Nietzsche’s metaphysics?* Galen Strawson draft only

Language ... sees doers and doings everywhere; it believes in will as cause; it believes in the ‘I’, in the I as being, in the I as substance, and it projects this belief in the I-substance onto all things—this is how it creates the concept ‘thing’ in the first place ... the concept ‘being’ first arises from, as derived from, the concept ‘I’. Nietzsche TI III 5.

§1 Eleven claims


[2] There’s no fundamental (real) distinction between objects on the one hand and their propertiedness on the other.

[3] There’s no fundamental (real) distinction between the basic or basal properties of things and the power properties of things.

[4] There’s no fundamental (real) distinction between objects or substances on the one hand and processes and events on the other.

[5] Reality isn’t truly divisible into causes and effects.


These claims are central to Nietzsche’s metaphysics. He also holds that

[7] there’s no free will

as ordinarily understood, although I won’t say much about this, and that

[8] nothing can ever happen otherwise than it does

—a position which is often called ‘determinism’, although the name is not apt in Nietzsche’s case. Finally (for now) he inclines towards the ancient—but also very modern—view that there is a fundamental (non-trivial) sense in which

[9] reality is one

* When I cite an author I give the date of first publication or first composition. Translations of quoted passages may differ from cited translations.
and towards what is arguably the most plausible—although difficult—view of the nature of reality, i.e. the hard-nosed stuff-monist view that

[10] reality is suffused with—if it does not consist of—mentality in some form or sense.

One reason for attributing [10] to him is his recurrent attraction to the idea that

[11] everything is ‘will to power’

for it seems that to endorse [11] is already to endorse [10] in some form, to say that everything is in some respect mental, to deny that everything is a matter of power or force conceived of in some wholly non-mental way.²

Here, I propose, we have the core of Nietzsche's metaphysics. I’m only going to consider concrete reality. I’m going to put aside [11], which is controversial,³ except to note that it entails [3], whether or not it entails [10], given that will to power is itself a power or force. For if power is the fundamental nature of reality, reality can’t have some other nature distinct from power that is the ground of its power.⁴

Of [1]-[10], I think the first seven negative claims are certainly true, and that the final three positive claims are very probably true.⁵ Nietzsche is known as a ‘perspectivist’ who is sceptical of the notion of truth, a word which he likes to put in inverted commas, sceptical, indeed, of the whole project of metaphysics, and he has a rich variety of purposes (protreptic and other) in expressing himself in this way. At the same time it’s not seriously in doubt that he is in his mature thought prepared to assert all of [1]-[8], at least. He doesn’t think his views on these matters are only ever ‘true’ in inverted commas, or true only from the perspective of some drive or some cluster of drives,⁶ not really about what he calls ‘the true being of things … the in-themselves of things’ (WL: 42; NL 1885, KSA 11, 40[9]).

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¹ According to stuff monism there is only one kind of stuff (e.g. material stuff), although there may be many things. According to thing-monism there is strictly speaking only one thing. Spinoza is an exemplary thing monist.

² In 1883–4 Nietzsche notes, correctly, that the view that ‘substance is experienceless is only a hypothesis! Not based on experience! (NL 1883–4, KSA 10, 24[10]). ‘Thus feeling is a property of substance’, he energetically continues; ‘there are feeling substances.’ In 1885 he notes famously that ‘this world is the will to power—and nothing else besides’ (NL 1885, KSA 11, 38[12]). In 1886 he recommends a monist line of argument that would allow one to ‘define all efficient force as will to power’ (BGE 36). In 1887 he favours the view that ‘in all events a will to power is operating’ over standard mechanistic views of nature (GM II 12). Much earlier, he proposes that ‘the push, the impact of one atom upon another presupposes feeling. It’s not the arising of feeling in the world, but that of consciousness, that is difficult’ (NL1872–3, KSA 7, 19[159]).

³ For an argument that evolution by natural selection can give rise to will to power that is not in any sense mental (at least in the biological case), see Richardson 2004, 2008.

⁴ [11] also entails [6], in effect, and this pulls in [4]; the interconnections are thick.

⁵ It’s a mistake to think that current physics supports indeterminism over determinism in any way (it’s a further point that it’s provable that neither determinism nor indeterminism can be proved true or false).

⁶ They may certainly be true from the perspective of some drive, and indeed a drive to truth, for to say this is not to say that they are not true period.
I’m happy to leave the detailed defence of this last claim to others. I’m also going to put aside [1], [7], and [8] and focus on [2]-[6]. Nietzsche’s endorsement of [1], the view that there is no persisting unitary self, needs no further argument, and is deeply bound up with his endorsement of [2]-[5]. Nor does [7], his denial of free will, need argument. [8] is also pretty tangled up with [3]-[6], and I’ll make three points in passing. First, the reason why the name ‘determinism’ may be misleading in Nietzsche’s case is that although he makes free use of the notions of power and force, he rightly purges the thesis that nothing can ever happen otherwise than it does of the notion of compulsion, and of the notion of necessity understood as some kind of compulsion, and of the idea of one particular thing bringing another particular thing about. He treats [8] rather, and deeply, in my view, as a kind of tautology, in a way that we can perhaps picture first by thinking of Leibniz’s causeless universe, in which every true statement about anything is an analytic truth, and then, perhaps, of the four-dimensionalist, ‘block universe’ of relativity theory.

The second point is that one doesn’t in attributing [8] to Nietzsche have to suppose that he endorses the doctrine of eternal return (which incorporates the idea that nothing can happen otherwise than it does) as a statement of theoretical or metaphysical fact independently of endorsing its value or truth as a practical-ethical guide to conduct. The third point is that Nietzsche's endorsement of [7], i.e. the denial of free will, doesn’t depend on his endorsement of [8]. As he famously makes clear, the denial of free will, in the sense in which he intends it, requires only the point that one can’t be *causa sui*, the cause of oneself, a point which is provably true independently of any thesis of determinism. It may be that the details of Nietzsche’s commitment to [2], [3], and [6] amount to an endorsement of [8] independently of the doctrine of eternal return, but there is I think a coherent philosophical position that remains agnostic on [8] and still endorses all of [1]-[7].

What about [9], the view that (in some sense) all is one? I don’t want to insist on this, although Nietzsche’s constant criticisms of the tomistic or cutting tendencies—and matching atomistic tendencies—of human thought and language may be thought to tend strongly in this direction (the cutting or tomism delivers the a-toms—the supposed radical individuals—of the atomism). ‘Thinking’, he says, ‘takes apart what is really one’ (NL 1885, KSA11, 40[38]). This is one of his most constant themes. It’s less clear, however, that he is an all-out ‘thing-monist’ in line with Parmenides, Spinoza, many Indian philosophers, and, now, many modern physicists and cosmologists, who hold that there is in the final analysis only one thing—spacetime (or whatever we actually manage to denote when we speak of ‘spacetime’) conceived of as itself an object, a concrete individual.

Nietzsche’s views have a fine ancestry—they are in a sense traditional—and they are, again, strongly in accord with much in present-day physics and cosmology. Their main elements are found in Heracleitus, in the Buddha, and in some of the work of the Buddha’s...

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7 See in particular Richardson 1996. See also §2 below.

8 See, classically, BGE §21. For more on the point that [7] is independent of [8], see e.g. Strawson 1994.

9 Nietzsche holds that ‘all things are enchained, entwined, enamored’ (Z IV 10), even as he favours a view according to which reality—including space and time—is discrete, ‘quantal’, at the fundamental level (see Ulfers and Cohen 2012). Modern cosmology and physics suggest that a quantal view is compatible with a version of thing monism, and the ‘relationalist’ quotations from Nietzsche in the next section (p. 000) tend in the same direction.
near contemporary Plato (e.g. *Timaeus*, *Theaetetus*, and the *Sophist*). In early modern times they connect strongly with elements of Spinoza’s and Leibniz’s philosophies, and, more recently, with Whitehead and the later Russell among others. Many more connections can be made, some of which I’ll indicate, but I’m not concerned with questions of influence. There are fundamental points on which Nietzsche also agrees with that great and much misunderstood genius Descartes, and with Locke, Hume, Kant, and Schopenhauer. None of this is surprising. ‘Metaphysics means nothing but an unusually obstinate effort to think clearly’, as William James remarked (1890:1.145). There are always a few obstinate thinkers around—none more obstinate than Nietzsche—and they may be expected to show convergence in their views. My present aim is to give a brief exposition of part of what I take to be the right view—the best description—of the fundamental nature of reality, with special reference to Nietzsche. I’d be amazed—worried—if there were anything new in what I have to say about Nietzsche. I simply want to provide a certain view of reality with one distinguished reference point among others. I’ll use the late (1885-1889) notebooks freely, even when there are equally good quotations from the work Nietzsche published himself. All one needs, in order to know that the notebooks are a legitimate or prime source of evidence for Nietzsche’s views—especially when it comes to his theoretical or speculative-metaphysical views, as opposed to his ‘practical’ or ethical views—is a basic sense of smell. But one may also note his letter to Franz Overbeck in 1885: ‘my philosophy’ he says, ‘is no longer communicable, at least not in print …. I often feel ashamed that I have said so much in public already, that should have never been put in front of an “audience”, even in more worthy and deeper times.’

§2 Reality as it is in itself

Perhaps the first thing to do, when it comes to the discussion of Nietzsche's metaphysics, is to note that Nietzsche isn’t sceptical about the notion of reality as it is in itself. This is hardly surprising, because such scepticism is incoherent. It’s incoherent because

(1) to be is necessarily to be a certain way, at any given time, to be somehow-or-other

and

(2) the way that a being is, at any given time, just is the way it is in itself.

—The point fails in Nietzsche's case, because he holds that being is becoming.

No. Reality is a certain way, as it is in itself, *whatever* the nature of reality. If reality is

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10 Heracleitus lived from about 535 to 475 BCE. Plato lived from about 428-348 BCE. The Buddha’s dates are disputed, and some now think that he lived more recently than has previously been supposed—perhaps as late as 450 to 380 BCE.

11 I think that Nietzsche lies equal first—alongside some very different peers—in any accurate ranking of German philosophers by merit.

12 2 July, 1885. See Bittner 2003: x.

13 Those who are sceptical about time can drop the words ‘at any given time’.
becoming—I’m going to avoid this useful way of putting things for the most part, because its ancient roots are so tangled—then that is the way reality is in itself, and there is of course a certain way becoming (i.e. reality) is as it is in itself.

—Nietzsche aside, our best models of the behaviour of things like photons credit them with incompatible properties, e.g. wave-like properties and particle-like properties; so there can’t be a way reality is as it is in itself.

What we learn from this is simply that this is how photons affect us, given how they are in themselves, and how we are in ourselves. We acquire no reason to think—incoherently—that photons are not somehow-or-other, at any given time. Whatever claim anyone makes about the nature of reality, including the claim that it has, to us, apparently incompatible properties, just is a claim about the way it is. This applies as much to the Everett ‘many-worlds’ theory of reality as to any other.\(^{14}\)

—Quantum theory shows directly that there is, objectively, no particular way that an electron or a photon is, at a given time.

This objection confuses an epistemological point about undecidability with a metaphysical claim about the nature of things. It’s not just that such a claim is unverifiable. It’s incoherent. Whatever the electron’s or photon’s weirdness (its weirdness-to-us: nothing is intrinsically weird), its being thus weird just is the way it is (in itself).

—Nietzsche plainly says that ‘the properties of a thing are effects upon other “things”: if one eliminates other things, the thing has no properties, i.e. there is no thing without other things, i.e. there is no “thing in itself”. (WP 557; NL 1885-6, KSA 12, 2[85]). He says that ‘the “thing in itself” is absurd. If I remove all relations, all “properties”, all “activities” of a thing, then the thing does not remain left’ (WP 558; NL 1887, KSA12, 10[202]).

Neither of these remarks challenges the propriety of the notion of reality (reality as a whole) as it is in itself; both are directed against a certain conception of particulars. Their target is, first, the incoherent notion of the bare particular, second, the notion that any part of reality as a whole can be supposed to be a radically self-subsistent entity, something that satisfies the traditional notion of a substance (an individual substance) as something that can exist by itself without any dependence on other beings.

—But Nietzsche writes that ‘there is no “truth”’, and that ‘what can be thought of must surely be a fiction’ (WP 616; NL 1886, KSA 12, 2[108]; WP 539; NL 1888, KSA 13, 14[148]).

There’s no tension between the view that there’s a determinate matter of fact about how things are in themselves and scepticism about our ability to know what it is and our ability

\(^{14}\) Even the claim that there is no way it is as it is in itself is a claim about the way it is as it is in itself, albeit a self-refuting one. Lange’s (1865) extreme anti-realism led him astray somewhere in this area.
to convey it with full accuracy in a representational system (thought or language) whose representations may be said to be true or false. Nietzsche constantly stresses the point that ordinary human thought or language is profoundly inadequate, when it comes to the attempt to try to express the nature of reality. He holds that human thought and language are in part essentially constituted by falsifying structures, fictionalizations of—errors about—that reality. At the same time, he never thinks that there’s any insuperable difficulty in using language that builds in such errors to express truths about those very errors—or indeed truths of other kinds. We have to weigh remarks which seem to express global scepticism about the possibility of expressing the truth about anything against the vast mass of the rest of his work, which is everywhere premised on the assumption that it is possible to express the truth about how things actually are or aren’t (it consists almost entirely of truth claims of this sort). It’s not as if it’s hard to fit dubitative remarks like these into Nietzsche’s work considered as a whole. It’s easy. It’s easy to understand their point in the context of his other views. It’s no harder than understanding the intuitively natural Buddhist distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth.

Once again, it seems to me that this interpretative matter has been sufficiently dealt with, and that a great deal of time has been wasted. As Kant says

many historians of philosophy, with all their intended praise,... attribute mere nonsense ... to past philosophers. They are incapable of recognizing, beyond what the philosophers actually said, what they really meant to say (1790: 160) .... If we take single passages, torn from their context, and compare them with one another, contradictions are not likely to be lacking, especially in a work that is written with any freedom of expression ...; but they are easily resolved by those who have mastered the idea of the whole (1787, Bxliv).

Nietzsche believes, of course, that there is such a thing as reality, concrete reality, which just is the way it is (the way it is being something about which he has much to say). He believes this even as he insists on the superficiality—the ultimate falsity—of thinking in terms of things, objects, and substances, as ordinarily understood. He believes this even as he moves smoothly between stressing the respect in which the idea ‘that things possess a nature in themselves quite apart from interpretation and subjectivity’ is a ‘perfectly idle hypothesis’, and verbal licks which suggest that he thinks that the idea is definitely and categorically—although incoherently—false.

§3 Object/process/property/state/event Turning now to detail, consider first thesis [4], according to which there’s no fundamental (real) distinction between objects or substances on the one hand and processes and events on the other. Physics, it may be said, is silent on traditional metaphysical issues of this sort. There is however an intuitive metaphysics that evolves along with physics as it develops over time, and it has in the last century become increasingly hospitable to the idea that objects are equally well thought of as processes.

15 See especially Richardson 1996: ch. 4.
16 WLN: 148; NL 1887, KSA 12, 9[40]. It’s idle in the sense that you can’t do anything at all with the fact that things are certain way in themselves independently of any interpretation. Hume makes the point (Treatise 1.3.14.27, Selby-Bigge, p. 168).
Certainly we didn’t need modern physics in order to grow into this idea, any more than the ancient Indian and Greek philosophers did, but we have learnt that matter is astonishingly ethereal—that substance is almost inconceivably insubstantial—relative to our everyday conception of it. Grainy individual particles were already being treated as ‘insubstantial’—as mathematical points, hence theoretical posits—in the eighteenth century, and they lost all real particulate punctuality long ago, inasmuch as they gave way to fields in post-1925 quantum physics (the phenomena of particles’ entanglement and their ‘infinite’ ‘tails’ reinforce the point). Everyday objects—from stones to brains—are collocations of patterns of energy, diaphanous process-entities whose existence involves a constant interchange with the quantum vacuum. It is literally correct, in the standard model, to say that everyday objects are partly constituted by the quantum vacuum—by the particle-pair creation and annihilation phenomena of the quantum vacuum. To this extent, the idea that processes or events require some sort of substance that is in some way distinct from them, and in which they can go on or occur, has collapsed. There is a fundamental respect in which the whole object/process/property/state/event cluster of concepts is entirely superficial. No important metaphysical questions turn on these differences, only questions about everyday human categorizations.

Some of the distinctions in the object/process/property/state/event cluster seem to us to mark real, irreducible, metaphysically fundamental differences. They seem integral to our most basic, discursive, subject-predicate forms of thought. And we can allow that they’re very natural, practically indispensable in everyday life. They are, however, deeply misleading when taken up in metaphysics as a guide to the fundamental nature of reality, as Nietzsche constantly stresses, and it isn’t particularly hard to see that this is so. All reality is process, as Whitehead was moved to observe by his study of twentieth-century physics, and as Heracleitus remarked long ago. ‘Nietzsche’s beings are becomings’, as Richardson says, and so are ours (1996: 104). Matter is best thought of as ‘process-stuff’. Matter is essentially dynamic, essentially temporal, essentially changeful. Objects (or matter) can’t be conceptualized as things whose existence can be grasped separately from their temporality. What is matter, on this mistaken view? A dust-covered china doll in a frozen pirouette on a chimney piece, a rock, an old boot, something just there, supremely motionless before our eyes, something that proposes itself as—in some fundamental sense—comprehensively given to us in this confrontation alone, wholly given to us in its basic essential quality as matter. And all this is wholly wrong.

17 ‘The mathematical physicists have no use for lump atoms in their science; consequently they construct for themselves a world of force-points that one can calculate with’ (WLN: 45; NL 1885, KSA 11, 40[36]).

18 Some philosophers enjoy arguing about how best to characterize the relation between a statue and the lump of bronze of which it is made. This can be as good as playing chess. It’s absorbing, and provides great scope for ingenuity. But it has nothing to do with real metaphysics, for in real metaphysics the initial description of the case (we have a statue and the lump of bronze of which it is made) already gives us all the relevant facts. It does not itself give rise to any metaphysical issue. All that remains is juggling play, play with our existing concepts and categories and ways of talking, questions about how best to couch things given those concepts and categories and ways of talking.

19 If ‘dynamic’ is taken to mean ‘temporal’, this is true even on the four-dimensionalist or ‘block-universe’ view of reality, which doesn’t of course deny the reality of time, although it thinks of it as somehow all laid out in a spacelike way.
The separation of ‘doing’ from the ‘doer’, of what happens from a something that makes it happen, of process from something that is not process but is enduring, substance, thing, body, soul, etc—the attempt to grasp what happens as a kind of displacement and repositioning of what ‘is’, of what persists: that ancient mythology set down the belief in ‘cause and effect’ once this belief had found a fixed form in the grammatical functions of language. (1885-6: WLN88 [2[139])

I sometimes think we should always call matter ‘time-matter’, or ‘matter-in-time’, so that we never for a moment forget its essential temporality and essential changefulness. When you grasp matter as ‘time-matter’, as not properly conceivable when considered at a time, but only when considered through time—except that the word ‘through’ is already wrong, because it carries the false picture of matter somehow travelling through time, which is false because matter’s time-being is part of its being in such a way that it can’t really be said to exist through time at all—, then you see that to say that nothing can happen other than it does is just to say that matter—time-matter—is what it is. To say that matter does certain things, or behaves in a certain way, is already to have falsified the reality of matter, in so far as it suggests that its behaviour could be distinguished from its nature.

—But its nature remains the same while its behaviour changes according to its circumstances. Sure. A good way of seeing the force of the claim that its nature can’t be distinguished from its behaviour is to see that it is compatible with the truth of what you’ve just said.

I’ll come back to the importance of temporalizing the claim that matter has a nature in the next section. For the moment, the point to record is that there is as [4] states no fundamental metaphysical distinction between what we think of as objects on the one hand and processes and events on the other. The positive form of [4] is simple:

[4] All objects are processes.

All the things we naturally pick out as objects are well (and actually with no great difficulty) thought of as processes in fundamental metaphysics. We ought perhaps to consider very seriously whether to go on talking in terms of objects at all, but it’s undoubtedly convenient for many purposes, as Nietzsche realized, and it isn’t in fact that hard to suspend or suppress the potentially misleading implications of such talk.20

§4 Separatism and staticism; identity metaphysics  Here we have a familiar and clear sample of Nietzsche's metaphysical thinking, and one way to frame his general metaphysical approach is as a rejection of two doctrines we can call separatism and staticism.21 One can state and criticize these doctrines clearly using the language of object

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20 It’s not so easy the other way—it’s not true that all the things we naturally pick out as processes are equally easily thought of as objects—but it’s no less interesting (metaphysically instructive).

21 For ‘separatism’ see e.g. Strawson 1987: 393-5; 2009: 311–12. For staticism see e.g. Strawson 2003: 159-64, 2009: 301-04.
and property; it’s not as if either the statement or the criticism is undermined by the fact that the language of object and property, in its ordinary use, has the doctrines built into it.

Separatism separates object sharply from object, contra [5] and [9], and hence also [1]. It also separates an object from its propertiedness, contra [2]—a crucial doctrine I’ll discuss in the next section. It combines with staticism in separating matter from force, contra [6]. Put otherwise, in the explicit terms of [6], it separates things from ‘laws of nature’, and then says, in separatistic style, that the latter ‘govern’ the former. Separatism and staticism combine again, contra [4], as remarked in the last section, to separate basic existence from time or temporality, or, in more Nietzschean terms, ‘being’ from ‘becoming’, in a way profoundly contrary to the intuitive metaphysics of current physics.

I’ve distinguished ten claims for purposes of philosophical discussion, but this separation—separatism—is also artificial. There are many internal connections and redundancies among the claims. [3], for example, can be seen as dropping out of [2] and [6]. I’m delaying direct discussion of [5], i.e. Nietzsche’s views on causation, until §6, but [4], [5], and [6]—indeed all of [2]-[6]—go very closely together.

What should we oppose to staticism? Dynamicism, process metaphysics, Heracleiteanism—the names don’t matter. To separatism? Monism, holism, the Buddhist doctrine of ‘dependent origination’ or ‘interdependent arising’ (pratītya samutpāda), Nāgārjuna’s ‘emptiness’ (śūnyatā) doctrine (with its rejection of the picture of radically distinct individual substances standing in discrete causal relations). I favour the name identity metaphysics for the general position.

The name may be thought to express only the rejection of separatism, and not also staticism, but this is another false separation—the separation of separatism and staticism, a separation that may be useful for analytical purposes but is again metaphysically superficial. It depends on the idea that there’s a sharp distinction between space and time, an idea appears to be radically false, given what we know of the nature of spacetime. We now speak freely of ‘spacetime’, using the single word to mark the collapse of the idea that space and time are radically distinct from one another; we might do well to add the word ‘matter’, to get the new single word ‘spacetime-matter’. Where ordinary thought and vast tracts of metaphysics find distinctness, discreteness, (numerical) difference, identity metaphysics finds unity, continuity, identity. Identity metaphysics is Identitätsphilosophie. Spinoza is one of its exemplary practitioners, followed by Schelling, the inventor of the term, and Hegel, the great synthesizer of the ideas of others (they say he never had an original idea of his own). Nietzsche’s thought lies in the same tradition (because it is true, not because it is a tradition), although he also lays great stress on differences of force or power (or rank).

Separatism and staticism run very deep in language, with its basal subject-predicate form, but we can see easily enough that this is so, and say so in language, and find ways of

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22 Weinberg suggests that all the objects we take ourselves to have to do with are best conceived of as being ultimately constituted of ‘rips in space-time’ (1997: 20), space-time being itself a physical object (the only one there is), a substantial single something. We can embrace the antiseparatism (thing monism) of this idea without fearing that it is put at risk by the fact that ‘rumors of spacetime’s impending departure from deep physical law are not born of zany theorizing … this idea is strongly suggested by a number of well-reasoned considerations’ (Greene 2004: 472).
putting things that avoid the problem. We have words like ‘process’, ‘continuum’, ‘flow’ and ‘flux’, that allow us to say what is wrong with conceptions of the nature of reality which find sharp separations, discrete existences, where really there are none. We can say, with Heracleitus, ‘in whose proximity’ Nietzsche feels ‘warmer and better than anywhere else’ (EH 5.3), that ‘everything flows’.

One will need to reconcile the fact that Nietzsche favours these ways of talking with his apparent acceptance of the idea that, considered at the very small scale, reality is non-continuous in nature, *quantal* for short. The quantal view is almost universally adopted by physicists and cosmologists today with regard to everything other than spacetime, and a considerable number think that it also applies to spacetime. This was also, it seems, Nietzsche’s position.²³ Here it is enough to note that a quantal conception of the nature of reality at the very small scale is compatible with the truth of all Nietzsche’s claims about the error of segmenting reality into radically discrete objects, events, causes and effects, and so on, at the larger scale.

§5 Object and propertiedness (subject and predicate) I want now to consider [2], the seemingly radical claim that there is no fundamental distinction to be made between objects on the one hand and their propertiedness on the other. This claim, taken correctly, is nothing like the standard claim that objects are ‘bundles’ of properties, because it melts the categories of object and properties together in such a way that the standard bundle theory can’t even be stated (I’m not, however, optimistic that this will be understood).

I say the claim is radical, and it may indeed be un-Aristotelian, but it’s hardly radical if by ‘radical’ we mean radically unorthodox. It may be relatively little known, but Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Kant are among those who unite with Nietzsche in their endorsement of [2]. They all hold—to use and slightly extend Descartes’s terms—that there is no *real* distinction, only a *conceptual* distinction, between a concrete object, considered at any given time, and its concrete propertiedness at that time (no real distinction, in another vocabulary, between a substance at a time and its essential attributes at that time, whatever the modal inflection of the attributes at that time).

There’s no real distinction between two things A and B, on Descartes’s terms, when they can’t possibly exist apart. The clearest case in which A and B can’t possibly exist apart (it is, perhaps, in the end, as identity metaphysicians like myself suspect, the only case) is the case in which A and B are identical, for then there is only one thing, and nothing can exist apart from itself. Strikingly (it’s striking for some), the case of an object, considered at any given time, and its actual concrete propertiedness, considered at that time, is a case of this kind. [2] is true—the claim that there is no real distinction between an object and its propertiedness—because

[2] objects (‘substances’) are literally identical with their propertiedness

where by an object’s propertiedness I mean the *total way it actually concretely is*,

²³ See e.g. Ulfers & Cohen 2012.
qualitywise or propertywise, uncut by discursive thought. At first this claim seems plainly false, given a standard training in analytic philosophy, and given the extreme naturalness of counterfactual thought, which builds in many of the metaphysical errors Nietzsche criticizes. But not, I think, after a while.

I’ve argued for this in another place, here I’ll cite others. Descartes is concise: ‘the attributes [of a substance], when considered collectively, are indeed identical with the substance’. Nietzsche is even more concise. ‘A thing = its qualities’ (WLN: 73; NL 1885-6, KSA 12, 2[77]).

It’s too quick to take Nietzsche's notebook entry ‘a thing = its qualities’ as an outright metaphysical claim, because the entry considered as a whole has a familiar epistemological bent. By ‘qualities’ Nietzsche here refers to aspects of reality that impinge on our consciousness given our evolution and survival needs, and his basic claim—that a thing or object or substance is a posit that adds nothing to the acknowledgement of the existence of qualities—can be read merely epistemologically, in a way that makes it fall short of a metaphysical claim. It can also be read as more positively metaphysical, however, and Nietzsche’s other comments on the subject-predicate structure leave little doubt that he takes the object-property or thing-quality distinction to be ultimately metaphysically superficial, a characteristic separatist distortion of human thought. Fighting the misleadingly divisive import of the words ‘substance’ and ‘attribute’, or ‘object’ and ‘property’—

‘subject’, ‘object’, ‘attribute’ — these distinctions are fabricated and are … imposed as a schematism upon all the apparent facts (WP 549; NL 1885, KSA 11, 36[26])

—divisive because each seems to require the other as ontologically distinct complement, we can try to put the point by saying that substance is, just is, concretely existing attributehood or propertiedness: quality or Sosein or thunsness or quiddity or ‘what-it’s-likeness’. There’s a sense in which this claim doesn’t really work in language as we have it, but to the extent that this is true it’s also true that thought—understanding—isn’t immovably shackled by the forms of language.

One might think that Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza want to hang on to a robust notion of substance in a way that Nietzsche doesn’t, but there’s a fundamental respect in which this is not so—in which they’re at one. The great rationalists are not less radical than Nietzsche. All agree, of course, that something exists, and all agree that whatever exists is

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24 I don’t mean its abstract property of being propertied in some way.
25 Strawson 2009, pp. 304–17 (revision of Strawson 2008), which I draw on in what follows.
26 1648b: 15; Descartes’s ‘considered position…is that while there is a conceptual distinction between substance and attribute…there is not a real distinction between them. Substance and attribute are in reality one and the same’ (Nadler 2006: 57; he goes on to point out that Spinoza also holds this view). One can substitute ‘property’ for the two traditional terms ‘attribute’ and ‘mode’.
27 There’s nothing distinctively experiential about ‘what-it’s-likeness’: an experienceless stone is as much like something as anything else.
28 Locke and Hume are also fully in line, epistemologically speaking, in holding that we have no philosophically legitimate idea of substance, nor indeed any legitimate reason to suppose that it exists, in so far as it’s supposed to be something that is in any way other than or more than particular qualities, and there are also epistemological elements in the rationalists’ endorsement of the view.
identical with (nothing substantially over and above) concrete propriedness. This thesis is indeed radical and initially difficult to think, given the structure of human thought and language, given in particular that ‘property’ is an intrinsically relational word that demands something for it to be a property of, but it’s sufficiently understandable for all that, and fully in line with the intuitive metaphysics of physics. Does it seem hard to think? Yes, but it’s not that hard, and it’s something one can cultivate and grow into—deeply. This is doing philosophy.

Descartes is Mr. Substance, for most philosophers, but the popular version of early modern philosophy bears little resemblance to the true story, which is much more exciting. Descartes was neither the first nor the last to think that ‘substance’ is an empty word, a mere place holder with no clear meaning other than ‘existent’ or ‘real’, and zero explanatory power. I believe this is one of the reasons he preferred the word ‘thing’, (Latin res, French chose) to the word ‘substance’. At the same time, he badly wanted to be left in peace to get on with his work, was anxious not to annoy the church, and used the word ‘substance’ increasingly in communication with others who weren’t prepared to talk in other terms.29

Kant is also onside, as already remarked. When he says that ‘in their relation to substance … accidents [or properties] are not really subordinated to it, but are the manner of existence of the substance itself’,30 I think he gets the matter exactly right. Nothing more needs to be said. As so often in philosophy, the mistake is to try to say more. Put aside philosophy and consider an object in front of you. Consider it in the fullness of its being or reality. There’s no ontological subordination of the object’s properties to the object itself. There’s no existential inequality or priority of any sort, no ontological dependence of either on the other, no independence of either from the other. There is, in other words, no real problem of universals and particulars, as traditionally understood—only a number of philosophically habitual ways of understanding the terms ‘object’ and ‘property’ that can’t survive a proper appreciation of the present point. The realization that this is so can be uncomfortable if one has been inducted into the philosophical debate about particulars and universals, but it settles out and matures powerfully in time. One looks at any ordinary object, and it is deeply mysterious how there can be thought to be a problem. Its Sosein (its being the way it is) is identical to its Sein (its being).

Objections based on counterfactuals flood to the front of many philosophers’ minds. I’ll say something about this soon. For the moment, note that we can as David Armstrong says ‘distinguish the particularity of a particular from its properties’, but

the two ‘factors’ are too intimately together to speak of a relation between them. The

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29 On this see Clarke 2003 chs. 1, 8, 9. For a brief account see Strawson 2009: 339ff. See also Descartes’s advice to Regius about not stirring up trouble (letter of 1642, quoted in Clarke 2006: 224). It’s worth mentioning, because not sufficiently well known, that Descartes held—in line, I think, with Nietzsche—that all is one so far as the material universe is concerned: a single substance, one big extended thing with different gradients of ‘texture’ at different places that we treat—ultimately falsely—as radically distinct substances, objects, horses, cameras, railway lines, and so on.

30 1781–7: A414/B441. ‘Manner of existence’ can’t just mean ‘the particular way a substance is’, where the substance is thought to be somehow independently existent relative to its mode of existing; for that would be to take accidents or properties to be somehow subordinate after all.
Thisness and the nature are incapable of existing apart from each other. Bare particulars are vicious abstractions ... from what may be called states of affairs: this-of-a-certain-nature.\(^{31}\)

This seems to me entirely Cartesian, and Nietzschean. We can as Armstrong says ‘distinguish the particularity of a particular from its properties’, we can make this conceptual distinction, but we can’t really ‘speak of a relation’, a real distinction, ‘between them’. \([2]\) is true; objects are literally identical with their (actual concrete) propertiedness. This is entirely compatible with claiming that an object’s properties—including its intrinsic or non-relational properties—may and do change through time, while it remains the same object.

A problem of exposition remains which I can express only indirectly, by repeating the point that you need to hear this, i.e. \([2]\), the claim that objects are identical with their propertiedness, in a way that is quite different from the way in which the standard ‘bundle theory of objects’ claim is often heard. The trouble with the standard claim that objects are bundles of properties—or rather, with the way in which that claim is standardly heard—is that it builds in the ordinary understanding of ‘property’, and to that extent continues to sound unacceptably weird: a theoretical road up which philosophers are forced at a certain point because every other way seems closed, but which remains a dead end. To get closer, look at an object in front of you in the fullness of its reality, and experience the way in which the metaphysical distinction between an object and its propertiedness starts to seem like a fish that is still (just) alive, but has been out of water for some time.

—You can’t say that an object is literally identical with its propertiedness and that its properties can change through time while it remains the same object. To hold that objects are identical with their properties is to hold that

\([i]\) objects necessarily have all the properties they have,

but we naturally say that object \(x\), for example, would still have been the object it is, at time \(t\), even if its properties or propertiedness, \(P\), had been different, at \(t\). We naturally say it would still be the object it is even if (some at least of) its properties were other than they are in fact.

True, but nothing here forbids this way of talking about the non-actual. The fact that there are contexts in which we find it natural to say that

\([ii]\) \(x\)’s properties might have been different from what they are while it remained the same object

provides no support for the mistaken idea that

\([iii]\) an object has—must have—some form or mode of being independently of its having

\(^{31}\) 1980: 109-110. Armstrong puts things this way for well known dialectical reasons to do with stopping ‘Bradley’s regress’, but there are good independent metaphysical reasons for the claim.
the properties it does have.

To think that it does is to build a whole metaphysics of object and property into counterfactual thought, a metaphysics that it doesn’t contain or license as it stands, and that is simply incorrect, on the present view. We can perfectly well say that

(iv) x might not have had the properties it does now have

when supposing that determinism is false, say, for this doesn’t put [2] in question. It doesn’t challenge the view that whatever happens, everything in which the being of x consists at any time is identical to everything in which the being of P (x’s propertiedness) consists at that time. It’s possible to read [2] in such a way that it’s challenged by [iv], but if one does one simply misses—chooses to ignore—the fundamental metaphysical truth expressed by [2].

—I’m bald, but my propertiedness is not bald, so I’m not identical to my propertiedness.

Language, not metaphysics, I answer, with Nietzsche. It’s foolish to think that such an appeal to Leibniz’s Law can refute identity metaphysics. To understand the present claim, to accept the sense in which the being of x is identical with the being of P (that there is such a sense is not in question), is to see that this style of objection has no force. It simply bounces off its target. It depends on what has been discarded—the standard, language-enshrined object-property distinction that drives the interminable debate about particulars and universals.32 I don’t think Ramsey exaggerates when he says that ‘the whole theory of universals is due to mistaking … a characteristic of language … for a fundamental characteristic of reality’ (1925: 60). And Whitehead only exaggerates a little, perhaps, when he says that ‘all modern philosophy hinges round the difficulty of describing the world in terms of subject and predicate, substance and quality, particular and universal’ (1927-8: 49). Both agree with Nietzsche that

language is built in terms of the most naïve prejudices … we read disharmonies and problems into things because we think only in the form of language—thus believing in the ‘eternal truth’ of ‘reason’ (e.g., subject, predicate, etc.)33

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32 It’s discarded, not refuted: it can’t be refuted on its own ground in the structures of ordinary language.

Objection: On your view x = P1 at time t1 and x = P2 at a later time t2, so P1 = P2 by the transitivity of identity; but x changes from t1 to t2, so P1 ≠ P2… Reply: this objection has no force against a correctly temporal view of the nature of matter, i.e. time-matter (for a further reply see Strawson 2008: 280-1).

33 WLN: 110; NL 1886–7, KSA 12, 5[22]; there are many similar quotations in the published works. Note that if the present point (no real distinction between an object and its propertiedness) were better appreciated, philosophers might finally stop claiming that ‘property dualism’ is a coherent position, when it comes to the ‘mind-body problem’. It’s obvious, independently of the present point, that a thing can’t possibly be a wholly physical thing and have natural, intrinsic, non-relational properties that are non-physical properties, but some still continue to suppose that consciousness properties could be, precisely, natural, intrinsic, non-relational, non-physical properties possessed by wholly physical things. Grasping the present point might help.
§6 Cause, force, power, law Nietzsche often focuses on causation when making this point. ‘That we have a right to distinguish between subject and predicate’, he says,

...that is our strongest belief; in fact, at bottom, even the belief in cause and effect itself, in conditio and conditionatum, is merely an individual case of the first and general belief, our primeval belief in subject and predicate.... Might not this belief in the concept of subject and predicate be a great stupidity? (WLN: 104-5; NL 1886, KSA 12, 4[8])

Again

One should not wrongly objectify ‘cause’ and ‘effect’, as the natural scientists do ... in accordance with the prevailing mechanistic doltishness which makes the cause press and push until it ‘effects’ its end: one should use ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ only as pure concepts, that is to say, as conventional fictions for the purpose of designation and communication (BGE 21).

And claims [2] and [4] are in fact deeply connected to claims [3], [5], and [6], which are in turn thickly interwoven with each other. It is to this triplet that I now turn.

The first point is a quick one: Nietzsche’s animadversions on talk of causes and effects do not amount to any sort of scepticism about the reality of what we can perfectly well call causal process. Nor do they amount to any qualification of his view that nothing can ever happen otherwise than it does, his belief in what we can well call natural necessity—so long as we detach this term from any idea that anything in nature is bossing anything else about.34 What he is objecting to is the substantivalist separatism of talk of individual causes and effects. He’s asserting [5], the claim that reality is not truly divisible into causes and effects. Our concepts of cause and effect have

merely elaborated the image of becoming without reaching above the image or behind it .... Cause and effect: there is probably never such a duality; in truth a continuum confronts us, out of which we isolate a couple of pieces.... (GS 112; my emphasis)

Again

the suddenness with which many effects stand out is a suddenness only for us. There is an infinite number of processes that elude us in this second of suddenness. An intellect that could see cause and effect as a continuum, as a flux of happening, and not in our way as an arbitrary division and dismemberment, would repudiate the concept of cause and effect’ (GS 112, 1882).

The error of dividing the reality-continuum, the becoming-reality, into discrete causes and effects, is for Nietzsche a particularly salient case of the fundamental error built into the

34 The notion of natural necessity—natural necessity as specifically opposed to conceptual or logical necessity—used to be frowned upon; quite wrongly.
fundamental form of discursive thought, most centrally, the subject :: predicate form or noun :: verb form, which inevitably enacts the object :: property error and/or being :: becoming error.\(^{35}\)

Against this error, we already have in place the positive versions of [2] and [4]: objects are processes and there is no real distinction between objects and their propertiedness.\(^{36}\)

The next thing to bring into line is the positive version of [3].\(^{37}\)

As it stands, [3] states that

[3] there is no fundamental (real) distinction, only (at best) a conceptual distinction,\(^{38}\) between a thing \(x\)'s basal properties and its power properties.

Put otherwise—here I intentionally use an unhelpful terminology because it’s so widespread that it’s worth trying to express the correct view in its terms even though they resist the truth—[3] states that

[3] there is no fundamental (real) distinction, only (at best) a conceptual distinction, between \(x\)'s ‘categorical’ properties and its ‘dispositional’ properties.\(^{39}\)

To consider [3] in any form, is, again, to separate out for purposes of discussion an aspect of what is, in the end, a single thesis, the single thesis of identity metaphysics, which inevitably comes out as something complex in human thought and language (it comes out as [2]-[6], for a start; [8] follows, then [9]; and so on). But one has (of course) to do this sort of thing when doing human philosophy, and one can perfectly well do it in the service of identity metaphysics—in the service of trying to show—as I am now trying to show—how and why the separations are artificial.

I’m not only going to talk for the moment in terms of the categorical/dispositional distinction. I’m also going to continue to talk in terms of objects and properties. The separatist object-property idiom can be dispensed with, and I’ll regularly also talk simply and neutrally of ‘being’, in a way that does not divide reality into objects and properties.\(^{40}\)

But I have, again, a specific dialectical purpose in retaining the language of object and property. I’m not doing it because the relevant points flow more easily or look more plausible when put in these terms, but because they look less plausible, more vulnerable. The idea is that when one thinks the points through in the more resistant object-property terms one can see that the points hold even when these terms are adhered to. Even when we

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\(^{35}\) The ‘and/or’ is really just ‘or’, for reasons given in §3. Note that there’s no conflict between [5] and Nietzsche’s discussion of the tendency to confuse cause and effect in TI VI.

\(^{36}\) Being is propertiedness which is process which is becoming. This seems to me strictly correct.

\(^{37}\) Hardly separable from [6], the claim that we can’t rightly think of the stuff of reality as something governed by laws of nature that are in some—any—sense distinct from it.

\(^{38}\) ‘Only (at best) a conceptual distinction’: the conceptual distinction is in the end a false—reality-distorting—distinction, in the Nietzschean scheme. It is not even properly admissible as a conceptual distinction, for in a correct metaphysics, the only acceptable conceptual distinctions are reality-representing distinctions, i.e. distinctions representing real distinctions.

\(^{39}\) Recent defenders of this view in these terms include C. B. Martin (1997), Mumford (1998), Heil (2005).

\(^{40}\) Here as elsewhere I use ‘being’ to mean simply ‘reality’, i.e. not in opposition to ‘becoming’. Becoming is simply what being/reality is, on Nietzsche's view, and mine.
add the burden of the categorical-dispositional terminology to the burden of the object-
property terminology, we can still express the truth of identity metaphysics. If we can show
this, we can throw away this terminology with more ease and gusto.

So to begin. It’s generally agreed that to talk of an object $x$’s dispositions or dispositional
properties, in contexts like the present one, is to talk of its powers or power properties—
which we may perfectly well call its causal properties. It’s less clear what the term
‘categorical’ is standardly used to mean in this context, but the simplest or minimal way to
understand it, I think, is as denoting $x$’s basic or fundamental or intrinsic or ‘primary’
qualities or properties whatever they are. $x$’s categorical being, I propose, is the totality of
$x$’s actual concretely existing being whatever its nature. Plainly this definition of
‘categorical’ doesn’t exclude the possibility that a thing’s so-called ‘dispositional’
properties should turn out to be among its categorical properties. Nor should it.

So far, perhaps, so good. The next thing to record is that it’s commonly held that

[a] the categorical properties of $x$ are the ground of $x$’s dispositional or power properties
(or: the categorical being of $x$ is the ground of $x$’s dispositional or power being)

and that

[b] the categorical properties of $x$ are the whole ground of $x$’s dispositional or power
properties, so that the dispositional or power properties are in no way ontologically over
and above the categorical properties (or: the categorical being of $x$ is the whole ground of
$x$’s dispositional or power being, so that the dispositional or power being is in no way
ontologically over and above the categorical being).

This view is most familiarly associated with Locke (in modern philosophy), and it’s plainly
central to it that the distinction between categorical and dispositional properties is at best a
conceptual distinction. It’s not any sort of irreducible ontological distinction. There’s
nothing more to the power properties or power being of a thing than its categorical
properties or categorical being, according to Locke. If the thing’s categorical being is in
place then its power being is certainly also in place (and conversely). A thing’s power being
is literally part of its actual concretely existing being. Its categorical being plainly doesn’t
exclude its power being, given the present definition of ‘categorical’.$^{41}$

This is, so far, clearly the right line to take. But [a] and [b] are often combined with the
view that

[c] the categorical properties of $x$ are in some way ontologically over and above the
dispositional or power properties of $x$ (or: the categorical being of $x$ is in some way
ontologically over and above the dispositional or power being of $x$)

and while [c] may seem natural enough at first, it is what is at issue. To accept [3], as

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$^{41}$ It’s very unfortunate, I think, that some have recently tried to use the terms ‘categorical’ and ‘dispositional’
to mark an ontological distinction.
Nietzsche does, is to deny [c]—to deny that there is or can be more to a thing’s being than its power being.\(^{42}\) I agree with Nietzsche that [c] is a great mistake, however natural it may seem at first. I think, in fact, that the point is effectively \textit{a priori}, once one accepts the reality of power being at all, as any sensible philosopher must. Let me try to explain.

Most philosophers agree that there can no more be dispositional being without categorical being than there can be categorical being without dispositional being; that everything has both categorical and dispositional being. Some reject the first half of this claim, holding that there is no categorical being, only dispositional being—

[D] there is only dispositional being

—and I’ll consider this very ill-expressed suggestion later.\(^{43}\) Before that, though, consider the following strengthened version of the claim that everything has both categorical and dispositional being:

[CD1] nothing can possibly have the (total) categorical being that it has and not have the (total) dispositional or power being that it has

and its converse

[CD2] nothing can possibly have the (total) dispositional being that it has and not have the (total) categorical or power being that it has.

I think this is obvious on reflection, given that we agree to use the categorical-dispositional language at all.

Before I argue for this, note that it’s a very short step, if it’s a step at all, from the conjunction of [CD1] and [CD2], which I’ll simply call ‘[CD]’, to the seemingly stronger claim that we have already encountered, i.e. the categorical/dispositional formulation of [3]

[3] there is no real distinction, only a conceptual distinction, between an object’s categorical properties or being and its dispositional properties or being

and from there to my preferred candidate for the positive form of [3], the seemingly stronger claim that

[3] a thing’s categorical properties or being and its dispositional properties or being are really—in reality—identical.

This can be put more simply as

\(^{42}\) There is widespread support for this general approach in current analytic philosophy; see e.g. Shoemaker 1980, and others he cites in that paper: Achinstein 1974, Harré and Madden 1975.

\(^{43}\) Some take it that [3] amounts to [D], but [D] is too ill-expressed to be acceptable even if [3] is true. See again Shoemaker 1980.
a thing’s $x$’s basal being (propertiedness) is identical with its power being (propertiedness)

which comes down in effect to

all being is power being

—fully in line with Plato: ‘I hold that the definition of being is simply power \((dunamis)\)^{44} I say ‘seemingly stronger’ because I don’t think that [3], the positive identity claim, is really stronger than the negative no-real-distinction claim, any more than the no-real-distinction claim is really stronger than [CD], for reasons already given. (This is identity metaphysics; really the word ‘basal’ is doing nothing … the claim is simply that all being is power being.)

All of this may seem quite wrong. Routine thoughts about the ‘multiple realizability’ of certain functional properties, which are paradigmatic dispositional properties, prompt the following linked objections to [CD]

[O1] two things can be dispositionally or power identical without being categorically identical

contrary to the second half of [CD2]; and this may lead to the related idea that

[O2] a thing can be changed in respect of its categorical properties without being changed in respect of its dispositional or power properties.

So too, thoughts about so-called ‘possible worlds’ (say) may prompt the idea that

[O3] a thing can be changed in respect of its dispositional or power properties without being changed in respect of its categorical properties

contrary to the first half of [CD1], and so also that

[O4] two things can be categorically identical without being dispositionally or power identical.

In fact, though, none of these things can be so.

Huge numbers of recent philosophical thought-experiments depend on [O3] and [O4]; they build in the profoundly separatist assumption that a material thing, say $x$, can be thought of as retaining its intrinsic nature or basic categorical being unchanged across different nomic environments (environments in which different laws of nature are imagined to hold) while changing its dispositional being on account of its different nomic

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^{44} Sophist: 247e, trans. Jowett. In White’s translation, ‘I’ll take it as a definition that those which are amount to nothing other than capacity’.
environment. But the idea is incoherent, on Nietzsche's view as on mine (this is [6]), and
indeed on any view that takes seriously the point that mass or matter is just (a form of)
energy. Matter isn’t a passively sitting stuff that is then (‘then’) regimented by laws. Laws
of nature can’t be supposed to be in any way ontologically independent of, rather than
essentially constitutive of, part of, the (categorical, intrinsic) nature of matter/energy.
Matter or reality is force or energy, and

the unalterable sequence of certain phenomena does not prove a ‘law’ but a power relation
between two or several forces. To say: ‘But precisely this relation remains the same!’
*means nothing more than*: ‘One and the same force cannot be a different force as well’.
(WLN: 88; NL 1885-6, KSA 12, 2[139]; my emphasis)

This takes a little thinking about at first, but it is exactly right. Here Nietzsche imagines
someone thinking that the claim ‘But precisely this relation remains the same!’ requires (or
involves) appeal to a law as an explanation of its truth. But that is to misunderstand what a
force is—what reality is. When you understand that, you see that ‘But precisely this relation
remains the same!’ is really nothing more than a tautology or necessary truth, a particular
instance of the necessary truth that ‘every thing is what it is, and not another thing’ (Butler
1729: 28).

In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche writes that

In the ‘in-itself’ there is nothing of ‘causal connections’, of ‘necessity’, there the effect does
*not* follow the cause, there is no rule of ‘law’ (§21)

and again this is exactly right, properly understood (it is also, in a sense, elementary). There
are no laws in nature, no objective ‘laws of working’ necessitating anything,45 in addition to
the matter or stuff of reality. The point may acquire special vividness given a four-
dimensionalist or ‘block-universe’ view (given the great structured givenness of the four-
dimensional reality, our talk of cause, necessity, and laws may seem a kind of superfluous
adornment); but it sits just as well with a more conventional view of the flowing nature of
time.

Note that we can refute [O3] even if we retain the language of laws and allow, for
purposes of argument, the coherence of the separatist assumption that

things can retain their intrinsic categorical nature across environments in which different
laws of nature hold.

For even when we retain this assumption we can’t suppose that x’s fundamental
dispositions or power properties change on change of nomic environment. Rather the
contrary; the full specification of x’s fundamental dispositions must already include x’s
disposition to behave in way F in nomic environment 1, the disposition to behave in way G
in nomic environment 2, and so on. The same points apply mutatis mutandis to [O4], where

45 See e.g. Mackie 1974.
we would be considering two qualitatively (categorically) identical things \(x \) and \(y\) in different environments.  

Turning back now to \([O1]\) and \([O2]\): the objection to \([CD]\) (nothing can possibly have the total categorical being that it has and not have the total dispositional or power being that it has, and conversely)—and so in effect to \([3]\)—that is based on the fact that certain properties may be said to be ‘multiply realizable’ doesn’t deserve serious consideration. Obviously two differently constructed pocket calculators can be functionally or dispositionally identical in some particular respect (e.g. mathematically speaking). Equally obviously, their total dispositional being will be different if they’re differently constructed (they melt differently, float differently, smell different, etc.). It is in the end a trivial point that if they are in any way categorically different, they will necessarily be dispositionally different: one atom’s difference between them makes a difference between their total dispositions. So too, no less trivially, if you change the categorical being of one of them in any way, you eo ipso change its total dispositional being.  

No one, perhaps, will disagree with this. So let me now turn to \([D]\), the claim that there is only dispositional being, and no categorical being.

§7 Power, energy, necessity If one takes ‘dispositional’ to exclude ‘categorical’, and then takes ‘the categorical being of \(x\)’ in the simplest way to mean nothing more (or less) than ‘the actual concretely existing being of \(x\) whatever its nature’, \([D]\) is incoherent. For given this natural understanding of ‘categorical’ it’s a necessary truth—a tautology—that all being is categorical being, whatever else it is or isn’t (i.e. even if we also want to say that it’s dispositional being). All being is categorical being because that’s what it is to actually be! That’s what being is! So if a thing has dispositional being, that is *ipso facto* part of its categorical being. On these terms, to say that there is nothing but dispositional being is to say that all categorical being is dispositional being, not to say, incoherently, that there is no categorical being. \([D]\), then, is necessarily false so long as the word ‘dispositional’ brings with it a contrast between dispositional and the categorical given which to say that there is only dispositional being is to say that there is no categorical being.

The trouble, again, lies in the use of the word ‘dispositional’, and the use of the categorical/ dispositional opposition. We should have stuck to talking of power properties or powers, with Locke and the great historical majority, keeping clear on the point that power properties are (of course) actual properties, substantive realities, potent properties, *potential* properties in the old and original meaning of the word ‘potential’, i.e. ‘potent, … possessing potency or power’ (*OED*). They’re not potential properties in the now standard sense of ‘potential’ according to which ‘potential’ is opposed to ‘actual’. The correct version of \([D]\), then, is

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46 When people think about dispositions they often have what one might call ‘externalist’ specifications of dispositions in mind, to which the present point seems insensitive. But the point goes deeper than such specifications, and stands as it is.

47 Again many standard moves are made in protest. Heil (2005, chapters 8–11) knocks them down in a tolerant manner.

48 The old original meaning of ‘potential’ (the first *OED* meaning), has disappeared under the second meaning, ‘possible as opposed to actual’. Potential properties in the first meaning are of course actual properties.
all being is power being

which we can read as a positive version of [6], as well as of [3]. The claim that all being is power being has no sort of reductive air of the kind that clings weirdly (incoherently) to [D]. In effect, [P] amounts to the claim that all being is energy, forms of energy, which I take to be orthodoxy in physics. [D], by contrast, is extraordinarily confusing, and soon leads to such peculiar claims as the claim that reality is just a matter of ‘bearerless dispositions’ (the next disastrous step, for some, is that this is Nietzsche's view.) We can say that this is just bad language, if we like, but it’s very, very bad language, and has caused horrible confusion.

Let me put it this way. If we continue to take it that ‘dispositional property’ and ‘power property’ are equivalent, and that categorical and dispositional are strongly opposed terms, then ‘categorical property’ must presumably mean ‘non-power property’. We have, then, the picture of things with non-power properties, and with ontologically distinct power properties that they have (wholly) in virtue of having their non-power properties. This view confuses linguistic with ontological distinctions, and is a proper target of Occam’s razor (apart from involving a wild degree of separatism). And yet the consequence of rejecting it, or something like it, may still seem too problematic for some. For the consequence seems to be that any existing property must (ipso facto, eo ipso) be a power property. The only way to exist without being potent, without being disposed to have an effect on other existing things, is not to exist! All being is necessarily ‘potential’ being in the original sense: potent being, power-involving being. Power being is categorical being, like all being. Potency entails actuality, reality, and conversely.49

Obviously, say Leibniz, Nietzsche, and I don’t know who else. And I think we should welcome this reaction. I think it’s important to see how undramatic (how boring, as it were) the point is in the end—although it may seem hard at first. At one point Nietzsche writes that

—the absolute necessity of the same things happening in one course of the world as in all others throughout eternity: not a determinism above what happens but merely the expression of the fact that the impossible is not possible … that one force cannot be anything other than that particular force (WLN: 199; NL 1887, KSA 12, 10[138]); second emphasis mine).

He concludes the note by saying that

‘what happens’ and ‘what necessarily happens’ is a tautology.

This doesn’t quite make sense as it stands, but I think it’s clear what Nietzsche means.50

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49 ‘Surely the idea of totally causally inert concrete existence is at least coherent?’ It seems to require the possibility that something may exist in a universe while that universe is just as it would be if the thing didn't exist….

50 The singular ‘is’ gives a clue.
The two phrases ‘what happens’ and ‘what necessarily happens’ are in fact equivalent; what happens just is what necessarily happens. So the claim ‘what happens is what necessarily happens’ is effectively tautological; it’s just like saying that what happens is what happens, which is of course an overt tautology. The idea occurs again in another note from the same year

regularity proves only that one and the same happening is not another happening as well (WLN: 154; NL 1887, KSA 12, 9[91])

Here all Nietzsche's thoughts about being, becoming, power, law, force, will, energy, cause, necessity, and fate converge. I think they converge on reality—the truth—the best description. Plato, Spinoza, Leibniz and others stand in the background in the past; Einstein and others in the foreshadowed future. Einstein is at one with Nietzsche when he writes that a Being endowed with higher insight and more perfect intelligence, watching man and his doings, would smile about man’s illusion that he was acting according to his own free will, having just remarked that

if the moon, in the act of completing its eternal way around the earth, were gifted with self-consciousness, it would feel thoroughly convinced that it was travelling its way of its own accord on the strength of a resolution taken once and for all.\(^51\)

I’m inclined to summarize this view as follows: \textit{Wesen ist Werden, Stoff ist Kraft, Sein ist Sosein, Ansichsein (Sein) ist Fürsichsein.}\(^52\) I believe this makes me a follower of Nietzsche, even if he would be unwilling to acknowledge me.\(^53\)

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References


\(^{51}\) Einstein 1931. Compare Schopenhauer on Spinoza (1819: bk 2 §24).
\(^{52}\) This use of ‘Ansichsein’ needs further commentary.
\(^{53}\) I’d particularly like to thank Alexandros Pagidas for reviving my interest in Nietzsche’s views. Thanks also to Manuel Dries, Andrew Huddleston, and David Skrbina for their comments on a draft.