



# On Seeing What There Is to See

## Nietzsche on Forgetting and Aspectival Captivity

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It is possible to live almost without memory, and to live happily moreover, as the animal demonstrates; but it is altogether impossible to *live* at all without forgetting.  
—Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

**The ability to forget is**, as Nietzsche says in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, “a form of *robust* health.”<sup>2</sup> Strong and full natures are, as Nietzsche observes in the same text, “incapable of taking [their] enemies, [their] accidents, even [their] misdeeds seriously for very long” (GM 1 10). That is, strong and full natures, on Nietzsche’s view, are discernible by their capacity “to forget” (ibid.). By contrast, those who have an “all-too-faithful memory,”<sup>3</sup> those who lack the faculty to forget, may be “compared (and more than merely compared),” says Nietzsche, to a “dyspeptic”: a person who “cannot ‘have done’ with anything,” a person who is, at the very least, showing symptoms of disease (GM 2 1). From these limited remarks, it is plain to see that forgetting, on Nietzsche’s view, is a marked capacity—a capacity to digest experiences such that they do not fester, such that they do not *poison*—that is associated with health, strength, and nobility (GM 1 10).<sup>4</sup>

Scholarly quarrels about whether Nietzsche’s counsel on forgetting can cogently function in this way—that is, as an ethical or political ideal—have, by and large, been settled. On the standard and now dominant reading, the idea that intractable memories of suffering ought to be met with “unreconstructed” forgetting is found to be “inappropriate if not cruel.”<sup>5</sup> The problem, according to these accounts, is that Nietzsche’s championing of forgetting turns out to be but another

tool of systemic oppression. Sara Ahmed suggests as much in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*:

Forgetting would be a repetition of the violence or injury. To forget would be to repeat the forgetting that is already implicated in the fetishization of the wound. Our task might instead be to remember how the surfaces of bodies (including the bodies of communities . . . ) came to be wounded in the first place. . . . In order to break the seal of the past, in order to move away from attachments that are hurtful, we must first bring them into the realm of political action. Bringing pain into politics requires we give up the fetish of the wound through different kinds of remembrance. The past is living rather than dead; the past lives in the very wounds that remain open in the present.<sup>6</sup>

Fundamentally, according to Ahmed, Nietzsche's counsel on forgetting functions at the behest of the dominant system of evaluation and, as such, is a mechanism by which that evaluative framework repeats, reinscribes, retrenches, or otherwise reaffirms itself. Forgetting, then, so this argument goes, is not a means of political resistance in which evaluative schemas might be viewed, called into question, held open as a site of contest, or otherwise reevaluated. Instead, the call to forget appears to imply, as Mari Ruti has it, that "those who have been damaged by collective structures of oppression, such as poverty, racism, sexism, or homophobia should learn to look the other way."<sup>7</sup> If so, and if the standard view properly reconstructs and captures Nietzsche's account, then it does seem rather far from ideal, or, if you will allow, "unconvincing," "politically questionable," and "ethically compromising, even indecent" (D 201, 203).

I think these worries ought to be taken seriously. Indeed, it is certainly worth seeking some clarity on whether we should read Nietzsche's praise of forgetting as "merely a convenient way to brush atrocities under the rug, to let victimizers off the hook" (D 203). And, given what has just been said, it also seems necessary to ask whether Nietzsche is putting forth some form of unreconstructed forgetting as an ethical and political ideal. If not, might this mean that Nietzsche's championing of forgetting is best read as but a moment of defensive grandiosity, or what some might call "false bravado"—a pride-fueled commitment to "an illusion of narcissistic self-sufficiency"?<sup>8</sup> Taken together, these questions clarify the issues at the center of debates surrounding the nature and value of forgetting in Nietzsche's works of the late 1880s.

My own view, and one that I will advance over the course of this paper, is that these questions can be answered, and that the core tensions can be resolved by attending to and drawing out two key moments from the *Genealogy*. More specifically, in §2, I revisit and reconstruct Nietzsche's most sustained discussion of the structural form of forgetting, found

in the *Genealogy*, to demonstrate a markedly underappreciated fact, one that is often glossed over in the secondary literature—namely, that forgetting is, on Nietzsche’s view, a “preserver psychic order” that organizes cognitive and affective experiences (GM 2 1).<sup>9</sup> By attending to the analogy of “digestion” through which Nietzsche develops his views on forgetting, “incorporation” and absorption become as crucial as that which is eliminated (*ibid.*). Taking Nietzsche’s analogy seriously allows me, in §3, to situate Nietzsche’s account of forgetting within his broader campaign against ascetic morality and allows me to show how this mode of morality impedes the digestion and incorporation of experiences (GM 2 3). Here, I show how the ascetic evaluative framework hampers “this apparatus of repression” by preventing the incorporation and integration of painful affect, particularly the feeling of vulnerability (GM 2 1). In other words, I establish that one of Nietzsche’s central objections to the ascetic form of morality is that it thwarts our capacity to digest our experiences and thereby diminishes our capacity to be present. I then conclude by developing the implications of this point. In doing so, I contend that Nietzsche’s counsel on forgetting deserves a second look because it may, when cast in the proper light, function as a conceptual tool for resisting the dominant moral and evaluative framework.

## 2. Nietzsche on Forgetting

Here is one of the key passages from the *Genealogy* in which forgetting takes pride of place:

Forgetting is no mere *vis inertiae* as the superficial imagine; it is rather an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression, that is responsible for the fact that what we experience and absorb enters our consciousness as little while we are digesting it (one might call the process “immentalization [*Einverseelung*]”) as does the thousandfold process, involved in physical nourishment—so-called “incorporation [*Einverleibung*].” To close the doors and windows of consciousness for a time; to remain undisturbed by the noise and struggle of our underworld of utility organs working with and against one another; a little quietness, a little *tabula rasa* of the consciousness, to make room for new things, above all for the nobler functions and functionaries, for regulation, foresight, premeditation (for our organism is an oligarchy)—that is the purpose of active forgetfulness, which is like a doorkeeper, a preserver of psychic order, repose, and etiquette: so that it will be immediately obvious how there could be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hope, no pride, no *present*, without forgetfulness. The man in whom this apparatus of repression is damaged and ceases to function properly may be compared (and more than merely compared) with a dyspeptic—he cannot “have done” with anything. (GM 2 1; trans. mod.)<sup>10</sup>

By centering the gastronomic metaphor of digestion, through which Nietzsche advances his account, it becomes clearer that forgetting preserves psychic order through the absorption, incorporation, immentalization, or rejection of certain cognitive and affective psycho-physiological experiences.<sup>11</sup> Forgetting, as an active, assimilative, appropriative (digestive) capacity, absorbs or expels experiences to permit certain configurations of feelings—happiness, cheerfulness, hope, or pride—and organizational abilities—regulation, anticipation, and calculation. When the integrating or sequestering capacity of forgetting “is damaged and ceases to function properly,” one suffers, as may be obvious, from indigestion. Dyspepsia, to retain the metaphor, is a condition in which one cannot metabolize experiences such that they become stuck, so to speak, and one “cannot ‘have done’ with” them.

The picture that is emerging is one of a “cheerful” mode and a “vengeful” form of digestion.<sup>12</sup> The distinction, as I will demonstrate, rests upon whether ideas can be assimilated, incorporated, or appropriated or whether they become “fixed” (GM 1 2). An example of the “cheerful” form of digestion is arguably that of the “good Europeans” who experience, Nietzsche tells us, a range of ignoble sentiments: “hours of national agitations, patriotic palpitations, and various other sorts of archaizing sentimental inundations” (BGE 241). What characterizes the “good European,” at least in part, is not the absence of nationalistic attitudes but the ability to understand the origins of such “fatherlandishness” and the capacity to let the idea quickly run its course without remaining doggedly attached to those “patriotic palpitations” (ibid.). Nietzsche makes a similar claim in the *Genealogy*: he describes “a strong and well-constituted” person as one who digests their experiences—“deeds and misdeeds included”—like they digest their meals, even when they have to “swallow some tough morsels” (GM 3 16). Forgetting is marked, then, not by the absence of unsavory experiences or ideas but rather by the capacity and ability to assimilate or appropriate, which is to say, somehow incorporate them. By contrast, the one who “digests . . . events badly” (BGE 244), who has a “vengefulness of the entrails,” suffers from dammed up forms of thinking and imagining.<sup>13</sup> Thus, such individuals suffer from what might be called fixed ideas (GM 1 2).

Some additional shape to that last remark is required. Before that, however, I must make one additional clarificatory observation. Given what has been said thus far, we may be tempted to think of forgetting as an immovable and hopelessly fixed intrapsychic structure.<sup>14</sup> The temptation, to put it another way, is to think of forgetting as “a sharp and final division” that separates out conscious and unconscious materials.<sup>15</sup> Rather, I would like to advance the claim that forgetting is a socially formed and informed way of making sense of experiences, particularly

the anticipation and regulation of feeling-states, such as helplessness, happiness, pride, shame, guilt, and rage.

To make my case, let me focus in on the “affects of *ressentiment*” and the question of why such powerful feelings poison in certain cases but not in others.<sup>16</sup> My hope is that such a discussion will bear out the assimilative or appropriative capacity of forgetting. At issue here is a cluster of reactive affective states—such as rage and anger, that are, Nietzsche suggests, the result of a “pathological vulnerability . . . [coupled with] impotent lust for revenge”—and the question of why they become noxious only in certain circumstances (EH W 6).

There are those, and Nietzsche holds up the Comte de Mirabeau as an example, for whom *ressentiment* does not “poison,” for whom, more specifically, the affective state does not serve as a recurring way of making sense of themselves or of their experiences (GM 1 10). There are two explanations, we are told, for why this is the case: First, they are strong enough to appropriate the affect and can thereby exhaust the feeling “in an immediate reaction” upon their enemies, their accidents, or their misdeeds (*ibid.*). Second, the affect simply “fails to appear,” which means, more exactly, that someone like Mirabeau, a stand-in for “nobility” generally, does not experience slights as narcissistic wounds (*ibid.*). In other words, Mirabeau does not regard those who insult or snub him as serious threats or dangers to his sense of self; rather, and crucially, he reveres them. Nietzsche writes: “He desires his enemy for himself, as his mark of distinction; he can endure no other enemy than one in whom there is nothing to despise and *very much* to honor!” (GM 1 10). It is possible, then, to read §10 of the “First Essay” of the *Genealogy* as advancing, and consistent with, the view that forgetting is a more than purely intrapsychic phenomenon: Mirabeau is not poisoned by *ressentiment* because he has, amongst other things, socially and politically permitted and sanctioned “drainage ditches for the affects”—an expression Nietzsche uses elsewhere (BGE 260). Further still, it is possible to read §10 of the “First Essay” as underscoring the appropriative—the form-giving or the shaping—dimensions of Nietzsche’s view on forgetting. Mirabeau can incorporate injuries and slights into his sense of himself precisely because of the way he shapes his view of an enemy: as “a mark of distinction.”

As we would expect, a similar account is on offer and will show itself when we consider those who are unable to regulate these strong affects—those who “cannot,” as Nietzsche writes, “get rid of anything . . . cannot get over anything . . . cannot repel anything—[for whom] everything hurts. Men and things obtrude too closely; experiences strike one too deeply; memory becomes a festering wound” (EH W 6). The “festering wound” of *ressentiment* is more than a purely intrapsychic

phenomenon: it results from being, at least temporarily, “denied,” socially and politically, “the true reaction . . . of deeds” (GM 1 10). Thus, it is clear that, on Nietzsche’s account, *ressentiment* takes shape in a relational context. That means, and this is the key point, that the psychic condition is not purely individualistic but, of necessity, an interplay between people. Further still, the “festering wound” of resentment fixates one’s view and precludes the ability to be “attuned only to the passing moment” (GM 2 3), to the the *present* (GM 2 1), by impairing the capacity to forget—the capacity, more specifically, to incorporate, appropriate, or otherwise assimilate and give shape to experiences.

As I have been suggesting, the formation of fixed ideas and the attendant inability to regulate strong affect is a symptom that the capacity of forgetting is impaired. Indeed, in the next section, I will try to show that one flank of Nietzsche’s campaign against ascetic morality is that this form of morality damages our capacity to forget and thereby to be “attuned only to the passing moment.” Before that, I will distinguish the account of forgetting that I have been offering from others in the secondary literature.

These are the general points that can be drawn from our analysis thus far: First, forgetting is not passive but an active sorting, form-giving, and organizing capacity (GM 2 1). Second, forgetting is not a mechanistic or purely physiological process (GM 3 16).<sup>17</sup> Third, it is an oversimplification to suggest that forgetting is a presocial natural endowment.<sup>18</sup> Rather, as I understand it, the mode of forgetting that interests Nietzsche in the *Genealogy* serves a sorting function and takes place within a social, that is, a normative-evaluative, context.<sup>19</sup> Fourth, forgetting is not “unreconstructed” or, to borrow a phrase from Christa Davis Acampora, some “celebration of mindlessness or oblivion” but rather, as I have been suggesting and amongst other things, an active appropriative capacity to organize, assimilate, or incorporate experiences.<sup>20</sup>

As I am asking us to take sides and to choose between readings, and as I am asking us to refrain from sympathizing with a reconstruction of forgetting as “simply looking away” (D 201) in favor of an account that holds out forgetting as an appropriative faculty, I will need to say more about why we should not simply regard the mode of forgetting as “a suddenly erupting decision in favor of ignorance” (BGE 230). I will need to say more about why we should not simply state that forgetting, in the end, amounts to nothing more than a resounding “Yea and Amen to ignorance” (ibid.), and why forgetting is more than a simple refusal to look, a “looking away.” A natural place to begin is §230 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, where the idea of digestion as appropriation is brought together with the need for moments of ignorance:

The spirit's power to appropriate the foreign stands revealed in its inclination to assimilate the new to the old, to simplify the manifold, and to overlook or repulse whatever is totally contradictory—just as it involuntarily emphasizes certain features and lines in what is foreign, in every piece of the “external world,” retouching and falsifying the whole to suit itself. Its intent in all this is to incorporate new “experiences,” to file new things in old files—growth, in a word—or, more precisely, the *feeling* of growth, the feeling of increased power. An apparently opposite drive serves the same will: a suddenly erupting decision in favor of ignorance, of deliberate exclusion, a shutting of one's windows, an internal No to this or that thing, a refusal to let things approach, a kind of state of defense against much that is knowable, a satisfaction with the dark, with the limiting horizon, a Yea and Amen to ignorance—all of which is necessary in proportion to a spirit's power to appropriate, its “digestive capacity,” to speak metaphorically—and actually “the spirit” is relatively most similar to a stomach. (BGE 230)

Nietzsche's point here can be summarized as follows: ignorance is as much a form-giving and appropriative capacity as assimilation and incorporation. Appropriation, then, is seen not simply in the “deliberative exclusion,” the focusing in on certain features and not on others, but in the ability to incorporate new experiences. Hence, rather than reading Nietzsche's championing of forgetting as an unrestricted “Yea and Amen to ignorance,” it is altogether more plausible to read his account as underscoring an appropriative capacity. Returning to the metaphor of digestion, it is evident that without incorporation or appropriation one has an emaciating experience: one cannot hold onto nutrients because one either eliminates too much or too little. Thus, far from advocating either the extreme of deprivation or that of overabundance, Nietzsche is advocating for the conditions that we can metabolize, that we can draw nutrients from.

Before pressing on with a discussion of how forgetting figures in Nietzsche's critique of morality, let me make a fifth and final point concerning how my view differs from others on offer in the secondary literature. As I have been underscoring the psychological dimensions of Nietzsche's account, it is worth pausing to note why an alternative reading, namely, one suggesting that forgetting takes the form of defensive grandiosity, misses the mark. The argument for such a view asks us to recall Nietzsche's treatment of Mirabeau:

We can see that Mirabeau's bravado in forgetting his enemies, which one suspects can only be false bravado—although Nietzsche seems oddly and uncharacteristically blind to this self-deception—is only possible because he transforms these enemies into “worms” who cannot get under his skin—or who do so only once before they are shaken off with, as Nietzsche emphasizes, a *single* shrug. In other words, Mirabeau's mercy turns on denying that how others perceive

or act toward oneself can actively constitute one's identity, or shape one's emotional landscape. This retreat into an illusion of narcissistic self-sufficiency in the face of the perils of intersubjectivity may well work as a perverse kind of therapy, but its paranoid construction of a world divided between humans and worms does not, needless to say, restore trespassers to active, respected, *equal* citizens. Nor, we might add, does its flight from the risks associated with the *agon* of recognition count as a sign of strength, even, or *especially*, by Nietzsche's own standards.<sup>21</sup>

The idea, clearly, is that Mirabeau's arrogant entitlement is but "false bravado." The move is a defense, it should be noted, because Mirabeau, so this argument goes, wards off feelings of vulnerability by posturing as impervious to such harms. But this is, I think, a rather odd, and to my mind unconvincing, way of reading the passage in question. In my reading, Mirabeau, far from transforming his enemies into worms or diminishing their importance and esteem, has "reverence" for them (GM 1 10). When confronted with the "perils of intersubjectivity,"<sup>22</sup> Mirabeau, far from retreating into an arrogant devaluation of others, "desires his enemy for himself" because in the figure of the enemy, as Mirabeau sees it and as Nietzsche puts it, "there is nothing to despise and *very much to honor!*" (GM 1 10). Forgetting, as the case of Mirabeau shows, is not a pathological form of defensive grandiosity but a way of shaping and assimilating painful experiences. Indeed, Mirabeau is not, we are told, defensively closed-off nor frightened by slights or insults, but one who welcomes them as "his mark of distinction" (*ibid.*), as a way of revering himself and his enemies. Mirabeau gives shape, perhaps prereflectively, to wrongs done to him, to insults leveled at him, to "vile actions done him," which, for Nietzsche, is an exercise in, and an example of, the assimilative capacity of forgetting (*ibid.*).

The account of forgetting that I have attempted to develop in this section is as a plainly active, appropriative, and form-giving capacity. As much as this appropriative capacity involves absorption and incorporation, it also requires elimination or rejection. I would like to turn now to discuss in much more detail a claim I only hinted at before, namely that ascetic morality is problematic on the grounds that it further impairs our capacity to forget.

### **3. On Morality, Fixed Ideas, and Aspectival Captivity**

A central dimension of Nietzsche's critique of ascetic morality is that it represses other moral vantage points and presents itself as the "*only possible*" view.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, ascetic morality achieves its dominance, at least in part, by obscuring its history (see, e.g., GM 1 7), generating an architecture of timeless universality—one takes "the *value* of these



‘values’ as given, as factual, as beyond all question”—, and limiting our evaluative perspectives (GM P 6). I therefore begin by conceptualizing this perspective-narrowing condition—a form, to retain our original metaphor, of indigestion—which I will call, following David Owen, the state of “aspectival captivity.”<sup>24</sup> Next, I turn to explore this condition and analyze it as a marked inability to forget, that is, and to mix our metaphors slightly, I diagnose “aspectival captivity” as a form of dyspepsia. I explicate this thesis by analyzing the subject of injury—the person who either wholly blames others for their suffering or exclusively blames themselves. What my analysis shows is that such a person is stuck, held captive by an interpretive framework and has a fixed evaluative lens precisely because this evaluative perspective impairs their ability to forget. As indicated by Nietzsche’s account of the subject of injury, we can see that such a person does not suffer from a wholly personal pathology. Rather, morality contributes to their indigestion, to their inability to break down their experiences, by impeding their capacity to process and make alternative meaning of their suffering.

### **3.1 On Ascetic Morality and Aspectival Captivity**

The perspectival-limiting force of aspectival captivity shows itself most readily through the prereflective assumptions that we make about our place in the world. These presuppositions are so fundamental, so elemental, that they often escape our awareness. Sigmund Freud marked this out as our “internal foreign territory”—the strange land within.<sup>25</sup> Others capture this as our “prereflective unconscious,” “unformulated experience,” or even “unthought known.”<sup>26</sup> These organizing beliefs about the world often remain unformulated by us or forever elusive to us. For that reason, we can liken aspectival captivity to a colonized vantage point: the state of being “trapped in an unreflected perspective, one that . . . [we do] not recognize as a perspective but . . . [accept] as not-to-be-questioned reality.”<sup>27</sup>

We may be tempted to think of this unreflected perspective, this condition of aspectival captivity, as functioning much like a scratched compact disc or a stuck music record: tirelessly repetitive, endlessly reiterative, perpetually, always perceptually, holding us in place. That likeness, I think, would be fine, as far as it goes. The limits of the comparison, however, are to be found in the nature of the repetition. Hence, it may be closer to the mark to think of our condition of captivity, in addition to being reiterative and perceptually colonizing, as a repertoire: it is not just the refrain we go back to, repeatedly, but the one without which we cannot play. In this way, the colonized vantage point of aspectival captivity works like a “rigid template . . . through

which all experience comes to be filtered.”<sup>28</sup> Aspectival captivity governs what is seen, what forms of life we view as permissible, and, just as significantly, what forms of life we view as impermissible. It is, to put it another way, the “implicit background or horizon of our practices of thought and action” by and through which we make sense of ourselves.<sup>29</sup>

As I have been suggesting, this fixed order, this system of evaluation, constraints us in two ways: First, it mandates what emerges. As it does, and this is important, the system makes distinctions of value: it champions forms of life as good or bad as it determines culpability and exculpation. On Nietzsche’s view, ascetic morality is one such system of evaluation that forms a fixed evaluative order (GM 2 3). Un-egoistic acts born of selflessness, self-denial, and self-sacrifice are commended and considered good. Egoistic acts born of selfishness, self-interest, and self-advantage are disparaged and considered evil. Indeed, the prohibition on self-advantage, to take but one example, leads, Nietzsche hazards, to atrophy: “Not to look for your own advantage”—that is just the moral fig leaf for an entirely different, namely physiological, state of affairs: ‘I don’t know how to *find* my own advantage anymore.”<sup>30</sup> Not knowing what we want, not being able to assess our interests, these states function to replicate the dictates of the moral system. That is, in not knowing how to locate one’s advantage, one comes to believe that one *should not* look for one’s own advantage. This is an example of aspectival captivity: one endlessly repeats a singular interpretation, which in this case is that securing one’s own advantage is problematic.

This leads me to the second point: in dictating what forms of life are allowed, these systems also limit our range of possibilities. In this way, the systems that hold us captive function as the limits beyond and without which we cannot conceive of being, acting, or thinking otherwise. These background assumptions hold us captive by denying their own perspectival nature.

Recall that *ressentiment* becomes a “festering wound” when the painful affect cannot be incorporated, when it is met, in other words, with the incapacity to forget. We can notice the precise shape of such indigestion—it takes the form of aspectival captivity—, and it is the result of a system of evaluation that encourages the formation of fixed ideas. That is, to put it more concretely, ascetic morality, as an evaluative framework, fosters aspectival captivity by impairing forgetting. In what follows, and by drawing on “the subject of injury,” I demonstrate that morality fixes in place the meaning of suffering and thereby thwarts the capacity to forget, that is to say, the ability to process or otherwise make sense of these painful states without blaming oneself or another person.<sup>31</sup>

### 3.2 On the Subject of Injury, Fixed Ideas, and the Meaning of Suffering

The subject of injury is defined by and through the meaning that they give to their suffering, particularly to a past wound. Such a person, Nietzsche writes, dwells

on nasty deeds and imaginary slights; they scour the entrails of their past and present for obscure and questionable occurrences that offer them the opportunity to revel in tormenting suspicions and to intoxicate themselves with the poison of their own malice: they tear open their oldest wounds, they bleed from long-healed scars, they make evildoers out of their friends, wives, children, and whoever else stands closest to them. (GM 3 15)

Their sense of self is formed around “the figure of victim.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, because of this the subject of injury is often aligned with the form of identity structured by and through the form of *ressentiment* that seeks external sources of suffering. That is, the constitution of this form of subjectivity is often seen to locate the cause of suffering in an external source, in the “*need*,” as Nietzsche puts it, “to direct one’s view outward instead of back to oneself” (GM 1 10). The *need* here is to locate blame, to find the source of one’s suffering, outside of the self. Yet, if this is the case, it nevertheless overlooks another explanation of the meaning of one’s suffering, notably recrimination turned inward. In this vein, one holds oneself responsible and tells oneself that “*you alone are to blame for yourself*” (GM 3 15). Hence, we have a subject of injury that seeks external sources and explanations for their suffering and a subject of injury that seeks internal sources and explanations for their suffering. So, in taking the two together, the observation that I want to make under the heading “subject of injury” is quite straightforward: it is a sense of self that is formed through the moralized notions of blame and responsibility and the affects of guilt and shame, which, when taken together, address the psychological need for an explanation of suffering. More than this, these recriminations fix the meaning of suffering as something for which someone is responsible and, as such, something that must and can be atoned for (*ibid.*; see also GM 3 28).

I want to take a moment to underscore the psychologically protective function of remembering, of having such fixed ideas about the precise causes of one’s suffering. Indeed, because an “all-too-faithful memory” (BGE 269) serves a psychologically protective function; some will need that refuge more than others. Those who do need this defense, and those for whom remembering is a means of self-protection, will make use of it, Nietzsche suggests, in at least two ways: First, remembering protects one from future slights. The person who structures their sense of self

around the feeling of *ressentiment*, Nietzsche writes, “understands how to keep silent, how not to forget, how to wait, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble” (GM 1 10). Hence, the memory of an insult affords such a person, Nietzsche says, “hiding places, secret paths and back doors,” which are, plainly enough, ways of protecting themselves from future affronts (*ibid.*). Further still, the memory of a slight preserves a sense of efficacy. Because remembering engenders cleverness, one knows, for example, when it is prudent to keep silent or to wait, one also feels up to the task and capable of protecting oneself.

Nietzsche draws a similar picture of this protective function in “Why I Am A Destiny.” The passage concerns the “the psychology of the good human being” of traditional morality or the type that structures their sense of self around the feeling of injury:

Let me tarry over the psychology of the good human being. To estimate what a type of man is worth, one must calculate the price paid for his preservation—one must know the conditions of his existence. The condition of the existence of the good is the *lie*: put differently, not *wanting* to see at any price how reality is constituted fundamentally—namely, not in such a way as to elicit benevolent instincts at all times, and even less in such a way as to tolerate at all times the interference of those who are myopically good-natured. To consider distress of all kinds as an objection, as something that must be abolished, is the *niaiserie* [folly/stupidity] *par excellence* and, on a large scale, a veritable disaster in its consequences, a nemesis of stupidity—almost as stupid as would be the desire to abolish bad weather—say, from pity for poor people. In the great economy of the whole, the terrible aspects of reality (in affects, in desires, in the will to power) are to an incalculable degree more necessary than that form of petty happiness which people call “goodness”; one actually has to be quite lenient to accord the latter any place at all, considering that it presupposes an instinctive mendaciousness.<sup>33</sup>

There are four points worth teasing out of this passage. First, Nietzsche is clear that to understand psychological types we must understand their conditions of emergence. Accordingly, one might be curious about and inquire into their socio-political circumstances: Are they, for instance, members of a subservient class and, if so, how does oppression shape or form their identity? Second, one must account for “how much it costs to maintain” the type and how they pay, as it were, for those psychic costs. Here, and to stay with “the good man,” Nietzsche’s answer in the passage is clear: the type is maintained through a psychological defense. This allows them to “*avoid* seeing that reality is *not* constituted in a way that always invites benevolent instincts, much less puts up with the interference of short-sighted, good-natured hands.” Third, the psychic defense, which in this passage seems to clearly be that of avoidance, makes possible a certain set of value distinctions and evaluations. To

retain our example, this type, “the good man,” Nietzsche makes plain, may “consider all forms of *distress* an objection, as things that need to be done *away* with” or avoided. Accordingly, we have an answer to the question: How does the type conceive of their values? Fourth, and finally, Nietzsche claims that the type’s insistence on avoiding or ameliorating distress is “instinctive mendaciousness,” a lie. The reason is that suffering is one of the necessary conditions for the emergence of this very form of life. Any attempt to do away with pain and suffering whole cloth is “as stupid as the desire to get rid of bad weather.”

We can see why one would object to suffering as a part of the “horrors of reality.” Distress is, no doubt and among other things, quite painful to experience. But it is hard to conclude, from the passages that we have just discussed, that Nietzsche is advocating that we look away from anguish, that we attempt to do away with agony or pain wholesale. Rather, it seems to me, Nietzsche is trying to understand why some people must hold onto and make sense of their “*distress* as objections, as things that need to be done *away* with” or otherwise atoned for. Indeed, the answer seems to be that such fixed ideas and explanations serve a psychologically protective function.

One might object that ascetic morality does not offer one meaning of human suffering and, as such, my reconstruction might be contested on the grounds that it lays bare a singular function of ascetic morality in the psychologically protective ends it serves. Indeed, one might point to the fact that a key point of Nietzsche’s genealogical investigations is that our practices do not enjoy any *one* function (GM 2 12). Nietzsche, so this argument might go, makes this point clear in a discussion of the practice of punishing. Why we punish is not reducible to any particular purpose or function, say, to render harmless the criminal, or to awaken guilt (GM 2 13–4). Rather the function of “punishment is overdetermined by utilities of all kinds” (GM 2 14). The same is true of traditional morality. Far from being a singular function of a moral practice, the utility of slave morality is “overdetermined.” Indeed, functions abound: It is certainly the case that slave morality serves to ward off feelings of helplessness (GM 1 13); it can also satisfy the need for “self-preservation and self-affirmation” (ibid.) and the “longing for *freedom*” (BGE 260); or perhaps even more generally, as Nietzsche puts it in the preface to the *Genealogy*, this mode of morality might operate “as symptom, as mask, as tartufferie, as illness, as misunderstanding; but also morality as cause, as remedy, as stimulant, as restraint, as poison” (GM P 6).

None of this is to deny that one of those functions is a psychologically protective one. So I do not want to defend the view that ascetic morality only serves a singular function, a sole purpose. To defend such a claim

would cut against, as we have just seen, Nietzsche's major point of historical method, and, for that reason, would be to defend a hopelessly implausible reading. I do want to claim though that among the many psychological needs that morality addresses there is included the protective one I have laid bare here. Indeed, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche tells us as much:

There are moralities which are meant to justify their creator before others. Other moralities are meant to calm him and lead him to be satisfied with himself. With yet others he wants to crucify himself and humiliate himself. With others he wants to wreak revenge, with others conceal himself, with others transfigure himself and place himself way up, at a distance. This morality is used by its creator to forget, that one to have others forget him or something about him. (BGE 187)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given what we have said so far, morality is overdetermined with psychological functions. Not only does morality aid in the undertaking of revenge; it can also function as a balm, a way to self-soothe and bring contentment.

Having established the claim that ascetic morality is overdetermined with utilities, and having reviewed Nietzsche's account of the psychologically protective functions of remembering and forgetting, I can now turn to a case study of a mode of forgetting that is not defensive. This case shows how one can make meaning of suffering in a way that does not wall off distress or agony. The case gives an account of how to incorporate suffering when the psychological need to avoid distress is absent. The account of the case is also instructive in that it resists univocal meanings of "guilt" and "misfortune" (EH W 2). Putting the matter in more positive terms, the case demonstrates how to incorporate and assimilate past pains. The case is, Nietzsche tells us, of someone who has turned out well. It is, of course, Nietzsche's self-portrait:

He has a taste only for what is good for him; his pleasure, his delight ceases where the measure of what is good for him is transgressed. He guesses what remedies avail against what is harmful; he exploits bad accidents to his advantage; what does not kill him makes him stronger. Instinctively, he collects from everything he sees, hears, lives through, *his* sum: he is a principle of selection, he discards much. . . . He believes neither in "misfortune" nor in "guilt": he comes to terms with himself, with others; he knows how to *forget*—he is strong enough; hence everything *must* turn out for his best. (EH W 2)

Again, then, forgetting concerns itself with selection—this time one lets much "fall by the wayside" as one selects from everything one "sees, hears, experiences." Further still, and to return to our original metaphor of digestion, such a person metabolizes their experiences such that they can draw nutrients from them: "what does not kill him makes

him stronger.” What this means, in part, is that such a person does not get stuck in overarching explanations of damages or mishaps—this time in “bad luck” or “guilt”—but can incorporate them into their sense of self. Hence, and in sum, forgetting is an assimilative capacity that requires selection, understood as either incorporation or elimination. Indigestion, then, is an impairment of this selective capacity and is marked by fixed ideas.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The account of Nietzsche’s conception of forgetting that I have tried to develop in this paper is one of a plainly selective and assimilative capacity. It is also, as I hope to have made clear, a marked departure from the dominant accounts, which suggest that Nietzsche’s account of forgetting amounts to nothing more than the directive to turn away from distress and suffering. I have attributed to Nietzsche a much more complex, and to my mind more compelling, view of how one might be able to digest or incorporate rather than avoid past mishaps, injuries, or hurts. Indigestion, or what I have called here aspectival captivity, inhibits our selective capacity by forming fixed ideas of the meaning of suffering. Indigestion, as I have shown, reveals to us something crucial about how oppressive systems of evaluation operate: They hold us captive; they colonize our vantage points; and they admit of only one interpretation of human suffering, namely that it must be done away with. Forgetting, then, it stands to reason, requires that we see more than one interpretive option from which we can select, and ascetic morality is problematic, at least in part, because it limits those alternatives.

Far from advocating “erased histories and historical invisibility,”<sup>34</sup> it seems that genealogy, as Nietzsche’s chosen investigative practice, poses “novel questions” and as such opens new interpretive horizons (GM P 7). The aim of such an investigative practice is to expand our views, allowing us to see “as though with new eyes” (ibid.). We need “new eyes” because we are perceptively caught in an ensnaring perspective. To give but one example, let us consider “duty.” According to Nietzsche, it “is a compulsive feeling which impels us to some action and which we call good and regard as undiscussable (—we refuse to speak of its origin, limitation and justification or to hear them spoken of).”<sup>35</sup> Here Nietzsche is clear: our duties compel us as they constrain us. In this way, even as such duties organize our experiences—they tell us what we must, must not, ought, ought not, should, or should not do—, the key issues remain out of view: “whence does it come? what is its purpose?”<sup>36</sup>

The practice of genealogy permits such discussions and demands that we ask these questions: What are the origins of these obligations? What

needs do they serve? Why does any given duty feel necessary, obligatory, beyond discussion? By drawing on historical, psychological, and critical insights, genealogy, as an investigative practice, creates space between us and the dominant system. If Nietzsche's genealogical investigations are true, then far from being "devastating," as Charles Taylor puts it, they can be liberating, even emancipatory.<sup>37</sup> The perspectival freedom that they afford is the capacity, Nietzsche explains, "to pass through the whole range of human values and value feelings and to be *able* to see with many different eyes and consciences, from a height and into every distance, from the depths into every height, from a nook into every expanse" (BGE 211). Such an expansive view, which genealogical inquiries purport to afford, allows us to see that evaluations that feel necessary are but one way of ordering things.<sup>38</sup>

Assessing whether Nietzsche's genealogies are up to the task of addressing our states of indigestion and our perspectival unfreedom is a task for another time. For now, I hope to have shown that interrogating the structures and systems that preclude forgetting is a worthwhile pursuit. Such a task involves reimagining the meaning that we give to past injury and opening new possibilities for making sense of ourselves. To do so is to take up the important work of genealogical investigation.

## NOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 62.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), essay 1, §1; henceforth GM, followed by essay number (or "P" for "Preface") and section number.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), §269; henceforth BGE, followed by section number.
4. I think that we do best to conceive of "nobility" here quite broadly as both a political position and an ethical system.
5. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 74. For reasons that will become clear, I think this is something of a misreading. As I hinted at in the opening paragraph, and as I will demonstrate in §2, forgetting, on Nietzsche's view, involves "digestion" and incorporation. As such, forgetting involves assimilation and implies some sort of transformation and is thereby not, as Brown has it, "unreconstructed" in its structural



- form. Christa Davis Acampora also notices that Nietzsche's conception of forgetting amounts to more than merely "a celebration of mindlessness or oblivion" ("Forgetting the Subject," in *Reading Nietzsche at the Margins*, ed. Steven V. Hicks and Alan Rosenberg [West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008], p. 52).
6. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 33.
  7. Mari Ruti, *Distillations: Theory, Ethics, Affect* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 203; henceforth D, followed by page number.
  8. Michael Ure, "The Politics of Mercy, Forgiveness, and Love: A Nietzschean Appraisal," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 26:1 (2007), p. 63.
  9. See Acampora, "Forgetting the Subject"; see also Rebecca Bamford, "Experimentation, Curiosity, and Forgetting," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 50:1 (2019), pp. 11–32; and Richard J. Elliott, "What Is 'Active' Forgetting in Nietzsche's *Genealogy* II, 1?," in *Nietzsche on Memory and History: The Re-Encountered Shadow*, ed. Anthony K. Jensen and Carlotta Santini (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 113–27. Though these commentators all rightly note that forgetting functions to bring psychic order, they are largely silent on what is organized, namely, cognitive and affective experiences.
  10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral: Eine Streitschrift*, in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* and *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, vol. 5 of *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988), pp. 291–2.
  11. Rebecca Bamford rightly observes "that 'active forgetfulness' provides the advantages of rest and etiquette to us, including peace and space for something new within consciousness and for the working of our nobler functions such as ruling" ("Experimentation, Curiosity, and Forgetting," pp. 17–8). Yet, absent from Bamford's otherwise very impressive analysis is the role of active forgetting in the digestion and incorporation of affective experiences.
  12. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Why I Write Such Good Books," in *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, §3.
  13. *Ibid.*
  14. I want to resist interpretations of forgetfulness as "doorkeeper" and "preserver of psychic order" (GM 2 1), which suggest that it is some sort of "mechanism" (see, e.g., Elliott, "What Is 'Active' Forgetting?," p. 119). My worry is that the mechanistic accounts may lead us too far afield from Nietzsche's central claim, as evidenced by the original nobles, that psychic ordering is social through and through (see GM 1 2), and that such accounts may rest on a problematic form of "materialism" (see GM 3 16).
  15. Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious," trans. C.M. Baines, in *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works (1914–1916)*, trans. James Strachey et al., vol. 14 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James

- Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 195.
16. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Why I Am So Wise," in *Ecce Homo*, §6; henceforth EH W, followed by section number.
  17. See, for example, Iain Morriison, "Patterns of Sickness: Nietzsche's Physio-Historical Account of Asceticism," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30:1 (2022), pp. 109–29.
  18. Bernard Reginster argues, for example, "that our minds are naturally endowed with an active force of 'forgetfulness,'" which is something of an oversimplification ("The Genealogy of Guilt," in *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide*, ed. Simon May [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011], p. 58; in the same work, see also Stephen Mulhall, "The Promising Animal: The Art of Reading *On the Genealogy of Morality* as Testimony," pp. 254–5).
  19. Nietzsche addresses the role of the morality of mores in §3 of the "Second Essay" of the *Genealogy*.
  20. Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 74; Acampora, "Forgetting the Subject," p. 52.
  21. Ure, "The Politics of Mercy," pp. 62–3; see also GM 1 10.
  22. Ure, "The Politics of Mercy," p. 63.
  23. David Owen, "Genealogy as Perspicuous Representation," in *The Grammar of Politics: Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy*, ed. Cressida J. Heyes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 82–96, esp. 92.
  24. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
  25. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. James Strachey, in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis and Other Works (1932–1936)*, trans. James Strachey et al., vol. 22 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 57.
  26. Robert D. Stolorow, Bernard Brandchaft, and George E. Atwood, *Psychoanalytic Treatment: An Intersubjective Approach* (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 2000), pp. 12–3; Donnel B. Stern, *Unformulated Experience: From Dissociation to Imagination in Psychoanalysis* (Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 2003); and Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Routledge, 2018).
  27. Bernard Brandchaft, Shelley Doctors, and Dorienne Sorter, *Towards an Emancipatory Psychoanalysis: Brandchaft's Intersubjective Vision* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 143.
  28. Brandchaft, *Towards an Emancipatory Psychoanalysis*, p. 206.
  29. Owen, "Genealogy as Perspicuous Representation," p. 83.

30. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” in *Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman, §35.
31. Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), p. 56.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
33. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Why I Am A Destiny,” in *Ecce Homo*, §4.
34. Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 56.
35. Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Wanderer and His Shadow,” pt. 2 of vol. 2 of *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), §43.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 72.
38. I discuss this suggestion further in “Concerning the Psychological Type of the Redeemer: Nietzsche on the Methods of Philosophy” *European Journal of Philosophy* 31:1 (forthcoming 2023), pp. 151–62; and “Knowing Ourselves: Nietzsche, the Practice of Genealogy, and the Overcoming of Self-Estrangement” in *Philosophical Genealogy from Nietzsche to Williams*, ed. Anthony Jensen, special issue of *Genealogy* 5:2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy5020041> (accessed May 16, 2023).