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Nietzsche: the Power of Perceiving

It begins in a scatter of fragments. The fragments don't fit one other. They don't even touch one another. But somehow, in a language not fully formed, they speak to one another.

—That was one fragment. Here is another. —Before Nietzsche, in fact before Socrates, there was Heraclitus. Heraclitus spoke in fragments. Fragments are all we have left of him. "Eyes are more accurate witnesses than ears,"¹ Heraclitus said. He said, "Everything flows."² He said, "You can't step twice into the same river."³ He said, "Battle is both father and king of all."⁴ He said, "The road up and the road down are one and the same."⁵

—A story tells of the god Dionysus. It's a story in pieces. One piece we know from Euripedes' *The Bacchae*. There Dionysus is grown and his mother is the human Semele. But Dionysus wasn't always grown and Semele wasn't always his mother. Other story pieces tell that Dionysus was the child of Zeus and the goddess Persephone, queen of the realm of the dead. Zeus' wife Hera gives the baby god to the Titans, who cut the child to pieces. Zeus finds one piece—the heart—and puts it inside Semele. From Semele Dionysus is born again. Dead, he comes back to life. In pieces, he becomes whole. Weak, he becomes powerful. And dangerous. And the bringer of intoxicating wine, taking people over, possessing them completely.

—Nietzsche spoke of himself as "the last disciple and initiate of the god Dionysus."⁶

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—Nietzsche wrote his later books in bits and pieces. One sharply slashed sketch follows another. The sketches are often loosely strung along a general theme but each sketch is separate from the others and doesn't depend on them. One might go for several pages. Another might be not even a sentence long. They're unpredictable. They're fragments. Nietzsche wrote in fragments. Nietzsche *saw* in fragments.

—Our thoughts flash sudden as lightning, and just as unpredictable. They take us over completely. They're abrupt, fragmentary, often breaking sharply from each other and from what's been going on. Sometimes they're an extended scene, sometimes a mere stroke no longer than a single comment.

—What's the difference between a single comment, however fully formed, and a conversation?

* * *

What does one do with fragments like these? They lie in a jumble, pointing in no obvious direction. They don't connect tightly enough to point anywhere. How can they tell anyone anything?

Begin somewhere. Pick one of the fragments. Try the one from Heraclitus about eyes and ears: "Eyes are more accurate witnesses than ears." What is that remark saying?

Eyes see better than ears hear. Seeing is more accurate than hearing. Why might seeing be more accurate than hearing? Well, I look out and see things around me. I can tell one thing from another. Sometimes I have to stand back to see better but when I do, I see what's there. What's *out* there. My eyes reach out. They cross distance. They locate things in relation to other things. To my eyes things are solid. They're related. They're anchored with respect to each other.

Like reality. Seeing shows me things the way I know them when I experience them as 'real.'

Ears, now—well, ears are different. Ears catch sounds that things make. Sounds aren't like things. Sounds swim together, melting into other sounds. I can't quite tell where the things making them are. I can tell whether the sounds are far or near but not much more, and I'm not even sure of that because a noise can sound far away but actually be near, just soft. And anyway I can't hear things very far away. I'm confined to what's closer to me. So I can't identify position very well. I can't locate too precisely where things are in relation to each other. Everything seems approximate, not sharp, not well defined in the way eyes define things. As witnesses to things, my ears simply aren't very accurate.

Heraclitus might be saying all that in his fragment. There's no evidence to say he isn't.

Now look at the fragment again: "Eyes are more accurate witnesses than ears." What if it meant something quite different? What if even before Socrates it were saying, 'See for yourself. Don't merely listen to what others tell you?' —I know. It's a bit of a stretch. But what about that other fragment of Heraclitus' where he says, "Dogs bark at a person they don't know"⁷? That's easy to read metaphorically, isn't it? And isn't there a pearls-before-swine possibility in the one that goes, "Donkeys would prefer straw to gold"⁸? In light of these companion fragments, couldn't our fragment be read metaphorically too? It doesn't say it *couldn't* be. It doesn't rule out this reading either.

One reading. Another reading. Which reading is right? One of them has to be right—right? Heraclitus has to have something in mind he's expressing. A reader can't just pick any reading she happens to like. A reader can't be *arbitrary*. You're 'arbitrary' when you decide something by mere whim without considering the facts or principles of the situation you're in. All you care about is your whim. You don't even *look* at facts and principles outside it. But when you don't look, you ignore solid things out there, as though blind to their demands. As though closing your eyes to their reality.

Closing your eyes?

Now it's clear what's going on. This worry about being 'arbitrary' is nothing but the first reading of Heraclitus' fragment. What looked like common-sense caution is simply a point of view. *One* point of view. And fragments aren't able to rule out other points of view. They're too—fragmentary.

But doesn't Heraclitus have to mean *something*? He must have an opinion. Somewhere in this fog of ambiguity there must be a right answer. A right answer must be at least imaginable.

Why? Why must a right answer be imaginable? What point of view does *that* idea embody? Evidently one that sees a thinker as a socket for an opinion like a car's cup holder for its cup. It's the *thinker's* opinion and he's holding it and he'll stop it from being moved. It's a solid opinion, it's identifiable, and for the moment it's not going anywhere. The thinker could utter it if he wanted to. He could say it to us as a developed, complete remark.

But what if the remark isn't complete? What if it's allowed to move, perhaps by being said in a conversation? The conversation might go on to give the remark more context, more dimension, more meaning than it had as first offered. The remark might *go* somewhere then, flowing forward with the conversation itself.

Everything flows, Heraclitus said. You can't step twice into the same river.

Able to flow, able to move with a conversation, could a person be like a remark? Could a person flow as a remark flows? Could he let his starting point of view shift? Go in a new direction? Connect with different points of view, perhaps joining them or pointing *them* in new directions? What if a person were as mobile in perspectives as a fragment is?

And I *am* like that. I can't help it. All manner of different things pop into my awareness, along with different ways of seeing the same things. As 'conscious,' I'm as vulnerable as a beach to anything tossed up on me.

Seeing that the beach of my awareness can receive *anything*, I realize I'm among fragments. I *am* a kind of fragment, liable to turn and veer and shift bewilderingly. I realize too that as 'conscious,' I'm the second perspective on Heraclitus' fragment, the one that sees in it the message 'See for yourself.' I'm a 'self' now, seeing as a 'self' sees. Seeing namely as someone lost among

fragments, needing to decide things for myself because the fragmentary things I encounter don't do it for me.

One perspective shows things distinct, solidly at anchor. The other produces a 'self,' unsure and vulnerable, continually invaded by sudden thoughts, perceptions, perspectives. A self that's 'conscious.'

But how can being conscious be a *perspective*? Isn't it a fact? Like a fact of nature? How *else* could anyone look at our conscious awareness? We're too *conscious* that we're conscious. It's a fact we *see*.

But try this. —Read out loud to a friend a complicated newspaper article on the Middle East. —Recite to an assembled roomful of people a poem you've memorized for the occasion.

As you read or recite, are you 'conscious'? Do you experience that you're even *there*? Or is there only the next detail of the tangle in Iraq, the next line of the poem? Afterwards you might tell yourself you *had* to have been conscious, you *had* to have been there. Who else would have been talking? —But at the moment you were reading or reciting, were you aware of being conscious of anything? Were you aware of yourself at all? If you weren't, why does the later moment, the one when you're explaining, seem like the experience to listen to? What makes the later experience more reliable than the earlier one?

At the end of the day I drive home. I'm not conscious of the route I regularly take. It simply unfurls ahead of me. I drive unhesitantly along the way I hum a familiar tune. I might notice a passing sunflower-yellow Humvee the size of a barge. I might notice a black Labrador retriever puppy in a red harness lunging joyfully at the end of his matching leash. But I don't notice I need to turn left now. I just turn. I'm not aware I need to turn. I don't *need* to be aware. I'm going home. The steps of the way are all laid out for me. I go where they go.

In fact *they're* the ones who go. Not me. There's no 'me' involved. The way home is so obvious, so dominating, it doesn't need any 'me' to participate with it. Describing the trip later, I might say my driving was 'mindless.' Or I was 'on automatic pilot.'

I do 'know' the way, of course. I don't get lost. But I know it the way I know a computer keyboard. My fingers find instantly the exact keys that spell out

the words I'm typing—if they're familiar words, that is, not weird ones like 'Nietzsche.' But I couldn't tell you what letters are in the keyboard's bottom row. I'm not 'conscious' of them that way.

In situations like these, 'being conscious' plays no role. It doesn't appear. It doesn't seem like a fact at all.

Now change the scene. Go back to the poem being recited before that roomful of people. Imagine the steady cadence of the lines suddenly faltering. A line isn't complete. I can't think of the line. Everybody's staring at me, waiting for the poem I've promised them and I can't find it. A word's gone. I try the last line again: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to"? Not to what? Not to *what*?

Up to this point there was no 'me.' There was just the stream of the poem. But now the smooth run of the surroundings has been broken. They're *not* known by heart. They're *not* familiar. There's a hole suddenly, not just in the poem but in the world, and here's a 'me' about to fall through.

I am about to fall through. Alone here in front of everyone. Scrabbling frantically for a piece of poem to hold onto. Helpless here in this place where poems can come and go at will, and everything can, and I'm the one they come to when they come, and when they don't come I'm in trouble. Or I'm saved. Rescued by a sudden word where, a moment before, there was no word at all.

"Yield." That's it! "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to *yield*"!

I'm so *conscious* of that word right now. I *have* it, where a moment ago I didn't. It's come to me. It's *happened* to me. —And thank God!

Now a state of 'being conscious' appears. But its presence is still just part of the particular situation, part of that situation's perspective. Being conscious is not an independent fact. Not like a fact of nature.

But if something as common in our lives as being conscious isn't a fact, what is? Is *anything* a fact?

Nietzsche speaks:

Against the positivism that stops with the phenomena: "there are only facts," I would say: no, facts are precisely what there aren't. Just

interpretations. We can't pin down any fact 'in itself': perhaps it's nonsense to want such a thing.

.... As far as the word 'perception' has meaning at all, the world is perceptible: but it can be differently interpreted; it has no meaning behind it, but rather countless meanings. —"Perspectivism"⁹

Why does Nietzsche say we can't pin down any fact in itself? I couldn't find that missing word in the poem, for instance. That's a fact, isn't it? What more does Nietzsche want?

But what does the fact mean? More pointedly, what is the fact? Is it that a word didn't come to mind when I needed it? Or is the fact rather that I failed? I had the job of reciting this poem and I didn't get the job done. I wasn't successful.

Which road do we take?

Because—and you see this for yourselves, I'm sure—this lack of a word is a fragment. It can be read different ways. The consequence of one way is, I go home and work harder and practice more and hopefully do better next time. With the other way, I wonder what happened. Was I nervous? And why would being nervous keep me from remembering? Also, why did I forget exactly the word 'yield'? Why not some other word?

Two ways of seeing the 'fact.' So it's ambiguous. But is a fact ever *not* ambiguous? Can't anything be seen in different ways, in different contexts?

How about my way home though? I just go. I just get there. No problem. No ambiguity. No 'mind' to make up. No 'me' jolted by any missing piece of road. Just the road going, going. And the car going as the road goes.

No sense of a 'perspective' here. No fragment. There's nothing broken. All is clear and easy. All is uninterrupted. From this vantage point what gives me the idea there even *are* perspectives?

'From this vantage point,' I just said. From this point of view. Now I'm taking my trip home as a point of view. Why? —Because it's so different from the poem-road I was traveling that suddenly got broken. The contrast conjures up a

different way things happen. I could call it a different '*meaning*.' And I call the meaning a '*perspective*' because there's more than one possible meaning to see.

At that point my way is no longer the way home. Home is what there's only *one* of. If I find nothing around me but many so-called '*perspectives*' interpreting what things mean, I have no clear home. And the world, as Nietzsche sees, "has become ... once again '*infinite*' to us: insofar as we can't reject the possibility that it contains in itself infinite interpretations."¹⁰

But why is Nietzsche talking about the *world*? Isn't it *mind* that interprets? Don't interpretations live in the mind, not the world? The world, separate from the mind, is that outer neighborhood where one finds facts—facts, for instance, like those examined by scientists of all kinds. Scientists work to pin down facts. Scientists interpret but they interpret respectfully. They know their conclusions are finally only theories, not anything actually inside the world. Scientists stand outside the world as they think and calculate. Looking from there, they take what they see and narrow it down to clusters of simpler regular relations one could loosely call '*mechanical*.' It's this easier-to-read '*mechanical*' aspect of things that concerns them. Not meanings. Not all manner of different meanings.

Nietzsche responds:

But an essentially mechanical world would be a world essentially without meaning! Supposing one estimated the value of a music according to how much about it one could count, calculate, get into formulas—how absurd would be such a "scientific" evaluation of the music! What about it would one have grasped, understood, recognized! Nothing, absolutely nothing of that which is actually "music" about it!¹¹

Nietzsche's proposing a world with music in it. A world with music and everything else that touches us the way music touches. Not just carbon and oxygen and atoms and molecules and electricity and mass and force and logarithmic growth and cells and genes and messenger RNA, but *cheese*. Cheese and umbrellas and jokes and breakfast and physicists and friends and worry and

cars and dogs and a mother who isn't here anymore because she died and you can't talk to her on the phone and you want to. You want to so badly.

That kind of world. The kind of world that really matters. The world we live in day to day, moment to moment.

But what kind of world is that? How does it work?

We experience it. It has appearances that show up like words in a poem. Or don't show up. Things happen, or they don't happen. We take them in and are warmed by them or devastated by them, but they *happen*. And we never know what's going to happen to us. It just does. But when it does, we perceive it.

Laboratory science shares this way of existing every time a researcher performs an experiment. He shoots tiny particles, say, through thin gold to see how they scatter. But if you're this researcher, you have no idea how they will actually scatter. They can surprise you. As physicist Ernest Rutherford reports, their bounces can be quite the most incredible event that ever happened to you in your whole life—as incredible as if you fired a fifteen-inch shell at a piece of tissue paper and it came back and hit you.¹²

Pretty incredible.

Because with experiments, you never know. You *can't* know. If you know, it's not an experiment. Experimental results just happen. And you experience what happens. Helplessly. Results happen to you and you're helpless to stop them, or steer them, or control them. They simply do what they do. Once you've set up the experiment and gotten it going, you're not involved anymore.

Afterwards, of course, when you see what did happen, you can 'explain' what happened, often by proposing a '*cause*' for it. Explaining points out how the result is just an extension of familiar concepts or contexts. The result then becomes part of what you already knew, not a break from it. But you can't do this explaining while the experiment's in progress—that is, while it's still an experiment. During the experiment you can only watch what happens, however surprising it may be. You can only perceive. Nothing more.

But that can be a lot. Nietzsche again:

No! Life hasn't disappointed me. From year to year I find it rather truer, more desirable and mysterious—from that day when the great liberator came over me, that thought that life might be an experiment of the one perceiving.'Life a means of perception'—with this basic principle in one's heart one can live not only boldly, but even joyfully and laugh joyfully!¹³

In this world of laughter and music and cheese, one can be alive and one's life can be an ongoing experiment. It can be a means of perceiving. A means. Which suggests the person alive is only the experimental avenue along which things are perceived. Which suggests that the perceptions themselves are what drive the life. And that maybe the real life here—strange as it might sound—is not the life of a person, but the life of these resulting perceptions that just ... happen.

What kind of sense does *that* make? Once again, Nietzsche: we're led astray, he says, by our language that

... understands—and misunderstands—every act to imply something that does the acting, a 'subject.' Just as, indeed, the man on the street separates the lightning from its flash and takes the flash as the *doing*, as the action of a subject called 'lightning.'"¹⁴

Is this our experience about ourselves? Do we think it's a *misunderstanding* to see ourselves as 'subjects' that act? Do we see instead our perceptions moving with their own initiative? Such that they seem to have their *own* life?

Look at the perceptions perhaps farthest from this suggestion. Look at the thoughts that appear in our minds. Isn't that us thinking? Isn't that *us*?

No, Nietzsche says. A "thought comes when 'it' wants, and not when 'I' want; so it's a *falsifying* of the situation to say: the subject 'I' implies the predicate 'think.' *It* thinks: but that this 'it' is precisely that famous old 'I' is, mildly put, only an assumption"¹⁵

Maybe you disagree. Maybe you believe *you* think your thoughts. You can just pick a thought and think it. All right, pick a thought. Now, how did you pick? Did you run your eye along some shelf of thoughts visible in your mind and pull one off like a book? Or did the thought just come? When *it* wanted?

Thoughts are as independent as cats. You're theirs as much as they're yours. Do they always come when you call? I bet you can remember how you got to this hall, to this college, to this city. I bet you can recall great swatches of your life spanning years. But can you retrieve the exact sequence of your thoughts over the last two minutes? I can't. The thoughts themselves are all that happen. They replace each other completely, leaving nothing behind. It's as though there's nothing they leave a mark *on*, no observer alert with his mental notebook. No dependable 'me.' Even on the occasions I do remember a particular thought, that memory is a thought too. It pops into my head like a letter into my mailbox and it's a letter I never sent.

Thoughts happen. Perceptions happen too. I don't know what I'm going to perceive next. I don't know what's going to happen to me. This is an *experiment* my thoughts and perceptions are alive in. Alive *as*. I can't control how they're going to go.

They go. I don't. They do what they do. Like lightning. They're not things any more than 'I' am a thing. They flash. They beckon. They hold. They *sing*.

This is a world, remember, with music in it.

And it's an 'experimental' world where events just happen as they do. Happen without plan, without purpose. We can try to plan, try to arrange things, but those intentions themselves begin as thoughts, and as thoughts they just happen. Even when the intentions start off as beams of control, they can't determine what ultimately happens. Things don't reliably work out according to our desires, our whims. In no way are they *arbitrary*.

Do they happen accidentally then? By chance? Prompted by Aristotle, Nietzsche sees clearly that when "you know ... there are no purposes, you know too that there's no accident; because only next to a world of purposes does the word 'accident' make sense."¹⁶

'Accident' as a perspective belongs together with the perspective 'purpose.' Accident, or chance, is a face of luck. There's good luck or bad luck. Good luck, like an arrow, hits a target meaningful enough to count as a 'purpose.' Bad luck misses it. — On our third day in Germany my wife and I chanced to meet on a Heidelberg street corner one of the German teachers I'd had two whole years before in Monterey. Good luck. — I plant my foot right where there happens to be a patch of ice and my legs fly out from under me. Bad luck.

These chance intersections just happen. But before, we said a life's experimental results also just happen. They happen, we said, "without plan, without purpose." So apparently they can't happen 'by chance.' But why can't they? Because they too can bless us or bruise us. They have meaning. They matter.

Let's explore further the connection of 'chance' with 'purpose' by looking harder at the perspective of 'purpose.' Something is meaningful in the way a *purpose* is meaningful if it's already known. It has to be in place ahead of time, or it can't act as a *destination* reached or missed. I know my body balance. I know how good it feels to be pain-free. I know what's being violated when a patch of ice puts me on my back. In Heidelberg I knew Herr Plötz, my German teacher. I recognized him instantly. It was a surprise to see him but *he* was not a surprise. He was completely familiar.

Experimental results, on the other hand, are not familiar. You have no idea what they will be. They aren't destinations you're already acquainted with. Our life events are results like that. They're wonders—little or big, glad or frightful but glad or frightful each in its own unique way. You have to *perceive* them. They're not familiar to you ahead of time anymore than your life is. They're as full of surprise as being born.

It's true that at moments in your life you could find yourself asking, 'Why was I put here on earth?' But that higher purpose you grope for is a plan in place *before* you were born or it doesn't qualify as a 'purpose.' *Inside* a life as it unfolds, there is no purpose. And without purpose 'chance' nowhere finds a grip.

How *are* perceptions then, if they're not arbitrary and they also don't happen by chance? Nietzsche has said that when perceptions are experienced

freshly, like unexplained experimental results, they participate in a 'life' that "might be an experiment of the one perceiving.'*Life a means of perception*'" Everything we experience is involved in this life, even the explanations we think up. As thoughts that come to us, they're *perceived*. From that perspective they're part of the experiment too.

But who *does* all this perceiving? Doesn't there have to be at least a 'consciousness'? A conscious mind?

We're aware of things that appear, and when something '*appears*,' it shows up on its own. But if appearing events show up on their own and are therefore independent of each other, how do they connect? How do they ever get coherent? Their coherence involves relations between them and this 'between' isn't anything that *appears* the way a perceived thing appears. So my mind must do the relating. My consciousness has to order things so they make sense. Has to constitute them, really, in the *way* they make sense to me. But how does it do that?

This was of course Kant's question. Nietzsche hears Kant ask the question and hears Kant offer in answer the triumphant insight—and this is just magnificent—that the mind adds things up—*by means of its faculty for adding things up!*

"What really is his answer?" Nietzsche says, "*By the faculty of a faculty*. But is that—an answer? An explanation? Or rather just a repetition of the question? How does opium induce sleep? 'By the faculty of a faculty, namely the sleep-inducing faculty'—answers that doctor in Molière But answers like that belong in comedy"¹⁷

So let's don't give ourselves answers that belong in comedy. Let's don't interpret our being 'conscious' of things as the faculty of some faculty called 'consciousness.' Okay? Because that's just a joke now.

But I do perceive. So don't I need some sort of faculty for perceiving? How else could I perceive?

But *do* I perceive? Am *I* what the perceptions appear to? The perceptions, the thoughts that strike me, the urgencies, the impulses are all that's there. The 'I' they supposedly strike is a traditional name given to the track they move in,

traditional but perhaps not helpful anymore. A sudden thought arrives. A sudden perception. A sudden doing. That's all. Encountering each other, they form alliances or conflicts but *they* do that.

And keep doing it.

But if a thought or a perception doesn't appear to *me*, what does it appear to?

A perception appears to another perception. New experiences that arrive work themselves into experiences already being experienced. That's what 'experiencing' is. 'I' don't experience, my experiences do.

Experiences perceive? How? Wouldn't that be like a book reading another book, a dream dreaming another dream? That's crazy. Isn't it?

I walk down the street with someone. There in front of us, orange and black on the side of a building, is the snarl of a circus poster. "What's that?" the person with me asks.

What's my answer?

If the person is a child, I might say, "That's a *tiger*, Mikie. See the stripes? Tigers have stripes."

With someone else I might answer, 'Nostalgia.' Or 'a piece of street art.' Or 'somebody's idea of a joke.' What I see is decided by who I'm with, by our mood together, by what we've been talking about, by lots of things. It is not decided alone by the poster itself—or whatever that is up on the wall there.

The new appearance joins experiencing already under way. It doesn't hover aloof, as though out there by itself. It's a foreground showing up against a background already here. Already here for *it*. Foreground and background make contact like remarks in a conversation. The poster-picture speaks to certain aspects of what's going on, and what's going on offers then a frame within which the activity on the wall can appear.

A frame—or a perspective. Experiences are perspectives—which means, they become background for further experiences to appear against, or more helpfully, 'appear *to*.' As foreground the new appearances are more prominent than their backgrounds. More compelling. The backgrounds slip farther away,

and get replaced, and the new foreground becomes background for what comes next.

Over and over. The sequence of it extending. Flowing. The movement of the flow is the perceiving—as the perceiving *happens*. Whatever happens happens *to* something. It joins it in sequence, making a line like melody, whose individual notes sing their song through their contact with each other. Making the melody, the notes move. They move principally ahead but they also extend back. Yes, they're notes of a melody but they're also fragments. They're broken off from each other. As broken, they sometimes break away from 'now' and rejoin motion they had in an earlier phrase of melody. Moving again with that motion, they repeat the earlier sequence. That is, they 'remember.'

Part of perceiving is 'remembering'—interpreted now not as the faculty of some retrieving 'consciousness' but as the movement of the chain itself. The joining of experience with earlier experience brings to bear what *is already connected*, or could be.

Does this sound strange? Remember something that happened to you today. Now shuffle a deck of cards and deal them to yourself. Try to remember the cards in order. See the difference? See how much harder it is to remember individual cards that tend to stay separate, that tend not to form up with each other along a line?

Experiences that I *live* flow like a melody. Like a conversation. Like a story.

This 'I' I've always thought I was? It's a flowing story line of joined experiences. The line is unified the way a conversation is unified, comment meeting comment, no individual comment saying it all.

"We are *more* than the individual," Nietzsche says, "indeed we're the whole chain, with all the tasks of all the futures of the chain."¹⁸ We're *this* chain. Another chain might have happened but it didn't. *This* is what happened. And it happened where one experience accepted another experience by '*perceiving*' it. Which means giving it a shape appropriate to the shape already here. Imposing on it a 'perspective.'

The influence exerted as a 'perspective' is a kind of power. Within 'perception' is power. It's this power that forges the *chain* of perceptions. Link ties into link, each link opening to take in the new appearance but also closing to hold it tight.

Each link is vital. Each comment of a conversation is vital. The conversation *lives* through its individual comments. Each comment gives a perspective on what's come before and what could make sense to come after. Each comment is not the whole story but it's nonetheless decisive. Nietzsche: "The individual is a bit of fate, in front and behind, one more law, one more necessity for everything that comes and will come."¹⁹

A bit of fate. It just happens. It happens when a walk down the street with a child joins a tiger in a circus poster. Moments of contact like this make up the line of a life. I experience the line from within *this* experience going on right now as 'me.' What happens, happens *to me*. It is mine, *my* life, *my* fate. Fate, because it happens not by arbitrary whim and not by chance. What happens can't be escaped.

The line of perceiving is my life and my fate, yes. But the line is still more than any merely individual 'me.' From the experience I'm presently looking from, I can't see far. To see over the next hill I have to walk up and look from the top. From there I see a farther place. I go to the new place. I look again from there. And go still farther and look still again, each perception a bridge to farther perceiving. And now here's New York City. And *Africa*. The line of seeing extends as a 'world,' interpreted now as a melody of experiencing rather than some enormous object outside me I ride in like a bus.

Even smaller things seem melodic now, less like isolated individual 'objects.' The mug I use for tea stands cobalt-blue on the counter, open at the top, showing me where to pour the tea. A curving of handle guides my grip. I lift. I drink. The sequence of 'doings' I experience is the mug itself. The mug is a road junction of experiences, a *region* of them. It's no less a region of the 'world' than New York City, just smaller. A smaller flow of sequence. But even long trips can

start off down a short driveway. The 'world'—the world that *matters*—can begin anywhere.

And its sequences can begin without ever having to reach an end. The line points out ahead and extends back. Going backward through the sequence, I 'remember.' But those recalled perceptions, like farther hilltops, open themselves to receive still other hilltops even farther back, or 'earlier.' The 'earlier' perceptions might be significant indications dug from the ground. They might be significant words written by other people. They might be perspectives I see I share with all the people in my life who've made familiar to me what I find familiar, who themselves point back to all the mothers and fathers who've made things familiar to *them*. The backward-linking perspectives reach beyond any life I could call 'my own.' Together they form a life and it's *that* life that my perceiving belongs to. A chain of experiences joining as they experience each other.

Wait. —My life is a chain of experiences that extends beyond my life? How can that possibly be?

Draw a pencil line in the middle of white paper. The line starts somewhere. It stops. It can stop anywhere.

A dark line on white paper. A vein of direction pointing ahead into farther white. Pointing back. The line aims into open space like a look. Its aim is a perspective showing there is an open area there ready for more line to be drawn. The untouched field of white and the line summoning it are different but they work together. They form a single perspective.

Alive, I perceive. The tea kettle I hear whistling on the stove takes me to the tea pot next to it on the counter ready with its tea. One perception leads to the next. The motion forward is what perceiving is. It's a line my experiencing draws. It's the line of my life. When the line approaches its stopping point, it signals where a farther chain of perceiving could stretch. Looking toward the end point of my life brings into focus that farther way just as the stopped pencil line brings into focus the open space of white paper *it* points into. My life unlocks the

farther expanse Nietzsche calls 'the whole chain.' It creates it as a perspective. And the perspective is *mine*. It arises from *my* life.

So it is my life. And when this life of mine becomes an experiment of perceiving, the whole chain becomes the experiment. The whole chain reveals itself at work discovering its own scope.

This is what a life of perceiving is like. It's a chain of experimenting that's experienced from *inside* the experiment, each moment a perspective with the power to shape how that next moment appears. Nietzsche gives a name to the perspective which acknowledges that shaping power. He calls it 'will to power.' It is the perspective in which '*perspectives*' appear.

But why call a perspective a *will*? Besides, isn't 'willing' the act of a human 'subject' who chooses? And with Nietzsche didn't we find there *was* no subject like that? Didn't we find that thoughts and perceptions arrive on their own? So why does Nietzsche invoke a 'will' to the sort of power that appears in perceiving? What could he mean here by 'will'?

Exert your own will. Make your finger move.²⁰ —When the finger moved, where was the willing? In your mind? But it was your *finger* that moved. Somehow the will must have reached the finger. So was the active part of your willing in the moving finger? But the finger would have moved in exactly that way if you you'd been tapping your leg with impatience or unobtrusively bidding for something at an auction. In those cases the finger would have moved on its own with your intention like a sheep with the flock. If it could move on its own then, maybe it's moving on its own now.

So maybe your will is separate from your finger. Maybe it's in your mind after all, distinct from your body, distinct from everything in the visible world, the heart of your *freedom* as the human subject you're suddenly beginning to look like again.

If your will is truly separate, if you're truly free, you should have no trouble separating your willing from a merely physical finger. So do it. Will your finger to move—but without the finger itself actually moving.

But if the finger didn't move, maybe you didn't really will it to. Maybe you just *thought* you did.

Now hold the finger down so it can't go anywhere and try to move it. Strain. Work at it. It's easier here, isn't it, to feel convinced that your will is involved. You can feel yourself *trying* to move the finger. There's *effort*. You're fighting to overcome resistance.

Will is most visible when it's connected to resistance. It's part of an encounter then. There's something meeting an action and getting in its way. When the resistance falls away, when it's overcome, there's a feeling of release. There's a feeling of momentum, of force. The doing contains now something extra, something like a *strength*. As though it's asserting its way forward. By sheer '*will*.'

The '*will*' we experience here is a feeling. It's the doing itself as it meets something that opposes it. At the instant of contact the doing—as an *experience*—includes the feeling of its own motion ahead in spite of resistance.

Nietzsche: "My principle is: that the will presented up to now by psychology is an unjustified generalization, there is no will like this. That, instead of thinking of one definite will branching out into many forms, the character of will has been erased when the content, the 'where to,' has been subtracted out."²¹ That is, the character of '*will*' has been erased when the '*doing*' has been subtracted out. Without an action aimed somewhere, pushing ahead, *increasing* as it extends itself, there's no '*will*.' And this version of will doesn't cause the action. It only *accompanies* what pushes ahead. It's the sensation of a push moving the resistance so successfully that the surrendering resistance seems to *join* the push and carry out its motion: "the will ... is above all a *feeling*, specifically that feeling of command."²²

I watch a child meet a circus display on the side of a building. The child becomes the point of view I see from. That perspective has the power to make a *tiger* spring out at us from the display. I say '*power*' to make the tiger spring out because the display can be seen in other ways. But the way appropriate to a child was the way that pushed through. A tiger was what I saw.

All right, power, but why a '*will*' to this power? A child dominates my attention, doing what a child does. Isn't the child's doing, power enough? Why talk about '*will*'?

Talking about 'will' shows the doing winning out against opposition. It shows the doing as it meets that opposition and presses ahead anyway. It shows it asserting *its* perspective even when other perspectives were possible. And putting *its* value on the experience it meets. This is the charged, influential meeting of *seeing* and *seen* that is perception. 'Will to power' is the perspective not only of 'perspectives,' but of 'perception' itself. And in its light, perception is not explained, not even really described, but rather *perceived*.

Experienced this way as a perspective, 'will to power' is only a way to look. Only *one* way to look. It's not an objective fact. It's not a concept. Above all it's not a truth.

As an image offered to see with, 'will to power' throws a light on all perceiving. It shows how every appearance seen is itself a seeing, itself a perspective offering an angle of sight that highlights a particular line of meaning. When 'I' saw the tiger in the poster, it was the child I was aware of that gave me the point of view I looked from. It was my perception of the child that actually did the seeing. Perceptions *see*. They are like little observers watching, discovering, linking up, fusing like meanings that join in conversation.

Each participating line of sight has power but submits at the same time to risk. It never knows where it will be taken. It has only its perceiving to go by. There are no guarantees here. No laws, no dependable concepts, no unassailable truths. Laws, concepts, truths may appear but they appear to lines of sight that *experience* their truth and see them opening the way to still farther truths. The truths are appearances now. They are lines of sight accepting the risk of uncharted new experience. Each appearance ventures. It voyages. This is its '*seeing*.'

Room for voyaging grows behind the visible surface any appearance offers by *appearing*. The appearing surface becomes a mask concealing its room for further encounter. The appearance becomes now unfathomed, uncontained, dangerous. Here it is as formidable and vulnerable as a hero in mid-story. As mighty and as membrane-thin as a god who can die.

When 'perceiving' is encountered like this as 'will to power,' each perception is seen to *overcome* itself. Each perception leaves itself behind to

reach out and perceive anew. To reach out and begin the line of what can come next. Its *impetus* begins the next segment of a life. By 'will to power' Nietzsche means the "life-will."²³ It's the life-movement perceptible in each experience's flowing out to influence what comes and be influenced itself. It's a reaching out that forges the chain of becoming, all of it, forward and back. "Becoming as inventing, willing, self-negating, self-overcoming ...," Nietzsche says, "no subject, but a doing, a setting in place, creatively, no 'cause and effect.'"²⁴

Can a single link of experience stand to *perceive* such a vast assignment? Can it face being responsible for the whole chain of everything we know as our world? Nietzsche tests the link's willingness with his image of the 'Eternal Return': "the ideal of the boldest, most alive and world-affirming person, who has not only reconciled himself to all that was and is, and learned to endure it, but who wants to have it again, *just as it was and is*, into all eternity"²⁵

What was and is, is everything we see as we look, feel, remember, think, imagine. It's the experiment of our life. It's all the encounters that just come, the children walking with us, the tigers that spring out. These encounters are everything we know in our life. They're what it means to be alive and being *fully* alive—that is, being alive in an *ideal* way—means accepting them. It means accepting what we see. All of it.

As a life moves from perception to perception, it reaches out with the perspectives those perceptions give and it pushes by means of their influence. It pushes against possible resistance. Moving against resistance, a life's motion *wills*. Being alive and affirming this world that's the *content* of its seeing life, a life *wills* its seeing. It wants to see what it sees. It wants to *keep* seeing it.

But a life's seeing moves ahead like a conversation. Particular sights don't last. A sight can last only if it reappears. Only if it returns. And that's what a life's motion wills when it affirms its own living. It wills sights, perceptions, to return. Again and again. The world of them not ending. Into all eternity.

When a moment of perceiving is lived this way, *affirmed* this way, it's too vital to be tracked back to anything else. *It* has the power to capture your attention as an army captures a city, taking you over, compelling you to absorb it. Its power links you into the chain *it* hammers together. It's irresistibly

meaningful now. Irresistibly intelligible. Then, says Nietzsche, the “world seen from inside, the world taken in its ‘intelligible character’ and designated that way, would be exactly ‘will to power’ and nothing else.”²⁶

This world “taken in its ‘intelligible character’” is everything you experience. It’s the experiment you enact as you perceive, and perceive, and perceive. Thoughts. Trees. Hard questions. Jokes. Melodies. All of it is you, flowing like a conversation from experience to experience. It’s the flow of *you*—alive, human, perhaps all too human—but it’s also the world. Try to separate yourself from this experienced world—as though bracketing the contents of your consciousness inside some sort of mental parentheses—and you simply look comical. We “just laugh,” Nietzsche says, “when we find ‘man *and* world’ placed next to each other separated by the sublime presumption of that little word ‘and!’”²⁷

The *world* is the experiment now. And since it’s an experiment, we perceive events just happening. They’re surprises we don’t yet try to explain to ourselves. Explanations are for later, not now. They’re not relevant at the moment something is happening. Not relevant at the moment it’s being lived. It’s speaking to us now and we’re speaking to it. This is a *conversation* we’re participating in. Thoughts keep coming. Perceptions keep coming. Things keep happening to us and we can’t stop them. We can try but the intention to try is a thought too. *It* happens too. It just comes.

Like fate.

Here in the continuing line of the world where perception joins perception, there’s no explaining. Nietzsche’s name ‘power’ explains nothing. It does nothing but jostle our perceptions to experience that things *happen*. Above all, ‘power’ is not a faculty. It’s no ability anything has. ‘Power’ does no more than keep the line of experiencing open, keeping us exposed as we’d be on a field of battle. In the encounter of battle nothing is decided at the beginning. One of the contending armies will ultimately shape what happens. Its force will command. In battle there are some who command, others who obey.

On our field of battle who can say for sure which perceptions will rise up to command? Who can say certain compelling ones won’t gather as lines of life that

become "commanders ... who reach with creative hand toward the future, and everything that is and was becomes thereby for them a means, a tool, a hammer. Their 'perceiving' is *creating*"²⁸

Of course it's creating. A perception willing to face what comes, perceiving its own decisiveness in carrying the chain forward, makes itself the perspective that *frames* what comes. It's only a fragment, but a fragment glowing like a lamp. New things appear now in *its* light. When the light for example brightens like a face on which something can appear as a smile, it gives birth to it *as a smile*. It doesn't assemble the smile from things already in sight. It summons it instead from the empty spaces between things where no thing yet is. It gives birth to it inside those spaces always opening wherever there are *fragments*.

This is 'creating.'

It's of course also 'perceiving.' It's what 'perceiving' means. It means the flash of lightning that tears open the night, touching with light a house, a watcher at his window, a tree before the window. Night, house, watcher, tree—they're all fragments. All pieces of an unfinished experiment that can join in unexpected ways. No road already built connects the pieces. The road is as not-yet-there as an unfinished conversation. But when piece finds its way to farther piece, there is 'perception.'

But there is still that 'I myself' watching at the window when the lightning flash comes. Why isn't the 'I' the pivotal one who 'perceives'?

This 'I' and the 'world' he participates in are together. They are one. The watcher is nothing but each of his perceptions—his thoughts, his experiences, the *line* of those experiences called his 'life.' There—only there—does something new ... happen. It happens to that life, which includes night, and window, and nearby tree. Imagining a perception without the *place* of the perceiving would be like imagining a word without the conversation in which the word *says* something.

In the sky a floating hawk will see a rabbit half a mile below him. But balanced on his falconer's fist, a person in front of him a few feet away, what will he see? The person, of course. Perhaps even the person's face. But will he see on that face the little quizzical smile?

A small child watching her mother in an armchair reading will see the smile on her mother's face. But coming closer to stare down at the book in her mother's lap, what will she see? The lines of print, of course. Perhaps in those lines even the separate words. But will she see in the line at the top of the page the *Greek* word?

Her mother sees the Greek word. How? Not because her eyes are sharper. Look at those glasses she's wearing. But she has met these Greek shapes before. The new appearance at the top of her page calls to those earlier perceptions. These rise up in answer, and together, new and old experiences build a place which is the mother's perception at this moment. The place that is the mother's life. That is the mother herself.

New things come to this place she is. They take up residence here, new joining old—just as the child did when originally she came to this woman uniquely here to receive her. Perceiving is a kind of being born. It is new life.

And who knows what can join what? Who knows what can speak to what and make sense together? Make *life* together? And be pieces of this world taken in its 'intelligible character'? Things in our world begin as flashes of perception and they appear within the ongoing experiment of our perceiving. We can always stop the experiment to offer explanations and point to causes but while the experiment itself is still under way, no causes can be experienced. Not yet. No explanations can arise. It's too soon. Results are still occurring in our experiment that's not over yet because it hasn't finished beginning.

In what way does it begin? —It begins in a scatter of fragments. The fragments can link up in different ways, in different combinations. They can have different conversations together. *Their* conversation is the line of my perceiving and the line of my perceiving is what I *am*. I am this 'world' the perceptions fashion together. It's the world I participate in.

What's this 'world' like that I participate in? —It's like the god Dionysus. It's powerful. It makes me see things. It possesses me through the perceptions that take me over. It's as intoxicating as wine, as jolting as lightning. Its power can separate me limb from limb.

It's in pieces. The pieces haven't come together. Not yet. Not till they do. But as we perceive, and go on perceiving, the pieces of experience begin to join. "Dionysus cut to pieces," Nietzsche says, "is a promise of life: it is eternally reborn and out of destruction will return."²⁹ The life returns when the pieces begin speaking meaningfully to each other. The fuller life emerges that we're part of. Part of. Because each moment of living is still only a piece. A fragment open at its ends.

Dangerously open.

And right here Nietzsche goes to work keeping things dangerous. Keeping eyes and ears and lives open—open as a battlefield is open. Where you don't know how things are going to come out but you know they'll come out somehow and you know you're there among them and they're happening to you.

Or through you.

Because you're involved. You can run, of course, but if you run, you have to run somewhere and that somewhere will be touched too by the battle. Or by some battle. And what happens on the battlefield will ultimately reach where you are. And reach you.

What happens is like a conversation you're in where comment meets comment and perspectives arise and the things appear that belong with those perspectives. The things *appear*. They can't help it. They're pieces of the conversation and they can't help making contact with what's already here. A thing is itself nothing but the strike of encounter, spear on shield, spear on spear. Meeting on this field of battle that is both father and king of all. The meeting that is perception.

And life.

And power. Because it is felt as power. Coming from beyond you—as a surprise comes. Or an enemy.

An enemy dangerous because he comes at you where your defenses are—and where they aren't. Finding you there in that most intimate place of all, where you are sharp new life—and also death.

The ancient place that is Dionysus.

Where the road up and the road down are one and the same.

And the end is the beginning.

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- ¹ *Heracitus*, Fr. 12, p. 19.
- ² *Heracitus*, Philip Wheelwright, trans. (Oxford, 1959), Fr. 20, p. 29.
- ³ *Heracitus*, Fr. 21, p. 29.
- ⁴ *Heracitus*, cf. Fr. 25, p. 29.
- ⁵ Cf. *Heracitus*, Fr. 108, p. 90.
- ⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke in Drei Bänden*, Karl Schlechta, ed. (München, 1966), Vol. II, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, p. 755 [*Beyond Good and Evil*, #295]. Quotations from the *Werke* are all my translation.
- ⁷ *Heracitus*, Fr. 90, p. 83.
- ⁸ *Heracitus*, Fr. 102, p. 90.
- ⁹ *Werke*, Vol. III, *Aus dem Nachlass der Achtzigerjahre* [From the Posthumous Papers of the '1880's], p. 903.
- ¹⁰ *Werke*, Vol. II, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 250 [*The Merry Science*, #374].
- ¹¹ *Werke*, Vol. II, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 249 [*The Merry Science*, #373].
- ¹² E. N. da Costa Andrade, *Rutherford and the Nature of the Atom* (New York, 1963) p. 111.
- ¹³ *Werke*, Vol. II, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, pp. 187-8 [*The Merry Science*, #324].
- ¹⁴ *Werke*, Vol. II, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, p. 789 [*Toward the Genealogy of Morals*, 1st Treatise, #13].
- ¹⁵ *Werke*, Vol. II, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, p. 580 [*Beyond Good and Evil*, #17].
- ¹⁶ *Werke*, Vol. II, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 116 [*The Merry Science*, #109].
- ¹⁷ *Werke*, Vol. II, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, p. 576 [*Beyond Good and Evil*, #11].
- ¹⁸ *Werke*, Vol. III, *Aus dem Nachlass der Achtzigerjahre*, p. 561.
- ¹⁹ *Werke*, Vol. II, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, p. 968 [*Twilight of the Idols*, "Morality as Anti-Nature," #6].
- ²⁰ For a discussion of 'willing' similar in spirit, though different in focus, look at Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, #611 ff, p. 159 ff (New York, 1958).
- ²¹ *Werke*, Vol. III, *Aus dem Nachlass der Achtzigerjahre*, p. 750.
- ²² *Werke*, Vol. II, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, p. 582 [*Beyond Good and Evil*, #19].
- ²³ *Werke*, Vol. II, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 215 [*The Merry Science*, #349]. The 'life-will' is not the will to live. Nietzsche explains here: "Wanting to survive is the expression of a neediness, of a restriction of the actual basic drive of life, which aims at extending power and in this will often enough calls survival into question and sacrifices it."
- ²⁴ *Werke*, Vol. III, *Aus dem Nachlass der Achtzigerjahre*, p. 896.
- ²⁵ *Werke*, Vol. II, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, p. 617 [*Beyond Good and Evil*, #56].
- ²⁶ *Werke*, Vol. II, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, p. 601 [*Beyond Good and Evil*, #36].
- ²⁷ *Werke*, Vol. II, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 211 [*The Merry Science*, #346].
- ²⁸ *Werke*, Vol. II, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, p. 676 [*Beyond Good and Evil*, #211].

²⁹ *Werke, Vol. III, Aus dem Nachlass der Achtzigerjahre, p. 773.*

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