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9

On Sovereignty and Overhumanity

*Why It Matters How We Read Nietzsche's Genealogy II:2**

Christa Davis Acampora

There is *nearly* unanimous agreement, among those who bother to pay attention to Nietzsche's anomalous claim about the "sovereign individual" in the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* that the "sovereign" is Nietzsche's ideal, and many more still take sovereignty as the signature feature of the overman Nietzsche heralds in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and other writings. I describe the reception among Nietzsche scholars as "*nearly* unanimous" because there has been at least one cry of dissent: that issued by Lawrence Hatab.¹ Curiously, his brief but incisive comments about the problematic nature of several readings along these lines continue to be ignored. With this chapter, I add my voice to his and call for a rally. Emphases on Nietzsche's sovereign individuality encourage what I shall argue is a *misreading* of the passage in question. Moreover, this mistake has far-reaching consequences insofar as it supports a mischaracterization of Nietzsche's philosophy generally and results in a failure to consider significant ways in which Nietzsche's conception of the subject might be relevant for contemporary moral philosophy.

Nietzsche most certainly is not upholding what he calls "the sovereign individual" as an ideal for which we should strive, and there is plenty of evidence to support the assertion. Few matters in Nietzsche interpretation are clearly and decisively settled, but I intend to add this one to that meager stock. In what follows, I scrutinize the context of the passage in question and its resonance with the overarching theme of

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the work in which it appears (my section I). I then consider what would be necessary to further support the majority view and show why such projects are untenable (section II). Finally, I briefly discuss why I think it matters very much that we get this one right (section III). The "sovereign individual" has animated numerous discussions of Nietzsche's politics and ethics. How we read *GM II:2* strikes at the heart of what we take to be the most significant features of Nietzsche's *constructive* philosophical projects.

I. "THE SOVEREIGN INDIVIDUAL": WHAT IT IS

The passage in question is familiar:

If we place ourselves at the end of this tremendous process, where the tree at last brings forth fruit, where society and the morality of custom at last reveal *what* they have simply been the means to: then we discover that the ripest fruit is the *sovereign individual*, like only to himself, liberated again from morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral (for 'autonomous' and 'moral' are mutually exclusive), in short, the man who has his own independent, protracted will and the *right to make promises*—and in him a proud consciousness, quivering in every muscle, of *what* has at length been achieved and become flesh in him, a consciousness of his own power and freedom, a sensation of mankind come to completion.²

A good place to begin is to consider what is the nature of "this tremendous process" so that we can better appreciate how it is that the sovereign individual is its *fruit*. The second essay of the *Genealogy* explicitly treats the development of concepts associated with moral responsibility and culpability. There, Nietzsche considers the fundamental basis of "'guilt,' 'the bad conscience,' and the like," beginning with promise-making. Nietzsche is essentially asking: What sort of being, *what sort of animal*, must one become in order to be able to make promises?³

On our way toward considering how Nietzsche addresses this question, which orients the rest of the essay, we might note a consideration to which we will return in the next section: Kaufmann and Hollingdale's translation of the very first sentence of the second essay has led many astray. It is often cited precisely as it appears in their English translation: "To breed an animal *with the right to make promises*—is not this the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man? is it not the real problem regarding man?" ["Ein Thier heranzüchten, das *versprechen darf*—ist das nicht gerade jene paradoxe Aufgabe selbst, welche sich die Natur in Hinsicht auf den Menschen gestellt hat? ist es nicht das eigentliche Problem vom Menschen?" (*KSA* 5, 291)] Rendering "*das versprechen darf*" as "with the right to make promises" has encouraged those who rely on the translation to think that Nietzsche sees promise-making as an entitlement that one must earn or which one is granted, and which presumably stands in contrast with something to which one might be inherently obliged. As I shall discuss at greater length below, it has been associated with

a certain kind of freedom. Moreover, since Nietzsche seems to emphasize orders of rank and entitlement throughout his writings, some compound their first error with a second in suggesting that it is Nietzsche's position that this sort of entitlement is something that might actually be desirable, that our seizure of it would represent some sort of completion of ourselves, the full realization of humanity. The more literal translation "who is permitted to promise" or "who is capable of promising" clearly better captures the sense of Nietzsche's phrase, since the very next sentence contrasts promising with its counteracting *Kraft*—the power or force of forgetting.⁴ Thus read, we better appreciate Nietzsche's suggestion that promising relies upon some kind of power (we soon learn that it is *remembering*) that has been cultivated to the point that it outstrips forgetting. Promising depends upon a *Kraft*—it is not an entitlement or right—and its enhancement emerged through a developmental process in which a counteracting *Kraft* was diminished.

The second account of the genealogy of morality that constitutes *GM II* charts the struggle of the two opposing forces of remembering and forgetting, thereby casting morality in terms similar to how Nietzsche describes tragic art as resting upon the contest of the artistic forces of creation and destruction in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The task of *GM II* is to offer an account of how the *Kraft* of remembering accomplished its victory, and to chart the deleterious effects of the atrophy of forgetting in the course of human development. The message is: the acquisition of the kind of willing that is had in promise-making came with a price—the diminution of forgetting, and we allow it to wither only at our peril. This interpretation is reinforced in Nietzsche's insistence that forgetting is not merely an absence or failure of remembering, but is rather something that is *positively active in its own right*. Nietzsche couches the matter in organic, biological terms of nutrition and digestion: "it [forgetting] is . . . responsible for the fact that what we experience and absorb enters our consciousness as little while we are digesting it (one might call the process 'inpsychation')—as does the thousandfold process, involved in physical nourishment—so-called 'incorporation'" (*GM II:1*). Were it not for forgetting, it is suggested here, we would not have a soul, a *psyche*, much as we would not have a body, a *corpus*, were we not able to eat. The themes of forgetting as an *active force* and Nietzsche's use of metaphors for digestion have not gone unnoticed. But what seems to have been overlooked is what this has to do with what Nietzsche says in the very next section of essay two in which the reference to the sovereign individual occurs. How is the sovereign individual the product of a process in which the active forces of remembering and forgetting struggle, with the result that remembering surmounts and suppresses its opponent? More precisely, what in the course of this struggle does the sovereign individual trump?

Answering the latter question leads us back to a deeper investigation of forgetting. Briefly, we can recall that the good of forgetting, as Nietzsche writes in *GM II:1*, issues from its effects of *inpsychating* consciousness; another way of putting it is that forgetting plays a role in the regulatory process that permits us to appropriate our experience such that we take from it what is necessary and rid ourselves of what is not.⁵ Nietzsche does not think that an individual is simply a monadic unitary entity.

Instead, we are composed of a multiplicity of forces such that "our organism is oligarchically arranged." Nietzsche's claim about the organization of the kind of organism we are warrants underscoring here, because it is both *consistent* with what Nietzsche *does* write about the "fiction" of the concept of individuals (e.g., *BGE* 16–20 and *GM* I:13), and *inconsistent* with (what he *doesn't* write about) an individual who *actually* is sovereign and self-legislating. We shall have occasion to address this issue in greater detail in the second section of this chapter.

Returning to the matter with which Nietzsche's second essay begins, we can now reformulate its inaugural question thus: What must have happened—from an organic developmental standpoint—in order for us to be able (*for nature to have granted us the ability*) to make promises? Clearly, this is a question that is raised about humankind generally. It applies to the kind of being that makes us human beings. It is not asked about individual humans. Indeed, each of the essays of the *Genealogy* endeavor, from a variety of perspectives, to offer a creation story of how the human animal, generally, came to be what it is, entwined with an etiology of moral concepts. The second essay is about the development of humankind as the animal with a conscience. What characterizes our species, at least as it is cast in this second essay, is the fact that some forces were strengthened over others in the course of our development. This process was *completed* (hence, it is not some tantalizing possibility for future philosophers to achieve) in pursuit of a particular "consciousness of . . . power and freedom," a "sensation" stemming from having and exercising the kind of power realized in promise-making. Hooked on that feeling, so to speak, human beings have (perversely) embraced their characteristic deformity (i.e., the atrophy of forgetting that occurs through the hyper-development of remembering). Indeed, the aesthesis of power that courses throughout the entire economy of promise-making—making promises, breaking them, and punishing others who are unable or unwilling to keep promises—is so great that humans have even instigated their own further deformity (i.e., more sophisticated mnemonics and the extirpation of forgetfulness).

Nietzsche's preoccupation with this process in *On the Genealogy of Morals* and elsewhere is tied to his concern for figuring out whether autonomy really is the *telos* of humanity that modern philosophy and the emerging social sciences claim it to be. What development might take us beyond ourselves, Nietzsche asks, and what would we be like if we overcame humanity as such? Would such *overhumanity* entail sovereign individuality? I believe Nietzsche thinks not, at least not as it is described in *GM* II:2.

II. "THE SOVEREIGN INDIVIDUAL": WHAT IT IS NOT

In the course of sorting through this particular issue it is necessary to consider how the idea of the sovereign individual has been pressed into service in various interpre-

tations in the scholarly literature, to consider what general image of Nietzsche those interpretations support, and to see whether such readings become difficult to sustain once the support lent by the concept of the sovereign individual is withdrawn. It is quite difficult to select which readings of *GM* II:2 should serve as the basis of this discussion. Once I committed myself to this topic, I was surprised to discover just how rampant the problem is, and how frequently the "sovereign individual" creeps into all manner of discussions of Nietzsche's works.⁶ Those who point to the sovereign individual as Nietzsche's ideal generally associate it with "the higher men," and sovereign individuality is often discussed in the context of clarifying what it means to "become what one is." In this section, I shall recount Hatab's points against the prevailing readings of the sovereign individual, supplement his claims, and critique several recent exemplary discussions that affirm the sovereign as Nietzsche's ideal.

In his *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy*, Hatab asserts that the "sovereign individual" names "the modernist ideal of subjective autonomy," and that "Nietzsche *displaces*" rather than embraces such ideals.⁷ This becomes clear when one notices, as virtually no one else does, that Nietzsche thinks that modern conceptions of the individual as autonomous have been crafted in order to press them into the service of moral accountability and retribution: "'Autonomy,'" Hatab writes, "is something that Nietzsche traces to the inversion of master morality; freedom in this sense means 'responsible,' 'accountable,' and therefore 'reformable'—all in the service of convincing the strong to 'choose' a different kind of behavior (*GM* I:13)."⁸ Thus, the distinguishing characteristic of the sovereign individual as it is described in *GM* II:2—namely, that it autonomous—is precisely what Nietzsche identifies as the legacy of moralization, which has produced the decadence that he associates with humanity in its modern form.⁹ I have addressed above how Nietzsche advances a quasi-physiological hypothesis about this process in terms of the development of powers of forgetting and remembering, and I shall return to this matter below.

Related to the issue of autonomy is Nietzsche's conception of freedom, which ambiguous as it may be, Hatab advises, is nevertheless clearly in tension with the kind of freedom associated with the sovereign individual who would be "master of *free* will." Hatab asks his readers to recall *BGE* 21 in which Nietzsche rejects idea of the completely free will: "the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one's actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely [a] *causa sui*," which Nietzsche describes as "the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far, it is a sort of rape and perversion of logic." But Nietzsche's rejection of free will does not signal his supposition of a completely *unfree* will instead: "Suppose someone were thus to see through the boorish simplicity of this celebrated concept of 'free will' and put it out of his head altogether, I beg of him to carry his 'enlightenment' a step further, and also put out of his head the contrary of this monstrous conception of 'free will': I mean 'unfree will,' which amounts to a misuse of cause and effect." Nietzsche advances ideas about the concept of causality in numerous works. In the passage under consideration from *BGE*, Nietzsche advises holding "cause" and "effect" as

“pure concepts,” fictions that are useful for communication but which do not have explanatory power.¹⁰

Finally, Hatab notes that, “the sovereign individual is described as claiming power over fate, which does not square with one of Nietzsche’s central recommendations, *amor fati* (EH II, 10).”¹¹ About the so-called sovereign individual, Nietzsche writes, “The proud awareness of the extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*, the consciousness of this rare freedom, this power over oneself and over fate, has in his case penetrated to the profoundest depths and become instinct, the dominating instinct. What will he call this dominating instinct, supposing he feels the need to give it a name? The answer is beyond doubt: this sovereign man calls it his *conscience*” (GM II:2). Committing oneself to conquering fate, which the sovereign individual of GM II:2 does as part of taking responsibility for the promises he makes, would seem to stand in the way of, would specifically bind one to an idea that would prevent one from, loving one’s fate. Replacing the ideal that prevents one from loving one’s fate is precisely what Nietzsche envisions at the end of GM II, and Zarathustra is supposed to make such overcoming possible.¹² As I shall discuss below, it is overcoming the ideal of humanity as ultimately and fundamentally *sovereign* in the sense provided in GM II:2 that “overhumanity” is supposed to represent.

But, the fact that the “sovereign individual,” as described in GM II:2, is at odds with how Nietzsche thinks about the composite nature of the self, his critique of the concept of free will, and his emphasis on *amor fati*, does not hinder those keen on locating sovereign individuality at the heart of Nietzsche’s philosophy. A representative view of the sovereign as Nietzsche’s ideal is advanced in David Owen’s “Equality, Democracy, and Self-Respect: Reflections on Nietzsche’s Agonal Perfectionism,”¹³ and Richard White devotes an entire book to the concept of sovereignty in Nietzsche’s philosophy, *Nietzsche and the Problem of Sovereignty*,¹⁴ both of which I consider here. Without doubt, others could be added, and the meager review of the literature that I am able to elaborate here by no means represents every approach to the topic.¹⁵ Although I do think I engage some of the most significant and prominent themes, the literature would repay yet more specific consideration. There are two general points I wish to make about the use of the sovereign individual in various interpretations: (1) there is little in the way of support for the majority view that the sovereign individual is one of the core ideas of Nietzsche’s positive project given that reference to such a being is limited to the one section under discussion here; and (2) any interpretation that places sovereign individuality at the heart of Nietzsche’s philosophy requires committing him to affirming other ideas, particularly about the nature of human subjectivity, which he clearly finds problematic.

The first point is very easily addressed. There is no mention of sovereignty per se in *Z*, preoccupations with the *Übermensch* withstanding. One finds not a peep about the *souveraine Individuum* in *BGE* (where one might expect to encounter it in its political context, especially if such individuals are supposed to have earned special rights) or the works that follow the *GM*. There are just a smattering of references to

things “sovereign” in the notebooks between 1882 and 1889, and these scant references support the reading of that I have offered in the first section of this chapter. Simply put, there is not enough textual evidence to support the general and oft-repeated claim that the sovereign individual of GM II:2 is Nietzsche’s ideal type.

The more interesting issues emerge when we consider what one must take Nietzsche to be saying when one considers the sovereign individual to be the ideal. A prominent feature of such discussions revolves around the matter of “having the right to make promises.” I take it that those who are wont to emphasize this phrase wish to draw a distinction between promising as an obligation that “the herd” imposes upon others in order to protect itself, and those who have risen above simply meeting that imposed obligation and who are willing to accept the responsibility to secure their word for themselves.¹⁶ Put another way, the distinction drawn appears to be: (1) relying upon the institution of promise-keeping (and the desire people have to avoid the harm that might come from the breaking of promises *given* to them) as the basis upon which a promise is made versus (2) agreeing to serve as the guarantor of one’s word for oneself. I can see how such an interpretation can be rendered consistent with Nietzsche’s preoccupation with drawing distinctions between the herd and those who somehow escape it, but how could it be that the Nietzsche who so emphasizes *becoming*, and who is suspicious of the concept of the subject (as the “doer behind the deed”), could think that is desirable—let alone *possible*—that a person could *ensure* his or her word in the future? How could one promise to do something, to stand security for something, that cannot be predicted and for which one is, in a sense, no longer the one who *could* be responsible for it? Either Nietzsche in GM II:2 temporarily sets aside the concerns that preoccupy not only his earlier thinking but also the very same book in which the passage in question appears (cf. GM I:13), or there is something wrong with attributing such views to Nietzsche. I am inclined to think the latter is the case, because this is not the only inconsistency at the heart of such interpretations.

Not only does Nietzsche think of the human subject, and all other entities for that matter, as having their being as a kind of becoming, but there is plenty of evidence that Nietzsche also thinks that our very conception of individuals is suspect. Nietzsche conceives of human beings, like all other organisms, as pluralities; as complexes of forces, not as discrete individual entities. This is not to say that there are no individuals; the particularity of the relations among (or arrangement of) the forces we are accounts for our individuality.¹⁷ The very interesting recent work on Nietzsche’s knowledge of and conception of science bears out this matter and traces the relevant literature.¹⁸ Nietzsche thinks that a well-functioning plurality, as noted above, is one that is governed as an oligarchy (and this stands in contrast with the view of Plato’s Socrates in the *Republic*, who characterizes the best soul as modeling an aristocracy).

It is at this point that the earlier discussion of forgetting, which sets the theme of the second essay, becomes significant again, because forgetting makes the oligarchic

arrangement possible. A pretense to sovereignty is achieved with the substitution of monarchic aspirations.¹⁹ The process of strengthening the force of remembering for the purposes of achieving moral accountability bears the fruit (i.e., yields the result upon its completion) of an entity that undermines the very purposes for which its direction was set: in the course of producing a morally responsible agent, the hypercultivation of remembering and the withering of forgetting yields a so-called sovereign individual who, as sovereign, no longer recognizes the claims of moral law. Thus the process of moralization that produces such an individual overcomes or undermines its very end. Like Christianity, discussed in *GM III*, a morality that endeavors to ground itself in radical autonomy is *self-overcoming*. The question that the *Genealogy* raises, without conclusively answering it, is—*What comes next?*—and we cannot begin to try to answer that question if we misread (or ignore) the beginning of *GM II*. Given that Christian morality and its secular alternatives have turned out to undermine their very own foundations, what, if anything, can serve as the basis for how we should cultivate ourselves and our relations to others? How can any action at all become meaningful or significant?

To consider how the problem plays out in a specific interpretation, I wish to return to the troublesome issue of promising. If it is really such a crucial feature of the ideal Nietzsche envisions, then why is it that one finds nowhere else such great emphasis placed upon promise-making and promise-keeping? Those who wish to proffer this idea must undertake some serious contortions in order to have it appear as though Nietzsche really does say as much himself. David Owen does this well. He reconciles Nietzsche's sovereign-individual-as-promise-maker with the egoistic strands in Nietzsche's philosophy by claiming that the sovereign individual realizes his sovereignty first and foremost in relation to himself. And that such is a condition for the possibility of meeting others on these terms. Autonomous individuality is cast as the pinnacle of Nietzsche's aspirations, and Owen endeavors to ascribe to Nietzsche the view that one has a *duty* (first to oneself, and then presumably to others) to "own" one's humanity, which fundamentally lies in recognition of oneself as a sovereign individual. Thus, servility, or herd mentality, is a *failure* to undertake one's duties. And failure to recognize sovereign individuality in others, Owen claims, "undermine[s] the grounds of my own recognition self-respect, that is, that I am, *qua* human being, a being who can stand to myself as a *sovereign individual*."²⁰ Perhaps so, if those lupine beasts of prey from *GM I* can be donned in Kant's civil sheepish clothing. But Owen's specification of the defining characteristic of humanity is telling: "I am, *qua* human being, a being who can stand to myself as a *sovereign individual*" (underlined emphasis mine). Nietzsche's discussion begins with consideration of what the human animal is, the "breeding" or developmental process required in order to make it capable of promising (i.e., chiefly by hypertrophic development of the power of memory and the withering of forgetting). What Nietzsche anticipates as the future for humanity in *GM III* and in *Z* is precisely the overcoming of the human such that even if we don't become a different species altogether, we might at least develop different capacities or different relations among the order of

forces that characterizes human existence generally. Nietzsche does not call us to realize the height of our humanity in becoming sovereign individuals (a capability already characteristic of the human animal, a "fruit" already borne)²¹ rather, he anticipates overcoming the concept of autonomy that buoys the contradictory ideal of the sovereign individual, and *that* requires the cultivation and heightening of *different* powers, which are not alien to us but which are nonetheless latent.

Owen does the best job of finessing how the sovereign individual stands in relation to Nietzsche's emphasis on becoming. It is worth considering his account at some length. The confines of this chapter do not afford the opportunity to give Owen's paper the full consideration it deserves, so I shall focus only on a passage that constitutes Owen's most explicit definition of the sovereign individual, which as Owen describes it, is "not a *telos*" but rather a dramatization of

an attitude, a will to self-responsibility (in Emerson's language: self-reliance), which is manifest in the perpetual striving to increase, to expand, one's powers of self-government such that one can bear, incorporate and, even, love one's fate—one's exposure to chance and necessity. (In other words, the *sovereign individual* represents the attitude of *amor fati*, that is, the affirmation of the fact of our exposure to *fortuna*.) The noble soul reveres itself because it is engaged in overcoming itself. To stand to oneself as a *sovereign individual* is, thus, to stand to oneself as one who seeks to extend oneself beyond one's current powers. In holding this view, Nietzsche is committed to a processual (i.e., non-teleological) perfectionism.²²

If the sovereign individual can be conceived as realizing or manifesting its sovereignty as an on-going process, then we can resolve a number of the issues that I have identified as problematic, most notably the conception of subjectivity and its faculties that *seem* to be required for the kind of activity that is characteristic of the animal who has the capacity to make promises—namely, regularity, completeness, and identity. This reading wriggles out of conflict with Nietzsche's other more prominent theme of hostility toward teleological thinking, suggests how it can be reconciled with *amor fati*, and somehow ties it to self-overcoming and an extension of powers as a kind of self-enhancement. But notice what is *not* emphasized in this part of Owen's interpretation, indeed what completely disappears, namely the idea of sovereignty as tied to promising. This is no accident. Rather than an exercise of self-legislating freedom, the autonomy of sovereign individuality instead becomes an *attitude* toward necessity and change. Promise-making completely recedes as it must, because what is required for promising—successfully distinguishing between chance and necessity, thinking causally, correctly predicting the future, being mindful of the future in the present, even at the expense of the present, being able to decide with certainty about what it would be right to do and how to go about doing it, being calculable, etc. (*GM II:1*)—cannot be garnered while emphasizing the "processual" and perpetual striving that the self becomes when we are attentive to most of the rest of Nietzsche's philosophy.²³ This leads me to wonder what good it does

to tie the model of self-reliance as "processual perfectionism" with the obscure reference to the *souveraine Individuum* in *GM* II:2. Deriving a basis for democratic respect (and perhaps respectability for Nietzsche among those with Kantian and liberal philosophical inclinations) seems to be Owen's goal, but I do not think it would be Nietzsche's. Moreover, I am unsure that Nietzsche's work is the best place to look for the richest notion of what democratic respect might be, and I do not think it advisable to distort Nietzsche's texts in order to make it such.

III. READING *GM* II:2—WHY IT MATTERS

At the root of the notion of the sovereign individual is the ideal of radical autonomy and, along with it, a kind of power over oneself and freedom or distance from others.²⁴ Once ascribed to Nietzsche, the idea seems to easily fit with the general reading of Nietzsche's critique of morality, which would presumably constrain radical autonomy, and, more curiously, with his appeals to a new nobility (given the talk of special "rights" and entitlements that the sovereign individual has "earned"). Thus, even when the sovereign individual is not called by name, its core idea stands—namely, that Nietzsche envisions the emergence of an ideal type whose signature characteristic is a form of autonomy so highly developed that it can successfully exercise its will tyrannically not only in matters political but also in those epistemic and axiological. But if, as I have argued above, the sovereign individual is not Nietzsche's ideal—on the grounds that both terms are problematic for Nietzsche—then the core idea of the power and freedom of autonomy, of which the "sovereign individual" is supposedly emblematic, is similarly undermined. And with that, the interpretations that radiate from that fault line are also thrown in doubt. Thus, it matters very much how we read *GM* II:2.

By the dramatic conclusion of the section in question, the process of producing a conscience is summarized in its entirety. With that, Nietzsche suggests the process of our development that is contained in our current concept of human beings is completed. The question remains whether this is truly the pinnacle of human existence. The sensation of power we get from the mnemonics of responsibility leads us to *believe* it is, but Nietzsche entertains the thought that there are some possibilities—beyond continuing relishing and relentlessly endeavoring to manifest sovereign individuality—that remain open to us. If we mistake the sovereign individual as Nietzsche's ideal for that which we ought (or might want) to strive, then we overlook what Nietzsche envisions beyond the overcoming of humanity anticipated in third and final essay of the *Genealogy*.

Most associate the sovereign individual with "higher humanity,"²⁵ claiming that they are the same or at least quite similar. But I have sought to make the case for the claim that Nietzsche sees the sovereign individual as standing at the end of a process of becoming the kind of animals that human beings are. In other words, the sovereign individual is the pinnacle of the current state of existence of *humankind*.²⁶

If it is the case that Nietzsche envisions a kind of overcoming of humanity, some sort of development toward what we might call *over-humanity*, and the sovereign individual stands at the end of the process that produced human animals, then *overcoming* the sovereign individual is what Nietzsche envisions. If the sovereign individual continues to stand as our end, even if the character of "the end" is construed so as to reconcile it with becoming, then we will fail both in understanding the task of pursuing that something higher that Nietzsche anticipates, and, consequently, in reaching it.²⁷

Still, the ideal of sovereignty is certainly not alien to Nietzsche, and clearly the exercise of will that is cultivated in the strengthening of memory that promise-making requires is compatible with Nietzsche's emphasis on willing and its role in the creation of meaning and significance. If the sovereignty of the sovereign individual named in *GM* II:2 is not precisely that for which Nietzsche is striving, then what is the other sense of sovereignty that Nietzsche can be said to affirm? How does it differ from the sovereign of *GM*? In brief, I think much of this work has been done already by Richard White, whose interpretation of what he describes as Nietzsche's problem of sovereignty deserves greater attention and careful examination. White argues that Nietzsche presages the problem of sovereignty in which we find ourselves caught since modern, humanist conceptions of the subject have been undermined by the likes of philosophers as diverse as Derrida and Dennett. Our contemporary philosophical labors seems to leave us with something of a false dilemma regarding how we conceive the self: either the self is determined by nature and "sovereignty" is merely a product of history so that the sovereign individual is something that can be appreciated from an *aesthetic* point of view as the "creation" of necessity, or sovereignty is found in the freedom of necessity in which case "the sovereign individual represents the transfiguration and salvation of nature from itself."²⁸ White proposes a third alternative that casts Nietzsche as holding the view that sovereignty is something that is a "strategic possibility," something Nietzsche advances from a "performative perspective" and that his writings aim to "provoke" in his readers. This allows White to take seriously Nietzsche's writings about eternal recurrence, fate, and necessity, while considering their tension with Nietzsche's appeals to creativity, willing, and a new sense of freedom. White does this without much reference to the sovereign individual of *GM* II:2,²⁹ and I think the direction of further study should follow White's lead.

The misreading of *GM* II:2 and its overemphasis on Nietzsche's interest in power *potentially* mischaracterizes his explorations (and exhortations) of mastery. It encourages associating Nietzsche's views with certain strands of existentialism that are actually quite at odds with many things Nietzsche has to say about fate, his interest in naturalism, and his complex views on freedom and necessity. Finally, such readings overlook and even obscure significant ways in which Nietzsche works through several problems in contemporary philosophy, particularly regarding the issue of conceiving the subject as contingent and relational while at the same time "natural,"

and articulating the bases upon which we might model our relations to other subjects in light of contemporary critiques of the ideals of rationality and autonomy.

The *real* problem of sovereignty draws us toward more deeply exploring how we might reconcile Nietzsche's appeals to creative willful activity with his critiques of subjectivity and the key ideas about identity and causality that are crucial for the conception of sovereign individuality that serve as the basis of Kantian moral philosophy and contemporary theories of justice and moral psychology. This is a problem for Nietzsche scholars, and its pursuit just might point toward promising further contributions Nietzsche's philosophy could make to contemporary moral philosophy. But if we continue to misread *GM* II:2, I think we will miss those opportunities, and, both within and outside the community of those who endeavor to practice reading well, Nietzsche will continue to be read as one obsessed with romantic existential fantasies about radical self-creation or self-transcendence and whose ideal type is nearly thoroughly unsuited for social life and unable to achieve the bonds of meaningful community.

NOTES

1. See his *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy: An Experiment in Postmodern Politics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 37–38.

2. Here, I cite Kaufmann and Hollingdale's translation, which I amend below. *KSA* 5, 293: "Stellen wir uns dagegen an's Ende des ungeheuren Prozesses, dorthin, wo der Baum endlich seine Früchte zeitigt, wo die Societät und ihre Sittlichkeit der Sitte endlich zu Tage bringt, wozu sie nur das Mittel war: so finden wir als reifste Frucht an ihrem Baum das *souveraine Individuum*, das nur sich selbst gleiche, das von der Sittlichkeit der Sitte wieder losgekommene, das autonome übersittliche Individuum (denn 'autonom' und 'sittlich' schliesst sich aus), kurz den Menschen des eignen unabhängigen langen Willens, der *versprechen darf*—und in ihm ein stolzes, in allen Muskeln zuckendes Bewusstsein davon, was da endlich errungen und in ihm leibhaft geworden ist, ein eigentliches Macht- und Freiheits-Bewusstsein, ein Vollendungs-Gefühl des Menschen überhaupt."

3. Subsequent to the original publication of this chapter, Paul S. Loeb published an article endorsing my view that Nietzsche's ideal is not the "sovereign individual" but arguing for a different reading of Nietzsche's claims about forgetting ("Finding the *Übermensch* in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 30 [Autumn 2005]: 70–101; revised excerpt included in this volume). Loeb further develops what comes after the "overcoming of humanity." In this slightly revised version, I add a few minor clarifications in light of Loeb's comments. Rather than argue point by point, I simply note here that Loeb and I apparently disagree considerably on Nietzsche's conception of nature and the status of the human in relation to nonhuman animals in Nietzsche's texts. This bears quite significantly on whether Nietzsche has a view of human beings (and further, the *overhuman*) as somehow transcending nature. Although I do not think Loeb would explicitly endorse the latter, it is implied in his argument. I do not find Nietzsche distinguishing between the "mere animal" and the "human." As they are characterized in *GM*, humans are the animals who make promises—they have not transcended their animality on account of their being able to make promises,

despite the common view to the contrary in the history of Western philosophy; the *overhuman* does not constitute a transcendence of this nature either.

4. Thus, for translation of this section, the best we have is the one rendered by Maude-Marie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Hackett, 1998), but that will change with the new edition of the Cambridge translation by Carol Diethe, edited by Keith Ansell Pearson (*On the Genealogy of Morality* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2006]). In their notes on the phrase in question, Clark and Swensen take notice of my first point about the absence of any language associated with rights and entitlements, but they do not follow me in my second point about the context of making a comparison between powers and capabilities.

5. Forgetting, it seems, is an important condition for experience—important for giving the shape, form, rhythm, texture, and depth that make the seemingly endless stream of possible objects of concern and attention *an* experience, to recall Dewey's famous distinction, not simply by piling experiences up or onto one another, but by taking some away, by encouraging some to fade, recede, fall away. Forgetting in this sense *grants* rather than evacuates or eliminates; too much remembering leaves us with experience without pause and strips from us possibilities for action. Nietzsche engages in more elaborate discussion of this idea in his earlier writings, particularly *BT* (in the association of the Dionysian with forgetting) and *HL* (where differentiation of the "stream of becoming" is described as necessary).

6. The best defense of the case for the sovereign individual is found in Keith Ansell Pearson's "Nietzsche on Autonomy and Morality: The Challenge to Political Theory," *Political Studies* 39 (1991): 276–301.

7. Hatab, *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy*, 37.

8. Hatab notes that *HH* 618 refers to "Individuum" in a similar vein.

9. I provide further textual evidence drawn from Nietzsche in support of this claim as I interpret his analysis of the mnemonics of punishment in my "Forgetting the Subject," in *Reading Nietzsche at the Margins*, edited by Steven Hicks and Alan Rosenberg (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, forthcoming 2007).

10. I discuss this idea at greater length in my "Nietzsche's Moral Psychology," *Blackwell Companion to Nietzsche*, edited by Keith Ansell Pearson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2006), 314–33.

11. Hatab, *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy*, 38.

12. Interestingly, Kaufmann and Hollingdale inappropriately insert the notion of rights in their translation of the passage with which the second essay concludes. They render the last sentence as follows: "At this point it behooves me only to be silent; or I shall usurp that to which only one younger, 'heavier with future,' and stronger than I has a right—that to which only Zarathustra has a right, *Zarathustra the goddess*.—" But there is nothing in the German original that implies that Nietzsche is talking about *rights*. Instead, he is clearly indicating a kind of *freedom*, not entitlement, when he writes, "—was allein Zarathustra freisteht, Zarathustra dem Gottlosen" (*KSA* 5, p. 337).

13. David Owen, "Equality, Democracy, and Self-Respect: Reflections on Nietzsche's Agonal Perfectionism," in *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 24 (Fall 2002): 113–31.

14. Richard White in his *Nietzsche and the Problem of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

15. Subsequent to the original publication of this article are Loeb's article noted above; and Thomas Miles, "On Nietzsche's Ideal of the Sovereign Individual" (unpublished paper presented to the North American Nietzsche Society, 28 April 2005).

16. Randall Havas makes this point. See his *Nietzsche's Genealogy: Nihilism and the Will to Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), esp. 193ff. I briefly discuss the views of Havas and Aaron Ridley in a note below.

17. On this idea, see Steven D. Hales and Rex Welshon, *Nietzsche's Perspectivism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

18. Numerous commentators have developed these ideas at greater length, particularly along the lines of Nietzsche's conception of language and grammar and his relation to Boscovich and Spir. For a concise review on the relevant issues, see Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, "On Judging in a World of Becoming: A Reflection on the 'Great Change' in Nietzsche's Philosophy," in *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory*, edited by Babette E. Babich and Robert S. Cohen (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 168–71. Compare Nietzsche's own discussion in "On the Prejudices of Philosophers" in *BGE*. See further Greg Whitlock's "Roger J. Boscovich and Friedrich Nietzsche: A Re-Examination" in *Nietzsche, Epistemology, and Philosophy of Science*, edited by Babette E. Babich and Robert S. Cohen (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999); Robin Small, "Boscovich Contra Nietzsche," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1984 (46): 419–35; Robin Small, *Nietzsche in Context* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2002); Gregory Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology, and Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Michael Steven Green's *Nietzsche and the Transcendental Tradition* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

19. This is not at all to suggest that Nietzsche claims we should aim to return to our prehuman history—it should be quite obvious that such is not possible in the same way that it is not possible for anyone to selectively return to some prior stage of human evolutionary development. The history of Western philosophy exhibits a severe allergy to forgetting and an association with knowledge, or enlightenment, strictly with remembrance. I find the same in Loeb's conception of the "second forgetting" associated with Zarathustra's "enlightenment," which curiously involves a forgetting (in the sense of foregoing) forgetting (in the sense of not remembering); see pp. 166, 170–71.

20. Owen, "Equality, Democracy, and Self-Respect," 116.

21. Owen is one of the few who at least recognize that the sovereign individual is not Nietzsche's ideal in the sense of a *future* possibility (although Owen appears to think it is a worthy ideal for the present). Owen rightly points out that Nietzsche associates the sovereign individual with the "morality of custom," a stage, in Nietzsche's historical account of the development of morality that he considers "pre-moral" (with Kant, *Sittlichkeit* precedes *Moralität*). However, I consider the sovereign individual to be the ideal that serves as the inaugural transition between the pre-moral and moral stages. Since the *Genealogy* appears to be oriented toward envisioning a "post-moral" stage of development, it is curious that Owen would endeavor to sketch Nietzsche's view about that stage by drawing on the type produced by the process of pre-moral customs.

22. Owen, "Equality, Democracy, and Self-Respect," 118. Compare with David Owen and Aaron Ridley, "On Fate," *International Studies in Philosophy* 35:3 (2003): 63–78.

23. Instead, Owen seems to emphasize "self-responsibility" and upholding one's commitments. For some concise accounts of the sovereign individual that do keep promise-making front and center, see Randall Havas, "Nietzsche's Idealism" and Aaron Ridley, "Ancillary Thoughts on an Ancillary Text," both in *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 20 (2000): 90–99 and 100–8, respectively. For Havas, the sovereign individual is the paradigmatic willing subject: he offers us instruction on what it means to will something: "giving our word" is

how this happens, and it is in this that we realize our "shared humanity" with others. Ridley apparently attributes to Nietzsche the idea that taking responsibility is a achievement or an accomplishment for which we might aim. I have endeavored to argue that Nietzsche is challenging the idea that sovereign individuality and all that it entails is the pinnacle of human progress. I am not suggesting that Nietzsche does not see anything at all that is valuable in the process of moralization and the working of the bad conscience that produces the sovereign individual as an ideal type. Indeed, I think a very interesting and persuasive case could be made that Nietzsche considers the practice of willing that the (vain) pursuit of sovereign individuality allows us to exercise has significant advantages, much as the slave revolt in morality (discussed in *GM I*) makes human beings interesting and creative in ways they had not been previously, and much as the ascetic ideal is shown to have been a highly effective (yet also destructive) mechanism for producing value (in *GM III*). But the ideal of the sovereign individual like slave morality (and, perhaps, the ascetic ideal) is something that Nietzsche envisions *overcoming*.

24. It is precisely this reading that leads many to claim that Nietzsche's politics are decidedly aristocratic and antidemocratic. Owen and Havas endeavor to associate Nietzsche's views with perfectionism and liberalism, thereby making Nietzsche's philosophy compatible with democratic theory. But if we grant that Nietzsche is *not* embracing the sovereign individual, but rather is calling for its overcoming, the need to discuss how sovereign individuality can be rendered compatible with democratic political theory disappears. Lawrence Hatab accomplishes the same without recourse to the sovereign individual.

25. As an example, see Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche* (New York: Routledge, 1983), 294.

26. This is not to say that we are all *already* sovereign individuals but rather that the concept of humanity that we presently hold is one that takes sovereign individuality as a real and desirable possibility for us to endeavor to achieve.

27. I maintain that whatever is involved in *overhumanity*, and I have not endeavored to describe it here, the beings who attain it or are involved in the process of pursuing it remain nonetheless *animals*. Nietzsche thinks the human is animal *through and through*. Of course, the human animal has its distinctive features, just as other animals do, but there's no reason to think that *these particular features* somehow make the human animal *more than merely an animal*, they merely make the human an animal of a particular sort. The focus upon some possible flight from or transcendence of animality is precisely what Nietzsche aims to overcome in his philosophical anthropology, and it plays a significant role in his critique of morality (e.g., *GM II:7*). Further discussion of this can be found in the numerous essays included in *A Nietzschean Bestiary: Becoming Animal Beyond Docile and Brutal*, edited by Christa Davis Acampora and Ralph R. Acampora (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004).

28. Richard White, *Nietzsche and the Problem of Sovereignty*, 86.

29. White reads Nietzsche as affirming the sovereign individual, but his discussion of the relevant passage is rather limited (see his *Nietzsche and the Problem of Sovereignty*, 144ff). Still, his account of sovereignty and Nietzsche's conception of the individual is richer than those that *begin* from the sovereign individual as Nietzsche's paradigm. Sovereignty is a decidedly problematic issue for Nietzsche, on White's account; it is not a specific ideal that we ought to pursue.