

Nietzsche, Agency, and Responsibility

“Das Thun ist Alles”

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Robert Pippin’s most recent contributions to debates about Nietzsche’s views about agency and freedom in his *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy*. In particular, I focus on his elaboration of Nietzsche’s claim, quoting Goethe, in *On the Genealogy of Morality* that “das Thun ist Alles”—*the deed is everything*. I highlight what I consider to be particularly promising features of Pippin’s expressivist reading of Nietzsche, suggest ways it might be developed even further, and indicate how such views about agency are relevant to Nietzsche’s anticipation of overcoming morality—particularly the sort that links value with intention—and to a revised conception of responsibility.

There is much in Robert Pippin’s *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* that merits consideration. During the panel discussion that provided the basis for this article, I marked several paths for further exploration, including Pippin’s treatment of Nietzsche’s naturalism and his characterization of what he calls Nietzsche’s “picture arguments.” Ultimately, I chose to focus on a concern that has drawn intense interest in the recent literature, namely Nietzsche’s conception of agency and freedom, which forms the subject of Pippin’s fourth chapter, “The Deed is Everything [*Das Thun ist Alles*].”¹ This chapter draws on and extends other work he has published in English during the past decade, specifically, his account of how Nietzsche challenges and replaces the image of agency that projects a “doer behind the deed” with a more expressivist notion. Here, I highlight some of the virtues of Pippin’s reading and endeavor to elaborate a few additional features and further implications of the alternative conception of agency he finds in Nietzsche. I conclude by raising questions about the motivation behind the search for a conception of agency that preserves the grounds for providing an account of responsibility as we know it. But before moving to the immediate concern, I wish to gloss a broad theme in Pippin’s book, which really deserves more attention than I can give it here and on which I draw in my observations, namely, his account of how Nietzsche conceives psychology and of the connection between that conception and the potent images found in his works.

JOURNAL OF NIETZSCHE STUDIES, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2013.

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Pippin organizes his text by focusing on “four Nietzschean figurative claims or images—that truth could be a woman, that a science could be gay, that God could die, and that there is no ‘lightning’ separate from its ‘flash’—and why it is a set of literary tropes that carry so much of the freight” (xvii). This interest is sustained and becomes more acute over the course of the book, which culminates in an impressive treatment of one of the most devastating images of Nietzsche’s oeuvre: the lightning-flash passage of *GM I*:13. One of Pippin’s goals in using this organizational structure for his book is to further his claim that, having abandoned philosophical theory, Nietzsche provides indirect analogical depictions of the images we have of ourselves, our past, and who we might aspire to be.

For Pippin, Nietzsche is better considered a thinker in the French *moraliste* tradition. Rather than presenting systematic theories or reified concepts, he offers his readers provocative images, which have the effects of either opening up gaps in our understanding or drawing our attention to particular features of images that already grip us.² Pippin thinks we face a great challenge in “trying to free ourselves of such an image [as the commanding doer behind the deed] without introducing another picture just as inappropriate, that of some subjectless play of anonymous forces” (47). I very much agree with Pippin’s account of both the philosophical mission and its dangers, and I wish to press for more details about the possibilities for replacement images. One might challenge Pippin to elaborate more explicitly how picture arguments are made and the degree to which they are or are not capable of responding to logical, systematic arguments, and on what basis a picture might come to replace its rivals.

It seems that one of the ways picture arguments work (or perhaps are intended to work) is as performatives: Nietzsche’s pictures not only depict something about us but also show and allow us to see the desirability (or repulsion) of *what* he is advancing. Pippin tantalizingly contrasts the erotic economy through which Nietzsche’s depictions operate with that of Plato.³ What Pippin describes as “‘erotic timidity’ of the late modern, bourgeois world” (122) is linked with Nietzsche’s view that it difficult for us to *want*, to *crave*, anything on account of what he sees as the leveling effects of democracy (and its will to sameness and equality) and the great mixing of cultures that occurs in modern Europe through the ease of mass communication (newspapers) and the reorganization of cultures in the production of nation-states. The problem of taste, while not taken up as a theme in this particular work by Pippin, is certainly evident in Nietzsche’s grappling with desire and the relation between desiring, knowing, and doing, and *this* relation, it seems to me, is a crucial one for us to follow if we want to understand how Nietzsche thinks about action, including in the texts that are the objects of Pippin’s investigations.

Lightning Flash

Among the “pictures” Pippin discusses, the most relevant to considerations of the character of human action is the lightning-flash passage in *GM I*:13:

To demand of strength that it should *not* express itself as strength, that it should *not* be a desire to overcome, a desire to throw down, a desire to become master, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs, is just as absurd as to demand of weakness that it should express itself as strength. A quantum of force is equivalent to a quantum of drive, will, effect—more, it is nothing other than precisely this very driving, willing, effecting, and only owing to the seduction of language (and of the fundamental errors of reason that are petrified in it) which conceives and misconceives all effects as conditioned by something that causes effects, by a “subject,” can it appear otherwise. For just as the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for an *action*, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was *free* to express strength or not to do so. But there is no such substratum; there is no “being” behind doing, effecting, becoming; “the doer” is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.⁴

If Nietzsche’s use of the image of the lightning flash is a metaphor for conceptualizing human subjectivity, it is potentially devastating in its consequences, since such a notion would undermine a significant source of pride as well as certain conditions for self-assessment and aspiration, namely our sense of responsibility for our deeds. Responsibility conceived in this way is related not only to a moral framework that makes our actions worthy of praise or blame but also to our picture of agency more generally and what it means to be the original (or at the very least, *primary*) source of our actions.⁵

Pippin’s chapter on the image of human action as like the lightning flash combines and extends his well-known work on expressivist conceptions of agency and prior analyses of this particular passage.⁶ Here, Pippin claims, Nietzsche “appears to be relying on a notion of expression, rather than intentional causality, to understand how the doer is in the deed” (75–76). Elsewhere, he expands on what follows from this thus: “What principles or motive seem consciously of great moment to you are not ‘up to you,’ but reflect or express who you have become given the family, community, and tradition within which you ‘got to be you.’”⁷ In his earlier work, Pippin underscores how the image strikes at the heart of our faith in *our own* subjectivity, because our deeds “reflect or express who [we] have become.”⁸ But in his more recent treatment of the passage in question, Pippin emphasizes that this image does not undermine our picture of responsible agency as such: “Nietzsche is not denying that *there is* a subject of the deed. He is just asserting that it is not *separate*, distinct from the activity itself; it is ‘in’ the deed” (75). “He does not say, ‘There are just strength-events’” (76). What this means, Pippin continues,

is that “we cannot say ‘there are only deeds,’ not agents, just as we cannot say that the flash is *just* an electrical discharge in the air. Clearly, a certain *sort* of meteorological event is ‘expressed,’ and so a phenomenally identical ‘flash’ might not be lightning, but could be artificially produced. It would be a phenomenally identical event, but not lightning. Its distinctness depends on *what* it is expressing” (76–77). Pippin places emphasis on the deed and underscores a need to distinguish “deeds” from “mere events.”⁹

In previous treatments of this passage, Pippin considers some of the mistaken and unwarranted assumptions in the “common-sense psychological view” toward which we are drawn on the basis of our supposition that intentions we freely and spontaneously form (which we produce independently) are the causes of our deeds. In this later treatment, Pippin is more focused on what we, as philosophers and interpreters of Nietzsche, should conclude about Nietzsche’s picture and the analogy it draws, on “what he thinks *giving up such a commitment* would amount to . . . and how we ought to picture a life without such a commitment” (68). The image shatters our sense of ourselves as freewheeling causes of our actions, as though we were strictly their “authors” (this is what Pippin emphasizes in his earlier treatments), but it also protects, Pippin stresses in this later work, a sense of responsible agency that is otherwise conceived. Another related concern emphasized in Pippin’s work (both earlier and later) is the importance of demonstrating the *psychological* nature of Nietzsche’s evocation and manipulation of such images, which aims to explore and expose our *attachments* to such beliefs and the conditions under which different attachments might be formed. The relation between desire and action is another very important consideration in Nietzsche’s works, one related to *eros*, so I further explore the notion of attachment following a closer look at Pippin’s argument that Nietzsche maintains the distinction between deeds and mere events and in so doing offers alternative pictures of responsible agency. While I agree that Nietzsche suggests alternative pictures of responsible agency and that he anticipates others he does not describe, I disagree with Pippin that these require the maintenance of the distinction between doer and deed even couched in a distinction between deeds and events. In short, I argue that there are other ways to maintain a robust sense of responsibility that do not commit us to the very metaphysical and moral notions Nietzsche finds pernicious.

Deeds and Events

According to Pippin, one approach to interpreting *GMI*:13, the lightning-flash passage, would be to claim that it is indicative of Nietzsche’s naturalism, that it gives voice to the idea that “there are only material objects in space and time (perhaps just the entities and properties referred to by the most advanced modern

sciences)” and thus is essentially just denying the existence of a separate soul and along with it free will, at least free will of the sort typically conceived as requiring a “metaphysically free subject behind the deed” (73). But Pippin maintains that this misses the broader scope of Nietzsche’s characterizations of what we believe and why: “He denies that whole model of behavior, ‘root and branch’” (74); moreover, the terms of the voluntarism debate might not bring out the most relevant or significant features of Nietzsche’s presentation. If the picture holds, if the image is apt, we must grant that there is nothing *behind* the deed, neither soul nor material brain states. In other words, Nietzsche is not just seeking to replace metaphysical objects with physical ones, preserving the basic framework of action, causation, and explanation. The picture challenged by Nietzsche’s lightning-flash image, as Pippin has it, includes *both* the postulation of a metaphysical subject-agent (the soul) *and* the account of “act descriptions” that turns on causation by some prior substratum: “Materialist or naturalist bloody-mindedness is not going to help” (74). Under attack here is not just the concept of soul but also attendant conceptions of action, agency, and free will that might be retained in substituting a collection of brain states for the soul.¹⁰

But Pippin is eager to avoid another conclusion that might follow from this: namely, that in demolishing both the metaphysical picture and an account of agency as caused by any alternative substratum, Nietzsche dissolves the distinction between deeds and events: “There would be little reason to take Nietzsche seriously if he were out to make what Bernard Williams has called the ‘uninviting’ claim that ‘we never really do anything, that no events are actions’” (75).¹¹ In a strategy Pippin often uses in his work, he draws our attention to what lies beyond the surface of the passage in question.¹² And in doing so, he works negatively to draw out what Nietzsche *does not say* when he compares human subjectivity to lightning flashing: “He is not denying, in other words, that there is a deed, and that it must be distinguishable from any mere event” (76). In directing readers to an alternative to the conception of the agent as author, creator, or root-cause of its actions, Pippin cites *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Z II: “On the Virtuous”), in which Zarathustra advises his disciples to give up their attachment to their virtues: “Let your self be in your deed as the mother is in the child. Let that be your word concerning virtue.” Pippin concludes: “This suggests a very different relation between self and deed than cause and effect, but we would still have to know first *how*, for Nietzsche, a mother can be said to be ‘in’ her child before we can appreciate what is being suggested, and that is not initially clear” (76). But Pippin does not elaborate much on the image or what precisely *it* depicts as the relation between self and deed. Instead, he returns to the lightning-flash image to make assertions about what *expression* means in this context, namely expression *of* something in particular. I wish to explore whether this concern for expanding the basis of expression satisfactorily

meets Nietzsche's challenge to recast the concept of a substratum behind our actions, as well as speculate about why one might be so reluctant to give up the prevailing image, why its overcoming might be so "uninviting" to many. But before turning to that concern, I want to tarry with the image of the deed as mother in child to which Pippin draws our attention.¹³

Mother and Child

A host of problems immediately crops up when one looks to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* for Nietzsche's views, even if they are gleaned in terms of what Nietzsche himself is purported to have depicted.¹⁴ I think such concerns can be bracketed for my purposes, since I am only considering how the specific image Pippin introduces as relevant is supposed to evoke some alternative to the familiar conception of agency cast in doubt. The contrast between the view being discarded and the alternative being offered becomes apparent regardless of whether, ultimately, the mother-child relation is offered by Zarathustra as an alternative to the lightning-flash picture, whether he changes his mind about this, given the context of its appearance in the book, whether Nietzsche endorses such a view, and so on—all of which are nevertheless legitimate concerns worthy of further discussion.

The broad context of the section that evokes the image of thinking of oneself as in the deed as the mother is in the child is that Zarathustra is talking to his disciples, having returned to them after growing concerned that his teaching had been in jeopardy (because his enemies were gathering) and that he had not been particularly successful as a teacher—he taught them to say "overman" but not to create (or to prepare for those who *could* act in this way) (Z II: "Upon the Blessed Isles"). And it is in relation to this second concern and the nature of creation that Zarathustra first draws the picture of the relation between mother and child in this part of the book: "To be the child who is newly born, the creator must also want to be the mother who gives birth and the pangs of the birth-giver" (Z II: "Upon the Blessed Isles").¹⁵

At least part of what follows from this, as Zarathustra appears to see it, is that one *perishes* (in Zarathustra's own case, "a hundred" times or more) in realizing the creative capacities he envisions. He reaches this conclusion after linking "creation" and "redemption from suffering": "Creation—that is the great redemption from suffering, and life's growing light. But that the creator may be, suffering is needed and much change. Indeed, there must be much bitter dying in your life, you creators. Thus you are the advocates and justifiers of all impermanence" (Z II: "Upon the Blessed Isles"). In renewing itself and thereby redeeming itself from suffering, the soul perishes, "passing through a hundred cradles and birth pangs," or at least that which is impermanent in

it dies.¹⁶ In addition to setting aside concerns about whether these ideas are properly attributed to Nietzsche, I am going to set aside their plausibility (for it could very well be that Zarathustra's or Nietzsche's ideas about these matters are not especially good), since again, I am simply considering *what* the image is supposed to depict.¹⁷ In this case, it would appear that what Zarathustra has in mind is a kind of self that he conceives in terms of a creative process rather than as an enduring entity or substance. This suggests that one somehow, mysteriously, gives birth to oneself repeatedly and perpetually. This certainly strains the imagination, and how it differs significantly from Münchhausen's effort "to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness" (*BGE* 21), I leave for others to attempt to explain. My interest here is how the character Zarathustra thinks this image would be received by his disciples, how even *he* thinks about this view: "Many a farewell have I taken; I know the heart-rending last hours" (*ZII*: "Upon the Blessed Isles"). In other words, Zarathustra acknowledges our attachments to these selves; their passing is significant, not something frivolously dismissed or passed over, much less gleefully celebrated. Redemption, in Zarathustra's image, turns on dying that might be appropriately mourned or lamented, but it also has the prospect of love if we can see ourselves in terms of becoming the next generation and loving it, nurturing and *caring for it* as a mother would.

The multiple personalities that appear in this image of the mother and child, though, might seem to suggest that instead of one doer behind the deed, there are scores in a lifetime, and perhaps even more than one at a time (vertiginously, both mother *and* child) *behind* each. But Zarathustra undercuts that second possibility in the statement that immediately follows his acknowledgment of the sense of loss in such a process: "But thus my creative will, my destiny, wills it. Or, to say it more honestly: this very destiny—my will wills" ("Aber so will's mein schaffender Wille, mein Schicksal. Oder, dass ich's euch redlicher sage: solches Schicksal gerade—will mein Wille" [*KSA* 4, p. 111]). Zarathustra's correction of his grammatical habit is indicative of what follows from the image he just evoked: it is not that his will is responsible for (in the sense of "stands behind") a creative act that results in his destiny; rather it is this very destiny ("thus it shall be") that he wills, that he positively affirms. His will is not the *cause* of how things turn out; rather his will is more properly thought of as affirming that and how this creative activity occurs (that is, that creativity necessarily involves such passing). It does not precede it as cause; rather, it *is* and comes to be in the willing itself. The relevant distinction to notice is that his will is an *affirmation*, not a preexisting source of *origination*.¹⁸

Zarathustra continues to flesh out what he envisions his disciples would have to give up, how they would have to think differently if they truly take in what he offers them. He recognizes they have significant investments in these ideas and that they would experience forsaking them as a loss, one that potentially

undermines their very sense of themselves. In this context he returns to the mother-child image in “On the Virtuous,” which Pippin suggests as a possible alternative to the lightning-flash picture as act description. In the same section, prior to the instance Pippin mentions, Zarathustra invokes the mother-child relation when he tells his disciples, “You love your virtue as a mother her child” (Z II: “On the Virtuous”). In this case, he is underscoring how precious virtue is to his disciples, and how this is indicative of a certain purity, sincerity, and earnestness, which make them “too good” for “the filth of the words: revenge, punishment, reward, retribution” (the primary conceptual byproducts of the process of the slave revolt in morality that results in the creation of the bad conscience in *GM* I and II). And since they are appropriately disposed thus, Zarathustra claims, they should give up expectations they have and ideas they hold about the value of their virtues and how they might serve as a basis for entitlement or claim on others: “[W]hat mother ever wished to be paid for her love?” (Z II: “On the Virtuous”). Zarathustra evokes another image to stand in the stead of thinking of virtue as something that deserves reward (even itself) and that is of the light of a dying star: “[L]ike a dying star is every work of your virtue: its light is always still on its way even when the work has been done. Though it be forgotten and dead, the ray of its light still lives and wanders.” “Your virtue,” he says, “is your most loved self” (Z II: “On the Virtuous”).¹⁹ So, when he later counsels his disciples “that your self be in your deed as the mother is in her child—let that be *your* word concerning virtue” (Z II: “On the Virtuous”), I think we are meant to recall the idea of the regenerating self linked earlier with destiny (and its attendant conception of willing as affirmation rather than cause), as well as this image of what happens to the “dead” ones thereafter: their light continues to shine, to give the appearance of the star it was before even though *it* is gone. This shining light, it seems to me, is related to the lightning flash in *GM* I:13, to which I now return.

Expressions Rather Than Intentions

Pippin draws out important features of Nietzsche’s depiction of agency as analogous to the lightning-flash picture to show that Nietzsche is concerned with *expression* rather than *intention* in his portrayal of human action. This is important because Nietzsche, in anticipating a postmoral future in *Beyond Good and Evil*, links the birth of morality proper with the location of moral worth and value in *intention* (and in valuing selflessness, or what is done for the good of all, above all else). Nietzsche anticipates that in overcoming morality, we will also overcome this emphasis on intention and the idea that it is the locus of value, and he seems to think we have a significant opportunity to do just that because we already have reasons to be suspicious about the relation between our

intentions and actions (*BGE* 32; cf. *BGE* 3, 6, 12). Yet Pippin is concerned to show that actions are different from events and that the lightning-flash analogy is not reductive. Recall Pippin's claim that "we cannot say 'there are only deeds,' not agents, just as we cannot say that the flash is *just* an electrical discharge in the air. Clearly, a certain *sort* of meteorological event is 'expressed,' and so a phenomenally identical 'flash' might not be lightning, but could be artificially produced. It would be a phenomenally identical event, but not lightning. Its distinctness depends on *what* it is expressing" (76–77). What distinguishes deeds, it might seem, turns on what is being expressed. So, my arm just going up and my willing my arm to go up, though phenomenally identical, would be distinguished on account of one being the expression of nerve damage that results in confused signals to the brain, say, and the other as the expression of my will.

Pippin states that when Nietzsche suggests "the deed is everything," there is still a *doer*, but it is *in* rather than *behind* the deed (77); thus a *doer* remains. What distinguishes the expression in the second case (that of deed rather than event) is that it is done by a *doer* (presumably, some sort of agent) rather than something else. But it is unclear from the presentation how this amounts to a demonstration of the difference rather than just an assertion. Pippin's substitution of "in" for "behind" the deed is intriguing. We might consider whether when Nietzsche writes "das Thun ist Alles," we have a statement of *identity* or a statement of *predication*. The latter might be construed as an assertion that "everything is (in) the deed," which is Pippin's view. The former (identity) interprets it as a claim that "the deed is everything"—that is, the deed, the *doing*, is all there is. While I have sympathy for Pippin's view and his interpretation of Nietzsche's views as consistent with a kind of expressivism more generally, I am not yet certain this is Nietzsche's position. If Pippin grants that both occurrences (phenomena, events) such as lightning flashing and human acting can be expressive, then it is not clear to me that he has shown how acts are distinguished from events, other than asserting that acts are the expressions of doers whereas events are not. We still need to know more about the *doing* and why it needs a *doer*. What drives Pippin to claim this distinction between event and deed is his desire to retain a sense of responsibility in Nietzsche's view; it stems from the belief that responsibility requires an agent, a doer of some sort. I think we can get a robust sense of responsibility without getting caught up in this puzzle, which might just be an artifact of the very conception of agency Nietzsche appears to be trying to surpass.

One might respond that surely the lightning is not *just* the flash, and so, following the analogy, the doer is not *just* or *only* the deed. A conceptual distinction among various aspects of a unified phenomenon is clearly possible, so even if it is the case that lightning and the flash, the doer and the deed, are not actually separable (Pippin proffers an "inseparability thesis" [77–78]), they can be conceptually distinguished. But the distinction identified in this case—between

doer and deed—is not what is wanted by Pippin and others who discuss this passage. What would determine the distinction they want, the subjective distinction—that a phenomenon results from the action of a subject—in the event? What makes the subjective distinction genetically different as an *act* rather than a mere *event*? Sticking with the analogy for just a moment longer, it is also worthwhile noting that, more precisely speaking, it is not the case that *lightning flashes*. There is simply *lightning flashing*, and that is one of the ways in which a particular meteorological event is expressed. Nietzsche draws the analogy of human action as like an event, both of which can be characterized as expressive. It would seem that what needs explanation or exploration are the possibilities for expression that would distinguish human actions from others beyond saying that the distinction rests on human actions as being the expression of agents—nothing is gained in such a claim. Nietzsche’s depiction suggests that *strength expresses itself in action* or *strength is expression in action*, not that strong agents express themselves in action. If it cannot be said that an agent can be strong in any meaningful sense without expressing strength, then why bother with the superfluous distinction between the deeds and the doer in such cases? Agents are strong by virtue of expressions of strength. Why suppose there is an agent, somehow already strong, expressing strength?

The depiction of agency in terms of a doer behind a deed does more than simply provide an explanation for action as Nietzsche suggests in his account of the development of morality. There are other motivations for holding the agent as distinct if not separable from the deed; our attachment to this distinction runs deep. Thinking of oneself as in one’s deed like a mother is in the child would have the effect of transforming such attachment: it would at once create some distance (distinct from identification) while at the same time affirm a sort of genetic continuity. For one’s children, one has *hopes* but not intentions—one has a longing, desiring *for*, a wanting something for the child. This can succeed or fail, it can turn out well or not—embracing this image would still allow one to make such judgments and apply relevant evaluative criteria however they might be defined.

While I cannot do much more here than begin to frame questions about the contours of this admittedly peculiar, indeed, *uncanny* conception of what might be construed as a kind of ethicality beyond morality, it seems possible at least to take notice of the fact that if the moral aims of retribution and reward no longer abide, the problems of responsibility and accountability that drive much discussion in the secondary literature of Nietzsche’s alternative to morality “in the narrow sense” (*BGE* 23) more or less dissolve, or at least they are redirected. Nietzsche anticipates this in his discussion of punishment in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, particularly in *GM* II:10, where he imagines a society strong enough that it does not need to punish: “It is not unthinkable that a society might attain such a *consciousness of power* that it could allow itself the

noblest luxury possible to it—letting those who harm it go *unpunished*. [. . .] This self-overcoming of justice: one knows the beautiful name it has given itself—*mercy*.”²⁰ This idea and its relation to an alternative sense of responsibility that might flow from the image of our deeds as more like our children than executive orders is compatible with Pippin’s emphasis on the centrality of psychology for Nietzsche and with his concerns about the disastrous effects of the failure of desire and the complexity and necessity of erotic attachment. It might be fruitful to explore how it could be the case that in thinking of ourselves as in our deeds as mothers are in children would not only transform our sense of *what* our deeds are (and ourselves *in* them) but also our attachments to them. By way of conclusion, I wish to suggest an outline of how a sense of creative power akin to the creation of life that mothering entails might well attend the revised conception of agency that is available in the lightning-flash passage as well as the one that Pippin himself flags from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Embracing this revised conception of agency does not require us to sustain our attachment to a *doer* (rather than focusing on *doing*), regardless of whether it is *behind* or *in* the deed. Moreover, preserving the attachment to the doer might well be indicative of our abiding attachment to morality.

A New Picture of Responsibility

As to how subjects are *in* expressions, Pippin offers “the inseparability thesis”: the subject, while not identical to its expression, is nevertheless inseparable from it. This certainly seems to follow analytically from our use of language—how could one have expression without something *expressing*? I wish to make two points about this concern. Pippin grants that even the lightning flash is an expression (of a certain meteorological event), and so nothing more is needed *in* the event. What leads him to suppose there is a doer in the deed that distinguishes the kind of expression human actions entail is his desire to distinguish between acts and events. But there is nothing in Nietzsche’s text that suggests he shares this concern. Additionally, we can question whether we can conclude from the fact that we can achieve *conceptual* separation between *doer* and *deed* that such distinction is real to the extent that the extension of responsibility should apply. I think this is Pippin’s true and ultimate concern: “Should not Nietzsche be aware that, by eliminating as nonsensical the idea that appears to be a necessary condition for a deed being a deed [as opposed to a *mere* event]—a subject’s individual causal responsibility for the deed occurring—he has eliminated *any* way of properly understanding the notion of *responsibility*, or that he has eliminated even a place for criticism of an agent?” (80n15). But Pippin’s “any” here is too much and too quick. If *causal* responsibility is not the only or even primary way in which one can be responsible, *or* if our ways of critically assessing actions

and persons shifted such that *responsibility* was somehow less significant in our deliberation and estimations, then it might not be so bad if it should happen to be that, in fact, Nietzsche is fully aware that “causal responsibility” would be undermined by the picture argument he is advancing, and that, precisely, is his point. I have indicated two distinct alternatives. Since I cannot fully develop them here, I shall settle with drawing out their differences and how Nietzsche could plausibly hold either such view.²¹ (There is at least one other alternative: Nietzsche could be offering us a view that undermines responsibility in a sense we might want to retain. Assuming we have other reasons for retaining it, I think we would be better off rejecting Nietzsche’s views on these grounds rather than trying to find ways to accommodate ourselves to his position or attributing to him views he does not articulate just so we can retain our attachments.) Pippin demonstrates sensitivity to these concerns, so it would be especially helpful to hear more from him about how he sees these addressed in Nietzsche’s texts.

That causal responsibility is not the only form of responsibility is clear from the mother-child image to which Pippin refers. Whereas causal responsibility (particularly for the purposes of accountability and criticism) looks backward to the past, a mother’s sense of responsibility for her child is nearly entirely future oriented (setting aside tantrums in public places, the boasting one does among family and friends, and the shame and regret one might suffer when the child does some monumental harm to others). In other words, the abiding sense of responsibility a mother has for a child, primarily and for the most part, stems not from the fact that she “caused” the child in contributing genetic material and giving birth but from a form of love (and terror) that is given shape in the promise for the future of that child. It is care about the future of the child that typically and for the most part motivates a mother’s (any parent’s) sense of responsibility.²²

Even if it should turn out that causal responsibility *is* the primary form of responsibility relevant for moral consideration, it need not be the sole or exclusive consideration. It seems possible to imagine other forms of responsibility, and Pippin’s discussions elsewhere of what would follow from such alternative conceptions of the relation between oneself and one’s deed provide some specific suggestions. If we were drawn toward different goals, organized ourselves in different terms, reordered our priorities, and thought of ourselves differently, it seems entirely plausible that we might not be so concerned with fixing responsibility and critiquing others or even ourselves. Pippin envisions such a possibility along with Nietzsche in an earlier analysis of the lightning-flash passage and surrounding text. The difference the alternative view of agency would make could be dramatic. Returning to the fuller scope of a passage I have already cited, I note how Pippin previously emphasized precisely the *lack* of causal responsibility (or at least its diffusion) in the lightning-flash picture: “The central assumption in this contrasting picture is strength or a strong character ‘expressing itself’ in (*sich äußern*) an action, rather than some intention or

motive causing the deed. . . . What principles or motive seem consciously of great moment to you are not ‘up to you,’ but reflect or express who you have become given the family, community, and tradition within which you ‘got to be you.’”²³ That a sense of responsibility other than causal responsibility is possible and important for human beings is evident in ancient Greek tragedy, and how this differs from the form of responsibility linked with what Nietzsche describes as “morality in the narrow sense” (*BGE* 32) is explored, in part, by Bernard Williams.²⁴ Such being responsible even (or especially) for what one *did not* cause need not diminish or trivialize our actions, but it would give us a rather different sense of accountability. Giving “an account of oneself” would still be possible. Such responsibility might entail the very hard, sobering work of articulating that “within which you ‘got to be you’” without relying on a story that highlights one’s own (self-) causal responsibility. The future philosophers conjured in *BGE* 210 are still able to “give an account of themselves” concerning that and how they express what they do (and in that respect they refer back to what they have done), but in their accounts, they need not focus on themselves as causal agents (they could rather see themselves as collections or loci of capabilities). As for the consequences that follow from this, Pippin considers how it might transform notions of guilt or self-recrimination issuing from regrets that one did not act as one could have into “a sadness” that one was not as one expected oneself to be: “here ‘something has unexpectedly gone wrong here,’ not ‘I ought not to have done that’” (83).²⁵

Why should the notion of ourselves as attached to causal responsibility be so important to preserve and retain? We might wonder whether it is fundamentally a *moral* concept, such that we would overcome it in a postmoral conception of agency. None of this is to say that Nietzsche *obliterates* the possibility of any picture of agency, that we “leap into the abyss” of “existential, groundless choices” (84), but it need not—as both Nietzsche and Pippin have shown—depend on a sense of causal responsibility as its primary characteristic or implication. However, we should be careful about how we might construe a revised conception of agency. It is not just that Nietzsche wants to discard all the corruption that is incidental to the responsible agent at the core of modern morality, purify it, and then allow it to emerge clean and refreshed. It might well be that there just is no way to make the metaphor of the responsible causal agent work, for it to grip us, given our other attachments.

We might need a different depiction, a different conception of what is at work and what options are available for pursuit, what we might be lured to pursue. All of this might make use of some talk of agency, and indeed, so much of Nietzsche’s writings seem to depend on a deep wrestling with the nature of human action, particularly that curious relation between “creating values” and facilitating forms of life. But the distinction between deeds and events might not turn on a distinctive, even if not fully separable, *agent*. It might be that Pippin’s sense of agency could be reconciled with Nietzsche’s provocative image of

the “many-souled” human being (and not just a single, autonomous soul with many parts), but I do not think we have such an account just yet. We can be grateful to Pippin for making the tension between our current conceptions of agency and responsibility and Nietzsche’s alternative models of subjectivity so apparent. With Pippin’s new and important work, resolving such tensions has only just begun.

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NOTES

I am grateful to my fellow panelists, including Robert Pippin, who provided the basis for a lively discussion period and helped me sharpen my concerns. Earlier versions of this text were organized while I held fellowships at the Institute of Advanced Study at Durham University and Warwick University. I gratefully acknowledge their support. My gratitude also extends to Ralph Acampora, Paul S. Loeb, and Keith Ansell Pearson for comments and Maxwell Acampora for object lessons.

1. This article was originally written based on the English translation of Pippin’s *Nietzsche, moraliste français: La conception nietzschéenne d’une psychologie philosophique* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006), which was the subject of the North American Nietzsche Society panel at the 2007 Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association. Subsequently, Pippin revised and expanded the text and published it in English as *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Quotations have been drawn from the more recent book, and page numbers, hereafter cited parenthetically, refer to that publication; however, this article does not include consideration of the final two chapters of the 2010 text. Portions of this article include formulations of passages that appear in my *Contesting Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

2. See Pippin’s account of Nietzsche’s understanding of Schopenhauer’s use of the term ‘Will’ (7) and his explicit, albeit brief, discussion of Nietzsche’s exploration of “the picture as a picture” and its role in his practice of “rhetorical argument by analogy” at the beginning of his chapter 3 (45–47). Since Pippin thinks this feature of Nietzsche’s work is crucial and distinctive and that nearly everyone ignores it, we can hope that he will continue to explore Nietzsche’s views on pictures as pictures if not also further offer explicit elaboration of how the philosophical work he engages in differs from the kind of labors frequently attributed to him by others particularly in anglophonic scholarship.

3. I write “tantalizingly” because Pippin succeeds mightily in making the reader *want* more on this line of thought. See Pippin’s earlier discussions of desire in Nietzsche’s philosophical project, especially “Morality as Psychology, Psychology as Morality: Nietzsche, Eros, and Clumsy Lovers,” in his *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 351–71, which includes a brief comparison of Nietzsche and Plato on the structure of eros and its possibilities for satisfaction, “Deceit, Desire, and Democracy: Nietzsche on Modern Eros,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 32.3 (2000): 63–70, and *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991).

4. “Von der Stärke verlangen, dass sie sich *nicht* als Stärke äussere, dass sie *nicht* ein Überwältigen-Wollen, ein Niederwerfen-Wollen, ein Herrwerden-Wollen, ein Durst nach Feinden und Widerständen und Triumphphen sei, ist gerade so widersinnig als von der Schwäche verlangen, dass sie sich als Stärke äussere. Ein Quantum Kraft ist ein eben solches Quantum Trieb, Wille,

Wirken—vielmehr, es ist gar nichts anderes als eben dieses Treiben, Wollen, Wirken selbst, und nur unter der Verführung der Sprache (und der in ihr versteinerten Grundirrtümer der Vernunft), welche alles Wirken als bedingt durch ein Wirkendes, durch ein ‘Subjekt’ versteht und missversteht, kann es anders erscheinen. Ebenso nämlich, wie das Volk den Blitz von seinem Leuchten trennt und letzteres als *Thun*, als Wirkung eines Subjekts nimmt, das Blitz heisst, so trennt die Volks-Moral auch die Stärke von den Äusserungen der Stärke ab, wie als ob es hinter dem Starken ein indifferentes Substrat gäbe, dem es *freistünde*, Stärke zu äussern oder auch nicht. Aber es giebt kein solches Substrat; es giebt kein ‘Sein’ hinter dem Thun, Wirken, Werden; ‘der Thäter’ ist zum Thun bloss hinzugedichtet,—das Thun ist Alles” (KSA 5, p. 279). I use Kaufmann and Hollingdale’s translation of *On the Genealogy of Morals* in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1969). Elsewhere in this article, I make use of Kaufmann’s translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1968), and Kaufmann’s translation of *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Vintage, 1966).

5. Ken Gemes argues that Nietzsche distinguishes “deserts free will” from “agency free will,” rejecting the former and affirming the latter. I do not address the issue of free will per se in this article, but I do note that the sense of *responsibility* invoked in these distinct conceptualizations is nonetheless similar: both regard the agent as cause and both find something *praiseworthy* in its proper (or a particular) instance, though the terms of evaluation differ. Deserts free will focuses on moral praise and blame and requires that one could have done otherwise; agency free will is regarded by Gemes as “an achievement” in which one reaches the status of an agent (presumably from out of some condition in which one is more or less *not* yet an agent—the process of such “achievement” is not clear). See his “Nietzsche on Free Will, Autonomy, and the Sovereign Individual” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 80 (2006): 339–57. We can be grateful to Gemes for drawing our attention to this conceptual distinction in Nietzsche, although we still need an account of how agency can be “achieved”—it appears to require an immense store of creative resources to accomplish, precisely those of the sort associated with one who is *already an agent*. I discuss this further in my *Contesting Nietzsche*, chapters 4 and 5.

6. There are at least two other focused discussions of this passage in Pippin’s corpus, including one in “Morality as Psychology, Psychology as Morality: Nietzsche, Eros, and Clumsy Lovers,” which has “Das Thun ist Alles” as its epigraph, and one in “Lightning and Flash, Deed and Deed, in Nietzsche’s *Genealogie*,” in *Friedrich Nietzsche, Genealogie der Moral*, ed. Otfried Höffe (Berlin: Akademie, 2004), which was revised and published twice, first as “Agent and Deed in Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*,” in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2006), 371–86, and second as “Lightning and Flash: Agent and Deed (I: 6-17)” in *Critical Essays on Nietzsche’s “On the Genealogy of Morals,”* ed. Christa Davis Acampora (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 131–45.

7. Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations*, 367.

8. Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations*, 367.

9. What is needed here are the conditions that would distinguish “in Wittgenstein’s famous words, . . . my arm going up from my raising my arm” (72n5).

10. Pippin explores the free will dimension of this picture in his chapter “How to Overcome Oneself: Nietzsche on Freedom.” My remarks here are aimed at the particular features of agency evident in the lightning-flash passage and only passingly address how this bears on the apparent tension in Nietzsche’s views between advocating a kind of determinism or fatalism and advancing a proto-existentialist conception of self-creation, although I develop these ideas at greater length in my “Beholding Nietzsche: *Ecce Homo*, Fate, and Freedom,” in *The Oxford Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). I am inclined to think that current debates about this particular matter largely recycle the same false dilemma Nietzsche identifies in *BGE* 21 and that rather than dwell on the metaphysical

actuality of freedom we should refocus attention on the psychology of it, the phenomenology of our positive and negative experiences of it, along with the relation of our experiences to what we value and the difference such renewed attention can make in our conception of agency. I think Pippin's work here contributes to opening up such exploration, and I hope that others will follow.

11. Pippin cites Bernard Williams, "Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology," in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's "On the Genealogy of Morals,"* ed. Richard Schacht (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 241.

12. Pippin is careful not to use terms such as "beneath" or "deeper" when he questions either superficial interpretations or the "surface" of the text, but it is hard to think otherwise, and this leads to questions about how Pippin thinks Nietzsche's texts work in terms of their superficial and perhaps "more profound" operations.

13. See also Alexander Nehamas's discussion of this image in his *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 72, 88, 162, 176. In the past few years, Nehamas has begun to explore a conception of agency in Nietzsche that integrates and challenges contemporary philosophical work that has been done, largely independently, on intentionality in theories of action and aesthetics as well as expressivism. We can look forward to the publication of this research.

14. Pippin provides a helpful overview of such challenges in his introduction to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), viii–xxxv.

15. "Dass der Schaffende selber das Kind sei, das neu geboren werde, dazu muss er auch die Gebälerin sein wollen und der Schmerz der Gebälerin" (*KSA* 4, p. 111).

16. We might see this account as part of Nietzsche's development of a picture of the soul that becomes possible once we displace accounts that commit us to what he calls "soul atomism" (*BGE* 12); see Pippin's discussion of soul in his chapter 1. I explore this possibility further in my *Contesting Nietzsche*.

17. That Nietzsche advocates a plurality of souls, a "psychical polycentrism," is the focus of Graham Parkes's *Composing the Soul: Reaches of Nietzsche's Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

18. In this respect, we might see Zarathustra as drawing on the idea of *amor fati*. Pippin has helpfully and repeatedly drawn his readers' attention to the importance of love in Nietzsche's works, and this image of the redemptive possibilities of love (in the here and now) might be relevant. See especially his *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations*, 360–64.

19. "Es ist euer liebstes Selbst, eure Tugend" (my translation); cf. further on in the same passage "Dass eure Tugend euer Selbst sei [. . .]" (*KSA* 4, p. 121).

20. This can be contrasted with the society too weak to punish that is described in *BGE* 201: "There is a point in the history of society when it becomes so pathologically soft and tender that among other things it sides even with those who harm it, criminals, and does this quite seriously and honestly. Punishing somehow seems unfair to it, and it is certain that imagining 'punishment' and 'being supposed to punish' hurts it, arouses fear in it. [. . .] [Thus] the morality of timidity draws its ultimate consequence. Supposing that one could altogether abolish danger, the reason for fear, this morality would be abolished, too, *eo ipso*: it would no longer be needed, it would no longer *consider itself* necessary." A fuller discussion of this outcome might take into account the whole of *GM* II, particularly *GM* II:10, in which Nietzsche discusses how the increase of the community's power and the development of the law exhibit "the increasingly definite will to treat every crime as in some sense *dischargeable*, and thus at least to a certain extent to *isolate* the criminal and his deed from one another."

21. I am grateful to Pippin, whose work has pushed me to explore these possibilities in greater detail; see my *Contesting Nietzsche*, chap. 4, and my "Nietzsche's Responsibility," in *Nietzsche's Values*, ed. Christopher Janaway and Ken Gemes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

22. This is not to say that causal responsibility is wholly alien to how we think about parental responsibility, as the exceptional cases attest, and we have such a sense of responsibility written into laws, particularly those that pertain to obligations and expectations for providing for the material needs and physical welfare of the child. What is important to note is how this other sense of responsibility, the one that motivates both the mundane and extraordinary acts and sacrifices parents make for their children, is driven by love, affective attachment to the child, and not by causal responsibility.

23. Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations*, 367.

24. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). While Williams is recruited by Pippin to supply the philosophical motivation to find the doer *in* the deed—out of a need to retain a robust sense of *responsibility*—I think there are other solutions to this concern in other writings by Williams. I discuss this in my “Nietzsche’s Responsibility” and *Contesting Nietzsche*.

25. Pippin makes this observation in the context of discussing Nietzsche’s interpretation of Spinoza in *GM* II:15. Pippin is citing Spinoza, *Ethics* III.