

UC Santa Cruz

UC Santa Cruz Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Suffering & The Value of Life

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/00f6w6mk>

Author

Coronado, Amena

Publication Date

2016

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

SUFFERING & THE VALUE OF LIFE

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

PHILOSOPHY

by

Amena Coronado

June 2016

The Dissertation of Amena Coronado is
approved:

Professor Daniel Guevara, chair

Professor Jocelyn Hoy

Professor John Bowin

Tyrus Miller
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

Copyright © by
Amena Coronado
2016

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	vi
PREFACE	1
<hr/>	
Chapter 1 The Limits of Life Affirmation	5
<hr/>	
I Structure of Nietzsche's Project	9
Crisis	9
Response	14
Critical Tools of Revaluation	16
Who Undertakes Revaluation	21
II Affirmation and Suffering	25
Formulations of Life Affirmation	27
Treatments of Affirmation	30
The Good of Suffering	30
Affirmation of the Whole	35
Inward Affirmation	40
III Conclusion	45
Shortcomings of Affirmation	45
Role of Affirmation	48
<hr/>	
Chapter 2 Sounding Out Idols	52
<hr/>	
I Brief Exposition of Revaluation	55
Origin of the Concept	56
Translating <i>Umwertung</i>	59
Revaluation as Experiment	64
II Critique of the Existing Mode of Valuation	69
The Pre-Christian Worldview	71
Internalization	73
Philosophers and Moderns	73
How We Suffer from Ourselves	80
The Origin of 'Good'	84
Becoming Accountable	89
Asceticization	93
The Ascetic Star	94

God and Nihilism	101
Suffering and Pessimism	104
III Nietzsche's Conclusions	109
Value and Power	109
Pursuing Life-Enhancing Values	115
<hr/>	
Chapter 3 The Problem of Suffering	122
<hr/>	
I Readings of Life Affirmation	128
Welcoming the Inescapability of Suffering	128
The Ethics of Power	130
A Practical Interpretation of the Eternal Recurrence	134
The Object of Revaluation	139
Seeking No Justification for Suffering	144
What Affirmation is Not	146
<i>Amor Fati</i>	148
The Problem of Suffering	151
How to Look on the Past	156
Conceptions of Nobility	157
Conceptions of Affirmation	162
Affirming the Whole of Life	167
II Failures of the Doctrine	170
Nietzsche's Treatment of Suffering	170
In the Context of Life Affirming Values	171
Yes-Saying and No-Saying	181
Doctrine of the Eternal Recurrence	184
The Suffering of Others	192
III Consequences for Revaluation	200
Alternatives to Life Affirmation	200
The Relationship Between Revaluation and Life Affirmation	203
 AFTERWORD	 208
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 213

ABBREVIATIONS

Nietzsche's works are cited by the standard abbreviation of their title, section number and, when applicable, by chapter. For example, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Essay II, section 15 is cited as GM II:15. In the case of the text traditionally translated as *Untimely Meditations*, I have used the Gray translation, which uses the title *Unfashionable Observations*.

A	<i>The Anti-Christ</i>
BGE	<i>Beyond Good and Evil</i>
BT	<i>The Birth of Tragedy</i>
CW	<i>The Case of Wagner</i>
D	<i>Daybreak</i>
EH	<i>Ecce Homo</i>
GS	<i>The Gay Science</i>
HH	<i>Human, All Too Human</i>
GM	<i>On the Genealogy of Morality</i>
TI	<i>Twilight of the Idols</i>
UO	<i>Unfashionable Observations</i>
Z	<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i>
WP	<i>The Will to Power</i>

ABSTRACT

Suffering & The Value of Life

Amena Coronado

Friedrich Nietzsche insisted that despite what philosophers and prophets have taught, suffering is desirable because it increases vitality and provides opportunities for growth. This is why one of his main criticisms of the pessimism and nihilism of his time is that they treat suffering as an argument against the value of life and in doing so, life is devalued by them. In an effort to find an alternative mode of valuation, he proposes that human beings should adopt an attitude of acceptance and affirmation toward suffering, making it possible to positively value life despite its pain. However, while some experiences of suffering are beneficial, even necessary, others are utterly destructive. Nietzsche's critique of his culture is deeply incisive and rightly insists that a reevaluation of existing values is in order, the goals of which are rooted in his commitment to "make life bearable" and increase wellbeing. However, because his interpretation of suffering fails to acknowledge destructive suffering, the value of his proposed mode of valuation is limited in two ways. First, destructive suffering, which causes only harm, undermines both of the goals of reevaluation. Attempting to affirm destructive suffering would also constitute masochism, which Nietzsche finds objectionable. Second, Nietzsche's insistence that suffering is beneficial informs his view that compassion is bad. However, attending to the

suffering of others will not make it impossible to leave them in pain when that pain is necessary and preserves the possibility of interceding on their behalf when doing so will limit destructive suffering, which increases wellbeing. Furthermore, because it ignores the social aspect of our lives life affirmation cannot be used to revalue all of our values. The value of the affirmative attitude is limited and Nietzsche fails to account for this because, in regards to both one's own experiences and the experiences of others, his account of suffering disregards the existence of destructive suffering. Ultimately, if the goals of Nietzsche's project are to be met, the use of additional methods of revaluation will be necessary.

In admiration of
Etty Hillesum
and Oscar Wilde

who were strong *and* kind, even in suffering.

PREFACE

I recently found myself in a classroom talking with students about Spinoza and free will. They were, as many are, resistant to the suggestion that free will does not exist. When I asked whether they thought it was possible that the concept of free will developed out of, and after, a certain value or set of values—whether, in other words, the manner in which things came to be described was a consequence of what people cared about or needed, rather than the other way around—none of them could conceive of it. Because I wanted them to truly and critically consider the possibility, I briefly outlined the main themes of the first two essays in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, describing Nietzsche’s view that the “subject,” individual accountability, and free will were interrelated ideals that developed as a *result* of certain needs and values (such as, in his view, the need to discharge one’s drives). Before the last words were out of my mouth a student in the second row blurted out, almost to himself, “That is exactly right!” It was as though the full picture of a puzzle he had struggled to complete suddenly appeared before him.

He seemed taken aback by his own conviction—after all, he had spent the entire term meticulously critiquing everything we had read from Descartes and

Spinoza. As a teacher of philosophy, I was surprised too. We spend a lot of our time with students shepherding the critical urge, encouraging students to hold off on rejecting an idea until after they at least have a good grasp of it and its contribution to our understanding. So it was a bit surprising that his first thought was not a critical one.

As a student of Nietzsche, however, I was not surprised by my own student's reaction to the critique presented in the *Genealogy*. Like others before me, only some of whom are disillusioned with Christianity, I instantly felt that something about Nietzsche's analysis of Western culture was so *right*. For us, there is something compelling about his explanations for why our supposed goals (pleasure, happiness) do not always square with our behavior, why what should make us feel good (God saves) can leave us feeling overwhelmed by guilt and self-doubt, why pain can be pleasurable. I suspect that many first-time readers of Nietzsche have a reaction similar to that of the student in my class—a sudden, uncommon sense of clarity.

But as is often the case with new acquaintances, spending more time with Nietzsche reveals a difficult, less appealing side. The defiance, the sense of courage and the language of perseverance—these qualities are engaging and stimulating, but the future he promises, that he hopes for, depends in part on disregarding others. He encourages self-imposed isolation and discourages compassion. The sort of independence that he envisions is remarkably similar to certain Stoic sensibilities, but without the Stoic ethical framework that might

protect the individual from cruel indifference to the experiences of others.¹ One need not believe that all lives are inherently or equally valuable to be concerned about the negative consequences of living as Nietzsche proposes.

For me, this is the paradox of Nietzsche. In his work there is at once palpable sensitivity and undeniable disdain, both of which impact the way he writes about the nature and value of suffering. My own thinking about suffering formally began with the research and writing of my master's thesis, in which I included material from Nietzsche, William James, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and Bergson. A dissertation on suffering could focus on a number of individual philosophers, but it was in Nietzsche's work that I found an answer to the question raised in my thesis² that seemed right to me. His *Genealogy* was a revelation to me then just as it was to the student reflecting on Spinoza's view of freedom years later. I was so convinced by what Nietzsche had to say about suffering in his critique of Western culture, in fact, that I found myself wanting to know *what now?* What would a healthier relationship with life and suffering look like and how do we construct it? I cared quite a lot about the answer to that question, for both personal and philosophical reasons, so it became the foundation of my dissertation research.

With that, what began as an attempt to understand a cultural relationship with suffering wherein Nietzsche was my guide became a slow-developing

¹ Epictetus, *Discourses*, trans. and ed. by Robert Dobbin, London: Penguin Books, 2008, Book 1: 11.

² That question was, to put it one way, *why is our relationship with suffering so awkward and damaging?*

critique of his ideas about how to develop alternatives and what those alternatives should look like. We were fundamentally at odds—I was convinced from the beginning that some suffering is irretrievably damaging and he believed that all suffering is, for the best of us, instrumental. It is one of the few areas where his reflections on human life are unwieldy and superficial. Though I find it plausible that this superficiality is rather intentional, perhaps one of his many tools of self-overcoming, I take him at his word for the purposes of this project because his words encourage the perpetuation of the very axiological problems he is hoping to resolve.

*18 April 2016
Santa Cruz, California*

I | THE LIMITS OF LIFE AFFIRMATION

"Suffering – I wonder has it been properly looked at."
John Steinbeck

In *Ecce Homo*, his famous book of self-inspection, Nietzsche writes, "*Revaluation of all values: that is my formula for an act of humanity's highest self-examination, an act that has become flesh and genius in me.*"¹ He had planned to write a series of works that would outline a philosophy of the revaluation of values, but it was not to be. *The Anti-Christ*, which he called the first book of revaluation,² was completed at the end of September, 1888, just three months before he experienced a mental collapse in Turin. It was the end of his working life. The most significant philosophical reverberation of that unhappy event is that Nietzsche's philosophy of revaluation would forever remain unfinished, more a promise than the fulfillment of a vision. It is not possible to say what Nietzsche's fully realized response would have been to the increasingly nihilistic attitude towards meaning in his time. It is not possible to say what a comprehensive philosophy of revaluation would have looked like.

¹ EC Why I am a Destiny 1.

² A, Preface 156.

This is a biting loss for those who find Nietzsche's critique of Western culture, his answer to the question *who are we actually?*,³ to be convincing. In the absence of that final chapter to his work, what we are left with is the compelling critique that reaches its pinnacle in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, the powerful call to revaluation that accompanies it, and the fragments of a groundwork for the possibility of a world with new, healthier values. Conceptualizing Nietzsche's project is also made difficult by the fact that Nietzsche approached the project of revaluation as an inventor approaches her work. It is experiment⁴ as much as it is proposition, in which he adopts different styles (e.g., aphorisms), perspectives, and methods (e.g., critique) in pursuit of his goal: a new, life-enhancing mode of valuation to replace the existing life-denying one. It would be difficult, then, to overstate the importance of taking care to approach the project of revaluation as one approaches a work in progress, as an *attempt*, rather than as a conclusion.

Despite this difficulty, a study of Nietzsche's works demonstrates an abiding commitment to certain overarching goals and ideas. Three interrelated claims form the core of his philosophical work. First, as his critical work shows, he holds the view that the decline in religious faith—specifically, the rejection of the notion of God—has led to a poverty of meaning in Platonic-Christian⁵ culture

³ He argues that we are weak, tired, self-deceiving, self-destroying, and unhealthy, among other things. For more details about his answer to the question, see GMI:13, GMII:16, and GMIII, especially sections 19, 24, & 28.

⁴ GS 7.

⁵ "Platonic-Christian" refers to "Western" culture because of its traditional commitment to Platonic metaphysics (in particular, the view that there is a hierarchy of Being,

because God is what guaranteed the value of human lives in that culture. Second, this shift gave rise to pessimism and nihilism in his own time, leading him to conclude that the only way to truly come out of the Platonic-Christian era would require the establishment of a new mode of valuation, which begins with the revaluing of all existing values (including those that had survived the decline in religiosity, such as Truth). Third, he proposed that this new, life-enhancing mode of valuation would have as its highest principle an affirmative attitude toward life. Rather than treating life as a poor replica or temporary stop on the way to a better, eternal realm, this 'affirmation of life' would take joy in mortal life, including even its most painful and uncomfortable moments.

The affirmative attitude would be the starting point and framework for a mode of valuation that would provide an alternative to pessimism and nihilism, both of which Nietzsche believed were actually expressions of the existing life-denying mode of valuation. Through his commitment to these positions, Nietzsche hoped to promote the restoration of good health in human beings and to 'make life bearable' without the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation. My dissertation, which is outlined in this chapter, presents an overview of Nietzsche's project, both the critical component of his work—which includes the critique of his contemporaries and the ancient mode of valuation that dictates meaning for them—as well as the constructive component of his work, which seeks an affirmative attitude toward life.

wherein timeless perfection rests at the top) and Christian morality, including its values and virtues.

Nietzsche's critique, which will be discussed in detail in chapter two, is convincing on a number of central points, including his argument that Platonic-Christian valuation has led to the devaluation of life and the overall decline of human wellbeing, and his claim that a revaluation of existing values is in order. However, his apparent conclusion that all experiences can, and should, be affirmed is problematic. This is made evident by his treatment of suffering. In the context of his constructive project, his treatment of suffering emphasizes the growth and transformation that suffering often makes possible, but ignores the sort of suffering that falls outside of this description. This is where my view diverges from Nietzsche's, then: I hold that there are experiences of suffering that are utterly destructive, that undermine and cripple the individual in whom they occur (many of which involve the sort of suffering that might be experienced as a result of her love for another). This leads me to the conclusion, which will be discussed in detail in chapter three, that the mode of valuation proposed by Nietzsche would encourage the individual to affirm experiences for which yes-saying, as he calls it, would be masochistic and encourage a lack of engagement with others, in the form of both apathy and a lack of compassion.

In other words, implicit in the view that affirmation should be our response to suffering is the notion that suffering is either value-neutral or good. An individual that adheres to this position will not be inclined to act in ways to limit the suffering of others. Furthermore, the affirmer will not be induced to view them sympathetically when they suffer because Nietzsche's interpretation

of suffering promotes the view that the sufferer who cannot affirm her suffering cannot do so solely as a result of weakness. This chapter will present an outline of Nietzsche's project, including the critique of Platonic-Christian culture that led him to the conclusion that a complete revaluation was in order, the outline of revaluation that emerges from a careful reading of his texts, and my conclusion that the doctrine of life affirmation has limited value and, potentially, harmful consequences.

I. STRUCTURE OF NIETZSCHE'S PROJECT

Crisis

Nietzsche's work to uncover the origins and development of contemporary European values—such as charity, humility, and equality—left him with two major concerns about the psychological health of his culture. He argues that the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation (which he calls herd morality) adopted Platonic metaphysics in promising the existence of an afterlife, which is taken as superior to Earthly life because of its eternity. While this may provide hope (in addition to fear and a thirst for death), it also severely limits the value of life because of its transience. This is why he calls Christian values life-denying. And yet, while Nietzsche's contemporaries had already begun to reject the Christian worldview, the mode of valuation that it promoted remained, he argued, intact. As a result, when that which guaranteed the value of life (God) was abandoned, what remained of the value of life was threatened. This left

Nietzsche deeply concerned about the potential that, with the loss of its axiological foundation, human life would be found to be meaningless. This threat, which is a description of a series of events more than it is a worldview, is what Nietzsche calls nihilism.

So nihilism, which he takes to be not only a loss of meaning but also a loss of desire,⁶ is the dangerous development that Platonic-Christian culture found itself facing after the decline in religiosity it had experienced. But why the decline in religiosity? In the *Genealogy* he describes the intellectual and existential crisis of nihilism as a consequence of the confrontation between a long-held commitment to truth and belief in God. Nietzsche argues that Schopenhauer is the first “uncompromising” atheist among Germans and that his indignation “when he saw anyone hesitate or beat around the bush” on the matter of God’s nonexistence was the result of the victory of two thousand years of discipline for truth “that in the end forbids itself the *lie* of faith in God.”⁷ Nietzsche insists that the will to truth “is the belief in a *metaphysical* value, a value *in itself of truth*”⁸ and that it leads to the destruction of the very ideals that have thus far given human life meaning. In other words, it is Christian morality – wherein the will to truth has been most fully realized – that ultimately necessitated a rejection of belief in God. With it, the meaning that such a belief guaranteed was also lost. Thus, Nietzsche writes, “As we thus reject Christian interpretation and condemn its

⁶ BGE 10.

⁷ GS 357.

⁸ GM III:24.

'meaning' as counterfeit, *Schopenhauer's* question immediately comes at us in a terrifying way: *Does existence have any meaning at all?*⁹ In this way, the door is opened to nihilism, an ancient wound reappeared.

Meaninglessness became a threat not only because of the "death of God," as he calls it, but also because of suffering. This is evident in light of Nietzsche's second concern with what followed the decline in religiosity in his culture: the sort of pessimism as that which is espoused by Schopenhauer. Though Schopenhauer rejects the notion of the Christian God, he argues that there exists an omnipresent metaphysical Will. Human beings, as part of nature, express will on an individual level, which is why, Schopenhauer argues, we are easily bored, greedy, and always wanting. As a result, while Schopenhauer rejects the idea that human suffering is a punishment from God, he maintains that the unconscious universe imposes on us, through our nature, the punishment of suffering. The best response to such circumstances, he believes, is to do what we can to limit our will, largely by becoming increasingly ascetic.

That is to say, Schopenhauer advocates the slow destruction of human desires (by refusing to indulge them) because desiring is the source of suffering. Though Nietzsche had once considered himself a student of Schopenhauer and adopted some of Schopenhauer's terms and worldview, over time he came to reject Schopenhauer's asceticism. He argues that it is in fact an atheistic extension of Christian asceticism, which treats suffering not only as a punishment, but also

⁹ GS 357.

as an argument against the value of life, insisting that a life in which suffering is present is not worth living (were it not redeemed by God). He also argues that the pessimistic mode of valuation, also like Christianity, promotes the devaluation of human life.

Still, it may not be immediately clear why nihilism and pessimism are consequences of the existing mode of valuation. After all, the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation gave meaning to human life when meaning was desperately needed.¹⁰ However, in Nietzsche's view, it also perpetuates the devaluation of life and facilitated an on going "sickness" that undermines human wellbeing: "In him [the human being who lives under the influence of the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation], however, the greatest and most uncanny of sicknesses was introduced, one from which man has not recovered to this day, the suffering of man *from man, from himself...*"¹¹ It is not only faith in God, that "otherworldly solution to the riddle of [human] existence," that is lost if the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation remains in place, but also "the belief in [human] dignity, uniqueness, irreplaceability in the hierarchy of beings"¹² that is guaranteed by God.

Thus, Nietzsche tells us, "The greatest danger that hovered and still hovers over humanity is the outbreak of *madness*—that is, the outbreak of

¹⁰ See GM III:28: "Precisely *this* is what the ascetic ideal means: that something *was lacking*, that an enormous *void* surrounded man—he did not know how to justify, to explain, to affirm himself; he *suffered* from the problem of his meaning."

¹¹ GM II:16.

¹² GM III:25.

arbitrariness in feeling, seeing, and hearing...."¹³ With the destruction of the "true" world—Plato's world of the Forms, God's realm—human beings are left unmoored and aimless. As Bernd Magnus nicely puts it in *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative*:

[A]ll meaningful distinctions between veridical and delusory disappear.... Indeed, the very possibility of meaningful criteria distinctions is abolished with the dissimulation of 'the true world.' Nietzsche characterizes this aimless relativity which he experienced in every sphere of reality—cultural, political, historical, and philosophical—as nihilism.¹⁴

This aimlessness is reflective not only by the loss of faith in an other world that guaranteed this one, but also by the loss of even the language or categories by which we might interpret the world. Furthermore, the sicknesses with which Platonic-Christian culture is infected, according to Nietzsche, makes it difficult to ascertain whether there is strength enough among his contemporaries to see the need for, much less cultivate, a new mode of valuation.

It is not the rejection of God, then, that marks the crisis, but the fact that the current mode of valuation cannot provide meaning in the absence of God, coupled with its life-denying quality. This leads Nietzsche to struggle, as Bernard Williams describes in his introduction to *The Gay Science* that Nietzsche "with the question of what act of creation, by whom, might overcome the emptiness left by

¹³ GS 76.

¹⁴ Bernd Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, 11.

the collapse of traditional illusions.”¹⁵ While the death of God brings the joy and new sense of freedom that overflow from *The Gay Science*, the loss of desire and meaning that accompanies this event demands a response. At stake for Nietzsche, just as it had been for Schopenhauer, is the value of life—how we might live in the absence of our cherished idols and how we might come to live joyfully despite our suffering.

Schopenhauer advocates abandonment, but he does not suggest that this also relieves of us our moral duty to others, instead calling us to be compassionate toward our fellow sufferers. Nietzsche, on the other hand, depicts nihilism as a historical development and a sign of a declining culture. Because he sees himself as a first responder, his philosophical project is largely aimed at undertaking the tasks of resistance and resuscitation, of revival and creation. He writes, “... Christianity *as dogma* perished of its own morality; in this manner Christianity *as morality* must now also perish—we stand at the threshold of *this* event.”¹⁶ The response to this crisis, he believes, will require provisions for both convalescence, as he liked to call it, and a new source of meaning.

Response

In response to the lingering threats posed by the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation, Nietzsche develops a series of concepts designed to reverse the devaluation of life and make the restoration of human health possible. This, in

¹⁵ GS Introduction, xii.

¹⁶ GM III:27.

turn, would significantly reduce the threat posed by nihilism and pessimism. This is no small task, in part because of how deeply entrenched the life-denying values of herd morality are, but also because suffering plays a pivotal role in the appeal of herd morality as well as in the rise of both nihilism and pessimism among his contemporaries. In regards to herd morality, Nietzsche argues that it was not suffering itself, but the meaninglessness of suffering that caused distress, and herd morality gave it meaning. In regards to pessimism (and nihilism) he notes that Schopenhauer's main objection to life is suffering—that, in other words, a world of ceaseless suffering is not a worthy world. In order for a life-enhancing mode of valuation to be complete, then, it must provide a value for suffering that both appeals to the human need for meaning while overcoming Schopenhauer's interpretation of suffering.

Nietzsche's approach to this work, which he calls the revaluation of all values, involves a variety of task. His overarching goal is to produce values that are life-enhancing, but in addition to its constructive work, this goal is achieved in part by way of destruction—the critical review of existing values. As E.E. Sleinis notes, "Revaluation is sometimes confronting specific values with other specific values; it is sometimes confronting specific values with higher-order values; but frequently it is neither.... the number of strategies Nietzsche uses to challenge values without in turn presupposing values is both extensive and

varied.”¹⁷ This passage refers specifically to the tools associated with the critical aspects of revaluation. The rest of this section will briefly discuss Nietzsche’s confrontation with existing values and the section part of the chapter will consider the constructive aspect of revaluation.

[1] *Critical Tools of Revaluation*

One of the easiest revaluation strategies to identify is the attempt to undermine loyalty to existing values. Some of Nietzsche’s most well-known attacks, such as the one on the objectivist¹⁸ commitments of Platonic-Christian morality—are motivated by the desire to undermine confidence in the values they secure.¹⁹ Nietzsche describes the three essays of GM as three “preparatory works for the revaluation of all values,” and the work undertaken there—the interrogation of foundational Western values like equality, justice, and goodness—is designed to undermine confidence not only in those values, but also in the other values they secure. The “moments of sheet lightning” and “muffled roar[s]”²⁰ in Nietzsche’s critical work can be grouped by the position from which they attack: from within and from outside. Those that work from

¹⁷ E.E. Sleinis, *Nietzsche’s Revaluation of Values: A Study in Strategies*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994, xix.

¹⁸ By this I mean those criticized by Nietzsche—in particular, the notion of absolute truth and the distinction between Being and becoming that is endorsed by both Platonic and Christian metaphysics.

¹⁹ Simon Robertson, “Nietzsche’s Ethical Revaluation,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 37 (2009): 66-90, 71.

²⁰ See EH GM: “Gradually increasing unrest; scattered moments of sheet lightning; the muffled roar of very unpleasant truths becoming increasingly audible in the distance,—until finally a *tempo feroce* is reached where everything presses forward with tremendous tension.”

within existing value constructs do so by exploiting internal defects—ones previously recognized and ones added by Nietzsche.²¹

One of the strategies he uses to attack existing values from within the dominant mode of valuation involves identifying logical inconsistencies in that system of values. For example, the belief in the possibility of absolute truth has great value in Platonic-Christian culture, but that value depends on the presence of a rational knower, one who can become aware of independent states of affairs without influencing the content of that awareness by observing dispassionately.²² According to Nietzsche, the concept of such a knower is contradictory, likening it to an eye that is turned in no particular direction.²³ Like the eye, which is always turned in one direction and away from others, knowers are embedded in certain contexts (and not others) and never dispassionate. In GM III:12, Nietzsche argues that it is absurd to advocate for an ideal that is logically impossible to attain, in the same way that an eye turned in no particular direction is absurd.

A related strategy for undermining loyalty to existing values involves identifying instances in which an accepted idea is simply false—for example, the notion that human beings have the ability to think, judge, and believe in a way that is will-less, timeless, and so forth. This belief, while appealing, simply does not reflect the nature and status of human beings, according to Nietzsche. Destroying such fictions, in his view, can significantly contribute to the

²¹ Chapter 7 of Sleinis' book is dedicated to discussing Nietzsche's strategies for revaluation and I borrow the distinction from within/from without from him.

²² Sleinis, 186.

²³ GM III:12.

undermining of the entire value system. The extent to which identifying such contradictions have an impact depends, of course, on how influential or foundational the contradictory notion is to the value system.

The strategies that work to undermine confidence from outside existing value constructs do so primarily by providing alternatives to the current values, thereby demonstrating weakness in the current system. Nietzsche criticizes the Platonic-Christian worldview, in part, by juxtaposing it with either an alternative (for instance, replacing the utilitarian view that happiness is of higher value than power with the view that power is of higher value than happiness) or applying a new means of measuring the values of the current system. The Eternal Recurrence is an example of the latter strategy. Asking ourselves whether we could want X to be repeated again and again in a cyclical eternity would likely result in a significant alteration of our values, but without presupposing other values. The value of undermining confidence in existing values is evident in a passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which Nietzsche writes, “whoever wants to be a creator in good and evil first has to be a destroyer of small values.”²⁴ In his view, the values of herd morality are the sort of small values that should be dismantled, beginning with the type of criticism that undermines confidence in them.

An additional group of strategies of revaluation involves the creation of distance. Nietzsche’s conception of distance has two related forms: the first is the

²⁴ Z II, “Of Self-Overcoming.”

pathos of distance, which is characterized by distance from others (particularly the weak and the sick),²⁵ which combats nihilism²⁶ and poor health; the second is distance from ourselves,²⁷ which is the sort of distance that Aaron Ridley describes—from our knowledge, our history, our values—as a move that creates space for self-overcoming. Distance of both kinds is necessary for the work of reevaluation. An example of creating distance in Nietzsche’s critical work is the use of types—such as the Christian who is oriented to another world (Heaven)—provide a mean for addressing value structures that may prove difficult to criticize when considering individual values.

When values are grouped into types and confronted with the complexities of the real world, they become more vulnerable to denunciation. After identifying a type, Nietzsche asks broad questions such as the one that founds the genealogical approach at work in GM: *what is the value of our values?* The benefit of taking this kind of step back is that it produces the possibility of—and requires—inquiry into the origin, development, function, and effects of our value constructs, producing a richer explanation and more robust body of information on which to perform reevaluation. The ability to expand one’s focus requires space, access to distance. For Nietzsche, creating distance is not only a tool for

²⁵ For example, see GM I:2, in which Nietzsche writes, “Now in the first place it is obvious to me that the actual genesis of the concept of ‘good’ is sought and fixed in the wrong place.... Rather, it is ‘the good’ themselves, that is the noble, powerful, higher-ranking, and high-minded who felt and ranked themselves and their doings as good.... Out of this pathos of distance they first took for themselves the right to create values....” See also GM I:6-7.

²⁶ GM I:12.

²⁷ GS 380.

increasing clarity, but also a way of protecting oneself from the dangers associated with the value constructs being evaluated.

Those participating in revaluation take a step back from the way of living associated with the values at hand in order to make growth possible, and this critical work is intended to positively impact the individual. Nietzsche's call for the development of a new mode of valuation, then, is not focused on the pursuit of knowledge *per se*, but on what the situated subject comes to understand as a result of his knowledge, the way his knowledge impacts his life.²⁸ Thus, knowledge is deeply intertwined with, as Nietzsche puts it, how much truth one can endure.²⁹ He writes:

It is in this context that the concept of nobility reveals itself to be part of a 'positive' teaching: nobility that is the product of the social pathos of distances increases the potential of a subject for enduring 'uncommon' knowledge because it promotes more comprehensive states, and these in turn indicate a growing strength in the subject's character that enables it to cope with more of 'the truth.'³⁰

Thus, as distance increases, knowledge changes and increases, which makes possible a new way of living. In this way, the creative tasks of revaluation depend on the effort to reach for higher states of the soul, higher enhancements

²⁸ BGE Introduction, xxvii.

²⁹ In BGE 39, Nietzsche writes: "No one would consider a doctrine to be true just because it makes people happy or virtuous.... Something could be true even if it is harmful and dangerous to the highest degree. It could even be part of the fundamental character of existence that people with complete knowledge get destroyed, — so that the strength of a spirit would be proportionate to how much of 'truth' he could withstand — or, to put it more clearly, to what extent he *needs* it to be thinned out, veiled over, sweetened up, dumbed down, and lied about."

³⁰ BGE Introduction, xxvii.

of humans. And the very possibility of the healthy development of human beings is dependent on the presence of space,³¹ on the ability to keep a distance from others in order to overcome oneself, in large part because the dominant mode of valuation is effective in giving life meaning but also undermines the value of human life. This, in turn, undermines growth. Christian values—lauding equality, humility, and so forth—erased the “rank and difference in value between man and man,” which was an intended consequence. But in doing so the fertile ground for human flourishing, which was made possible through the pathos of distance, is also depleted. In other words, Christian values encourage sameness, rendering the potential of the strong dormant.

[2] Who Undertakes Revaluation

Given Nietzsche’s criticism of equality, and his contempt for humility, inoffensiveness, and justice, which he takes to be expressions of weakness,³² one wonders who he expects to take on the work of revaluation, who the project is intended to benefit, and whether it might come at a cost to others. There is a lot written, especially by those working through the political and social implications

³¹ See BGE 257: Without the pathos of distance which grows out of the ingrained difference between strata—when the ruling caste constantly looks afar and looks down upon subjects and instruments and just as constantly practices obedience and command, keeping down and keeping distance—that other, more mysterious pathos could not have grown up either—the craving for an ever new widening of distances within the soul itself, the development of every higher, rarer, more remote, further-stretching, more comprehensive states—in brief, simply the enhancement of the type “man,” the continual “self-overcoming of man,” to use a moral formula in a supra-moral sense.

³² GM I:14.

of Nietzsche's philosophy, on whether Nietzsche's positive project is elitist in nature. Is his insistence on the need for revaluation and his allegiance to experimentation meant for only a few? In *Nietzsche Contra Democracy*, Frederick Appel argues that Nietzsche is committed to "an uncompromising repudiation of both the ethic of benevolence and the notion of the equality of persons in the name of a radically aristocratic commitment to human excellence."³³ Following this line of thinking through to its supposed end, Appel argues that "Nietzsche's elitism is not only fundamental to his entire worldview, it is so profound that it leads naturally to the conclusion that 'the great majority of men have no right to existence.'"³⁴ This is important not only for what some would find to be backwards views about the value of human lives.

Malcolm Bull holds a view similar to Appel's, drawing out its implications for the project of revaluation. He suggests that Nietzsche would not have been disappointed if his revaluation of all values was continually rejected by those who continued to adhere to the values despised by him.³⁵ While it may be argued that Nietzsche's having taken pleasure in that sort of rejection might be entirely justified, such a response—rather than, say, surprise or concern—would certainly give the impression that Nietzsche's work is not intended by him to improve the 'lot of humankind' in the way that it is traditionally conceived (which is to say, an improvement in conditions for all).

³³ Frederick Appel, *Nietzsche Contra Democracy*, Ithaca: Cornell University, 1999, 2.

³⁴ Malcom Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche*, London: Verso, 2011, 29.

³⁵ Bull, 29.

And there is plenty in the texts to support at least the claim that his formula for revaluation has an elitist element. In GM III:25 Nietzsche makes his opposition to equality clear, writing, “The predominance of the mandarin is never a sign of anything good: any more than the rise of democracy, of peace-arbitration courts in place of wars, of equal rights for women, of the religion of compassion, and whatever other symptoms of declining life there are.” This suggests that Nietzsche is not merely elitist, but also that, as Appel notes, he does not adhere to the common view that all human lives are valuable, and more or less, equally valuable. It is also clear that his conception of revaluation is in fact shaped by his elitism. In BGE 29 he writes, “Independence is for the very few; it is a privilege of the strong.” Later in that same section he suggests that “[b]ooks for all the world are always foul-smelling books: the smell of small people clings to them.” And in BGE 30 he continues, “Our highest insights must—and should—sound like follies and sometimes like crimes when they are heard without permission by those who are not predisposed and predestined for them....” And, he concludes, “What serves the higher type of men as nourishment or delectation must almost be poison for a very different and inferior type.”

Continuing the argument that strength is rare and comes with special privileges, he claims, “It may offend their pride, also their taste, if their truth is supposed to be a truth for everyman,” and later in the section, “[i]n the end it must be as it is and always has been: great things remain for the great, abysses

for the profound, nuances and shudders for the refined, and, in brief, all that is rare for the rare."³⁶ As Nietzsche remarks in one of his notebooks, those who cannot withstand the thought of eternal recurrence are, he claims, unfit for life: 'Whosoever will be destroyed with the sentence 'there is no salvation' ought to die. I want *wars*, in which the vital and courageous *drive out* the others."³⁷ On his view, it seems, only the "strong" will have the ability and desire to dismantle the value system of herd morality, and his message is intended for them.

Richard Schacht and Philippa Foot also interpret Nietzsche's project of revaluation as the work intended for only a few. Schacht argues that revaluation is undertaken from a privileged perspective, which is "an understanding of the fundamental character of life and the world serves to define and establish."³⁸ The existence of this privileged perspective is what guarantees the authority of the evaluation that is taking place. Foot suggests that revaluation takes place from an aesthetic perspective, one shaped by the admiration that is commonly expressed toward those with an "exceptional independence of mind and strength of will,"³⁹ people understood as powerful by Nietzsche. Neither of these interpretations precludes adherents of traditional morality from participating, of course, but they do require a special perspective. Still, it isn't obvious that Nietzsche finds the great majority of human beings to be worthy of life, and he does seem to

³⁶ BGE 43.

³⁷ "NF, Fruhjahr 1884", KGW7/2:81

³⁸ Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche*, London: Routledge, 1983, 349.

³⁹ Philippa Foot, "Nietzsche: the Revaluation of Values," in Solomon, ed., *Nietzsche: a Collection of Critical Essays*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973, 163.

conceive of revaluation as the work of only the few, perhaps partly because they must begin from within the dominant mode of valuation.

Nietzsche's disdain for weakness is hardly a secret, and given the magnitude and demands of the project, revaluation is rather demanding work. Whether he underestimates just who might be capable of the task is an interesting question worthy of further consideration, but the problems and inquiries taken up in this dissertation are focused on the viability of life affirmation as a method of revaluation and my arguments against life affirmation do not hinge on the character of the affirmer. Though Nietzsche's troublesome views on the value of individual human lives will not be addressed in detail in this project, his elitism is still important to this study, as the shortcomings of life affirmation—its all-consuming focus on the individual and the fact that it discourages compassion—most likely arise from the same elitist sensibility that leads Nietzsche to claim that the work of revaluation is for a small number of privileged individuals. This, I will argue in chapter three, produces one of the major shortcomings in his approach to revaluation, and in particular, the impact of his interpretation of suffering and rejection of compassion on his doctrine of life affirmation.

II. AFFIRMATION AND SUFFERING

The core component of the constructive aspect of the project of revaluation is generally taken to be the doctrine of life affirmation. In many

cases, commentators interpret the doctrine through the lens of the eternal recurrence,⁴⁰ but there is disagreement about what affirmation through the eternal recurrence represents. For example, in R. Lanier Anderson's view⁴¹ true affirmation would primarily consist in one willing the whole of one's life as opposed to its individual events, while John Richardson⁴² argues that when Nietzsche is thinking "ultimate thoughts" about the eternal recurrence, affirmation must be a *yes* to each thing, to each experience of one's life. Alternatively, Simon May⁴³ suggests that affirmation is expressed through an attitude of joyfulness towards one's life as a whole, without seeking alternatives or justification for it.

No matter their approach, however, the difficult feature of human existence with which all interpreters of Nietzsche's life affirmation must come to

⁴⁰ See GS 341 for Nietzsche's most famous presentation of the eternal recurrence, in which he writes, "'The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!'... [H]ow well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to long for nothing more fervently* than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?"

⁴¹ R. Lanier Anderson, "Nietzsche on Redemption and Transfiguration," in Landy and Saler eds., *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, 239: "If I could tell my life story in such a way that I will the whole, then I could likewise affirm each event within it, in virtue of its essential contribution to the meaning of the whole story."

⁴² John Richardson, "Nietzsche's Value Monism: Saying Yes to Everything," Friedrich Nietzsche Society Conference, 2009, 8: "... I will argue that [Nietzsche] means – at least at these moments when he thinks 'ultimate' thoughts about eternal return etc. – that we must say Yes to each thing, i.e. recognize each thing as good.... This 'distribution' of value down to every individual 'bit' of life is buttressed by Nietzsche's metaphysical claim that everything is necessary. Nothing in the world and all its history could be different without everything being different. And inasmuch as everything is necessary, to say Yes to anything requires saying Yes to everything."

⁴³ Simon May, 79: "To affirm life is to look with joy upon one's life as a whole, conceived as necessary (or fated) in all its elements, without justifying it or desiring an alternative to it." (This is first of a six-part theory of affirmation.)

terms is suffering. This is because suffering in the broad sense—including physical and emotional violence, boredom, disease, consciousness, physical pain, and so forth—is the ugliest thing. That is to say, while suffering is the sort of experience most in need of affirming, it is also, the most difficult of human experiences to affirm. The three texts examined more closely in this dissertation—*The Affirmation of Life* by Bernard Reginster, “Why Nietzsche is Still in the Morality Game” by Simon May, and “Nietzsche on Nobility and the Affirmation of Life” by Christopher Hamilton—are noteworthy in that they attend, in a rich and thoughtful way, to the problem of suffering in their work on the doctrine of life affirmation. These texts recognize that the possibility of life affirmation is largely dependent on its treatment of suffering. Before reviewing their interpretations, however, it is appropriate to briefly consider what Nietzsche says about life affirmation.

Formulations of Affirmation

Nietzsche’s comments on life affirmation are few in quantity and scattered throughout his published works. There are, however, at least four important aspects of the doctrine revealed in his remarks. In the section on *Daybreak* in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche tells us that he is looking for the “new morning” in “a revaluation of all values, in an escape from all moral values, in an affirmation and trust in everything that had been forbidden, despised, cursed until now.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ EH *Daybreak* 1.

This passage emphasizes the subversive nature of life affirmation, while also suggesting that Nietzsche understands the affirming of life not as a choice made among multiple options, but as, rather, the inversion of what has been until now the only option.⁴⁵ As the opposite of the current mode of valuation, which says *no* to life, life affirmation seems to Nietzsche like the best weapon against Platonic-Christian valuation.

Another noteworthy aspect of the doctrine of life affirmation comes from a passage in *Beyond Good and Evil*, in which Nietzsche explains that it was his study of pessimism (and the nihilism that accompanies it, one imagines) that brought him to the belief that the opposite of the ascetic ideal is a life-affirming ideal. He writes:

Anyone like me, who has tried for a long time and with some enigmatic desire, to think pessimism through to its depths and to deliver it from the half-Christian, half-German narrowness and naiveté with which it has finally presented itself to this century.... will have inadvertently opened his eyes to the inverse ideal: to the ideal of the most high-spirited, vital, world affirming individual, who has learned not just to accept and go along with what was and what is, but who wants it again *just as it was and is* through all eternity....⁴⁶

This new ideal, Nietzsche imagines, bears the promise of a new value for life. But here the possibility of life affirmation is tied up with the practice of eternal recurrence, which sets a high bar, given that the doctrine of eternal recurrence requires the affirmation of all of one's life, so much so that one would want to

⁴⁵ GM III:28.

⁴⁶ BGE 56.

live it again. Such a task requires certain qualities in the individual, including joyfulness and good health, in addition to strength.

Nietzsche's most personal, and perhaps most convincing, published comment on life affirmation comes in the fourth book of *The Gay Science*, and it displays a third noteworthy aspect of the doctrine of life affirmation as he conceives of it. He declares:

I'm still alive; I still think: I must still be alive because I still have to think. *Sum, ergo cogito: cogito ergo sum*. Today everyone allows himself to express his dearest wish and thoughts: so I, too, want to say what I wish from myself today and what thought first crossed my heart.... I want to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them – thus I will be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on.... And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer!⁴⁷

While the emphasis of this passage is on accepting *what is*, wanting it and loving it, what I find most compelling about this formulation of life affirmation is the expression of the desire to find and produce beauty. It calls the reader's attention to the fact that life affirmation is a creative act. Creativity is necessary because, as has been said already, there so far has been no ideal to oppose the ascetic ideal – thus, one will need to be *formed* rather than *found*.

A final important aspect of the doctrine of life affirmation, one that perhaps makes the creative act possible, is revealed in a claim from *Ecce Homo*, in which Nietzsche tells the reader that his "formula for greatness in a human being

⁴⁷ GS 276.

is *amor fati*, that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary – but *love* it.”⁴⁸ There is a continuing emphasis here on the fact that in order for life affirmation to be effective, merely facing life in a way that is honest and open will not be enough. The creation of new values requires not only a shift in knowledge, but a shift in *belief*, and perhaps even a shift in feeling. That is to say, life affirmation requires a commitment—not to truth, but to an attitude of openness and of joy. The formulation of life affirmation that will be the focus of this dissertation is the one associated with the doctrine of eternal recurrence. This is the formulation that receives the most attention from commentators interested in life affirmation, presumably because Nietzsche calls it the highest formulation of life affirmation⁴⁹ and it creates the highest bar by which to determine how affirmative one’s attitude is.

Treatments of Affirmation

[1] The Good of Suffering

In his book, *The Affirmation of Life*, Reginster agrees with the claim that Nietzsche’s philosophical project consists in determining whether there is a way to overcome nihilism, but argues that nihilism is not defined by the fact that

⁴⁸ EH II.10.

⁴⁹ See EH Z:1: “... *the thought of eternal return*, the highest possible formula of affirmation....”

there are no objective values. In fact, he contends, it is not primarily a claim about values at all. It is, instead, a claim about the world itself and our life in it, the conviction that our highest values cannot be realized in this world.⁵⁰ Despair is the name Reginster gives to this reality. Binding the problem of nihilism with the problem of suffering from the very start, Reginster argues that while it is easy enough to disregard the Christian idea of, for example, eternal life, calling into question beliefs associated with the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation produces often unacknowledged consequences, one of which is the reappearance of the question “of the place and significance of suffering in human life.”⁵¹ Thus, one of the most valuable contributions of Reginster’s book to scholarship on Nietzsche’s work is the acknowledgement that the question of suffering is, from the start, present in any attempt at the revaluation of values. Furthermore, in arguing that suffering is the focal point of Nietzsche’s revaluation, he acknowledges that an affirmation of life will invariably include an affirmation of suffering.

In response to this requirement, Reginster posits that suffering can be interpreted as a good, which makes it a proper object of affirmation. In pursuit of that goal he notes important advantages to identifying the value of suffering as the focal point of Nietzsche’s revaluation. One of these, Reginster believes, is that

⁵⁰ Reginster, 28.

⁵¹ Reginster, 8.

doing so explains how Nietzsche came to see the will to power⁵² as the guiding principle of revaluation. He argues that if we value the overcoming of resistance (which is the exercise of power), we must also value the resistance itself; therefore, we must also value suffering. Reginster writes:

First, Schopenhauer defines suffering in terms of resistance to the satisfaction of our desires. Accordingly, the doctrine of the will to power radically alters our conception of the place and significance of suffering in human existence. Willing the overcoming of resistance implies willing the resistance to overcome, and this amounts to willing nothing less than suffering.⁵³

Reginster argues that Nietzsche defines power in terms of overcoming resistance, but one wonders whether Nietzsche also defines suffering in terms of resistance to the satisfaction of desires? It is clear that Reginster believes that he does, but if Nietzsche does not define suffering as resistance, the fact that the *will to power* is a will to overcoming resistance may say very little about the place of suffering, and much less about how and why we might will suffering.

But the argument that we will suffering is of great importance to Reginster's broader concern that "... to affirm life we must show that suffering is not just a necessary condition of the realization of certain values, but good in itself."⁵⁴ He hopes to accomplish this by building on the previously presented argument, making a connection between the good of the will to power and the good of suffering. He writes:

⁵² See A 2: "What is good? – Everything that enhances people's feeling of power, will to power, power itself."

⁵³ Reginster, 12.

⁵⁴ Reginster, 15.

The importance of the will to power to the project of a revaluation of those [life-negating] values becomes clear. If Nietzsche can show that what he calls 'power' is indeed good, then he will thereby show that suffering, which is an essential ingredient of power, is also a good, and not the object of a legitimate wholesale condemnation.⁵⁵

Reginster offers, as example of this relationship, the work of the creative individual, which is littered with challenges in the form of boundaries and limitations whose overcoming represent expressions of will to power.

Perhaps Reginster is right to call, as he does, creative activity the paradigmatic manifestation of will to power. But is it the paradigmatic manifestation of suffering? While it certainly seems true to speak of creative activity as involving the overcoming of resistance, the suffering that this creates seems deeply different from that which results from loss, disease, and so forth. While any attempt at thorough revaluation will involve, as Reginster rightly suggests, a revaluation of suffering, it is not the cases of suffering in pursuit of excellence that raise the greatest doubt about what sort of meaning suffering can have. It is the destructive suffering that troubles us. It is the obliterating and tragic suffering, the kind that destroys faith and all sense of meaning that most undermines any real attempt at revaluation. That is to say, even if Reginster is right that in willing the overcoming of resistance, one also wills the resistance itself, many experiences of suffering involve neither the willing of the overcoming of resistance, nor the willing of the resistance itself.

⁵⁵ Reginster, 12-13.

The lack of attention paid to this other kind of suffering, which certainly does not participate in good, weakens the force of Reginster's claims. Reginster does make a distinction between suffering and pain, noting that pain need not arise from the disappointment of a pre-existing desire, which provides a place for the previously mentioned exceptions. And he admits that this creates a difficulty, as we cannot invoke the idea that willing power (the attempt to overcome resistance) is also willing suffering (the resistance to be overcome) in order to reevaluate pain. He goes on, however, to apply a very similar treatment to pain as he did to suffering

His approach to pain originates in the view that desires are born from needs and needs are manifested in consciousness, in the form of an experience of pain (all desires come from pain). The will to power, in turn, is stimulated by a desire (it has a desire to desire). Therefore, the will to power requires pain as a condition of its satisfaction. Pain offers an escape from the boredom that the will to power would otherwise experience. Reginster does acknowledge that most of us would not welcome pain as an opportunity to exercise the will to power, and that certain kinds of pain might undermine one's prospects for greatness. He attributes this, however, to weakness, which is just the sort of response one comes to expect from Nietzsche himself. "Only beings with exceptional strength," Reginster suggests, "could fight all the fights, enjoy them all, and manage greatness throughout."⁵⁶ But one does, in fact, fight all the fights—the

⁵⁶ Reginster, 235.

presence of strength does not abate suffering. She doesn't, however, enjoy them all and doesn't always manage greatness. Like Nietzsche, Reginster seems to resist an interpretation of suffering that ascribes as much affecting influence to the debilitating power of suffering as it does to the influence of human weakness.

[2] *Affirmation of the Whole*

In contrast to Reginster, May argues that merely giving suffering a new (non-ascetic) meaning will not lead to life affirmation, especially if it is given a meaning in terms of a "higher good that it makes possible."⁵⁷ He suggests that "the real challenge is not to find a new answer, no longer informed by the ascetic ideal, to the question of the meaning of suffering.... The real challenge is to stop being obsessed with the question itself."⁵⁸ May supports this claim by calling into question, through three of its aspects, the way we think about suffering. The first part of May's analysis of suffering takes up the question of the *object* of affirmation. Thus, May argues that Nietzsche does not conceive of life as a series of events. He contends that Nietzsche is a determinist who believes that an event is always embedded in a chain of cause and effect, making single units of affirmation superficial. This being the case, a whole lived life is the best object of affirmation. But, he goes on to say, particular events and experiences can be

⁵⁷ Simon May, "Why Nietzsche is still in the morality game," in May ed., *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 79.

⁵⁸ May, 100.

affirmed in (and only in) the affirmation of the whole lived life (because they are necessary to that life).

Thus, May concludes, "in affirming Auschwitz in the only way in which it can, perhaps, be affirmed—within the whole life to which it belongs—the particular despised experience is redeemed."⁵⁹ What affirmation really consists of, then, is *yes-saying* to the whole of one's life. In affirming the whole, the particular events are also affirmed. May argues for decentralizing suffering by appealing to this interpretation of life affirmation as affirmation of the *whole* of one's life. This is important because he also argues that the revaluation of suffering is the positing of new goods that occurs at the level of affirming the *particular* events of one's life. He writes, "the proper object of affirmation is not the particular event as such but rather my whole life of which the particular event is an inescapable part."⁶⁰ So the cogency of his claim that the question of the meaning of suffering needs to be demoted is dependent on his argument for what constitutes life affirmation.

This raises a number of questions, including whether there is no sense in which affirming suffering might occur, and even must occur, at the level of the whole life (especially if it is on this level that affirmation takes place). If not, what, precisely, is one evaluating when undertaking the task of affirming the whole life? Even if we grant his interpretation of life affirmation, the problem of the value of experiences of suffering persists because they call the value of life

⁵⁹ May, 82.

⁶⁰ May, 98.

into doubt and because individual events are affirmed or repudiated even in May's account. Furthermore, as previously noted, it isn't clear that the question of the meaning of suffering arises only at the level of particular events and experiences—to take the long view of one's whole life would, it seems, include an evaluation of the *fact* of suffering in human life and in one's own life. That is to say, contending with the reality of suffering in our lives suggests that the question of the meaning of suffering operates not only on the level of particular events, but also on the level of one's entire life.

The second aspect of suffering that May calls attention to can be described as the *meaning* of suffering, and he makes an interesting claim about the relationship between suffering and justification, suggesting that it would not occur to the life-affirmer to seek justification for suffering. This is, in part, because the desire for justification is inconsistent with affirmation. He argues that life affirmation is not "a matter of merely reversing the valuations of life-denial. The post of assuming that 'life' or its suffering can be evaluated and justified is the pose of the life-denier, *even if* he should end up giving it a positive valuation."⁶¹ May also argues that to interpret suffering as constitutive of creative activity, for example, is to "still be in the business of abolishing precisely the helplessness, the interpretive vacuum, that gives suffering its sting."⁶² In

⁶¹ May, 87. May goes on to say in the next paragraph that the reason the life-affirmer has no desire to justify suffering is also a result of the nature of suffering, which "at its heart is about helplessness, vulnerability...." Thus, to interpret suffering "comfortingly," as Nietzsche does, is to be in the business of abolishing suffering.

⁶² May, 87.

other words, such an undertaking is the pursuit of the abolition of suffering because, he believes, suffering interpreted is no longer suffering.

A true revaluing of suffering would dissolve 'the problem' of suffering altogether by ceasing to "make vindications of it so vitally important to ethics and to the affirmation of life."⁶³ This is what informs May's claim that a stance toward life that affirms it would not see suffering as in any need of justification. Thus, Reginster and May come to very different conclusions about the place of interpreting (i.e., valuing) suffering in the pursuit of life affirmation. While Reginster believes that interpreting suffering as a good is necessary for a project of affirmation, May suggests that the move to interpret suffering is actually an attempt to mitigate the effects of suffering and, ultimately, suffering itself.

May also argues that the question of the meaning of suffering needs deposing even if a revaluation of suffering *would* result in finding beauty in what was once considered ugly. As support for that he cites GM III:28, in which Nietzsche contends that it was the meaninglessness of suffering, and not suffering itself, that hung over humanity like a curse. It seems to me, however, that May is overlooking the real contribution of that passage to understanding our relationship with suffering. A cure would not come from leaving the question alone, learning to not bother so much with whether suffering has a meaning, as May believes. This is because, as Christopher Janaway⁶⁴ points out,

⁶³ May, 87-88.

⁶⁴ Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's 'Genealogy,'* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

human beings are, on Nietzsche's view, interpreting beings. We cannot stop interpreting suffering. So the curse is not simply the meaninglessness of suffering but the meaninglessness of suffering *in the context* of the human need to interpret. That is to say, our problem is not the meaning of suffering but *our need* for a meaning for suffering. And yet, if this were not the case, a revaluation of everything and all values requires one to ask the question of the meaning of everything—and that must include the question of the meaning of suffering. A difficult problem arises as a result: May is right to avoid calling suffering a good, but it would necessarily be positively valued somehow in the context of genuine life affirmation.

May presents one additional reason for his claim that the question of the meaning of suffering needs to be demoted, this one involving the *experience* of suffering. He writes, "Moreover, since affirmation as joy cannot be a purely cognitive matter but is primarily affective, it cannot ultimately depend upon finding a satisfactory meaning in suffering, or be a product of justifying suffering—whether my own suffering or suffering as intrinsic to life."⁶⁵ This passage suggests once again that life affirmation is not dependent on providing a meaning for suffering, but where we have previously seen the justification for that claim lie in May's view of the meaning of suffering in largely logical terms, his argument here is that because life affirmation is largely affective, it won't

⁶⁵ May, 82.

depend on finding a meaning for suffering even if one parses out the meaning of suffering.

This argument seems to be intended to reinforce his claim that we should stop asking the question of the meaning of suffering, but it seems to be undermined by the fact that, as May tells us, life affirmation will not be possible until we are free of the problem of suffering. However, experiencing the joyfulness that May associates with life affirmation does not preclude the possibility of also continuing to ask the question of the meaning of suffering. Thus, even if it were true that life affirmation is not dependent on finding a satisfactory meaning for suffering, the question of the meaning of suffering will not be dissolved just because an attempt at life affirmation is made. Moreover, life affirmation as it has been presented must involve the reevaluation of suffering.

[3] Inward Affirmation

In his essay on the conceptions of nobility and affirmation in Nietzsche's work, Christopher Hamilton takes a different approach to working through the meaning and nature of the doctrine of life affirmation, focusing on the relationship between Nietzsche's notions of nobility and affirmation. Based on his interpretation of his understanding of this concept, he argues that the affirmation of life does not depend on weighing the good and bad experiences of one's life, but in judging its overall value. The same holds true for the affirmation

of the lives of others, making it possible, he argues, for the affirmer to condemn the bad behavior of others, to acknowledge the burden of suffering in their lives, and to work to put an end to the suffering of others when possible. Like May, he rejects the view that suffering must be interpreted as desirable in order for it to be affirmed.

Hamilton's account is, as noted, dependent on his interpretation of Nietzsche's understanding of 'nobility' and 'affirmation.' He argues that there is a difference between affirming one's life in an "inward" sense and affirming life in general, and that Nietzsche's doctrine of life affirmation requires both. However, Nietzsche's view of the value of human lives, which is revealed in his concept of nobility, makes it difficult to achieve both kinds of affirmation. To explain why, Hamilton presents an account of what he takes to be the two most prominent conceptions of nobility in Nietzsche's philosophy: worldly and inward. The worldly noble is the one described in GM I, according to Hamilton: the powerful, overflowing with vitality, privileged creature that possesses the strength to discharge his drives at will. The conception of value possessed by the worldly noble is rooted in his success—he considers himself good because he is generally able to satisfy his desires. He considers bad that which is opposite (those who are weak and cannot discharge their desires as he can). This type of noble, Hamilton argues could affirm his life—both its joys and sorrows—because of his immense "hardness." But, he argues, there doesn't seem to be anyone in recorded human history who fits the description of a purely *worldly* nobility,

leading him to suggest that if affirmation is possible and not merely theoretical, there will be another type of nobility that gives it expression.

The name he gives to this other type is inward nobility, individuals with “at least the rudiments of inner depth,”⁶⁶ who experience the feelings of guilt and responsibility that Nietzsche associates with the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation and considers unhealthy signs of a decaying culture. This conception of nobility is notable, according to Hamilton, because it describes a type of noble character who is not free of the unhealthiness caused by the herd morality of Christianity. What distinguishes him from the herd animal is not freedom from sickness, but the “ability to overcome the elements of slavish morality in oneself.”⁶⁷ What Hamilton is arguing, then, is that there are forms of both genuine nobility and affirmation that are nonetheless impacted by the life-denying mode of valuation in which they exist. And the affirmer who possesses inward nobility will not wish that his life might be repeated again, as the doctrine of the eternal recurrence seems to suggest he must, or that he will *want* his suffering, but that he does not weigh the good against the bad in order to determine the value of his life.

Hamilton supports this claim by noting, first, that it is common for human beings, despite the pain they have experienced, to look fondly on their own lives, because their pasts belong to them. My past is important to me, in other words,

⁶⁶ Christopher Hamilton, “Nietzsche on Nobility and the Affirmation of Life,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 3 (2000): 169-193, 179.

⁶⁷ Hamilton, 181.

though there are certainly parts of it I would not want to relive. What the affirmer realizes, when looking on the painful experiences of the past, is that it is useless to wish things had gone otherwise. This awareness, Hamilton argues, is what marks the beginning of the possibility of the kind of affirmation he identifies with Nietzsche, an affirmation that is not dependent on how well things have gone. He writes, "Someone who affirms life in this deeper way must leave his love or affirmation of life open to repudiation.... The issue here is one of the *quality of his spirit*."⁶⁸ An affirmer of this type will do what he can to ease his current burdens but affirms his life despite its pain, on the grounds that nothing can be done about the past.

Hamilton argues that that no historical person represented the worldly noble, but in regards to the conception of nobility most often associated with Nietzsche, he finds an example of the inward noble in Michel de Montaigne. What makes Montaigne a worthy example of inward nobility, on Hamilton's view is that there is evenness in his response to both pleasurable and painful experiences. Certainly he would have preferred less pain, but he does not indulge the feeling of self-pity that might arise when reflecting on the past, because he recognizes that such lamentation is of no use. This attitude is important not only for helping the affirmer remember that his ability to affirm

⁶⁸ Hamilton, 183. This aligns with Nietzsche's remarks in BGE 287, in which he writes, "What is noble? What does the word 'noble' still mean to us today?... There are no actions that prove who they are,—actions are always ambiguous, always unfathomable.... It is not works, it is *faith* that is decisive here, faith that establishes an order; some fundamental certainty that a noble soul has about itself, something that cannot be looked for, cannot be found, and perhaps cannot be lost either."

life does not arise from what his life looks like on balance, but also because, in rejecting the urge to indulge in lamenting over the past, he protects himself from the prolonging of suffering that results from this sort of self-indulgence. Hamilton writes, "This is why Montaigne said, in a comment that is profoundly Nietzschean *avant la lettre*: '[T]he most uncouth of our afflictions is to despise our being.' Montaigne was, indeed, in his understanding of, and response to, pleasure and pain, 'superficial out of profundity.'"⁶⁹ Based on this, Hamilton argues that Montaigne is one of Nietzsche's so-called free spirits: he has overcome himself.

Hamilton's conception of affirmation, however, does raise an important question about the distinction between affirming one's own life, which Hamilton discusses in detail, and affirming life as a whole, which poses a different problem for the affirmer: how can he affirm, for himself, the lives and painful experiences of others? Hamilton acknowledges that this question needs answering, but concludes that making sense of life affirmation as the affirmation of the whole of life is simply not possible with the terms of Nietzsche's own framework for the doctrine. This is because the affirmation of the whole of life, which requires us to affirm the lives of others, is only possible if we, unlike Nietzsche, embrace the view that human beings share a "common lot," that the life of each individual has value and dignity. Hamilton further argues that we share a joint responsibility for humanity. Thus, what we affirm in others is their inwardness,

⁶⁹ Hamilton, 186.

“an affirmation of the world on behalf of others – not merely an affirmation of one’s own life.”⁷⁰ This understanding of human value cannot, of course, be reconciled with Nietzsche’s view of human value, so the only notion of life affirmation that functions within the terms of Nietzsche’s philosophy is the one in which affirmation is always only an affirmation of one’s own life.

III. CONCLUSION

Shortcomings of Affirmation

The greatest test of Nietzsche’s ambitious doctrine of life affirmation will be suffering – whether the affirmation of the worst experiences of suffering is possible and advisable. In order for the doctrine of life affirmation to fulfill Nietzsche’s goals for revaluation, it must be able to provide a new meaning for suffering. This new meaning must be more convincing than the meaning provided by the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation and its non-religious forms (pessimism and nihilism), which counts suffering as an argument against life, a reason why life is bad or meaningless or regrettable. The question is whether we can affirm suffering. If the answer is *no*, the doctrine of life affirmation, while perhaps useful in a more limited capacity, fails to provide a new meaning for life. If genuine affirmation is an affirmation of all of one’s life (even all of life itself, on some interpretations), the primary mode of interpreting suffering must be that of

⁷⁰ Hamilton, 190.

affirming it. One must say *yes* to it. Not only are there cases in which doing so would be extremely difficult, it seems plausible that there are also cases in which doing so would produce harmful consequences.

While Nietzsche takes Schopenhauer's pessimism as an act of weakness and cowardice, I believe that it could be argued, instead, that there is deep sensitivity and honesty in the interpretation of suffering that informs Schopenhauer's summation of the value of life. Schopenhauer is deeply attuned to the great amount of suffering that permeates human experience, and to the fruitlessness of some of that suffering. While Nietzsche has good reason to worry about the potential negative effects of nihilism and to push for revaluation, it is also true that methods of revaluation—such as the doctrine of life affirmation—that do not retain a means of accounting for destructive suffering are of limited use.

Nietzsche is not the first to recognize that attitude plays a role in the way one experiences and values her life. Perhaps the most valuable fruit of the multi-faceted Stoic worldview is that precise doctrine. And there are many, many human experiences for which it is wise counsel. But it is Schopenhauer rather than Nietzsche who rightly incorporates into his work the recognition that there are limits to the power of attitude and conscious interpretation. There are some experiences for which silence may be the only appropriate and bearable response, over which despondence hangs like a flag.

As we have seen, efforts have been made to demonstrate how life affirmation can successfully account for all human experience, including suffering, and while the level of success of those efforts is unclear at best, the more important point is this: 'suffering' is a term used to describe many different kinds of experiences, and while some of those experiences have the potential to be instructive and some of them are minor, others are eviscerating, their only result being the destruction of the threads that bind an individual (or community) to one's sense of value, one's own humanity, one's identity, one's emotional stability, and so forth. Attempts to recast suffering as a good, or to set it aside altogether, generally ignore these destructive experiences of suffering in their attempts to remove a difficult roadblock to life affirmation. A mode of valuation that does not acknowledge and account for not only instructive, but also destructive suffering is insufficient and dangerous, with the potential to give rise to apathy or even cruelty. May suggests that suffering interpreted is no longer suffering, but I do not believe that anyone who has received a diagnosis for a lifelong, debilitating illness, or who has endured long-term abuse, or who has experienced the death of a young child, or who suffers from mental disease would agree.

Experiences of destructive suffering are not affirmable. Furthermore, the doctrine of life affirmation, given both its limitations and Nietzsche's treatment of suffering, cannot on its own fulfill the goals of revaluation. The affirmative attitude toward one's own destructive experiences undermines his wellbeing.

When interpreted as one aspect of Nietzsche's overarching work – which can be characterized as the project of self-overcoming – life affirmation becomes a useful tool against which one examines, sharpens, and intensifies oneself. In such a context, life affirmation is no longer merely a goal that is achieved or not, but becomes a test that produces a deeper self-knowledge necessary for the challenges that lie ahead. But the goals of revaluation will be met by means other than life affirmation or a combination of ideals that includes a more limited use of the affirmative attitude.

Role of Affirmation

There is way to think about the relationship between affirmation and revaluation in Nietzsche's other than treating the affirmative attitude as the goal of revaluation. He writes that his task is to prepare for humanity's moment of highest self-examination, "a *great noon* when [humanity] will look back and look out, when it will escape from the domination of chance and priests and, for the first time, posit the question 'why?,' the question 'what for?' *as a whole....*"⁷¹ This is one among many places where Nietzsche notes the necessity of self-critique and evaluation, but this passage also reveals something about his approach to the problem of life-denying values and nihilism: namely, that, to use the medical terminology that is often associated with Nietzsche, there is an ailment present

⁷¹ EH Daybreak 2.

and as is often the case in such matters, curing it will involve a process of trial and error, assessment, pause, and openness above all.

Thinking about Nietzsche's work in this way – as experimental, that is⁷² – gives us good reason to accept the following two claims: first, that revaluation is a process that comes in steps; and second, that revaluation is a broad project and life affirmation is but a part of that project. The first claim is supported by comments like the following: "Let us not underestimate the fact that *we ourselves*, we free spirits, already constitute a 'revaluation of all values,' a *living* declaration of war on and victory over all old concepts of 'true and 'untrue.'"⁷³ This passage makes clear that Nietzsche believes there are small, but necessary, victories along the way, that overcoming nihilism begins with a destructive act before it can become a creative one.

This passage also hints at the nature of the project of revaluation, which is not *primarily* one of affirming, but of self-overcoming. Thus, life affirmation can neither be a singularly successful method or goal of revaluation nor can it be successful in a more modest application without the recognition that the process of changing one's values can only happen alongside the work of changing one's *self*. This is the task that will make revaluation possible, and it is the task to which Nietzsche set himself. He writes:

To be able to look out from the optic of sickness towards *healthier* concepts and values, and again the other way around, to look down from the fullness and self-assurance of the *rich* life into the

⁷² GS 51.

⁷³ A 13.

secret work of the instinct of decadence—that was my longest training, my genuine experience, if I became master of anything, it was this. I have a hand for switching *perspectives*: the first reason why a ‘revaluation of values’ is even possible, perhaps for me alone.⁷⁴

As this passage makes clear, there is work to be done before revaluation becomes even a possibility. In addition to the perspectivism described here, Nietzsche makes note of other practices that make it possible for one, *in our circumstances*, to overcoming oneself. These include seeking freedom from the seduction of words,⁷⁵ developing strength,⁷⁶ and critiquing the will to truth,⁷⁷ among others.

While Nietzsche does sometimes make strong claims about the centrality of life affirmation to the project of revaluation, it is clear that, given the effort he dedicates to evaluating our collective health, to learning all he can about the sickness he observes in Western culture, and the fact that he writes of revaluation in aspirational terms, good health is the broader project. And in *our* circumstances, the pursuit of good health will require self-overcoming. The method of affirmation is best understood in the context of that goal. Nietzsche writes:

It is the profound, suspicious fear of an incurable pessimism that forces whole millennia to bury their teeth in and cling to a religious interpretation of existence: the fear of that instinct which senses that one might get a hold of the truth *too soon*, before man has become strong enough, hard enough, artist enough.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ EH 1.

⁷⁵ BGE 16.

⁷⁶ BGE 30.

⁷⁷ GM III:24.

⁷⁸ BGE 59.

Thus, for those emerging from two thousand years of no-saying, the *exercise* of affirming is a means of countering a destructive habit, pushing the individual toward the strength and artistry necessary to bear reality and, through reevaluation, create new ideals. Thinking of affirming as an exercise and component of a new mode of valuation has great value, without the side effect of encouraging unhealthy hardness toward oneself and apathy toward others.

II | SOUNDING OUT IDOLS

“That hunger for the absolute must be crushed inside me. And the belief that without it we grow poorer. We grow richer, more complex, more diversified....”

Etty Hillesum

Though Nietzsche was alarmed by what he perceived to be an increasingly nihilistic attitude among his contemporaries, his claim that Platonic-Christian culture was in the midst of a crisis of meaning largely ran against the sensibilities of his time. Where he saw danger, his contemporaries seemed to have experienced theirs as an era of freedom, in which deferring to God in all matters of things unexplained had ceased and confidence in the capabilities of human beings soared. It was a time in which liberation from religious dogma further increased faith in the ability of human beings to understand and manipulate the workings of the world to our benefit, a shift that had begun with the Renaissance. In the midst of this, Nietzsche was convinced that a change of beliefs such as the one taking place in his time did not constitute the progress that others took it to be. Rather, he insisted that more was needed—a complete overhaul of *values* was in order.

He believed that Platonic-Christian values—those associated with Christian morality—had not diminished alongside religiosity, but had continued on, expressed in atheistic forms: namely, pessimism and nihilism. In pursuit of an alternative, he attacked the values and doctrines he believed were responsible for their rise, among them the concepts of good and evil, the notion of absolute truth, and the idea of eternity. It is on the grounds of this critique that Nietzsche calls for a “revaluation of all values”¹ in order to produce a life-enhancing mode of valuation, and *through* his critique that the work of revaluation begins. This dissertation concludes that the call for revaluation is justified but that, insofar as it is constituted by the doctrine of life affirmation,² the project of revaluation cannot fulfill its goals. This chapter takes on the first part of that claim while the next chapter will discuss the second part.

To defend the view that a revaluation is in order this chapter will present a basic sketch of Nietzsche’s genealogy of Platonic-Christian morality, followed

¹ See BGE 203: “where do *we* need to reach with our hopes?—Towards *new philosophers*, there is no alternative; towards spirits who are strong and original enough to give impetus to opposed valuations and initiate a revaluation and reversal of ‘eternal values’; toward those sent out ahead....”

Also see, EH Daybreak 1 and TI Preface.

² The doctrine of life affirmation will be discussed in detail in chapter three. Also see EH BT 2: “These two insights [[the phenomenon of the Dionysian and the recognition that Socrates is a decadent] catapulted me high above any pathetic, idiot gossip about optimism *contra* pessimism!—I was the first to see the real opposition:--the *degenerate* instinct that turns against life with subterranean vindictiveness (—Christianity, Schopenhauer’s philosophy, and in a certain sense Plato’s philosophy, the whole of idealism as typical forms) and a formula of the *highest affirmation* born out of fullness, out of overfullness, an unreserved yea-saying even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything questionable and strange about existence. . . This final, most joyous, effusive high-spirited yes to life is not only the highest insight, it is also the most *profound*, the most rigorously confirmed and supported by truth and study.”

by the argument that the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation is not life-enhancing because [1] it promotes the undermining of human well-being (regarding what we might call our psychological and emotional health) and [2] it encourages the devaluation of life in general, and underpins ideologies that interpret life as meaningless. Nietzsche identifies two creative processes that give rise to the current mode of valuation and the crisis of meaning that follows the increasing rejection of Christian dogma: moralized internalization and asceticization. The first produces the guilt and shame that cause moral and psychological “sickliness” in Platonic-Christian culture. The second involves belief in an eternal realm and the rejection of Earthly life that leads to its devaluation.

Together, these processes explain how the current mode of valuation took root, what made it so powerful, why it has remained intact despite a decline in religiosity, and why a crisis of meaning has been the result. Nietzsche’s approach to trying to understand the nature of the crisis and the threats it poses to life involves both critique and construction. Therefore, the first part of the chapter will provide a brief account of the history and nature of revaluation in Nietzsche’s work, in terms of both how it manifests in Nietzsche’s critique and how it functions in his constructive philosophy. The second part of this chapter will defend Nietzsche’s claim that revaluation is necessary by looking more closely at his critical work, and in particular his critique of the development of Platonic-Christian morality, its ongoing transformation throughout its long

history, and its consequences for Western culture right up to Nietzsche's own time.

I: BRIEF EXPOSITION OF REVALUATION

Nietzsche's genealogical project is what brought him lasting notoriety but it has been argued³ – rightly, I think – that what makes him a great philosopher is his unwavering focus on values, the fact that he turns other sorts of philosophical questions – epistemological, ontological – into axiological ones, making the study of value central to his thought. This is especially clear in his call for a revaluation of values, a process that he considers a life-saving response to Platonic-Christian values and the nihilistic attitude that it reifies.⁴ However, developing a definitive account of revaluation is difficult, in part because it is a project with many faces, including, as Simon Robertson describes it, “critical and positive, normative and metaethical”⁵ components. The texts published by Nietzsche do not comprise a full or homogenous account of *what* or *how* revaluation is.

As a result, attempts to produce a thorough account of revaluation results in something like Mozart's “Requiem Mass in D Minor” or Bruce Lee's *Game of Death*, both of which were only partially finished at the time of the artists' deaths and completed by others afterwards. Producing such a work demands not

³ Thomas A. Brobjer, “The Origin and Early Context of the Revaluation Theme in Nietzsche's Thinking,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 39 (2010): 12-29.

⁴ GM Preface 6.

⁵ Simon Robertson, “Nietzsche's Ethical Revaluation,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 37 (2009): 66-90.

merely interpretation, but also addition. Using Nietzsche's published texts, it is a challenge to produce definitive answers for even the most basic questions that the proposition of revaluation raises—*how* do you revalue? What do you use when you revalue *all* values? All philosophical interpretation involves addition, however, and while attempts to successfully map Nietzsche's revaluation suffer from the abrupt end of his working life, which left his project unfinished, an account of revaluation is both possible and promising, even if incomplete.

Origin of the Concept

In an essay that challenges popular ideas about the early context of revaluation in Nietzsche's work, Thomas Brobjer observes that the literature on revaluation [*Umwertung*] takes the concept to have originated in either 1884 or 1886. This is likely due to the fact that the term first appears in Nietzsche's published work in 1886's *Beyond Good and Evil*, as well as to the fact that in subsequent published works, revaluation is a major theme. Brobjer argues, however, that the general concept of revaluation arises considerably earlier—around 1880 or 1881—in Nietzsche's notes, and points out that revaluation is also briefly mentioned in 1882's *The Gay Science*, using synonyms for *Umwertung*.⁶ He pinpoints a number of instances in which Nietzsche discusses the theme of revaluation during this earlier period,⁷ leading him to conclude that revaluation was actually the first of the concepts of Nietzsche's affirmative thinking—which

⁶ Brobjer, 14.

⁷ Brobjer, 17.

includes will to power,⁸ eternal recurrence, and *Übermensch*⁹—but that it did not become a major theme until after the other three.¹⁰ It is difficult to say when, based on the history of the term *Umwertung* in Nietzsche’s writing, revaluation became a “major” theme, especially given that, as Brobjer points out, Nietzsche was using synonyms for *Umwertung* in the early 1880s. Brobjer’s more important (and more defensible) point is that Nietzsche was working on the concept of revaluation from an earlier time than generally believed, suggesting that in addition to *The Antichrist*, which Nietzsche described as the first official book of revaluation,¹¹ the works published from at least the early 1880s might all contribute meaningfully to an interpretation of revaluation.

In regards to the early context of the concept, the inspiration for revaluation certainly grows out of Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity, as the second part of this chapter will show. But as Brobjer suggests, it is about equally true that Nietzsche’s conception of revaluation is inspired by his critique of his non-Christian contemporaries, specifically, the problem of pessimism—and, presumably, the threat of nihilism that follows.¹² This is certainly supported by

⁸ “Will to power” describes what Nietzsche takes to be the driving force behind human behavior. The concept has been interpreted in a number of ways, but generally represents the urge for achievement, self-expression, and, perhaps, self-perfection. This may sometimes result in the pursuit of actual power over others, but this will likely only be the case when power over others makes possible the sorts of activities that cultivate personal growth.

⁹ Zarathustra presents the *Übermensch* as a goal for humanity, a term that is intended to represent the great strength that will be required to, under the threat of nihilism, create new values—which is precisely what, according to Zarathustra, the *Übermensch* will do.

¹⁰ Brobjer, 24.

¹¹ A Preface 156.

¹² Brobjer, 24.

the texts, as even in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche's famous critique of Christian morality, the last few sections are dedicated to a criticism of modernity and its nonbelievers. He writes, "we knowers today, we godless ones and anti-metaphysicians, we too still take *our* fire from that great fire that was ignited by a thousand-year old belief, that belief of the Christians, which was also Plato's belief, that God is truth, that truth is *divine*."¹³ Greek antiquity is also important to the development of Nietzsche's conception of revaluation, which is made evident by his claim that *The Birth of Tragedy* was his first revaluation, as well as Nietzsche's association of Dionysius with the Eternal Recurrence.

Brobjer argues that Nietzsche's 'revaluation' was largely based on historical parallels—not only with Greek antiquity, but also with the Renaissance, which Nietzsche takes as an attempt at the revaluation of Christian values. Brobjer writes, "Thus when he [Nietzsche] claims that '*my* question is its question' he refers to the Renaissance revaluation of Christian values into essentially ancient values."¹⁴ Following the Christian inversion of Greek values recounted in the *Genealogy*, the Renaissance represents, then, a second attempt at revaluation. In the second case, however, unlike the first, the attempt failed. So it is clear that the context in which Nietzsche's conception of revaluation developed is complex, a result of the historical, critical, and contemporary concerns that his genealogical work rouses. What motivates his call to the task in

¹³ GM III: 24.

¹⁴ Brobjer, 25.

his own time, however, is the sickliness he takes to be present in his era and the devaluation of life that the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation perpetuates.

Translating *Umwertung*

In addition to tracing the origins of the concept, examining the history of the translation of *Umwertung* is also helpful for understanding the task of revaluation and the different interpretations of commentators. Like Brobjer, Duncan Large notes that Nietzsche “had been exploring and exploiting a tremendously rich vocabulary of value since the beginning of his philosophical career.” And from this perspective, he writes, “the term ‘Umwertung’ marks the culmination of his axiological engagement.”¹⁵ This aligns with Brobjer’s claim that revaluation is the earliest of Nietzsche’s affirmative concepts, though perhaps the last to become a major theme. The translation of the term, which was coined by Nietzsche, is worth exploring not simply because it has been given a variety of names in the literature, but also because the reasons for that variation contribute to understanding how readers have come to interpret Nietzsche’s goals and framework for revaluation in different ways.

There have been two main terms used for *Umwertung* when translating from German to English. Though ‘transvaluation,’ which was coined in 1907, was used in the first English translation of BGE by Helen Zimmern, ‘revaluation’ has come to be the most popular choice following the work of Kaufmann and

¹⁵ Duncan Large, “A Note on the Term ‘Umwertung,’” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 39 (2010): 5-11, 6.

Hollingdale. The difficulty with translating the term and the reason variation exists stems from Nietzsche's use of the prefix *um-*, which in simplest terms denotes change (in a value-neutral sense).¹⁶ The generality of the prefix creates some debate about how Nietzsche intended the term to function.

Manuel Dries argues that 'revaluation' is an accurate translation of *Neubewertung*, *Nachbewertung*, or *Aufwertung* (i.e., to evaluate something for a second time), but that it does not, "capture the sense of penetrating and transforming traditional value practices, for which Nietzsche coined the term *Umwertung*." Instead, he uses 'transvaluation,' as he takes the prefix *trans-* (meaning "to pass through, penetrate, or surpass") to better represent Nietzsche's intentions.¹⁷ Simon Robertson and Brobjer, among others, use 'revaluation.' Brobjer argues that 'transvaluation is a less accurate translation, in part because of the synonyms Nietzsche uses for *Umwertung*.¹⁸ They align more closely, he suggests, with the prefix *re-* than *trans-*,¹⁹ making 'revaluation' a better choice. Rejecting both arguments, Aaron Ridley prefers the use of 're-evaluation' to the more common options. He holds that 'revaluation' implies that the result of the process will always be the assigning of new or different value to the values under review, while 're-evaluation' "feels (to me, at least) as if it leaves open the

¹⁶ Large, Note, 6.

¹⁷ Manuel Dries, "On the Logic of Values," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 39 (2010):30-50, 48n1.

¹⁸ These include, according to Large: *Umkehrung* (= reversal), *umkehren* (= turn back), *Umdrehung* (= turn, revolution, rotation), and *umdrehen* (= turn round, turn over, turn back).

¹⁹ Thomas Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Ethics of Character*, Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1995, 296n10.

possibility that the value of a given value might emerge from the process unchanged,"²⁰ which is more in the spirit of Nietzsche's project as Ridley interprets it.

Finally, some argue that the matter largely comes down to personal preference. Though Large opts for 'revaluation' in his own work, he concludes that the reason that no standard English translation of *Umwertung* has definitively imposed itself is that "the two main candidates, 'transvaluation' and 'revaluation,' are more or less equally good and equally bad. Nietzsche clearly intends the term to denote some kind of value change, and what is at stake is the type of change envisaged."²¹ One's preference, I think, stems from whether she puts greater emphasis on the sense of revisiting or the sense of overcoming that is invoked by *Umwertung*. The arguments in favor of each of the translations are illuminating, and I follow what has become the norm, using 'revaluation' because of the forward-looking quality that it reflects, which is very much in line with Nietzsche's goals for the project as I understand them. 'Revaluation' and its suggestion of creativity also aligns nicely with the imagery – particularly that of heading out onto the open sea²² – Nietzsche employs when discussing the philosophers of the future and the new values that might be developed by them.

²⁰ Aaron Ridley, "Nietzsche and the re-evaluation of values," *Proceedings from the Aristotelian Society* 105 (2005): 155-175, 155n1.

²¹ Large, 7.

²² See GS 343: "Indeed, at hearing the news that 'the old god is dead', we philosophers and 'free spirits' feel illuminated by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, forebodings, expectation – finally the horizon seems clear again, even if not bright; finally our ships may set out again, set out to face any danger; every daring of the

In addition to the task of developing new values, it is also important to note that revaluation is also the organizing theme of Nietzsche's ethics.²³ Revaluation is certainly a critique of prevailing morality, but this critique has both an evaluative component and a metaethical one, through which Nietzsche "challenges the objectivist foundations underpinning morality's claim to authority."²⁴ Simon Robertson recounts the ways in which Nietzsche's positive program has been interpreted by commentators—as proto-existentialist by Magnus, as egoist by Nehamas, as virtue ethicist by Solomon, as consequentialist by Hurka, and most recently, as perfectionist (in the broad sense that he proposes a conception of human good involving the realization of excellence).²⁵

These varying interpretations "yield contrasting views about the role of morality after revaluation, how extensive a devaluation Nietzsche envisages, and how influential he intends the revaluation to be."²⁶ While this is true, at least some core aspects of revaluation emerge from Nietzsche's published work. In GS 269, Nietzsche writes, "*What do you believe in?—In this: that the weight of all things must be determined anew.*"²⁷ It seems, given his criticism of the ascetic ideal and his notion of the "argonauts of the ideal,"²⁸ that while a complete picture of revaluation is not revealed in the primary texts, it is clear that the

lover of knowledge is allowed again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; maybe there has never been such an 'open sea.'"

²³ Robertson, 66.

²⁴ Robertson, 66.

²⁵ Robertson, 67.

²⁶ Robertson, 67.

²⁷ GS 269.

²⁸ GS 382.

project has both a destructive and constructive task. In my view, that constructive task, broadly construed, is to develop life-enhancing values (which will be discussed in the next chapter). More specifically, it requires the pursuit and development of excellence in the form of self-overcoming. Thus, in addition to its critical task, revaluation involves the constructive task of developing an alternate ideal.²⁹

One of the best ways to illustrate Nietzsche's approach to creating new values, as just mentioned, is to consider the imagery of sailing that is woven throughout his later published texts, including *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche writes in EH that Zarathustra speaks to the "bold seekers, experimenters, and anyone who has ever embarked with cunning sails on terrible seas."³⁰ He describes his own critical and creative experience when reflecting on his *Untimely Meditations*, claiming that he did not deceive himself "for a minute about the path, the sea, the danger—and the success! The great calm in promising, this happy gaze out onto a future that won't remain just a promise!"³¹ He also writes of philosophers and free spirits who, upon hearing the news that God is dead³² "feel illuminated by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, forebodings,

²⁹ See GM II:24: "But someday, in a stronger time than this decaying, self-doubting present, he really must come to us, the *redeeming* human of the great love and contempt.... This human of the future who will redeem us from the previous ideal as much as from that *which had grown out of it*, from the great disgust, from the will to nothingness; this bell-stroke of noon... that makes the will free again, that gives back to the earth its goal and to man his hope; this Anti-Christ and anti-nihilist; this conqueror of God and of nothingness...."

³⁰ EH *Why I Write Such Good Books*, 3.

³¹ EH *Untimely Ones*, 3.

³² GS 125.

expectations." Finally," he announces, "the horizon seems clear again, even if not bright; finally our ships may set out again, set out to face any danger; every daring of the lover of knowledge is allowed again; the sea, our sea, lies open again; maybe there has never been such an 'open sea.'"³³ Passages such as these reflect that Nietzsche takes his project to be one that begins in known territories, like his critique, but which goes on to discover new ones.

The part-given and part-constructed aspect of Dries' interpretation of *Umwertung* is supported by this metaphor, as seekers and sailors have long led to the development of new cultures that are a combination of their old worlds and the creation of new ones. Even those that return to their old communities alter them by exposing them to different customs, values, and beliefs. In my view, the constructive work of revaluation is best represented by the combination of reassigning value to existing values, and the development of new values that will come out of the creative-constructive relationship with the world—and that creative-constructive relationship will begin with experimentation.

Revaluation as Experiment

After two millennia of the distorting influence of the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation, the ultimate question about the condition of life, Nietzsche claims, is the extent to which truth can stand to be incorporated. That is to say,

³³ GS 343.

whether this “new challenge”³⁴ will be met depends, first, on whether and when the courage for honesty about the true meaning of existing values will arise. The secondary literature does not highlight enough that for Nietzsche the way that this question will be answered, along with many others, is through experimentation.³⁵ Experimentation largely involves trying on different perspectives, but also adopting, perhaps temporarily, different beliefs. The goal of this testing of one’s beliefs and lifestyle is always either to drive out old, dangerous values or to make new ones tenable. The common notion of the “soul-hypothesis” is an example. In BGE 12, Nietzsche writes:

Between ourselves it is not at all necessary to get rid of ‘the soul’ at the same time, and thus to renounce one of the most ancient and venerable hypotheses.... But the way is open for new versions and refinements of the soul-hypothesis; and such conceptions as ‘mortal soul,’ and ‘soul as subjective multiplicity,’ and ‘soul as social structure of the drives and affects,’ want henceforth to have citizens’ rights in science. When the new psychologist puts an end to the superstitions which have so far flourished... he practically exiles himself into a new desert and a new suspicion...

Experimentation can function as a next step following destruction and distance, but it can also be an alternative to those other methods of re-evaluating value. In a passage that brings Nietzsche’s critical work into sight of his constructive work, he wonders whether the discipline of science might be brought out of service to the ascetic ideal. He writes:

³⁴ See GM Preface 6: “Let us speak it aloud, this *new challenge*: we need a *critique* of moral values, for once the value of these values must itself be called into question—and for this we need a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances out of which they have grown, under which they have developed and shifted....”

³⁵ GS 110.

If all these jobs were done, the most delicate question of all would emerge in the foreground: whether science is able to *furnish* goals of action after having proved that it can take such goals away and annihilate them; and then an experimenting would be in order, in which every kind of heroism could find satisfaction—an experimenting that might last for centuries and eclipse all the great projects and sacrifices of history to date.³⁶

For Nietzsche, then, experimentation is vital to the work of revaluation.

And though revaluation is often discussed in terms of how it impacts the system of valuations, Nietzsche most frequently describes experimentation as the work of the individual, something one lives with, or something one practices on oneself. He writes of “we” who see our own actions as experiments, ourselves as guinea pigs, our lives as attempts.³⁷ There seem to be two reasons for this emphasis on experimentation as a way of life. First, it is through living the experimental life—adopting a new perspective, for example—that one becomes an evaluator and creator of values,³⁸ and the ability to create values is vital to the work of revaluation if, as Nietzsche argues, it is the case that Platonic-Christian culture has only ever had one ideal (and it is a harmful one).³⁹ Second, “spirits which are prevented from changing their opinions; they cease to be spirits.”⁴⁰ In an age of diminished moral and psychological health, experimentation is a type of convalescence for the individual. Therefore, experimentation will largely be

³⁶ GS 7.

³⁷ GS 41, 219; BGE 42, 210.

³⁸ BGE 211.

³⁹ GS 41, 219; BGE 42, 210.

⁴⁰ D 573.

the means by which future individuals will be uninhibited by herd morality and free to create new values.

The way to become uninhibited is by practicing self-assessment and self-testing. According to Nietzsche, “One has to test oneself to see that one is destined for independence and command—and do it at the right time. One should not dodge one’s tests, though they may be the most dangerous game one could play and are tests that are taken in the end before no witness or judge but ourselves.”⁴¹ One may, for example, test her ability to build strength through a variety of methods, as Nietzsche describes in WP 915: “I also want to make asceticism natural again: in place of the aim of denial, the aim of strengthening... an experiment with adventures and arbitrary dangers.—One should even devise tests for one’s strength in being able to keep one’s word.”

Another kind of testing is described in GS 2, where Nietzsche presents a method for rooting out self-deception. He advises that “we philosophers” should become ill, we should “shut our eyes to ourselves, as it were.” In practicing self-temptation and self-questioning, one becomes “better than before at guessing the involuntary detours, alleyways, resting places, and sunning places of thought to which suffering thinkers are led and misled on account of their suffering.” One imagines that this is the sort of work Nietzsche is thinking of when he claims, “I want to teach the idea that gives many the right to erase themselves—the great

⁴¹ BGE 41.

cultivating idea.”⁴² In addition to self-testing, experimentation can also take other forms. Karl Löwith writes about the experimental aspect of Nietzsche’s work, describing both the criticism and skepticism as aspects of Nietzsche’s experimentation in his own life. Löwith writes:

By way of an attempt, Nietzsche’s experimental philosophy anticipates the possibility of fundamental nihilism—in order to pass through to its opposite, to the eternal cycle of Being. The special meaning of Nietzsche’s *criticism* and *skepticism*, too, is determined by the fundamentally experimental character of Nietzsche’s philosophy: both serve the testing. His criticism is the ‘attempt’ at a revaluation of all previous values, and his skepticism that of ‘audacious’ manliness.⁴³

Löwith suggests that both serve as “attempts” on Nietzsche’s part, which supports the view that critique, such as that undertaken in the *Genealogy* is deeply important to revaluation.

Though experimentation is crucial to revaluation, there is, as is the case with all experimentation, the potential for failure. In GS 41 Nietzsche explains that the experimenting individual sees “his own actions as experiments and questions, as seeking explanations of something: to him, success and failure are primarily answers.” He is not “vexed” nor “feels remorse because something goes wrong.” He is free of guilt but also without conviction, without certitude,

⁴² WP 1056.

⁴³ Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy: A System in Aphorisms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 12.

and, in some cases, without guides or safety nets.⁴⁴ This makes his work dangerous, though potentially powerful – and ultimately necessary, as Nietzsche sees no other way to create a new ideal. Thus in GS 324 Nietzsche writes, “No, life has not disappointed me. Rather, I find it truer, more desirable and mysterious every year – ever since the day the great liberator overcame me: the thought that life could be an experiment for the knowledge-seeker – not a duty, not a disaster, not a deception!” Through the self-testing, risking, and openness associated with experimentation, both the creative and critical components of revaluation have the potential to fulfill Nietzsche’s goals.

II: CRITIQUE OF THE EXISTING MODE OF VALUATION

The critical portion of the revaluation experiment is certainly successful insofar as it identifies a crisis of values. That work, Nietzsche says, began with a question. In the preface of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche writes that he had a natural skepticism towards morality that led him to ask at an early age: *what is the origin of our ‘good’ and ‘evil’?* Later, he says, it was reshaped into *under what conditions did humans invent those value judgments good and evil?* It is this question, perhaps more than any other, that gives life and form to Nietzsche’s astute, disturbing, and deeply imaginative critical works. It is the foundation of the critique of what he calls herd morality – that mode of valuation that has

⁴⁴ WP 963: “The great man is necessarily a skeptic, provided that greatness consists in this: to *will* something great and the means to it. Freedom from any kind of conviction is part of the strength of his will.”

dominated Western⁴⁵ culture since the rise of Christianity. Written for that Platonic-Christian culture, the *Genealogy* is a book about the rise, dominance, and consequences of herd morality, about which, Nietzsche tells us, “[t]here is no other way: the feelings of devotion, self-sacrifice for one’s neighbor, the whole morality of self-denial must be questioned mercilessly and taken to court.”⁴⁶

His method for carrying out this work is what he calls “sounding out idols.”⁴⁷ It involves “posing questions with a hammer” because, he tells us, the world has more idols than realities so “the very things that want to keep quiet are *made to speak out*.”⁴⁸ As we will soon, posing questions with a hammer is crucial to Nietzsche’s project because he is convinced that the histories that do exist, the explanations of the origins of our morals, are false—and intentionally so. Nietzsche’s critique also reveals a great deal about the development of human psychology that takes place alongside the development of Platonic-Christian morality. And it is in this regard that it is easiest to see how the *Genealogy* operates as a kind of patient history, tracing various aspects of the present state back through past states and actions and practices, not simply to more fully understand the story of human development under the conditions of Platonic-Christian morality, but also to uncover clues about how a different, better future might be made possible.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche uses the terms “Europe” and “European” but the values and ideals he critiques are certainly found in other “Western” cultures, too.

⁴⁶ BGE 33.

⁴⁷ TI, Preface, 1555.

⁴⁸ TI, Preface, 1555.

The Pre-Christian Worldview

The reason that Nietzsche sometimes refers to the values of herd morality as Platonic-Christian values is because the origins of the story of the meaning of human existence in Western culture are Greek, or rather, the Greek disintegration.⁴⁹ Before the rise of Christianity, the Greeks developed values and meaning for their lives, and this influenced the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation. For example, as Gilles Deleuze notes in *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, for the Greeks “suffering was used as a way of proving the injustice of existence, but at the same time as a way of finding a higher and divine justification for it.”⁵⁰ But there are other Greek ideas that contribute to Christian morality. Plato holds that there is an eternal realm that is, by comparison to the mortal realm, more real, more right, more true – that is to say, it is a world of perfection and the source of any truth that exists. This metaphysics is deeply intertwined with a notion of meaningfulness that measures the value of things that exist in the natural world by how closely they come to imitating that which is eternal. For Plato, then, what gives human life its value is how closely it imitates the eternal realm. The mortal realm in which human beings live is, by this standard, a mere replica, and a poor one, full of errors and defects.

⁴⁹ See EH BT 1: “The two crucial *innovations* of that book [*The Birth of Tragedy*] are, first, the understanding of the *Dionysian* phenomenon...The other innovation is the understanding of Socratism: Socrates, recognized for the first time as the instrument of Greek disintegration, as a typical decadent. ‘Rationality’ *against* instinct. ‘Rationality’ at any price as dangerous, as a form of violence that undermines life!”

⁵⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 19.

This doctrine also teaches that perfection has greater value than imperfection, that what is eternal has greater value than what is temporary, and that, therefore, what largely limits the value of human life is its fleeting quality. This notion is crucial to Platonic-Christian culture and dangerous in Nietzsche's view because it promotes the sense that value cannot be earned or created. This hierarchy of being is one of the Platonic sensibilities that undermines the Dionysian quality in Greek culture and lives on in Christianity. In fact, as we will see, this worldview very efficiently serves the processes of moralized internalization and asceticization that Christianize the West. Understanding why these processes did not take root until the advent of Christianity requires an understanding of how the Platonic worldview was amended by the rise of Christianity.

What Christian doctrine adds to the Platonic model is the fullness of its devaluation, wherein human life is *altogether* condemned. Deleuze notes that "[i]n comparison with Christianity the Greeks are children. Their way of depreciating existence, their 'nihilism,' does not have the perfection of the Christian way. They judged existence blameworthy but they had not yet invented the refinement which consists in judging it faulty and responsible."⁵¹ From the Greek perspective, it is the gods who bear responsibility for errors and shortcomings, even those of humans, who are easily influenced by the gods. The crimes of human beings are treated by the gods as foolish. It is through

⁵¹ Deleuze, 21.

Christianity, and moralized internalization in particular, that humans are made responsible, guilty, and *sinful*—all of which undermine our well-being and destroy the cheerfulness that had existed in the Greek way of living.

This is the move from blaming existence to blaming ourselves and it takes place in the religious intellectual environment of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The rise of Christianity added poor health, but the devaluation of life is rooted in Platonism. That is to say, while the story of the meaning of existence begins before Christianity, it is herd morality that transforms the tragedy of life into, to use Nietzsche's phrase, an argument against life that turns suffering into evidence of the valuelessness of life. According to Nietzsche, this transition takes the form of *moralized internalization*, which accounts for the unhealthy consequences of the psychological deepening of human beings, and *asceticization*, which perpetuates the devaluation of life. These two developments and the values associated with them are the reason, he claims, that pessimism and nihilism threaten to fill the void created by a decline in religiosity.

Internalization

[1] *Philosophers and Moderns*

As noted, Nietzsche's *Genealogy* begins with a question about the origins of good and evil, and he was as intrigued by the answers that other philosophers gave as he was by the implications of his own conclusions. This reflects his career-long interest not only in philosophical questions but also psychological

ones. Nietzsche was convinced that whatever has value has been *given* value, that human beings have created the world that is of concern to us. However, as existing histories of the origins of morality demonstrate, there is among his contemporaries a lack of awareness regarding this creative relationship between humans and values. They see a static connection there, wherein humans come to *recognize* the inherent value of things and ideas. While moral philosophers argue that the origin of good is usefulness, that acts were called good by those for whom they were useful, that the good act is the one that brings pleasure or happiness, Nietzsche argues that such a claim is merely an expression of the habits of moral philosophers, who *themselves* judge acts by this standard. It tells us nothing about the *history* of “goodness.” Nietzsche, as we will soon discover, produces a very different account of the origin of “good” and argues that the lack of self-understanding present in the philosophers’ account is a sign of their ahistorical approach to history.⁵²

We know that from the beginning, Nietzsche is not only interested in the histories of the morality that have been developed by others, but also in the individuals who produce them. He writes of moral philosophers, “I confess, in fact, that precisely as riddles in the flesh they have something substantial over their books—*they themselves are interesting!*”⁵³ The attention he pays to them is more than a matter of mere personal fascination, as Nietzsche makes clear in the third essay of the *Genealogy* that he believes the values of Platonic-Christian

⁵² GM I:2.

⁵³ GM I:1.

morality, despite the decline of religiosity, are perpetuated, largely intact, by philosophers. So when he says that he finds his contemporaries interesting, he is at least partly referring to their being *a part* of the history of morality, not merely as adherents to the existing mode of valuation, but as those largely responsible for its persistence after the decline of faith in God. His contemplation about why their ideas about the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation have been so different from his own sets him on the path to developing his own history of the origins of morality. The observation of his contemporaries, then, serves as a natural entry point into his genealogical work—not only because it tells us who he is positioned against, but also because it reveals something about why he feels compelled to write *On the Genealogy of Morality*—that, in his view, his genealogical work has important implications for those living in his own time.

Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* that those who attempt to tell the history of morality misunderstand human beings, that they misunderstand “nature,” because they “still look for something ‘pathological’ at the bottom of these healthiest of all tropical monsters and growths, or even for some ‘hell’ that is supposed to be innate in them....”⁵⁴ There is no bottom, no core, innate nature to humans, in Nietzsche’s view. This claim coupled with the other claim that what has value for human beings has been give value by human beings, tells us that the fact that philosophers seek the origins of values in something beyond

⁵⁴ BGE 197.

human activity is a fundamental misunderstanding of our creative and changing nature and the creative relationship between human beings and their world.

This lack of self-understanding is described by Nietzsche as a distance from oneself. In *Human, All too Human* he observes, “Man is very well defended against himself, against being reconnoitered and besieged by himself, he is usually able to perceive of himself only his outer walls.”⁵⁵ This suggests that the distance is both intentional and self-inflicted, and he explains how it is established in “Schopenhauer as Educator,” writing, “For human beings today have become so multiple and complex that they cannot help but become dishonest the moment they want to speak at all, make assertions, and then act in accordance with them.”⁵⁶ Human beings are accustomed to deception,⁵⁷ he argues, and the myths about our origins reflect both the dishonesty and the confusion that arise from our multiplicity. Based on his observation of the lack of self-understanding, confusion, and self-deception, Nietzsche concludes that “we are unknown to ourselves,”⁵⁸ and this presents a danger in his own era.

Nietzsche holds that his contemporaries are “sufferers who do not want to admit to themselves what they are... anesthetized and unconscious ones who

⁵⁵ HH 9:491.

⁵⁶ “Schopenhauer,” UO, 2.

⁵⁷ BGE 192.

⁵⁸ He is speaking specifically of philosophers in this case. See GM Preface 1: “We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers: and for good reason. We have never sought ourselves – how then should it happen that we *find* ourselves one day?”

fear only one thing: coming to consciousness....”⁵⁹ Though they reject Christian dogma, they are not, Nietzsche claims, free. He writes in GM III:24:

These negating and aloof ones of today, these who are unconditional on one point – the claim to intellectual cleanliness – these hard strict, abstinent... pale atheists, anti-Christians, immoralists... these last idealists of knowledge in whom alone the intellectual conscience today dwells and has become flesh – in fact they believe themselves to be as detached as possible from the ascetic ideal... and yet, to divulge to them what they cannot see – for they stand too close to themselves – this ideal is precisely their ideal as well... *for they still believe in truth.*

Nietzsche argues that truth “has not been permitted to be a problem” but that the value of truth, along with all other values, needs to be reconsidered, revalued. He writes of his contemporaries that when they ask, *who are we really?*, they “count up... all twelve quavering bellstrokes of our experience, of our life, of our *being* – alas! and miscount in the process....”⁶⁰ The misunderstanding of the origins of our morality are the example par excellence of this problem, leading Nietzsche to observe that the defining characteristic of modern humans is the “ingrained *innocence* in their moralistic mendacity.”⁶¹ The distaste for life that he observes in those around him demands it, but because they do not recognize their own hatred, their “weariness,” that truth has been *given* a value – in short, because of their distance from themselves – they have no will to investigate their presumptions or ideals.

⁵⁹ GM III:23.

⁶⁰ GM Preface:1.

⁶¹ GM III:19.

As a result, they do not recognize the potential danger posed by the current mode of valuation and their lack of self-awareness cuts them off from the possibility of recovery. It contributes to the “bad air”⁶² in which Platonic-Christian culture is immersed, raising the stakes of Nietzsche’s experiment with critique and creation. To put it another way, Nietzsche may rightfully be described as a diagnostician and hopeful agent of change, but he is convinced that if better health is to become a real possibility, it will be because we create that possibility *for ourselves*. And yet, only a patient who recognizes that he is ill will seek treatment. This, I propose, is why the project of revaluation really begins with Nietzsche’s critique of Platonic-Christian values.

On this view, the first major task of revaluation is a kind of unmasking of supposedly intrinsic values, revealing that they are instead instrumental in nature. Nietzsche argues that the value of morality is instrumental, that it serves, ultimately, survival.⁶³ Although in his earlier work Nietzsche holds the view that there are no genuinely moral motivations at all, his position becomes more nuanced over time. He writes in *Daybreak* 103 that to reject morality can mean either denying the motivations people claim have inspired their actions or to deny that moral judgments are based on truth. He goes on, writing:

It goes without saying that I do not deny – unless I am a fool – that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral ought to be done and encouraged – but I

⁶² See GM I:14: “But enough! enough! I can’t stand it anymore. Bad air! Bad air! This workplace where they *fabricate ideals* – it seems to me it stinks of sheer lies.”

⁶³ See also Aaron Ridley, “Nietzsche and the re-evaluation of values,” *Proceedings from the Aristotelian Society* 105 (2005): 155-175, 159.

think the one should be encouraged and the other avoided *for other reasons than hitherto*.”⁶⁴ Those other reasons include: the need to learn to think and feel differently, rather than the desire to behave morally.

Statements such as the one quoted here lead to the conclusion that Nietzsche’s efforts in regards to revaluation had expanded over time.⁶⁵ It also seems clear to me that, given the attention he pays to the perceived shortcomings of his contemporaries, and the goals of revaluation, Nietzsche’s critique of the origin of morality is in part an attempt at self-recognition. This is supported by his opening remarks in the preface of GM, in which he writes in section one, “We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers: and for good reason. We have never sought ourselves—how then should it happen that we *find* ourselves one day?” He yearns to explain not only the nature of the current mode of valuation, but also how, through it, his contemporaries came to be the way they are, *what* they are. Beginning, as we have done here, with what we say about his contemporaries, we will work our way backwards from there to uncover the main themes and claims that his critique produces. This approach effectively demonstrates, in my view, the breadth and depth of the undermining of human well-being that occurs as a result of the process of moralized internalization.

⁶⁴ D 103.

⁶⁵ Nietzsche’s early focus was on revealing supposedly intrinsic values to be instrumental, but he came to evaluate supposedly intrinsic values in other ways, which, as Aaron Ridley argues, may not involve debunking existing values at all. Ridley writes, “Here, then, Nietzsche presents the project of re-evaluation as a critique of the structure of reasons immanent in a given way of living, a structure that the values intrinsic with respect to that way of living hold in place.”⁶⁵ The shift was away from criticizing individual values and towards the foundations that held the axiological system in place.

[2] *How We Suffer From Ourselves*

If Nietzsche's account of what ails his contemporaries is accurate, one wonders why beings who are so committed to the view that honesty is a virtue could develop in ways that involve deception so deep and so lacking in self-awareness. In this case, understanding the 'how' will reveal the 'why.' To that end, Nietzsche's genealogical work suggests that the crisis of meaning in his time is the primary consequence of three factors, which will be described in the remainder of this section on moralized internalization. Perhaps the most immediately felt is the spiritual unhealthiness that is characterized by the very common feelings of shame and guilt—these constitute what Nietzsche calls "bad conscience" and they arise in human beings alongside the development of permanent communities. He describes bad conscience as the conscience of the individual who is expected to be "calculable, regular, necessary,"⁶⁶ who is taken to possess the "privilege of responsibility, the consciousness of this rare freedom, this power over oneself and fate"⁶⁷—in short, the human being in any society, as we understand human beings.

The development of a conscience is taken as the mark of a moral agent, and the expression of the responsibilities associated with free will. But Nietzsche describes it as a gloomy thing⁶⁸ and the circumstances of its human inventors as

⁶⁶ GM II:1.

⁶⁷ GM II:2.

⁶⁸ GM II:4.

longing and desperate,⁶⁹ as its fortification requires “the most gruesome sacrifices and pledges [to which sacrifice of firstborn belong], the most repulsive mutilations [castration, for example], the cruelest ritual forms of all religious cults,”⁷⁰ and its effect is that “man has grown ashamed of *man*.”⁷¹ Therefore, when Nietzsche claims that there is a “suffering of man *from man, from himself*”⁷² he is referring in part to the self-imposed feeling of guilt that afflicts the individual who feels herself accountable but who fails to live up to her own (or the community’s) standards. This demonstrates that guilt involves both the feeling of regret, an inner pain, and the acknowledgement that both the *act itself* and the agent are reprehensible (which is to say, sinful).⁷³ In other words, the individual with a conscience accepts responsibility for her deeds and accepts that certain deeds are in themselves worthy of shame.

This is a moralized conception of guilt but it has roots in a non-moralized conception of guilt, according to Nietzsche: “the very material”⁷⁴ concept of debt, which was largely constituted by the creditor’s “right to cruelty”⁷⁵ when a debtor failed to repay what was owed. Through the punishment of the debtor, the creditor exercises power, attaining “the elevating feeling of being permitted to

⁶⁹ GM II:7.

⁷⁰ GM II:3.

⁷¹ GM II:7.

⁷² GM II:16.

⁷³ Aaron Ridley, *Nietzsche’s Conscience: Six Character Studies from the Genealogy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998, 32.

⁷⁴ GM II:4

⁷⁵ GM II:5.

hold a being in contempt.”⁷⁶ Such an expression will be quite natural for any living thing, given that “[a]bove all, a living thing wants to *discharge* its strength—life itself is will to power.”⁷⁷ Thus, the punishment of a debtor was compensation to the extent that making-suffer felt good. It is the evolution of the notion of debt into moralized guilt that produces the sickly consciousness Nietzsche recognizes in his contemporaries—one that is marked by self-judgment (the feeling that one is responsible) and devaluation (of the natural instincts that undermine this commitment to the community).

The name Nietzsche gives to this, as we have seen, is bad conscience and he characterizes it as the most fundamental of all transformations that human beings have experienced: “the change of finding [ourselves] once and for all within the sway of society and peace.”⁷⁸ When a living thing cannot discharge its strength outwardly, the instinct turns inward. *This* is internalization, as Nietzsche put it: “All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly turn themselves inwards—this is what I call the internalizing of man.”⁷⁹ The individual’s inner world, which had once been “thin as if inserted between two skins” takes on depth and the instincts of hostility, cruelty, pleasure in persecution, and destruction are all turned “backwards *against man himself*.” This relationship between power and conscience is why, according to Nietzsche, the

⁷⁶ GM II:5.

⁷⁷ BGE 13.

⁷⁸ GM II:16.

⁷⁹ GM II:16.

conscience has become our dominant instinct.⁸⁰ It gives the will to power an outlet. But it also causes human beings to suffer from ourselves. What bad conscience represents is the internalizing of instincts that have no access to outward expression.

But the consequence of this is self-harm and one punishes himself, deprives himself, condemns himself because he cannot violate and deprive others when his instincts demand it. And it is in bad conscience that Nietzsche finds an explanation for the view among philosophers that the unegoistic act is the moral act. Bad conscience is a will to self-maltreatment and the infliction of pain on oneself, which is internalization. Such conditions explain why actions that serve the individual could be deemed “evil” and why generosity and meekness are lauded instead: they increase both self-deprivation and give the will something to hold against itself—a tool by which to punish itself. Thus, the unegoistic act is deemed more valuable, more *good* than other acts. This is what gives internalization its moralized component. Still, the development of bad conscience tells us why judgment and vengefulness turned inward, but not where those feelings *came from*. To answer that question, Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* goes further back, to a time before the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation and before communities had fully fenced in human beings, in arguing that an ancient revaluation is responsible for the poor health of his contemporaries.

⁸⁰ GM II:2.

[3] *The Origin of "Good"*

As Nietzsche sees it, very ancient humans were much different than modern ones—simpler, more honest, more brutal, nearly unrecognizable animalistic versions of us. The process of internalization that transforms these human beings into self-loathing and self-deceptive creatures is set in motion by an unsophisticated but powerful hatred. The object of this hatred is a group of “noble, powerful, high-ranking, and high-minded who felt and ranked themselves and their doings as good... in contrast to everything base, low-minded, common, and vulgar.”⁸¹ Pre-Christian, ancient valuation, as this passage reveals, was characterized by what Nietzsche calls the pathos of distance,⁸² which transformed a natural feeling of superiority on the part of the strong and noble into the conviction that noble—which is to say, powerful, aggressive, self-serving—is ‘good’ and not noble is ‘bad.’⁸³ The manner of valuation of this type of human, Nietzsche tells us, “acts and grows spontaneously” out of the characteristics it possesses—“a powerful physicality, a blossoming, rich, even overflowing health.”⁸⁴ These noble savages are strong and wild and without concern for weaker creatures. To them, the weaker among them is bad, but only

⁸¹ GM I:2. In other places he calls them “beasts of prey” and describes their manner of valuation as “knightly-aristocratic.”

⁸² GM I:2.

⁸³ ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ here are not a way of speaking of the unegoistic vs. egoistic acts, but represent the pathos of distance on the part of the nobility. They represent, in other words the distinction of higher vs. lower natures. This distinction is also taken up in Part 9 of *Beyond Good and Evil*.

⁸⁴ GM I:7. In herd morality, on the other hand, the qualities deemed ‘good’ are the ones that will be familiar to us now: selflessness, lack of egoism, meekness, and so forth.

because the weak—the herd animal, as Nietzsche calls them—is not strong, beautiful, healthy. In other words, they are unlike the nobles, who love and value themselves instinctively and easily.

This is the oldest notion of “good” and “bad,” the first origin, according to Nietzsche—the right, on the part of the strong to call themselves good because they are strong. As one might imagine, the herd animal grows increasingly resentful of its inability to affirm itself, of the low value placed on its needs, of rejection and the domination of the noble savage. As a result of their nature and instincts being denied outlet the herd animals “become repressed; they turn in on themselves and develop an inner life, a soul, on which they can vent all the aggression and cruelty that their position at the bottom of the pile prevents them from venting on anyone else. This new interiority is thus a locus of great and seemingly unassuageable suffering.”⁸⁵ This is the earliest instance of internalization in humans. The suffering that the herd animal experiences generate hatred, eventually transforming into what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*, which is constituted by both the feeling of hatred and the act of revenge. It is also the feeling that feeds moralized guilt and facilitates the growth of bad conscience.

This first instance of internalization leads to the first “act” of revenge—an inversion of morals, a reversal of the noble understanding of “good.” And we will see come to see, the inversion of morals is the main contributing factor in the

⁸⁵ Ridley, *Conscience*, 23.

crisis of meaning among Nietzsche's contemporaries. Where the "well-born" simply felt themselves, as a result of their strength and abilities, to be good, the herd animal suffers. The yes-saying that came naturally to the noble savage is impossible for the insecure herd animal, so he develops a different means by which to affirm himself. In opposition to the "triumphant yes-saying to oneself" of noble morality, the herd animal says 'no,' to all that is different and outside, to that which is "not-self."⁸⁶ Unable to say 'yes' to himself because he is weak and powerless, he will say 'no' to everything else—in his rejection of the noble savage, he consequently affirms himself.

As Nietzsche explains in GM I:10, "Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant yes-saying to oneself, from the outset slave morality says 'no'...and *this* 'no' is its creative deed. This reversal of the value-establishing glance... belongs to the very nature of *ressentiment*." In response to his suffering, and in order to exact punishment on the nobles, he develops cleverness and prudence—strengths of a different kind than those possessed by the nobles, but strengths nonetheless. The fruit of that cleverness is what Nietzsche calls herd morality (and I have referred to as Platonic-Christian morality). This rejection, the no-saying is the origin of "good" and "evil" in the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation, is the source of Nietzsche's characterization of that mode of valuation by its attitude of denial, and contrasts it with both the ancient Greeks and the attitude of affirmation he hopes will be expressed by a new mode of valuation.

⁸⁶ GM I:10

The origin of “good,” which is responsible for many of the particular values of Platonic-Christian culture, is in the inversion of the meaning of “good” and “bad.” “Good” once a word used to describe strength, power, and brutality, came to be understood as meek, kind, and gentle. Nietzsche argues that the success of that inversion has been so complete that “[f]or the longest time meek, benevolent, yielding, compassionate feelings [are] by now so high in value that they are almost ‘the values in themselves.’”⁸⁷ At the other end, those instincts that were previously taken to be “good” — strength, power brutality — become “evil.” The mode of valuation that results from this inversion, which takes weakness for goodness, has dominated so completely, Nietzsche observes, that moral philosophers like Kant and Mill have taken it as a given, beyond question.

As we have seen, the cost of this inversion is the development of bad conscience, a moralized conscience that creates the feeling of guilt and the sense of sinfulness in individuals. Though it empowers the herd animal, it also results in his own condemnation — he, too, becomes internalized, full of shame and guilt. The unhealthy state this produces is the result of the fact that individuals had come to live within stable communities because, as we have seen, once the individual is “enclosed once and for all within the sway of society and peace,”⁸⁸ the instinct for punishment turns inward. And the more that the outward discharging of one’s will is obstructed, the more internalized she becomes. While the sort of human being that is produced by this process is more cunning and

⁸⁷ GM III:9.

⁸⁸ GM II:16.

creative than her predecessors, and internalization is in itself value neutral, Nietzsche argues, as demonstrated here, that the *way*⁸⁹ human beings have been internalized undermines their well-being. In addition, the problem that suffering poses for Nietzsche's project of revaluation, which will be discussed in the next chapter, can be traced to internalization, particularly to the turning inward of guilt and punishment. Nietzsche writes:

Now, when suffering is always marshaled forth as the first among the arguments *against* existence, as its nastiest question mark, one would do well to remember the times when one made the reverse judgment because one did not wish to do without *making-suffer* and saw in it an enchantment of the first rank, an actual seductive lure to life.⁹⁰

The Platonic-Christian mode of valuation displaces an earlier understanding of suffering, a worldview in which suffering and *making-suffer* are outlets for the discharge of strength, exercises in vitality.

In the context of Christianity, treating suffering as an argument against existence is acceptable because God guarantees the value of human life. On this model, one treats suffering as proof of God's plan and God's benevolence—suffering plays the role of bringing sinner to God and, ultimately, salvation. This is the meaning of suffering in such a context. But the decline in religious belief that Nietzsche observes in his own time destroys the value associated with

⁸⁹ Moralized internalization is carried out and through the ascetic priest, according to Nietzsche. He writes in GM III;15 that the ascetic priest "brings along ointments and balm, no doubt; but he first needs to wound in order to be a physician; as he then stills the pain that the wound causes, *he poisons the wound at the same time,,, the priest changes the direction of resentment.*"

⁹⁰ GM III:9.

treating suffering as an argument against life that exists within a Christian worldview. Because God guaranteed the value of suffering, it has no value in the absence of God. This produces the problem that any attempt at developing a new mode of valuation faces: what, *for us*, is the value of suffering? That is the question to which we will return in the next chapter.

[4] *Becoming Accountable*

There is one final component that is integral to the nature and staying power of the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation: the concept of the responsible subject. As previously noted, the development of the guilty conscience is dependent on the aspect of the origin of “good,” which aligns itself with a duty to avoid violence and retaliation, to practice patience, humility, and righteousness. This alignment allows the herd animal to affirm himself because he already possesses these qualities, but does not satisfy the desire for revenge, which is the form of his instinct for destruction and domination. His ability to exercise his yearning for revenge begins with creative self-deception. Nietzsche explains that it is “thanks to that counterfeiting and self-deception of powerlessness”⁹¹ that the herd animal believes himself to have *chosen* non-violence, as though he were voluntarily patient and humble.

But this assumption of choice presupposes quite a lot, Nietzsche observes. “In order to have this kind of command over the future in advance,” he writes,

⁹¹ GM II:7.

“man must first have learned to separate the necessary from the accidental occurrence, to think causally, to see and anticipate what is distant as if it were present, to fix with certainty what is end.”⁹² What gives herd morality its thrust, what gives weight to its inversion of values, what gives rise to the psychological state produced by bad conscience, what makes it a tool for self-condemnation is a mechanism by which to place blame and to account for how well or how poorly one conforms to ‘good’ behavior is the concept of “the subject,” “upon whom duties rest, to whom rights are granted, within whom virtues are cultivated or potencies are realized,”⁹³ in whom command to be good and the feeling of guilt are connected. This is the third major contributing force to the crisis of values in Nietzsche’s own time.

He describes the development of the subject in the following way: the relationship between the noble savage and the herd animal is something like the relationship between birds of prey and lambs (or any other animal they might consume). To the herd animal, however, the violence of the noble savage feels like victimization—the result of the actions of the nobles, but also of his own inability to defend himself—and he grows to hate the noble savages, thinking them wrong for their violence. But how could birds of prey be *wrong* for eating little lambs, for whom lambs are simply a food source? The way to convince them (and be convinced) that it is true that they are wrong and worthy of hate is

⁹² GM II:1.

⁹³ Christa Davis Acampora, “Naturalism and Nietzsche’s Moral Psychology,” in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, edited by Keith Ansell Pearson (Hoboken, Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 318.

to insist that they are *free* to stop hunting lambs. Never mind that it isn't true, according to Nietzsche, who argues that separating strength from expressions of strength, as though the strong are *free* to express strength (or not) is an error. To illustrate his point, he uses the example of lightning. To consider lightning as separate from its flash, to take the flash to be an effect of the lightning, to treat the lightning as the 'doer' and the flash as the 'deed,' is to gather for oneself "the right to hold the bird of prey *accountable* for being a bird of prey."⁹⁴ This mistake, another act of self-deception, gives weight to the notion of the subject with free will.

On the grounds of this mistake, which Nietzsche calls a linguistic error,⁹⁵ the lamb insists that the bird of prey is free to stop devouring lambs, the noble savage is free to express civility, gentleness, and selflessness. This mistaken belief that "the hidden affects of revenge and hate exploit,"⁹⁶ is the tool by which the suffering herd animal identifies the agent of his suffering and extracts revenge on him. Furthermore, difference is reinforced rather than destroyed by the development of the concept of the subject. The pathos of distance, which had previously made aristocrats of the noble savage, serves *only* the herd animal, because in the herd manner of valuation, restraint, peacefulness, and civility are

⁹⁴ See GM I:13: "A quantum of power is just such a quantum of drive, will, effect – more precisely, it is nothing other than this very driving, willing, effecting, and only through the seduction of language (and the basic errors of reason petrified therein), which understands and misunderstand all effecting as conditioned by an effecting something, by a 'subject,' can it appear otherwise."

⁹⁵ GM I:13.

⁹⁶ GM I:13.

characterized as good. It is the herd animal that experiences the sense of superiority that fosters distance in this case, distance from the noble savage. As the bridge between the inversion of values and the development of bad conscience, the invention of the subject made it possible for the weak to interpret weakness as freedom, to reinforce the interpretation of their own nature as 'good,' and to hold their tormentors accountable for their actions. This is why Nietzsche suggests that the concept of the subject has "until now been the best article of faith on earth."⁹⁷

On Nietzsche's account, then, the revolt of the herd animal leads to an inversion of values, the development of the "subject," and the concept of personal accountability. For him, "who has interpreted into suffering an entire secret salvation machinery," there is no meaningless suffering. This is the great success of herd morality. Still, Nietzsche argues, this internalized life is an "essentially dangerous" form of life. While the suffering of the herd animal is meaningless under the confines of the noble manner of valuation, the Platonic-Christian manner of valuation does not eradicate her pain. Her pain is, in fact, exacerbated, first through the establishment of the subject, then through the development of bad conscience, and further promoted by the "terrible bulwarks" used by the state to protect against the instinct for freedom—punishment, pleasure in persecution, assault, and hostility. As a result of moralized internalization, the quality of human life suffers. As the power of the community

⁹⁷ GM I:13.

grows, the guilt and shame associated with accountability are turned inward, leading the instincts of destruction and the expression of strength, the instinct to make suffer, to also turn inward, causing a decline in the quality of human life. This is how the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation undermines human well-being. We turn our attention now to attempting to understand why a decline in religiosity did not bring the devaluation of life to an end.

Asceticization

In addition to arguing that the general health of human beings has declined since the rise of the Christian mode of valuation, Nietzsche also claims that underlying that system of values all along was a will to self-annihilation that often takes the form of the devaluation of life. This devaluation contributed to the decline in human well-being, but it also, Nietzsche argues, laid the groundwork for the sort of pessimism and nihilism that he believes fills the ideological space left empty by the abandonment of Christian doctrine among his contemporaries. It is this point in particular—that the decline of religiosity has had little impact on the mode of valuation that accompanies it—which supports Nietzsche’s conclusion that a complete revaluation of values is necessary. That is to say, he finds pessimism and nihilism unsuitable responses to Christianity and is convinced that no other, healthier worldviews can grow out of the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation because it is life-denying by nature. To support this argument, he presents an account of how that mode of valuation is not

dependent on Christianity and what happens to it and us when the Christian dogma is stripped away.

[1] *The Ascetic Star*

Early in the third treatise of the *Genealogy* Nietzsche notes the medicinal qualities of the ascetic ideal, arguing that it is for the “physiologically failed” – as such, it is the “principle instrument in the battle with slow pain and with boredom.”⁹⁸ In addition, he calls the ascetic ideal the “best tool of power,” a “pretext for hibernation,” and a “form of madness.”⁹⁹ It is, in other words, a means of exercising power over oneself and one’s suffering, in a desperate attempt to alleviate it. This is why Nietzsche says that when a philosopher pays homage to the ascetic ideal, he does so because he wants “to break free from a torture.”¹⁰⁰ He makes two additional important claims; first, he argues that the ascetic ideal is the only ideal Platonic-Christian culture has ever had.¹⁰¹ Second, while the ascetic ideal takes root in what he calls the “priestly class,” he holds that its reach extends far beyond religious boundaries to the intellectuals and philosophers of his era, who adopt the interpretative structure, contradictions, and values that are championed by the ascetic ideal.

One of Nietzsche’s concerns regarding his contemporaries is their failure to recognize that within the Platonic-Christian manner of valuation is a powerful

⁹⁸ GM III:1.

⁹⁹ GM III:1. He is speaking here of priests and saints.

¹⁰⁰ GM III:6.

¹⁰¹ GM III:1.

method of diminishing the value of life – one not restricted to Christianity. He is referring to the practice of asceticism, which promotes, he argues, anesthetization and decreases vitality and growth, all of which occur under the influence of what he calls “the ascetic ideal.”¹⁰² Though the idealization of asceticism is the topic of the third treatise of the *Genealogy*, understanding how and why it developed at all requires a look back to the first treatise, where the reader is introduced to the priestly class. This is because the priestly class, a smaller group within the knightly-aristocratic class existed prior to, and played a pivotal role in, the inversion of values that gave asceticism its value. In fact, Nietzsche tells us that the priestly *nature* – the concern with purity, the avoidance of blood, certain foods and women, the turning inward and away from action – is what made it possible for the internalization that occurs in herd morality to happen so swiftly and completely. Thus, it should be noted that while the idealization of asceticism promotes the devaluation of earthly life, it contributes further to the conditions of the crisis of meaning in the post-Christian West by encouraging the development of the inner world that creates the space for and inclination to practice self-deception and self-flagellation.

The priestly class branches off from the knightly-aristocratic class because they are the most powerless members of a group whose values presuppose physical power, overflowing health, adventure, the hunt, and athletic contests.

¹⁰² The ‘ascetic ideal’ and ‘ascetic ideals’ are both used by Nietzsche. The latter seems to represent various aspects of the prior. This will be discussed in more detailed a little further into the paper.

Lacking the strength and stomach of the other members of their class, they grow hateful, hastening the inversion of the noble manner of valuation by being the first to declare that: “the miserable alone are the good; the poor, the powerless, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly are also the only pious, the only blessed by God, for them alone there is blessedness....”¹⁰³ So, Nietzsche claims, with the ascetic priest everything becomes more dangerous because he is the one who posits that the “world” and “nature,” are inferior to the non-transitory realm of God, who treats the earthly realm as a mere bridge. He treats life “as a wrong path... as an error that one refutes through deeds—*should* refute.”¹⁰⁴ Nietzsche describes the broad influence of the ascetic priest and his ideal in the following way:

Read from a distant star the majuscule script of our earthly existence would perhaps tempt one to conclude that the earth is the true *ascetic star*, a nook of discontented, arrogant, and repulsive creatures who could not get rid of a deep displeasure with themselves, with the earth, with all life and who caused themselves as much pain as possible out of pleasure in causing pain: — probably their only pleasure.¹⁰⁵

That the ascetic ideal has been the defining means of interpreting life in human history is obvious, Nietzsche argues, given that neither era nor culture nor social class has affected its appeal. The ascetic priest has existed in every race and social rank—he flourishes everywhere. But this means, Nietzsche concludes, that the contradiction present in the ascetic existence—it seems to represent life *against*

¹⁰³ GM I:7.

¹⁰⁴ GM III:11.

¹⁰⁵ GM III:11.

life—must only be apparent. What it actually represents is the protective instinct of a degenerating life that “seeks with every means to hold its ground and is fighting for its existence.”¹⁰⁶ It must be, he argues, that it is *in the interest of life* that this self-contradiction not die out. Understanding how that could be depends on our remembering that the revolt of the herd animal gives the herd animal a means of reinterpreting himself, creating an outlet for his will to power, his need for self-affirmation.

But the inversion of morals has no effect on the meaninglessness that haunts him. Though it is through his suffering that he affirms himself, the *fact* of his suffering still stands, for him, as an argument against life. Thus, if his existence is to have meaning, his suffering must have meaning, especially after the inversion of values, when he takes his suffering to be his defining quality. We have seen that his suffering is given meaning through belief in God. The ascetic priest provides an additional source for providing meaning to suffering. This, through ascetic practices, is what the ascetic priest provides. Such practices take the form of contempt for those things in oneself that one opposes. It is the ascetic priest who facilitates the turning of *ressentiment* back on the sufferer,¹⁰⁷ so that the sufferer becomes the object of his own cruelty and hate, and, as it were, “consumes within himself those disruptive forces that previously threatened to be unleashed outward.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ GM III:13.

¹⁰⁷ GM III:15.

¹⁰⁸ Ridley, *Conscience*, 53.

One of the most effective forms of self-cruelty is self-denial. The priest encourages asceticism. This gives the individual's instinct to cruelty an outlet. But the practice of asceticism is also instrumental to a larger process. Sexual abstinence, for example, may bring advantages to a certain way of living, but extrapolating that technique into a rejection of everything worldly, everything bodily, constitutes a retreat from the world, from existence. Therefore, it is not only ascetic techniques that the priest encourages, but also the view that existence itself, which is taken to be sinful, is just one big procedure that should be engaged in ascetically. This is crucial because, once the individual accepts that life itself is a procedure—which is to say 'trial' or 'punishment'—the end to which the procedure is directed is, inevitably, beyond life, in another realm.¹⁰⁹

That the ascetic ideal continues to exert considerable influence despite its dangers leads Nietzsche to conclude that the fact that it has meant so much to humanity is "an expression of the basic fact of the human will, its *horror vacui*: it needs a goal."¹¹⁰ Meaninglessness is more unbearable than pain. The transformations that occur through the internalization of human beings largely lead to the development of evaluative practice. It is the ascetic ideal, from the beginning, that operates as a normative and regulating force. It provides the interpretation that directs the practice of judging. Because the ascetic ideal has been the only ideal, because meaning in the realm of human life has always been anchored by its relationship to that other realm, when belief in God is

¹⁰⁹ Ridley, *Conscience*, 60-1.

¹¹⁰ GM III:1. Trans. of *horror vacui*: horror of emptiness.

abandoned, the threat of meaninglessness reappears. When the possibility of salvation evaporates, life loses its meaning. The abandonment of faith in God, and all that God guarantees, is not the result of some external force acting on the ascetic ideal. Rather, the seeds of that destruction, and the crisis that follows, are there in its very foundation. Furthermore, because any attempt at revaluation will require heartiness a strong will, the idealization of asceticism, because it attempts to destroy desire itself, may in fact be the most dangerous threat to the possibility of creating new values.

It is worth noting that there is some debate over Nietzsche's relationship with the ascetic ideal. Some commentators argue that Nietzsche is a proponent of the ascetic ideal, while other conclude that he rejects it. In her book, *Nietzsche On Truth and Philosophy*, Maudemarie Clark cites the third essay of the *Genealogy* as the basis for her claim that Nietzsche opposes the ascetic ideal, writing, "Nietzsche's analysis of this ideal leaves little doubt that he opposes it." Yet she continues: "However, the essay also seems designed to confuse readers concerning how many ascetic ideals there are and which ones he opposes."¹¹¹ This confusion arises, for example, in the shift between the terms 'ascetic ideals' and 'the ascetic ideal.' Nietzsche begins the third treatise using the first phrase but soon begins using the second, shifting, it can be argued, from a number of approaches and interpretations of asceticism to what seems, in his descriptions, a willful participation of priests and philosophers in *an* ascetic life. Others argue

¹¹¹ Clark, 160.

that the priestly class adopted ascetic ideals and philosophers adopted the ascetic ideal, differentiating between the two by their adherents rather than strictly by what is encompassed by each term. Additionally, some commentators argue that Nietzsche is only opposed to the ascetic ideal if it is universally demanded of people, while others argue that Nietzsche is a proponent of the ascetic ideal.¹¹²

In my view, Nietzsche is opposed to the ascetic ideal insofar as it plays a role in misleading, self-hatred, and devaluation. This is not, however, a strictly moral opposition. The only value judgment he makes seems to come in the form of his revulsion at seeing the devaluation of life, which is reinforced by concepts such as guilt and the interpretation of suffering. It does not appear that he believes the majority of humans would necessarily be better off without the ascetic ideal. For the herd animal, the ascetic ideal is the means by which it discharges its power, the means by which it attempts to gain control over life—and it is, as we have seen, successful in real ways. My sense that Nietzsche is opposed to the ascetic ideal does not turn on the claim, then, that the ascetic ideal is “bad” but on the claim that it has perpetuated the undermining of human well-being and the devaluation of life. Furthermore, because it is not restricted to Christianity, what matters for the purposes of this dissertation, is that Nietzsche’s comments regarding the ascetic ideal indicate that the values that perpetuate it are not dependent on Christianity and that they continue on being

¹¹² Walter Kaufmann. *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.

expressed through asceticism, lending support to the claim that a revaluation of all values is in order.

[2] *God and Nihilism*

Nietzsche asks in GM III:27, “[I]n all strictness, *what actually triumphed* over the Christian god?” He provides an answer, writing in that same passage:

Christian morality itself, the ever more strictly understood concept of truthfulness... translated into the scientific conscience.... All great things perish through themselves, through an act of self-cancellation: thus the law of life wills it, the law of the necessary ‘self-overcoming’ In this manner Christianity as *dogma* perished of its own morality.”

In other words, the unconditional will to truth leads to a damning question: what “if God himself proves to be our *longest lie*?”¹¹³ This question is raised when one becomes, as Ridley describes it, “harsher with oneself, and increasingly steels one’s heart against one’s own most comfortable fantasies, one eventually realizes that the priest’s stories are just that—comforting fantasies; one is forced to admit that God is a fiction, a fiction one ought truthfully to do without....”¹¹⁴ The abandonment of this fiction is what leads Nietzsche to declare that we have killed god.¹¹⁵ The *will* to truth that had long been cultivated in Christianity morality is more powerful than even belief in God. So, what triumphed over faith in God is faith in truth.

¹¹³ GM III:24.

¹¹⁴ Ridley, *Conscience*, 9-10.

¹¹⁵ GS 125.

The consequences of the abandonment of Christian dogma are described in the famous passage in *The Gay Science* that tells of the story of madman (GS 125) who runs through the streets looking for God. Nietzsche writes:

‘Where is God?’ he cried; ‘I’ll tell you! *We have killed him* – you and I! We are all his murderers. But how did we do this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling?

This series of questions effectively implies that the death of God and the rejection of Christian dogma did not liberate so much as it put adrift, that abandoning that which guaranteed the value of our world and our lives is to displace ourselves more than it is to displace God. But the people in the streets laugh at the madman. Nietzsche continues:

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; they too were silent and looked at him disconcertedly. Finally he threw his lantern on the ground so that it broke into pieces and went out. ‘I come too early,’ he then said; ‘my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lighting and thunder need time; the light of the stars needs time; deeds need time, even after they are done, in order to be seen and heard.

The people on the streets laugh because they do not understand the meaning of what has occurred or the threat it creates.

It is tempting to conclude that a rejection of Christian belief will clear the way for the sort of revaluation that Nietzsche hopes for, but it is actually, one gathers from Nietzsche’s account, this move that acts as the immediate catalyst

for the crisis of meaning in Platonic-Christian culture. In one of the most glaring examples of the lack of self-knowledge that so concerns Nietzsche, his contemporaries have failed to realize that the most serious danger is not posed by faith in God, but by their notion of “good,” their ideas about truth, and their belief that what is lasting has greater value than what passes. In their rejection of Christian belief, their practices may have changed, but the interpretive model remains. That is to say, they had been associated with each other for so long that the distinction between religious doctrine and values had all but disappeared, but those values remain long after the religious doctrine is abandoned. It is one of those values – truth – in fact, that leads to the abandonment of its dogma.

The power of the will to truth explains how the death of God occurs, but not why it pushes Platonic-Christian culture toward nihilism. As we know, Nietzsche believes that the ascetic priest turns the herd animal’s hatred of the external condition that created his pain inward. But Nietzsche also argues that this hatred intensifies to such a degree that nothing in this contingent world is desirable to the herd animal. He needs “transcendental consolation,”¹¹⁶ which is provided by the God of the priest. In other words, Christianity provided a structure for the thriving of a particular meaning for life and God served as the guarantor of the value and specialness of that life. Thus, the death of God “unchained this earth from its sun,” threatening the world with what R. Lanier

¹¹⁶ Ridley, *Conscience*, 9-10.

Anderson calls disorientation.¹¹⁷ Without God, there is no relief, no resolution for the problem of our suffering, and the drift toward nihilism builds steam because, according to Nietzsche, “man would much rather will *nothingness* than *not* will....”¹¹⁸ That is to say, the will needs an object, but internalization has led to the intensification of *ressentiment* to such an extent that no individual or group can satisfy its need for revenge. This leads to the will taking, in a sense, revenge on existence itself. It creates something beyond the world, something bigger and more powerful (God), but when the will to truth destroys that bigger, more powerful thing, the will that cannot create a new ideal desires even the emptiness left behind in the aftermath and, ultimately, its own death.

[3] *Suffering and Pessimism*

According to Nietzsche, Schopenhauer is the best representation of the consequences of rejecting Christian dogma while Platonic-Christian values remain intact, particularly the value placed on truthfulness. Nietzsche does claim that philosophers in general are natural vessels for asceticism, given the “characteristic philosopher’s irritability and rancor against sensuality.” But he calls Schopenhauer the most eloquent expression of the ascetic ideal. To see why, one need only look at Schopenhauer’s own work, in which he argues that human suffering is the result of human nature, which is more susceptible to pain than

¹¹⁷ R. Lanier Anderson. “Nietzsche on Redemption and Transfiguration,” in Landy and Saler eds., *The Re-Enchantment of the World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

¹¹⁸ GM III:28.

pleasure, easily disappointed, easily bored, time-conscious, and always striving. Human nature is also greedy, selfish, and seeking control. He argues that the sum total of pain and suffering that exists in the world is enough on its own to give weight to the argument that it would have been better to have never been. The source of this pain is our willing nature, which is exacerbated by our human nature. He explains:

The constant striving that constitutes the essence of every phenomenon of will, however, obtains its first and most general foundation on the higher levels of objectification in the fact that will here makes its appearance to itself as a living body, with the iron command to nourish it; and what gives force to this command is precisely that this body is nothing other than objectified will for life itself. The human being, as the most complete objectification of that will, is accordingly the neediest of all beings: he is through and through concrete willing and needing, is a concretion of a thousand needs.¹¹⁹

This neediness drives human beings to repeat the cycle of striving, attainment or not, suffering, and striving all over again. And Schopenhauer concludes that every individual life is only one more short “dream on the part of the infinite spirit of nature, of the persisting will for life,”¹²⁰ a will that has no ultimate goal. The bad outweighs the good, then, in terms of both individual lives and in human life in general. Thus, Schopenhauer contends, “If we knocked on the graves and asked the dead whether they would like to rise again, they would

¹¹⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Volume 1*. Translated by E.F.J. Payne. Mineola: Dover Publications, 1966, 366.

¹²⁰ WWR, Vol. 1, 377.

shake their heads.”¹²¹ This is another way to say the pessimistic position that Schopenhauer defends: life is, simply, not worth living. But, according to Nietzsche, it is a suspicious fear of an underlying “incurable pessimism,” such as that expressed by Schopenhauer, which leads “whole millennia to bury their teeth in and cling to a religious interpretation of existence.”¹²² This may be because, he claims, there has until now been nothing more potent for “beautifying” humanity than piety. It can turn “man into such art, surface, play of colors, graciousness that his sight no longer makes one suffer.”¹²³

Schopenhauer rejects the notion that suffering is a punishment from God, but argues for the view that we exist in a godless, unconscious universe that imposes, through the nature it burdens us with, the punishment of suffering. Nietzsche argues that Schopenhauer’s mistake is the generalization of the will in individuals into a metaphysical Will that is omnipresent in nature, Nietzsche calling this an error that can be “pressed into the service of all kinds of mystical mischief.”¹²⁴ While he agrees that the world is a place of suffering, he contends that the value of suffering, and of life, is not to be found in the claim that suffering brings us closer to perfection or release, or that it constitutes a punishment for our failings. To believe such things, Nietzsche argues, is to seek a metaphysical justification for suffering. In rejecting Christian dogma without

¹²¹ Arthur Schopenhauer. *The World as Will and Representation, Volume 2*. Translated by E.F.J. Payne. Mineola: Dover Publications, 1966, 465.

¹²² BGE 3:59.

¹²³ BGE 3:59.

¹²⁴ HH II:5

rejecting its metaphysics, Schopenhauer relied on the old determinants of value, making it impossible to find or create value in 'earthly' life. Thus, the crisis to which Nietzsche's attention is so drawn is not merely the result of the loss of faith in Christianity but in the continuing devaluation of earthly life on the part of the 'godless ones' of his time, including, and perhaps most of all, Schopenhauer.

Schopenhauer's condemnation of life and interpretation of suffering as the punishment of the living leads Nietzsche to claim that Schopenhauer, despite his atheism, "pays homage to the ascetic ideal,"¹²⁵ that he the most eloquent expression of the philosophers' irritability and rancor against sensuality, which makes them such natural conduits for the ascetic ideal.¹²⁶ Schopenhauer expresses, in other words, a will to nothingness. Schopenhauer does not deny this, of course, but Nietzsche insists that he also does not recognize the link between his asceticism and the ascetic ideal—that he does not recognize that his atheistic asceticism is rooted in the same values of metaphysical commitments as religion that he rejects. And that is part of what makes his asceticism dangerous.

Because it is willing that leads to suffering, Schopenhauer argues that the only way to find relief from constant suffering is to stop willing, to discourage and eventually overcome one's desire. While Schopenhauer considers the possibility that his philosophy leads to nihilism, he concludes that from the standpoint of the person who has achieved ascetic consciousness all the world

¹²⁵ GM III:5.

¹²⁶ GM III:7.

appears to be nothing. This, he holds, is a different kind of rejection than that which results from the person who, unable to secure her own happiness, commits suicide. The Schopenhauerian is still committed to the work of affirming her own will, and thus commits suicide because her desire for happiness is unfulfilled. For the individual who undergoes the deep change in consciousness that Schopenhauer associates with asceticism, the world is literally transformed, and this seems to make the difference, leading him to conclude that his philosophy is not nihilistic.

But nihilism is characterized by Nietzsche as both the loss of meaning and the loss of desire. The suffering of the world leads Schopenhauer to argue that it has no inherent positive value. Nietzsche, it seems, would agree with this, but because he does not interpret suffering as undesirable,¹²⁷ he entertains the possibility of giving suffering a new meaning altogether. In addition, on Nietzsche's model Schopenhauer's asceticism expresses nihilism precisely because it advocates for the destruction of desire. And in fact it is the loss of desire, it seems, that is the more dangerous experience for human beings living in the cavernous space left behind by the death of God. Where Schopenhauer seeks peace (through willless-ness), Nietzsche hopes for victory: peace, on his view, is at odds with life, with creativity, and with the will-to-power. New meaning, which is the goal of revaluation, will be rendered impossible by the rejection of desire. In this sense, the nihilism that Nietzsche foresees has already

¹²⁷ Nietzsche's views on suffering will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

arrived. Still, even if the threat of nihilism were minimal, the undermining of human well-being and the devaluation of life that largely shape Platonic-Christian culture are enough to warrant Nietzsche's call to reevaluation.

III: NIETZSCHE'S CONCLUSIONS

Value and Power

In order for the reevaluation of a set of values to be possible, it must be the case that the set has conditional, rather than absolute, value. Nietzsche believes this is true of the mode of valuation of Platonic-Christian culture. In order to support this position it is important that he gives an account, as he does in the *Genealogy*, of how the values of Platonic-Christian culture came to have value. The notion that there exist intrinsic values is a roadblock to the pursuit and development of new values, which Nietzsche takes to be absolutely necessary. In the case of Platonic-Christian culture, Nietzsche intends to dispel the myth of intrinsic values by revealing their true origins: a revolt against the existing social order. In GM I: 10 he writes, "Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant yes-saying to oneself, from the outset slave morality says 'no' to an 'outside,' to a 'different,' to a 'not-self': and *this* 'no' is its creative deed." This constitutes the reversal of "the value-establishing glance," demonstrating that the mode of valuation of Platonic-Christian culture is not intrinsic, but the consequence of desperation, inequality, hatred, and ingenuity. The feelings that arise in response to the noble manner of valuation, according to Nietzsche, are a

reaction to the conditions in which the herd animal finds himself, but not because the conditions are in themselves *bad*. Rather, Nietzsche insists, *ressentiment* develops because, under those conditions, the will to power of the herd animal is restricted.

This is an integral claim to Nietzsche's philosophy, shaping both the critical and construction parts of his project of revaluation. He affirms his view in many places, among them, as E.E. Sleinis notes, *The Will to Power* 674, in which Nietzsche writes, "What is the objective measure of value? Solely the quantum of enhanced and organized power." Sleinis argues that this passage tells us that Nietzsche believes that [1] there is an objective measure of value and power is that measure and [2] power is the only source of value. On his view, Nietzsche's account of the origins of Platonic-Christian morality conforms to this framework. It is because his instinct for power is made impotent by noble morality that the herd animal develops *ressentiment*. This is followed by creativity, and creativity is followed by the development of new values. The challenge Nietzsche's position poses, according to Sleinis, is to "flesh out the theory [of value] in a way that it will accommodate these points."¹²⁸ Sleinis attempts to do just this, by providing an account that adheres to the view that the needs and drives of human beings determine the value of our values. In the case of the individual, he suggests, the

¹²⁸ E.E. Sleinis, *Nietzsche's Revaluation of Values*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994, 2.

“inner power” of the individual, which is what draws her to the goal, is constitutive of the positive value associated with a given value.¹²⁹

A value has positive value to the extent that the individual pursues it. But, Sleinis argues, power is not a means to value for an individual—it is not the cause for which value is the effect. Instead, “[w]hat makes the positive value *a positive value* is precisely the existence of the individual’s inner power, drawing the individual to the goal.”¹³⁰ It is the individual’s “attracting and repelling power” that is the essential ingredient in a value (along with the right conditions).¹³¹ This theory includes a natural criterion for how valuable goals are both intrapersonal and interpersonal. For the individual, the value of a goal increases based on how strongly the individual is attracted to it. In the case of two individuals, there is, all other things being equal, more value for the individual who is more strongly drawn to the goal. Thus, there are two ways in which new values can be created. First, the individuals’ conception of herself can be changed in such a way that her inner power directed at goals is altered in some way, providing the foundation for new values for that individual. Second, the individual’s conception of the world can be changed in such a way that her inner power directed at goals is altered in some way, providing the foundation

¹²⁹ Sleinis, 4.

¹³⁰ Sleinis, 4.

¹³¹ Sleinis notes that it is important not to construe the connect between power and value too generally. He writes, “Power ranges beyond an individual’s inner power to attract and repel, and it would be a mistake to generalize that whenever a power is active it is constitutive of a value. For example, the power active in nonliving things is not constitutive of value.” (5)

for new values. This demonstrates, Sleinis argues, that exercising power is essential to the creation of new values.

In the case of groups, it isn't merely aggregates of individuals that produce value, but "modes of relating, modes of organization, modes of structuring collections of individuals that give the collection an identity, a possibility of common purpose, common interest, and common action that cannot readily be reduced to the individual entities."¹³² Because of this, according to Sleinis, groups generate the possibility of values that go beyond the aggregate of the values of the individuals of which they are composed. Manuel Dries makes a similar argument, suggesting that the more committed we are to our values, the more they impact our decision-making, the more valuable they are.¹³³ Dries also suggests that our values are, in part, the result of our need to avoid uncertainty and reduce complexity, but that they may involve the desire to control one's environment and to survive.¹³⁴

This seems to align with Sleinis' notion that at the most fundamental level, all individuals and groups seek power,¹³⁵ that the will to power is the ultimate source of value. Sleinis takes this interpretation of Nietzsche's view of the relationship between power and values, but also power and life, to be in line with the part that power and the will to power—which refer to the ability to exercise one's urges, to feel good about oneself, but also to name, judge, and

¹³² Sleinis, 6.

¹³³ Dries, 36.

¹³⁴ Dries, 39. He uses the example of knightly-aristocratic values here.

¹³⁵ Citing GM I:13, Sleinis takes Nietzsche's conception of power to be that it is activity.

oppose—play in Nietzsche’s description of the origin of morality and the development of the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation.

In my view, both Nietzsche’s focus on power and interpretations that view power as the only source of value are, at the very least, worthy of suspicion. While it seems unlikely that Nietzsche held that there is an “objective measure” of power, that the will to power is a central tenant of his philosophy creates difficulties for revaluation. It is true, as Sleinis suggests, that the exercise of power is necessary for the creation of new values, and the notion of “inner power” is useful in understanding the history of values. And Sleinis’ account of “inner power” is an appropriate way of describing the creation of the noble manner of valuation, which is active, self-affirming, and self-involved. However, Nietzsche’s account of the inversion of values perpetuated by the herd animal is not only an instance in which inner power is being drawn to a goal, but one in which the goal *fundamentally* involves revenge.

The “inner power” in this case is not merely the will to self-actualization, but also a will to the destruction of the other. For the herd animal, it seems, the discharge of his instincts is not complete without it. On Nietzsche’s account this is because, for the herd animal, self-affirming was not possible. The discharging of his instincts coincided with (and required) the destruction of the noble manner of valuation. One wonders, however, if a desire to not be mistreated, to have one’s needs acknowledged, to be valued for one’s strengths (even if they are not outwardly apparent)—all of which constitute an “inner power”—would have

been enough to motivate the herd animal to develop a new mode of valuation. It seems possible that the development of conscience, and the feelings of shame and guilt that accompany it, have a source other than the internalization of a will to make-suffer. On Nietzsche's account that other source, so to speak, is the ascetic priests, who facilitate the guilt and sense of sinfulness that characterize bad conscience.

One of the strengths of Nietzsche's genealogy is that his account explains why human beings do things that do not appear to be in their "best interest" – why an individual willingly takes on pain, for example: what she is driven to pursue, even more than pleasure, is power. If "will to power" refers primarily to self-actualization and self-preservation, it seems unremarkable to describe power as the driving instinct of living things. But if "will to power" also essentially refers to domination over others, as Nietzsche claims it does for the majority of people (those who are of the herd animal type), the notion that it is the driving human instinct becomes more difficult to defend. While human beings (and other animals) do partake in acts of violence and domination over others, our behavior is also often motivated by a feeling for the other and a sense of obligation to others.

Likewise, while sometimes drawn to goals that undermine the well-being or power of others, it is most often the case that this harm is not the *motivating* factor. Rather, the negative consequences that are experienced by the other are collateral damage. While I find Nietzsche theory of power to be less convincing

than other parts of his philosophy of human psychology, my agreement with his claim that a revaluation of existing values is not dependent on whether his description of human motivation is without reproach. Though his theory of power sets him down the troubling path to the kind of individualism and elitism that finds expression in life affirmation, my view that his call to revaluation is not only justified but welcome is a reflection of my agreement that the current mode of valuation is damaging and devaluing.

Pursuing Life-Enhancing Values

Though Nietzsche's recounting of the revolt of the herd animal and the inversion of values that follows is peppered with admiration¹³⁶ for the cleverness required to transform a morality of strength into a morality of humility, and although he acknowledges that this transformation gave expression to the will to power for those who benefited from the inversion of morality, he takes revaluation to be a necessary measure to overcome the threat of nihilism and the dangers that arise from Platonic-Christian values. In BGE 202 he describes European morality as herd morality because it "indulged and flattered the most sublime herd-animal desires," such as fairness, modesty, submissiveness, conforming mentality, and the mediocrity of desires.¹³⁷ What is needed is an opposite valuation, a revaluation to "invert 'eternal values.'"¹³⁸ Thus, in GS 269

¹³⁶ GM I:6-10.

¹³⁷ BGE 201.

¹³⁸ BGE 203.

he writes, “[T]he weight of all things must be determined anew.” And in *EH Daybreak* 1 he reflects on “that morning, that as yet undiscovered tender red that marks the beginning of another day,” writing that he seeks it in “a revaluation of all values, in a liberation from all moral values.” Because the most foundational values of Western culture are derived from Platonic metaphysics, and because modern science is fueled by the Judeo-Christian will to truth,¹³⁹ merely rejecting Christianity would not be sufficient protection against the threat of nihilism. In fact, Nietzsche argues, the overestimation of truth (including the value of modern science in his time) is rooted in “a certain *impoverishment of life*”¹⁴⁰ that leads to the development of a will to nothingness.¹⁴¹ Thus, in addition to its function as an alternative to nihilism, revaluation is necessary for the restoration of good health, culturally and psychologically, according to Nietzsche.

The passages just discussed give a sense of why he believes that a change is necessary, but a question still remains. Nietzsche’s notion that power is the ultimate source of value seems to “imply that values take care of themselves in the natural course of events.”¹⁴² Why, then, are new values required? Why can’t we trust that the old values will evolve in ways that will continue to benefit us? The answer, Sleinis believes, lies in the fact that overall value is drawn from the

¹³⁹ GM III:24-25.

¹⁴⁰ GM III:25.

¹⁴¹ GM III:28.

¹⁴² Sleinis, 40.

health and inner power of individuals and groups. If that inner health¹⁴³ and power is compromised, the overall value in the system is decreased. He writes:

Revaluation is required to eliminate from the system those artificial value constructs and those modes of organizing and directing life that have been taken to embody genuine values, but that in fact operate to diminish real value overall. The situation is critical because of the widespread deleterious impact that such value constructs and modes of organizing and directing life have had and continue to have.¹⁴⁴

This interpretation of Nietzsche's reasons for pursuing revaluation is quite right and demonstrated by a variety of examples in Nietzsche's critique of herd morality—among them, his treatment of truth. For as long as Platonic-Christian culture is committed to the view that truth is divine,¹⁴⁵ it remains impossible to recognize that "Truth," first expressed through faith in God, then through faith in science, merely serves the ascetic ideal, which is inherently life-denying. Thus, the value of truth needs to be called into question, according to Nietzsche. Rejecting the doctrines of Christianity does not liberate one from the values that underpin it. The rising mistrust of herd religion does not necessarily, in other words, create deep change in our value system. So, values do not always take care of themselves.

¹⁴³ While Nietzsche suggests in GS 120 that illness is good for the development of virtue, but his criticism of herd morality takes place partly on the grounds that it causes poor health and that it holds that "the miserable alone are the good; the poor, powerless, lowly alone are the good; the suffering deprived, sick, ugly, are also the only pious" (GM I:7). In GS 382, he describes a new health for "we premature births of an as yet unproved future" as "stronger, craftier, tougher, bolder, and more cheerful than any previous health."

¹⁴⁴ Sleinis, 12.

¹⁴⁵ GM III:24.

Value constructs that are not life-enhancing must be destroyed and replaced with others, both in order to increase good health and as a measure of protecting against nihilism. If, for example, a person who believes that souls/heaven/God exist eternally, later comes to believe that there is no such thing as a soul/heaven/God, but continues to believe that what makes a life worth living is eternal and permanent, such as that provided by the notion of souls, heaven, or God, one is at risk for a poverty of meaning. As Dries puts it, nihilism “as the ‘falling into the opposite of valuation’ – ‘Everything is false’ – becomes a real threat.”¹⁴⁶ The destruction of the concept of the eternal soul does not prevent the overall decrease in value, because the idea of the eternal soul still, even if belief in such a thing is no longer tenable—has greater value in Platonic-Christian culture than the concept of a soul that is not eternal, or no soul at all. This is because the system of values that opposes being and non-being and rejects the notion of becoming is still intact. Life is either worth living or it is not worth living, and if the thing that gives its worth is lost, life also loses its value. As long as one’s beliefs fail to successfully incorporate the idea of becoming, nihilism will remain a threat. Nietzsche writes that “[t]he affirmation of passing away and destruction that is crucial for a Dionysian philosophy, saying yes to opposition and war, becoming along with a radical rejection of the very concept of ‘being’” are the ideas most associated with his work.¹⁴⁷ This is so because of

¹⁴⁶ Dries, 31.

¹⁴⁷ EH BT, 3.

his commitment to the view that if the longstanding mode of valuation does not enhance life it must be replaced.

Nietzsche's accomplishment is that he makes the problem of value explicit—not only uncovering *why* it is a problem, but also showing why it matters to seek a new mode of valuation. He does this by revealing the relationship between the current mode of valuation and its effects: the undermining of human well-being and the devaluation of life. What remains to be seen is the *how* of getting to a new mode of valuation. We might attempt to limit, or altogether abolish, suffering through education, technology, medicine and so forth. Such efforts have been (and continue to be) made without success, and it is clear that this cannot serve as the only response to the crisis—both because such a goal is impossible and because, as Nietzsche rightly notes, many experiences of suffering are instructive. Alternatively, one might accept Schopenhauer's claim that since life is suffering, human beings are incapable of giving meaning to either suffering or life.

The option Nietzsche pursues, however, is a push to truly get to the other side—to seek a new ideal, to find a new way of life in which suffering might take on a different value, a kind of life that will open up other possibilities for what life might mean. This new way of life will, he hopes, uncover a “new nobility, a way of living that recaptures the original nobles' sense of themselves as immanently valuable, but which constructs that sense out of the capacities that

two millennia of asceticism have bequeathed to us.”¹⁴⁸ Nietzsche’s first move toward that new nobility, as we have seen, is the sounding out of idols, and it serves as preparation for the even more daunting task of the creation of a new ideal, a new mode of valuation.

Yet, another question still remains. Nietzsche determines the value of values and of morality by weighing them in terms of the extent to which they are life-enhancing. He writes in BGE 13 that life *is* the will to power so the extent to which a value construct expresses or extends power determines the extent to which that thing or idea has value. Doesn’t it follow from the fact that Nietzsche understands the principles of herd morality as an expression of the will to power¹⁴⁹ that they have positive value? If so, why must they be overthrown? On Nietzsche’s account, the effect of the values of herd morality is indirect, but still bad, as Ridley notes, “not just within Nietzsche’s perspective, but within the perspective, one is tempted to say, of any recognisably human way of living.” This is because “self-understanding, the sense of having ‘power over oneself,’ is potentially a value that”¹⁵⁰ transcends a particular way of living and can be claimed as having what Ridley calls intrinsic value, which is to say, value for human beings in general.

So, while it is true that herd morality expresses the will to power, it still undermines good health. Its value constructs are not, despite their benefit to

¹⁴⁸ Ridley, *Conscience*, 11.

¹⁴⁹ GM I:8, I:11.

¹⁵⁰ Ridley, 173.

Platonic-Christian culture, life enhancing. As noted, even if Nietzsche's theory of power is overreaching, his project of the revaluation of existing values is worthwhile because [1] humans do suffer from themselves (through the guilt, shame, and self-loathing produced by Platonic-Christian values) and [2] earthly life is devalued even after the so-called death of God, making it difficult to see how, under the current mode of valuation, humans could *ever* stop suffering from themselves.

III | THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

"Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark, and shares the nature of infinity."
William Wordsworth

The bulk of chapter two of this project described the reasons Nietzsche gives for his concern that the moral and psychological situation of his contemporaries is precarious. His genealogical account of the moral history of Platonic-Christian culture concludes that the nature and dominance of what he calls herd morality,¹ which develops out of *ressentiment*² and produces dishonesty and self-harm, presented an ongoing threat in his own time. This is because, though his contemporaries had begun to reject belief in God, the underlying mode of valuation that is expressed through Christianity remains in place. Therefore, the main targets of Nietzsche's attack are nihilism and pessimism, the current forms through which that mode of valuation is expressed.

¹ GM I:7: "[T]he miserable alone are the good; the poor, powerless, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly are the only pious, the only blessed of God, for them alone there is blessedness, – whereas you, you noble and powerful ones, you are in all eternity the evil, the cruel the lustful, the insatiable, the godless, you will eternally be the wretched, accursed, and damned!"

² GM I:8: "[O]ut of the trunk of that tree of revenge and hate, Jewish hate – the deepest and most sublime hate, namely an ideal creating, value-shaping hate whose like has never before existed on earth – grew forth just as incomparable, a *new love*, the deepest and most sublime of all kinds of love...."

Chapter two also presented a sketch of Nietzsche's proposition for what work is required to overcome these threats: a revaluation of existing values. Revaluation is intended to produce a life-affirming mode of valuation, one that Nietzsche hopes will [1] make life bearable—which is to say, meaningful³—without depending on herd morality⁴ and [2] restore the health⁵ of human beings—both psychological and moral. In his view, the whole mode of valuation that is produced by *ressentiment* is suspect and in need of revaluation. While some existing individual values might survive the process of revaluation and be retained in an updated form, Nietzsche is committed to the pursuit of a new ideal, one that can rival what he calls our only ideal thus far: the ascetic ideal.⁶ The new one that he proposes is what he calls affirmation and the task of this chapter will be to determine how well this doctrine fulfills the goals of revaluation.

³ In GM, Nietzsche often describes the rise and staying power of herd morality not only in terms of its ability to provide for the discharge of drives, but also in terms of its having given meaning to the lives of those who otherwise had none and who found life unbearable as a result. In Nietzsche's view of human beings, it seems, a bearable life is a life with meaning.

⁴ GM III:15: The priest "brings along ointments and balm, no doubt; but he first needs to wound in order to be a physician; as he then stills the pain that the wound causes, *he poisons the wound at the same time*—for in this above all he is an expert, this magician and tamer of beasts of prey, in whose vicinity everything healthy necessarily becomes sick and everything sick, tame."

⁵ GS 382: "We who are new, nameless, hard to understand; we premature births of an as yet unproved future—for a new end, we also need a new means, namely, a new health that is stronger, craftier, tougher, bolder, and more cheerful than any previous health."

⁶ GM III:14: The ascetic ideal "*springs from the protective and healing instincts of a degenerating life* that seeks with every means to hold its ground and is fighting for its existence; it points to a partial physiological hindrance and tiredness against which the deepest instincts for life, which have remained intact, fight incessantly with new means and inventions."

Nietzsche was convinced by what he took to be the transformative power and healthy stance of the affirmative attitude, writing in GS 276 that affirmation would be the “sweetness of the rest of [his] life” and that hoped to someday be only a “Yes-sayer.” However, the abrupt and unexpected end of his working life left us with only his cursory remarks on life affirmation. Attempts to translate his outline into a fully developed theory of revaluation reveal that the affirmation of life is a far more problematic doctrine than one may suspect after reading only Nietzsche’s beautifully written words on the three components of affirmation: eternal recurrence, *amor fati*, and yes-saying. This difficulty is most severe in regards to the revaluation of suffering. Nietzsche is quite aware that the stakes are high here, that whether the threats of nihilism and pessimism are overcome depends on whether suffering is given a new value, one that does not originate in the devaluation of life. Nietzsche’s words and the general direction of his positive project suggest that he believes suffering can, and should, be affirmed.

The affirmative attitude toward one’s life is intended to counteract the treatment of suffering in the Platonic-Christian culture that is rooted in herd morality. Under that mode of valuation, suffering is interpreted as the crowning argument against existence, “as its nastiest question mark.”⁷ This leads to the devaluation of life—the sense that what is Earthly is inferior, that what passes has little value when compared with what is eternal, because what is eternal is preferable to what passes—and the development of nihilism and pessimism

⁷ GM II:7.

which threaten to devalue human life to the level of meaninglessness.⁸ Nietzsche's goal for the project of revaluation is to restore the value to human life, and this requires a new understanding of the value of suffering. In his response to what he takes to be the common response to suffering of his contemporaries, his own view of suffering is revealed. He writes in BGE 225:

You want, if possible (and no "if possible" is crazier) to *abolish suffering*. And us?—it looks as though *we* would prefer it to be heightened and made worse than it has ever been! Well-being as you understand it—that is no goal; it looks to us like an *end!*—a condition that immediately renders people ridiculous and despicable—that makes their decline into something *desirable!* The discipline of suffering, of great suffering—don't you know that *this* discipline has been the sole cause of every enhancement in humanity so far? The tension that breeds strength into the unhappy soul, its shudder at the sight of great destruction, its inventiveness and courage in enduring, surviving, interpreting, and exploiting unhappiness, and whatever depth, secrecy, whatever masks, spirit, cunning, greatness it has been given:-- weren't these the gifts of suffering, of the discipline of suffering?

Nietzsche takes the view that the fact that pain hurts is no argument against it, noting its constructive value. In fact, Nietzsche seems to regard that constructive quality as the *character* of suffering.

Though he writes of the harm of suffering in his genealogical account of the history of Platonic-Christian culture—the way it contributes to the

⁸ GM III:28: "One simply cannot conceal from oneself *what* all the willing that has received its direction from the ascetic ideal actually expresses: this hatred of the human, still more of the animal, still more of the material, this abhorrence of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and of beauty, this longing away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wish, longing itself—all of this means—let us dare to grasp this—a *will to nothingness*, an aversion to life...."

devaluation of human life, for example – it isn't suffering itself, but the meaning given to suffering that leads to such conclusion. It is clear that Nietzsche hopes to eradicate the guilt and pleasure one takes in suffering that emanate from the echoes of *ressentiment* because of their negative impact on human well-being, both in terms of our values and because self-overcoming is stifled under the way of life he abhors. However, his descriptions of his own view of suffering emphasize the growth and transformation that is made possible by pain⁹ and ignores, as seen in the passage above (among others), the sort of suffering that fails to produce positive consequences – not necessarily because of weakness in the individual but because of the nature of the pain itself.

In failing to distinguish the constructive sort of suffering that produces great artists, for example, from the sort of suffering that cripples, undermines, and obstructs, Nietzsche's treatment of suffering in the context of his positive project of revaluation, wherein he calls for the affirmation of suffering, is short-sighted and dangerous. The usefulness of his doctrine of life affirmation is limited by its inability to account for suffering that is not shaped by either *ressentiment* or not potentially constructive. In addition, it fails, in its capacity as an ethical proposition, to address the social aspect of human life, promoting

⁹ For example, one might imagine the soreness and exhaustion experienced by a professional athlete during training.

isolation¹⁰ and discouraging compassion.¹¹ Because it also undermines the well-being of the sufferer, it also fails to fulfill Nietzsche's own goals for revaluation.

The first part of this chapter will present the accounts of life affirmation developed by three scholars who attempt to overcome this problem of suffering on Nietzsche's behalf. Minimal commentary will be added, as the second part of this chapter will present my reasons, in light of both Nietzsche's work on the topic and the work of commentators, for becoming convinced that this doctrine cannot fulfill the goal of revaluation. While of use in a number of other areas—such as the revaluation of good/bad and being/becoming—the doctrine of life affirmation cannot provide a new meaning for suffering that adequately accommodates experiences of suffering that are utterly destructive—experiences for which yes-saying would be masochistic and affirmation would encourage apathy toward the suffering of others.

Thus, there is a problem of suffering for herd morality, as its interpretation as an argument against existence threatens the value of existence. But there remains a problem of suffering for the doctrine of life affirmation. The problem of suffering is a problem of the meaning of suffering. Nietzsche argues

¹⁰ See HH Preface 4; GS 98, 99, 117; BGE 26, 29. Also, Nietzsche writes in BGE 41: "We have to test ourselves to see whether we are destined for independence and command, and we have to do it at the right time. We should not sidestep our tests, even though they may well be the most dangerous game we can play, and, in the last analysis, can be witnessed by no judge other than ourselves. Not to be stuck to any person, not even somebody we love best—every person is a prison and a corner.... We must know *to conserve ourselves*: the greatest test of independence."

¹¹ Nietzsche's rejection of the positive value associated with compassion will be discussed in detail in the second part of this chapter.

that it must have meaning in order for it, and life, to be bearable. He proposes that revaluation might give it new meaning is the doctrine of life affirmation. However, painful experiences that offer no possibility for overcoming and are thoroughly destructive are not affirmable. Therefore, the goals of revaluation must be met by means other than life affirmation.

I: READINGS OF LIFE AFFIRMATION

Welcoming the Inescapability of Suffering

Very early in *The Affirmation of Life*, Bernard Reginster acknowledges that the revaluation of suffering is central to revaluation. His response to the problem of suffering develops out of his view that to affirm life, we must be able to show that suffering is “good for its own sake.”¹² He writes, “The revaluation of suffering from the standpoint of the ethics of power... shows that suffering is not merely a compliment or precondition of the good, but a constituent of it.”¹³ He suggests that a close examination of Nietzsche’s project of revaluation should confirm, if his own view is correct, two central claims. “The first,” he writes, “is that the ultimate object of revaluation is the role and significance of suffering in human experience. And the second is that revaluation is driven by the ethics of

¹² Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006, 15. He writes, “It does not suffice for the affirmation of life to acknowledge that suffering is a (contingently) necessary condition or consequence of the realization of certain values, such as creativity, for this remains compatible with a condemnation of suffering, and therefore with the negation of life.... To affirm life, we must therefore show that suffering is good for its own sake.”

¹³ Reginster, 231.

power.”¹⁴ Reginster further argues that these claims are interrelated, that Nietzsche does not make a distinction between affirming life in general and affirming it in particular. This is one of the ways in which his account differs from May’s (and, perhaps, Hamilton’s), as May argues that the object of life affirmation will be life in general and not its particular experiences.

Reginster holds that, rather than in contrast to individual events, “[t]o affirm life in general is to recognize that those necessary aspect of it ‘hitherto denied’ are ‘desirable for their own sake.’ This means, he contends, that the ethics of power welcomes the inescapability of suffering in human life. “It would consider wretched an existence in which there is no resistance to overcome, no challenge to be met—that is to say, an existence completely devoid of suffering.”¹⁵ The project of revaluation, if rooted in the ethics of power, makes it possible to no longer deny life in general on the grounds of inevitable suffering, as the old mode of valuation demands. However, in his view life is worth affirming so long as it involves enough *overcoming* of resistance (not merely resistance to be overcome). In other words, the value of life rides on there being some success and not merely the presence of *potentially* constructive suffering. Given the structure of Reginster’s account of the doctrine of life affirmation, quite a lot rides on his definition of suffering. As a result, the rest of this section gives an account of his treatment of suffering in relation to affirmation and shows why,

¹⁴ Reginster, 185.

¹⁵ Reginster, 267.

as he acknowledges, his notion of suffering cannot account for all painful experiences.

[1] *The Ethics of Power*

It is important to understand why Reginster argues that one might come to welcome suffering depends on properly understanding Nietzsche's view of power, so we begin there. Reginster suggests that focusing on Nietzsche's reevaluation of the value of suffering has the advantage of explaining why Nietzsche believes that the will to power is the guiding principle of reevaluation: it radically changes our conception of the role and significance of suffering in human life.¹⁶ Reginster defines Nietzsche's conception of power as the overcoming of resistance. And if, Reginster suggests, we value the overcoming of resistance, we must also value the resistance, as an ingredient of the overcoming. Therefore, power is the principle behind the reevaluation of suffering. Because we value power, we must also value suffering.

Reginster raises some important questions about this way of understanding power. First, he wonders, is the resistance we encounter, which contributes to the value of our achievements, absolute or relative? More specifically, is the resistance a function of the strength or weakness of individuals? If resistance is the function of the strength or weakness of the individual, what constitutes a great achievement of resistance in the weak

¹⁶ Reginster, 177.

individual will not have the same value if accomplished by the strong individual. He argues that Nietzsche would reject such a position, noting Nietzsche's claim that the "strength of those who attack can be measured in a way by the opposition they require."¹⁷ He concludes that Nietzsche's remarks lead to the conclusion that resistance is not a function of the strength and weakness of particular agents, but is defined independently of them.¹⁸ If he is right about this, and I think he is, there exists the possibility that some resistance is insurmountable. It is difficult to see how such experiences of suffering could be counted as good and affirmable within the framework of Reginster's account, as we will see.

Reginster also asks what sort of difficulty is relevant to the value of an achievement. One might argue that only that difficulty which is intrinsic (pertinent and essential) to the nature of the accomplishment is relevant to the value of an achievement. Alternatively, one might argue that the difficulty which is extrinsic (either non-essential but still pertinent or non-essential and not pertinent) to the nature of the accomplishment?¹⁹ Reginster suggests that intrinsic and extrinsic resistance make different contributions to the value of an achievement. On the one hand, we would be inclined to consider the completion of beautiful musical symphonies by two different composers as equally valuable achievements. On the other hand, we will likely admire Beethoven more than we

¹⁷ EH I:7.

¹⁸ Reginster, 179.

¹⁹ Reginster, 179.

would otherwise admire him (and, perhaps, more than we would admire another composer) when we learn of his deafness. This is because he had to overcome extrinsic difficulty in addition to the intrinsic difficulties associated with writing a symphony.²⁰

This certainly tells us something about the value of an accomplishment, but it does not explain the nature of the contribution of difficulty to the value of an achievement. Is difficulty sufficient or merely necessary to the value of an achievement? Reginster notes Nietzsche's vagueness on this matter. Because the targets of revaluation are the life-negating condemnation of suffering, the morality of compassion, and pessimism, Reginster concludes that "[f]or this general revaluation of the role and significance of suffering in human existence, establishing the value of power suffices."²¹ In other words, Nietzsche's account of revaluation does not need to answer the question. Reginster notes, however, that the further question of how we determine when the pursuit of power is appropriate is an important question.

While Reginster suggests that answering the question about whether difficulty is sufficient or merely necessary for the value of an achievement is not required for Nietzsche's project of overcoming nihilism, he also notes that Nietzsche does sometimes appear to answer it. On Reginster's view, Nietzsche suggests that what determines the value of an end is whether it provides an opportunity for power, writing in Z I:10, "You say it is the good cause that

²⁰ Reginster, 180.

²¹ Reginster, 181.

hallows even war? I say unto you: it is the good war that hallows any cause.” According to Reginster, statements such as this imply that power can be an end in itself.²² He writes that Nietzsche “suggests that providing an opportunity for power is what determines the value of a determinate end.”²³ However, Reginster resists this, arguing that power is always pursued in connection with a determinate end other than power, and that this is what gives resistance determinate content. He asks whether one could, for example, seek resistance in the pursuit of knowledge without caring about the knowledge itself.

According to Reginster, it seems unlikely that Nietzsche does believe that it is a condition of one’s participation in an activity that she cares about its determinate end. He writes, “Thus, when I *contemplate* an activity, I may care only about the activity itself and not its end, but full participation in this activity requires that I care about its end.”²⁴ Because it would be rather difficult, perhaps even impossible, to force oneself, arbitrarily, to care about an end, it is likely that one’s ability to participate in an activity depends on whether she already and independently cares about its end. As we will come to see, Reginster’s understanding of the meaning and role of power in human life plays an important role in his claim that the affirmer take suffering to be good in itself and welcomes the fact of suffering in her life.

²² Reginster, 182.

²³ Reginster, 182.

²⁴ Reginster, 183.

[2] *A Practical Interpretation of the Eternal Recurrence*

The eternal recurrence plays an important role in each of the interpretations of life affirmation that will be presented here, and I will discuss Nietzsche's own use of this doctrine in the second part of the chapter, so it is appropriate to introduce here Nietzsche's formulation of the doctrine using the passage most closely scrutinized by scholars. It comes from GS 341, in which Nietzsche writes:

The heaviest weight. – What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once against and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine.' If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, 'Do you want this again and innumerable times again?' would like on your actions as the heaviest weight! Our how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to long for nothing more fervently* than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?

As the highest formulation of affirmation, the doctrine of eternal recurrence is central to any serious attempt to understand and apply life affirmation. In order to understand the role of the eternal recurrence in the project of life affirmation,

Reginster begins by considering what the eternal recurrence is—in other words, what it constitutes. He observes that according to scholarly tradition, the eternal recurrence should be understood as the focal point of the new *ethical* ideal of life affirmation. He follows this with two additional suggestions in regards to the role of the eternal recurrence in affirmation. First, as a thought experiment the purpose of eternal recurrence is to determine whether one is life-affirming, by gauging one's reaction to the proposition of eternal recurrence. If it is joyful, the individual is life-affirming. On the other hand, the individual is life-denying if his reaction to the proposition of eternal recurrence is despair.²⁵

Second, Reginster proposes that it may be said that the eternal recurrence has a theoretical role, which is to bring out a property of life that is to be affirmed. It also has a practical role, which is to tell us something about what *sort* of practical attitude affirmation is. He illustrates the difference between them by presenting an analogy. He writes:

People sometimes express their valuation of a particular satisfying moment in their life by wishing that this moment would never end. Suppose I urge you to live the next moment of your life in such a way that you are able to wish that it would never end. I could urge you to do so because the moment *will*, in fact, never end, and if you want to have no regret over your life you should be prepared to deal with that fact. This would be the theoretical interpretation. More typically, however, in exhorting you to live a moment so that you are able to wish it would never end, I am in fact exhorting you to live that moment in such a way that you become able to adopt a certain attitude toward it. This is what I call the practical interpretation.

²⁵ Reginster, 201-3.

The doctrine of eternal recurrence is demanding in its theoretical role not because affirming is in itself difficult, but because “affirming a life with that particular property is,”²⁶ whatever it may be. Reginster’s own interpretation is, as he puts it, decidedly practical. The eternal recurrence tells us something about the nature of affirmation, rather than about the life to be affirmed. From the practical viewpoint, he suggests, the important question is not whether the individual can be convinced that her life will eternally recur, but what the possibility of the eternal recurrence tells us about the nature of affirmation. He concludes that the doctrine is “not meant to underwrite a purely formal exhortation to have no regret about our lives by realizing our values in it to the greatest extent possible” but a “substantive invitation” to live up to certain values.²⁷

Reginster also considers the possibility that the doctrine of the eternal recurrence is intended as a rejection of the idea of eternal life, an other life than Earthly life, and as an invitation to “think of [human life] as a finite segment in an ever-evolving cycle.”²⁸ But he rightly concludes that the rejection of eternal life does not require the use of such a strange doctrine as the eternal recurrence to make its point. So, he asks: “what ideal motivates the exhortation to live one’s life so as to be able to will its eternal recurrence?”²⁹ In order to answer this

²⁶ Reginster, 202.

²⁷ Reginster, 205.

²⁸ Reginster, 223.

²⁹ Reginster, 223.

question, he pursues a practical interpretation and attempts to explain *how* eternal recurrence works. Two steps are required to develop this interpretation. The first is a reconsideration of the nature of eternity. Reginster considers the possibility of interpreting eternity not merely as life that never ends, but as permanence: something is eternal when it escapes the temporal order (i.e., the order of 'becoming'). This nicely emphasizes Nietzsche's rejection of the Platonic-Christian valuation of 'being' over 'becoming.' The second step is to explain why the affirmer craves life's eternal recurrence, as Nietzsche claims she will. Reginster suggests that Nietzsche's notion that one would take joy in eternity tells us that there is perfection present in eternity, because one would not wish the eternity of an experience that is not wholly satisfying.³⁰ Therefore, what brings affirmation and eternity together is the attitude of joy. Reginster observes that joy is different from pleasure insofar as one cannot disapprove of the object of his joy and still take joy in it. Joy requires "that the experience at which it is taken to be (or to be perceived to be) is *perfect*, and wishing the eternity of the joyful moment is precisely a way of expressing this sense of perfection."³¹ Thus, according to Reginster, Nietzsche is distinguishing between two ways in which eternity might be willed: as permanence or as eternal recurrence.

Wishing for permanence occurs when an individual is in the midst of a fulfilling moment (but also involves a set of assumptions, including that lasting satisfaction can be sustained). This indicates an awareness of the imperfection of

³⁰ Reginster, 224.

³¹ Reginster, 224.

satisfaction—it leaves something to be desired because it is subject to change. However, willing the eternal recurrence rather than permanence, while still a will to extend satisfaction, is to acknowledge that the perfection of the eternal recurrence is its impermanence. In other words, the call to live in accordance with the eternal recurrence is an effort on Nietzsche's part to recognize the value of 'becoming,' to perform a revaluation of the ancient condemnation of 'becoming.'

Accepting the doctrine of the eternal recurrence is to accept that life is "composed of finite processes," that life is, essentially, 'becoming.'³² In opposition to Platonic-Christian values, then, "to embrace the ideal of affirmation framed by the doctrine of eternal recurrence is to adopt values by the light of which impermanence and becoming prove to be desirable."³³ One lives in accordance with the doctrine of eternal recurrence if she regards her life as leaving nothing to be desired—that it is, in other words, perfect—and this is achievable only if she is free of life-denying values (which would make 'nothing to be desired' impossible). For this reason, according to Reginster, revaluation is a condition for the possibility of life affirmation.

This account sets a very high bar for what it means to accept the doctrine of eternal recurrence. It is also difficult, I think, to understand *how* revaluation is to be carried out without the use of life affirmation and eternal recurrence. Furthermore, if the axiological goal of revaluation is the production of a new

³² Reginster, 226.

³³ Reginster, 227.

ideal, and the old ideal was the product of life-denying values, it stands to reason that life-affirming values will give rise to the new ideal. On this view, the completion of the project of revaluation requires the practice of affirming. Whether revaluation or affirmation comes first, so to speak, is relevant to a critique of the doctrine of life affirmation—and Reginster’s defense of it. But my critique is far more concerned with Reginster’s treatment of suffering than his answer to that question because it is on the grounds of the interpretation of suffering that the doctrine fails.

[3] *The Object of Revaluation*

While much of Reginster’s discussion of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence focuses on the problem of the devaluation of becoming, Reginster recognizes that it is in response to suffering that becoming is devalued. Because it is in relation to suffering that becoming is devalued, Reginster writes, “the condemnation of suffering is the normative core of nihilism” for Nietzsche.³⁴ This is why, Reginster suggests, the object of revaluation is suffering. As a response to the problem of suffering—that it, at the very least, limits the positive value of life—Reginster develops an argument for how suffering can be affirmed and why it *must* be affirmed in order for Nietzsche’s life affirmation to properly function. His definition for ‘suffering is “the experience of resistance to the

³⁴ Reginster, 227.

satisfaction of desires.”³⁵ From this he argues for the following: [1] from the standpoint of the ethics of power suffering is not merely a precondition of the good, but a constituent of it, and [2] a true affirmation of life demands that suffering be valued for its own sake.³⁶ However, he acknowledges that this isn’t the only way to find suffering desirable.³⁷

One might, for example, think of life affirmation as a compensation for our inevitable suffering. Reginster explains, writing, “Nietzsche is sometimes taken to argue that creativity or other sorts of goods are intended as compensations for suffering. In redeeming this suffering, they make it possible for us to cease counting it as an objection against existence, and therefore to affirm it.”³⁸ And, he notes, such an approach involves neither resignation nor concealment—the treatments of suffering that find their way into the atheistic pessimism of Schopenhauer and herd morality, respectively. However, Reginster argues, such an attitude toward suffering cannot make possible a genuine affirmation of life and we cannot attribute this conception of redemption to Nietzsche. He suggests that this model presupposes a common “value currency” that would allow for the measurement of compensating good and suffering, but

³⁵ Pain, on the other hand, need not result from the frustration of existing desires, but spawns a desire (because it is composed of a state and a desire for its termination).

³⁶ Reginster, 231.

³⁷ Reginster 230: “It is not enough to acknowledge the necessity of suffering, one must also recognize its desirability.” This is because *amor fati* is the highest formulation of life affirmation.

³⁸ Reginster, 231.

it is unclear what that currency would be.³⁹ It is also unclear, Reginster argues, whether any amount of compensation can make life worthy of genuine affirmation. Thus, it is not enough for affirmation to redeem suffering so that we might stop counting it as an objection to existence, which would fall short of a true revaluation of suffering.

Another possibility that Reginster raises is that one might value suffering conditionally – that is, in relation to other things that are affirmed (for example, if it is a by-product of the affirmed thing or a precondition of the good/affirmed thing). But, he suggests, it is not enough to positively value suffering in this conditional manner. He writes, “The revaluation of suffering from the standpoint of the ethics of power... shows that suffering is not merely a complement or precondition of the good, but a constituent of it.”⁴⁰ To be truly affirmed, he suggests, suffering must be valued for its own sake. So he comes to the view that suffering is, must be, a constituent of the good, arguing that from the standpoint of the ethics of power, suffering is not just something that, “under the circumstances of this world, individuals have to go through in order to be happy; it is rather part of what their very happiness consists of. On Reginster’s view of suffering, to find desirable the overcoming of resistance is also to find desirable

³⁹ He writes on 232, “It is sometimes assumed that finding genuine love or friendship can compensate for lack of wealth, for example. But can wealth compensate for the loss of love? And how much wealth would be required? Even utilitarians who propose pleasure as the common value currency acknowledge that pleasures (or pains) of different *qualities* may not be commensurate.”

⁴⁰ Reginster, 231.

the resistance to be overcome.”⁴¹ Suffering is an “ingredient” of happiness, on this view, and as such, it is desirable for its own sake.

To explain how such suffering might look, Reginster considers the sort of suffering associated with creativity. He writes:

[T]he suffering Nietzsche claims to be desirable for its own sake will include as much the struggles of artistic creation or the frustrations of inquiry as the difficulties in fulfilling other longings, such as the longing for love. In saying that suffering is valued for its own sake, furthermore, it is important to remember that it is not valued by itself, but only as an ingredient of the good. The good life involves not only resistance (and therefore suffering), but also its overcoming.⁴²

In attempting to understand how suffering can participate in the good, I agree that presenting the example of artistic struggle is elucidating. However, it is my view that not all suffering can be characterized as constructive. Some experiences of suffering only limit the sufferer’s ability to flourish, causing damage without the prospect of commensurate growth. Furthermore, if what it means to say that suffering is valued only as an ingredient of the good is that it is valued in terms of its participation in the good, where does that leave things in cases in which the negative experience does not participate in the good, when it *cannot* lead to overcoming, when it destroys, when, for example, it is the result of a terrible thing happening to someone you love—in other words, what about pain?

⁴¹ Reginster, 231.

⁴² Reginster, 233-4.

Reginster defines suffering as resistance to the satisfaction of desires, arguing that willing power is to will the overcoming of resistance, and in this way we will 'suffering.' He does acknowledge, however, that the same cannot be said about negative experiences that do not conform to this definition. He describes these experiences as instances of pain, writing that pain "need not results from the frustration of pre-existing desires."

Nietzsche, Reginster argues, characterizes pain as an opportunity for the will to exercise itself. Nietzsche writes in GS 56, "When I think of the desire to do something, how it continually tickles and goads the millions of young Europeans who cannot endure boredom and themselves, I realize that they must have a yearning to suffer something in order to make their suffering a likely reason for action, for deeds." Based on the sentiment expressed here, Reginster argues that "insofar as it involves a desire to desire, the will to power requires pain as one of the conditions of its satisfaction. By spawning new desires, indeed, pain offers an escape from boredom."⁴³ We might, then, seek pain because it gives us something to do, a challenge, and can become, in a sense, a grounds for happiness. Thus, Reginster concludes, "[A]lthough Nietzsche's revaluation does show that the sole presence of pain and suffering in human existence does not necessarily count as an objection against it, it does not show that particular instances of pain and suffering can never make us wish for a better life."⁴⁴ But, Reginster argues, it is important not to lose sight of what Nietzsche's philosophy

⁴³ Reginster, 234.

⁴⁴ Reginster, 235.

does accomplish: liberation from heaven or nirvana, freedom from the pursuit of a life devoid of pain and suffering.

This last claim seems right to me and it demonstrates that life affirmation is of use in regards to our general attitude toward life. But, as Reginster's account demonstrates, the affirmative attitude cannot be applied to individual experiences in the way that defenders of the doctrine of eternal recurrence argue it can. In other words, it is difficult to see how one might truly desire the repetition of even those experiences that were entirely destructive. Furthermore, my own view also diverges from Reginster's in regards to his definition of suffering, which I consider to be too narrow. It does not accommodate what he calls pain and, therefore, does not adequately demonstrate how all of one's life and experiences can be affirmed.

Seeking No Justification

In "Why Nietzsche is still in the morality game," Simon May develops an account of life affirmation that rejects efforts to affirm suffering by recognizing it as a constituent of the good, such as that proposed by Reginster. Rather, he argues that it is only a will that has "turned against life" that seeks a justification for suffering. He writes, "My central claim in this chapter is that a will that affirms one's own life or life in general—that looks with joy upon it as a whole, conceived as necessary (or fated) in all its elements—seeks no such justification

[for suffering]; indeed, I claim that such justification *does not occur to it.*"⁴⁵ To explain, May notes that Nietzsche argues in the *Genealogy* that nihilism will be overcome when a new type of spirit is able to give suffering a meaning that is free of the ascetic ideal.

However, May believes that a meaning for suffering that affirms life is not going to produce such a result – not until the very insistence on “giving suffering a meaning in terms of a higher good that it makes possible, or of which it is constitutive, is itself overcome.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, he argues, giving suffering meaning in terms of a higher good is to advance a theodicy and our urge to do so is irrevocably tied to herd morality – in other words, attempts to justify suffering is a moral matter. One of the central themes developed in the *Genealogy* is that humans tolerate and even will suffering so long as that suffering has a meaning. According to May, this is an expression, by Nietzsche, of moral thinking and its religious roots. A stance toward life that genuinely affirms it is not in need of a meaning for suffering, he insists. In May’s view, Nietzsche does sometimes recognize this and aspires to *amor fati*, which does not rely on justifications for suffering (according to May), but Nietzsche often falls back into a habit of seeking such justification – seeing suffering as a precondition for growth, for example.

⁴⁵ Simon May, “Why Nietzsche is still in the morality game,” *Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide*, edited by Simon May, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 86.

⁴⁶ May, 79.

[1] *What Affirmation is Not*

In attempting to develop an account of life affirmation that is not undermined by this unacknowledged theodicy, May makes a number of points about what affirmation is not, beginning with the claim that it is not the product of naturalism. Platonic-Christian culture's ascetic ideal provided suffering with a meaning, Nietzsche tells us in GM III:28. This provided an object for the will so that "*the will itself was saved.*" But the ascetic interpretation of suffering also had darker, more dangerous consequences: "new suffering," guilt, and "a will to *nothingness*, an aversion to life." It might occur to those concerned about the nihilistic attitude that runs through the ascetic ideal that a rejection of Christian doctrine is a proper solution.

However, Nietzsche asks, "Does anyone in all seriousness still think that, say, Kant's *victory* over the conceptual dogmatism of theology did damage to that ideal?"⁴⁷ No, "the death of God"⁴⁸ does not diminish the power of the values that underpin herd morality. Thus, as May notes, "An unheroic, ethically unambitious, risk-averse civilization that laughs at supernatural ideas, sees man as nothing more than a sophisticated animal, and takes it for granted that life and its goods can be conceived only in naturalistic terms—such down-to-earth naturalism does not by these tokens affirm life."⁴⁹ Instead, as Christian dogma is undermined by the loss of faith in its unconditioned values, the will to

⁴⁷ GM III:25.

⁴⁸ GS 125.

⁴⁹ May, 84.

nothingness, and the fear of suffering, intensify. This is why Nietzsche claims that affirmation is not constituted by the absence of religious beliefs, explanations, and values.

Affirmation is also not merely the reversal of Platonic-Christian values. To see why one need only consider what happens after the death of God. The result is not to “liberate individuals boldly to pursue their own destinies, but, according to May, to erect an array of conceptual and ethical barricades against the risky and the unexpected.”⁵⁰ What arises from the death of god is not affirmation, but atheistic pessimism (such as that espoused by Schopenhauer)—not as a result of suffering, but out of fear and squeamishness about suffering,⁵¹ which, as Schopenhauer demonstrates, can actually intensify life-denying tendencies. In fact, the more that suffering is “mastered”, the more terrifying it becomes. A life determined by the avoidance of suffering is a bored life and that can lead to the pursuit of any activity that will stimulate sensation, even suffering—a craving to do *something* can be expressed as a craving to suffer. Praising strength instead of weakness, cruelty instead of pity, etc. are expressions

⁵⁰ May, 84.

⁵¹ May makes reference to GS 48 here: “The general lack of experience of pain of both kinds [of the body and of the soul] and the relative rarity of the sight of anyone who is suffering have an important consequence: pain is now hated much more than was the case formerly; one speaks much worse of it; indeed, one considers the existence of the mere thought of pain scarcely endurable and turns it into a reproach against the whole of existence.”

of the life-affirming spirit but such reversals can only be achieved by “those who are no longer dogged by the ‘problem of suffering.’”⁵²

So, May concludes, the belief that ‘life’ or suffering can be evaluated and justified is “the pose of the life-denier, even if he should end up giving it a positive calculation. The desire for justification is inconsistent with the spirit of affirmation.⁵³ May argues that the attitude of the life affirmer is not the result of a calculus, as the affirming individual conceives of life and all its elements as necessary and the possibility of seeking justification for life or life’s suffering simply does not occur to her. So we must ask, May suggests, how we can take an affirmative attitude toward life if there is no problem of suffering—not just in terms of the cognitive and axiological commitments that entails, but in terms of how such an attitude would actually be experienced.

[2] *Amor Fati*

It is in *amor fati* that May sees Nietzsche’s most affirmative attitude. The most famous formulation of this idea comes in GS 276, in which Nietzsche’s writes:

Today everyone allows himself to express his dearest wish and thoughts: so I, too, want to say what I wish for myself today and what thought first crossed my heart—what thought shall be the reason, warrant, and sweetness of the rest of my life! I want to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them—thus I will be one of those who make

⁵² May, 86.

⁵³ May, 87.

things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on! I do not want to wage war against ugliness. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. Let looking away be my only negation! And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer!

The attitude of love, of loving one's fate, described here represents genuine life affirmation because, according to May, love seeks no justification. Love of life seeks no justification for life and it is this move, on May's view, that offers the most promising possibility in Nietzsche's "struggle to escape theodicy." *Amor fati* allows us to "say Yes to the 'piece of *fatum*' that [Nietzsche] elsewhere says each of us is, while also accommodating the obvious fact that we all... find much 'nauseating' or 'loathsome' in our lives, experience and encounters."⁵⁴ Life affirmation, then, will take the shape of an "undergrounded joy" in the quiddity of life. In order to understand how and whether Nietzsche is successful in affirming life, May attempts to produce a more robust account of life affirmation than the one Nietzsche himself does. To that end, he suggests a theory of life affirmation that includes multiple components.

First, affirmation "is to look with joy" on one's life as necessary in all its elements without seeking justification or wishing it were different. However, this joy is a disposition, not a judgment or a begrudging acceptance. It is not grounded in ends, but simply says Yes to my life in its essence. Furthermore, to affirm one's life does not exclude the possibility of regret and rejection of some of one's suffering (these experiences are affirmed only in terms of their relationship

⁵⁴ May, 80-1.

to the whole of one's life, which is the object of affirmation). When suffering is "welcomed" by the affirmer, as Nietzsche often puts it, what is "welcomed" is not the "original suffering," as May calls it, which would see some sort of good in suffering and be counter to the stance of life affirmation (and, in any case, the suffering that poses the greatest challenge to one's ability to affirm is that which cannot be justified). In addition, affirmation as joy is cannot be a purely cognitive matter and is primarily affective in nature, so it cannot depend on finding a meaning or justification for suffering.⁵⁵

According to May, affirmation will also not involve being convinced that suffering participates in the good, either by being essential to some attainable good or by being good itself, or take the approach that, all things considered, life is good. This is because the will to justify "involves, experientially, detachment from, perhaps even mistrust of, its object"⁵⁶ and presupposes that there is the option to say No, even if it rejects that alternative. Affirmation is an attitude that has no desire to engage in justification and is characterized by taking "joy in the existence and reality of its object, joy that cannot be mitigated by the object's failings, however painful or unsightly or regretful we find them."⁵⁷ May offers the example of the individual who affirms the life of her child. She does not do so only after evaluating him, and it is not that she is not aware of his failings. In fact, she dislikes his faults in the way one might expect. However, she takes a joy in

⁵⁵ May, 82.

⁵⁶ "May, 86-87.

⁵⁷ "May, 86.

“the reality or there-ness of his life” that is not diminished by his faults. And this is true of anything that we love.

[3] *The Problem of Suffering*

The reason that the life-affirmer does not have the desire to justify suffering is in part because of the relationship between affirmation and justification, but also because of the nature of suffering, which May describes as “at its heart about helplessness, vulnerability, uncertainty, lack of control.”⁵⁸ He rightly argues that to interpret suffering in the way that Nietzsche does (as constitutive of creativity, for example, in such a way that holds that to will creativity is to will suffering) is “to be in the business of abolishing precisely the helplessness, the interpretive vacuum, that gives suffering its sting”⁵⁹ by convincing ourselves that we have willed suffering and that its consequences are desirable. But he also argues that this effort is thus still in the business of abolishing suffering, a goal to which Nietzsche does not adhere. The real path to revaluing suffering requires Nietzsche not to solve, but to dissolve the problem of suffering. While May is critical of what he takes to be ongoing efforts at justification on Nietzsche’s part, he also notes that the movement in Nietzsche’s thought shows that he is tending toward the sort of dissolution that May deems necessary in order for life affirmation to function properly. By the time of his last couple of productive years (especially in *Ecce Homo*), May argues, Nietzsche

⁵⁸ May, 87.

⁵⁹ May, 87.

makes a clear move away from grounding life affirmation in the justification of suffering.

This also means that Nietzsche's notion of life affirmation changes over time. In BT, life affirmation is presented by Nietzsche as the result of an aesthetic justification.⁶⁰ By the time of GS, rather than arguing that as an aesthetic phenomenon existence is justified, he remarks that as an aesthetic phenomenon existence is bearable. May argues that this demonstrates that Nietzsche is not conceiving of affirmation as unconditional and describes life affirmation as possible because of the "'counterforce' that art provides against the 'nausea and suicide' that honestly looking at the nature of things would induce."⁶¹ Toward the end of the middle period of his productive life, and then especially in its last couple of years, May notes an increasing ambivalence in Nietzsche's thinking about the justification of suffering. The expressions of life affirmation that are advanced by Nietzsche in his later works, *amor fati* and the eternal recurrence, mark a change in approach, a formulation of life affirmation that does not presuppose or attempt a justification of suffering. His ability to affirm no longer depends on art (either in terms of creativity or in terms of beauty).

This returns us to the original question: "how are we to affirm life, precisely if we do not or cannot justify its most horrific events or see anything beautiful in them?"⁶² May argues that to affirm one's life does not mean, and

⁶⁰ BT 5 and 24.

⁶¹ May, 89.

⁶² May, 93.

does not require, that we find it to be entirely good or beautiful. In fact, the orientation of affirmation allows for repudiation and regret in regards to particular experiences, so long as such sentiments are not expressions of the ascetic ideal—in other words, so long as they do not rise from the desire for a different or more purified life. May's argument that affirmation is possible despite life's horrors is dependent on his claim that the proper object of affirmation is not the particular events of one's life but "my whole life of which the particular event is an inextricable part. This helps us to see how saying Yes to the whole and No to the particular can be reconciled."⁶³ According to May, Nietzsche does not interpret life as the compiling of a series of events, so the affirmation of life is also not the affirmation of a series of events.

So the object of life affirmation, May argues, is "my whole lived life until now."⁶⁴ Interestingly, he maintains this position despite some of Nietzsche's comments that seem to suggest individual events are the object of the eternal recurrence (e.g., GS 341). May argues that individual events cannot be taken as objects of affirmation on their own precisely because of, to use my own words, the existence of destructive experiences of suffering. Because such events undermine the individual's ability to flourish, even the affirmer cannot take an attitude of love toward them. Therefore, the object of affirmation must be the whole of one's life.

⁶³ May, 95.

⁶⁴ May, 96.

May supports his position using a number of other means as well—first, by pointing out that Nietzsche does “say No” to many events and advocates others doing the same. In addition, he argues that a number of Nietzsche’s fundamental philosophical positions suggest that individual events are “less suitable” candidates for affirmation than the whole of one’s life—including Nietzsche’s determinism (an event is always embedded in a chain of cause and effect) and his account of human action (that our intentions are “inscrutably complex,” making any description of a particular event incomplete). Thus, because all events and experiences are necessary, particular events are affirmed only insofar as the whole lived life is affirmed. Though we may despise and reject individual events, such as those which inhibit our flourishing, even those events are affirmed when we affirm the whole of our fated lives.

To put it another way, May argues that affirmation and positive valuation are not one and the same—rather, affirmation is a work of art “in the whole of which we can find beauty or take joy without needing to do so in every one of its individual parts.”⁶⁵ May describes this affirmation as a new kind of redemption.⁶⁶ This new redemption is characterized by its ability to make loathsome events affirmable, even those as loathsome as Auschwitz (the example he provides). What is painful about the past, May rightly notes of Nietzsche’s view, is our impotence in the face of it. Such experiences are redeemed when we

⁶⁵ May, 98.

⁶⁶ He refers to the following from Nietzsche: “... only the particular is loathsome, all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole.” (TI, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” 49).

will—which is to say affirm—the past. In the context of this work, May argues, redemption “no longer involves escape from what causes us suffering in this life... into another life that is supposedly free of those causes of suffering. Rather redemption is affirming everything that has happened in our past, including the suffering, by ‘willing’ it.”⁶⁷ May concludes that affirmation is characterized by a joy taken in the whole of one’s life, but also that life is experienced as beautiful by the affirmer. The affirmation of life will also invariably involve “saying No” to particular events, but such events are still affirmed by virtue of their being inextricable parts of the whole life.

Much of May’s account is insightful, especially the consideration given to what I call destructive suffering—the sort that is destructive to the individual rather than instructive in some way, such as the sort of suffering that might be characterized by Reginster’s definition of suffering as resistance to be overcome. One might think of childbirth or artistic creativity here. And yet, it remains difficult to understand the difference, in regards to suffering, between affirming the individual events of one’s life and affirming one’s life as a whole. What, one wonders, is the object of the affirmation of one’s whole life if not the events of which it is composed? Whether individual experiences are affirmed one by one or affirmed en masse, it is still the individual experiences that are being affirmed. Furthermore, while Nietzsche does insist that nothing is dispensable, that

⁶⁷ May, 99.

“[n]othing in existence should be excluded”⁶⁸ from affirmation, there is also reason to believe, as May acknowledges, that Nietzsche regards the eternal recurrence to be challenging precisely because of difficult individual events. What gives the eternal recurrence (and the affirmation of life) its power is precisely that it is supposed to redeem even the most painful experiences. Given this, it seems that individual experiences *should* be central to efforts to affirm life.

How to Look on the Past

Taking a different approach to parsing the nature and meaning of the doctrine of life affirmation, Christopher Hamilton argues in his essay on Nietzsche’s notions of nobility and affirmation⁶⁹ that there is a difference between affirming one’s life in an inward sense and affirming life in general, and that Nietzsche’s notion of life affirmation requires both. Nietzsche’s idea of nobility and his views of the value of human life, however, make such work difficult. In order to understanding why, Hamilton presents an account of what he considers the two most notable conceptions of nobility and affirmation in Nietzsche’s philosophy – ‘worldly’ and ‘inward.’ However, according to Hamilton, Nietzsche does not fully develop the worldly conception, and we can only make sense of the inward notion of nobility and affirmation “at the cost of a certain view about the significance of individual lives which finds no proper

⁶⁸ EH, BT 2.

⁶⁹ Christopher Hamilton, “Nietzsche on Nobility and the Affirmation of Life,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 3, no. 2 (2000), 169-193.

place in Nietzsche's work."⁷⁰ To explain, Hamilton begins in much the same way as May, noting that Nietzsche did not fully work out the idea of life affirmation, and he sets out to develop an interpretation of affirmation that explains how it would work as a mode of valuation, particularly in regards to suffering.

[1] *Conceptions of Nobility*

Hamilton draws attention to two of the prominent conceptions of nobility in Nietzsche's work and suggests that the *most* prominent one is that of the worldly noble in GM I. In that essay, Nietzsche describes such individuals as strong, healthy, and overflowing with vitality, as well as the sort of power and privilege that allows them to discharge their drives at will. Their mode of valuation is simple: they are convinced of their own goodness because they are generally successful in satisfying their own desires. Their conception of value is, rooted, therefore, in *activity* and *creativity*. Their sense of what is bad, on the other hand, is shaped by contrast to their own goodness. Nietzsche is quick to note, however, that there is no such thing as a strong character (in the everyday sense of the term, as there is no self behind the actions of the worldly noble.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Hamilton, 169.

⁷¹ GM I:13: "A quantum of power is just such a quantum of drive, will, effect—more precisely, it is nothing other than this very driving, willing, effecting, and only through the seduction of language (and the basic errors of reason petrified therein), which understands and misunderstands all effecting as conditioned by an effecting something, by a 'subject,' can it appear otherwise.... But there is no such substratum; there is no

Additionally, the nobles show reverence only for each other and on the basis of their power and strength.

Hamilton regards this conception of the worldly noble as aligned with a particular formula of life affirmation—the one that emphasizes the doctrine of the eternal recurrence. He argues that the worldly nobles of GM I could affirm their own lives in terms of the eternal recurrence—wanting not only one’s joys, but also one’s misfortunes—because of their “hardness”: they can bear to affirm even their pain. But what concrete example of such a creature can be found, Hamilton wonders. Nietzsche does not provide any, as it turns out, referring only to types as he sees them—he writes of the “Roman,” “Japanese nobility,” and “Scandinavian Vikings,” among others,⁷² as examples of worldly nobles.

But individual members of these groups do not fit Nietzsche’s model, according to Hamilton. Achilles, for example, “is nothing like the worldly noble whom Nietzsche describes who simply acts on his drives and impulses.”⁷³ He has, in other words, at least some amount of the inwardness that characterizes the herd animal in GM I. He is vengeful, “scheming and cunning, plotting ways to wreak havoc on his fellow Greeks: he cannot forget the disservice done to him, and mulls it over continuously in his mind, feeding and enjoying the spirit of his revenge.”⁷⁴ Hamilton further argues that there is no one in the historical record

‘being’ behind the doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is simply fabricated into the doing—the doing is everything.”

⁷² GM I:11.

⁷³ Hamilton, 174.

⁷⁴ Hamilton, 174-5.

that can be called an example of the worldly noble that Nietzsche describes and if any such individual existed in prehistory, we can know nothing about him or her. Given that, we can only speculate about whether such individuals existed and, more importantly, we “have not the slightest chance of becoming noble purely in the worldly sense. We are simply too loaded down with the weight of history for that.”⁷⁵ As a result, Hamilton contends, Nietzsche cannot provide a plausible account of nobility in the worldly sense.

However, Hamilton argues, there is another conception of nobility in Nietzsche’s work—individuals who are not inwardly empty—and this conception is largely rooted in the ideas and arguments advanced in GM II. To understand how inwardness develops, it is useful to review the arguments Nietzsche makes about *ressentiment* and bad conscience in that essay. The nobles in GM I exist alongside another type of human being: individuals who are unable to create their own values and who are wholly reactive, whom Nietzsche calls them herd animals or slaves. The weakness of the herd animals creates in them a feeling of envy, fear, and hatred, producing a desire for revenge, which Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*. In GM II Nietzsche gives an account of what happens after they take their revenges, describing the origin and history of guilt and “bad conscience” in human life. There are, according to him, two sources of guilt—the debtor/credit relationship and the sense of debt one has towards one’s ancestors. However, he suggests that they are intertwined. The debtor/creditor

⁷⁵ Hamilton, 175.

relationship seeps into the sense of debt in the tribe to dead ancestors in the form of the feeling the need to pay one's ancestors back.

The feeling of guilt described here is pre-moral, but as the power of the tribe grows, outlets for the expression of the natural human instincts to destroy, persecute, and exercise cruelty are diminished, leading those instincts to be turned inward. This process, called internalization, gives rise to bad conscience. The individual suffers as a result of her inability to act on her instincts and interprets her suffering as punishment from the gods, as a sign of her guilt, as a sign of her debt. Therein lies the moralization of guilt. "On Nietzsche's story," Hamilton writes, "the subject supposes himself to be suffering *because* he is guilty and frustrated, hence that it is good to suffer. And this way of thinking ties guilt, frustration and suffering so closely together that the subject comes to think that central to the suffering which is good are feelings of guilt and frustration themselves."⁷⁶ As a result of those feelings, human beings often engage in self-pity when misfortune befalls us. It is perhaps worth mentioning here that, like Nietzsche's remarks, much of Hamilton's commentary on suffering focuses on painful experiences that result from our own mistakes and shortcomings, and does not speak to the tragic experiences that do not give rise to guilt, but to numbness and brokenness.

As Hamilton notes, Nietzsche believes that the debtor/creditor relationship exists at every level of civilization, even the most primitive, and that

⁷⁶ Hamilton, 177.

the sense of guilt and indebtedness toward one's ancestors grows as civilizations grow. Therefore, even nobles are subject to pre-moral guilt. Relying on Nietzsche's description of the nobles limiting each other in their communities and his description of nobles as those who practices severity on themselves, Hamilton additionally contends that nobles also experience pre-moral bad conscience. This provides us with a picture of nobles "with at least the rudiments of inner depth."⁷⁷ Further, there are good reasons to believe that the development of guilt and bad conscience happens in the nobles, according to Hamilton. What is important about this conception of nobility, for Hamilton, is that it suggests that nobles of inward nobility are not free of the constituents of herd morality.

But what would characterize this sort of noble, if not the distance from slavish qualities? The answer, according to Hamilton, is "the ability to overcome the elements of slavish morality in oneself."⁷⁸ He notes BGE 260, in which Nietzsche describes noble individuals as those "who joyfully exercise severity and harshness over themselves," who can be characterized by their faith in themselves and their hostility to selflessness and pity. Based on this, and perhaps on Nietzsche's claim in BGE 287 that "the noble soul has reverence for itself," Hamilton, argues that there is a modern nobility and affirmation, one that is not free of the moral emotions that Nietzsche associates with herd morality. Unlike

⁷⁷ Hamilton, 179.

⁷⁸ Hamilton, 181.

the worldly noble, this type of noble is characterized by the presence of the possibility of overcoming slavish emotions by the person who experiences them.

As Hamilton notes, his inward conception of nobility raise the question of whether this understanding of nobility – “according to which we find someone noble if he can affirm or love life without becoming bitter and resentful even if things do not go for him in a world sense in the way he wants”⁷⁹ – is representative of Nietzsche’s own account. Some may argue that this sort of “equanimity in the face of worldly success seems un-Nietzsche.” In other words, this conception of nobility seems aligned with the Stoic way of minimizing pain. However, Hamilton notes that this conception of nobility does not the require modesty of desire that Stoicism demands and allows for the efforts to change the world in light of one’s desires that is expressed and encouraged throughout Nietzsche’s body of work.

[2] *Conceptions of Affirmation*

Attempting to explain what such an understanding of affirmation might look like, Hamilton controversially argues that the affirmer in this case would not want, if given the opportunity, to repeat his life with all its suffering – and yet, he does genuinely affirm life. Here he returns to the example of Achilles. As previously noted, the Achilles from the beginning of the *Iliad* is scheming and vengeful, but there comes a point when he demonstrates nobility: “where he

⁷⁹ Hamilton, 186.

finally begins to emerge from his god-like self-absorption when Priam comes to ransom his son's body."⁸⁰ Moved by Priam's plight, he begins to overcome his vengefulness and envy, and becomes more reconciled with his past to a greater extent than at any other point in the *Iliad*. In this moment there is, Hamilton argues, both nobility and affirmation in him: an *inward* nobility and affirmation. An affirmer such as this does not *want* his suffering, Hamilton insists, but his longing to be free of suffering does not call into doubt his affirmation of life.

This is an interesting claim in light of Nietzsche's remarks on the refining power of suffering—the fact that the individual who has suffered deeply has “a certainty that his sufferings have given him a greater knowledge than the cleverest and wisest can have.... Profound suffering makes you noble.”⁸¹ This way of describing suggests that the affirmer, in Nietzsche's view, would *not* long to be free of suffering, that she would welcome it. Perhaps Hamilton's position is that one can be cheerful about her suffering without longing for it, though this attitude toward suffering would not meet the standards, the love of one's life, required by the doctrine of life affirmation. Where Hamilton's account does align with Nietzsche's is in his claim the individual who expresses inward affirmation does not weigh the good and bad in order to determine its value. His ability to affirm is not dependent on how well, on balance, things have gone. Why?

First, Hamilton argues that it is common for people to look fondly on their own individual past even though it has contained some amount of pain and

⁸⁰ Hamilton, 181.

⁸¹ BGE 270.

suffering because, he suspects, it is *their* past, their unique possession. Even when the past has been painful, it remains important to the individual to whom it belongs. Hamilton does acknowledge that there are instances in which this reaction to the past is not the case, when the amount of pain and suffering present in the past is enough to make it impossible for the individual to “cherish” the past. But fondness is the common reaction when the pain and suffering of one’s life has not been great. Furthermore, this attitude toward the past does not preclude the possibility that the individual will also wish that things had gone otherwise, that she would have preferred less pain, but she recognizes that such thinking is useless – and it is this awareness what allows her to take an affirmative stance toward the past.

This relationship to one’s past is what marks the beginning of the possibility of the kind of affirmation Hamilton identifies with Nietzsche, wherein affirmation is not dependent on how well things have gone. He writes:

For what he has in mind is the development in two directions of the idea of being able to cherish one’s past even when it has contained *some* pain and suffering. The first is the deepening of this attitude so that it involves the affirmation of not merely the smaller of one’s pains and sorrows but all of them, including those that are the most profound and from which one naturally shrinks. The second is the extending of this attitude to one’s past to include one’s present so that one is able to affirm even present pains and sufferings. Someone who affirms life in this deeper way must leave his love or affirmation of life open to repudiation.... The issue here is one of the *quality of his spirit*.⁸²

⁸² Hamilton, 183.

Such an affirmer will love life even though he also will say, if asked, that he would prefer that he had experienced less suffering in his life over the possibility of living his life over again in the exact same way. This sort of affirmation, in which the individual would have preferred a less painful life but affirms his life anyway, on the grounds that there is nothing that can be done about the past, is one of the factors that allows the affirmer to avoid becoming bitter and resentful. The other factor, of course, is that he does what he can to ease his current pains. Affirmation, then, is dependent on rejecting "idle wishes and regrets."⁸³

Hamilton presents Michel de Montaigne as an example of this conception of affirmation, citing Montaigne's reflection that "[w]e must learn to suffer what we cannot avoid. Our life is composed, like the harmony of the world, of discords as well as of different tones, sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, soft and loud. If a musician liked only some of them, what could he sing?"⁸⁴ What marks Montaigne's attitude as special, for Hamilton, is the evenness in his response to the pleasurable and the painful in his own life. Though he certainly would have preferred less pain, he rejects self-pity, recognizing that it is of no use to lament the past. He does not succumb to the sort of self-indulgence that prolongs suffering, which is so common after one is met with misfortune, nor does he revert to *ressentiment*, which would create pleasure in suffering. In this sense, Hamilton argues, Montaigne is one of Nietzsche's so-called free spirits: he has

⁸³ Hamilton, 184.

⁸⁴ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, translated by M.A. Screech, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics: 1993, 1237.

overcome himself. This is not a claim that Montaigne experiences no psychological struggle, but that he exhibits great strength. Hamilton also acknowledges that part of what makes one capable of reacting to suffering as a free spirit is that his life is given sustenance from other sources.⁸⁵

Hamilton concludes, "This is why Montaigne said, in a comment that is profoundly Nietzschean *avant la lettre*: '[T]he most uncouth of our afflictions is to despise our being.' Montaigne was, indeed, in his understanding of, and response to, pleasure and pain, 'superficial out of profundity.'"⁸⁶ Though the sort of equanimity demonstrated by Montaigne is rather convincing, and it is certainly the case that reconciling oneself with one's past will play an important role in the extent to which one is able to affirm her life, Hamilton's account says painfully little about how the impact of current suffering that one *cannot* bear well, particularly the pain that arises from love one feels for others—the untimely death of a parent, for example. It is easier to affirm one's pains than to affirm the pain caused by the suffering of others, particularly those one loves. Furthermore, Nietzsche's own remarks on nobility encourage distance from others, whom Nietzsche describes in BGE 41 as prisons and corners.

⁸⁵ Hamilton writes on 186, "Montaigne sought to show in his final essay—indeed, throughout *The Essays*—how, by attending to them properly, the most banal and quotidian of activities—eating, drinking, shitting, dressing, moving, breathing and so on—can provide (some of) the spiritual sustenance which allows us to affirm even our misfortunes and sufferings through accepting them in a spiritual equanimity."

⁸⁶ Hamilton, 186.

[3] *Affirming the Whole of Life*

An objection related to the recognition that affirming the pain caused by the suffering of others comes from Henry Staten, who notes that there is a distinction between affirming one's own life and affirming life as a whole. He writes:

For each of us to redeem our own relation to our personal past and to the past in general might... make us affirmers of life. But as regards to the past in general this affirmation has not been thought through very seriously or in any detail, either by Nietzsche or by those of his interpreters who blithely tell us that "the eternal recurrence signifies my ability to want my life and the whole world to be repeated just as they are".... Might there not be such a thing as terror so overwhelming that the sufferer cannot or will not affirm it, and in that case who can affirm it on his or her behalf?⁸⁷

Despite that this concern is often overlooked by commenters, it is a question that must be answered by anyone attempting to demonstrate that Nietzsche's notion of life affirmation is an appropriate and practically useful component of reevaluation. One might imagine a human being that is utterly indifferent to the suffering of others, who could affirm life without, perhaps, even acknowledging the suffering of others. And such an individual, one might think, affirms life as a whole in this way. However, Hamilton notes that indifference is not the same as affirmation and indifference might just as easily be interpreted as denial as it could be interpreted as affirmation. Thus, the question is not so easily answered. Hamilton acknowledges that there is a serious objection present in this question

⁸⁷ Henry Staten, *Nietzsche's Voice*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, 75-76.

and concludes that making sense of life affirmation as an affirmation of life as a whole is possible, but cannot be done within the terms of Nietzsche's own philosophy. This is because the affirmation of life as a whole is only possible if we embrace an understanding of the value of human lives that is rejected by Nietzsche—namely, that each one is inherently valuable and, roughly, equally valuable.

The conception of nobility and affirmation of life that is proposed by Hamilton does not depend on weighing the good and bad of one's life as a way of judging its overall value. Taking this approach in regards to the lives of others will mean that one does not weigh the good and bad of their lives in order to determine the overall value of their lives. This makes it possible for the individual to affirm the lives of others in such a way that also leaves open the possibility of condemning their behavior or acknowledging the burden of suffering on them and working to put an end to their suffering. This, Hamilton notes, would be "an affirmation of the inwardness of others—an affirmation of the world on behalf of others—not merely an affirmation of one's own life."⁸⁸ The foundation of such an attitude is the realization that one shares a "common lot" with others, an understanding that "however mean, squalid, petty or even evil a person's life is, it is still a life with a meaning, even if that meaning is elusive to the person whose life it is."⁸⁹ On Hamilton's view, the common lot we share as human beings is that the life of each has a "dignity" or value that is

⁸⁸ Hamilton, 190.

⁸⁹ Hamilton, 190.

independent of our actions. Further, according to Hamilton, we share a joint responsibility for humanity and because one's behavior is only free of the evil acts found in another's by luck or grace, we are all "enmired" in the guilt of others.

Hamilton's account is notable for its attempt to acknowledge and address that the affirmer is impacted by the actions and experiences of others – not only in terms of what they might do to him, but how their suffering might cause him to suffer. The introduction of the notion that the lives of individual human beings are valuable seems to be Hamilton's way of accounting for this interconnectedness without falling into weighing the good and bad (but in the lives of others in this case) – an approach he has already rejected. In other words, in accepting the view that all lives have value, the affirmer is provided grounds for affirming the lives of others that is not affected by the amount of suffering they might experience.

The sort of inward affirmation proposed here – that is, the affirmation of the inwardness of individuals – allows one to affirm the whole of life, but cannot be reconciled with Nietzsche's conception of nobility and affirmation because he rejects the view that each human being has dignity and value that is independent of his actions. In fact, Nietzsche denies that the lives of most people have meaning, as well as the proposition that great individuals share a common lot with the rest. Therefore, Hamilton concludes, the only notion of life affirmation

that functions within the terms of Nietzsche's philosophy is the one in which affirmation is always only the affirmation of one's own life.

II: FAILURES OF THE DOCTRINE

Nietzsche's Treatment of Suffering

Hamilton draws attention to what I take to be a fair criticism of Nietzsche's philosophy. There are, however, other shortcomings, both within the doctrine of life affirmation and in his other philosophical commitments, which limit the value of life affirmation to the project of reevaluation. Reviewing secondary accounts of the doctrine helps to isolate them, but because it is equally important to review Nietzsche's own claims about suffering, the eternal recurrence, and life affirmation, the remainder of this chapter will draw on Nietzsche's own words as part of my critique of the doctrine of life affirmation. The shortcomings in the doctrine can be traced to his views on the value of individual human lives, as Hamilton noted, but also to his treatment of suffering. While Nietzsche's comments about the internalization of human beings that creates psychological pain and the consequences of the human urge to seek a meaning for suffering are insightful, his remarks regarding suffering in the context of life affirmation—the way an affirmer of life would think about or experience her suffering—are less nuanced and, in some cases, more aspirational than descriptive. That is to say, once again, there are some experiences that could not and should not be willed to return again. This remains true despite

Nietzsche's claims to the contrary, which I take to represent *hope* that all experiences of suffering can be constructive, even if only for those who are strong.

His association of suffering with cultivation – the suffering of the artist in the process of creating art, for example – seems to be his main point of entry to begin the revaluation of suffering and a sufficient grounds, in his view, for committing to the view that suffering could and should be affirmed. However, as the work of commentators has shown, the insistence on affirming suffering will pose problems for Nietzsche's project of revaluation. Taking into account Nietzsche's own voice and the efforts made by commentators to develop a more detailed description of what, precisely, constitutes life affirmation, it is my view that the doctrine of life affirmation is of limited value to revaluation, that Nietzsche's apparent confidence in it is not justifiable, and that its shortcomings can be attributed to its inability to overcome the problem of suffering. Problems begin with Nietzsche's treatment of suffering and become more pronounced in his doctrine of the eternal recurrence.

[1] *In the Context of Life-Affirming Values*

In BGE 225, which I quoted previously, Nietzsche summarizes the opening claim of the *Genealogy*: there is a long tradition in Western philosophy to measure the value of things in terms of how much pleasure they produce and how little pain. These philosophies presume, then, that pleasure is good and pain

is bad, and that their moral theories, whether it is those of pessimism, utilitarianism, or eudaemonism, are developed with that principle as their guide. Nietzsche argues in the *Genealogy* that these traditions are wrong about the origin of morals and in BGE 225 he argues that what those who attempt to abolish suffering⁹⁰ fail to understand is that it is actually through suffering that all “enhancements” in humans have been forged. Whatever qualities of the soul that have been “granted” to it come through the “unhappiness which cultivates its strength,” through “the discipline of great suffering.” Nietzsche goes on to suggest that the “creature” in human beings, the “fragments, abundance, clay, dirt, nonsense, chaos” in us is meant to suffer because it needs to be molded and purified, and the expression of pity is the height of “pampering and weaknesses.” This passage is particularly powerful because its expression encompasses what I take to be the pivotal components of Nietzsche’s view of suffering, particularly in terms of the project of revaluation and as it relates to the possibility of developing life affirming values.

The first is his sense that pleasure and pain are intertwined. In GS 301, he describes “higher” human beings as always happier and unhappier than others. This is because the world becomes “even fuller for someone who grows into the height of humanity.” Such individuals are attracted and stimulated by a greater number of things – which can cause pleasure or displeasure. In the next section, he argues that the one with “Homeric happiness” in his soul is also more capable

⁹⁰ In BGE 44 Nietzsche argues that two doctrines, “equal rights” and “sympathy for all that suffers” are evidence of urge to abolish suffering.

of suffering than others. So, he ties the development of the human soul and mind to the rise in both the potential for happiness and the potential for unhappiness. Thus, for example, in GS 183 he writes, "I would consider the foremost musician to be the one who knew only the sadness of the deepest happiness, and no other sadness at all." An increase in the capacity for one increases the capacity of the other. But Nietzsche seems to also argue that those who feel greater happiness *will* invariably feel greater pain, as though the one always accompanies the other. This is because "ever more baited hooks to attract his interest are cast his way; the things that stimulate him grow steadily in number,"⁹¹ both those that bring him pleasure and those that bring him pain.

The second notable component of Nietzsche's view is the notion that suffering has positive value. This is because pain is one of the "prime species-preserving forces."⁹² He suspects that he is alone in understanding this, that "moderns" no longer understand that bodily torments, deprivations, and even cruelty toward oneself are necessary for self-preservation. They no longer understand the value in "great pains of the soul" and as a result, even the smallest pains seem terrible to them: "even the inevitable mosquito bites of the soul and the body seem much too bloody and malicious, and the poverty of real experiences of pain makes one tend to consider *painful general ideas* as already suffering in the highest rank."⁹³ Nietzsche also argues that pain is hated more

⁹¹ GS 301.

⁹² GS 318.

⁹³ GS 48.

now than in the past, which makes it impossible to endure and a “reproach against the whole of existence.”⁹⁴ That is to say, the sense that pain is bad undermines one’s ability to love and take joy in life. The poverty of real experiences of pain has led to “the will to nothingness.” He concludes the recipe against the distress caused by pessimistic philosophies and excessive sensitivity is distress. The way to combat self-annihilation is pain because overcoming that nihilistic attitude requires the development of a new mode of valuation, a healthier way of thinking about the value of pain, and the sort of growth that is always driven by creative distress. This is why, on Nietzsche’s view, suffering is worthy of affirmation: it is a tool of self-preservation and of growth.

It is worth noting here that May is critical of Nietzsche’s definition (which is shared by Reginster) of suffering as constitutive of creativity because, in his view, the helplessness and “interpretive vacuum” associated with suffering is precisely what makes suffering hurt. Thus, he suggests, in attempting to give suffering a positive value Nietzsche is trying to abolish suffering. However, it is difficult to square this with Nietzsche’s stated disgust with those who seek to abolish suffering and his endorsement of the value and power of suffering. It is true that Nietzsche is looking for a way to fill the interpretive vacuum associated with suffering, which he considers necessary for the project of revaluation,⁹⁵ but it doesn’t seem to me that this is properly constituted as an effort to abolish

⁹⁴ GS 48.

⁹⁵ Meaningless suffering lends considerably to the appeal of the pessimism and nihilism that Nietzsche is attempting to thwart.

suffering. This is in part because suffering is constituted in many cases by physical pain and mental anguish *in addition to* feelings of helplessness and meaninglessness. Thus, filling the interpretive vacuum associated with those experiences would not extinguish the pain associated with them. There is a difference between reconfiguring one's relationship with suffering and attempting to eradicate suffering.

Finally, and I take this to be the main thrust of Nietzsche's thinking about suffering, he holds the view that through pain and painful experiences, human beings are transformed from chaotic fragments into stronger, more ingenious, more intentional creatures. He takes the view that suffering builds character, so to speak. For example, as previously noted, he writes in BGE 270, "Profound suffering makes you noble: it separates." In BGE 44, he describes the tendency to seek "the universal, green pasture happiness of the herd, with security, safety, contentment, and an easier life for all," and argues that others, such as himself, understand that humans have thrived best under the opposite conditions. He writes of those individuals:

We think that the danger of the human condition has first had to grow to terrible heights, its power to invent and dissimulate has had to develop under prolonged pressure and compulsion into something refined and daring.... We think that harshness, violence, slavery, danger in the streets and in the heart, concealment, Stoicism, the art of experiment, and devilry of every sort; that everything evil, terrible, tyrannical, predatory, and

snakelike in humanity serves just as well as its opposite to enhance the species “humanity.”⁹⁶

One might have thought that Nietzsche’s argument regarding the benefits of suffering is restricted to experiences that are difficult in the way that studying for the bar exam is difficult, the way that bearing a child is difficult. But as this passage demonstrates, Nietzsche is committed to the view that even the most harmful and cruel experiences participate in the development of human beings,⁹⁷ individually and collectively.

It is for this reason that Reginster’s commitment to the view that revaluation must show that suffering is good for its own sake,⁹⁸ which—despite that he seems to be saying that suffering is good for us rather than good in itself—is closest to Nietzsche’s own sense of how suffering should be treated in the context of revaluation, is problematic. Reginster’s discussion of just how we might interpret suffering as good for its own sake, how suffering is actually a constituent of the good, is committed to a definition of suffering—the displeasure that results from resistance to the satisfaction of one’s desires—that does not account for that which does not result from the frustration of pre-existing desires. We might imagine terrible, tyrannical, predatory possibilities

⁹⁶ He acknowledges that suffering is damaging to some, but chalks it up to the weakness of the individual rather than the sharpness of the pain, insisting that the flourishing of human life is, and will be, indebted to suffering.

⁹⁷ BGE 44.

⁹⁸ Reginster notes on 234 that in saying that suffering is valued for its own sake, “it is important to remember that it is not valued *by itself*, but only as an ingredient of the good. The good life involves not only resistance (and therefore suffering), but also its overcoming.”

here. Reginster acknowledges that his notion that suffering can be redeemed by creativity⁹⁹ does not account for those experiences he describes using the word 'pain,' which do not result from the experience of the resistance to the satisfaction of desires and do not, therefore, constitute suffering. And yet, as we have seen (and Reginster notes), Nietzsche does insist that pain can be a source of affirmation.

For his part, Reginster admits that particular experiences of pain and suffering can inhibit one's prospects for greatness and make us wish for a better life. It is difficult to see, despite his and Nietzsche's commitment to the view that suffering can and should be affirmed, how the affirmation of all suffering is possible.¹⁰⁰ Reginster has taken up the work of demonstrating precisely this and, upon considering "pain," concludes that the effort to affirm suffering will, at the very least, alleviate us of our Christian aspiration for heaven – that is to say, a life devoid of suffering. While I agree, this is a much smaller victory than the one Nietzsche intends. To understand why Nietzsche's goals are unattainable using his own methods, it is worth looking more closely at why the doctrine of life affirmation cannot provide value for all experiences of suffering.

While it is true that threats to one's well-being can inspire inventiveness, it is equally true that such threats often destroy rather than inspire. I might also

⁹⁹ Reginster, 233.

¹⁰⁰ As noted earlier, Nietzsche's view seems to be that all experiences, including the painful ones, must be affirmed. See his proposition of the eternal recurrence in GS 341, in which he writes that "every pain and every joy and every thought and sign and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you."

add that Nietzsche's claims about the positive value of suffering seem to rest on its ability to rouse us to greatness without properly demonstrating why such greatness is more desirable than freedom from at least certain kinds of pain. On Nietzsche's view, the will to power is a basic factor of life, which may seem to explain why suffering, which he takes to serve self-preservation and growth, is desirable. However, as Nietzsche is quite aware, not all self-preservation and growth contributes to greatness. The will to power can take the form of herd morality just as it might take the form of a noble manner of valuation. Therefore, it seems that the presence of the will to power cannot be the reason that, according to Nietzsche, greatness is more desirable than freedom from pain. Furthermore, a life with less suffering, as opposed to no suffering, will still involve processes of self-overcoming. So it remains to be seen why Nietzsche insists that all suffering has positive value and that greatness is more desirable than freedom from the most painful and destructive experiences.

In any case, Nietzsche's claim that suffering has positive value does not seem controversial when considering the sort of physical challenges one takes up to become an elite athlete or the sort of pain discussed in GS 295: "Yes, at the very bottom of my soul I am grateful for all my misery and illnesses and whatever is imperfect in me because they provide a hundred back doors through which I can escape enduring habits." Here, as in other places, Nietzsche makes reference to his own poor physical health and its positive impact on his life. But take a different sort of example, perhaps the case of the parents of Adam Walsh,

a six year-old who was abducted, murdered, and decapitated in Florida in 1981. In the aftermath of his death, his family created the Adam Walsh Child Resource Center, spearheaded federal legislation designed to help missing and exploited children, and produced television shows designed to aid in the capture of fugitives. Adam Walsh's parents have contributed significantly to the effort to protect children from harm, demonstrating a level of determination and fortitude that was, in all likelihood, brought to life by the terrible loss they had endured.

Their loss made them harder in some sense, more focused, deeper. And yet, one imagines, John and Revé Walsh do not place higher value on the enhancements that have resulted from their suffering than on the life of their son or their experience in losing him. They likely would have preferred, in other words, to have avoided the loss, no matter what good came of it for themselves or others. The same must be true for Adam, who certainly would have preferred to live and gained nothing for himself through his suffering. Furthermore, whatever resilience and creativity resulted from this terrible experience, one can only imagine the ways in which the experience disrupted the growth and undermined the overall well-being of Adam's parents. So, while Nietzsche's seems little concerned with this distinction, I am convinced of the magnitude of recognizing that there is a difference between advocating for the resistance of anything difficult and rejecting the notion that *all* pains should be, can be, treated as instrumental to growth or success—and, therefore, worthy of affirming. In some cases the potential that is fulfilled after the painful experience comes at too

high a cost. In some cases the suffering that accompanies the enhancement does more harm to the individual than the enhancement improves him.

There are cases in which Nietzsche's view of suffering seems even less appropriate, where no enhancement whatsoever comes of the pain one endures. Why is it, Dorothee Sölle asks in *Suffering*, that "some suffering strikes us blind and dead and leaves us mutilated, while other suffering enriches our lives?"¹⁰¹ Nietzsche answers this question by proposing that the difference lies in the quality of character of the individual, that suffering shrinks the weak and imbues the noble with strength and wisdom. This account is an acknowledgement of what I call destructive suffering – that which, by its very nature, is destructive; that which is destructive through no shortcoming or fault in the sufferer. There is no mechanism in life affirmation, in either Nietzsche's comments or the work of those theories discussed in the first part of this chapter, that is equipped to properly address this sort of experience.

Reginster's account, as noted, also cannot accommodate this. While May argues that we should seek no justification for suffering, he also maintains that life affirmation is an affirmation of the whole of one's life. He suggests that life affirmation does not exclude the possibility of feeling regret and the rejection of individual events, which at first appears promising, but he goes on to say that every event is ultimately affirmed. This means that the acts carried out in Auschwitz during the second World War (his example) are affirmed as a part of

¹⁰¹ Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 2.

the whole. This puts his account in line with Nietzsche's view that suffering has a positive value and raises a question about what the object of affirming *is*, if it is not the series of events and feelings that make up one's life.

May's account also raises questions about the role of interpreting in human life. Hamilton's position, that the affirmer does not want to repeat his suffering but does genuinely affirm life because his ability to affirm is not dependent on how things have gone, raises a similar question. If Nietzsche's claim that what gave the ascetic ideal its power was its ability to give meaning to suffering and his claim that human beings must have a meaning for our suffering are correct, any proposed alternative to the life-denying values he associates with the ascetic ideal must also provide a meaning for suffering. May's account intentionally fails to do this, based on his argument that affirmation requires us to no longer give justification for our suffering. Hamilton's account fails to do this, as it must, because it acknowledges the destructive power of suffering.

[2] *Yes-Saying and No-Saying*

One might raise the point, as May and Staten do, that the doctrine of life affirmation does accommodate No-saying in some capacity, and that this, perhaps, might be what accounts for destructive suffering. Staten notes that Nietzsche moves back and forth between two senses of affirmation. First, there is the more common understanding, the sense that it is opposed to negation.¹⁰² The

¹⁰² See GS 276.

second is the sense in which it includes and overflows both affirmation and negation.¹⁰³ The second sense “generates a politics of generosity and inclusiveness” while the first sense generates “a politics of reaction, defensiveness, and exclusion.”¹⁰⁴ Staten’s observation about the stance associated with each of the two senses of affirmation is particularly useful for understanding how Nietzsche’s critique of Platonic-Christian culture can be rightly considered part of his project of revaluation and, more particularly, how his critical and negating comments serve to promote his push toward life affirmation.

There is additional evidence in the primary texts to support the argument that Nietzsche’s doctrine of Yes-saying allows for some amount of No-saying. In GS 27, he writes, “What does the renouncer do? He strives for a higher world, he wants to fly further and higher than all affirmers.... Yes, he is cleverer than we thought, and so polite towards us – the affirmers! For he is just as we are even in his renunciation.” Later, in a section titled “In Favour of Criticism,” he writes, “When we criticize, we are not doing something arbitrary and impersonal; it is, at least very often, proof that there are living, active forces within us shedding skin. We negate and have to negate because something in us wants to live and affirm itself, something we might not yet know or see!”¹⁰⁵ This suggests that negation, just as affirmation—No-saying as well as Yes-saying—can be the

¹⁰³ Staten, 77.

¹⁰⁴ Staten, 77.

¹⁰⁵ GS 307.

expression of strength and nobility. When is that the case? Nietzsche tells us which sorts of instances in which No-saying is the expression of the affirmative stance toward life in UO 203, where he declares that the negation of “our lies” (e.g., God, Truth) is a negation that is rooted in a desire for salvation. This sort of negation is an appropriate expression of the desire to affirm because of its honesty and contribution to human well-being. This aligns with Nietzsche’s usual use of No-saying, which is generally in terms of his rejection of herd morality and the ascetic ideal.

However, while there is a place for No-saying within the framework of life affirmation, Nietzsche’s view is that No-saying is affirmative when it negates or rejects that which has undermined human flourishing. As we have seen, he does not place suffering in this category. Therefore, on Nietzsche’s account suffering falls into the category of things to which the affirmer will say Yes. And this, again, leaves no space for rejection or silence in response to destructive suffering. Before moving on, it is worthwhile to summarize the argument so far. First, I propose that there are experiences of suffering that are thoroughly destructive and that Nietzsche’s remarks on suffering do not account for them. In addition, while the framework for life affirmation does accommodate No-saying, this exception to affirming cannot be applied to suffering if we accept Nietzsche’s ideas about the nature and value of suffering and his view of the role No-saying plays in work of the affirmer. If, however, Nietzsche *did* acknowledge destructive

suffering, its place in the framework of life affirmation would be here amongst those things to which one says No – rejected because it undermines well-being.

[3] *Doctrine of the Eternal Recurrence*

This brings us back to Nietzsche's most famous and most specific formulation of the doctrine of life affirmation. This section will include a brief discussion of the nature and importance of the eternal recurrence to affirmation, before considering the possibility of affirming destructive suffering and its consequences. In *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, Karl Löwith argues that the eternal recurrence is the fundamental issue in Nietzsche's philosophy¹⁰⁶ and that through this doctrine Nietzsche revived the controversy between Christianity (being) and the pagan tradition of Heraclitus (becoming).¹⁰⁷ The eternal recurrence is, he goes on, a specific answer to a specific problem: how to establish a standpoint from which to judge the Christian interpretation of life. This is in line with Brobjer's claim, discussed in the previous chapter, that early mentions of revaluation have it closely aligned with the doctrine of the eternal recurrence.¹⁰⁸

As a response to the Platonic-Christian worldview, the eternal recurrence is the opposite of the dialectic of despair and redemption, according to Löwith,

¹⁰⁶ Karl Löwith, "Nietzsche's Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6 (1945): 273-284, 274.

¹⁰⁷ Heraclitus argues that nothing is constant in the world but change. Thus, becoming is the fundamental essence of the universe.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas A. Brobjer, "The Origin and Early Context of the Revaluation Theme in Nietzsche's Thinking," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 39 (2010): 14-16.

“a timeless *nunc stans* or eternal.”¹⁰⁹ He goes on to describe Zarathustra’s reaction to the eternal recurrence, which is not despairing that all is alike, but reveling in the freedom from “all-too-human purposes in the eternal recurrence of all things, whose time is an ever present circle.” When eliciting this sort of response, the doctrine of the eternal recurrence poses an alternative to the Christian belief that history is progressive and determined by an absolute beginning and end. The eternal recurrence represents, instead, “unmoralized fullness of creation *and* destruction, of joy *and* suffering, of good *and* evil.” The position taken by Löwith is what Sleinis calls the “realistic” interpretation of the doctrine of the eternal recurrence, the one that takes it to be a genuine hypothesis about the nature of the world. The alternative approach, which Sleinis calls the “attitude portrayal” interpretation, takes the doctrine to be a graphic characterization of the maximally affirmative attitude. On this view, it is more test than description.

The nature of Nietzsche’s presentation of the doctrine and the other components of his philosophy strongly suggest that the second interpretation is the one more in line with Nietzsche’s thinking.¹¹⁰ In *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, Alexander Nehamas offers a good description, which is echoed by Reginster, of the psychological proposition contained in the doctrine, writing, “[T]he only way

¹⁰⁹ Löwith, 278.

¹¹⁰ As previously noted, Nietzsche calls the eternal recurrence the highest formulation of life affirmation. Additionally, in GS 341 he presents the idea as a thought experiment, beginning with “What if....” Statements such as these lend weight to the idea that the eternal recurrence is intended as a self-test. It is possible that Nietzsche takes the idea to also have ontological significance, but even if that were the case, his use of it is generally oriented toward what sort of response such a proposition would elicit from the person to whom it is posed.

to justify one's life is to become able to accept it in its entirety; and the mark of this ability is the desire to repeat this very life (and hence everything else in the world as well) again in all eternity."¹¹¹ The doctrine of the eternal recurrence asks, in other words, whether one could love her life with the knowledge that there is no redemption to be had, no revelations from God, if everything she has labored over, lost, and tried to overcome would return again.

This constitutes Nietzsche's most daring and most demanding form of rejection of the Platonic-Christian mode of valuation. Not only has he rejected the idea of redemption through God, he also rejects the notion of the 'subject.'¹¹² This is why, Nehamas suggests, the demon only presents the possibility of one's life recurring in the exact same way—the possibility of a different life would constitute a different person. Therefore, the demon offers us only the very same life, in its entirety.¹¹³ As a result, life affirmation can only be the affirmation of everything—even the worst of one's life.

There are a number of questions raised about, and by the doctrine of the eternal recurrence. Löwith and Hamilton both wonder about the viability of the doctrine. For Löwith, it fails on the grounds that the modern ego is at odds with the old pagan belief in an impersonal eternal cycle of the natural world.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 347.

¹¹² GM I:13.

¹¹³ Nehamas, 343-4.

¹¹⁴ Löwith 283-4: "To the Greeks Eternal Recurrence was the manifestation of a universal rational order and beauty, to Nietzsche it is 'the heaviest burden' because it conflicts with his radically modern will. To the Greeks the eternal recurrence of generation and

Hamilton, on the other hand, argues from the opposite end of history, recalling Nietzsche's claim that ancient noble savages could want the recurrence of their joys and their misfortunes because of their hardness, and suggesting that there likely isn't anyone in known history who fits such a description. Though both views are worthy of consideration, my primary concern is with Nietzsche's (and some of his commenters) *commitment* to the doctrine.

Though I am of the opinion that the doctrine does fail, but on different grounds than those proposed by Löwith and Hamilton, the fact that he pursues it, whether or not it turns out to be a viable tool of life affirmation, signifies a shortcoming in his thinking. In my view, the maximally affirmative attitude expressed most distinctly in the doctrine of the eternal recurrence, which demands the affirmation of even destructive suffering, undermines the well-being of the individual and promotes the diminishing of compassion, disregarding the painful experience of ourselves and others. Compassion will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, which is about the suffering of others, so I set it aside for now.

corruption explained natural occurrences as well as historical events, to Nietzsche the acceptance of eternal recurrence requires a standpoint beyond man and time.... As a modern man Nietzsche was so hopelessly divorced from any genuine loyalty to the earth and from the feeling of eternal security under the bell of heaven that his great effort to re-marry man's destiny to cosmic fate or to 'translate man back into nature' as the original text could not but be frustrated. Thus, wherever he tries to develop his doctrine rationally it breaks asunder in two irreconcilable pieces: in a presentation of eternal recurrence as an objective fact, to be demonstrated by physics and mathematics, and in quite a different presentation of it as a subjective hypothesis, to be demonstrated by its ethical consequences. It breaks asunder because the will to eternalize the chance fact of the modern ego does not fit into the assertion of the impersonal eternal cycle of the natural world."

Much of the discussion surrounding the doctrine of the eternal recurrence is focused on one's ability to will the repetition of his *own* life and experience, perhaps because Nietzsche's most famous formulation of the doctrine seems to do the same: the demon asks whether one would be able to want "this life as you now live it and have lived it... every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh."¹¹⁵ While Hamilton's account is notable for its rejection of the notion that a true affirmer would *want* all of his suffering again, this is clearly at odds with Nietzsche's understanding of affirmation, leading one to wonder whether the sort of affirmation proposed by Hamilton will have the ability to fulfill Nietzsche's goals for revaluation. Furthermore, it seems that an acknowledgement that wanting *all* of one's life again is madness should lead to the rejection of Nietzsche's notion of life affirmation as the new mode of valuation and measure of the extent to which one has overcome the life-denying values of herd morality.

Hamilton does acknowledge that an account of life affirmation is only possible if we go beyond the framework of Nietzsche's philosophy—as it requires the incorporation of the belief in the dignity and inherent value of individual human lives. This speaks more to my second complaint against the doctrine of the eternal recurrence—which will also be discussed in the next section—rather than the first.

¹¹⁵ Nehamas, 343-4.

The concern at hand is with the effect of the doctrine on the would-be life affirmer as he attempts to work himself up to willing the repetition of even his most awful experiences. In the case of destructive suffering – that which maims and undermines – willing its repetition is to will one's undoing. And such an effort seems to me to be incongruous with Nietzsche's goals for revaluation. In other words, though willing that which maims and undermines might provide some amount of control over one's life and an opportunity to demonstrate strength, in the case of the most damaging experiences, this might amount to the will to self-annihilation.

Would, after all, willing the thoroughly destructive moments in one's life make that life more bearable? Would such a revaluation improve one's psychological and emotional health? Despite May's insistence that no such justification is necessary, Nietzsche is committed to the view that we are driven to seek a meaning for our suffering.¹¹⁶ And in an effort to vanquish the ascetic ideal and the nihilism that it leaves in his wake, he seeks its opposite. He does not acknowledge the existence of destructive suffering, however, and leaves us, if we use Nietzsche's proposed mode of valuation, with the option of either affirming destructive suffering or leaving it out of the revaluation process.

¹¹⁶ See GM II:7: "What actually arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering in itself, but rather the senselessness of suffering; but neither for the Christian, who has interpreted into suffering an entire secret salvation machinery, nor for the naïve human of older times, who knew how to interpret all suffering in terms of spectators or agents of suffering, was there any such *meaningless* suffering at all."

The first option promotes the undermining of one's well-being and the second conflicts with Nietzsche's sense that for human beings suffering must have a meaning. This problem is not resolved by a closer look at Nietzsche's own work, nor by the contributions of commentators. Reginster's account turns away from the revaluation of destructive suffering. May's account holds that we affirm the whole of life rather than individual events, but this distinction, even if accurate, doesn't help, given that destructive suffering impacts the remaining whole of one's life. Hamilton's interpretation, while correctly noting that one is more likely to look kindly on one's own past *because* it is his own, only considers bitterness as the possible negative association with one's past. It is entirely possible for an individual to have been deeply harmed by her experiences without feeling bitterness, and it is not clear, on Hamilton's account, why the realization that she can do nothing about that past should lead her to affirm it.

Before moving on to how and whether one is supposed affirm the suffering of others, it is worth considering why Nietzsche might ignore the existence of destructive suffering, and why he aims at affirmation as a response to the need for a new mode of valuation. Staten provides a very compelling suggestion. In EH XIII, 4:324, Nietzsche writes, "I myself have never suffered from all this, what is *necessary* does not hurt me; *amor fati* is my inmost nature." In agreement with Hamilton, Staten suggests that even the worst of life's miseries would lose their sting if "I transformed myself from the passive one

who underwent into the active one who chose it all.”¹¹⁷ In other words, one suffers when she struggles against what is necessary, when she rebels against what happens in her life. But if, instead, she welcomes it, says yes to it, perhaps, according to Staten, this provides liberation from suffering. Illness and betrayal and solitude would still be, but their sting would be gone. And yet, something continues to bother Staten. He writes:

Nietzsche speaks as though suffering were nothing more than the coloring of an event, something dispensable, so that to will the recurrence of the event is not also to will the recurrence of the suffering. But what then is the essential nature of the event, or of the experience of the event, the essential kernel which one loves in *amor fati*? The suffering involved is precisely what is so hard to will; it seems as though it is the essential point and that Nietzsche is subtly sidestepping it, conjuring it out of existence.¹¹⁸

But this avoidance does not seem to represent what the demon had in mind when he presented the eternal recurrence in GS 341, which promised the return of “every pain.” So, Staten asks, what sort of “I willed it” might be represented by “the active one who chose it all”?

This question is answered for Staten by looking more closely at the nature of Nietzsche’s treatment of suffering. The way that Nietzsche sidesteps suffering, Staten argues, is through subterfuge. In particular it is the sort of subterfuge that Nietzsche teaches us to call *ressentiment*—the vengefulness of the impotent over those who have power over him. It is the most spiritual form of *ressentiment*, Staten argues, one born of a lack of recognition: “if you will not recognize me

¹¹⁷ Staten, 37.

¹¹⁸ Staten, 38.

and thus confer *Dasein* upon me I will make you go *fort*, I will auto-authorize myself and refuse you that same recognition which you deny me, thereby avenging myself against you.”¹¹⁹ What motivates Nietzsche’s doctrine of the eternal recurrence and the call to life affirmation, if Staten is right, is this form of “I willed it,” which he describes as, “the will that chooses the absence of the other whose presence cannot be guaranteed.” It is the will of the Dionysian yes, in which Nietzsche accepts his audience’s rejection of him, embraces that rejection, and declares that it is right. In this way, he enacts “I willed it.” In accepting his absolute solitude, Nietzsche manifests his self-sufficiency and *ataraxia*. He rejects others preemptively, putting himself beyond their reach. This proposal from Staten provides a plausible explanation for why Nietzsche pursues the doctrine of the eternal recurrence despite its high cost. It also calls attention to the fact that willing the recurrence of suffering is not merely a test of one’s ability to affirm, but also of one’s willingness to undergo self-harm.

[4] *The Suffering of Others*

As we have seen, Hamilton’s account attempts to deal with a difficulty of the doctrine of life affirmation that Nietzsche’s account largely ignores—namely, the need to address the pain of others. While Hamilton’s account fails, along with the accounts of Reginster and May, to seriously consider the pain I might experience as a *result* of the suffering of others, it does genuinely consider

¹¹⁹ Staten, 38.

Staten's objection with regards to my affirming the pain that *belongs* to others. However, as Hamilton concludes, the objection cannot be overcome from within the boundaries of Nietzsche's philosophy. Furthermore, his response to Staten's objection regarding how we might come to affirm the suffering of others is rather focused on how one might affirm the life of another when that life is marked by bad behavior or evil on the part of the individual. But what about a life swollen with misery rather than cruelty toward others?

Staten offers the example of Primo Levi, who is able, he argues, to "affirm the Nazis." He quotes Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*, in which he writes:

[T]he just among us [victims of Auschwitz], neither more nor less numerous than in any other human group, felt remorse, shame and pain for the misdeeds that others and not they had committed, and in which they felt involved, because they sensed that what had happened around them in their presence, and in them, was irrevocable. It would never again be able to be cleansed; it would prove that man, the human species—we, in short—were potentially able to construct an infinite enormity of pain; and that pain is the only force that is created from nothing, without cost and without effort.¹²⁰

Hamilton suggests that Levi was able to affirm the individuals involved in his captivity without approving of their actions because he continued to think of them as human beings whose lives have value. Perhaps this is representative of an account of a type of affirmation, but an equally pressing concern is unmentioned: how do we affirm the life of Primo Levi, who was not the cause of

¹²⁰ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989), 66.

suffering but its object? No amount of being free of hatred will suffice in such situations. And if the content of our affirmation is only the acknowledgment of our common lot and the dignity of Levi's life, 'life affirmation' has moved quite far from Nietzsche's notion of affirmation and oddly near to Schopenhauer's ethical imperative: compassion. Though Hamilton acknowledges that such an understanding of affirmation does not square with Nietzsche's ideas, it seems that Hamilton's account has gone beyond simply adding a missing element (the inherent value of individual human lives) to motivate Nietzsche's notion of affirmation and transformed into something else entirely.

Hamilton makes a distinction between *amor fati* and the eternal recurrence, arguing that the first constitutes 'I accept it as it has been' and the second constitutes 'I will that it happens again,' but it is clear that the second is intended as a test of the first and that the first requires a stance that is more engaged and intense than 'acceptance.' This is evident in GS 341 in which Nietzsche concludes with the following about the doctrine of the eternal recurrence: "Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to long for nothing more fervently* than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?" The challenge of life affirmation isn't merely that Nietzsche's philosophy rejects the notion that each life is individually valuable, but that it *depends on* not acceptance alone, but also love—not merely on that which is inward, but events and painful experiences. So, I ask again, how am I to affirm the suffering of Primo Levi? How could I *long* for it? To take such a stance is

perverse and demonstrates that life affirmation, as an ethical imperative, fails to account in any meaningful way for the familial and social aspects of our lives. Though it seems that, if he did not outright endorse such an omission, Nietzsche would certainly consider it an acceptable consequence of adopting the affirmative attitude.

Furthermore, the doctrine discourages compassion. This is not surprising, as Nietzsche's disdain for compassion is well-known. In GS 338, he asks whether it is good for us to be "above all else" compassionate persons and whether our compassion is good for those who suffer. He argues that the way one experiences his suffering is different from the way his suffering is construed by others, that "it is the essence of the feeling of compassion that it *strips* the suffering of what is truly personal about it: our 'benefactors' diminish our worth and our will more than our enemies do." This seems like a natural consequence of Nietzsche's view that suffering and misfortune are beneficial to the individual. When others want to help us in our dark times, he insists, they are taking from us what is vital to us. He takes the view that "the path to one's own heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of one's own hell."¹²¹ Therefore, Nietzsche insists, the sufferer who is also an affirmer should live in seclusion and for himself. This protects him from the compassion of others, just as he should not express compassion for them.

¹²¹ GS 338.

There are two flaws with Nietzsche's conception of compassion and they are what, in part, account for his condescension. The first is his view that the compassion of others somehow undermines the sufferer. Again, this follows from Nietzsche's view that suffering is constitutive of growth and health (via self-overcoming). While it is certainly true that the way the sufferer experiences her suffering will likely be different from how those around her experience her suffering, it is also true that real empathy, imagining what the other must feel, while not always spot on, certainly works to prevent the trivialization of the experience of the sufferer. In addition, as previously noted, Nietzsche does not account for destructive suffering. In such instances, the compassion of the other cannot have the negative impact on the sufferer that Nietzsche imagines here. His suffering is already bankrupt of its supposed value. Also, perhaps there is truth in the notion that the feeling of compassion can sometimes strip suffering of its personal quality, but it is not clear why the sufferer is harmed by this. Nietzsche assumes that compassion somehow leads to amelioration, but this brings us to the second flaw in his conception of compassion.

This second troubling aspect of his view is that he seems to conflate compassion with charity – he assumes that compassion always and automatically results in an effort to interfere on behalf of the sufferer. While concern for the well-being of others can lead to charitable deeds on their behalf, the feeling of empathy may also take the form of a simple recognition of the burdens created by suffering for the other. In the absence of such recognition, the suffering of the

individual is often increased, either by the added feeling of isolation and, perhaps, worthlessness in the eyes of others, or because preventable suffering continues unabated in the absence of some form of support from others. Sölle presents a detailed description of such a case early in her book on suffering. She writes:

A woman I know lives in a little Bavarian village with her husband and their three children. Her husband is a weak individual, small in stature and short on intellectual gifts. He has been drinking for many years, and when he comes home he kicks up a fierce storm, taking revenge on his wife for everything life withheld from him. He torments her incessantly. He accuses her of being a whore, yelling by the open window so that the neighbors hear it, waking the children. Often he beats her. She has no life of her own. She is never allowed to undertake anything independently and has no control over her time or money. He also tries to take away the support her own family gives her, maligning her before her brothers and sisters.... The woman endures this hell. She walks beside a river and wishes she were lying in it. She speaks of suicide, but there's hardly a chance she'll do it. Just thinking of the children is enough to stop her. She cannot be induced to seek a divorce. She suffers.¹²²

Sölle goes on to explain why the woman does not even consider a divorce, and the reasons are typical: her Catholicism discourages it, her financial precariousness discourages it, and her society discourages it. Despite that others are quite aware of her suffering and express rage over it, a divorce would negatively affect her reputation. In a case such as this, it is not clear why acknowledging the cruelty of the woman's situation undermines her in anyway.

¹²² Sölle, 10.

Furthermore, this strikes me as just the sort of case in which one should intercede—the one in which the sufferer’s experience is thoroughly harmful. So, despite Nietzsche’s claims, compassion can take the form of recognition without action. In addition, his sense that intervention is harmful to the sufferer only applies in cases where the suffering is somehow constitutive of at least the possibility of self-overcoming for that individual.

Nietzsche’s insistence that compassion has no place in his doctrine of life affirmation is the result of his strange conception of compassion, his failure to account for destructive suffering, and the fact that he rejects the view that human lives are inherently valuable. I have discussed the first two of these aspects of his philosophy. In regards to the third, I do not think my critique is dependent on whether or not he is right. Even if Nietzsche’s view that human lives do not have inherent value is accurate, the absence of equality and inherent value does not negate the value of compassion, which is not dependent on the value of the sufferer’s life. Rather, compassion allows for a more nuanced approach to the suffering of others than the one proposed by Nietzsche. Expressions of compassion, particularly in cases of destructive suffering, can positively impact the well-being of the sufferer—one of Nietzsche’s goals—without undermining opportunities for growth.

Furthermore, it seems to me that part of what would demonstrate the strength and good health that Nietzsche values is an aptitude for compassion toward others—especially if to feel compassion is to take on the burdens of

others—in the face of one’s own troubles and the difficulties of life. Such an experience provides the sort of challenge to strength oneself for which Nietzsche advocates. Even more important to the question of the viability of the doctrine of life affirmation is the fact that the development of a new mode of valuation that utterly denies the need for compassion and ignores the social aspect of our lives does not revalue all of our values.

Despite that Nietzsche is deeply resistant to the notion that there is something common to us all, his own *Genealogy* is a testament to the fact that all human beings do, in fact, have at least some thing in common: we suffer and we seek meaning for our suffering. Acknowledging this does not undermine Nietzsche’s goal—it does not make it impossible to leave another person in pain when that pain is “necessary” (for example, receiving a vaccine, preparing for a marathon, or mourning the loss of a beloved pet). In addition, recognition of the suffering of others makes it far more likely that we will interact with them in a kinder, more generous way, as well as leaving open the possibility of interceding on behalf of another when doing so will limit destructive suffering, which should be a goal for anyone, such as Nietzsche, who seeks to make life more bearable and increase human well-being. None of this is possible within Nietzsche’s framework for life affirmation, and that is its greatest failure. Its usefulness is limited by the fact that it is an inappropriate method of revaluing destructive suffering.

III: CONSEQUENCES FOR REVALUATION

Alternatives to Affirmation

How is a genuine revaluation possible under the circumstances, under the legacy of herd morality and the creeping threat of nihilism and pessimism? This is Nietzsche's most personal, most deeply held philosophical question. In *Nietzsche, Psychology, & First Philosophy*, Robert Pippin describes this as the "Montaigne problem," which he puts in the following way:

That is, how one might combine an uncompromising, brutal honesty about human hypocrisy and bad faith – a realization of the very 'low' origins of even the highest of aspirations – with an affirmative reconciliation of some sort with such a weak and corrupt human condition, and all this somehow below, deeper than, the level of conscious belief or attitude. That is, how was it that Montaigne successfully fulfilled the task that Nietzsche attributes to him: 'to make [himself] at home in the world' (UM, 135)?¹²³

This way of describing both Nietzsche's question and his goal is particularly appropriate, calling out the conditions in which Nietzsche is working, his goals, and illuminating the wish left unfulfilled by pessimism and nihilism: to feel at home in life. Unfortunately, as Aaron Ridley notes in *Nietzsche's Conscience*, Nietzsche is far more convinced of the gravity of the problem than he is of the efficacy of his proposed solution.¹²⁴ I conclude, as some others have concluded,¹²⁵

¹²³ Robert Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology, & First Philosophy*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 23.

¹²⁴ Aaron Ridley, *Nietzsche's Conscience*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 94.

¹²⁵ Ken Gemes, "Postmodern's Use and Abuse of Nietzsche," *International Phenomenological Society* 62, no. 2 (Mar 2001), 464: "...Nietzsche himself had an intimation that he had not fully solved the problem of how to affirm life. The

that the verdict on Nietzsche's doctrine of life affirmation is mixed. While there is value in challenging the presumption that the value of Earthly life is miniscule when judged alongside the long-held conceptions of Plato's Forms or herd morality's God, it is also the case that life affirmation as Nietzsche conceives of it does not, and cannot, fulfill his goals for revaluation.

There are a number of ways of talking about Nietzsche's ambitions for revaluation. Dries, for example, describes the process as one designed to "simply deracinate these few, strong, value-deciding categories such as *purpose*, *unity*, and *permanent being* from our system... and then we reach the state where no exclusive disjunction [life is valuable or it is not valuable] can throw any unfavorable light upon existence."¹²⁶ On this view, revaluation is a kind of protective measure—against the negative attitude toward life and against the nihilism this may ultimately produce. Its method is to exclude, thereby opening up to possibilities other than those excluded. Alternatively, Sleinis holds that the push to revaluation is a fierce determination to call every sacred cow to account,"¹²⁷ making revaluation magnificent not only for its boldness but also its scope. This way of describing revaluation emphasizes its critical goals—destroying or overhauling existing values and creating new ones—and this

problematic teachings of *amor fati*, the eternal recurrence, and the overman are all parts of Nietzsche's not totally successful attempt to carve out a clear account of how genuine life affirmation might again be possible."

¹²⁶ Dries, 34.

¹²⁷ Sleinis, 209.

second description is more in line with Nietzsche's language when he discusses revaluation.

Common to them both is a sense of urgency and worry over the continuing decline of meaning and value if revaluation does not occur. Both Dries and Sleinis understand that one of the immediate goals of revaluation is protection against nihilism: Platonic-Christian culture is plagued by both the intended and unintended effects of herd morality. This is a culture in decline and the threat of nihilism is real. The long-term goal of revaluation, then, is to counter sickness, to make life bearable once again.¹²⁸ Success or failure will largely depend on whether revaluation can give new meaning to life and to suffering—the problem for which herd morality and the ascetic ideal were a response.¹²⁹ A new mode of valuation, one equally effective, must be developed.

However, as the first part of chapter two suggested, Nietzsche's pursuit of this new valuation has multiple facets, and distinguishing revaluation in general from the method of life affirmation is helpful for developing a proposal for undertaking the work of revaluation in a way that is not entirely dependent on the affirmation of life. First, coming to see revaluation as a process with phases lends weight to the suggestion that the doctrine of life affirmation is conceived of by Nietzsche, or should have been conceived of by Nietzsche, as instrumental and not necessarily as a goal in itself. For example, the affirmative attitude may prove useful helping the individual to overcome the notion that an existence that

¹²⁸ GM III:16, 17.

¹²⁹ GM III:3.

is not in some way immortal is without value. But because the affirmative attitude is, on this view, instrumental, one will not feel obligated to apply its test to experiences for which yes-saying is an inappropriate response.

The work done here also provides grounds for interpreting the eternal recurrence and *amor fati* as both experimental in nature and a way of reassigning value. Once again, this creates the possibility of making use of these concepts without being limited by them. Finally, that revaluation clearly has a critical component gives rise to the possibility that even Nietzsche's call to yes-saying does not demand an affirmation of all things, as his comments sometimes suggest.¹³⁰ He argues that "[a]ges should be measured by their *positive forces*... we are a *weak* age."¹³¹ This can be interpreted as a need for discernment and rejection as much as it can be interpreted as a need for affirmation. Incorporating this into the work of revaluation provides an alternative to the affirmative attitude, a tool to be used alongside the doctrine of life affirmation.

The Relationship Between Revaluation and Affirmation

I might also note here that there is some disagreement over the relationship between life affirmation and revaluation. Sleinis suggest that "the values utilized in the revaluation and the values that survive it in substantial measure serve to define the conceptions of the eternal recurrence and the

¹³⁰ GS 276.

¹³¹ TI 37.

Übermensch."¹³² On this view, some of the work of revaluation is completed before the work of affirming life begins. This follows when we think, as Sleinis seems to be thinking here, of revaluation in its broadest sense, which includes Nietzsche's critique of herd morality and the ascetic ideal. Manuel Dries argues that affirmation is instead a condition of revaluation.¹³³ Finally, Reginster seems to hold the view that affirmation is the goal of revaluation, arguing that affirmation results from revaluation.

Interestingly, Nehamas and Staten question both Nietzsche's motives and methods, taking the position that Nietzsche's revaluation does not involve the sort of affirmation that he professes to seek. Staten examines Nietzsche's methods, writing:

Nietzsche must somehow extricate himself from the contagion of this decay whose other name is asceticism. Yet the drive to overcome this decay is itself an expression of decadence. It is by the drive for truth that the decadent lies of Platonism and Christianity must be overcome; but the drive for truth is the essence of the decadence of Platonism and Christianity.¹³⁴

Nehamas, taking a different approach to critiquing revaluation, argues that Nietzsche becomes a "comedian of the ideal" (GM III: 27) who does not attempt to determine in general terms the value of life: "Nietzsche's 'solution' is to

¹³² Sleinis, xx-xxi.

¹³³ Manuel Dries, "On the Logic of Values," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 39 (2010): 30-50, 35.

¹³⁴ Staten, 23.

'fashion a literary character out of himself' such that he gives "value" to his own life in terms of something like the value of the literary form.¹³⁵

My own critique is not dependent on either position, nor on whether Nehamas' contention that Nietzsche perpetuates the ascetic ideal, which I find striking, is accurate. I hold that affirmation, if it is to be salvaged, must be treated as a tool of revaluation, though there is some reason to believe that Nietzsche thought of it as the goal of revaluation. If this is true, that only reaffirms that his faith in the idea was misplaced. The doctrine of life affirmation is commonly thought to be the core of Nietzsche's project of revaluation but its shortcomings make evident that it should, along with the eternal recurrence and *amor fati*, only be understood as instrumental—of use for a wide variety of exercises in revaluation, but not a proper goal for revaluation. This becomes evident when one considers Nietzsche's most dearly held goal, the restoration of the health of human beings. Will life affirmation promote the best, healthiest life? The answer is no.

An affirmative attitude to purely destructive experiences of suffering undermines one's own health and the very possibility of compassion. It promotes social isolation,¹³⁶ which, in my view and despite Nietzsche's claims to

¹³⁵ Staten, 24, referring to Nehamas, *Literature*, 136-7.

¹³⁶ This sentiment is echoed by Staten: "Why does the demon come in to your loneliest loneliness to present the ER: "Isn't it because it is *this*, the loneliest loneliness itself into which the demon comes, and not the repetition of specific events of suffering, that is the essence of the unbearability of the eternal return, so that when Nietzsche/Zarathustra thinks of reliving his life innumerable times what he thinks of is the eternity of an absolute solitude where no human voice ever reaches?," 183.

the contrary, is not preferable. This is, in part, because good health for human beings will include the health of our social selves. I am also convinced that the strongest spirit of all will not need self-imposed isolation in order to thrive. If understood as the goal of revaluation, the doctrine of life affirmation is the ethical arm of Nietzsche's elitism and single-minded focus on power.¹³⁷ If, rather, the doctrine is intended as a tool of revaluation, it fails on the grounds that it cannot resolve the problem of suffering.

Ultimately, as José Daniel Parra nicely puts it, "Nietzsche's teaching is an enticement to self-examination, personal development, and spiritual self-overcoming. It is addressed to 'free spirits' – 'good Europeans' with the 'will to free will' to shape and cultivate themselves, to form a new nobility that leads a life of experimentation...."¹³⁸ Thus, revaluation opens the door to possible methods of pursuing good health and new meaning that go beyond *amor fati* and the eternal recurrence. The test for revaluation will be whether, through its methods self-examination and personal development, it lead to the self-overcoming that will result in better health and renewed vitality. Nietzsche declares, "My greatest experience was a recovery."¹³⁹ The question is whether his project of revaluation will produce the same results in others. Nietzsche's

¹³⁷ BGE 259: "[L]ife itself is *essentially* a process of appropriation, injuring, overpowering the alien and the weaker, oppressing, being harsh, imposing your own form, incorporating, and at least, the very least, exploiting...."

¹³⁸ José Daniel Parra, "Who Educates the Educators?" Nietzsche's Philosophical Therapy in the Age of Nihilism," in Horst Hutter and Eli Friedland eds, *Nietzsche's Therapeutic Teaching*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 35.

¹³⁹ CW Preface, 233.

philosophy provides multiple sources of protection against the threats of nihilism and pessimism and for the work of creating a new mode of valuation. However, the doctrine life affirmation can serve to improve health and vitality in only a limited capacity.

AFTERWORD

Though I have argued that Nietzsche's treatment of suffering fails in important ways, I am equally convinced that there is deep value in his rejection of Schopenhauer's call to resignation and his desire to find another way forward. When he writes that "the path to one's own heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of one's own hell"¹ I am certain that he is right: that there is a hell for and by each of us, that a heaven is also possible for and by each of us, and that there is no way to travel from one to the other except by one's own actions, commitments, and leaps of faith. But I remain skeptical of the demands and supposed value of the doctrine of life affirmation. This leads me to wonder, then, if new heavens are not going to be raised out of the work of yes-saying alone, what shape might they take?

I

It is not that Schopenhauer is wrong. We do suffer as a result of consciousness and desire, and it is difficult to argue with the claim that there is a great amount of suffering in the world—much of it needless and much of it

¹ GS 338.

unavoidable. Like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche was attuned to this. Thus, he does not attack Schopenhauer on the grounds of his claims about the potentially overwhelming presence of suffering in the world. Instead, he rejects Schopenhauer's claims regarding how we could and should respond to the painful nature of our lives. While I do not necessarily find resignation to be a "wrong" response to the inescapability of suffering, I am drawn to the alternative Nietzsche provides, as well as to the fact that he seeks an alternative at all.

That is to say, I appreciate that Nietzsche's response to his own experiences and his observation the world is to seek beauty, to choose love, to think and act creatively. This is no small victory for someone so attuned to suffering. And while I am resistant to the notion that one could approach any and every experience this way, there are a great many experiences that would be improved by a commitment to treating one's life as a creation, to an attitude that places an at least equal value on the beauty and love that one is able to foster and find as she places on the pain that limits and diminishes her.

I am also convinced that there is immense value in aspects of the individualism that Nietzsche proposes. While distancing oneself from others is sometimes a terrible idea, and I take complete self-isolation to be more an act of weakness than strength, it is also true that distance can create the possibility of outgrowing the limitations placed on the individual by and through her relationships with others. In other words, while attempting to always remain at a distance from others is unrealistic and unhealthy and potentially cruel, a certain

amount of distance from certain people can be immensely effective in giving the individual space to grow. For example, Nietzsche's insistence that the demands of meekness, forgiveness, and charity are expressions of a deeply unhealthy morality and worthy of rejection will be incredibly liberating for those who find themselves otherwise acquiescing to people who bring them harm, whether through aggression, the encouragement of guilt, or some other means. Nietzsche's emphasis on self-realization is, in this context among others, of great value.

I acknowledge this, happily, and believe that this example of liberation in the form of throwing off the harmful limitations imposed through culture as well as personal relationships draws attention to an important theme in Nietzsche's work: overcoming and self-overcoming. The move toward self-overcoming, like the doctrine of life affirmation, is intended to increase health and vitality. However, it is not dependent on yes-saying and therefore, if one concedes the existence of destructive suffering and the value (however limited) of compassion, not subject to the shortcomings that limit the usefulness of the doctrine of life affirmation.

II

One of the questions I find myself asking is whether readers of Nietzsche have made too much of the place of the eternal recurrence in the project of reevaluation and the viability of the doctrine of life affirmation. Nietzsche writes

in GS 110 that the strength of knowledge “lies not in its degree of truth, but in its age, its embeddedness, its character as a condition of life.” This suggests that the sort of knowledge needed for reevaluation does not arise from undergoing the most demanding test or adopting ideas or methods designed to measure and build strength, but that it will develop out of the incorporation of new ways of thinking, so much so that they become “instinctive.” In my view, considering Nietzsche’s contributions to the question of the meaning and value of human life in terms of the fragments of knowledge that he uncovers and develops—rather than on how a doctrine of life affirmation will look—shines the most appealing light on his positive project.

A core component of what he uncovers and develops is found in those reflections on creativity, beauty, and joy—and their relationship with each other. It is impossible to determine whether Nietzsche’s intended books on reevaluation would have reinforced the sense his published works create that the eternal recurrence is central to what he has in mind for reevaluation. It is impossible to know whether he might have shifted his attention from the sort of value-creation that comes from yes-saying to different expressions of creativity (perhaps those made possible by an emphasis on beauty and joy rather than on affirming) and how they might aid in the development of a new mode of valuation, a different way of life. Whatever might have been the case, the seeds for an other way of thinking about reevaluation are present even in his published works.

Nietzsche suggests that the creature in humans is what suffers and the creator in us is what invents, perseveres and endures.² One might say that the eternal recurrence is in many ways a response to the first observation. Though that doctrine certainly requires invention and perseverance, its purpose is rooted in shoring up that which is weak in us. It intends to make strong through testing oneself against the most uncomfortable challenges. It is often in Nietzsche's remarks regarding that other aspect of human life—the creative aspect—that his joy and hopefulness about the future is most evident. His claims regarding the possibilities associated with self-overcoming are invaluable and empowering. Thus, while his critical work will increase self-understanding, it also creates a pathway to the possibility of greater liberation than a mere rejection of the dogma of herd morality will do. That is to say, while the doctrine of life affirmation has limited value, this is not cause for giving up on the project of reevaluation, of the eradication of destructive guilt and shame, of the increase of self-confidence and healthiness of the spirit.

² GS 58, BGE 225.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acampora, Christa Davis. "Naturalism and Nietzsche's Moral Psychology," in Ansell Pearson, ed., *A Companion to Nietzsche*. Hoboken, Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- Anderson, R. Lanier. "Nietzsche on Redemption and Transfiguration," in Landy and Saler eds., *The Re-Enchantment of the World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- Frederick Appel, *Nietzsche Contra Democracy*, Ithaca: Cornell University, 1999.
- Brobjer, Thomas A. *Nietzsche's Ethics of Character*, Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1995.
- Brobjer, Thomas A. "The Origin and Early Context of the Revaluation Theme in Nietzsche's Thinking," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 39, (2010), 12-29.
- Bull, Malcolm. *Anti-Nietzsche*, London: Verso, 2011.
- Clark, Maudemarie. *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Dries, Manuel. "On the Logic of Values," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 39 (2010): 30-50.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche & Philosophy*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Foot, Philippa. "Nietzsche: the Revaluation of Values," in Solomon, ed., *Nietzsche: a Collection of Critical Essays*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961.
- Gemes, Ken. "Postmodern's Use and Abuse of Nietzsche," *International Phenomenological Society* 62, no. 2 (Mar 2001).
- Hales, Steven D. "Recent Work on Nietzsche," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 12 (2000): 313-333.

- Halpern, Cynthia. *Suffering, Politics, and Power: A Genealogy in Modern Political Theory*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2002.
- Hamilton, Christopher. "Nietzsche on Nobility and the Affirmation of Life," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 3 (2000): 169-193.
- Hillesum, Etty. *The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum: 1941-1943*. Edited by Klaus A. D. Smelik and translated by Arnold J. Pomerans. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002.
- Hollingdale, R.J. *Nietzsche: The Man and His Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Janaway, Christopher. *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's 'Genealogy.'* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Kaufmann, Walter. *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.
- Large, Duncan. "A Note on the Term 'Umwerthung,'" *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 39 (2010): 5-11.
- Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. London: Abacus, 1989.
- Löwith, Karl. "Nietzsche's Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6 (1945): 273-284.
- Lowith, Karl. *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*. Translated by J. Harvey Lomax. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Magnus, Bernd, et al. *Nietzsche's Case: Philosophy As/And Literature*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Magnus, Bernd. *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- May, Simon. "Why Nietzsche is still in the morality game," in May ed., *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- de Montaigne, Michel. *The Complete Essays*. Translated by M.A. Screech. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics: 1993.

- Nehamas, Alexander. *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Anti-Christ*. Edited by Aaron Ridley and translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Edited by Aaron Ridley and translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann Judith Norman and trans. Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Case of Wagner*. Edited by Aaron Ridley and translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Daybreak*. Edited by Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter and translated by Hollingdale, R.J. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ecce Homo*. Edited by Aaron Ridley and translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. Edited by Bernard Williams and translated by Josefine Nauckhoff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Human, All Too Human*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated by Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols*. Edited by Aaron Ridley and translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Unfashionable Observations*. Translated by Richard T. Gray. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Edited and translated by Adrian Del Caro. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1967.

- Reginster, Bernard. *The Affirmation of Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Parra, José Daniel. "Who Educates the Educators? Nietzsche's Philosophical Therapy in the Age of Nihilism," in Horst Hutter and Eli Friedland eds. *Nietzsche's Therapeutic Teaching*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Pippin, Robert. *Nietzsche, Psychology, & First Philosophy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Reginster, Bernard. *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Ridley, Aaron. "Nietzsche and the re-evaluation of values," *Proceedings from the Aristotelian Society* 105 (2005): 155-175.
- Ridley, Aaron, *Nietzsche's Conscience: Six Character Studies from the Genealogy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.
- Richardson, Jon. "Nietzsche's Value Monism: Saying Yes to Everything." Friedrich Nietzsche Society Conference, 2009.
- Robertson, Simon. "Nietzsche's Ethical Revaluation," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 37 (2009): 66-90.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Schacht, Richard. *Nietzsche*. London: Routledge, 1983.
- Schacht, Richard. *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Essays and Aphorisms*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin Classics, 1970.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation, Volume 1*. Translated by E.F.J. Payne. Mineola: Dover Publications, 1966.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation, Volume 2*. Translated by E.F.J. Payne. Mineola: Dover Publications, 1966.

- Sleinis, E.E. *Nietzsche's Revaluation of Values: A Study in Strategies*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994.
- Sölle, Dorothee. *Suffering*. Translated by Everett Kalin. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975.
- Soll, Ivan. "Nietzsche on Cruelty, Asceticism, and the Failure of Hedonism." in Schacht ed., *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Staten, Henry. *Nietzsche's Voice*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.