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The Jan Hus Analogy in Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil §24[1]

William Wood[2]

Abstract

Beyond Good and Evil is often, although not universally, regarded as Nietzsche's most important work of philosophy. The second part of this book, "The Free Spirit," is often regarded as the most important part of this book. Yet the opening aphorism 24 of this part – arguably the most important part of arguably Nietzsche's most important book – has not received the attention it deserves. This essay focuses on the analogy between the philosopher and the Czech free thinker Jan Hus which structures this part. It focuses on the use which Nietzsche makes of this analogy and its relationship to his views about free causality and natural determinism.

Keywords: *Beyond Good and Evil; causality and determinism; philosophy as way of life*

The allusion to Jan Hus in the short aphorism 24 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, and this aphorism itself, have not received the attention they deserve.[3] To a certain extent, this is understandable; BGE §24 is a fairly short, somewhat opaque aphorism and it is initially difficult to determine how it should be approached. However, its scholarly neglect remains surprising. BGE is frequently, although not universally, regarded as Nietzsche's most important work of philosophy, where he touches on nearly every aspect of his mature thought and approaches philosophical questions in a relatively conventional, even if still unmistakably Nietzschean way. Furthermore, the second part of BGE, "The Free Spirit" or "The Free Mind" (*Der freie Geist*), is often regarded as the most important part of this book. It is in this chapter that Nietzsche explicitly thematizes the way of life of the philosopher. Even as the ontological foundations of the philosopher's way of life are thematized in the first part, and even as Nietzsche returns to the theme of the philosopher's way of life extensively in the sixth part, it is in the second in which this theme receives its most extensive treatment. The analogy of the philosopher with Jan Hus is introduced in the first line of the short aphorism and structures it throughout. The purpose of this article is to go some way towards remedying the lack of scholarly attention paid to BGE §24 and the analogy with which it begins.

I will first cite the aphorism in Walter Kaufmann's translation, which has been modified for accuracy:

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[2] William Wood, University of Pardubice, Czech Republic. E-mail: williamcarroz@gmail.com
[3] The only article devoted to BGE §24 known to me is Martin Endres' excellent "Nicht als sein Gegensatz, sondern – als seine Verfeinerung!" The present analysis supplements Endres', which focuses on Nietzsche's manner of writing in BGE §24 taken as exemplary of his manner of writing in his later corpus and as providing it with a theoretical justification.

> O *sancta simplicitas*! In what strange simplification and falsification the human being lives! One can never cease marveling once one has acquired eyes for this marvel! How we have made everything around us clear and free and easy and simple! How we have known how to give our senses a passport to everything superficial [*einen Freipass für alles Oberflächliche*], our thinking a divine desire for wanton leaps and mistaken inferences! How from the beginning [*von Anfang an*] we have contrived to retain our ignorance in order to enjoy a scarcely comprehensible freedom, harmlessness [*Unbedenklichkeit*], lack of caution, heartiness and cheerfulness of life [*Heiterkeit des Lebens*] – in order to enjoy life! And only on this now solid, granite foundation of ignorance could knowledge rise so far – the will to knowledge on the foundation of a far more powerful will: the will to ignorance, to the uncertain, to the untrue! Not as its opposite, but – as its refinement! Even if *language*, here as elsewhere, will not get over its awkwardness, and will continue to talk of opposites where there are only degrees and many subtleties of gradation; even if the inveterate Tartuffery of morals, which now belongs to our inconquerable 'flesh and blood,' twists the words even of those of us who know [*uns Wissenden*] – here and there we grasp this and laugh at how precisely even the best science seeks most to keep us in this simplified, through-and-through artificial, suitably constructed [*zurecht gedichteten*] and suitably falsified world – how it unwillingly-willingly [*unfreiwillig-freiwillig*] loves error, because, being alive – it loves life![4]

As we have come to expect from Nietzsche, this passage is far more carefully constructed than its boisterous, carefree tone suggests, while also being darkly humorous. "O holy simplicity!" With this exclamation, Nietzsche identifies himself with the Czech heretic and free thinker (*Freigeist*) Jan Hus at the particular moment when he was bound at the stake, unable to move freely, and burning to death. Hus was supposed to have cried these words out as a pious old woman added a bundle of wood to the fire that consumed him to keep it burning. If there is any doubt that Nietzsche knew of this story or meant to allude to it here (the phrase "holy simplicity" took on a life of its own, to refer to any foolish thing done by a simple person in the belief that they are acting righteously), I cite an aphorism from 1878: "*Sancta simplicitas of virtue*. – Every virtue has its privileges; for example, that of supplying to the pyre of a condemned person its own little bundle of wood." (HH §67).[5] This aphorism shows that Nietzsche knew the story on which this saying was based.[6] It is crucial that Jan Hus (Nietzsche), "the free spirit," *knows* that he is unable to move freely, while the old woman, the simple pious person, "the bound spirit," moves freely and surely acts in the belief that she can.

Nietzsche implies, then, that the position of the "The Free Spirit," or the philosopher (BGE §26 makes this identity clear), in relation to "the herd" or "the crowd," the "bound spirits,"[7] is analogous to that of Jan Hus at the stake, unable to *move* freely, but freely

[4] Kaufmann, Walter, translator. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. By Friedrich Nietzsche, Vintage Books, 1989, 35. Cf. KSA 5.41–42.
[5] Handwerk, Gary, translator. *Human, All-Too-Human (I)*. By Friedrich Nietzsche, Stanford University Press, 1997. Cf. KSA 2.80.
[6] In his commentary on BGE, Andreas Urs Sommer notes that the saying was well-known in Nietzsche's time, and mentions a variety of places where Nietzsche may have come across it. See 216.
[7] This contrast is developed extensively in HH.

observing those around him, at whose hands he suffers, and commenting on the "strange simplification and falsification" in which the average human being, the simple believer, lives. The image of the philosopher bound at the stake in BGE §24 contrasts starkly with the image of the philosopher on the verge of undertaking a risky and exciting sea journey, whose destination remains unknown, in the preceding aphorism, BGE §23. Nietzsche mischievously implies that this is where that journey will end, with the philosopher condemned and publicly executed by the common people. Yet, while the register of BGE §23 is full of gravitas, emphasizing danger and the need for heroism and sacrifice, BGE §24 is written in a contrastingly light-hearted tone, emphasizing the carefree enjoyment "we" take in life, the "wanton leaps" made by "our senses," a cheerful tone referred to by Nietzsche himself at the beginning of the very next aphorism, BGE §25, which becomes darkly comic when the implications of the allusion to Jan Hus are brought to the surface. It is thought-provoking and strange that Nietzsche describes an allusion to an execution as "cheerful."

The "holy simplicity" of the non-philosophers consists in their lack of awareness that "the world in which we believe [*glauben*] that we live," as Nietzsche puts it in BGE §34 (one might say, the world in which we have *faith* that we live), is "from the beginning" a "falsification." Nietzsche appeals implicitly to a distinction between an apparent (falsified) and a real (unfalsified) world – the contrast between what he called in the first chapter our initial perspectival evaluation and "real life." In "real life," there are no free and unfree wills, just stronger and weaker desires (BGE §21). But isn't Nietzsche famous for refusing any contrast between an "apparent" and a "real" world as exemplifying the "dualistic" way of thinking he wants to overcome? "*Along with the true world, we have also done away with the apparent!*" (TI "World" 6)[8] However, as with all of Nietzsche's notoriously dramatic declarations ("God is dead," "life itself is will to power," and so forth), one must be careful with how one takes them. As a rule of thumb, one can assume that the first impression they produce is misleading. Nietzsche wants to abolish the contrast between the apparent and the real world if this contrast implies that the world of affect and desire is somehow "less real" and ontologically or causally derivative from a "higher" world behind the phenomena, not directly accessible to us, or accessible only through, e.g., revelation, mystical experience, moral sense, or *a priori* metaphysical reasoning. BGE §2 makes this clear. However, a different kind of contrast between an "apparent" world and a "real" world, a contrast *internal* to the phenomenal world itself, is indispensable for his conception of philosophizing.

The world in which we believe that we live, permeated by illusions such as "free will," and the world in which we *actually* live, are the same world viewed from two different perspectives – the commonsensical and the philosophical. The switch from "one" (*man*) to "we" (*wir*) indicates the switch from one perspective to the other: "In what strange simplification and falsification the human being lives! One can never cease marveling once one has acquired eyes for this marvel! How we have made everything around us clear and free and easy and simple!" The philosopher possesses a double-consciousness equidistant from the Platonic image of the philosopher as achieving insight into a transcendent sphere of reality and the Aristotelian image of the philosopher as merely rendering common sense

[8] Polt, Richard, translator. *Twilight of the Idols: Or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer*. By Friedrich Nietzsche, Hackett, 1997. Cf. KSA 6.81.

reflectively explicit. The distinction between "our senses" (in the plural) and "our thinking" (in the singular) refers back to Nietzsche's conception of human experience in BGE §19 as self-misinterpreting desire, a "complex" of feeling and thought, a *plurality* of "feelings" and a *single* "commanding thought," which "from the beginning" we habitually misinterpret as the sovereign and independent subject exercising its capacity of free will. In this aphorism, Nietzsche indicates that philosophical wakefulness consists in becoming reflexively aware of the manner in which our experience is constituted by these errors without ceasing to be human and thus subject to them. The assertion that we have "made" (*gemacht*) things this way reminds us that Nietzsche regards these illusions as rooted in the human perspective rather than coming from elsewhere, e.g. "a deceptive principle in the 'essence of things'" (BGE §34, KSA 5.52).

But Nietzsche's intentions are no longer the same in "The Free Spirit." In the first part of BGE, "On the Prejudices of the Philosophers," and especially in BGE §19, by far the longest aphorism in this part, where he presents his argument against free will, he wanted to show how such a conception of the philosopher could be rendered epistemologically coherent. But now he is concerned with drawing out the implications for the philosopher's way of life – his inner life and his social or political life, which the allusion to Jan Hus suggests are inseparable, even as they involve inevitable tensions. Nietzsche is now concerned with the effect which insight into the falsifications to which we subject ourselves "from the beginning" has on our experience of the world and our relationships with others.

Significantly, BGE §24 (unlike the aphorisms directly preceding and following it, BGE §23 and §25 respectively) contains no exhortation whatsoever, only phenomenology. Nietzsche doesn't say, "Let's learn to enjoy life!" Rather, he says that human beings in general ("we") have always already "falsified" their experience *in order to be able* to enjoy life. The phrase "from the beginning" (*von Anfang an*) has two meanings here; the historical beginning of the human species, addressed in aphorisms such as BGE §20 and §32 and implicit in the problems which Nietzsche tackles here, and the more immediate meaning of the beginning of every individual's life. Again, as in BGE §19, he suggests a psychological, not a neurophysiological, explanation for our habitual self-misinterpretation, what we always already believe. Gradually, the notion of "the will to power," introduced in BGE §9, has come to mean the desire for an increase in the pleasurable feeling of power which accompanies all action, or even just the desire to enjoy life, which may come down to the same thing, depending on how exactly "enjoyment of life" is understood. What initially appeared as a bizarre, univocal reduction of all human desire to a desire for domination and control, accompanied by an even more bizarre suggestion that such a desire is operative throughout the physical world,[9] has gradually come to appear as Nietzsche's way of formulating the far more plausible, albeit initially far more indeterminate, Epicurean or Aristotelian thought that all human beings desire pleasure or enjoyment. BGE §24 also contains Nietzsche's version of the Platonic and Aristotelian thought that philosophy begins in wonder: "One can never cease marveling [*man kann sich nicht zu Ende wundern*] once one has acquired eyes for this marvel [*dies*

[9] This idea comes back suddenly in BGE §36, but hedged with hypothetical formulations and scare quotes. See Maudemarie Clark's remarks on this aphorism in her "Nietzsche's Doctrines of the Will to Power."

Wunder]!"[10] Nietzsche would surely also agree with Aristotle that very few human beings can be expected to have this experience of wonder, to "acquire eyes for this marvel." They simply go about their merry (or not so merry) way, like the pious old woman adding her bundle of wood to the pyre.

Aristotle also claimed that all human beings desire knowledge, even if very few become philosophers. Nietzsche by contrast seems to claim that all human beings desire ignorance and illusion, precisely because their instincts lead them to recognize (unconsciously) that they are unable to "enjoy" life without them. On the other hand, when Nietzsche then goes on to claim that "the will to knowledge" emerges out of "the will to ignorance," not as its antithesis but rather as its "refinement" (contrary to Christa Davis Acampora and Keith Ansell-Pearson, who say that for Nietzsche in BGE §24 the will to ignorance is the refinement of the will to truth, getting it the wrong way around[11]) he doesn't explicitly restrict the will to knowledge to the philosopher, to the rare few who have "acquired eyes for this marvel" (Nietzsche regards the will to knowledge as operative in authentic even if partial and abortive ways in non-philosophers, as he makes clear e.g. in BGE §10). Conversely, Aristotle recognized the need for illusion, or at least rhetoric and persuasion, in political life.[12] The difference between Nietzsche and Aristotle on *this* question is more one of emphasis than substantive disagreement.

Furthermore, Nietzsche doesn't draw a simplistic contrast between the philosophers, who need knowledge and nothing else to enjoy life, and the herd, who need illusion and nothing else to enjoy life in their own, rather different way. Rather, "the human being" (whoever such a person might be, philosopher or non-philosopher, comparable to Jan Hus or to the pious old woman who helped the fire around him to burn) cannot live without a complex, dialectical interplay of knowledge and illusion. This applies to the philosopher or knowledge-seeker as well as to "the herd" – the important question concerns the *difference* between the forms this interplay takes in the philosophical and in other ways of life, understood not as fixed types or species-kinds (however immense the difference in "gradation" between, e.g., someone like Epicurus or someone like Carlyle) but as ideal types or paradigms, even as certain uniquely "philosophical states" (as Nietzsche calls them in BGE §213)[13] produced by philosophical inquiry are inaccessible to most of us.

> Even if the inveterate Tartuffery of morals, which now belongs to our inconquerable 'flesh and blood,' twists the words even of those of us who know – here and there we grasp this and laugh at how precisely even the best science seeks most to keep us in this simplified, through-and-through artificial, suitably constructed and suitably falsified world – how it unwillingly-willingly loves error, because, being alive – it loves life!

The formula "those of us who know" finally brings the "one" who marvels at the falsification in which we live (the philosopher) together with the "we" who unreflectively

[10] Sommer notes the allusion to Plato and Aristotle. See 216.
[11] Acampora and Ansell-Pearson 12 and 54. Although Nietzsche leaves much in this text implicit, he is explicit that the will to ignorance comes before the will to truth and that the latter is the *Verfeinerung* of the former, rather than the former being the *Verfeinerung* of the latter, as Acampora and Ansell-Pearson say both in their summary of BGE §24 on 12 and in their analysis of the aphorism on 54.
[12] See Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1:1–14.
[13] Cf. KSA 5.147.

simplify our experience (the herd), qualifying without negating the difference between them.

Nietzsche suggests, then, that the philosophical life will involve neither a willful *creatio ex nihilo* of "life-affirming illusions," as "fictionalist" readings of his thought suggest, nor a decision to believe in propositions one knows in advance are false, but rather a knowing, ironic acquiescence in the impossibility (contra the rhetoric of BGE §23) of simply "sailing right over" the illusions of popular morality, combined with a critical distance from those illusions and the private, largely incommunicable "enjoyment" which accompanies this complex union ("marriage") of acquiescence in "inconquerable" illusions ("darkness") with critical awareness of their illusory character ("light").[14]

Nietzsche's use of Jan Hus bound at the stake, commenting humorously on the foolish actions of the simple believers around him, as an image for the philosopher's place in human society supports the contention that "free will" is the fundamental illusion in Nietzsche's eyes. Although Nietzsche is not a causal determinist, and his position on the problem of determinism is very difficult to articulate and resistant to any kind of labeling (because the very concept of causality is so deeply bound up in our speech and thought, as Nietzsche himself would emphasize), nevertheless, if we need a label for his position, it is less misleading to describe him as a highly unusual kind of determinist, than as a "compatibilist." As a philosophical thesis, determinism has two basic elements – the postulates of causality (causal power) and necessity (cause follows necessarily from effect, there is no such thing as an action or event that "could have been otherwise"). What is unusual about Nietzsche is that he tries to reject the former element (causality) and preserve the latter (inexorable necessity in the temporal unfolding of events), while retaining the concept of "freedom" as a purely psychological (not ontological) concept, which tends to (but does not always) refer to freedom of mind, i.e. freedom from illusion or convention.

Numerous citations throughout his middle and late corpus, especially but not exclusively from *Human, All-Too-Human* and *Daybreak*, support the ascription of such a view to Nietzsche. I will cite two passages from the earlier book, which make his point about inexorable necessity in a helpfully forceful and vivid way. In HH §107, Nietzsche writes:

> The complete irresponsibility of a human being for his behavior and his nature [*sein Handeln und sein Wesen*] is the bitterest drop that the knower [*der Erkennende*] must swallow… Just as he loves but does not praise a good work of art because it cannot help being what it is, just as he stands before a plant, so he must stand before the actions of human beings, before his own actions. He can admire the strength, beauty and fullness of them, but he can find no merits [*Verdienste*] therein: the chemical process and the strife of elements, the agony of the sick person who thirsts for recovery, are as little merits [*sind ebensowenig Verdienste*] as those struggles of the soul and states of distress in which we are torn this way and that by various motives until we finally decide on the most powerful one.[15]

[14] I am using the poetic metaphors with which Nietzsche ends the book, in the final lines of the Aftersong to BGE.
[15] Translation modified. Cf. KSA 2.103–104.

In the preceding aphorism HH §106, Nietzsche writes:

> We would certainly be able to calculate every individual action [*Handlung*] in advance if we were omniscient, likewise every step forward in knowledge, every error, every act of malice. The agent himself is admittedly stuck in the illusion of willfulness [*Willkür*]; if at some moment the wheel of the world were to stand still, and an omniscient, calculating understanding were to make use of this pause, it could tell the future of every creature, on into the most distant times, and describe every track on which that wheel had yet to roll. The agent's delusion about himself, the supposition of free will [*die Annahme des freien Willens*], is itself part of this still-to-be-calculated mechanism.[16]

Nietzsche implies that from a philosophical perspective, human life has an unavoidably farcical character – we rush around trying to get things done, concerned about our success or failure, when nothing we do makes any difference to the outcome, which is fixed in advance, not by mysterious or divinely ordained "fate" or "destiny," but by the inexorable movement of temporality or becoming itself. Like Jan Hus, the philosopher knows that he "cannot move" in the sense that he cannot freely cause anything, and that he is slowly and inexorably dying, and he cannot help but suffer from this knowledge. But he also learns to take an ironic and even cheerful pleasure from contemplating the foolishness of those around him, who are in a profound sense no less "bound in place" than he is, but are wholly unaware of this fact, or continually forget it: "O holy simplicity!"

Bernard Williams objects to such a reading of Nietzsche because it attributes to him the "uninviting" idea that "we never really do anything" (241). To this my response is twofold. First, Nietzsche *emphasizes* that this idea is "uninviting" – indeed, it is "the bitterest drop that the knower must swallow." For Nietzsche, that an idea is "uninviting" is not a reason to reject it, but to be suspicious of our motivations in *wanting* to reject it. Secondly, everything depends on what we mean by "do." In support of Williams, Pippin helpfully points out that, in GM II §12, Nietzsche proposes *Aktivität* as his most "fundamental concept" (75). But by "activity," Nietzsche means primarily the activities of desiring or interpreting, or both activities taken as a complex unity. There remains an important sense in which "we never really do anything" – we never really causally effect anything. As Nietzsche puts it in a passage which Williams himself cites: "*You are being done* [*du wirst getan*]! In every moment! Humanity has at all times mistaken the passive for the active: it is their constant grammatical mistake." (D §120).[17] I agree with Williams and Pippin that there are good reasons to be philosophically suspicious of such a radically counter-intuitive position (and to ask: has Nietzsche really done enough to justify it, either in his middle period writings or in his later period?), but there is a great deal of textual support to ascribe it to him.

This brings us to the tricky interpretive question of how to reconcile Nietzsche's "determinism" (such as it is) or (perhaps better) "necessitarianism" with his exhortatory rhetoric. However, there is no *formal* incoherence here; presumably, Nietzsche would regard exhortatory or prescriptive language, whether moralistic or merely prudential, as an

[16] Translation modified. Cf. KSA 2.103.

[17] Hollingdale, R. J., translator. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*. By Friedrich Nietzsche, Cambridge University Press, 1982, translation modified. Cf. KSA 3.115.

unavoidable feature of human speech, as "itself part of this still-to-be-calculated" temporal flux, even as the philosopher possesses a reflexive detachment on the human perspective from within the human perspective, which alters the character of philosophical rhetoric and gives it an inevitably ironic, reflexive tinge ("the inveterate Tartuffery of morals, which now belongs to our inconquerable 'flesh and blood,' twists the words even of those of us who know"), even when the philosopher goes about his daily life, but especially when such a person writes books. Furthermore, it suggests that Nietzsche's exhortatory speech must be "philosophically translated," as it were, by the reader into a phenomenology of the inner lives of the philosopher and those around him – or, as Nietzsche puts it, into "a morphology of the will to power" (BGE §23, KSA 5.38).

It is surely no accident that Nietzsche carefully avoids such rhetoric in the very aphorism in which he draws the Jan Hus analogy, while the directly preceding and succeeding aphorisms are among his most exhortatory or prescriptive, albeit in very different ways. After the pure phenomenology of BGE §24, Nietzsche returns to an exhortatory register in BGE §25. But while his exhortation to "sail over morality" in BGE §23 made use of a heroic, "noble" (*vornehm* or *edel*) and indeed (ironically) almost moralistic pathos ("what do we matter!" – let's destroy morality even if we have to destroy ourselves in the process!), his exhortations in BGE §25 have a prudential or "base" (*gemein*) character, replete with ironic notes of deflationary caution (don't get too worked up about "the truth"!) and advice about self-preservation (there's no need to be a martyr!) and the preservation of one's cheerfulness and serenity (don't worry if you can't persuade others of "the truth" – after all, what did you expect?). It is therefore no accident that BGE §26 ends with a qualified praise of the base. BGE §23 and §25, then, implicitly present philosophy itself as noble and base respectively, while BGE §24 proposes that the assumption common to both the noble and the base, free will (the noble person assumes one is free to choose between noble and base ends and thus has contempt for those who choose the latter, while the base person believes one is free to choose the best means to base ends and thus has contempt for those who choose poor means), is an illusion which the philosopher recognizes as such and partially overcomes.

Jan Hus was a martyr to his cause – he could probably have saved his life, like Socrates, but he refused stubbornly to recant his teachings. In this sense, he was a voluntary martyr, like Giordano Bruno. While the image of Jan Hus at the particular moment when he was bound at the stake and commenting sardonically on the actions of the simple believers around him serves Nietzsche's purposes in BGE §24 very well, the choice of a voluntary martyr as an image for the philosopher in the aphorism just before that in which "the martyrdom of the philosopher" is attacked (BGE §25) also raises the question: Does the philosopher "choose" to be a martyr, like a religious heretic who refuses to recant? Or does the philosopher have an equally sardonic perspective on the "holy simplicity" of voluntary martyrs such as Jan Hus and Giordano Bruno, whose heresies Nietzsche would regard as expressing "relative" freedom of spirit (relative to the orthodoxy of the epoch), not truly philosophical thinking? Nietzsche has already made it clear that he regards the concept of "free spirit" as a "relative concept,"[18] even as he is most concerned with free-spiritedness in the most radical sense possible.

[18] HH §225, KSA 2.189–190.

Nietzsche will address the question of martyrdom in BGE §25, the next aphorism. Our reading of BGE §24 has helped us see how it is connected to the preceding aphorism and introduces the next one. It has thus helped us see how, as Nietzsche tells us in a notebook fragment, "In aphorism-books like mine […] chains of thought stand between and behind short aphorisms." (NL 1885, 37[5]).[19] The analogy with Jan Hus serves Nietzsche's purposes in this aphorism, but it may have to be qualified as he moves on with the argument of the book as a whole.

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[19] eKGWB/NF-1885,37[5] Translation is my own.