a world of ready-to-hand identities and possibilities, is rarely cognized or consciously attended to—and yet, our meaningful activities and pursuits are shaped, guided, and conform to public expectations concerning what one is and does. Peperzak also notes this structure, when he writes,

"Becoming aware of myself, I find myself involved in a particular world of people (parents, educators, others like me), places (houses, streets, countrysides), events (historical and private), and several communities with their own histories and traditions. These people, communities, and histories have formed me. I share their culture, including their beliefs and their customs. Much of my identity is a result of this engagement."

This everyday absorption in and conformity to given structures and pursuits is part of human facticity and it is manifest as burden of existence, the relentless need to “make something of ourselves,” generally in accordance with what the They prescribes.

There are disruptions in this factical absorption, however. Lingis explains, “Into this succession of days and tasks that recur each day, there come bad hours in which we sense that the forms we have given our lives are coffins . . . The very recurrence of the days and the day’s work gives us the sense that nothing is being accomplished, the kitchen each day has to be cleaned up all over again, the office desk cleared, the assembly line run through again.”

This is anxiety and it “senses that what death is closing in on is

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not me, but rather my identity,” for now “this identity seems to have been nothing of my own.” In other words, one’s life is revealed to be a life that Anyone (das Man) could live. Anxiety forces one to confront the contingency, the emptiness, or the nothingness upon which one’s meaningful engagements have been based. Is this the last word, however? This is where Heidegger stops and claims that anxiety is the most revealing mood because it is the most unsettling and uncanny (Unheimlich), the significance of things is stripped bare of its color and splendor, and the support of existence is cut out from underneath one. It is not the case, however, that the mood of anxiety replaces or eliminates that of existential trust—for existential trust is a supportive and upholding way of being that is based upon an ineliminable grounding in life, no matter how unaware we are of it.

Lingis makes this point when he indicates that the “singular force and heat of a life one’s own finds still, in the drifting dissolution of the instrumental and social environment [disclosed in anxiety], a substantial raft of earth under its feet. From the dissolving carpentry of the environment the elemental rises up. This life finds something solid, something supporting, unnameable, that does not crystallize into the recognizable outlines of layouts and well-worn paths that recur across the common and public world of the day.” Though Lingis goes on to indicate that it is through the mood of anxiety, perhaps exclusively, that “one finds one’s own forces of existing,” “a compass of elemental possibilities responding to oneself alone,” the crucial point is that anxiety

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68 Ibid.
cannot rid itself of the elemental solidity, support, and earthly ground of which existential trust so clearly is aware.\textsuperscript{69}

Peperzak criticizes Heidegger on precisely this point, as is evidenced by the following:

anxiety cannot constitute the primordial mood of my being, for it can only arise as a response to a fundamental threat. Existence as such is experienced as that which—although unnecessary and without ground—is given as being there. Before anxiety creeps in, the experience of my being as that and what I am—a human existence—takes the form of an original consent and agreement: I embrace it, try to persevere in it, and protect it against the nothingness from which it has emerged. Anxiety accompanies this experience, but it rides on the back of a positive assent: the \textit{Jasagen} [affirmation] through which I appropriate my contingent, fragile, unprotected, but nonetheless given, real, and cherished existence. . . . Acceptance of our existence, self-affirmation, self-love, endurance, perseverance, and concern for ourselves are conditions of life. All of these are positive responses to the givenness of our being . . . the fundamental mood that permeates a human life expresses a profound kind of agreement.\textsuperscript{70}

Where Peperzak speaks of “an original consent and agreement,” “positive assent,” affirmation, and “acceptance of existence,” as the “fundamental mood,” I have been speaking of existential trust.\textsuperscript{71} The point is that our “attachments” and “involvement” with the world, and its involvement and engagement with us, ensure that existential trust is the primordial mood. It is not possible to sever the real, lived relations in life that anchor us to existence, define our identities and engagements, and sustain our human “forces of existing” (Lingis), “original consent and agreement” to existence (Peperzak), or what Daniel Heller-Roazen calls the “feeling of existence” or “sensation of life”

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., p. 5

\textsuperscript{70} Peperzak (2004), pp. 58, 59.

\textsuperscript{71} In another work, Peperzak explicitly speaks of trust as lived affirmation, “the element of consent in our moods, the basic mood” (2005: p. 75).
manifest in existential trust. The sense of the way in which a human being is
supportingly upheld in openness toward a world, others, things, and possibilities, and
actively responding to their imperatives in taking up its existence as a task—this sense
captures the mood of existential trust, and it is both deep and profound, given with a
world, others, things, and possibilities, and sustained in our day-to-day activities and
encounters regardless of whether we attend to it in a mood of anxiety, an act of reflection,
or as a matter of personal concern. In his analysis of mood, Peperzak describes how
“moods unite the world and me in one feeling,” and in defining a mood as “a
characteristic mode of modulating human existence, a fundamental and global response
to its inescapable givenness, the background music of its being-there as being affected by
the world and itself,” he approximates the “sense” that existential trust captures.

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, the following five features of existential
mood as such can be distinguished. All moods (i) disclose being-in-the-world as a whole
and thus act as necessary conditions for orienting ourselves; (ii) all moods reveal our
thrownness; all moods (iii) constitute a way of being attuned to the world such things can
matter to us and so that we can matter; all moods (iv) are generated and made available
publicly; and finally, due to their affective character, (v) moods are ways of being
affected by the world, of receiving the givenness of existence, at the same time that
moods enable an active responses to the demands inherent in such affectation. I have
discussed the first four features of mood already, but the last point—that of affectedness
and demand—needs further elaboration.

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72 See Daniel Heller-Roazen (2007).

**Mood, Affectation, and Demand**

A mood is an expression of the way in which “[t]he world forces me to accept its necessities and suggests possibilities for my reactions.”\(^{74}\) This is a way of saying that just by the nature of existence, of life, I am subject to its demands and imperatives; or, conversely, the world affects me in fundamental and inescapable ways. At the most basic of levels, the fact that I live at all indicates that I am continually affected or moved by vital necessities of some kind. As was argued in the last chapter, Nietzsche’s work is driven and motivated by this thought. On another level, one that is as fundamental to human beings as that of vital life, the fact that I exist in the world in a specially human way, means that I am affected by, subjected to, certain existential imperatives and demands. This claim is developed, at least implicitly, by Plato, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Peperzak elucidates, “Being involved in the story of a surrounding world is to be affected without and within. . . . All beings with whom I share the same space and time touch and partially determine me. I experience myself as constantly affected by what I am not. Affection envelops my commerce with the world.”\(^ {75}\)

Furthermore, to the extent that human life and existence, significance and meaning, as well as understanding is to be found in being-in-relationship (relationships with others, a world, oneself, things, possibilities, etc.), then it follows that being-in-relationship involves demand and affectivity as well. Let us not misunderstand what is meant by being-in-relationship here. The claim is not that a human being enters into relationship with others or a world of his or her own accord; this understanding of

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\(^{74}\) Ibid.

\(^{75}\) Peperzak (2004) p. 56.
“being-in-relationship,” though true for conscious subjects, is not adequate to explain what precedes and grounds the possibility for conscious judgment and decision. Rather, being-in-relationship designates the way in which a human being is or exists as a relationship. I am not primarily a separable, self-same substance that can be isolated and separated from other substances. To think of myself as primarily such a substance, is to divorce myself from the relational context from which I live and exist. Rather, I am, I exist, in and through a relational context. To an extent, it could be said that I am the sum total of my relationships. Hence, it follows from this relational understanding that who and how I am is largely a product of how I respond to being affected by the demands of my involvement in constitutive relationships. Peperzak confirms this when he claims, “I feel an affection as done to me and undergone/received by me; I feel myself (as) touched by something,” from which he concludes, “The structure of affectivity is relational.”

Inasmuch as existential moods reflect the way in which human beings relate to being-in-the-world as a whole, or existence as such, then we are primordially affected by our relationship to existence such that moods disclose the burden of taking up the demands of that existence.

We “fall” into an existential mood (from another mood) in large part due to the way in which we are affected by the world. That is, a mood is a response to the way in which we are affected by the world and thus it enables us to be affected by phenomena in a certain way so that these phenomena can matter to us in a certain way.

Phenomena address—touch, confront, surprise, amaze, stir, trouble—us. Whatever they do to us, we are affected by them as soon as we pay attention to them . . . in different degrees of insistence, they address us, call on us, appeal to us. However,

their ways of appearing and affecting are diverse: each phenomenon has its own manner of provoking us.\textsuperscript{77}

As soon as we allow something (or someone) to affect us, we are challenged: being affected (that is feeling an affection) is feeling provoked and urged to react. In their address, phenomena suggest and request, or even demand, a response … in our response, we must accept and ‘recognize’ the proper character of the affecting phenomenon. Our response … must therefore involve a form of adjustment, at least to some extent.\textsuperscript{78}

When a particular mood “comes over” me, I will be affected by things differently than in another mood. Additionally, certain things will matter for me differently according to what mood I am ‘in’. When the mood of unbridled exuberance comes over me, my place in the universe and my existence as a whole affects me as warm and joyous (I might say, “My prospects are bright”), things will appear bright and rosy, in a cheerful aspect. I do not regard the car driver who just cut me off with anger and a jaded view of today’s youth—in fact, this incident, which on most days would matter to me, might not matter to me at all in my jubilant mood. My step is “light” as they say, and I see new and exciting possibilities opening up for the first time in my life while the negative possibilities recede. It is clear that my mood of exuberance is a response to the affectation of the world, at the same time, that it opens me up towards the affective demands of phenomena in a distinct manner.

To sum up: Existing in a mood is a function of the way in which I am affected by others and by inhabiting an existence defined first and foremost by being-in-relation, such that I am continually engaging with beings, others, and other phenomena; invested in the relations that define my being and life; and responding to these affectations. In

\textsuperscript{77} Peperzak (2004), p.61-62.

\textsuperscript{78} Peperzak (2004), p. 62.
other words, the genesis of meaning and significance in existence at this most basic of levels, involves the recognition that the shape and tone, the structure and configuration, and the form and content of the (actual or possible) phenomena encountered are constituted in response to the manner whereby these phenomena affect me. Peperzak encapsulates this point in the following remark: “Being affected by phenomena, we react by affectively responding to them. How we respond depends upon the openness and refinement of our sensitivity, our character, the story of our life, and many other conditions. So long as we continue to live, however, there is always some sort of basic consent and trust.”

This assertion allows a central feature of existential trust to emerge: Trust “holds us open” in the constitutive relationships that shape and determine our lives. It is not that the “openness” or “sensitivity” to the affectation of phenomena is a matter of choice; rather, we are, by nature of the kind of beings that we are, always already held open toward and affected by the phenomena encountered. Trust, therefore, is the means whereby we are affected by phenomena, and insofar as this affectation demands a response, calls for a particular engagement with and comportment toward these phenomena, this response will “color” and “fill out” existence in a meaningful way.

The Distinctive Features of Existential Trust

So what about existential trust? How does the world affect me in this most basic of moods? How does existential trust, as the basis and background for the other moods, enable phenomena to affect me with their demands? Do things matter to me differently in the basic mood of trust as opposed to a mood that is grounded on trust? These questions

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79 Peperzak (2005), p. 75.
need to be addressed, and I will do so by investigating existential trust with an eye to its characteristics. There are several features of existential trust that distinguish it from other moods and ways of being beyond the fact that it is the most basic of existential moods and the most fundamental way of being-in-relationship (to others, things, oneself, a world, an environment, events, etc.).

In the first part of this chapter, I had already isolated four characteristic ways that the phenomenon of trust is manifest in our everyday, concrete experience of relationships. These four are: vulnerable openness, supportive upholding, attunement, and demand. To illuminate the way in which trust can be distinctively characterized through these four characteristics, I want to briefly employ a metaphor: That of a standing human being.

_Illustrating Existential Trust through the Metaphorical Description of a Standing Human Being_

When I am standing, my feet are placed on the ground, supporting my weight through my contact with the far greater support of the earth (or a surface supported by the earth). Thus it is that my weight and posture are steadied by virtue of the firm footing the ground supplies. I feel secure, upheld, confident because of the stability of the earth on which I stand and rely to keep me upright and positioned.

At the same time, in standing upright, I am exposed to the uneven surfaces of the earth and to all of the forces and elements above the earth, in my environment. I cannot see in all directions at once, nor be turned in all directions, but rather I am limited to a specific outlook. Because of this exposure, I am vulnerable, subject to an infinite variety of ways of being affected by phenomena in my surrounding environment. In my exposed
and vulnerable position, I am open to being affected to be sure, but I am open in such a way as to reach out towards the world at the same time that I receive it. This openness allows me to feel, perceive, focus upon, and accept what is given to me in my surroundings.

In concert with this experience of openness and secure footing, I also feel oriented, for I must assume a distinct orientation that is dictated by the direction I am facing. In being directed, I am attuned to the landscape, the features, movements, and colors available to my limitation of perspective. Also, my upright posture determines an orientation of place and of the approach and location of things in space. Without such orientation and attunement, I could not attend to anything at all, nor could I perceive and respond to what affects me.

Finally, my posture and my stance is largely determined and shaped as a response to the demands of various forces, phenomena, movements, and necessities of embodiment and thought to which I am susceptible. I must hold myself in a certain way if I am to stand securely, obeying the dictates of gravity and of the sensations my feet pick up as they are affected by the contours and consistency of the earth. In perceiving the features of the land or room about me, my eyes follow the imperatives of surface and depth, caressing the textured surface of things and responding to the way that things present themselves.

As just described, when I stand, I am and feel supported by the ground, upheld and secure; I am vulnerable and open, exposed, to the elements and forces; I am oriented, facing a certain direction and attuned to those features and things that I face; and finally, in order to stand, I must heed the directives and imperatives of my environment, my feet
must heed the contours of the broken earth, and my body must adjust to the atmosphere and movements around me. It is not just that these features show up when I am standing, of course; they are also involved as the conditions for my movement and active commerce with the world and things within it.

Existential trust is manifest in our everyday experience in a way that is similar to the experience of standing or moving. I have tried to show that existential trust is a mood, the most primordial mood in fact. Like all existential moods, existential trust is disclosive. It discloses our primordial situatedness, the fact that one “finds” oneself entangled and situated within a relational context of meaning and significance. Disclosing our being-in-the-world as a whole, existential trust attunes one to one’s global situation, the totality of available sense and possibilities, the background from which things, events, and others can affect and touch us in certain ways (hence, in the mood of fear, a person walking in the shadows affects me as threatening). Finally, as a mood, existential trust enables things and possibilities to matter in particular ways.

Now, in a sense, existential trust is mood (or “moodiness”) as such insofar as it is the condition for the possibility of all the other moods. Hence, existential trust operates as the primordially disclosive function as such in that disclosure implies a certain primordial lived assent or consent to our thrownness into a relational context and to meaningfulness or “mattering” as such. In terms of our experience of standing, existential trust is a manifestation of the way in which we are held out into and standing within existence in a specifically human way. In terms of this image, existential trust is that which holds one up into the situation in which one is thrown, orienting and attuning one to specific features and meanings of things that are available as matters of concern, holding one
open to the solicitations and directives of phenomena and others, allowing them to affect one in certain ways, and finally, existential trust is the means whereby one receives and is enabled to respond to the demands of existence that emerge from our being-in-relation.

Just as moods constitute distinct ways of being affected by our situatedness and our being-in-the-world, so too does existential trust involve responsiveness to the demands of our relationships.\(^80\) Existential trust involves taking up these demands by responding to them with acceptance, resistance, or discernment. Such responsibility defines the direction and character of one’s existence, for how responsive to and how accepting of the demand one is has everything to do with the intensity, scope, and depth of a relationship; and because relationships shape existence, then someone who, for one reason or another, is closed off and unresponsive to the demands of his or her more or less fundamental relationships is likely to have an attenuated, strained, or impoverished existence. Thus, we can understand that the need to participate in the relationships that define the character and quality of our existence is a function of feeling entrusted with life, responsible for those relationships to which we belong.\(^81\)

On the basis of the foregoing I can now define existential trust as a primordial mood (global and diffuse) with a distinct affective character or “feel” that arises on the basis of one’s situatedness in the nest of relationships that constitute existence. The

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\(^80\) Trust sometimes involves an apparent forgetfulness of the demand in those relationships that are most familiar or that we most rely on. Actually, however, such ‘forgetfulness’ is a habitual response to the demands inherent in the relationships—one has always already adjusted to the solicitations of the other term in relation.

\(^81\) It expresses the way in which I find myself inhabiting a context of meaning at any given moment. Existential trust enables projection of possibilities, shows up things and projects that matter to me, discloses existence as a meaningful whole of determinate practices and modes of comportment, and tunes me into the world, things, and others in such a way as to count for me in my concern-ful engagements.
affective character specific to existential trust is an overall effect of four characteristics: 

*supportive upholding, vulnerable openness, attuned orientation, and demand.* The sketch of existential trust that I have provided constitutes an attempt to remedy what is lacking in most contemporary philosophical treatments of trust. Such treatments are modeled on forms of trust that are confined to intersubjective relationships as well as narrow sets of conditions that result in the failure to either appreciate or accommodate the way in which trust can be both *global,* encompassing the whole network of relations that compose existence, and *pervasive,* manifest to some degree in virtually every human transaction, engagement, and relation.
CHAPTER EIGHT:

ETHICS AND TRUST

We reached the curving brink of a steep bank
constructed of enormous broken rocks;
below us was a crueler den of pain.

“Fraud, that gnaws the conscience of its servants,
can be used on one who puts his trust in you
or else on one who has no trust invested.

This latter sort seems only to destroy
the bond of love that Nature gives to man;
so in the second circle there are nests
of hypocrites, flatterers, dabblers in sorcery,
falsifiers, thieves, and simonists,
panders, seducers, grafters, and like filth.

the former kind of fraud both disregards
the love Nature enjoys and that extra bond
between men which creates a special trust;

thus, it is in the smallest of the circles,
at the earth’s center, around the throne of Dis,
that traitors suffer their eternal pain.

—Dante’s *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, Canto XI, 1-3, 52-66

When Virgil describes the logic behind the type of sinner assigned to the most
severe forms of punishment it is startling to realize that Dante has determined that those
who commit *fraud* against their fellow human beings are *worse than murderers.*

Furthermore, among those who commit fraud, the absolute worst are those who have
betrayed “special trust” amongst human beings. These are the unfortunate souls who
inhabit the Ninth Circle of the inferno, the Circle of Treachery. They have violated not only the natural bond of love toward fellow human beings, but, even more dammingly, they have violated that “special trust” that binds human beings together in community and society. For Dante, apparently, there is no sociality, no order, and hence, no morality among human beings without trust. Though Dante does not develop a robust account of trust in *The Divine Comedy* nor explain its importance, one can easily surmise that he understood a breach of trust to constitute a great moral evil because it severs us from one another in such a way that murder, rape, thievery, usury, and the like are made possible. To betray trust is to willfully violate the very core of what lends significance and meaning to human lives and such a violation denies the responsibility for the other inherent in the relation of trust.

What exactly is this link between trust and sociality, trust and ethics? In the last chapter, I sketched a conception of existential trust, appropriating Heidegger’s notion of “mood” (*Stimmung*) and “situatedness” (*Befindlichkeit*) in order to show how existential trust can best be described as a basic mood. There we saw that Heidegger claims that moods are prescribed and produced by the “they” (the Anyone); that is, the range of moods available to me is limited by what is publically available, by what moods one or Anyone can be “in.” The mood in which I find myself is always already a mood that is made available to anyone in the social milieu and the “time” (in the sense of an Era or Age) into which I have been “thrown.” To put it differently, *sociality* determines what shows up (and can show up) as mattering to me because it generates the mood in which I find myself. If this is the case, then the mood of *existential trust* is generated and
sustained by *sociality*. That is, the manner whereby I find myself securely upheld, vulnerably open, oriented, and demanded in existence is a function of the publicly available structures, practices, and modes of feeling secure, vulnerable, and so on—i.e., my way of existentially trusting is a way available to “Anyone.” The problem with this picture is that Heidegger does not propose the *mechanism* whereby one transitions from one mood to another. Though moods are publicly available possibilities of finding oneself “there,” this does not help us determine how it is that one moves from one mood to another mood. In the last chapter, I suggested that existential trust is a fundamental mood in that it can support and sustain another mood—i.e., it operates as a background mood. One must be careful here, however, for like Heidegger, I may have sounded as if I was claiming that one is *always* in a mood of existential trust, that it just comes over one and never leaves. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that existential trust *can* operate as a supportive background mood, attending other moods. Though Heidegger never provides the mechanism whereby one transitions from one mood to another (one just “finds oneself” in a given mood without knowing how one got into that mood as opposed to another), I want to propose that the mechanism whereby one is in the mood of existential trust or not (there are degrees of involvement in and intensity of the mood) is that of the ethical demand that emerges in my encounter with another person. The mood of existential trust is initiated and sustained as a response to the ethical demand.

Now it would appear that my provisionally Heideggerian view of the relationship between trust and sociality and Dante’s view contradict one another. Dante implies that trust generates and supports sociality, whereas I am claiming that sociality generates and

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1 For Hiedegger’s view of “sociality” see Theodore R. Schatzki (2005).
supports the mood of existential trust. Part of the confusion here is that I have been using “sociality” to name disparate phenomena. The sense of sociality tacit in Dante’s mention of trust is that of an interpersonal ethical bond between human beings which forms the basis for society in the broad sense of “the society of human beings” and in the more narrow sense of a social-political entity (e.g., French society). Heidegger’s notion of das Man (Anyone) and publicness, on the other hand, implies that sociality is not the product of the encounter and relationship between human beings, that it is not an ethical relationship though it might be a normative one (i.e., the range of existentiell possibilities and their interpretations are governed by das Man²). In other words, Dante conceives of a breach of trust as an ethical breach because it violates the sociality that constitutes our higher nature.³ Heidegger, on the other hand, would not conceive of sociality in moral terms, as involving any demands other than the limitations and boundaries of permissibility that das Man allows to be publically available to Dasein. This is why Heidegger would likely not have allowed that trust could be an existential mood in the first place. Trust, as Dante is well aware, when experienced in interpersonal and social relationships, invariably involves an ethical dimension. When I trust another, I have implicitly made a demand of him or her, a demand that is best understood in ethical terms. Social cooperation, communication, and coordination depend upon this ethical dimension of trust. More radically, however, I argue that sociality in the Heideggerian

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² One way of thinking about this idea is that, for Heidegger, I cannot be anything or anyone other than what One (das Man) can be in the world that I share with others.

³ I must thank Deborah Cook (University of Windsor) for bringing this reference to trust in Dante to my attention and for her insightful suggestions regarding the link between trust and sociality at the 2010 Society for European Philosophy (SEP)/Forum for European Philosophy (FEP) conference (Rome, Italy).
sense—as the condition for the meaning and the mattering of things and events—is itself generated and sustained as a *response* to the ethical demand that is contained in the encounter with the other person—an encounter that can itself be described as a *trusting* encounter.

To put it otherwise, the ethical demand that typifies the interpersonal encounter at the most primordial level is the root of all sociality. Sociality is made possible at all as a means of coping with and responding to the ethical demand inherent in the encounter between persons. Hence, the mood of existential trust emerges from and is sustained as a response to the interpersonal ethical demand. The “natural” trust (Løgstrup) with which I approach the other bears or carries the ethical demand because, as I will show Levinas insisting later on in this chapter, I cannot assimilate or consume or incorporate the other person like I can objects or things. This is trust at its most basic level: ethical, interpersonal trusting.

This chapter will be concerned with developing and unpacking the claim that the global and diffuse mood of existential trust discussed in the last chapter is generated and sustained by the interpersonal encounter. In other words, my encounter with another originally initiates the mood of existential trust, and as sociality itself is given impetus and significance by the demand inherent in this interpersonal encounter, then every time I encounter another, my mood of existential trust is reconfigured or transformed in some way. If I accept the demand and respond appropriately, then my world can be enriched and my trust intensified. If I reject the demand and evade my responsibility, then trust cannot come to fruition and my relationship with the other person will not be enriching or
ethical. My general and global mood of existential trust is diminished or intensified, or some aspect is accentuated or attenuated (perhaps my feeling of being supportively upheld is affected). This does not mean that I blindly and naively put my trust in the other person for this is not always the appropriate response to the pre-conscious and pre-reflective encounter with the other that bears the absolute, infinite, and unfulfillable ethical demand to care for the other’s life. However I may consciously and willfully respond to the demand inherent in the fact that the other approaches me in the vulnerability and dependency of trust, it remains the case that I am responsible for enriching or diminishing the other’s world, for caring for his or her existence.

In order to substantiate this idea, I will first examine the thought of Emmanuel Levinas in which he thinks the fundamentally ethical nature of interpersonal relations, showing how ethics precedes ontology and traditional metaphysics, and how existence, reason, justice and meaning are all products of an original and radical responsibility for the Other that resists the violence of the drive to incorporate, assimilate, and reduce alterity to a moment in a totality. My account agrees with that of Levinas in holding that the ethicality of the interpersonal encounter is what institutes meaning, significance, and sociality. Secondly, I will turn to the work of Knud Eijler Løgstrup and his description of the fundamental and essential role that he assigns to trust in conveying the ethical demand in the interpersonal relation. Løgstrup argues that human beings encounter one another with a kind of “natural” trust (the default acceptance of vulnerability), i.e., the interpersonal encounter can be described in terms of an appeal to accept responsibility for the other person, and thus that the ethical demand is contained in this trusting encounter. I
will argue that Løgstrup is better served if he conceives of this encounter as a relationship of “natural entrustment” instead of “natural trust.” Finally, the connection between the ethical demand contained in the interpersonal encounter and the conception of trust as existential mood will be fleshed out in brief.

**Introducing Emmanuel Levinas**

Within certain philosophical circles, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is sometimes credited with the renewal of the question of the Other (person) in the Western philosophical tradition—a tradition that, as Levinas sees it, has for the most part been preoccupied with knowledge, truth, and ontology while ignoring, misunderstanding or actively suppressing alterity and ethics. In opposition to those in the philosophical tradition who have understand ontology, epistemology, or a philosophy of power to be “first philosophy” rather than ethics, thereby granting pride of place to questions of being over questions of ethical responsibility, Levinas proposes instead that ethics be granted primacy. Levinas contends that, in the wake of the Holocaust, “Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality” (*TI* 21). In other words, given that the Holocaust occurred and that massive destruction of human life at the hands of others has stained the very fabric of history in the 20th Century, how can we continue to speak of morality? Isn’t it the case that we’ve been duped into thinking that we have moral obligations toward others when it is in truth merely a matter of striving for power? Isn’t life a perpetual “state of war” which ultimately “suspends morality” indefinitely (*TI* 21)? In other words, given the reality of “war”—by which Levinas means not only military stratagems and the aggressive posturing of nation-states,
but also and primarily ontological tyranny and the violent erasure of the singularity of the other—it would seem that morality is rendered naïve, illusory, nothing but a story to tell children.

Levinas’s philosophy constitutes an answer to this problem of war and his answer hinges on the ethical demand implicit in what he calls the “face-to-face” encounter with the other person. Without getting into the many nuances of his account, I will look at Levinas’s description of the ethical encounter with the other person and show how this interpersonal ethical encounter grounds sociality and meaning.

_The Ethical Demand Contained in My Encounter with Another Person_

One of the primary aims of Levinas’s thought is to combat a common tendency of philosophy to locate wisdom in the identification and representation of beings by assimilating those beings into a totality within which they can make sense, take on a meaning, and find their truth. The work of philosophy, on this view, is the _totalization_ of all things, gathering the disparate parts and processes of the world and wrapping them up into as neat and simple a package as possible, with no remainders or loose ends, reducing all singularity to essential and immediately identifiable characteristics that fully account for a thing. This drive to incorporation and totalization is symptomatic of the desire to incorporate the other into the Same, to extinguish alterity by comprehending or consuming it, thereby integrating that which is different into that which is identical, identifiable, measurable, or understandable. Thus, “Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by the interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being” (_TI_ 43).
In other words, according to Levinas, the very way we think in Western culture and history exercises a certain kind of violence in that Western rationality demands that singularity (otherness) be surpassed and raised to the level of the universal (Same). This violence may be necessary, even desirable, if we are to thrive in the world, for we must organize, categorize, compartmentalize, assimilate, and calculate in order to organize, navigate and orient ourselves in the world. However, this totalitarian tendency becomes dangerous and tyrannical to the extent that we approach and experience other persons in ways that actively deny and ignore the otherness of the other person—his or her absolute uniqueness—out of an insatiable appetite to dissolve his or her alterity.

Speaking of the history of Western philosophy, Levinas says, “This history can be interpreted as an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing other outside of itself, and thus becomes absolute thought. The consciousness of self is at the same time the consciousness of the whole. There have been few protestations in the history of philosophy against this totalization” (EI 75). What does Levinas mean by a “totality wherein consciousness embraces the world”? The role of consciousness in the effort of possession and ontological colonization is that of an ego, an “I,” a “being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it” (TI 36). Though the world is initially “foreign and hostile” to the ego, exterior to the field of consciousness, it eventually translates that which is “outside” into that which can be known “inside” the domain of consciousness. The ego ceaselessly strives to make itself at home in the world, to render the unfamiliar familiar, to make that which is
Elaborating on this relation between the I and its world, Levinas writes,

It finds in the world a site and a home. Dwelling is the very mode of maintaining oneself, . . . as the body that, on the earth exterior to it, holds itself up and can. The ‘at home’ is not a container but a site where I can, where, dependent on a reality that is other, I am, despite this dependence or thanks to it, free. . . . Everything is here, everything belongs to me; everything is caught up in advance with the primordial occupying of a site, everything is com-prehended (TI 37-38).

In this dwelling-comprehending, the ego puts everything at its disposal, it can navigate, manipulate, and utilize those things that it “finds” in its world precisely because it has translated the heterogeneous and unfamiliar into the Same, populating consciousness with its furniture and décor. Anything that the ego is unable to control or manipulate is nevertheless assimilated to consciousness in that it is assigned its place as sublime, terrifying, or awe-inspiring. As Levinas puts it, “The possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the way of the same. I am at home with myself in the world because it offers itself to or resists possession. (What is absolutely other does not only resist possession, but contests it, and accordingly can consecrate it.)” (TI 38). In short, the “alterity” (which is not really “other” in the truest sense of transcendence) of the world and of things in the world can always be brought into relation with the I, and integrated, subsumed, or consumed, through self-identification. Is not this insatiable appetite for incorporation and

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4 Levinas writes, “The way of the I against the ‘other’ of the world consists in sojourning, in identifying oneself by existing here at home with oneself. In a world which is from the first other the I is nonetheless autochthonous” (TI 37).
consumption on the part of the ego (its dwelling and comprehending) the very mechanism whereby trust makes familiar?

Trust, as an existential mood, appears to enable the whole mechanism of the dwelling and the incorporation of the Other into the Same. After all, trust is what allows one to find oneself “at home” in the world in the first place, for trust is what supportively upholds one in the world, holding one open towards that which can affect one and thus solicit and demand a response, as well as direct and attune one in existing. In so doing, it looks as if trust integrates alterity into a totality defined by the Same, by the “known,” by the “familiar.” To be sure, this possibility must be kept before us in what follows, for if true, then trust would not be a condition for sociality, since trust would be a part of the process of assimilation whereby that which is other, strange, and unfamiliar, is made familiar by being integrated into the Same and comprehended. In other words, according to Levinas, the other person is absolutely singular and thus transcends the economy of the Same; whereas a relationship of trust, is a relationship between two persons at least one of whom trusts the other on the basis of an assumed commonality or mutual similarity that confers confidence or security upon the relationship. On this understanding, trust is a means of eliminating alterity, mediating difference, and reducing risk\(^5\), by bringing the other person into a relation of comprehension (even if in the most primordial and Heideggerian sense of “understanding”) and creating the possibility of reciprocity. I will consider and reject this understanding of trust later on in this chapter by showing, via the work of Danish philosopher Knud Eijler Løgstrup, that the understanding of trust

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\(^5\) Of course, right away, the notion of trust as a means of reducing risk is questionable; for it is far from evident that trust reduces risk at all. In fact, the more that risk is reduced, the less trust would seem to be involved. Trust, as we shall see, involves accepting or affirming the risk, the hazard, of responsibility.
developed here is sufficiently sensitive to Levinasian critique to avoid the charge of committing violence against the alterity of the Other.

**Sensibility and Enjoyment**

Despite how it may sound, Levinas does not claim that we *initially* encounter another person (nor the world) through consciousness. Rather, we encounter the world and the other first and primarily at the level of sensibility. Before I am a consciousness, an ego proper, I am a *sensible egoism*, an embodied and organic self—an organism, if one prefers. At the elemental level of life as lived by this sensible ego, things—whether material or immaterial—are “enjoyed,” the ego “lives from” them. “We live from ‘good soup,’ air, light, spectacles, work . . . They are always in a certain measure . . . objects of enjoyment, presenting themselves to ‘taste,’ already adorned, embellished” (*TI* 110). If we temporarily suspend the primacy of the ethical relation with the other, then, at a basic level, we can see that the sensible egoism “feeds” off from its world, where “world” is understood as the totality of things, events, and processes that are initially exterior (“other” in a non-absolute sense⁶) to this ego. As Levinas says, the sensible egoism *nourishes* itself on its world, appropriating, incorporating, and assimilating what is other and exterior in order to enjoy and satisfy its needs. “Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognized as other, recognized, we will see, as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it, becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy,

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⁶ Peperzak, commenting on this qualification, says that the otherness of such things is not absolute (like that of the Other), “but relative and integratable otherness” which is “‘transmuted’ into the Same of ego’s economy. They are assimilated” (1993, p. 151).
my strength, me. All enjoyment is in this sense alimentation” (TI 111). Also, “To be sure, in the satisfaction of need the alienness of the world that founds me loses its alterity: in satiety the real I sank my teeth into is assimilated, the forces that were in the other become my forces, become me (and every satisfaction of need is in some respect nourishment). Through labor and possession the alterity of nutriments enters into the same” (TI 129). On this point Levinas is in fundamental accord with Nietzsche who writes that “life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and at the least, at its mildest, exploitation” (BGE 259). Though it remains that Levinas claims that ethical life, as it were, transcends and is exterior to sensible life, whereas Nietzsche clearly does not allow this.

*Halting Before the Other*

Given that the ego, in both the elemental sense of a sensible egoism and in the derivative sense of a consciousness (or a “psychism” as he calls it), must appropriate and incorporate what is other and exterior, integrating the different into the Same, it would make sense to assume that the ego must assimilate the other person to itself in the same way. In fact, Levinas thinks that this is exactly what the ego attempts and most commonly strives to do. However, and this is the core idea of Levinas’s philosophy, the ego is held up by or runs aground or is resisted and repelled by the truly exterior,

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7 So that Levinas writes: “In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone. Not against the Others, not ‘as for me . . .’—but entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate—without ears, like a hungry stomach” (TI 134)
The alterity of the Other absolutely resists, refuses, and forces back one’s insatiable appetite to consume in order to enjoy, to assimilate what is strange into consciousness. In Time and the Other, Levinas describes this relationship as “nonreciprocal” and asymmetrical, a relationship with an Other that is not an alter ego, but a radically different and singular Other.

But already, in the very heart of the relationship with the other that characterizes our social life, alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship—that is, as contrasting strongly with contemporaneousness. the Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this, not because of the Other’s character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other’s very alterity. The Other is, for example, the weak, the poor, “the widow and the orphan,” whereas I am the rich or the powerful. It can be said that intersubjective space is not symmetrical. (TO 83-84)
The Other is so absolutely other in its radical alterity that it calls the egoism that encounters it into question. That is, as Diane Perpich has insisted in her work on Levinas, “Responsibility in the Levinasian sense requires an apology in the Greek sense of the term: it means giving a defense of oneself, justifying oneself before the other . . . it is to be called to justify one’s life and one’s construal of the world before another whose body is vulnerable to hunger, thirst, pain, and misery.”\(^8\) I have no choice but to encounter the alterity of the Other as a radical call to responsibility, a demand to account for myself before the Other.

According to Levinas, then, the ego cannot help but be responsive to the ethical demand presented by the encounter with the Other. I can, of course, respond to the demand or the responsibility that is placed upon me by ignoring or turning away from that responsibility, but what cannot be denied is that I am responsible for and to the Other.

*The Facing Relation in Totality and Infinity*

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes the original relationship of ethical responsibility in terms of “facing,” a “face-to-face” relationship between myself and the Other. The demand embodied in the face of the Other is not something that can be represented to consciousness, contained in language, comprehended in thought, “enjoyed” by a sensible egoism, or reciprocated by or exchanged with the Other—though all of these things presuppose this original ethical demand. My ethical responsibility toward the Other who “faces” me is carried in language, in “discourse.” “Language accomplishes a relation between terms that breaks up the unity of a genus” and thus it is

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\(^8\) Perpich (2008), p. 6.
“the very power to break the continuity of being or history” \((TI \, 195)\). Now, Levinas does not indicate that words must be spoken, sounds made, in order for discourse to occur; rather, discourse consists in responsiveness to the command of the Other, the command contained in what Levinas calls “the first word: ‘you shall not commit murder’” \((TI \, 199)\). The face of the Other commands me not to kill, not to de-face the Other; or, to put it more concretely, my encounter another person contains an inherent demand not to eradicate his or her alterity by reducing the other person to my image or idea of him or her that is not responsive to care for his or her life. I can never eradicate the irreducible singularity and radical alterity of the other person, I cannot avoid “hearing” or receiving the commandment not to murder, I must respond to it. What I can do, however, is to violate my responsibility, to deface the face of the Other, by responding to the command by trying to “kill” the other, by striving to dissolve the otherness, the alterity, the uniqueness of the other person into a conceptual totality, a racial stereotype, a gender prejudice, and so on.

The face of the Other carries with it “the idea of infinity,” the idea of that which is absolutely beyond my grasp, beyond my powers. As Levinas writes, “Infinity presents itself as a face in the ethical resistance that paralyzes my powers and from the depths of defenceless eyes rises firm and absolute in its nudity and destitution” \((TI \, 199-200)\). Precisely in the vulnerability and defenselessness of the face, and because I encounter the Other as the stranger, as the widow, the orphan, and beggar in distress, the transcendence, height, infinity of the Other is manifest as a command “from above”: I am to care for the life of the Other. “The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by
appealing to me with its destitution and nudity—its hunger—without my being able to be
deaf to that appeal. Thus in expression the being that imposes itself does not limit but
promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness” (TI 200). The vulnerability of the other
person in the face of my egoistic striving tacitly bears the command “Do not kill!”—a
prohibition of consumption—that amounts to holding me accountable and responsible for
the life of the Other. I am not free to rescind my responsibility for the Other, but I am free
to respond to his or her appeal. Because it directly bears on the vulnerability and demand
component of interpersonal trust, it is worthwhile to examine this point in a little more
detail.

Levinas insists that “The face is present in its refusal to be contained” and it
“resists possession, resists my powers” to grasp, say, or cognize it (TI 194, 197). The face
of the Other “puts the I in question,” for the “Other remains infinitely transcendent,
ininitely foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me
breaks with the world that can be common to us,” a world in which we exist as sensible
egoisms that strive against one another for nourishment and enjoyment (TI 195). This is
an essential point: At the level of sensibility and consciousness in Totality and Infinity, as
at the level of being in his later work Otherwise than Being, Levinas asserts that the very
conditions for an egoism’s enjoyment and nourishment are the very conditions of ethical
violence. “Being’s interest takes dramatic form in egoisms struggling with one another,
each against all, in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one another
and are thus together” (OB 4). The egoism’s constant thirst to assert itself over, to
consume for itself, runs aground against the demand of the Other, and yet this presents
the possibility of violence toward the Other, of war waged against others. As Schopenhauer poetically expresses it in his *The World as Will and Representation*: “This world is the battleground of tormented and agonized beings who continue to exist only by each devouring the other. Therefore, every beast of prey in it is the living grave of thousands of others, and its self-maintenance is a chain of torturing deaths”. In other words, when I react to the burden of responsibility demanded of me by the Other by asserting myself over the Other, by attempting to “consume,” incorporate, or assimilate him or her, I commit an act of “murder” whereby I de-face the Face of the Other. However, it is not the case that the ethical relationship and the sociality that it founds is merely a condition of compromise amidst the struggle of competing egoisms. I am not a “beast of prey” or “allergic egoism” first and a responsible self second. Rather, as Levinas asserts, “War presupposes peace, the antecedent and non-allergic presence of the Other; it does not represent the first event of the encounter” (*TI* 199). The very foundation of our activity, both practical and theoretical, is the ethical encounter with the Other.

Language and discourse, love and hate, labor and play, knowledge and belief, meaning and sense, and even the showing up and the mattering of things given in Heidegger’s primordial moods—all of it is in some sense an ongoing response to our original ethical responsibility. Levinas goes so far as to say that I am for the other, I exist at all just because I am called to responsibility by the other person. Does this mean that no securing, no upholding, no stability can be found in this original relationship? Rather than preserving the radical nature of the ethical demand, is trust a means of alleviating

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my responsibility for the Other? Does trust place the other person in a relationship of familiarity, reciprocity, and exchange? In trusting another, do I inevitably assume the familiarity of the Other and thus deny his or her alterity? Am I not granted a ground to stand on when the Other “faces” me? Does the destitution and exposure of the Other mirror my own vulnerable openness thereby precluding any trusting relationship?

One could interpret Levinas’s work in such a way as to exclude the possibility that the ethical relationship between myself and the Other can be one of trust, that the call to responsibility is a traumatic event, described in terms of “persecution,” “obsession,” and being “held hostage” by the Other. In short, on this understanding, my existence is not governed by nor grounded in trust; rather, my life constitutes an ongoing response to the ethical encounter defined by vulnerability and demand (not upholding and attunement). Though a reading of Levinas that excludes the possibility of trust operating at the level of the primordial ethical relationship has some amount of legitimacy, I argue that it is not the case that trust, properly understood, is a symptom of the drive to integrate the Other into the Same. Rather, trust is, in a most basic sense, an acceptance of the responsibility for the Other’s life with which I am entrusted. It is true that Levinas uses language that could be associated with an absence or corrosion of trust to describe the ethical relation between a self and the other, particularly in Otherwise and Being where Levinas consistently uses terms like “hostage,” “persecution,” and “obsession” to describe the relation between a “me” and the other. In this work, Levinas conceives of the self, of subjectivity, in terms of what he calls “substitution” and he locates the source of subjectivity, signification, and meaning in the “an-archic” and “persecutory” relation.
of the substitutionary self to the Other. Levinas’s analysis of subjectivity in *Otherwise Than Being* is worth summarizing in order to determine whether his actual account excludes trust. After briefly recounting Levinas’s account of “substitution,” a concept that is central to his later work, I will turn to the work of Knud Løgstrup to disclose a way of understanding the ethical relation between a self and an other that preserves the fundamental role of trust while accommodating the Levinasian account of ethics.

*Levinas on Substitution*

Levinas’ work on substitution first appears in a sustained fashion in a 1968 lecture titled (appropriately enough) “Substitution.” Later he revised it somewhat and used it as the central Chapter IV of his second major work (after *Totality and Infinity*), *Otherwise Than Being: or Beyond Essence*, published in 1974. In the “Substitution” lecture, Levinas is concerned with dismantling the “reduction of subjectivity to consciousness,” with the tendency to ground meaning, intentionality, and self-identity in the sovereignty and self-coincidence of an ego consciousness—a preoccupation that Levinas claims has dominated the Western philosophical tradition “since Hegel” (*BPW* 83). According to the traditional philosophical schema, “consciousness is therefore always the grasping of a being through an ideality,” specifically the “ideality of the logos” according to which in order to find myself or establish my self-identity, I merely “venture” out in search of a self that I eventually discover was always already there (*BPW* 80). Thus, says Levinas, the search for identity is merely a “detour,” not an “adventure” at all. “It is never dangerous. It is always a self-possession, sovereignty, *arche*. What arrives of the
unknown is already disclosed, open, manifest, cast in the mold of the known, and can never come as a complete surprise” (*BPW* 80).

There are at least two things wrong with this drive to reduce subjectivity to consciousness, on Levinas’s view. First, it assumes that genuine self-consciousness, the idealist dream of a fully realized, all-knowing, rational ego, can achieve a god-like level of autonomy and control over all that might threaten it. Essentially, the ego is like a glorified *conquistador* who violently inflicts its will upon and subdues all that is “foreign” to it, “other” than it, dominating any and everything that could call its sovereignty into question. Theoretically, nothing is *unknowable*, or, to employ the language of *Totality and Infinity*, all that is Other can and must be “consumed” and “assimilated” into the Same. Secondly, Levinas questions this willful blindness to the claim of the Other on me, for such blindness impedes a genuine understanding both of subjectivity and of the ethical relation between a self and an other. Levinas accuses the traditional account of obscuring and ignoring the concrete way in which I am exposed and vulnerable when in *proximity* to the other, for “[p]roximity is a relationship” “with what is incommensurable with” any knowable theme, “with what cannot be identified in the kerygmatic logos”—i.e., the proclamation: “Aha! I’ve got it! I’ve figured you out!” (*BPW* 80). This relationship of proximity is absolutely fundamental in terms of the original constitution of the self, and Levinas summarizes it in the following way: “*Anarchically*, proximity is a relationship with a singularity, without the mediation of any principle or ideality. In the concrete, it describes my relationship with my neighbor, a relationship whose signifyingness is prior to the celebrated ‘sense bestowing’” [i.e.,
Husserl’s *Sinngebung*. . . It is the summoning of myself by the other (*autrui*), it is a responsibility toward those whom we do not even know” (*BPW* 81).

This point seems to me to be an important one. Not only is Levinas saying that the self is **not** and **never will be** the sovereign ruler over itself and the world that philosophical idealism desires, but he is claiming that **I could not even become a self except as summoned by the other, the neighbor**. My very selfhood and unicity is dependent upon the ethical responsibility placed upon me in the relationship of proximity to the other. Thus, the birth of meaning, of signification, of my very self, is shown to begin in the concrete relation of proximity with and approach of the other.

Levinas does not stop here, however. He proceeds to describe how this proximal relation is an *obsession*, a “movement” that “traverses consciousness contrariwise, inscribing itself there as something foreign, as disequilibrium, as delirium, undoing thematization, eluding principle, origin, and will.” This obsession is so intrusive, so “anarchic,” that Levinas describes it as a forcible “inversion of consciousness,” as “persecution”\textsuperscript{10}—i.e., a “placing in question anterior to questioning, a responsibility beyond the logos of the response.”\textsuperscript{11} This obsession, which is a persecution, an accusation from one “knows not where,” is “a total passivity,”\textsuperscript{12} a “Passion,”\textsuperscript{13} or “undergoing” completely outside my control wherein the “ego,” here understood in an almost malformed or at least inchoate manner, “is in itself like one is in one’s skin, that is to say,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[10] Levinas, *BPW* 81.
\item[11] Ibid., 82.
\item[12] Ibid., 87.
\item[13] Ibid., 82.
\end{footnotes}
cramped, ill at ease in one’s skin” and the “ego is an irritability, a susceptibility, or an
exposure to wounding and outrage, delineating a passivity more passive still than any
passivity relating to an effect.”14 It is precisely in the “anguish” of being shoved back
upon itself, in the “constriction of an ‘entry within’” itself by the other, that the self is
found to be a *unicity*, a unique and irreplaceable self (*BPW* 86). I am a “one” precisely
because I am to be an expiation for the other, responsible for the suffering of the other
that I did not commit. Levinas nicely sums up the *accusatory* nature of this relationship
of persecution in the following passage: “Obsessed with responsibilities which do not
result from decisions taken by a ‘freely contemplating’ subject, consequently accused of
what it never willed or decreed, accused of what it did not do, subjectivity is thrown back
on itself—in itself—by a persecuting accusation. Concretely, this means to be accused of
what others do and to be responsible for what others do. It is to be pushed to the limit,
responsible for the very persecution undergone” (*BPW* 88).

It is undeniable that Levinas uses the language of persecution and accusation to
describe this concrete and “nonphilosophical experience” of the self in its relation to the
other, clearly laying emphasis on the *vulnerability* and *exposure* implicit in the
interpersonal encounter as well as the crushing weight of the *demand* tacit in the
approach of the other (*BPW* 92). The neighbor who is the other approaches me by
persecuting and expelling me from my place, taking me hostage without recourse to
defense such that I already stand “condemned without being able to speak”; and it is this
standing on trial, exposed and persecuted, already found guilty, that constitutes the true

14 Ibid., 86.
an-archic beginning of the self (*BPW* 94, my emphasis). It is, perhaps, not too far of a stretch to say that Levinas believes the self to be born of the extreme suffering inflicted upon it by the crushing weight of a responsibility it can neither satisfy nor escape from. Now, I could be overstating Levinas’s point here, but the 1968 “Substitution” essay and the chapter of the same name in *Otherwise than Being* both describe the relation of a self and the other as one of being taken “hostage,” of “obsession,” “persecution,” “expiation,” “exposure to wounding and outrage,” “accusation,” “gnawing remorse,” etc. I will admit that Levinas may be justified in the use of such language, for it certainly helps to unsettle, disturb, and disrupt the Western philosophical prejudice in favor of the sovereign and rational self, an ego that is the *arche* or source/principle of meaning and of its world.

Be that as it may, I think that the *connotations* of Levinas’s language and descriptions can lend themselves to occlude or obscure an important possibility in the originary relation between self and Other: the fact that in proximity to the Other, I am not only vulnerable and exposed, commanded and condemned, but that I can also be upheld, ensured, situated, and attuned in and by the encounter. That is, I can meet the Other on the ground of trust, proximally related without approximating the Other. The dependence and vulnerability, even the exposure and passivity, are preserved in such a description, and Levinas’ stress on the irreducible difference between self and other is maintained, but the connotation of the relation is understood differently.¹⁵ Analogically speaking, it may be just as accurate to say that I am a self, an irreplaceable unicity, because the neighbor

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¹⁵ Of course the dilemma arises that it becomes easier then to speak of reciprocity as the root of ethics, thereby restoring the primacy of a sovereign ego and eliminating the possibility of the gift.
offers me her hand, to help me up or in to the world and meaning, as it is to say that “I am” because I am persecuted, accused, and “shoved back” by the other.

*The Philosophy of Knud Ejler Løgstrup*

In order to give legs to the view that the ethical nature of interpersonal relationships can be understood in terms of trust, I will now turn to an explication of the concept of “natural trust” in the work of the Danish theologian and philosopher, Knud Ejler Løgstrup (1905-1981). His work can help us think the other side of the relation between the neighbor and self, even though, ultimately he fails to account for the fact that in the trusting encounter with another person, one is upheld and oriented in the relation and not only vulnerably open and ethically commanded.

In the introduction to his major work, *The Ethical Demand*, Løgstrup announces his concern with giving a “definition in strictly human terms of the relationship to the other person which is contained in the religious proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth” (*ED 1*). Simply stated, Løgstrup wants to explicate the core existential insight contained in the religious teachings of Jesus and translate this insight into philosophical terms and concepts that are accessible to reason—i.e., to take the insight expressed in language exclusive to a specific religious context and put it into the universal and non-religious terms of philosophy. This insight, or “proclamation,” must speak to something in our existence, some “perplexity,” “contradiction,” or “expectation” that concerns us in existence; and in so doing, it must reveal some feature of existence that was not recognized before (*ED 1*). Furthermore, Løgstrup insists that because the proclamation has drawn attention to this newly revealed feature of existence, this feature can be

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*Knud Ejler Løgstrup (1997).*
recognized by anyone without recourse to the original proclamation. Hence, given that
the existential insight is originally contained within a proclamation that is confined to a
specifically religious context, “the task becomes one of defining in strictly human terms
those features of our existence to which the proclamation speaks and which—possibly for
the first time—it helps us see” (ED 1-2).

Løgstrup offers two reasons why it is necessary to define the existential insight
contained in the religious proclamation in “strictly human terms.” First, though the
message contained in the proclamation might cause “offense” in its secular and universal
formulation, it must nevertheless be made to conform to the conditions of general and
universal intelligibility if assent to it is not to be a matter of coercion, of believing
something without understanding. As Løgstrup expresses it, “understandability means
only that the proclamation answers to decisive features of our existence. It is one thing
for a proclamation to be understandable in the banal sense that it reinforces our own
wishful thinking. It is quite another thing for it to be understandable in the personal and
objective sense that it discloses to us our existence” (ED 2). The second reason why the
insight contained in the proclamation must be made generally available is that the
religious proclamation is “not limited to what it discloses” (ED 2). In other words, the
insight expressed in the proclamation is not just limited to what can be made intelligible
to all (its “objective” content), it also speaks to the individual’s existence.

What then is disclosed in the religious proclamation of Jesus? What “feature of
existence” is revealed? According to Løgstrup, the religious proclamation of Jesus
discloses the most important feature of existence for human beings and for the individual:
“the individual’s relation to the neighbor” (ED 3). According to the proclamation of Jesus, the individual’s relation to God is wholly determined by the individual’s relation to his or her neighbor. Additionally, according to this view, something decisive in the life of my neighbor is at stake in my relationship with him or her. To quote:

the other person must to such a degree be dependent upon me that what I do and say in the relationship between us—I alone and nobody else, here and now and not at some other time or in some other manner—is of decisive importance. If my relation to the other person is the place where my relation to God is determined, then it must at the same time be the place where that person’s existence is so totally at stake that to fail him is to fail him irreparably. In other words, what I withhold from him is one situation he will not be able to recoup in another situation, either from me or from anyone else. (ED 5)

In this way Løgstrup attempts to show how the explicitly religious message of Jesus contains an insight into a decisive feature of human existence that pertains to a fact of interpersonal relationships: the existential fact that we are dependent upon one another in some way and that in some important sense how a person responds to this fact of interpersonal dependence is of crucial importance in the life of the other.

How does Løgstrup describe this phenomenon? What “fact” of existence is he going to explicate? Løgstrup claims that he will describe “the fact which is the source of the silent demand” (ED 8). To be more specific, what Løgstrup is concerned to describe is the fact that, as human beings, we approach and encounter one another with “natural trust” (unless we have reason not to trust one another) and that the original ethical demand calls one to respond with trust. Not only is the “silent demand” that emerges in trust the source of all ethical normativity, it is also the source of significance and

17 If one were to speak in more Levinasian language, one could say that the individual’s relation to transcendence and infinity is wholly determined by the individual’s relation to the Other.
meaning. This claim must now be given substance and Løgstrup’s thesis developed in some more detail.

*The Fact of Natural Trust*

Logstrup, much like Levinas, rejects the primacy granted to conscious intentionality, the sovereign ego, and resists the tendency for rational totalization in the Western philosophical tradition. He writes, “We have the curious idea that a person constitutes his own world, and that the rest of us have no part in it but only to touch upon it now and then. If the encounter between persons therefore means, as it normally does, nothing more than that their respective worlds touch upon one another and then continue unaffected on their separate courses, the encounter can hardly be very important” (*ED* 16). Not only is this atomistic view frequently taken for granted in both popular and philosophical thinking, it is also mistaken, for it ignores one of the most fundamental conditions of human life and meaning: that we are *interrelational* beings and that our world, who we are, and what we do, is, in large part, constituted or defined by a web of interpersonal relationships. In some special sense, “we do indeed constitute one another’s world and destiny” (*ED* 16).

Løgstrup goes further than the claim that human beings are fundamentally interrelational, however, and argues that subjectivity, meaning, thought, and communication, are all grounded in interpersonal relationality, in one’s relation to others; and that interpersonal relationality is in turn established and sustained by a fundamental and originary phenomenon or “fact”: the fact of *natural trust*. Løgstrup introduces his description of “natural trust” with an assertion and observation:
It is a characteristic of human that we normally encounter one another with natural trust. This is true not only in the case of persons who are well acquainted with one another but also in the case of complete strangers. Only because of some special circumstance do we ever distrust a stranger in advance. . . . Under normal circumstances, however, we accept the stranger’s word and do not mistrust him until we have some particular reason to do so. . . . Initially we believe one another’s word; initially we trust one another. This may indeed seem strange, but it is a part of what it means to be human. Human life could hardly exist if it were otherwise. We would simply not be able to live; our life would be impaired and wither away if we were in advance to distrust one another. (ED 9)

It is important to note Løgstrup’s strong claim here: Human beings simply could not live without a basic form of trust. Of course, we must be careful here, for Løgstrup is not making a claim about biological life, but about a distinctly human existence. Without trust, one can be alive, but one’s existence is impaired and the goods that make life worth living cannot thrive. If Løgstrup is right, then one of the most basic conditions for a fully human life and for a meaningful existence is a trust relation between human others.

Furthermore, when Løgstrup says that trust is the source of the ethical demand and that we always encounter one another in natural trust unless we have reason not to, he is making the claim that, phenomenologically speaking, when I encounter another human being, I encounter him or her in trust before my preconceived notions about her untrustworthiness can come into play and before I am able to “pin down” his or her place with socially and culturally-produced dispositions and ways of seeing. To be sure, there are those who, because of past trauma or psychological pathology, are so affected as to view any new context with fear, dread, and anxiety such that virtually any unknown person who “shows up” within his or her horizon is confronted as an object of fear. Even in this case, however, the trauma victim’s default attitude of fear and distrust of the other is, in some understandable sense, a response or a reaction to a prior condition of trust.
(which was experienced as being severely violated in some way). In other words, the original and basic condition of “natural” trust must be modified or altered in some way—that is, I must have a reason to distrust the other. To put it otherwise: Distrust supervenes upon trust.

How might we understand this point about distrust? Take the following case: I enter a dimly lit parking garage and, on my quick and nervous walk to my car (all the while furtively casting my eyes around the darker parts of the garage), I notice a man walking swiftly towards me from another part of the garage. I might view this figure with suspicion and fear. Perhaps I live in a totalitarian state in which surveillance is everywhere and the secret police could be anyone. In such a condition it is quite plausible that I will encounter very few persons with trust. I am already in a mood of nervous and fearful apprehension. The mood comes over me due to culturally induced fears or past experiences. This fact already colors any possible encounter with another. Notice however, that I have reacted to a set of conditions by assuming the mood of apprehension. Thoughts and pre-conceived notions enter my mind supervening upon or inhibiting my natural trust—I have already decided how I will encounter the other. When the dark figure moves towards me, then I assume that this figure is untrustworthy and up to no good. I respond to his presence, and the demand it makes upon me, by cloaking him in a shroud of suspicion. In this case, trust is absent or greatly diminished in my encounter with others, it is not “natural.” Løgstrup might say that this has little to do with the fact that my encounter with another person would be one of trust were I in a more “natural,” that is, healthy, social condition. A totalitarian regime necessitates attitudes in
its subjects that are precisely “unnatural” because they are “inhumane”—that is, they diminish the capacity of a human subject to lead a human life.

Løgstrup gives content to this natural trust in the form of a phenomenological description. Trust, at this most basic and primordial level, is “to lay oneself open,” to “surrender” oneself to another, and thus to give the other some power over oneself. In other words, echoing Levinas’ assertion concerning the self’s utter passivity vis-à-vis the approach of the other, Løgstrup describes the condition of the self here as one of complete vulnerability and dependence. In order to illustrate this point, Løgstrup provides us with two cases of experiences that we encounter with some regularity throughout the course of our lives.

The first case is one where there is a “collision” between the “worlds” and “spirits” of two persons “due to the fact that a purely personal expectation is not fulfilled by the other person” (ED 9). In such an instance, the offended person (whose personal and usually unstated expectation is not fulfilled by the other person) either accuses the other person of moral wrong-doing or else takes up a disproving and moralistic tone toward the other. If no explicit wrong-doing has occurred, only that my expectations were not fulfilled by the other, then why resort to moral accusation or feeling? Løgstrup concludes that this consequence is possible only because “by manifesting the expectation one has already surrendered oneself to the other person—even before it is certain there will be any fulfillment” (ED 10, my emphasis). Thus, “One’s expectation, exposed through its manifestation, has not been covered by the other person’s fulfillment of it. And it is this exposure which causes the encounter to erupt in moral reproaches and
accusations” (ED 10, my emphasis). What is this *expectation* that we have with regard to one another? Whenever one surrenders oneself in “that trust of the other person,” a “requirement is always imposed upon him [the other person] insofar as one comes to him with an expectation.” This *expectation* “amounts to a delivering of ourselves over into his hands” (ED 17). The “exposure” and “self-surrender” in which we approach one another with trust is the condition for the possibility of manifesting an expectation with moral significance.  

The second example of the way in which the ethical demand emerges in the basic trust relation is that of communication understood in terms of human *conversation* or *discourse*. Though Løgstrup declares that “there is self-surrender in all forms of communication,” he focuses on human conversation as the paradigm instance of communication. “In its basic sense trust is essential to every conversation. In conversation as such we deliver ourselves over into the hand of another. This is evident in the fact that in the very act of addressing a person we make a demand of him” (ED 14). Løgstrup’s claim here is remarkably similar to Levinas’s analysis of language and the address, the Saying and the Said, in *Otherwise than Being*, for Løgstrup insists that the demand inherent in conversation is not merely a demand for a response to what one says. Rather, the more original meaning of the demand is found in the fact that when I address another, I enter into an ethical relationship with another. The demand is a demand to care

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18 Notice that this experience occurs with the most frequency in our closest and most intimate relationships as opposed to passing acquaintance or hostile relationships. The closer the relationship with the other person, the more I expect of him or her and the more outrage I will feel if that expectation is not met. This phenomenon can be accounted for by acknowledging the degree to which we assume that we “know” and can “predict” the character and personality of those closest to us. In other words, we more readily incorporate them into our schemes as familiar and manipulable components of our ‘world.’
for the speaker who is exposed and given over to another in the address. Thus, “that all speech takes place in such fundamental trust is evident in the fact that the most casual comment takes on a false note if one believes that it is not accepted in the sense that it is intended” (ED15).

The basic relationship between two persons is that of natural trust wherein I am “held open” or “surrendered to” the other person, thereby imposing an ethical demand upon him or her. Conversely, in our meeting or encounter, the other person is also exposed and opened toward me, thereby vesting me with power over him or her. As Løgstrup explains, “That life together with and over against one another consists in one person being delivered over to another person means that our mutual relationships are always relationships of power, the one person being more or less in the power of another person” (ED 53). This fact of natural trust whereby one person is partially delivered over to another person is unavoidable (“this self-surrender is a part of his or her life, irrespective of any decision on his or her part”) as is the demand inherent in having the life of another person placed into one’s power (“it is impossible to avoid having power over the person with whom we associate”), but one’s response to this fact and demand of trust is not predetermined. We are, in fact, compelled to decide, in advance of encountering another human being, “whether to use our power over the other person for serving him or her or for serving ourselves” (ED 53). In a manner redolent of Levinas’s claims regarding my responsibility for the Other, Løgstrup claims that “insofar as the demand is ignored, the other person becomes the object not of my care but of my
exploitation” (ED 54), thereby rendering the other person a mere instrument of my egoistic struggle to assert myself in existence.

Another point of similarity between Levinas and Løgstrup is found in the fact Løgstrup, like Levinas, claims not only that the other person’s life is in some sense delivered over to my power, but also that I become a self, a unicity, because the other person demands that I care for him or her\(^\text{19}\). In this way, the ethical demand emerges with the fact that the other’s life is in my hands and thus is at my mercy: “Through the trust which a person either shows or asks of another person he or she surrenders something of his or her life to that person. Therefore, our existence demands of us that we protect the life of the person who has placed his or her trust in us” (ED 17). Additionally, and this has already been implied, the ethical demand that arises from trust is not a matter of decision or deliberation simply because trust “is not of our own making; it is given”; and in being given, not made, trust can be said to give me myself insofar as another’s life is given over to me and I am responsible for it without my having assumed any obligation or having asked for it (ED 18).

**Comparing the Insights of Levinas and Logstrup**

The foregoing examination of the thought of Levinas and Løgstrup has sought to display what is unique to each thinker as well as show how their ideas bear certain important similarities that can be summed up as follows. First, both offer phenomenological descriptions of *interpersonal* encounters: Levinas in terms of the

\(^{19}\) Løgstrup: “The radical character of the demand means that it is up to the individual himself to determine what will best serve the other person. And since, as we have said, this could prove to be the very opposite of what the other person asks for and desires, the demand has the effect of making the person to whom the demand is directed a singular person. *Ethically speaking the demand isolates him or her*” (ED 45, emphasis added)
“Face-to-Face” encounter and Løgstrup in terms of “natural trust.” Second, both thinkers emphasize the ethical nature of this encounter and unpack the way in which the original demand of ethics is contained in the encounter. Levinas speaks of how the command “Do not kill” is contained in the face of the Other and how this command comes to me from the Other’s infinite and transcendent height, whereas Løgstrup describes the trusting encounter as being “held open” toward the other person, surrendered to him or her, and that in this fact we see how the ethical demand to care for the other’s life is handed over to me in trust. Third, both thinkers emphasize the extreme exposure, vulnerability, and defenselessness of the other person in the interpersonal ethical encounter and how one’s own subjectivity is given in the encounter (“I” am in my response to the demand embodied in the relation to the other), i.e., I am a responsible self before I am an ego. Finally, both Levinas and Løgstrup claim that all subjectivity, society, personal and communal identity, meaning, and significance, as well as all relations other than the primary interpersonal relationship, are founded upon or established in response to the ethical demand inherent in the encounter with the other person. This claim amounts to saying that all activities, all engagements with the world, the world as such, and all meaning are constructed and maintained on the basis of a need to address or respond to the original ethical demand that just is our encounter with one another. Both thinkers, then, are alike in holding that all human relationships are derived from or based upon one relationship that is primordial and basic, and that this relationship is fundamentally ethical. Both stress, in my words, the vulnerable openness and the demand element of this primordial relationship, and further, it is probable that both would claim that
Heidegger’s existential moods described in the last chapter are phenomena that come into being in response to the these two elements of the primordial interpersonal relationship.

Within the confines of the theme of trust, the major difference between Løgstrup and Levinas is found in the fact that Levinas does not develop the theme of trust explicitly in his work, whereas Løgstrup describes the ethical relationship of one to another as one of “natural trust.” It is on this point that the two thinkers diverge radically, I think. Whereas Levinas holds that the ethical demand emerges in the interpersonal encounter between myself and an Other, and that a phenomenon such as trust could only constitute a response to the ethical demand, never contain or constitute the ethical demand, Løgstrup argues that the interpersonal encounter between myself and another person just is a relationship of natural trust in which the ethical demand is contained because the other person’s life is delivered over to my care. Levinas argues that I am not free to escape the ethical demand (or call to responsibility) that is thrust upon me in my encounter with the Other. He would, I think, say that I am free not to trust the Other and not to accept the Other’s trust. Løgstrup, on the other hand, clearly suggests that I am not free to approach the other person without surrendering my life to him or her in natural trust. The ethical demand emerges with trust, trust is not a response to a prior ethical demand. On this point, must agree with Levinas, for it appears that Løgstrup conflates trust with entrustment. It is quite consonant with Levinas’s philosophy to say that the Face-to-Face encounter can be characterized in terms of being entrusted with the Other’s life. This sense of entrustment clearly connotes an ethical sense of responsibility. If Løgstrup were to describe the ethical demand that is inherent in the interpersonal
encounter in terms of entrustment rather than trust, then the sense in which I can refuse to accept the trust with which I am entrusted is preserved. Instead, Løgstrup’s language makes it sound as if trust is always already achieved in my encounter with another person. This is clearly not the case, though it is certainly true that the other is “held open” before me and part of his or her life surrendered to me. In other words, part of the care of his or her life is entrusted to me when I encounter the other person, and a relationship of trust may be demanded of me in response.

Differences in characterizing the ethical relationship aside, both Levinas and Løgstrup offer rich and helpful resources for understanding the nature of interpersonal relationships and their work can be brought to bear on the issue of the ethical dimension of trust in a way that most contemporary accounts of ethics cannot.

The Need to Supplement the Accounts of Levinas and Løgstrup

Despite their insightful and important contributions to philosophy and to ethics, neither Levinas nor Løgstrup offer an account of the interpersonal relationship that includes a discussion of assuredness or supportive upholding, of directedness or attuned orientation—fundamental elements of the phenomenon of trust. Thus, according to the account that I developed in the last chapter and which I will bring to bear here, these elements would need to be included in any account of trust that applies to the interpersonal relationship. In other words, whereas Løgstrup confines his description of the “natural trust” with which I encounter another solely in terms of ethical demand and vulnerable openness, I want to argue that a more complete understanding of the “fact” that he describes here would involve a more precise designation, “natural entrustment,”
and would describe the way in which one is called to be trustworthy, to accept the other’s vulnerability and the demand tacit in it. According this account, I am vulnerably open and ethically responsible to be sure, but I am also supportively upheld and oriented in and by the trust relationship that is demanded of me. The ethical demand to care for the other person’s life is entrusted to me in the facing relationship. If I respond to this demand by accepting the responsibility to and for the other person with which I am entrusted, then I will strive to be trustworthy, to safeguard those goods that have been entrusted to my care. In so doing, in accepting the responsibility for the other person, I find my identity and meaning. Of course, it is quite possible that I do not consciously make a decision to accept my responsibility, but rather take it up in the existential possibilities and ethical choices that I pursue. What remains is that my response to the ethical demand inherent in being entrusted with responsibility to and for the other person determines the extent to which I am supportively upheld in existence and whether I can live a full or flourishing human life.

How does this work? I offer only a provisional sketch of such an account in what follows. In providing this sketch, I acknowledge that much more must be said about how the existential mood of trust and its four elements relates to the trusting encounter between persons—but that would be a project for another book. For now the following will have to suffice.

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20 It is hard to imagine that I have accepted my responsibility to be a trustworthy steward of another’s life, say, a child, if I am selling him or her into slavery. In such a case, I have refused the responsibility demanded of me, the charge to care for the other’s life with which I am entrusted. I am not trustworthy. I have de-faced the Other. Am I making a decision every time that I sell a child into slavery that will refuse the responsibility with which I am entrusted each and every time that I encounter the Other? No, for I have developed a habit of ignoring the plea expressed in the face of the Other. It is now a disposition, a “frame of mind,” a reactive attitude.
A Sketch of How the Existential Mood of Trust Informs the Interpersonal Relationship

In my everyday encounters with another person, I encounter him or her in the existential mood of trust. This encounter renews, reproduces, and reshapes my existential mood of trust, the diffuse and global mood that enables certain things to matter to me and allows what matters to thrive. I am vulnerable before the Other and responsive to the tacit ethical demand contained in our face-to-face encounter. When I encounter another person, responsibility for and to him or her is demanded of me; or, to put it differently, I am entrusted with care of the other. I can either respond with acceptance or denial of this demand, but I must respond. If I accept my responsibility, then I accept the need to cultivate a relationship of trust, to be trustworthy. Furthermore, existential trust is generated, reshaped, and renewed as a response to the ethical demand inherent in the approach of my neighbor, my encounter with a stranger, and the relationships with those dearest to us. In commit myself to taking up the demand for trust, however, I am, to some extent, oriented, given direction, and upheld in existence. It is this mood of existential trust whereby I find myself vulnerably open, supportively upheld, and oriented in the world, that operates a the background condition for or the backdrop against which meaning and significance in life is enhanced and enriched.

This is where Levinas’s work on the irreducible alterity and the inviolable singularity of the Other person becomes essential to our understanding of the importance of trust to human existence. When one encounters another in the mood of existential trust, one’s world, within which one exists trustingly, is “called into question” in the sense that the other person’s existence, his or her world, does not and cannot wholly coincide with
one’s own. There is always going to be an element of alterity to the other person that will not be able to be assimilated and incorporated into one’s own world and which thus destabilizes and dis-orientates one’s standing and place vis-à-vis the Other. It is not that one is no longer upheld and attuned through existential trust when one encounters the ethical demand embodied in the vulnerability of the other person; rather, one’s standing and orientation is suspended in the face of the other, requiring justification and that an account be given. This calling to account necessarily results in a re-configuration and re-generation of one’s secured upholding and orientation vis-à-vis not only the other person but the world as such.

Chapter Summary

It is clear that much work must be done to develop and extend the account of the foundational and primordial role that the interpersonal trust relationship plays in the emergence of ethics, meaning, politics, and so on. I have tried to take a step in that direction by examining Levinas’s and Løgstrup’s work in order to account for the primacy of interpersonal relationships in the emergence of subjectivity, meaning, communication, and sociality. The interpersonal relationship was shown to be the source of the ethical demand by which we become responsible selves and the vulnerability and exposure inherent our encounters with others was heavily emphasized. Løgstrup’s description of the interpersonal relationship in terms of natural trust and the ethical force tacit in this trust was found to be useful, if insufficient, in that it is one of the only accounts of the phenomenon of trust that binds it to a fundamental conception of the interpersonal relationship. Finally, I offered a brief sketch of the way in which the
phenomenological description of trust as an existential mood developed in the last chapter could provide a more complete way of understanding the ethical dimension of trust at a primordial and basic level of existence.
CONCLUSION

This project emerged out of a desire to examine a phenomenon that I felt was extremely important to human life and community and yet I saw that there was little explicitly written on trust in the Western philosophical literature. At the same time that I noticed a dearth of literature on the subject, I intuited that two of my favorite philosophers—Plato and Nietzsche—actually had much more to contribute to the study of trust than it first appeared. This dissertation has been my attempt to glean insights regarding the nature and importance of trust from Plato and Nietzsche while also contributing something of my own thinking about this rich phenomenon to the project. Of course, to say that the account of existential trust as mood and of the ethical nature of trust constitutes my own effort of thought is a bit of a misnomer since I relied heavily on the work of others, of philosophers and teachers far more accomplished and illuminative than I. In conclusion, I think it appropriate to offer some final thoughts and reflections concerning what I think is accomplished in this study as well as what I feel is lacking or is in need of further development.

In the study of Plato’s Phaedo, I discovered a rich and dense thicket of insights into the matter of trust. There, I found Socrates giving voice to a distinctly religious account of matters of duty in life and of death and interpreting the existential core as a call to take up the life that we can sense is entrusted to us. Then, in examining the way of life that best responds to this call of entrustment, Socrates subtly demonstrates the
bankruptcy of two ways of life—the ascetic and the somatic—neither of which achieves a proper form of trust in life. Finally, the Phaedo culminates in Socrates’s plea to avoid the danger of misology, the hatred of arguments, and his injunction to ground one’s trust in the art of arguments, the most trustworthy means of living the good and complete life.

The study of trust in Plato needs to be expanded beyond the Phaedo. The findings in the Phaedo should be compared with the Divided Line of the Republic so that a fresh interpretation of the role of trust in the ascent to the highest ideas (eide) can be given. Furthermore, my reading of trust in the Phaedo must be brought into a reading of the other dialogues in order to determine whether it is consistent with other of Plato’s concepts. Also, within my reading of the Phaedo, I do very little with the arguments for the immortality of the soul offered there. If I were to bring the findings on trust in the other passages to bear on the nature and function of the arguments for the immortality of the soul, it would be a more complete project.

In the chapters on Nietzsche, I developed a reading of his work that strove to make sense of his ambivalent mentions of trust by showing how he might conceive of trust in a negative sense, as pathological trust, and how he advocates a certain form of trust in life that I call vital trust. Pathological trust turns away from earthly life and leads to the possibility of the complete loss of trust in meaning in existence, a condition that Nietzsche names “nihilism.” Vital trust, on the other hand, is a necessary component of Nietzsche project of life-affirmation and the revaluation of all values; and it constitutes the restoration of earthly life as ground. My analysis of Nietzsche’s thinking about trust needs to be further researched and elaborated upon. One area that I know can be worked
on is the link between vital trust and Nietzsche’s frequent appropriation of artistic creation and intoxication as models of life-affirming value creation.

The chapter on trust as an existential mood argues that the most global and diffuse manifestation of the phenomenon of trust can be understood as *existential trust*, and that existential trust can be defined as a primordial mood (global and diffuse) with a distinctly affective character or ‘feel’ that arises on the basis of one’s situatedness in the nest of relationships that constitute existence. The affective character specific to existential trust is an overall effect of four characteristics: *supportive upholding, vulnerable openness, attuned orientation, and demand*. I think that much more remains to be answered regarding the way in which it is quite possible to stunt the emergence of existential trust (I think of a child who has been abused or of the subject born into a totalitarian regime in which basic human relationships are strained) or to have one’s trust so damaged that it can barely be said to exist anymore (genocide victims or rape victims immediately come to mind here). Such cases make glaringly obvious the fact that existential trust is, at some level, willed or accepted by the truster. Perhaps trust is demanded if one is to live an enriched and fully human life, but it is possible to refuse the demand or to have the choice taken from one by a violation or repeated violations of trust. More must be said as well concerning when trust ought to be refused. Here, one might distinguish between ill-informed existential trust and properly formed trust.

Finally, the chapter on the ethics of trust attempted to show how trust relates to the ethical demand. When, glossing on Levinas’s claim that my encounter with the other person issues in a call to responsibility, I argue that trust is one of the things demanded of
me, I need to further elaborate the reason why it is that trust is demanded of me. In other words, why is trust rather than distrust demanded of me? What does this trust amount to? Also, my criticism of the idea that Løgstrup’s claim that the other is held open before in “natural trust” and that this is the source of the ethical demand must be elaborated upon. For I argue that the ethical demand precedes the possibility of trust and thus the most that can be said is that the other person’s exposure and vulnerability before me means that I am entrusted with the care of the other person. Trust is a response that is demanded of me, but it is not a de facto condition of the interpersonal encounter.

Ultimately, there are many more questions than answers given in this investigation of trust, but it is to be hoped that this study has provided a small contribution to the task of a philosophical investigation of trust. For if one thing is clear, it is the fact that the phenomenon and reality of trust touches human life in every aspect of our existence, leaving its trace in all that we think, do, and accomplish, whether one lives in the mountains and hillsides of Ecuador or in the noisy and frenetically paced silver and steel urban metropolis of Chicago; whether one is bound up in a daily struggle for survival under conditions of poverty or illness; whether male or female, child or adult, dark-skinned or light-skinned, rich or poor, farmer or corporate CEO. Yet, in spite of the way in which we all, as human beings, live, move, and breathe within a ‘world’ woven and knit together by trust, it nevertheless appears that this world is threatened in our age by a powerful climate of distrust. In addition to the events and aftermath of the “war on terror,” one only needs to recall the frequent revelations of hypocrisy, abuse, and evil on the part of self-declared champions of justice and freedom; the rapidly increasing rate of
divorce, depression, and drug abuse, even within those supposedly “stable and advanced” modern societies; the persistence of genocide alongside rapid technological and scientific innovation; the increasing devastation and voracious consumption of our natural resources with no regard for those environmental and ecological costs the earth is increasingly forced to bear—all of these events and much more could be said to be swiftly eroding relationships of trust to the point at which all relations (of nations with other nations, of humans to the environment, etc.) are becoming ever more unstable and frenetic, interpersonal communication and fellowship strained and antagonistic, our world increasingly less durable and perhaps unendurable, and our very humanity threatened by a kind of inhuman barbarism.

In light of the dire signs and destructive events of our age, this project and its continuance represents a hope that this minor attempt to think through the phenomenon and meaning of trust will perhaps go some of the way towards a much more thorough investigation that can help further the efforts of far more capable thinkers and actors than myself to think about ways to cultivate and maintain a proper and reasonable sense of trust among our fellow human beings. Maybe a properly philosophical understanding of this most important part of human life can do justice to the ethical relationships that trust demands and restore a greater sensitivity to the needs and dignity of those others with whom each one of us is entrusted.
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