

Physiologies of eros: a response to Fiona Ellis

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Abstract: In her article, ‘Two erotic ideals’, Fiona Ellis offers a sustained critique of my interpretation of Nietzschean eroticism. In the following piece, I respond to her criticism by proposing a shift in emphasis away from ‘erotic ideals’ and towards a greater attentiveness to the physiological states that condition our desire. I argue that such a move allows us to see how questions about eroticism and questions about nihilism are in fact integrally connected.

Among the many provocative questions raised by Fiona Ellis, in her recent *Religious Studies* article, two in particular stand out.¹ Does Nietzsche’s glorification of an infinitized, unfulfillable desire force us into an inevitable choice between hell and some ‘terminological variant upon theism’? And does Nietzsche’s rehabilitation of erotic distance comprise a meaningful response to the problem of nihilism? Ellis answers yes to the first question and no to the second. In the following, I would like to show why I believe she is wrong on both counts.

Before presenting my reasons for opposing her claims, let me offer a brief synopsis of Ellis’s argument, as it relates to the questions at hand. Central to Ellis’s argument is a critique of what she perceives to be a false dilemma established by me in recent Nietzsche scholarship between two erotic ideals – a ‘courtly’ ideal that affirms distance and the prolongation of erotic deferral, and a ‘teleological’ ideal that emphasizes consummatory fulfilment.² With considerable insight, Ellis shows how blurry the line between these ideals can become when love’s impossibility, for instance, paves the way to some higher form of fulfilment – as in the case of Simone Weil. Here, neither one nor the other of the two ideals assumes priority. Why, after all, should we be forced to choose between absolute distance or the pursuit of total fulfilment? Weil’s approach, according to Ellis, preserves both ideals, granting us fulfilment through grace, while emphasizing the providential design inherent within earthly love’s failings. Is this not preferable to any conception of love, or desire, that consigns us to interminable striving without hope of

reward? Ellis further wonders how a regimen of uncompromising forbearance, such as the one implied within Nietzsche's *Fernsten-Liebe*, can possibly be understood to offer a 'solution' to the problem of nihilism. Is such a solution not as poorly defined as the problem it attempts to solve?

On each of these points, Ellis presents a persuasive case. Indeed, it is easy to see Nietzschean eroticism, in light of Ellis's article, as a strictly narcissistic endeavour – a proposition as unappealing as it is untenable. Such a view, however, involves a gross misreading of Nietzsche's text. Chief among my objectives, here, is a clarification of Nietzsche's motivation for lauding a form of eroticism that might be characterized as radically non-teleological. I want to suggest that the notion of an infinitized desire is not proposed by Nietzsche in a prescriptive, but rather, in a *diagnostic* sense. He is not suggesting that we should all choose to love without fulfilment; rather, he is asking what sort of disposition towards life would be needed in order for an individual to say yes to an eternity of unfulfilled longing. Ultimately, for Nietzsche, this becomes a question of physiology. What kind of health would an individual need to cultivate in order to affirm an eroticism perpetually bereft of satisfaction – and not use this lack of satisfaction as a reproach against life? The more general question is: What does the nature of our desire tell us about our underlying health? What sort of health, for instance, would compel an individual to desire release, repose, escape, or even nothingness? And what sort of physiological comportment would enable an individual, by contrast, to desire nothing more fervently than an endless perpetuation of desire itself?

Hell or theism?

The first of two major points developed by Ellis in her article can be summarized in the following terms: By endeavouring to rehabilitate the notion of erotic distance and prioritizing an eroticism bereft of fulfilment, Nietzsche is consigning us to an unhappy choice between hell on earth or some form of crypto-theism. Certainly, it is true that Nietzsche is interested in the 'courtly' notion of desiring the endless perpetuation of desire. It is also true that, at least for most of us, this courtly affirmation would amount to a rather burdensome proposition. The notion of an endlessly amplified, unfulfilled longing would be considered a cruel punishment – not unlike the punishment accorded to Tantalus. Case in point, here, is Wagner's *Tristan*, whose world-weariness in the face of perpetually unfulfilled desire leads him to seek even death rather than accept the indefinite prolongation of erotic deferral. The desire for the tantalizing 'object' is transformed, by Act III, into a desire for total release – a release from desire itself.

For Ellis, *Tristan's* reluctance to accept a yearning-without-end is hardly surprising. As she asserts within her article, 'even the most Godless anti-metaphysician' demands ultimate fulfilment in some sense of the term.³ Could any of us really consent to the prospect of desiring endlessly without any hope of receiving some payoff? To do so, she insists, would be to experience something akin to

hell on earth. According to Ellis, this hell of perpetual unfulfilment is indeed one of two possible outcomes towards which an infinitized desire must inevitably lead. The other outcome, she claims, is theism.

It is one of Simone Weil's great insights, Ellis suggests, to have recognized that perpetual unfulfilment, though crushing, need not consign us to the hell of Tantalus – as long as we are willing to change our conception of what it means to desire, and what it means to love. 'Love tends to go ever further and further,' Weil writes, 'but there is a limit. When the limit is passed love turns to hate. To avoid this change love has to become different.'⁴ Weil recognizes that love, like desire, can withstand futility only for so long before the lack of fulfilment adversely alters one's disposition towards life. What is needed, according to Weil, is a rethinking of the role of distance. It must no longer be understood as a merely contingent feature of amorous relationality, but rather as its essential component. 'To love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love',⁵ even to the point of making the distance more important than the object itself. 'We have to go down to the root of our desires to tear the energy from its object',⁶ Weil writes. 'To detach our desire from all good things and to wait. Experience proves that this waiting is satisfied. It is then that we touch the absolute good.'⁷

In these passages, Weil seems to gesture us towards a conception of amorous life in which transitivity has been all but eroded. We might take for granted, perhaps incorrectly, that love, like desire, is necessarily transitive: it requires an object. But here, Weil is telling us something very different, namely, that the purest love concerns itself with distance only – just as the purest desire is the one detached from all objects. We are reminded here of Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Recall the scene in which Malte, having just encountered Abelone in the stillness of the harbour, begins to read aloud from a book of letters – Bettina's correspondence with Goethe. At first, Abelone listens respectfully, and despite Malte's general clumsiness, is indeed moved by the manner in which he gives voice to the young lady's words of avid longing. But then, just as he is about to begin reading one of Goethe's responses, Abelone suddenly interrupts Malte, demanding of him that he not continue.

Why has she done this? Why has she silenced him? When Malte asks her, she offers no response, except to make it known that only Bettina's letters (and not Goethe's replies) are to be read. The meaning of this injunction remains for a long time unclear to him. But little by little, as Malte gradually comes to an understanding of it, his love for Abelone cannot help but be profoundly transformed. For what he ultimately discovers in Bettina's letters is a form of love that so far exceeds – in its audacity and its breadth – the ardour summoned by her correspondent, that Goethe's every attempt at reciprocating it amounts to little more than a profanation. Indeed, as Malte tells us, 'such love as hers needs no response.'⁸ For unlike Goethe's passion, which remained at the level of transitivity, Bettina's love 'belonged to the elements'⁹ – which is a way of saying that it

belonged to nothing and originated from no one. It was a love passing into pure openness.

This is a radical idea. It suggests an infinitization of love in the sense that Bettina's love overflows, by virtue of its superabundance, every person, every object, that could possibly receive it. It is unfettered by transitivity because what is affirmed through this love is nothing short of the cosmos in its holistic unity. No single object can be loved, here, because no object can be conceived in isolation from the whole. The deepest love, the most superabundant love, does not stop with the object, but overflows, in an infinitized manner, unto the whole of creation. Is this what Weil, by encouraging us to tear our love away from the desirable object, is similarly suggesting to us?

Upon closer examination, it is a very different emphasis that emerges within Weil's account. If transitivity is eroded, and love is infinitized, it is not on account of an overflowing superabundance of love – but, rather, for an entirely different reason. 'Nothing which exists is absolutely worthy of love', writes Weil. 'We must therefore love that which does not exist.'¹⁰ Love cannot be directed towards any object, because no object is worthy of it. The more we read Weil's text, the more we come to see that the absence of the object is simply her privileged way of talking about God. 'God can only be present in creation', she claims, 'under the form of absence.'¹¹ Her negative theology here is nicely glossed by Maurice Blanchot, in *The Infinite Conversation*. As Blanchot tells us, the creation of the world implies for Weil not a manifestation of God's infinite power or love; rather, it must be understood as an act of self-limitation. God, as Infinite Being, was necessarily everything. 'In order that there be a world, he would have to cease being the whole and make a place for it through a movement of withdrawal.'¹² Thus creation is literally God's self-renunciation made manifest.

The upshot of all this is that self-renunciation now becomes a supremely divine act. 'In a sense God renounces being everything. We should renounce being something. That is our only good.'¹³ It is through self-renunciation that God created the world, and it is through self-renunciation that Weil believes we can de-create the world, thus reconciling ourselves to the divine. In renouncing our own being, we are simply emulating God. If creation, according to Weil, seems a fundamentally inexplicable act, its sole justification may be that 'it leaves us the possibility of destroying it by renouncing it.'¹⁴ This is why, in the lines quoted above, we are told to tear our love away from objects and love only that which does not exist. Only that which is absent, infinitely distant, is worthy of our love. It is in this manner that we arrive at the infinitization of desire in Weil's account.

Much of the brilliance of Ellis's article resides in her ability to show how Nietzsche's distance-love appears, at times, somewhat congruent with the theism of Simone Weil – for whom the love of distance plays such an important role. Could it be, she asks, that behind Nietzsche's notorious critique of religious belief we might discover a glorification of infinite, unfulfillable love that resembles, in all but name, some kind of apophatic theism?

The suggestion is certainly provocative. But is it correct? There is at least one point on which Weil and Nietzsche agree: 'When the limit is passed love turns to hate. To avoid this change love has to become different.'¹⁵ For Weil, as we have just shown, this 'different love' involves an infinitized love directed towards an absent God. This is the sort of theism that Ellis thinks she discerns in Nietzsche as well. For Nietzsche, however, the notion of infinitized love is far from commensurable with any conception of a 'beyond', just as it remains irreducible to any experience of hellish condemnation. Contrary to what Ellis suggests, these are not in fact the only two options available to Nietzsche. In formulating her disjunction - hell or theism - Ellis neglects to consider the crucial role that health plays in conditioning and sustaining our desire. By turning to a consideration of physiology, and its connection to eroticism, we will see how the infinitization of desire need not culminate in either of the two outcomes on which she insists.

Why physiology matters

Much has been written about the notion of health in Nietzsche's philosophy, and it would lead us beyond the limited scope of this article were we to recapitulate the entirety of his views on the subject.¹⁶ Let us limit ourselves to the following remarks. First and foremost, Nietzsche does not see health in general as something like a stable state that can be decisively achieved and held; health is not a definitive vanquishing of sickness. Rather, health is latent; it becomes manifest 'only in sickness and the surmounting of sickness'.¹⁷ Moving away from any kind of 'essentialist' account of health, Nietzsche suggests that health must be understood in relation to a specific individual's ability to cope with life's myriad predicaments. Whether an individual is capable of gaining health, or whether she sinks deeper and deeper into sickness, will depend on a variety of factors, including 'individual constitution and disposition; individual immune status, and the pathogenic force of viruses, bacteria, fungi, toxins, and mechanical traumas . . . [as well as] an individual's moods, feelings, affects, and life-guiding convictions'.¹⁸ Nietzschean health is a matter of 'plasticity'. It pertains to the individual's ability to adapt herself successfully to both external and internal stimuli, and thus to maintain a level of relative equilibrium, in the face of all threats.

But what does any of this have to do with eroticism? Here we come to our central point. The 'two erotic ideals' that Ellis criticizes as being both too vague and too mutually exclusive will indeed appear arbitrary unless they are traced back to the underlying physiological states that condition them. Nietzsche's wager, throughout the 1880s, is that the physiology that underlies a desire for fulfilment, consummation, or repose differs qualitatively from the physiology that underlies a desire for the sheer amplification of desire. It was, after all, the weariness of enervated peoples that led to the fabrication of 'worlds beyond'.¹⁹ Their desire for a place of eternal repose was unmistakably related to their own state of diminished

health and their need for release from physiological affliction. In everyday situations, the erotic feelings we direct towards individuals or objects are likewise conditioned as much by the way our bodies feel as they are by the way we feel about our bodies. One must cross a certain threshold of physiological wellness before the desire for sexual activity asserts itself. One must cross a further physiological threshold before sexual desire can be liberated from the restricted economy of an exclusively coital orientation. One must be healthy enough, in other words, for a practice like Tantra – and Tantra, as practitioners know, will then further invigorate the practitioner, making a perpetuation of the practice possible.²⁰

Tantra, to pursue the example, would clearly be an undesirable, if not impossible, practice for a terminally ill person. Why is this? Because the nature of our desire is so closely linked to our physiological comportment. As our health undergoes changes, so do our desires. The case of Tristan is an excellent example. We see his erotic longing for Isolde ultimately transformed, by the opera's concluding stages, into a desire for the total release from desire. The reason for this is clear. By Act III of Wagner's opera, Tristan lacks sufficient health to cope with the indefinite perpetuation of erotic deferral. He is physiologically incapable of prolonging the courtship, despite his valiant efforts up to that point. Release from the shackles of spatio-temporal existence now becomes his desired end. So, in a sense, Ellis is correct: for Tristan, at least, the prospect of an infinitized desire would indeed be tantamount to hell.

But there is big difference between hell in the absolute sense and what amounts to hell for a *specific individual* in the context of their present health. Here, Ellis is guilty of a crucial oversight. She fails to recognize that what is hellish and what is not depends entirely upon the physiology of the specific person in question. The fact that most of us would view the prospect of an endless courtship without fulfilment and without release as somewhat of a curse rather than a blessing only highlights our physiological limits. Yet, there is absolutely nothing intrinsically hellish about *coitus reservatus* or the experience of infinitized desire. It is only a hellish idea for those who are lacking the requisite health, which is to say, those lacking a sufficient level of physiological adaptability. What is needed in order to go beyond Ellis's hell/theism dichotomy, therefore, is the cultivation of a more resilient, more adaptive, physiology: a comportment that would dispose an individual to assent cheerfully to the prospect of desiring infinitely and without fulfilment.

Individuals capable of this, according to Nietzsche, would require 'a different kind of spirit from that likely to appear in this present age . . . [they] would require even a kind of sublime wickedness, an ultimate, supremely self-confident mischievousness in knowledge that goes with great health; [they] would require, in brief and alas, precisely this great health!'²¹

'Great health' – to use Nietzsche's phrase – would be 'a new health that is stronger, craftier, tougher, bolder, and more cheerful than any previous health.'²² In practical terms, it would involve a level of unparalleled adaptability that would allow an individual to confront the most terrifying diagnosis and to bear it

lightly, joyfully, without rejecting earthly existence on its account. Just as the body's strongest immunity can only be forged in response to the most dangerous pathogen, so does Nietzschean 'great health' emerge only in response to the greatest sickness. The most resilient physiology, for Nietzsche, can only arise from a direct confrontation with that which poses the most serious threat to us. It is in this context that the connection between health, eroticism, and the crisis of nihilism becomes unmistakable.

Health, eros, and nihilism: what's the connection?

Ellis correctly insists upon the great difficulty surrounding the task of defining the problem of nihilism. In Nietzsche's later writings, he famously links nihilism to the devaluation of all values, but this oft-quoted formulation can mistakenly give the impression that nihilism is a strictly 'negative' phenomenon. In actuality, nihilism is so difficult both to define and ultimately to combat because our very efforts to define and combat it are often themselves nihilistic. The thought of life's meaninglessness, for instance, is obviously nihilistic, but so too is the seeking of compensatory recourse in religious belief. Nihilism may assume, in physiological terms, the appearance of either a poison or a cure – and the cure, in time, may itself become a poison.

This aporia appears insoluble until we discover that there is indeed a common thread linking each of the various manifestations of nihilism. In the recent words of Malcolm Bull, 'The history of nihilism is . . . the history of extremity.'²³ It is extremity that characterizes nihilism in each of its various forms. On the basis of this insight, it becomes somewhat easier to see how the transition from a world-view predicated upon the extreme elevation and earthly inaccessibility of Truth to one based upon the extreme poverty of all values is clearly nihilistic in both its phases. Extremity begets extremity. The challenge that confronts anyone seeking to respond to the crisis of nihilism is to develop a practical response to extremism that is not itself extremist. Responding to nihilism, in other words, requires subtlety and moderation. As Bull writes, 'Faced with meaninglessness eternally, the strongest are those who can accept it without any correspondingly extreme reaction.'²⁴ The challenge is to confront nihilism in its most extreme form without desiring to summon forth an equally nihilistic response.

But what specifically are we talking about when we talk about 'extreme forms' and 'moderate responses'? For Nietzsche, although nihilism may take on many forms, it leads invariably towards a single, most extreme manifestation. We are not talking, here, simply about the possibility of earthly existence bereft of meaning, but rather, that of earthly existence bereft of both meaning and end. As Nietzsche tells us in a notebook from June 1887, the most extreme form of nihilism is in fact concentrated in the thought of eternal recurrence.²⁵ This thought implies, among other things, that the individual can no longer be rescued from meaninglessness, sorrow, and dissatisfaction by death. There is no Tristanian

'highest bliss' to be gained at the end of one's journey, only the endless reliving of one's earthly existence. Faced with this possibility, the question is what sort of person would remain capable of loving life and even thriving under such conditions? What kind of person, in other words, might be capable of facing the thought of eternal recurrence without viewing it as a form of hell on earth, or rejecting it in favour of some theistic soteriology?

Only the most moderate, adaptable, individual would be capable of this. 'Those who can face eternal recurrence without either the . . . longing for annihilation on the one hand, or the active nihilist's destructive self-destruction on the other, will have finally left nihilism behind.'²⁶ The only type of person who would be capable of this, moreover, would be the individual for whom the practices of love and desire had been exonerated from any teleological constraint. Why is this? Because so long as we conceive of love and desire as necessarily directed towards some state of ultimate fulfilment, completion, or consummation – either in this life, or the next – we will be incapable of seeing the prospect of eternal recurrence as anything but hellish, since the eternal return denies us the very possibility of our desire ever coming to rest. To affirm the possibility of desiring for all eternity, without release or final fulfilment, would require that the individual in question rehabilitate the notion of erotic distance. As I have argued elsewhere, this involves coming to interpret erotic distance in a somewhat unprecedented manner as both invigorating and worthy of valorization, rather than as something to be gradually suppressed or even eliminated.²⁷ The only sort of person who would be capable of saying yes to the infinitization of desire, in other words, would be the individual capable of interpreting erotic distance in a positive light – as a stimulant to life.

And this is why health is so important. Because it is our level of physiological adaptability that makes this rehabilitation of erotic distance possible, and in turn makes us able to accept the most extreme hypothesis (eternal recurrence) without resorting to some equally nihilistic, extreme response. Everything begins, in other words, with health and physiological well-being. If we are healthy, or adaptable enough, we can come to see erotic distance and unfulfillable desire as infinitely stimulating, allowing us to sustain and affirm our passion, even in the absence of any final satisfaction.

But is all of this not all simply an exercise in narcissistic self-indulgence, Ellis asks. Is this not merely an excuse to withdraw from 'real' love relations and needlessly eschew possibilities for genuine satisfaction? Nietzsche anticipates such objections when he writes of an individual yet to come, undoubtedly of 'great health', whose love for distance will be 'misunderstood by the people as if it were a flight from reality – while it is only his absorption, immersion, penetration into reality, so that, when he one day emerges again into the light, he may bring home the redemption of this reality'.²⁸ The point here is clear. In no sense does the infinitization of desire imply a disengagement from amorous investiture, or a withdrawal into narcissistic self-absorption. Quite to the contrary, it remains inextricably linked to a re-valorization of everything that is sensuous, tangible, and

invigorating. In short, everything that will allow us, over time, to become capable of emulating Bettina's ever-prodigious love – that boundless, superabundant love that flows infinitely in excess of all desirable 'objects' unto the whole of the cosmos. This would be a love enveloping the sum-total of causal connections required to bring about the eternal recurrence of this very moment. Nietzsche's name for this love is well-known: *Amor Fati*.²⁹

In conclusion, let us return to a claim made near the beginning of this article. It is not Nietzsche's intent, I suggested, to force us into a hell of unending erotic forbearance against our will, any more than it is his intent to relegate us to narcissistic self-enclosure. Nietzsche is not a sadist. Indeed, it is precisely by viewing the rehabilitation of erotic distance as some kind of metaphysical shock-treatment designed to 'solve the problem' of nihilism that Ellis makes her biggest mistake. 'Another ideal runs ahead of us, a strange, tempting, dangerous ideal to which we should not wish to persuade anybody',³⁰ writes Nietzsche. The intent, here, is rather to *diagnose* by means of these various 'erotic ideals' how well-disposed towards life we are, and how capable we are of responding to the most extreme form of nihilism without resorting to extremism ourselves. Nietzsche's question is simply this: could we, with our current state of health, with our current disposition towards life, accept an eternally extenuated courtship – a courtship without any hope of ultimate consummation? In answering this question truthfully, in the negative, we admit that such a prospect would indeed resemble hell for us. The challenge, then, becomes to lay the necessary conditions for a different answer to become possible in the future. This task, as I have argued, must begin with a renewed attentiveness to the physiologies of eros.

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Notes

1. Ellis (2015).
2. Kuzma (2013), 69–88.
3. Ellis (2015), 10.
4. Weil (1987), 56.
5. *Ibid.*, 58.
6. *Ibid.*, 20.
7. *Ibid.*, 13.
8. Rilke (2008), 151.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Weil (1987), 99.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Blanchot (1993), 116.
13. Weil (1987), 29.
14. Blanchot (1993), 118.
15. Weil (1987), 56.
16. For a general overview of Nietzsche's views on health and sickness, see Glenn (2001).
17. Danzer (2002), 18.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Nietzsche (1978), 31.
20. In *Libidinal Economy*, Lyotard makes an analogous point about 'Confucian eroticism.' We are told that: 'if the man practices the sexual act without ejaculating, his vital essence will be strengthened, his body will be wholly at ease, his hearing will be refined, and his eyes perceptive . . . his love for the woman will be increased.' See Lyotard (1993), 204–205.
21. Nietzsche (1989), 96.
22. Nietzsche (2001), 246.
23. Bull (2011), 63.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Nietzsche (2006), 385–390.
26. Bull (2011), 65.
27. See Kuzma (2013).
28. Nietzsche (1989), 96.
29. For a 'non-erotic' reading of *Amor Fati*, see Han-Pile (2013), 217–234.
30. Nietzsche (2001), 247.