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The Biology of Evil: Nietzsche on *Entartung* and *Verjüdung* (Degeneration and Jewification)

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Universal history is perhaps the history of the different intonations given to a handful of metaphors. - Jorge Luis Borges

1. Introduction ¹

This essay aims to examine how Nietzsche uses some of the tropes and rhetoric of 19th century degeneration theory in order to show how he attempts a radically new interpretation of those tropes. It also examines Nietzsche's rather ambiguous place in the related rhetoric of *Verjüdung* (Jewification) to show how here again he takes an idiosyncratic and nuanced approach. ² Understanding his use of the rhetoric of *Verjüdung* will help us explain the originality in his use of the notion of degeneration. The key point is that contra conventional opinion he claims that both degeneration and *Verjüdung* can and have been productive forces, even leading to a certain kind of human enhancement. To get a more focused picture of the importance of the notion of degeneration and *Verjüdung* in Nietzsche's work we will have to say something about Nietzsche's related concepts of sickness, health and great health (*grosse Gesundheit*).

Nietzsche's reputation has long laboured long under the shadow of anti-Semitism, and his relationship to this dark tradition has been the object of intense interest for some years. His many asides in published works, letters, and notes, for instance about the alleged smell of the Jews (A 46, SB 2:326), show that he was at least a casual anti-Semite. It is also clear that he eventually became an anti-anti-Semite. Nietzsche's friend Overbeck claimed that Nietzsche like Overbeck himself, had no sympathy for the political anti-Semitic agitators, but "almost everyone, at least every educated person, had a certain antipathy for Jews, so much so, that this was true among the Jews themselves" (1999:32-33). Clearly being an anti-anti-Semite does not preclude one having negative attitudes towards Jews.³ One might think that the current anti-Semites have merely latched onto the wrong issues, e.g. nationalism, the Reich, etc. (KSA 13: 546); or that being associated with anti-Semites might be detrimental to one's reputation (KSB 7:142, 493; KSB 8:216-7) or that anti-Semitism has cost one friendships and financial losses (KSB 6:493). A key claim in this essay is that Nietzsche, unlike major cotemporary anti-Semites of his time such as Wager and Dühring, was not really that interested in the actual Jews or any so-called Jewish problem of his times. ⁴

2. Degeneration: A Quick Introduction

In the latter half of 19th century there developed a fairly widespread rhetoric of degeneration. The French physician Bénédict Morel's 1857 book *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine et des causes qui produisent ces variétés maladives* is often cited as a kind of founding document of that rhetoric.

Gobineau's 1853 *Essai sur l'inégalité des races*, which included a chapter head which translates as "the Meaning of the Word "Degeneration"" was also influential. According to Gobineau:

The word degenerate, when applied to a people, means ... that the people have no longer the same intrinsic value as it had before, because it has no longer the same blood in its veins, continual adulterations having gradually affected the quality of that blood. (1999:25)

Perhaps the most useful account comes from Nordau's hugely influential work

Degeneration:

The clearest notion we can form of degeneracy is to regard it as a morbid deviation from an original type... the morbid variation does not continuously subsist and propagate itself, like one that is healthy, but, fortunately, is soon rendered sterile, and after a few generations often dies out before it reaches the lowest grade of organic degradation. (1895:16)

A key point of the rhetoric of degeneration theory is that it implicitly, and sometimes explicitly (e.g. Lankester 1880:59-60), questioned the inevitability of humanity progress. Rather it saw regression as an all too real possibility. Thus, it typically rejected what it took to be the Enlightenment's naive and optimistic assumptions about the inevitable spread of the natural light of reason. Initially developed by scientists and medical professionals its practitioners often took themselves to be replacing religious/moral notions of good and evil with medical/scientific notions of health and sickness (pathology). However, if we take part of the core notion of evil to be the normative conception that it is that which is corrupt and ought not to exist, then, since the degenerationists' notions of health and sickness carried exactly this normative import, the appropriate conclusion is that the degenerationists' notion of sickness was really a relabeling in secular, medical, terms of the old religious/moral notion evil. This rhetoric of sickness and health provided a new logic for the improvement of humanity. In the Christian world view evil is often configured as a type of

error than can be eliminated by proper education, even if certain elements have a tendency towards stubbornness and resistance. By spreading the truth about the messiah, evil is in principle eliminable. While other forms of Christianity may put less stock in education, they generally leave scope for the salvation of even the worst of us. In the enlightenment world view, as developed by philosophers such as Descartes, evil is also typically configured as a species of error, a failure or misapplication of the faculty of reason. As such, again, evil is treatable. Indeed it may be ultimately be eradicated, through the ever widening influence of education and the light of reason.⁵ In contradistinction, the 19th century degenerationists saw, evil, or sicknesses, as a kind of bodily infection which needs to be isolated or destroyed before it further infects the greater populace. One can correct faulty representations (failure to accept the Messiah, failure to use one's faculty of reason) by education. One can't eliminate a disease merely by education, by altering one's representations. The degenerationists sought to replace the enlightenment's logic of correction by education with a logic of isolation and/or elimination. The optimistic notion of the ever-widening circle of light is replaced by the pessimistic rhetoric of the ever-widening field of infection. As many who adopting the rhetoric of degeneration were keen to argue, one can't educate bacteria, parasites, and infections.

I think it appropriate to call the core degenerationist view Manichean in the sense that degenerationists generally took the sick and the healthy as two separable and individually distinct types locked in a kind of battle for humanity or for particular national souls, much as the original religious Manicheans saw good and evil as two equally powerful forces locked in battle for individual human souls or for dominion of the earth.

3. Nietzsche as a Classic Degenerationist⁶

There are plenty of passages where Nietzsche sounds like a classic degenerationist, claiming that there are certain elements in society that are degenerate and a danger to the healthy:

The diseased are man's great danger: not the evil, not the "beasts of prey". Those who from the outset are failed, downcast, broken – they are the ones, the weakest are the ones who most undermine life among humans, who most dangerously poison and call in question our confidence in life.....That the sick not make the healthy sick – and this would be such a softening – that should certainly be the highest viewpoint on earth –

but this would require above all else that the healthy remain separated from the sick.
(GM III 14).

Here we see Nietzsche advocated the idea that the sick need to be isolated. Occasionally Nietzsche uses a medicalized vocabulary claiming that “the physiologist demands excision [*Ausschneidung*] of the degenerating part” (EH Dawn 2). Other passages suggest the solution of elimination (A7, TI, Expeditions of an Untimely Man 36, *Ecce Homo* Birth of Tragedy 4). In a notebook entry titled “The Great Politics,” Nietzsche writes of the great politics which makes physiology the queen who “wants to breed humanity as a whole” [*Menschheit als Ganzes zuchten*], and which will inexorably put an end to what is “parasitic and degenerate” (KSA 13:637-8).

It is mark of much of the 19th century writing on degeneration that in its use of medical/scientific terms such as “diseased”, “sick”, “infection”, “parasite” and the like it is unclear what is to be taken literally and what is to be taken metaphorically. When one reads Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* in the light of knowledge of 19th and early 20th century degeneration theory with knowledge of his sources one sees that much of his language is borrowed directly from degeneration theory. In the case of Hitler, the language of degeneration is meant wholly literally. The passages above from Nietzsche’s works (see also BGE 62, KSA 11:75, KSA 12:31, KSA 13:470), which variously extol the perishing, extermination, and destruction of alleged degenerates, might lead one to conclude that Nietzsche is also propounding a literal rather than a metaphorical reading. By turning to Nietzsche’s engagement with the rhetoric of *Verjüdung* we can open the way for a reading of Nietzsche on degeneration that avoids the conclusion that Nietzsche is a conventional degenerationist peddling Manichean notions of sickness and health which entail a logic of isolation, excision and elimination.⁷ But before examining Nietzsche’s rhetoric of *Verjüdung* we need first to examine the more conventional rhetoric of *Verjüdung* to see an important contrast.

4. Verjüdung: A Quick Introduction

The term “*Verjüdung*” has been generally attributed to Wagner’s essay of 1850, “Judaism in Music.”⁸ There he alludes to various motifs of religious anti-Semitism including that of

blood libel. More generally it argues that Jews have infected modernity with a crass materialism. The following evinces both these motifs:

Who bothers to notice that those innocent pieces of paper money are stained with the blood of countless generations? What the great artists toiled to bring into being for two thousand unhappy years, the Jew today turns into an art business (1973:25).

Wagner also presses the standard anti-Semitic trope that the Jews have no language of their own (1995:87; 1994:271) and hence lack the basis for genuine creativity (1973:27, 29):

The Jew speaks the language of the country in which he has lived from generation to generation, but he always speaks it as a foreigner... the Jew speaks modern European language only as learnt not as a native, makes it impossible for him to ever speak colloquially, authoritatively, or from the depths of his being. (1973:27).

The claim that Jews have infected modernity with a crass materialism is echoed in that other great exemplar of *Verjüdung* Marx's essay "On the Jewish Question":

What is the secular basis of Judaism? Practical need, selfishness. What is the secular cult of the Jew? Haggling. What is his secular god? Money. Well then, emancipation from haggling and money, from practical, real Judaism, would be the self-emancipation of our age. (1977:66).⁹

What is central to these classic texts of *Verjüdung* is that they turn the question of emancipation on its head: for Wagner and Marx the question is not how are the Jews to be emancipated and integrated into civil society, but rather how is civil society to be emancipated from its Jewishness; that is, how is society to be emancipated from the growing influence of materialism and egoism? They are not calling for the literal extermination of Jews but for the metaphorical extermination of Jewishness, seen as a certain set of character traits.

5. Nietzsche on *Verjüdung* I: Creative Jews

What is arguably a third great tract of *Verjüdung*, after Wagner's *Judaism in Music* and Marx's *On the Jewish Question*, Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality* (hereafter GM) also poses the question of Jewish emancipation not in terms of the emancipation of the Jews but in

terms of an emancipation from Jewishness.¹⁰ However for Nietzsche the relevant infection is not materialism and egoism but Christianity. The preface of GM starts off with the claim that we do not know ourselves, we are “strangers to ourselves”. Bringing this message home is one of the aims of GM and as we shall see the figure of the Jew is used to help make this clear to us.

In GM Nietzsche opposes a master morality – allegedly the morality of the ancient Greeks and Romans - to a slave morality. The master morality values strength, beauty, wealth, power, valour, honour, etc. The way Nietzsche tells it, the ancient Greeks in worshipping their Gods were really deifying their own instincts, they were worshipping and affirming themselves (GM II 7).¹¹ Slave morality is the morality of the weak and oppressed, typically slaves. The slave originally wants and valued exactly what the masters have, namely strength, wealth, beauty etc. but had no way of achieving these values. Because of this they suffer and what is worse they find no meaning in their suffering. This leads to a kind of cognitive dissonance. As Nietzsche says in GM III 28 the problem is not suffering but the meaninglessness of suffering. In order to make sense of their suffering the slaves are amenable to re-interpretations of their suffering that do not treat it as a brute fact, a reflection of their weakness. It is the priests, in Nietzsche’s text configured as Jewish priests, who provide the meaning, telling their flock: You suffer because that is God's pathway to the eternal kingdom of heaven, and: You suffer because you deserve to suffer for your sins. Slave morality inverts the values of the masters saying it is bad to be an oppressor; it is bad to be wealthy, strong, etc. To be good is to be humble, to turn the other cheek; the weak shall inherit the earth. The God of these Jews/Christians, being omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent is nothing like them, and their very instincts are an affront to that God. In a sense they use their God to repudiate their human nature (their aggressive, and other, instincts).¹²

In GM I 7 Nietzsche writes:

Nothing is worthy of mention in comparison with what the Jews have done against them [the nobles, the mighty, the lords] ... The Jews that priestly people who in the end were only able to obtain satisfaction from their enemies and conquer through a

radical revaluation of their values, through an act of spiritual revenge ... with the Jews the slave revolt in morality begins.

GM I 8 describes “Jewish hate” as “the deepest and most sublime” but then immediately goes on to characterize it as “an ideal-creating, value-reshaping hate whose like has never existed on earth.” This claim that Jewish hate has created a totally new set of values entails a wholesale rejection of a central claim of the typical anti-Semitic rhetoric of the 19th century, namely that Jews are incapable of genuine creation.¹³ Indeed this idea of Jewish creativity picks up ideas in earlier sections of GM where Nietzsche says “it was on the soil of this essentially dangerous form of human existence, the priestly form, that man first became an interesting animal” (GM I 6) and that “human history would be much too stupid an affair without the spirit that has entered into it through the powerless” (GM I 7).

These passages suggest that Nietzsche is not a nostalgic who wishes to return to the times of the masters, but that he, in a sense, admires the slave revolt and the Jews who instigated it for making history interesting, for giving man depth. Later in the same work he says

The Jews ...were that priestly people of resentment par excellence, in whom there dwelt a popular-moral genius without parallel: just compare the peoples with related talents – for instance the Chinese or the German – with the Jews in order to feel what is first and what is fifth rank (GM I 16).¹⁴

This reference to creative moral genius resonates with his earlier suggestion that “those instincts of reaction and *ressentiment* with the help of which the noble dynasties together with their ideals were finally brought to ruin and overwhelmed” are “the actual *tools of culture*” (GM I 11).¹⁵ I say ‘suggestion’ because in the text this is offered under the form of a supposition; one I believe Nietzsche to some degree endorses. What he is suspicious of is the value of this culture; which encompasses the culture of his present time. But in saying the Jews were the instruments for the creation of culture, be it good or bad, he stands apart from the of classical *Verjüdung* rhetoric which runs the line that Jews cannot be instruments of culture of any kind.¹⁶

6. Nietzsche on Verjüdung II: Alles Verjüdet

In Nietzsche studies there are two main readings of the so-called slave revolt. One emphasizes the slaves' need to make sense of their suffering. The other is the strategic reading which stresses how the weak deliberately strategized to overcome their physically stronger masters (the Romans). Both readings have a basis in the text.¹⁷ In section 8 of GM I Nietzsche suggests that the Jews deliberately repudiated Christ so the idiot Romans would take the bait:

Does it not belong to the secret black art of truly great politics of revenge, of a far-seeing subterranean, slow-working and pre-calculating revenge, that Israel, before all the world, should deny as its mortal enemy and nail to the cross the actual tool of its revenge so that "all the world" namely all the opponents of Israel, could take precisely this bait without thinking twice?

Here we have the traditional anti-Semitic motifs of sly conniving Jews manipulating Christians, or, in this case, future Christians, to serve their own ends.¹⁸ Arguably, this wild conspiracy theory is not seriously endorsed by Nietzsche. It would have been totally absurd for Israel to believe that killing Jesus would somehow eventually lead to the conversion of their Roman oppressors to values that would undermine their strength. The fact that Nietzsche only poses it as a question not as a statement is a clue this is not what he actually thinks.¹⁹ The point here is that Nietzsche knows his audience is susceptible to Jewish conspiracy stories and plays upon that susceptibility.

In section 14 of GM Nietzsche invites his readers to see where values – we are to think of these as the new Jewish-invented Christian values – are manufactured:

Would anyone like to go down and take a look into the secret of how they fabricate ideals on earth ... into these dark workplaces... there is a cautious malicious quiet whispering and muttering... out of all the corners and nooks They are lying; a sugary mildness sticks to each sound... They talk of "love of one's enemies and sweat while doing so... they are miserable... all these whisperers and nook and cranny counterfeiters... enough, enough I can't stand it anymore. Bad air! Bad air! This workplace where they fabricate ideals – it seems to me it stinks of sheer lies.

Nietzsche is clearly trying to invoke feelings of disgust in referencing the near inhuman lying language of these Jewish figures – they are underground, plotting, nook dwellers, with a foul smell.²⁰

Why does Nietzsche use the classical figure of the plotting Jew? As I have argued elsewhere (Gemmes 2006: 200) he wants to at first distance his audience before uncannily reversing that distance thereby bringing them to shocking knowledge of their true nature. At the time of Nietzsche's writing GM the notion of German identity was seriously fraught. Germany had only recently become a unified nation; protestant north and Catholic south had different religions over which tremendous wars had been fought, and they barely had a common language. Northern Germans could often not understand German as spoken by Bavarians. As Nietzsche observed in the work preceding GM: "It is characteristic of the Germans that the question, "What is German?" never dies out amongst them" (BGE 244).²¹ One of the few things Germans of this period knew that they had in common is that they were not Jews. Nietzsche seeks to destabilize Germans' identity, and to tar the Christianity shared by both Protestants and Catholics, by associating it with the hated figure of the Jew; he wants to transfer the German disgust with Jews onto Christianity itself.

It is worth recalling that the two figures that Nietzsche's writings address more than any others, namely Schopenhauer and Wagner, claimed that it is a mistake to take Judaism to be the principal source of Christianity, a claim Nietzsche himself was aware of (see GS 99). Schopenhauer argued that Christianity resonated more with Brahmanism and Buddhism thematically, and perhaps even genealogically, than with Judaism (1958: 488,623 and 2015: §179). Wagner claimed that Christianity undoubtedly developed from Indian sources (SB 7:130; 1912: Zweiter Teil: 79). While Schopenhauer was an atheist he did, by Nietzsche's lights, hold to the core component of Christianity, namely the value of compassion (*Mitleid*). Similarly, Nietzsche took Wagner to have "sunk down, helpless and broken, before the Christian cross" (NCW How I broke from Wagner 1, see also his comments on Wagner's Parsifal in GM III 4). For Nietzsche the anti-Semites Schopenhauer and Wagner were, through their allegiance to Christian values, and unbeknownst to themselves, actually "verjüdet".²² This is brought home in his comments about Schopenhauer and, especially,

Wagner in the third essay of the *Genealogy* where he points out that they both give expression to Christian religious ascetic ideals.

These reversals, the Christian, and even Wagner and Schopenhauer, as essentially Jewish are shocking. But readers of the *Genealogy* are in store for a more shocking reversal.

For his audience of secular enlightened intellectuals, the figure of the Jew is distant, and even the figure of the devout Christian is receding. In GM he allows his secular intellectual German audience a feeling of superiority to those subterranean Jews and their foolish dupes the Christians: All that belongs to the now surpassed age of religious superstition. But in GM III 23, which is arguably is the climax of the whole book (see Gemes 2006), he comes back with his most important and uncanny reversal. There he says we holders of the alleged counter ideal to the religious ascetic ideal, those who realize this is the one and only world, those whose ideals are those of truth, objectivity and science, are not, as they complacently suppose, possessors of a counter-ideal to the religious ascetic ideal. Rather they are its most sublime manifestation:

Precisely the opposite of what is claimed here is the truth: science... is not the opposite of the ascetic ideal but rather its most recent and noblest form.

Nietzsche is arguing that science in its will to truth, the idea that truth is to be valued as the ultimate good that trumps all other goods, is a manifestation of the religious ascetic ideal.²³ It is both otherworldly and a valorization of a certain kind of passivity:

Science also rests on the same ground as the ascetic ideal when calculated physiologically: a certain *impoverishment of life* is a presupposition here as well as there—the affects become cool (GM III 25)

Here he is attacking the identity of his secular enlightened audience. They see themselves as a decisive break from the religious past, but Nietzsche maintains they are in fact its culmination. For Nietzsche the defining characteristic of Christianity is not its ontological commitments (the existence of God, the existence of an immortal soul) but its normative or moral commitments. The enlightenment's commitments to truth and compassion are, for Nietzsche, just Christianity without the ontology. What is more, those commitments are a Jewish invention. In effect Nietzsche is saying you people of the Enlightenment are the dupes of the Jews. As he says in GM I 9 "alles verjüdet"; everything is jewifying. In *The*

Antichrist Nietzsche says, ‘The Christian, that *ultima ratio* of the lie, is the Jew once more – even *thrice* more’ (A 44).²⁴ The same for Nietzsche is true of the secular enlightened humanist. What is more, the Jews were at least original in inventing those values. The Christians and the secularist are just the pale imitators, the invention of, even dupes of, the Jews.

For Nietzsche, contra the enlightenment, the decisive historical break is not that between medieval world of superstitious religious faith and the modern world of scientific rationality and objectivity. Rather he configures the major break as that between pagan times and Christian times; the time of the triumph of Judeo-Christian values which still rule today, albeit in secular form, even among atheists. On his reading the modern secular world, no less than the Christian world, is infused with Jewish values.

It is important to note that Nietzsche in GM is criticizing the Jews of antiquity for what they did long ago with their slave revolt and the subsequent invention of Christianity. This separates him from Wagner, Marx, Paul de Lagarde,²⁵ Wilhelm Marr and Houston Stuart Chamberlain and countless others from the 19th and early 20th century who claimed the Jews of the present day, or the alleged Jewishness of today, is a current existential threat.²⁶ For Nietzsche the damage was done long ago:

This is precisely why the Jews are the most *disastrous* (*verhängnissvollste*) people in world history: they have left such a falsified humanity in their aftermath that even today Christians can think of themselves as anti-Jewish without understanding that they are the ultimate conclusion of Judaism. (A 24)

It is central to Nietzsche’s story of the Jews development in *The Antichrist* that when they moved from being a warrior nation with a correct and “natural” relationship to God to becoming the priestly people we are familiar with from GM I their nature radically changed (A25). This again is contrary to the typical view of the promoters of the rhetoric of *Verjüdung* such as Wagner and Marx who take an essentialist line claiming that Jews have an unchanging, eternal, nature which is fundamentally corrupt and corrupting.²⁷

For our purposes there are four essential points we need to focus on in Nietzsche's relationship to the rhetoric of Verjüding: First, unlike conventional users of the rhetoric such as Wagner and Marx, he figures the Jews as creative - indeed they created us. Nietzsche turns the conventional rhetoric of the Jews as imitators not originators on its head, with the Christians and secularists configured as mere imitators, or at least inheritors, of the Jews.²⁸ Indeed the ancient Jews achieved what Nietzsche aspires to achieve; a re-evaluation of values, albeit that he seeks values that affirm rather than denigrate life. Second, that creative act gave man a complexity and depth that makes him interesting. Third, this is all a matter of history long past and, hence, is removed from any suggestion of a current threat from the Jews of his day. Fourth, Nietzsche uses the rhetoric of Verjüding not to foster prejudice against the Jews but to reveal to his audience their true nature as strangers to themselves.

Nietzsche uses the figure of the Jew not because he is focused on making points about contemporary Jews, but because he finds the figure of the uncanny Jew particularly useful for destabilizing the identity of his Christian German audience.²⁹ This use of the figure of the creative Jew to unsettle Christian identity is of a piece with his references to the Jewish genius of Heine and Offenbach which Nietzsche contrasts with "the degenerate music of German romanticism" (KSA 12: 361). This barb is aimed at Wagner who notoriously criticised Offenbach and Heine on account of their Jewishness. In a later note, (KSA:13:152), he again praises Heine and Offenbach, in the context of claiming that in modern Europe the Jews have touched the most supreme form of spirituality (*Geistigkeit*); the very virtue Wagner reserves for himself and vehemently denies Jews have any capacity for. There is also this element of Wagner baiting in when he writes in a note "I believe that the Semitic races approach Wagner's art with more understanding than the Aryans do" (KSA 8:549). Greg Moore with great plausibility takes the theme of Nietzsche's Wagner baiting even further by arguing that Nietzsche even insinuated that Wagner himself was somehow a feminized Jew (2002:183-4).³⁰

The crucial point for us is that while Nietzsche utilizes the notion of the Jews as a kind of infection, he shows that this infection is both crucial to who we now are and that this infection has given us an admirable depth and complexity.

Of course, even if we accept that Nietzsche's real targets are the Germans, modern Europeans (and occasionally Wagner), and not the Jews, this allows that Nietzsche's rhetoric may indeed have fostered anti-Semitism among some of his readers. It equally allows that Nietzsche was aware of this possibility. The point here is that it was not his aim to foster such anti-Semitism, as it was clearly the principal aim of texts such as Wagner's "Judaism in Music". With Nietzsche the fostering of such anti-Semitism is perhaps better regarded as "collateral damage".³¹

7. Nietzsche Rejecting a Degenerationist Manichean View

We noted above that Nietzsche does want to return to pre-Christian age of master values.³² In GM his references to history being stupid without the infusion of the priests, to man becoming interesting with the slave revolt, etc, show that he does not want to return to earlier times. What he wants is a kind of *aufhebung* of the master-slave dichotomy. He wants the complexity and depth of the slave but the confident self-assertion, world affirmation, and activity of the masters. His ideal is one of mixing, not isolating, the disparate elements. Nietzsche sees us moderns as being composites of both slave and master values (BGE 200 and 260). What he aims for is a combining of these various elements into an organic whole. As his character Zarathustra puts it

I walk among men as among fragments of the future: of the future which I scan. And it is my art and aim, to compose into one and bring together what is fragment and riddle and dreadful chance. (*Thus spoke Zarathustra*, II, 21)

This bringing into one does not involve the degenerationists' fantasy of excising or eliminating all so-called infectious elements. In *Human all too Human* Nietzsche gives his most considered view about the treatment of infections. The relevant passage titled, *Improvement through degeneration*, deliberately proposes a juxtaposition unthinkable to his audience educated in conventional degeneration theory which sees no possible benefits in degeneration:

It is the more unfettered, uncertain and morally weaker individuals upon whom spiritual progress depends in such communities: it is the people who attempt new things and, in general, many things. ... It is precisely at this injured and weakened spot

that the whole body is as it were inoculated with something new; its strength must, however, be as a whole sufficient to receive this new thing into its blood and to assimilate it. Degenerate natures are of the highest significance wherever progress is to be effected. Every progress of the whole has to be preceded by a partial weakening..... The strongest natures preserve the type, the weaker help it to evolve. - Something similar occurs in the case of the individual human being; rarely is a degeneration, a mutilation, even a vice and physical or moral damage in general without an advantage in some other direction. ...it is precisely the weaker nature, as the tenderer and more refined, that makes any progress possible at all. A people that becomes somewhere weak and fragile but is as a whole still strong and healthy is capable of absorbing the infection of the new and incorporating it to its own advantage.³³ (HAH I 224 with my corrections of translation)

The same ideal of incorporation is seen in other passages where he extolls the task of bringing “opposing forces into harmony... without suppressing or shackling them. (HH I 276).

Nietzsche’s considered view of health involves the notion of incorporating diverse elements, even initially foreign elements, into a greater unity. Generally, he treats pathology not as the presence of an element that is itself pathological, but as a matter of the imbalance between various elements. Even in the early works, such as *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he chastises Socrates for his extreme valorization of reason, his point is not that we need to isolate or eliminate that element, but that what we need is a proper balance between that element and the more primitive, sensual, bodily elements.³⁴ Nietzsche thus basically rejects the Manichean worldview that is at the core of classical degeneration theory. He, like Freud after him (S.E. VII:231; S.E. IX:210; SE XXIII:195), sees the pathological not as different in kind from the normal, but as a kind of window into the normal. Like Freud, he sees health as the achievement of harmony, not repression or excision. In his notebooks we find the following:

It is the value of all morbid states that they show us under a magnifying glass certain states that are normal-but not easily visible when normal.

Health and sickness are not essentially different, as the ancient physicians and some practitioners even today suppose. One must not make of them distinct principles or

entities that fight over the living organism and turn it into their arena. That is silly nonsense and chatter that is no good any longer. In fact, there are only differences in degree between these two kinds of existence: the exaggeration, the disproportion, the nonharmony of the normal phenomena constitute the pathological state (Claude Bernard).³⁵

Just as "evil" ["das Böse"] can be considered as exaggeration, disharmony, disproportion, "the good" may be a *protective diet* against the danger of exaggeration, disharmony, and disproportion. (WTP 47, KSA 13:250).³⁶

In another unpublished passage entitled "Why the weak conquer" (KSA13:365-6) Nietzsche claims that the sick and weak have more spirit ("Geist"). Interestingly, he there also nominates the Jews as a race with "esprit". He further claims there that the sick and weak are more interesting than the healthy; that the fool the saint and the genius are closely related to the sick; and that the even the healthiest are sick at certain periods of their life. The last is a claim we will soon see Nietzsche's applying to himself.

8. Nietzsche on Decadence and Great Health

We have seen that Nietzsche, against the entire tradition, sees a positive role, for degeneration. Indeed he sees it as a necessity for all progress³⁷. However, there is no text, despite all his many writing on his own very serious illnesses, where he ever characterizes himself as degenerate. In the only place where he mentions himself and degeneration together, he is careful to say "[t]here is altogether no sign of any local degeneration" (EH "Why I am so Wise", 1). However, in both published works and notes and letters, he describes himself in terms of decadence:

A long, all too long, series of years signifies recovery for me; unfortunately it also signifies relapse, decay, the periodicity of a kind of decadence. Need I say after all this that in questions of decadence I am *experienced*? I have spelled them forward and backward. (EH "Why I am so Wise", 1)

The subsequent section of "Why I am so Wise" Nietzsche offers the paradoxical assertion "[a]part from the fact that I am a decadent, I am also the opposite." What the text makes clear is that Nietzsche means that while he is prone to episodes of decadence, he is not fundamentally decadent in his nature, in that he has

always instinctively chosen the *right* means against wretched states; while the decadent typically chooses means that are disadvantageous for him. As *summa summarum*; I was healthy; as an angle, as a specialty, I was a decadent." (EH "Why I am so Wise", 2)

A genuinely decadent person such as Socrates - for Nietzsche Socrates is the philosopher of decadence (see TI "Problem of Socrates" 3-4) - is wholly taken over by some infection. In Socrates' case the infection is the monomania of reason, "rationality at any cost" (TI "The Problem of Socrates" 11). In the case of Wagner, "the artist of decadence" (CW5), the infection is "physiological degeneration (more precisely a form of hystericism)" or possibly "the fatality of romanticism" (CW 3). In contrast, someone who is at core healthy can experience an infection, can experience sickness, without being overcome by it³⁸:

I took myself in hand, I made myself healthy again: the condition for this-every physiologist would admit that-is *that one be healthy at bottom*. A typically morbid being cannot become healthy much less make itself healthy. For a typically healthy person, conversely, being sick can even become an energetic *stimulus* for life, for living *more*. (EH "Why I am so Wise", 2)³⁹

The idea that one can have bouts of decadence ("as an angle, as a specialty") without being fundamentally decadent in one's nature probably is part of the explanation of why Nietzsche never classes himself as a degenerate.⁴⁰ Generally the rhetoric of degeneration applied to individuals is not used to explain episodic occurrences but used to specify a being's fundamental nature.

For Nietzsche his bouts of decadence are integral to a certain enrichment of life. Indeed, as against classical degenerationists, great health involves not a freedom from infection but an incorporation of infecting elements towards a greater whole. This involves a new notion of health:

we premature births of an as yet unproven future need for a new goal also a new means -- namely, a new health, stronger, more seasoned, tougher, more audacious, and gayer than any previous health. Whoever has a soul that craves to have experienced the whole range of values needs one thing above everything else: the *great health* -- that one does not merely have but also acquires continually and must acquire because one gives it up again and again and must give it up. (GS 382).⁴¹

How can we square this with those passages cited above where Nietzsche seems to extol the isolation and even elimination, extermination, of the “sick” elements? While it fair to say that some of those passages are explosions of his often uncontrollable rancour against Christianity and the influence of Christianity, I think the considered view must be that Nietzsche thinks that if one is constitutionally weak then one is not capable of achieving the great health of incorporation. For such weak natures there can only be a limited form of health that requires the excision of elements that corrupt weaker natures. Whereas in the case of stronger natures the incorporation/sublimation of such elements invigorates and heightens their activity. In a passage in *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche contrasts the Germans’ inability to absorb Jews with the Italians, French and English greater success on this front. He attributes this capacity to the latter’s “stronger digestion” (BGE 251). To put this in terms of psychoanalytic concepts, concepts occasionally used by Nietzsche himself, a genuinely strong person (or society) deals with threatening elements by sublimating them into a greater whole. A genuinely weak person or society can only deal with such elements by repressing them.⁴² For Nietzsche this was a long held idea: As early as 1872 Nietzsche chastised the weakness of his contemporary society observing that there is something uncanny in the effects of repression in the case of the degenerate educated people of his present-day pseudo-culture (KSA 1:747).

9. A Concluding Remark on Irresponsible Genius

It is typical of a genius such as Nietzsche to take conventional tropes and metaphors and attempt to give them a new direction, or, in Borges’ phrase, a different intonation. Nietzsche was aware of the received meaning and direction of the rhetorics of Verjüdung and degeneration and the prevalence of notions of health that configured it in terms of a freedom from infection. He sought to give the rhetorics of Verjüdung, degeneration and health a new and more profound set of resonances and valences knowing that his more flat footed readers might miss the point.⁴³ It is perhaps a mark of his deep irresponsibility that he cared little for what such readers would make of him and the collateral damage that might thereby be inflicted.

Nietzsche famously boasted with a good deal of hubris and some optimism:

One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous-a crisis without equal on earth..... there will be wars the like of which have never yet been seen on earth. It is only beginning with me that the earth knows *great politics*.” (EH “Why I am a Destiny” 1).

What a contrast this makes to the 1834 words of Heine who, like Nietzsche, thought so profoundly about Germany’s place in modernity and pessimistically warned:

Smile not at the fantasy that in realm of reality there is to be expected the same revolution that has taken place in the realm of the mind [*Geistes*]... There will be played in Germany a drama which will make the French Revolution seem like an innocent idyll. (Heine 1997:143).

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²This is not to imply that 19th century degenerationists typically participated in the rhetoric of Verjüdung; though Eugen Dühring (e.g. 1881:18-19) made the connection. The melding of the rhetoric of Verjüdung and degeneration was more a phenomena of the first half of the 20th, especially in America and Germany - for example, Ford (1920-22), Günther (1927) and Lenz, Bauer, Fischer (1921).

³ Holub argues Nietzsche was not an anti-Semite in the sense supporting the German nationalist political anti-Semitic movement of the late 19th century, but that he exhibited “anti-Judaism or Judephobia” (2016:237-8, fn. 20).

⁴ Sommer (2012: 560) comes to a similar conclusion.

⁵ Voltaire’s *Candide* is a bromide against facile such optimism. For more on the questionable relationship between enlightenment and optimism see Gay (1995).

The sources for Nietzsche’s use of the notion of degeneration is hard to pin down. While Nietzsche only refers once to Gobineau, and that is in his notebooks, Gregory Moore concludes that it is highly likely Nietzsche was aware of his ideas through their repetition in essays by Wagner and others in the *Bayreuther Blätter* in the early 1880s (2002:124). Moore (2002: 126) also cites the influence of his reading of the psychiatrist Charles Féré’s 1888 work *Dégénérescence et criminalité*. In Nietzsche’s later writings, especially those from 1888, ‘Entartung’ is often used with more obvious physiological connotations than its use in the earliest works, such as BT, UM and BGE which focus on cultural and spiritual degeneration. His use of the term ‘Entartung’ was also influenced by his reading of Henry Maudsley’s *Die Zurechnungsfähigkeit der Geisteskranken* in the early 1880s which acknowledged both spiritual and physiological aspects of degeneration. In 1888 Nietzsche

noted that “Moral degeneration cannot be separated from physiological; it is simply a symptom complex of the latter” (KSA 13.290).⁶

⁷ In contrast Holub (2007) argues that Nietzsche is a more conventional degenerationist advocate of eugenics.

⁸ There is no definitive proof that Nietzsche read the essay, but, given its notoriety, there is little chance that Nietzsche was not aware of its content. See Holub 2016: 52.

⁹ Marx also questions the possibility of Judaism providing a basis for creativity (1977:68).

¹⁰ For Nietzsche’s concept and terminology of *Verjüdung* Wagner’s *Judaism in Music* was surely one source. Nietzsche was aware of and repudiated Eugene Dühring’s vicious anti-Semitism (see SB 8:51, GM III 14). As early as 1875 he was acquainted with Dühring’s *Kursus der Philosophie* which presses the line that Christianity is a Jewish import that has debased current culture (1875: 316-7). By 1885 he had read Dühring’s *Sache, Leben und Feinde* which repeats this claim (1882: 236-7) and contains references to jewified social-democrats (1882: 214, 220) and to the jewification of the press (1882:321). The concept of *Verjüdung* is prominent in Wellhausen’s *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, a major source for parts of *The Antichrist*.

¹¹ For more on God as a projection of joy in oneself see A 16.

¹² This juxtaposition of the invocation of Gods as life affirming against the invocation of Gods as revenge against life may owe something to his reading of Lange (1887: 251). Compare also KSA 13:523 titled “Zur Geschichte des Gottesbegriffs”.

¹³ And not just the 19th century, Voltaire (1767: 26): “The Jews have never invented anything “. Two places where Nietzsche explicitly expresses the conventional anti-Semitic view of Jews as non-creative are In a letter from 31 May 1888: “The Jews appear to be a chandala race who learnt from their masters the principles by which to form a priestly caste and organize the masses... The Jews here also appear simply as mediators - they invent nothing” (KSB 8:325). In a note from 1888: “The development of the Jewish priest-state is not original, they learnt the scheme in Babylon, the scheme is Aryan (13:386)”.

¹⁴ Nietzsche often characterizes anti-Semites in general as creatures of resentment (GM III 14; KSA13:581) but in doing so never suggests they are talented or creative. Presumably he would allow Wagner as an exception.

¹⁵ See also HAH I 474 which attributes to the Jews “the noblest human being (Christ), the purest sage (Spinoza) the mightiest book and the most efficacious moral code”.

¹⁶ Contrast this with a note from 1888 entitled “Why the Weak Conquer” where Nietzsche configures the Jews of the current age as mediocre and as a merely conserving power. (KSA13: 365-9).

¹⁷ For more on this see Wallace (2007)

¹⁸ *The Antichrist* 59, using anti-Semitic “dog-whistle” terms, claims the Roman empire was not defeated by Teutons but by “cunning, secret, invisible anemic vampires” from the “ghetto world of the soul”.

¹⁹ Nietzsche sometimes poses rhetorical questions suggesting possibilities and answers he does not actually endorse. In BGE 36 where he proposes the idea that everything is will to power, even to the point of absurdity (see Clark 1990: 212-218); in BGE 15 he considers the possibility that the external world is the work of the sense organs; and in BGE 211 he asks if are there any real philosophers, ones capable of philosophizing with a hammer, today?

²⁰ This is similar in tone to much of Wagner's *Judaism in Music*, and the portrayal of Mime as a Jew in Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (see Weiner 1997: 136,143).

²¹ I owe this citation to Greg Moore.

²² Nietzsche took malicious pleasure in raising questions about Wagner's identity. In a footnote to the first postscript to *The Case of Wagner* he asks, “Was Wagner a German at all?”. Another of Nietzsche's targets here (see GM III 26 and later in *The Antichrist*, A 17, 29, 31, 32) is the French historian and anti-Semite Renan whose claim “Christianity was the rupture with Judaism, the abrogation of the Torah” (1882: 635) Nietzsche clearly rejected.

²³ Here Nietzsche may be developing ideas from Lange's *Geschichte des Materialismus* which argued that even after we have rejected Christian dogma our moral outlook is determined by the Christian influence (1887: 747, 772).

²⁴ Earlier Nietzsche claimed that sin is a Jewish invention and that “Christianity aimed to “Jewify” the whole world” (GS 35). In GS 139 he asks with respect to the Christians tendency to vilify the passions “Did they not want to be Jews in this respect?”

²⁵ Sommer also notes that where Nietzsche emphasizes the influence of the ancient Jews the anti-Semite de Lagarde focuses on influence of current Jews (2012:553, 557).

²⁶ Chamberlain (1910: 229-30): “We live to-day in a “Jewish age” ... their present history actually takes up so much room in our own history that we cannot possibly refuse to notice them. ... this alien people has become precisely in the course of the nineteenth century a disproportionately important and in many spheres actually dominant constituent of our life”. Wagner (1994:43): “German Judaism now works so forcibly, vastly and tirelessly at the new culture and science, that the greater part of Christendom is led, consciously or unconsciously, by the spirit of modern Judaism” – My translation.

²⁷ Marx (1977: 47): “[the Jew] fancies himself justified in separating himself from humanity, as a matter of principle takes no part in the movement of history”. This important point about Nietzsche’s rejection of alleged Jewish essentialism I owe to John Richardson.

²⁸ As early as 1873 Nietzsche made a note that German morality “has a foreign aftertaste and looks like an imitation without talent” (KSA 7:582).

²⁹ Overbeck’s editors argue that he believed Nietzsche “strategically” used anti-Semitic resentment to undermine Christianity by associating it with Judaism (Overbeck 1999: XLIV). Overbeck claimed neither himself (2008:181-2) nor Nietzsche (1999:33) were concerned with any current so-called Jewish problem (also 1999: 138). For an opposed view see Holub 2018:299, 302.

³⁰ After questioning whether Wagner was German (see footnote 23), Nietzsche continues: “His father was an actor by the name of Geyer. A vulture [Geyer] is nearly an eagle [Adler]”. Both Nietzsche and Wagner associate Jews with actors and ‘Adler’ was recognizable as a common Jewish name. In fact, Geyer was Wagner’s stepfather though, as Nietzsche hints in the same place, Wagner’s *Mein Leben* betrays Wagner’s fears that Geyer was his biological father and Jewish. Elsewhere he raises the question whether Wagner was a Jew, saying that posit would help explain Wagner’s antipathy to Jews (KSA 8:500).

³¹ Correspondence with Chris Janaway helped clarify this point.

³² “We “conserve” nothing, neither do we want to return to past periods” (GS377).

³³ Contrast this with Wagner: “it was impossible for an element completely foreign to this living organism to take any part in its growth. Only when a body's-inner death is evident can an outside element gain entry and then only to destroy it. Then the flesh of that body is transformed into a swarming colony of worms” (1973:38).

³⁴ In later works where he tends to a more medicalized vocabulary, he refers to Socrates' need to "make a tyrant of reason" as "pathologically conditioned" (TI Socrates 10).

³⁵ This paragraph is a direct translation from Claude Bernard (1876:391).

³⁶ Moore (2002:122) says that the later Nietzsche "regards health and disease... not as ontologically distinct entities".

³⁷ One might argue that Lombroso's 1864 work *Genio e follia (Genius and Madness)* also allows for a positive role for degeneration.

³⁸ This fits the idea that decadents cannot form balanced wholes: "What is the sign of literary decadence? That life no longer dwells in the whole... The whole no longer lives at all: it is composite, calculated, artificial and artefact" (CW 7). Nietzsche probably borrowed this conception of decadence from Paul Bourget (1883).

³⁹ It has been put to me by Robert Holub that the key passage cited concerning degeneration, HAH I 224, was written in 1878 and that since that time Nietzsche took on a more physiological notion of degeneration in line with the eliminativist rhetoric of classic degeneration theorists. I agree in the later writings 'Entartung' is used with more explicit physiological connotations. But I take this passage from the 1888 work *Ecce Homo* and the 1888 notebook passage referencing Claude Bernard to show that Nietzsche still held an ideal of health predicated on incorporation of, rather than freedom from, infection.

⁴⁰ In a note from 1888 Nietzsche says that the healthiest are sick at certain periods of their life and that decadence is part of everyone who does not die too soon. (KSA 13:366)

⁴¹ EH Zarathustra 2 repeats with emphasis this passage from the aphorism titled "The great Health". Nietzsche only mentions the notion of great health (*grosse Gesundheit*) a few times in his corpus, but his general emphasis on health, as the incorporation of diverse elements is a repeated theme

⁴² For more on Nietzsche on sublimation as the means to health and repression as resulting in pathology see Gemes (2009).

⁴³ GS 371 says that he is misunderstood partially because he has driven his "roots more powerfully into the depths - into evil". In GS 381 he notes "[e]very more noble spirit and taste selects its audience when it wishes to communicate itself; and choosing them, it at the same time erects barriers against "the others"." In *Zarathustra* his mouthpiece the prophet

says he no longer aspires to reach members of the herd (Z Prologue 9). In claiming in EH that "I never speak to masses.- I have a terrible fear that one day I will be pronounced holy: you will guess why I publish this book before: it shall prevent people from doing mischief with me"(EH "Why I am a Destiny" 1) I think Nietzsche is expressing a hope rather than a firm belief that he can prevent being misinterpreted, as indicated by his use of the phrase 'terrible fear'.