How is desire attracted to frugality? Is there no inducement to frugality in the absence of other-worldly incentives? These questions clearly have environmental and political consequences that will critically influence our future ideas of morality. At the same time, we might acknowledge that excess, of various celebratory, erotic, and aesthetic varieties, can be as much a life-giving value. How do we move between the poles of frugality and excess? I argue that the question of frugality is intimately tied to the history of religion, more specifically to ascetic ideals, variably actualized in different places and times. In this paper, I explore the tension of frugality and excess in relation to three figures, each from a different continent, who share a lifelong preoccupation with ascetic ideals, Gandhi, Thoreau and Nietzsche. Taking Gandhi and Thoreau to be instances of a this-worldly ethic of frugality, Nietzsche provides a productive counterpoint, in his critique of Judeo-Christian and Hindu-Buddhist ascetic ideals, and the sensual counter-ideal he envisions with Dionysius. I explore these disagreements and resonances in five domains that give us coordinates for the frugality-excess problem: Diet, Erotics, Economics, Relation to Truth, and, War and Peace. In conclusion, I suggest that we might think of this framework of thought as ‘geo-philosophy’.
Introduction: Preliminary Work for a Future Morality

A short while back just into this third millennium, I was in a mall. It could have been in the United States or in India or elsewhere. Surrounded by shops and hoardings, I was struck by a question, so distant now but such a vital part of the human past that we might pause for some wonderment over the waning of this aspect of our collective inheritance. The question: how does human desire come to be attracted to frugality? To clarify, I am not talking about prohibitions, my question is, how is desire attracted to frugality? The ‘rational’ answer to this question came to me soon afterwards. This kind of moral imperative seems explicable when there is some accompanying incentive such as heaven, or some other world in which the self-imposed hardships of this world will be suitably compensated, for instance, in what is famously called the Protestant ethic. So then, is there no inducement to frugality for those of us with an ethic bound to this world? The answer to this question, of how less comes to seem more, it seems to me, will have a number of future environmental consequences and will crucially influence whatever differentiation of lifestyles there is to be in the capitalism of tomorrow.

Is there any way not to moralize this question of the attraction to frugality? Advocates of frugality invariably start by complaining about the hedonism of others. Avoiding such moralization we might point out that excess of various erotic, aesthetic and celebratory varieties, is as much a joyous life-giving value as any of our redemptive imperatives. How do we move between the poles of frugality and excess? Is this a question for a new religion or for a higher economics? As a starting point I will assert that the question of frugality is intimately tied to the history of religion, more specifically to ascetic ideals, variably actualized across seemingly every world religion (Madan 1982; Weber 1976; Wimbush & Valantasis 1995). ‘When seen from a distance, the earth has been the ascetic planet par excellence’, exclaimed Nietzsche (2007, p. 33), a century or so before mine. How might we analyze the place of ascetic ideals, not in relation to otherworldly incentives, but in this-worldly, political terms? Further, is it possible to conceive of ascetic ideals, not entirely as moral injunctions, but in more experimental, open-ended forms?

We might find our initial orientation for such an exploration in Michel Foucault’s study of Greek and Greco-Roman asceticism in The History of Sexuality (1990). Foucault tells us that in Greek asceticism, frugality is not codified as an injunction for a universal majority or sanctioned by divine revelation. Rather, it is a kind of exertion, spiritual exercises and experiments designed to test and enhance one’s self-mastery, what Foucault calls the ‘cultivation of the self’. Rather than an imperative towards otherworldly distinction, Greek asceticism is primarily civic, its ideal directed not towards the monastery or everyday other-worldliness, but towards enhanced participation in the polis. In other words, these exercises are both spiritual and political, the goal of which is better health in this world, a
type of training and education. How might we continue our education at present?

In this essay I seek to add further global coordinates to the political and moral stakes of asceticism and eroticism that drew Foucault to the Greeks. My investigation focuses on three major figures, each from a different continent, Gandhi, Thoreau and Nietzsche, each of whom was preoccupied in ways conceptual and practical, with the ascetic ideal for most of their adult life. Gandhi’s unique type of politics and his conditions for himself, as for his army of passive resisters in everyday life, are well known: chastity, poverty, truth (Gandhi 1997, p. 96). Similarly Thoreau’s experiments with austerity and his sojourns, most famously to Walden Pond are common knowledge to the English reading public worldwide. Taking these two figures (and the resonance between them, exemplified in Gandhi’s fascination with Thoreau), to be instances of a this-worldly ethic of frugality, Nietzsche provides an interesting counterpoint, in his sustained and ferocious critique of Judeo/Christian and Hindu/Buddhist ascetic ideals and the counter-ideal he provides in the affirmation of sensual Dionysian excess. What seems like an outright opposition between frugality and excess among these three figures, on closer scrutiny, as we will see, turns out to be a related zone of sensual, spiritual and political experimentation.

In an earlier essay I explored certain affinities between Gandhi, Thoreau and Nietzsche, in particular their shared attraction to the writings of Emerson, as well as their conception of themselves as philosopher-physicians, diagnosing diseases of ‘civilization’ (Singh 2006). In this paper I follow resonant points of difference, in ways that provide us specific coordinates for the frugality-excess problem. Along what axes might we map these coordinates? In analyzing Greek asceticism, Foucault (1990) gives us four fruitful categories, specific zones in which experimentation takes place. I will use these categories, adding only one more to Foucault’s table for its relevance to our three dramatis personae. The categories are: a) Diet, b) Erotics, c) Economics, d) Relation to Truth, and the last that I add is e) War and Peace. A philosophical qualification before we begin, regarding the differences I hope to chart. Worldly (asceticism) is not the same as secular. The coordinates of frugality and excess I set out are neither entirely secular and nor wholly religious, but rather to be understood as ‘political theologies’, a concept I approach in the concluding section. A second qualification: as distinct from a mainstream tradition of philosophy, the method of thought in evidence here is non-dialectical. The salience of this qualification will become clearer as a requirement to engage Thoreau and Nietzsche, crucial to whose methods is a bipolar tendency, where two opposed propositions coexist and remain equally valid. For the frugality-excess question, the departure from dialectics is also critical to our conception of difference. Differences between the key figures of this essay, Gandhi, Thoreau and Nietzsche will not necessarily appear as contradictions or negations. Rather these are variable coordinates and poles, occasionally antagonistic, at other times mutually
animating, sometimes gesturing to a difference in degree or in kind. As these differences are sharpened they will not be resolved in a higher synthesis that overcomes the oppositions. Instead of a synthesis, I seek to map a continuum of variables, differences of degree and of kind along which experimentation takes place. I will describe this method and orientation, present throughout this essay, as geo-philosophy (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, p. 85), a term we will return to in the conclusion.¹ Let us begin with the most everyday of categories, diet.

**Nutrition, Material and Spiritual**

Here is a typical communiqué from Gandhi:

It is a well established fact that one can derive a much greater amount of nourishment from the same quantity of food if it is masticated well. The habit of proper mastication of food inculcated by the use of uncooked greens therefore, if it does nothing else, will at least enable one to do with less quantity of food and thus not only make for economy in consumption but also automatically reduce the dietetic himsa [violence] that one commits to sustain life. (Quoted in Alter 2000, p. 34).

Do political leaders ordinarily concern themselves with the chewing of food? This concern is more explicable when we see that a central tenet of Gandhian principles for political action is *Brahmacharya*, which we might translate as ‘aspiration for self-control’. How does the control of the self exert its political force on others? Perhaps the most memorable of weapons in Gandhi’s arsenal was fasting, such being the connection between bodies, his own and that of the Indian body politic that he is perhaps unique in world history for being able to subdue inter-community riots by temporarily ceasing to ingest.² More ordinary followers of Gandhian politics also undertake variably exacting regimens in the pursuit of self-control. In his study of ‘dietetics’ in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1990, p. 51) describes the ongoing concern among Greek philosopher-physicians on the relation between different appetites, sexual and alimentary, and a very similar logic is often expressed by Gandhi in his writings. A crucial aspect of non-violent politics is ‘mastery over the passions’ and in this regard, according to Gandhi in *Self-Restraint vs. Self-Indulgence* (1928), as the gateway to the generation of internal heat, ‘the chief sinner is the palate’ (1928, p. 89). A chapter in Gandhi’s autobiography entitled ‘Experiments in Dietetics’ describes a lifelong process of doing without specific foods, milk, pulses, salt, some for temporary observances, others more permanently: ‘I have tried the experiment of a salt-less and pulse-less diet on many of my co-workers, and with good results…’ (Gandhi 1927, p. 273) The reasons for this disciplinary obsession on Gandhi’s part will become clearer in the later segment on war. For now we might say that Gandhi’s writings on austerity, *Key to Health* (1906), *Self-Restraint* (1921) and various other texts might be placed on a global map of frugality experiments, such as Foucault’s analysis of the ancient Greek
Hippocratic text, *A Regimen for Health* (1990, p. 110). Reading this resonant map, we might begin to notice points of tension. For instance, what we have in the Greek case are ‘strategic adaptable principles’, seasonal variations, meats, wines, workouts, baths, where the oscillation is between more and less restrictive economies rather than prohibitions (Foucault 1990, p. 111). Distinct from this, an unshakeable tenet of Gandhian dietetics is vegetarianism, a precept he claimed to hold ‘independent of any religion’ (1927, p. 271).3

A recent text that poses the moral and conceptual significance of vegetarianism and thereby of human-animal relations most strongly is the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee’s (2003) *Elizabeth Costello*.4 The novel is composed of a series of lectures delivered by Elizabeth Costello, the central character. The most controversial of these is one in which Costello compares modern industrial slaughterhouses, meat-packing industries, trawlers and laboratories to Nazi death camps. In our dealings with animals, according to Costello, we have turned into beasts. In a previous century, as sharp a set of polemics were issued by a key member of London literary-vegetarian circles, Henry Salt, whose book *A Plea for Vegetarianism* was acknowledged by Gandhi as a signpost on his journey to vegetarianism.5 Henry Salt was also crucial to the introduction of Thoreau’s writings to England, writing a popular biography, *Life of Henry David Thoreau* (1993[1890]). Salt’s popular polemical piece *The Logic of Vegetarianism* (1906), ends with lines from Thoreau’s *Walden*: ‘It is part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized’ (Salt 1906, p. 48).

Should we take Thoreau to be one with Gandhi and Henry Salt regarding the question of diet? Moving closer to *Walden* we might notice a mode of experimentation subdued in Salt’s reading of Thoreau. Salt’s quotation is from the chapter ‘Higher Laws’ in Thoreau’s *Walden* (1960). The chapter begins ‘…I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw … I found myself ranging the woods like a half-starved hound…’ (1960, p. 179). Regarding dietetics, Thoreau adds: ‘I am glad to hear of experiments of this kind being tried; as that a young man tried for a fortnight to live on hard, raw corn on the ear …The squirrel tribe tried the same and succeeded. The human race is interested in these experiments’ (1960, p. 58). What is the range of experiments Thoreau is willing to try, and to affirm as part of human up-building? While he certainly affirms vegetarianism as a potential human destiny and a ‘higher’ condition of existence (‘every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food…’), a few lines later Thoreau declares, ‘I could sometimes eat a fried rat with a good relish, if it were necessary’ (1960, p. 185). What is the source of this bipolarity? Let us say that these are different faces of the human animal. ‘We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and
perhaps cannot be wholly expelled...’ (Thoreau 1960, p. 186). A page later these hierarchies are further levelled: ‘All sensuality is one, though it takes many forms; all purity is one’ (1960, p. 187).

Breaking with the logic of purity, in Nietzsche these evaluations of growth, high and low, human and animal, are further reordered. Consider Nietzsche’s statement on vegetarianism, all the more amusing when placed next to Thoreau’s innumerable comments in *Walden* exalting Indian philosophy and dietetics:

Those who promote narcotic ways of thinking and feeling, like some Indian gurus, praise a diet that is entirely vegetarian and would like to impose that as a law upon the masses. In this way they want to create and increase the need that they are in position to satisfy. (1974, p. 193)

So then is Nietzsche a moral anarchist in this regard? Not quite. Although the mode of attainment is quite different, the question, as with Gandhi and Thoreau, is one of health and self-mastery. This is how Nietzsche puts it in *Ecce Homo*, his philosophical autobiography:

I am much more interested in a question on which the ‘salvation of humanity’ depends far more than on any theologian’s curiosity: the question of nutrition. For ordinary use, one may formulate it thus: ‘how do you, among all people, have to eat to attain your maximum of strength, of virtu in the Renaissance style, of morale-free virtue?’ (1969, p. 237; original emphases)

What we have here is a vision of self-awareness as attentive as Gandhi. Nietzsche describes his own regimen and his ‘escape from German and English indigestion’ (1969, p. 239). Is the value of frugality simply denied by Nietzsche? Nietzsche contra Gandhi? How might we map the range of these differences? Here we might turn to a dietary aspect of Nietzsche’s spiritual affirmation of Dionysus, influenced by the history of religion set out for us in his *Genealogy of Morals*. The crux of ancient Indo-European (Vedic Hindu, Roman, Greek) civic religion was ritual sacrifice (Vernant 1985, p. 109). Diet was a central aspect of religious life and meat was primarily eaten according to the rules of the sacrifice (Vernant 1985, p. 111). Elizabeth Costello claims that this was still a more thoughtful morality than the false non-violence of the contemporary supermarket. Two major alternatives appeared to this mainstream sacrificial religion in Greek and other contexts, broadly speaking those of asceticism on the one hand and of frenzy on the other and both were predicated on breaking the dietary rules of the sacrifice. A crucial rite of Dionysian religion is that of *omophagia* or the devouring of raw animal flesh (Vernant 1985, p. 114) through which the human gives themselves over to both their divine (Dionysian trance) and animal aspects. The other trajectory away from Greek sacrificial religion is the Orphic way of life that opts for a vegetarian diet in order to refuse blood sacrifice. If Gandhi is of this latter type, then Nietzsche is more drawn to the frenzy, while Thoreau manifests aspects of both. Each is a type of will
to power and a reconstitution of the human animal. Some may be disappointed by this un-polemical conclusion regarding the dietary aspect of the frugality-excess problem. This may also be the disappointment of the human with itself that it must prey on other life (but in what way?). ‘What is human flesh that its appetites, even needs, express, and threaten, the human soul?’ as Stanley Cavell puts it, in his response to Elizabeth Costello (2008, p. 125). This question of the flesh and its appetites takes us to our next question, that of eroticism.

**Erotic Ascetics**

Gandhi placed a seemingly monastic stress on chastity and celibacy. Far from being a puritan segregation of the sexes (quite the opposite, women came to play a much more central role in political life during the Gandhian era in India), this imperative is also an aspect of *Brahmacharya*, self-control or ‘control of the passions’. Gandhi’s autobiography describes the vow of celibacy taken by him and his wife in 1906 and subsequently maintained for the remaining four decades of their lives. As an appendix to his book *Self-Restraint vs. Self-Indulgence*, Gandhi attached a short piece by Thoreau entitled ‘Chastity and Sensuality’ (1928). In this essay, Thoreau tells us that on the topic of sex (and we might take this to be a more or less radical statement), ‘it is plain that the education of man has hardly commenced’ (1928, p. 209). Here are the lines of Thoreau’s essay most favored by Gandhi: ‘Let love be purified, and all the rest will follow’ (1928, p. 211). ‘If it is the result of pure love, there can be nothing sensual in marriage. Chastity is something positive, not negative. All lusts or base pleasures must give place to loftier delights’ (1928, p. 209). And here is Nietzsche’s (1911) counter-attack directed against ‘Wagner as the Apostle of Chastity’, ‘There is no necessary contrast between sensuality and chastity; every good marriage, every genuine love affair is above this contrast … all well-constituted and good-spirited mortals are not in the least inclined to reckon their unstable equilibrium between angel and animal among the objections to existence … It is precisely contradictions of this kind which lure us to life’ (Nietzsche 1969, p. 268).

Posed as such these figures stand in stark contrast. A somewhat different view emerges if we review these trajectories, perceiving the abjuring of sex not as a renunciation of sensuality and erotics. For this reinterpretation I turn to a critical signpost of philosophical erotics, Plato’s *Symposium*.

In the segment on ‘True Love’ in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1990) points out that despite the surface playfulness, lover’s games, squabbles and drunkenness, a profound ascetic transformation is
wrought in Plato’s *Symposium*. Greek erotic education is redefined; the art of courtship is displaced by questions of truth and asceticism (Foucault 1990, p. 230). Socrates is a consummate player of the sexual game, driving boys to frenzy. However his strength lies precisely in that he does not yield. ‘Total abstention is posited as a standard and the game of love is displaced by the spiritual value of the ideal of renunciation’ (Foucault 1990, p. 245). At the end of the *Symposium*, Alcibiades, dressed as a mock Dionysus, crowns the victor; Socrates absorbs and transcends Eros. Let us draw two conclusions, a) Socrates is an erotic ascetic and b) Socrates (Diotima’s) answer to the question, what is love, displaces love from a question of amorous behavior to an ontological plane. Love is redefined as love of the true, that which seeks to regenerate itself by conceiving of something eternal, human and animal procreation being only the most common type of conception (Foucault 1990, p. 236).

Reading Thoreau in this light we might note that perhaps no book is more sensual than *Walden* (1960), if we take sensuality to mean ‘heightened sense-perception’. ‘This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore’ (Thoreau 1960, p. 112). Is Thoreau not erotic because he is alone? Is he alone? Thoreau responds with characteristic bipolarity: ‘We are never alone … I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time’ (1960, pp. 117-18). The immortal lover Narcissus is displaced outwards by Thoreau, ‘I see by its face that it is visited by the same reflection; and I can almost say, Walden, is it you?’ (1960, p. 165).

Numerous analysts have argued that in Thoreau, sexuality is ‘sublimated’ into ‘nature’ (Harding 1991). But this is an impoverished picture of the human, as distinct from ‘nature’, one that *Walden* precisely disorients. ‘What is man but a mass of thawing clay? … Is not the hand a spreading palm leaf with its lobes and veins? … Who knows what the human body would expand and flow out to under a more genial heaven?’ (Thoreau 1960, p. 259). Love seeks to regenerate itself through conception. ‘Let us spend our lives in conceiving then’ (Thoreau 1960, p. 85). *Walden* ends with scenes of conception and regeneration, the thawing of spring, the ‘rebirth’ of a bug from dead wood and the promise of new dawns to come, ‘The sun is but a morning star’ (1960, p. 280), a line from the *Rig Veda*, a version of which also prefaces Nietzsche’s *Daybreak*. I will say that that like, but differently from Socrates, Thoreau is an erotic ascetic.

In this light we might also review Gandhi’s attempts to embody femininity and his arguments for the non-segregation of the sexes in a political struggle. What modes of togetherness was Gandhi potentially open to? An experiment of Gandhi’s widely passed over in ‘civilized’ silence in most accounts of his life, was his practice, carried on for about a year, of taking naked young women to bed, in particular two grand-nieces (Lal 2000). Gandhi described the objective of this experiment as wanting to ‘empty’ himself utterly and thus achieve the condition whereby God would possess him (Lal 2000, p. 117). From a ‘rational’ perspective this experiment appears quite dubious. In the conceptual terrain of this essay, it is explicable as an experiment by
Gandhi (in keeping with what Nietzsche would affirm as his ‘will to power’), to increase the potency of his body in the hope of influencing the body politic, in ways comparable to his fasts. The logic for such an experiment is available in our ordinary language that links two entirely different phenomena, ‘sex and violence’, in a single moral phrase. The unconscious relation is one of the unnecessary shedding of vital fluids, blood and semen. A common Indian belief has it that ‘forty drops of blood make one drop of semen’ (Lal 2000, p. 112). The path of Gandhian ‘self-purification’ in this case was an attempt to stem the flow of blood through an experiment with the withholding of semen. As a nullification of mutual desire, this particular type of eroticism flirts with androgyny and several authors have written of Gandhi’s aspirations to embody femininity. His grand-niece Manu, the bed sharer in these ‘vitality’ experiments later wrote a memoir of her years with Gandhi entitled \textit{Bapu—My Mother}. In his analysis of this experiment Lal fruitfully brings up Gandhi’s invocation of mythological images of life, such as the god Krishna, also known as \textit{Acyuta}, ‘one whose seed does not fall’ (Lal 2000, p. 132).

Although from a different strand of Hinduism than that favored by Gandhi, another key ‘seed-preserving’ ascetic deity in the mainstream Hindu pantheon is Shiva. In her study, \textit{Siva: The Erotic Ascetic}, Wendy Doniger describes the bipolar nature of Shiva, a fiery ascetic and a phallic lover, balancing the life-negating threat internal to ascetic chastity with the regenerative power of fertility and life-affirming sexuality, putting forward an interesting answer to the moral problem of asceticism and eroticism: controlled release, Tantrism, wherein desire is not denied but modulated (Doniger 1969, p. 334). Shiva alternates between phases of creative asceticism and intense lovemaking. Creation is continued, even replenished by the potentiality building exercises of Shiva’s asceticism. ‘She desires the bull who is held back’, it is said of Shiva’s wife, the goddess Parvati: a question of powers rather than of morals such as sin or virtue (Doniger 1969, p. 317). In iconic terms, Shiva is worshipped in many parts of India as an ‘Ithyphallic’ yogi, an erect phallus icon, as much a symbol of fertility as it is of chastity and the drawn-up seed. The dictionary definition of ‘Ithyphallic’ reads: ‘of or relating to the (“straight” or erect) phallus carried in the ancient festival of Bacchus-Dionysus’. In a related essay ‘Dionysus and Siva: Parallel Patterns in Two Pairs of Myths’ (1980), Wendy Doniger points to remarkable overlaps noticed even in antiquity, in Ancient Greek references to Shiva as the ‘Indian Dionysus’ (1980, p. 81). Aside from points of visual and ritual correspondence (wine, ecstasy, the bull, snakes, lion-skin, the mountains, nocturnal rites with drums and dancing, frenzied women, fertility, the imposition of an ‘alien’ cult upon established orthodoxy, the coincidence of opposites), Doniger explores thematic parallels in the mythological material. These thematic overlaps have to do with the denial and belated acknowledgement of a blatantly erotic, ‘outsider’, maverick God. The acceptance of this divine form entails an acknowledgement of human animality, as evidenced also in Shiva’s mythic encounter with the Pine Forest sages, inadequately aware of their own erotic selves. For Shiva would the forest-dwelling...
Thoreau (or other lesser souls in search of their own Walden) express an inadequate compromise between asceticism and eroticism? It all depends on the rhythm, the phase of life (Shiva himself alternates between asceticism and eroticism, frugality and excess), and the form of strength and self-awareness that one achieves.

Less often quoted than Nietzsche’s ‘God is dead’ statement is his proposition, equally serious and playful, ‘I would believe only in a God who could dance’ (1966, p. 41). Notwithstanding his passing familiarity with Buddhism and Indian Vedantic philosophy, we can only regret that Nietzsche was not acquainted with Shiva, creator, destroyer, affirmer of the terrible, dancing God par excellence. A near miss, it had the makings of a geo-philosophical romance between mythos and logos with an animating spark nowhere brighter than on the question of asceticism and eroticism. At any rate, this identification, however belated, of Nietzsche as a Shivaite philosopher, still gives us some delight. With Gandhi, Thoreau and Nietzsche, we have different varieties of erotic ascetics. This finding, far from being a ‘synthesis’, has the seeds of a much more delicate and experimental antagonism. For instance, one would be between Gandhi and Nietzsche (with Thoreau yet again expressing a bipolarity that tends towards both ends) around the rhythm between the possession (control) and dispossession (frenzy) of a self as an aspect of self-mastery, or the desirable range of experiments one might be open to in building ‘self-control’ or risking its loss. ‘For one must be able to lose oneself occasionally if one wants to learn something from things different from oneself’ (Nietzsche 1974, p. 244).

In their experiments these erotic ascetics search not for a safe ‘middle path’ but for ways of pushing the extremities and extending the divergent poles. Let us move further to another domain that daily concerns us, as ordinary and profound as erotic life, namely economics.

**Keeping an Account of Oneself**

People often criticize democratic capitalist lifestyles as being overly consumerist. What is prescribed as the alternative to these excesses? Take a recent statement, a commonplace moralism by the philosopher Slavoj Zizek, ‘In today’s era of hedonist permissivity as the ruling ideology, the time is coming for the Left to (re)appropriate discipline and the spirit of sacrifice…’ (2007, p. 2). To oppose hedonism and sacrifice is a theological obfuscation (God vs. Mammon) that I am trying to redefine as potential tensions between different types of excess (festive, sacrificial, philosophical…) and frugality (ascetic, sensual). Would ascetic frugality redeem our ‘hedonistic’ capitalist earth? In his classic thesis on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Max Weber describes the centrality of Puritan Christian ‘worldly’ asceticism (frugality as a worker/householder ethos rather than a monastic ideal) in enabling the emergence of capitalism in Europe and the United States (1976, p. 52). Stressing a methodical, frugal ideal for daily conduct and turning against ‘the spontaneous expression of undisciplined
impulses’ (the dance hall, pub, theater, eroticism, nudity etc.) (1976, p. 168), this ethos minimized expenditure and maximized savings thereby leaving large surpluses for investment in permanent capital, overseen by business owners who took the ‘legal acquisition of money as God’s duty’, employing sober, industrious workmen who ‘clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God’ (1976, p. 177). Whether or not we are wholly convinced by Weber’s thesis on the birth of capitalism, we can at least see that frugality is not inherently ‘anti-capitalist’. Do we now live in an era of ‘late capitalism’ where the Protestant Ethic is outgrown and excess and ‘spontaneous expression’ is encouraged? While this may seem true at some very general level in contemporary democratic cultures, let us be wary of our capacity for critique and its propensity towards the classic posture of ascetic philosophy, with its distrust of sensuality, ‘paganism’, icons and the ‘idolatry of the flesh’. Can we offer a more interesting perspective on life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?

For Weber, the clearest instance of the Protestant Ethic is found in Benjamin Franklin’s writings and American New England Puritan capitalist morality. A century after Franklin, this same soil delivered Thoreau. Is Thoreau’s methodical stress on economic precision (providing exact accounts of his expenditure and earnings in ‘Economy’, the opening chapter of Walden) and his exaltation of frugality only an intensification of his American Christian inheritance? To the contrary, following Stanley Cavell in The Senses of Walden, I take Thoreau to be providing a philosophical challenge to our lives as moral beings, in particular to New Testament concepts of material and spiritual economy. According to Cavell, Walden playfully disorients several terms of measuring value:

…profit and loss, rich and poor, cost and expense, borrow and pay, owe and own, business, commerce, enterprises, ventures, affairs, capital ... It is a brutal mocking of our sense of values, by forcing a finger of the vocabulary of the New Testament ... For that is the obvious origin or locus of the use of economic imagery to express, and correct, spiritual confusion: what shall it profit a man; the wages of sin; the parable of talents; laying up treasures; rendering unto Caesar; charity. What we call the Protestant Ethic, the use of worldly loss and gain to symbolize heavenly standing, appears in Walden as some last suffocation of the soul. America and its Christianity have become perfect, dreamlike literalizations or parodies of themselves. (Cavell 1992, p. 88)

In what ways does Thoreau challenge the Protestant Ethic, say the accumulation of surplus as a side effect of frugality? A recurrent aspect of Thoreau’s relation to objects is the theme of transience, expressed in images of destruction, departure, relinquishment and temporary attachment. Thoreau exalts a Native American practice of annually setting fire to one’s possessions, a thanksgiving ritual that begins with a fast and ends with a feast, ‘I have scarcely heard of a truer sacrament’ (Thoreau 1960, p. 61). A further disorientation arises in the perception of natural objects as bearing their own animate life,
thereby raising the question of how such assets are claimed as property. Here is how Cavell intensifies this tension:

And he [Thoreau] can say, evidently, in a worldly register, ‘A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone’, thus humoring the labor theory of possession that runs, in Locke’s formulation in his Second Treatise of Government, ‘Whatsoever [any man] removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his Labor with, and joyned to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his Property’. Locke wants something of the kind metaphysically to define ownership, and Marx wants the denial of something of the kind to reveal itself to us in the phantasmagoria of the exchange of commodities; so it is bracing that Thoreau isolates and makes explicit the religious, or animated, bearing of the features of nature left to us, as when he characterizes a lake (in the ‘Ponds’ chapter of Walden) as ‘earth’s eye’. (Cavell 2005, p. 278)

Cavell links Thoreau’s orientation to objects to the Bhagavad Gita’s conception of ‘un-attachment’ (transfigured in Walden into a concept of ‘interestedness’), an Indian text that Thoreau admired and emulated in structure (eighteen parts) and in concepts (Cavell 1992, p. 117). Relinquishing attachment is not, however, simply ‘renunciation’, since Thoreau’s interest in the world remains keener than most. Walden offers an education in political economy through a peculiar mode of associational behavior (if we take that to be a working definition of politics) that entails a delicate rhythm of turning away from and turning towards the world. Thoreau lives ‘one mile from any neighbor’, just near enough to be seen (Cavell 1992, p. 11). ‘Un-attachment’ to objects is not renunciation but rather a mode of growth. If a child grows up by giving up a prized object, say a doll or a gun, what do we have to abandon to ‘molt’ (Walden’s term for self-overcoming)? We might further ask: to whom are these teachings directed? Walden is addressed to everyman, particularly ‘those who are said to be in moderate circumstances’ (1960, p. 34), and those ‘seemingly wealthy’ who live ‘without arithmetic’ (1960, p. 175). Thoreau invites us to calculate: ‘The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run’ (1960, p. 30). What is calculated, rendered open for re-examination are our genuine necessities, ‘the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue’ (1960, p. 115)—in the peculiar singularities in which we may find them, or not. If we want to hunt in the morning and fish in the afternoon as Marx advised, Thoreau demonstrates a vital instance of this life in Walden, with the additional question, hunt for what? ’It would be nobler game to shoot one’s self’, as Thoreau tells us (1960, p. 269).

Let us review Gandhi’s somewhat different attack on the spirit of capitalism, an aspect of his turn away from ‘civilization’, resonant in as many ways as it is different from Thoreau. Gandhi like Thoreau is drawn to the Bhagavad Gita. ‘I turned to this dictionary of conduct ... Words like aparigraha (non-possession) and samabhava (equability)
gripped me … How was one to divest oneself of all possessions? Was not the body itself possession enough?’ (Gandhi 1927, p. 221). Gandhi’s attack on the spirit of capitalism has three related elements, technological, philanthropic and collective-experimental. The first element consists of Gandhi’s efforts, ambiguously viewed in post-independence India, to reorient ‘civilization’ by working towards an alternate mode of production. ‘Machinery has begun to desolate Europe. Ruination is now knocking at the Indian gates’ (Gandhi 1997, p. 107). This thought was most prominently put into practice in Gandhi’s movement for khadi (homespun cloth) as an alternative to ‘reproducing Manchester in India`, subsequently established as the dress code for the Indian National Congress. What of existing mill-owners? ‘We cannot condemn mill-owners; we can but pity them. It would be too much to expect them to give up the mills … Whether they do this or not, people can cease to use machine-made goods’ (1997, p. 109). The second, philanthropic element is the centrality of seva (service) to Gandhian practice, a form in which Gandhi is often memorialized in the ethos of Indian NGOs today. As a lawyer in South Africa Gandhi describes his longing ‘for some humanitarian work of a permanent nature’ (1927, p. 169). In contrast, philanthropy, very much a part of the American ethos, is repugnant to Thoreau. ‘If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life … I would rather suffer evil the natural way’ (1960, p. 66). A third and equally crucial element of Gandhian practice are experiments in communal living, the Ashrams in which Gandhi lived for most of his political life, the Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat and the Tolstoy Farm and Phoenix Settlement in South Africa.

For each of these tenets of his economic practice, a key companion text for Gandhi was John Ruskin’s Unto This Last: Four Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy (1862), the reading of which he describes in his autobiography as ‘The Magic Spell of a Book’: ‘I believe that I discovered some of my deepest convictions reflected in this great book of Ruskin … I translated it later into Gujarati, entitling it Sarvodaya (the welfare of all) … I arose with the dawn, ready to reduce these principles to practice’ (1927, p. 250). In Unto This Last, contrary to the ‘bastard science’ of Ricardo and Mill, Ruskin argues that the genuine ‘value of wealth depends on the moral sign attached to it’ (1862, p. 58). Moral signs are read in terms of ‘justice’ (1862, p. 58) and ‘human happiness’ conceived in spiritual terms: ‘I leave to the reader’s pondering, whether, among national manufactures that of Souls of a good quality may not at last turn out a quite leadingly lucrative one?’ (1862, p. 65). Justice is to be measured as ‘perfect and accurate exchange’ (1862, p. 84), even as the ‘action of justice’ is ‘to diminish the power of wealth in the hands of one individual, over masses of men, and to distribute it through a chain of men’ (1862, p. 93). Ruskin insists that his ideas are far from socialism, since ‘if there be any one point insisted on throughout my works more frequently than another, that one point is the impossibility of Equality’ (1862, p. 102). Acknowledging the existence, ‘the meeting, face to face, of rich and poor’, the question is how they will conduct themselves, whether
it be ‘gentle and just, or convulsive and destructive’ (1862, p. 71). What needs to be redistributed more than meat and money, according to Ruskin, is ‘wisdom’ (1862, p. 160), since ‘wise consumption is a far more difficult art than wise production’ (1862, p. 144). Wealth, for Ruskin, is a question of right use and right price, although the assignment of value, according to Ruskin is ‘a difficult science dependent on more than arithmetic’ (1862, p. 124), ‘...the nature of price is a very high metaphysical and psychical problem’ (1862, p. 136). At its highest measure, ‘there is no wealth but life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings...’ (1862, p. 156). And how is this wealth (of life) to be increased? ‘The maximum of life can only be reached by the maximum of virtue. In this respect the law of human population differs wholly from that of animal life’ (1862, p. 157). On Ruskin’s account, on this moral basis, both the rich and the poor can strive for their ‘right to be holy, perfect and pure’ (1862, p. 161).

We might discover a ferocious and yet delicate antagonism to Ruskin’s well-intentioned morality in what I take to be Nietzsche’s main text on economy (if we take economics to be a branch of ethics, dealing with human welfare), *Genealogy of Morals* (2007) that like *Unto this Last* expresses a horror of commercial civilization. While their key terms seem to be similar—value, debt, justice, life, noble, highest good, happiness, fixing prices, Ruskin is the very type of British moralist that Nietzsche’s text begins by criticizing. What is meant by the terms ‘noble’, ‘happy’, ‘highest good’ and ‘life’ that Ruskin’s conclusion exalts? The *Genealogy of Morals* starts where other moral texts such as Ruskin’s, end. The fundamental problem of morality according to Nietzsche, is one of setting ‘values’, the way in which these ‘values are valued’ (2007, p. 45). In this light Nietzsche’s claim of a ‘revaluation of all values’ unsettles a shared ground of religious and secular ideals. The temptation of secular and religious salvation moralities is to conceive of the ‘highest good’ or the maximization of life, as an absence of suffering, an impossible and therefore life-denying ideal for this world. In Nietzsche’s definition, ‘life functions essentially in an injurious, violent, exploitative and destructive manner, or at least these are its fundamental processes and it cannot be thought of without these characteristics’ (2007, p. 50). This is neither an optimistic nor a pessimistic view. Rather, what we have in Nietzsche are bipolar, coterminous rhythms of creation and destruction.

Keeping in mind the continuation of distress and destruction, Nietzsche defines ‘rich’ and ‘poor’: ‘There are two kinds of sufferers: first, those who suffer from the over-fullness of life—they want a Dionysian art and likewise a tragic view of life, a tragic insight—and then those who suffer from the impoverishment of life and seek rest, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves...’ (1974, p. 328). The values rich/poor, noble/base are linked in Nietzsche to ‘active’ and ‘reactive’ forms of life, a distinction crucial to his reinterpretation of the concept of ‘justice’. The most characteristic debasement of
justice is ‘to sanctify revenge with the term justice—as though justice were fundamentally simply a further development of the feeling of having been wronged—and belatedly to legitimize with revenge emotional reactions in general...’ (2007, p. 48). For Nietzsche, ‘to be just is always a positive attitude’ characterized not by reactive, but by active emotions including even, the lust for mastery (2007, p. 49). How is the spirit of revenge to be tempered? This is perhaps Gandhi’s greatest victory in the history of struggles against oppressors: victory over resentment, Nietzsche’s definition of nobility. According to the Genealogy of Morals, the ascetic ideal has been key to human welfare, controlling reactive sentiments by turning them ‘inwards’ (2007, p. 94). Ascetic ideals of frugality, even for the poor and the laity, are not ‘opium for the masses’, but rather (a comparable bewitchment?) according to Nietzsche, ‘a trick for the preservation of life’ (2007, p. 88), that may be undone, for good and for ill. Are these glad tidings? Nietzsche calls this a philosophy of ‘Dionysian pessimism’ (1968, p. 543). It ‘certainly does not need to be a doctrine of happiness: by releasing force that had been compressed and dammed to the point of torment it brings happiness’ (1968, p. 529).

Nietzsche’s direction is not towards an ‘other’ world but towards another world, the future, a vision of the up-building of life: the human is a bridge, a promise. An economic aspect of this vision is training in the art of give and take. In relation to Zizek’s opening exaltation of ‘self-sacrifice’, we might pose a more difficult question: how does one offer oneself up as a sacrifice or more simply, give? And in order to give what is it necessary to take? Like Thoreau, Nietzsche is repulsed by charity: ‘[Altruistic] beings preserve themselves best when they find a fitting place in another organism; if they fail to do this, they become grumpy, irritated, and devour themselves’ (1974, p. 176). And yet, he repeatedly exalts ‘the bestowing virtue’, ‘a gift-giving virtue is the highest virtue’ (1966, p. 74). ‘To give presents well is an art and the ultimate and most cunning master-art of graciousness’ (1966, p. 270). What we have here though contra Ruskin is not simply an ‘idealism’ of increasing virtue. Every over-coming in Nietzsche is also an ‘under’-going. ‘Man is beast and super-beast ... these belong together. With every increase of greatness and height in man, there is also an increase in depth and terribleness: one ought not to desire one without the other—or rather: the more radically one desires the one, the more radically one achieves precisely the other’ (1968, p. 531). A bipolar proposition par excellence! Perhaps Nietzsche’s truths are too unpalatable for us. The question then remains of what kinds of truths attract us. The relation to truth is a key aspect of asceticism, although the alchemy of this word combines very different valences.

Experiments with Truth

Last summer a rectangular plastic sun-guard adorned the rear window of many cars in the urban Indian landscape. On this sun-guard was a photo of Gandhi with the phrase ‘God is Truth’. What is it about this mass-produced moral relic that fuels its consumption? Let us explore
the energies given to the term ‘truth’ by ascetic ideals. In the case of Platonic asceticism, as Foucault points out, the play of desire is recast, ‘beyond the appearances of the object, love is a relation to truth’ (Foucault 1990, p. 239). Truth is grounded in ‘eternity’ and ‘beauty’, the form of the good (1990, p. 244). The ascetic aspect of this conception is that the relation to truth contains ‘an essential element of moderation’ (1990, p. 89). Moderation turns against Dionysian ‘frenzy’, as Socrates affirms, ‘The right kind of love has nothing frenzied or licentious about it’ (Foucault 1990, p. 91). In Greek ascetic exercises, moderation, as a form of self-mastery, is a practice of freedom crucial to the well-being of the city. ‘To be free in relation to pleasures was to be free of their authority; it was not to be their slave’ (1990, p. 79).

A comparable relation between freedom, truth, self-mastery and asceticism is to be found in Gandhi’s autobiography, My Experiments with Truth (1927). Gandhi describes himself as a ‘seeker’: ‘Truth became my sole objective. It began to grow in magnitude every day, and my definition of it also has been ever widening’ (1927, p. 29). All-embracing as this sounds, Gandhi describes his repugnance to various revered Hindu sites of pilgrimage, whose religious commerce upset him so much that he felt the need to ‘impose some act of self-denial on myself in atonement for the iniquity prevailing there and purify myself’ (1927, p. 325). Crucial to Gandhi’s quests are acts of self-examination and ‘purification’, conducted particularly through self-imposed vows of austerity, a recurrent topic of his autobiography. At the political level this concept of truth is further amplified with the Gandhian practice most famously associated with the Indian freedom struggle, Satyagraha (‘truth-force’). This term is most clearly set out in Hind Swaraj (‘Self Rule’/’Freedom for India’) (1997), Gandhi’s main text of political theory, a polemic against the existing revolutionary ‘extremist’ and ‘moderate’ reformist positions of Indian nationalism and conceptions of freedom. The key expository task of Hind Swaraj is a redefinition of the concept of ‘force’. Gandhi calls the extremist revolutionary force of arms ‘Brute Force’: ‘What is granted under fear can be retained only so long as the fear lasts’ (1997, p. 78). In contrast the strategy of the moderates, petitioning the British for gradual reforms, seems equally flawed to Gandhi since ‘a petition, without the backing of force, is useless’ (1997, p. 84). Gandhi calls his alternative practice of force Satyagraha, ‘truth-force’, also known as ‘passive resistance’: ‘You can govern us only so long as we remain the governed; we shall no longer have any dealings with you’ (Gandhi 1997, p. 85). How Satyagraha was put into practice has been well recorded by historians and filmmakers. Crucially for our argument, ‘truth-force’ is inextricably linked to self-mastery through austerity. In Hind Swaraj Gandhi sets out the strictest of ‘conditions for passive resisters: chastity, poverty, truth, fearlessness’ (1997, p. 96), a variant of the ascetic ideal, as we have been mapping it in various spiritual-material domains.

Gandhi claimed of Thoreau’s ‘Civil Disobedience’ that it had offered him ‘proof’ of his methods. A crucial overlap here regards the
question of consent (what we might call the ‘social contract’), how consent is given and how it might be withdrawn. The question of slavery in America animates the problem of consent for Thoreau, since even those who are opposed to it cannot ‘afford’ to withdraw their consent, since ‘they cannot spare the protection of the existing government, and they dread the consequences to their property and families of disobedience to it’ (2004, p. 50). The political salience of frugality for Thoreau is as a precondition for refusing allegiance to an objectionable state. Written some years after ‘Civil Disobedience’, *Walden* is a quest, an invitation to this life of self-emancipation, lived without necessitating slavery. To what extent can we measure our entanglements with the world, the good and evil we sustain? The case of slavery was clear enough, other questions may be less so. From what perspective is a government, a state of affairs, our way of life to be examined? As an ‘experiment of living’ (Thoreau 1960, p. 47) *Walden* sets out coordinates for further research into renewable definitions of truth. The research for truths in *Walden* involves both scholastic and mystic methods. What we might call the scholastic element is the striving for precision in the observations that compose *Walden*, a task Thoreau calls an ‘account’ (1960, p. 22). Learning to ‘keep pace with the seasons’ (1960, p. 269), Thoreau reports the date of the freezing over of Walden Pond, its date of melting, its exact temperature compared to Flints’ Pond, the sound and style of its thawing, its precise depth. Is Thoreau’s precision an end to all enchantment? Not quite. What I am calling the mystic element of Thoreau’s investigations is a further intensification of the scholastic state of heightened perception. *Walden* charts varying states of consciousness, expressing rapture, reverie, revelation, issuing not from divinity, but rather from ‘intelligence with the earth’ (1960, p. 119). ‘Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in … I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars … My head is hands and feet’ (1960, p. 86). Reality is both fathomed and unfathomable. Certain oppressions or burdens, such as slavery, must be cast off, others have to be borne. In what mood shall these fated burdens be borne? Thoreau offers us varying moods, through the bipolar play in *Walden* between ‘mourning’ and ‘morning’, the former for certain conditions which must be borne, the latter as an intimation of new worlds within this one.

What is the political salience of ‘morning’? It is the quest for a perspective from which our present state, the taken for granted (as slavery and colonialism once were and who knows what else is today?) will reveal itself in its twilight. ‘Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep’ (1960, p. 79). The ascetic element of this quest is the examination of our grossest necessaries, ‘animal life, is nearly synonymous with the expression, animal heat … The grand necessity then, for our bodies, is to keep warm, to keep the vital heat in us’ (1960, p. 16). What constitutes an education in this regard? ‘How can a man be a philosopher and not maintain his vital heat by better methods than other men?’ (1960, p. 17). *Walden*, an account of such a life, leaves words as embers from which others may draw sustenance and
provocation: ‘The words which express our faith and piety are not definite; yet they are significant and fragrant like frankincense to superior natures’ (1960, p. 273).

In his observations of temperatures at Walden Pond, Thoreau playfully remarks that perhaps Thaw is a more powerful god than Thor (1960, p. 260). The differences between these two states, defrost and thunderstorm, might well describe the variation between Thoreau and Nietzsche in their respective claims of freedom, truth and self-mastery. ‘I am no man, I am dynamite’, Nietzsche thunders (1969, p. 326). In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche, like Thor, a wielder of the hammer, delivers ‘a lightning bolt of truth’: ‘everything that has hitherto been called ‘truth’ has been recognized as the most harmful, insidious, and subterranean form of lie; the holy pretext of ‘improving’ mankind, as the ruse for sucking the blood of life itself. Morality as vampirism’ (1969, p. 334). The new problem for Nietzsche is that ‘the will to truth needs a critique – let us define our own task with this – the value of truth is tentatively to be *called into question*’ (2007, p. 113). Why ‘tentatively’? This is because Nietzsche is not ‘denying’ the value of truth. It is rather the ‘idealists’ who have been ‘higher swindlers’ (1969, p. 331), poisoning our sense of reality with pictures of ‘another world’. In contrast, ‘the self-overcoming of morality, out of truthfulness; the self-overcoming of the moralist, into his opposite – into me...’ (1969, p. 328). Nietzsche calls himself an *immoralist* (1969, p. 331). His discovery is the calamity of morality: ‘That one taught men to despise the very first instincts of life; that one mendaciously invented a ‗soul’, a ‗spirit’ to ruin the body; that one taught men to experience the presupposition of life, sexuality, as something unclean; that one looks for the evil principle in what is most profoundly necessary for growth, in severe self-love...’ (1969, p. 332). What constitutes the severity of this self-love? That truth henceforth becomes a question of daring, of endurance: ‘How much truth does a spirit *endure*, how much truth does it *dare*? More and more that became for me the real measure of value’ (1969, p. 218).

In the segment on ‘Dionysus’ in *The Will to Power*, we see some of the spiritual truths that Nietzsche is willing to affirm. ‘You are all afraid of the conclusion: ‘from the world we know, a very different god would be demonstrable, one who at any rate is *not* humanitarian’—and, in short, you hold fast to your God and devise for him a world we do *not* know’ (1968, p. 534). Is Nietzsche then an atheist? We should ask instead, what does Nietzsche mean by the word ‘god’? I offer a definition that becomes relevant for even the most hardened secularists, once we understand the genealogy of our morals: Gods are forces of nature (human and non-human), cultivated, a process by which the human animal is bred and tamed. God is a being to whose tune we humans learn how to dance. Nietzsche adds a supplement to this definition:

> And how many new gods are still possible! As for myself, in whom the religious, that is to say god-forming instinct occasionally becomes active at impossible times—how differently, how variously
The divine has revealed itself to me each time! ... And how many new ideals are, at bottom, still possible! (1968, p. 534)

The world must be transfigured, recreated. The Dionysian affirmation for Nietzsche offers philosophy the chance to drop its 'ascetic cocoon', its 'monk's habit': 'The peculiarly withdrawn attitude of the philosophers, denying the world, hating life, doubting the senses, desensualized, which has been maintained until quite recently to the point where it almost counted for the philosophical attitude as such' (2007, p. 84). In this way, philo-sophia, love, and thereby pursuit of truth, becomes possible again towards rather than away from this earth, although with each of our three figures we find somewhat different types of love and daring and experimentation.

**War and Peace**

If we dare to, we might ask, what is the philosophical attitude to war? Is it a self-righteous pacifism? Or more genteel utopian hopes ('They say I'm a dreamer...' as John Lennon sings). In none of our three figures do we find this to be the imagination. Thoreau is often pictured as a genteel soul with a view of nature as entirely peaceful, to which one would oppose Hobbes or Werner Herzog, depending on one's taste. Despite his sojourn in the forest, would we describe Thoreau as a relatively 'tame' protagonist? On the contrary, in *Walden* we may sense the force he exerts in the forest: 'At midnight, when there was a moon, I sometimes met with hounds in my path prowling about the woods, which would skulk out of my way, as if afraid, and stand silent amid the bushes till I had passed' (1960, p. 236). Cavell gestures to the tonalities of a heroic epic, that most worldwide genre of a 'song of war' in *Walden*, which accounts for the otherwise puzzling presence of a poem that insinuates a critique of asceticism ('We do not require ... your forced falsely exalted passive fortitude') and an exaltation of warrior ideals ('...that heroic virtue for which antiquity hath left no name, but patterns only, such as Hercules, Achilles, Theseus', (1960, p. 71)). The hero of *Walden* is on a quest. His mission is to bring our words back to life, a pursuit that brings him heroic knowledge: 'The hero departs from his hut and goes into an unknown wood from whose mysteries he wins a boon that he brings back to his neighbors. The boon of Walden is Walden. Its writer cups it in his hand, sees his reflection in it, and holds it out to us' (Cavell 1992, p. 119).

Thoreau is hero and bard, providing on one occasion, a detailed and gruesome chronicle of a war in his yard between neighboring tribes of red and black ants, in a feat of observation for any naturalist, even placing three combatants under a microscope: 'the dark carbuncles of the sufferer’s eyes shone with ferocity such as war only could excite ... the black soldier had severed the heads of his foes from their bodies, and the still living heads were hanging on either side of him like ghastly trophies...' (1960, p. 196). In admiration Thoreau makes a pointed crack: 'I have no doubt that it was a principle they fought for, as much as our ancestors, and not to avoid a three-penny tax on their
Are there other battles, on issues more valuable than a ‘three-penny tax’ that are worth fighting for? Cavell points to a ‘song of war’ present in the background of Walden, the epic Mahabharata, in its most famous segment the Bhagavad Gita that begins with the warrior hero Arjuna in a dilemma regarding whether or not he ought to go to war against his cousins. Here is how Cavell describes the resonance between the Gita and Walden: ‘it begins with its hero in despair at the action before him; and it ends with his understanding and achieving of resolution, in particular his understanding of the doctrine … that the way of knowledge and the way of work are one and the same, which permits him to take up the action it is his to perform and lead his army against an army of his kindred’ (Cavell 1992, p. 118). Cavell tentatively suggests that on the question of slavery, Thoreau anticipates the American Civil War, ‘this people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people’ (Thoreau 2004, p. 43).

We might reconsider such songs of war. Violence becomes more traumatic in recent times, a problem in evidence for instance in the English war poetry of the early 20th century. No more is the song of war a matter of valor or the divine play of warrior gods. Technology has changed the face of war, a shift that intensifies as battles come closer to being waged as video-games from the attacker’s perspective. Eerie as these new wars may be, the hope for a better future should not lead us to misunderstand our past and the longstanding moral and theological tensions between war and peace. The history of bloodshed, mutilation and blood sacrifices, as Nietzsche points out in the Genealogy of Morals, is not to be understood as mere ‘savagery’. War, the warrior ideal, warrior gods and the agonistic competition between neighboring tribes was central, globally, to the human way of life. Most of the ‘pagan’ religions (Vedic Indian, Roman, Iranian, pre-Christian Europe) cannot be understood without this perspective, as Georges Dumezil’s classic texts on warrior divinities tell us. Morality according to Nietzsche constitutes a turn away from these gods with the rise of ascetic ideals in several world religions. Written some decades before the First World War, the Genealogy of Morals exalts the earlier ‘aristocratic-warrior mode of evaluation’ with concepts such as ‘festive cruelty’, justice as ‘active aggression’ etc. Are these symptoms of Nietzsche’s ‘nostalgia’ for the warrior ideal? I will argue that something quite different is going on in these recurrent references to war and in Nietzsche’s description of himself as ‘war-like’. To clarify this point we must sharpen a difference between Gandhi and Nietzsche. Consider a letter by an unnamed Indian correspondent who had clearly been reading Nietzsche with some enthusiasm, published along with Gandhi’s reply, in Self-Restraint vs. Self-Indulgence (Gandhi 1928). Here are segments of the correspondent’s letter, arguing against several aspects of Gandhi’s moral arsenal, sexual and otherwise:

Man is above all an artist and a creator. He is not satisfied with bare necessity, but must have beauty, color and charm as well … He has made every necessity into an art and has spent tons of
blood on them. He cannot be ‘simple’ as Rousseau, Ruskin, Tolstoy, Thoreau and Gandhiji would like him to be. War he must have as its necessary corollary which also he has transformed into a great art … ‘Nature’ cannot be his teacher. Those who appeal to it overlook that it does not only consist of hills and dales and flower-beds, but flood, cyclone and earthquake as well. ‘From an artistic standpoint’, says Nietzsche the iconoclast, ‘Nature is no model. It exaggerates, distorts and leaves gaps. Nature is the accident.’ … Just as the perfection of other arts does not interfere with the science of life, with the whole life (in the Nietzschean sense of the term) – so also I will not allow the ideal of Brahmacharya to dominate other values … We have made such a hobgoblin of it! … Scriptures such as Prashno-Upanishad say ‘there is Brahmacharya where sexual union occurs only at night (i.e. as opposed to abnormal cohabitation during the daytime).’ Here normal sex life itself was spoken of as Brahmacharya, the rigid conception of which began after we had already topsy-turvyed the proper scheme of all the values of life. (Quoted in Gandhi 1928, p. 99)

The correspondent makes a series of Nietzschean sounding points: man is an artist, art deifies necessity, war is one such art, nature is both creation and destruction, the ideal of chastity ‘topsy-turvy’ the values of life. Now listen to Gandhi’s well-argued defense, working with a different vision of art, life and up-building:

I fear the correspondent has misapplied his reading. Man is undoubtedly an artist and a creator … His instinct for the artistic taught him to discriminate and to know that any conglomeration of colors was no mark of beauty, nor every sense enjoyment good in itself … Similarly, when he pondered over the phenomenon of the pleasurableness of sexual union, he discovered that, like every other organ of sense, this one of generation had its use and abuse … The correspondent says well that man makes art out of his necessities. We should therefore beware of that art which has not necessity as its basis … ‘War he must have’. But the correspondent is wrong when he says that ‘as its necessary corollary he has transformed it into a great art’. He has hardly yet learnt the art of war. He has mistaken false war for true, even as our forefathers, under a mistaken view of sacrifice, instead of sacrificing their base passions, sacrificed innocent non-human fellow creatures as many do even at the present day. We have yet to learn the art of true war. Surely there is neither beauty nor art in what is going on today on the Abyssinian frontier. The correspondent has chosen unhappy (for him) names for his illustrations. Rousseau, Ruskin, Thoreau and Tolstoy were first-class artists of their time … The correspondent seems to have misapplied the word nature. When an appeal to man is made to copy or study nature, he is not invited to follow what the reptiles do or even what the king of the forest does. He has to study man’s nature at its best, i.e. I presume his regenerate nature, whatever it may be. Perhaps it requires considerable effort to know what regenerate nature is. It is dangerous nowadays to refer to old teachers. I suggest to the correspondent that it is unnecessary to bring in Nietzsche or even Prashno-Upanishad. The question for me is past the stage of quotations. (Gandhi 1928, p. 101)
In this finely conducted *agon*, Gandhi, in my opinion, delivers the winning riposte: ‘We have yet to learn the art of true war.’ And this precisely is Gandhi’s task, the education he offers, his specificity as a warrior-ascetic. His battle, perhaps his most unique achievement in world-history, was to turn war back into a nobler art form, *Satyagraha*. Those who perform *Satyagraha* are warrior-ascetics. ‘Everybody does not become a warrior for the wish’ as Gandhi says in *Hind Swaraj* (1997, p. 98). Thus the rules of *Brahmacharya*, poverty, chastity, truth, must remain so strict since these are the preconditions to wage this specific art of war. This re-identification of Gandhi as a Napoleonic ascetic gave me a better sense of the waning of his peace-time significance and his ambiguous value in post-independence India, most often as a moral statue or a photograph devoid of life.23

Redefined in these terms as warriors, Gandhi and his army of *Satyagrahis* are vulnerable to what Dumezil in his studies of the warrior ideal has called the ‘fatality of the warrior’ (1970, p. 106). While the battle is raging and a strong antagonist focuses his energies, the warrior is at his best. Problems begin after the war is over and the warrior finds himself somewhat of a stranger in the society he had staked himself to protect. Without an object, the warrior’s force is a problem that may be settled, but might equally turn inwards or outwards at those in his vicinity. This better explains a problem I considered in an earlier essay (Singh 2006), in accounting for the disenchantment of the elderly Gandhians I knew in contemporary India. Not quite ascetics or warriors but still desiring frugality, uncertain of their relation to post-independence India, they were moralizing, somewhat bitter, speaking of past glories and of presently degenerating values. In that earlier essay I let the matter rest with an image of Shakespeare’s Polonius, sermonizing while the youthful Laertes laughs behind his back. Now I add to it the more serious problem of the fatality of the warrior, combined with the potential disenchantments of frugality that Nietzsche alerts us to. We might call this moralizing tendency an atrophy of agonistic instincts: a watchful eye, used to keeping accounts, turns outwards from itself to judge its neighbors. Alert to this potential debasement of agonistic instincts, Nietzsche comes alive, illuminating the threats of moralization internal to the ascetic ideal, as also the dangers of ordinary entropy after the revolutionary excitement of battle dies down.

Dionysus, I will say, is a peace-time ideal. The exaltation of the ‘aristocratic-warrior mode of evaluation’ and the critique of ascetic ideals in the *Genealogy of Morals* is not a symptom of ‘nostalgia’ for the warrior ideal. Coming closer to Nietzsche’s text, we see that the ascetic ideal ascends after the warrior ideal is already in decline. Already in 7th century BC, Hesiod is complaining: the Heroic Age is over (Walcot 1979, p. 350). The ascetic ideal ‘springs from the protective and healing instincts of a degenerating life’ (Nietzsche 2007, p. 88). A spiritual transformation is underway. No more war? What then do we make of Nietzsche’s descriptions of himself: ‘I am warlike by nature. Attacking is one of my instincts. Being able to be an enemy, being an enemy—perhaps that presupposes a strong nature;
in any case, it belongs to every strong nature’ (1969, p. 231). These declarations of war by Nietzsche cannot be understood without a related philosophical achievement that he claims for himself, the ‘spiritualization of enmity’:

The spiritualization of sensuality is called love: it is a great triumph over Christianity. A further triumph is our spiritualization of enmity. It consists in profoundly grasping the value of having enemies ... The Church has at all times desired the destruction of its enemies: we immoralists and anti-Christians, see that it is to our advantage that the Church exist. In politics too, enmity has become much more spiritual – much more prudent, much more thoughtful, much more forbearing. Almost every party grasps that it is in the interest of its own self-preservation that the opposing party should not decay in strength; the same is true of grand politics. (1990, p. 53)

I will draw two implications from this conception of war, the ‘spiritualization of enmity’, best understood as a reanimation of the Greek agon. The first implication is primarily philosophical. Nietzsche is one of the foremost exponents of what I earlier called ‘non-dialectical’ thought, part of the task of which is to preserve and to sharpen an opposition, rather than to resolve it into a ‘higher’ synthesis, thereby dissolving the agon as Socrates is prone to doing (which is why Nietzsche takes him to be an enemy). This is the philosophical art of war. A broader implication, not necessarily limited to philosophical method, regards a suspicion of various types of ‘idealism’, which imagine their utopia as a world in which all agonistic relations are at an end (‘Imagine all the people, living life in peace...’), a recipe in Nietzsche’s terms for the stagnation and ‘taming’ of humanity. Perhaps the one competitive ideal with the most currency at present is that of the ‘free market’ (regarded with varying degrees of suspicion by Nietzsche, Gandhi and Thoreau, as being among the lower forms of competition). Whatever our degree of distrust of this ideal and the lies and truth behind it, the ‘spiritualization of enmity’ is a signpost of vigilance for ideals that hinge on a denial of agonistic instincts, which may persist and turn haywire. We are yet to learn the art of war. Contrary to appearance, I will say that Gandhi is a philosopher of war (and this redefinition does not reduce his honor as an ‘apostle of non-violence’, it only transfigures it) and Nietzsche is a philosopher of peace, while Thoreau, as in earlier cases, shows bipolar elements of both. Their visions of war and peace hinge not on ‘just’ or ‘unjust’ war but on the art and modality of conflict. In no case do we have a self-evident pacifism. The problem though, as Gandhi puts it, is that these questions of war and peace are soon past the stage of quotations and with that our patience for philosophy.

Conclusion: Steps towards Geo-philosophy (a Cartographic Art)

Foucault tells us that his History of Sexuality is not a history of ‘discourses’ about sex (1990, p. 3). It is rather the continuation of a task of mapping a comparative genealogy of morality (1990, p. 25). I have tried to use it as such, extending a few steps further, to explore
tensions of asceticism and eroticism, frugality and excess, war and peace. These global tensions could not have been examined simply by stressing the locality, say the geographical territory or nationality of each of our three figures. I have tried instead to explore a more mobile but still relatively specific set of resonances and differences: a Greek Orphic Christian Vaishnava Tantric Gandhi, a Shivaite Dionysian Nietzsche, a Vedantic bipolar Thoreau. We have gone over and under the realm of nationalist and identity politics to explore more subterranean, more elemental differences. We discovered Gandhi in his element, in his experiments with ascetic ideals, austerity, chastity, truth-force, and as a philosopher of war, a warrior-ascetic, an overcomer of revenge emotions, perhaps the noblest artist of combat to have lived in a while. Have we understood the difference between Thoreau and Nietzsche? I gestured intermittently to these differences but I should make it clearer. Nietzsche is to Thoreau as fire is to water, as mountains are to ponds and plains, as ecstatic dance is to contemplative rapture. In this sense, words such as ‘nature’ are too general when loosely used to describe these philosophical lives.

These de-territorial redefinitions are significant, both for our everyday morality, and for our scholarly vocabulary. In terms of our everyday morality, I have not proposed a ‘solution’ to the moral stakes of frugality and excess with which we began, but rather suggested coordinates along which we may further orient and seek ourselves. Who knows what future enthusiasts might learn from Shiva on how to better modulate between asceticism and eroticism, and from Thoreau on how to keep pace with the seasons, and how to treat austerity as a mode of heightened pleasure, intensifying and modulating our demands on nature, and from Nietzsche on Dionysian severity. In these different modes of experimentation, translatable through many cultures, in this continuum of frugality and excess, we have the seeds of more specific relations and oppositions than those that would be described in terms such as East and West, or traditional and modern, or secular and religious. These moral variables illuminate differences internal to cultures, religions and selves that are as, if not more crucial than the differences between them. Faced with the superiority of such distinctions internal to selves, cruder ideas of difference such as the ‘clash of civilizations’ have to skulk away in embarrassment.

A more delicate problem arises with a (geographical?) term such as ‘post-colonial’, if we were to identify, say Gandhi, as such. Who among us is not post-colonial? Or, to pose the question differently: What, if any, is our postcolonial understanding of the global history of ethics and human cultivation, if we do not want to see it as only European? In almost every case, scholars will mouth evasive phrases like ‘very particular’, ‘complex and contradictory’, to hide the fact that we have no answers. Is this only a postcolonial problem? In some ways we are all recovering from the epoch of colonialism, Europeans and non-Europeans, seeking coordinates of relatedness and difference, in finding our way about the world. Some will scoff at the experimental coordinates I have sought here, saying that they are fine for those who can ‘afford’ them and will point instead to wicked
governments and states of suffering. Our question to such reactionaries: suppose you find yourself, by chance, with a government you approve of, or in a situation of relative peace, how do you hope to spend your time? What is the education you want to offer to those in moderate or somewhat better circumstances? In preparation for this education I have tried to explore coordinates with spiritual and political elements.

In these movements between the spiritual and the political, how might we name the region and type of thought, neither wholly secular nor definably religious, that our three figures in this essay express? I will use the term ‘political theologies’ as a way of conceiving movements between religious and secular modes of thought and life. The concept (in the singular ‘political theology’) is most famously associated in the twentieth century with Carl Schmitt who argued that modern images of authority and power are ‘secularized theological concepts’ (1985, p. 36). Perhaps the best-known argument on morality as a ‘secularized theological concept’ is Max Weber’s thesis on the Protestant ethic (from which the divine may recede, as Weber argues), the stakes of which we encountered above. A crucial question though, is what do we mean by ‘theology’? In what ways might we further pluralize and redefine the term political theology? In this essay, I have gestured to more diverse variants of asceticism and images of divinity than the Puritan Christian trajectory central to Weber’s theos, or the monotheistic ‘decisionist’ theology assumed by Schmitt. In light of the analysis above, we might define ‘theos’, as variable logics of transcendence, even if we conceive of transcendence in entirely worldly terms such as ‘up-building’ and forms of self-overcoming. As an image of up-building and heightened life, ascetic ideals may animate even godless moralities, as Nietzsche teaches us. Even if God is eliminated altogether we still conceive of heightened life, just as capitalist democracies encourage the proliferation of idols and icons, super human if not fully divine. The distinction between religion and secularism hinges on the modes of transcendence we seek. We participate in political theologies even if we belong to no organized religion. Our images of transcendence affect our ideas of life, in how we aspire and conceive of a higher quality of life, aspects of which I tried to explore through the variables of diet, erotics, economics, truth, and war and peace. We might identify ascetic ideals (in their divergent modes), as a key concept of political theologies, among others that I will attempt to outline in future work.

A further clarification: the term ‘political theologies’ signals a condition of thought and life shared by various competing orientations. Within this global condition, I name my own orientation as ‘Geo-philosophy’, taking up a term conceived by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, among the finest exponents of ‘non-dialectical’ thought (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, p. 85). Rather than offering a binding definition, this essay demonstrates elements of this approach. Geo-philosophy, as I have suggested, is non-dialectical. What I recurrently refer to as bipolarity above is called ‘schizophrenia’ by Deleuze and Guattari, as in their two volumes Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1983, 1987)
(which might less dramatically have been titled ‘Capitalism and non-dialectical thought’). A second, signature characteristic of Geophilosophy, in evidence in each of our three figures, is a relationship to the earth, privileging this world rather than any other such as a religious heaven or a secular utopia. In its relation to this earth, Geo-philosophy is a cartographic art, a way of making world-maps. A crucial cartographic question, in terms of movements within and from specific territories is how one ‘deterritorializes’, as Deleuze and Guattari call it (1987, p. 142), through over-comings and undertakings, passages that I have tried to map with each of our three figures.

After an initial survey, it seems to me that what lies in front of us are seeds, as yet only infant steps towards an eventual, genuinely international philosophical culture, perhaps via a transfigured Hellenism and thereafter in unforeseen directions. Will the aim of this eventual culture be a perpetual peace: we are all the same? ‘The world is flat’, as a bestseller tells us? The world is flat: only a snake could have said that. For us bipeds a step also means that we could lose our balance, in learning how to dance. But in this loss, perhaps precisely because of it, we may find a new set of coordinates, a new extremity, a new pole. As Thoreau puts it, the sun is but a morning star.

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Notes

1 In his striking reinterpretation of Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze sounds the war-cry ‘No compromise is possible between Hegel and Nietzsche’ (Deleuze 1983, p. 156). I leave this as a signpost in the journey away from dialectical thought.

2 For a different but related perspective on Gandhi’s practice of fasting, also placed in relation to Nietzsche, see Joseph Alter’s (2000, p. 28) thought-provoking essay.
As a signature instance of his steadfastness to vegetarianism, independent of religious and medical authority, Gandhi in his autobiography discusses how he and his wife Kasturba wagered her life, leaving a doctor’s premises in South Africa in a critical condition because of her refusal to ingest a meat-based liquid treatment (Gandhi 1927, p. 271). A well-intentioned Swami (ascetic) was brought in to convince them to let her take the treatment, quoting sacred Hindu texts from the era of Vedic sacrificial religion prior to the ascendancy of vegetarian morality in Indian religious life. Gandhi was unyielding, ‘I held my view on vegetarianism independently of religious texts’ (1927, p. 271).


In 1931, Gandhi, by now world famous, delivered an address to the London Vegetarian Society, of which he had formerly been a member, with Henry Salt seated to his right, declaring ‘It was Mr. Salt’s book A Plea for Vegetarianism, which showed me why, apart from a hereditary habit, and apart from my adherence to a vow administered to me by my mother, it was right to be a vegetarian. He showed me why it was a moral duty incumbent on vegetarians not to live upon fellow animals’ (quoted in Salt 1993, p. xxx).

Nietzsche’s famous antagonism with the musician Richard Wagner also had a dietary element to it, as part of a broader conflict of moralities. In his later years Wagner showed an interest in vegetarianism, insinuating that a degenerate humanity ‘falls from grace’ by eating flesh (Finck 1901 [2004], p. 389). Here is Nietzsche’s response in his polemic, The Case of Wagner (1911): ‘The definition of a vegetarian: a creature who has need of a corroborating diet. To recognize what is harmful as harmful, to be able to deny oneself what is harmful, is a sign of youth, of vitality. That which is harmful lures the exhausted: cabbage lures the vegetarian ... Wagner increases exhaustion: therefore he attracts the weak and exhausted to him’ (1911, p. 13).

My reading of Thoreau is deeply influenced by Stanley Cavell’s The Senses of Walden (1992 [1970]). For a creative rendering of Thoreau’s ‘techniques of the self’ (in Foucault’s terms) see Jane Bennett’s Thoreau’s Nature (2002).

On the eve of Indian independence, it is well known that rather than participate in nationalist celebrations, Gandhi spent those months engaged in various efforts to stem the communal violence that had broken out in different parts of the country. Fasting was one such attempt, partially successful, as is well described in Attenborough’s popular film Gandhi. In 1946, Gandhi arrived in Noakhali (in present day Bangladesh), a scene of recent massacres and ongoing violence. He was joined by Manu, his grandniece, who often accompanied him in the years after his wife Kasturba’s death. Gandhi told her of a ‘bold and original experiment, whose heat will be great’ (quoted in Lal 2000, p. 116). This experiment involved sleeping together naked in bed. Following the criticism of co-workers, Gandhi suspended this experiment in February 1947.
The title is a pun since Bapu (father) was an affectionate and popular epithet for Gandhi, less formal than the more famous epithet Mahatma (Great Soul).

Gandhi is closer to Vaishnava Hinduism, a primarily vegetarian strand of the religion, favoring the worship of Krishna and Rama, as distinct from and on certain points opposed to Shivaite Hinduism allied to Shiva and Shakti (the latter being diverse forms of the divine feminine principle), in particular the Goddess Kali. Gandhi gives a gruesome account of his 1902 visit to the Kali temple in Calcutta: ‘On the way I saw a stream of sheep going to be sacrificed to Kali … We were greeted by rivers of blood. I could not bear to stand there’ (Gandhi 1997, p. 71). However, Gandhi is not to be wholly identified with this or any one religion, since as I have indicated, he shares affinities to Jainism, Tantrism, pacifist Christianity, Greek Orphic religion and Greco-Roman (Stoic) asceticism, and to outright denials of religious authority.

In Hindu mythology, the creator Brahma’s sons are passionless ascetic-yogis (Doniger 1969, p. 326) and centuries of mythological-conceptual production go into crafting Shiva’s ‘bipolar’ divine response to the tension between asceticism and eroticism. The tension is engaged, according to Doniger, at two levels, logical and mythological. Logically, the contradiction between asceticism and eroticism is mediated in Shiva through the principle of heat which he both absorbs and generates: Agni, the Vedic sacrificial fire (the primary aim of the rite being fertility and regeneration), Kama, the heat of erotic desire, and Tejas, the heat of asceticism. In mythological terms, the central, recurrent episode of the Saiva (Purana) literature is Shiva’s burning of Kama (‘Eros’), partly in retaliation to an arrow fired by Kama. This destruction (and absorption) of the God of erotic desire fundamentally alters the character of Shiva, leading to his marriage with Parvati. In the process of alteration Shiva is strengthened rather than weakened, becoming a leading god of the post-Vedic pantheon.

Dionysus, in turn, is often referred to as a ‘God from the Orient’ and in perhaps the most well known Dionysian text, Euripides’ Bacchae, he is said to be returning to Thebes after his victorious journey through Asia.

I should re-clarify that there is a ‘bipolar’ tension rather than a simple opposition to ascetic ideals in Nietzsche. For instance, in the Genealogy of Morals (2007), the ascetic ideal is partly the condition of the highest strength for a philosopher (2007, pp. 77-81). So Nietzsche is not ‘against’ the ascetic ideal, if we want to speak in terms of for and against. And yet he declares ‘The non-sensuality of philosophy hitherto as the greatest nonsensicality of man’ (1968, p. 538). This non-sensuality arises from the philosophical attraction to ascetic ideals: ‘Undeniably, as long as there are philosophers on earth and whenever there have been philosophers (from India to England, to take the opposite poles of a talent for philosophy), there exists a genuine philosophers’ irritation and rancor against sensuality’ (2007, p. 76). What I am calling a ‘bipolar’ tension here is Nietzsche’s affirmation of sensuality simultaneous with his declaration of the ascetic ideal as a possible precondition of strength for philosophy.

Thoreau is more reserved in his views on technology, sometimes observing it with appreciation, as he would a brook or a hawk, as when he says of the train ‘…this traveling demigod, this cloud compeller … the hills
echo with his snort like thunder … it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it’ (1960, p. 101), or bemused at other times, as when he says of the new telegraph line being built from Maine to Texas, across the United States, ‘Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate’ (1960, p. 48). Having said that, the conditions of British factories in the 19th century troubled many a sensitive soul (this being one of the main spurs for Gandhi’s struggle for homespun cloth). In Walden, Thoreau asserts, ‘I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing. The condition of the operatives is becoming every day more like that of the English…’ (1960, p. 26).

15 See Ajay Skaria ‘Gandhi’s Politics: Liberalism and the Question of the Ashram’ (2002).

16 For instance, ‘Hubris’ today characterizes our whole attitude towards nature, our rape of nature with the help of machines and the completely unscrupulous inventiveness of technicians and engineers…” (Nietzsche 2007, p. 82). For readers more familiar with Walter Kaufmann’s classic translation of Nietzsche’s text, I use the title On the Genealogy of Morals in the main body of my essay. The actual quotations of Nietzsche that I cite, however, are from a more recent translation by Carol Diethe, who rewords the title as On the Genealogy of Morality.

17 For more on the active/reactive distinction and its relation to the question ‘What is Justice?’ see Gilles Deleuze, Nietzsche and Philosophy (1983, p. 39).

18 For more on Gandhi’s relation to Thoreau’s political writings, see G. Hendrick, ‘The Influence of Thoreau’s ‘Civil Disobedience’ on Gandhi’s Satyagraha’ (1956).

19 For this point too, I am indebted to Stanley Cavell, in This New Yet Unapproachable America (1989).

20 Nietzsche does express respect for an ‘unconditional, honest atheism’ while describing it as ‘one of the last phases of development in the discipline of truth-telling’ (2007, p. 118). That is to say, it is not opposed to the ascetic ideal. Rather, it contains its ‘kernel’ (2007, p. 119), a belief in truth, which through an ‘act of self-sublimation … finally forbids itself the lie entailed in the belief in God’ (2007, p. 119). This, too, is not the ‘end’ of religion. Rather, according to Nietzsche, ‘The same process of development [took place] in India, completely independently, which therefore proves something; the same ideal forcing the same conclusion; the decisive point was reached five centuries before the European era began, with Buddha or, more precisely already with the Samkhya philosophy subsequently popularized by Buddha and made into a religion’ (2007, p. 119). Atheism is not Nietzsche’s ‘religion’ and nor is Buddhism. He is as I described above, a Shivaite.

21 I am thinking here of poets such as Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and others, whose war poetry of the first World War expresses the shock of those who went into the trenches with epic notions of battle.

22 See in particular Georges Dumezil’s The Destiny of the Warrior (1970).
It is of course controversial to say that Gandhi is ‘devoid of life’ in post-independence India, since various instances of an afterlife could be found and this essay itself is partly an attempt to re-inhabit this inheritance. A major political instance of Gandhi’s influence in post-colonial Indian history would be Jayprakash Narayan’s call to ‘Total Revolution’ which led to the declaration of a state of Emergency by the Congress government in 1975-77. This was also a ‘call to arms’, an attempt to revive Gandhian techniques of war for national change. A more rigorous assessment of the waxing or waning of Gandhi’s influence in post-independence India would, however, have to take on a number of complex and varied factors. Gandhi is still very much present in the moral imagination, evidenced not only in NGO and activist networks but equally in a spate of very recent Bollywood films which take up the question of his afterlife in India. I am making a much more general point here: by and large, post-independence India is said to have gone down Nehru’s path of technological development rather than Gandhi’s vision of a nation of ascetics.

In preserving oppositions, non-dialectical thought is not ‘all-affirmative’. Only an ass says ‘yea’ to everything as Zarathustra tells us. See the chapter ‘The Ass-Festival’ in Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1966, p. 313).

Nietzsche is most at home in the mountains, as are Zarathustra (in Nietzsche’s rendering), Dionysus (on Mount Cithaeron in The Bacchae) and Shiva (who lives on Mount Kailash). Nietzsche makes his literal and imaginative home in the mountains, for instance in Ecce Homo, describing the mountain retreat most conducive to his work in Piedmont in Northwest Italy: ‘Those who can breathe the air of my writings know that it is an air of the heights, a strong air. One must be made for it … Philosophy, as I have so far understood and lived it, means living voluntarily among ice and high mountains’ (Nietzsche 1969, p. 218). Thoreau, on the other hand, closest to the ‘perennial source of [his] life’ at Walden Pond, is ill at ease on mountains, as evidenced in perhaps the most uncanny moment in his writings, when he reaches a lofty stretch of Mount Ktaadn and senses the spirit of Shiva-Dionysus and expresses his acute discomfort: ‘There was felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites … What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! … the solid earth! The actual world! The common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?’ (Thoreau 1972, p. 71) He hurries back downwards.


This essay is part of a larger book project in progress, with the working title This World, Another World: Essays in Geo-philosophy. Alongside ‘ascetic ideals’, another key term of ‘political theologies’ would be the concept of sovereignty. For my argument (contra Schmitt and Agamben) on sovereignty, I refer the reader to my essay, ‘The Headless Horsemans of Central India: Sovereignty at Varying Thresholds of Life’ (Forthcoming in 2011 in Cultural Anthropology).
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