Is Nietzsche a Life-Affirmer?

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Abstract
The question of how to affirm one's life in view of suffering and loss is central to Nietzsche's philosophy. He shows, I claim, that one can affirm – take joy or find beauty in – one's life *as a whole*, conceived as necessary in all its elements, while also despising parts of it. Yet he mostly pictures such life-affirmation as achievable only via an atheistic theodicy that relies on a key ambition of the very system of morality that he famously attacks: namely to explain or justify suffering in terms of a higher end to which it is essential. I argue that affirmation of one's life is more powerful without the crutch of any theodicy, and point to Job as a paragon of one who can affirm his life without seeking an answer to the question of the meaning or value of suffering – indeed who can dispense altogether with that question.

I'd like to start with a variant of an ancient question: how can evil, and all the suffering to which it gives rise, be explained, or even justified, so that, far from causing us to turn against our life, we are able to celebrate it?[1] In other words: what stance must we take towards so-called natural evil – illness, earthquakes, tsunamis – and moral evil – sadism, murder, concentration camps – such that we can affirm a life into which we are cast through no choice of our own? And indeed fill it with genuinely demanding ends and virtues to which we are strongly committed?

This sort of question has been asked with particular insistence (though by no means exclusively) by Christianity, beginning not so much with the Gospels as with the Church Fathers, and in particular with Augustine. One way of posing the question in Christian terms – the question that since Leibniz has been called the 'question of theodicy' – is this: why would an all-good and all-powerful God – the God whose very nature, John the Evangelist tells us, is love – place us in a world filled with so much evil and suffering? How do we

[1] This article is a reworking of, and contains extracts from, Simon May, 'Why Nietzsche is still in the morality game', in S. May (ed.), *Nietzsche's* On the Genealogy of Morality*: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 78–100, © Cambridge University Press 2011, reproduced with permission. I am grateful to Bernard Reginster and to Ken Gemes for their penetrating comments on an earlier draft.

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affirm the life and the world that this God has given us? Whether or not we hold that God created the possibility of evil. For even if you're a Manichean who believes that evil is an autonomous force, the handiwork of a rival deity, the fact is that our Creator decided to place us in a world where the possibility of evil exists.

What is at stake here is nothing less than men's and women's capacity to be reconciled to, indeed to affirm, their own lives and the world in which they are set, if only as something to be overcome. Moreover, the principal, but by no means the only, answer of mainstream Christianity to the question of theodicy is well known, and it is roughly this: 'free will is the cause of our doing evil', as Augustine puts it in the *Confessions*,[2] and free will gives us moral responsibility, which is integral to the full human dignity that God intends for us. The possibility of moral evil is therefore both explained and justified as flowing from the capacity for free will, a capacity that gives weight and substance to human dignity.

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Now what interests me about this question of theodicy is not, for the moment, any particular answers that are given to it, or the theological terms in which it is posed – in other words how to justify the ways of a putatively all-good and omniscient God. Rather, I am interested in what the *question itself* presupposes. And I think that if we look at this question we will see that it presupposes at least two things. The first is that the existence of natural or moral evil, and the suffering that flows from it, can profoundly alienate us from the world of which it is an inextricable part, as a result of which we are in danger of fatally resenting our life, or indeed life as such. At the limit this assumption is sufficient to motivate Camus's famous claim in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the only serious philosophical question – and decision – in life is whether to commit suicide.[3]

And a second assumption underlying the question of theodicy is that any answer must take the form of an explanation, or even a justification, of the possibility of evil in terms of a great good that could not have been achieved without it – a good of which the possibility of evil is constitutive or a precondition. In other words, an answer cannot just show that sometimes bad things result in good things – that some pain happens to lead to gain: for example, starting

[2] Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), 107.

[3] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin, 1975), 11.

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a charity in the name of a dead loved one, writing a novel as catharsis for hardship, creating a successful company out of the experience of a failed one, and so on. The impulse behind theodicy is more ambitious than this: the possibility of evil, it demands, must be shown to be not just contingently a cause of good, but to be a precondition of good.

Theodicy, in other words, seeks to posit a supreme principle of good that cannot be attained without the possibility of the relevant evil; an ultimate standard of value that vindicates and *gives meaning* to the possibility of evil, and all the suffering with which it is associated, so that the world or a life of which it is a part can be affirmed and welcomed.

Now let me turn to Nietzsche, whose entire philosophy, it seems to me, is suffused by precisely these two presuppositions of the question of theodicy: that natural and moral evil can profoundly alienate us from our life and the world; and that evil and suffering can be tolerated, even welcomed, only by finding a meaning for them in terms of a supreme and demanding principle of good that *could not* be achieved without their possibility.

As he puts it in his conclusion to *On the Genealogy of Morality*: 'Man […] does *not* deny suffering as such: he *wills* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it, a *purpose* of suffering.' (GM, III, 28).[4] How then, Nietzsche repeatedly asks, can we find a meaning for suffering that will enable us to affirm life wholeheartedly and unreservedly? How, through discovering such a meaning, can we maintain that fundamental trust in life without which we cannot flourish? (By 'life' he refers, I think, to our own life in particular and to life viewed as a whole – from our individual perspective and

[4] Following standard convention, I refer to the English translations of Nietzsche's works using the following abbreviations (references are to section numbers): *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE), trans. W. Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage, 1966 [1886]); *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT), trans. W. Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage, 1966 [1872]); *Ecce Homo* (EH), trans. W. Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage, 1967 [1888]); *On the Genealogy of Morality* (GM), trans. C. Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 [1887]); *The Gay Science* (GS), trans. W. Kaufmann (New York, NY: Vintage, 1974 [1882; Part 5: 1887]); *Twilight of the Idols* (TI) (1889), trans. W. Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York, NY: Viking, 1954); *The Will to Power* (WP), trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, NY: Vintage, 1968); *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Z) (1883–1885), trans. W. Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York, NY: Viking, 1954).

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out of our individual experience, of course, rather than from nowhere or everywhere.)

These questions matter desperately to Nietzsche – they underlie his whole philosophy – because of his overwhelming conviction that suffering came in Western cultures to be regarded as so unacceptable that men and women turned against and denied life;[5] at the limit turning against everything about the world that causes suffering, such as time and transience and loss – which, for Nietzsche, means that they turned against the only world that exists. When this happened, suffering – experienced and, in various ways, detested by all human beings in all cultures – became 'the problem of suffering'[6] – experienced by human beings in very particular cultures, notably, he says, those permeated by Platonic/Hellenized Jewish/Christian thought and morality and, since the 18th century, by their secular successors.

Nietzsche's concern is therefore that in the modern age despair created by this intense awareness of the so-called problem of suffering has ended up either in a nihilism of ethical passivity, indifference and confusion, where none of our highest values hitherto seems achievable or remains authoritative for us; or in a still more radical nihilism in which no demanding higher values at all, and perhaps no possible groundings for such values, are ultimately authoritative.

The nihilism that really worries Nietzsche isn't, therefore, just one characterized by losing faith in God, or in one particular set of reigning values – a nihilism marked, affectively, by despair or confusion resulting from this loss and from uncertainty about what faith and what values are to replace it. The nihilism that disturbs Nietzsche most is much more thoroughgoing: it is a loss of trust in, a repudiation of, ultimately an indifference towards, *any* demanding values or ends along with a rejection of *any* feature of existence that is seen as entailing suffering. This is the nihilism that ends up in a vacuous 'religion of comfortableness' (GS, 338) in which suffering itself is regarded as so unacceptable that our supreme concern is only to keep going without pain and without hardship, and in which, for all our outward ambition and boldness and will to power, we have in fact detached ourselves from any ends, any project, any experience, any virtues, any philosophy, indeed any religion, that, because they are difficult and require uncompromising commitment, might risk suffering and so threaten our comfort.

[5] GM, Preface, 5; GM, III, 11.
[6] Just as evil became 'the problem of evil'.

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The kind of person who pursues this nihilism of comfort – whose overriding aim is avoiding suffering – Nietzsche's Zarathustra calls the 'small man' (Z, II, 4) or the 'last man' (Z, 'Zarathustra's Prologue', 5). And though this last man, who no longer believes in God or in a transcendent domain, seems as far away as it is possible to be from a supreme metaphysician like Augustine, whose ethic is certainly structured by demanding higher values, he is in effect, for Nietzsche, an insipid version of the metaphysician. For both of them are slaves of what Nietzsche calls a 'will to nothingness'.

In other words, both are governed by a will characterized by 'an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental prerequisites of life' (GM, III, 28): a life-denying will that makes life's highest end the elimination or justification of suffering – for the sake of some state of affairs that is purified of it. For the last man this highest end is the 'happiness' of a life dedicated to career, health, comfort and the avoidance of risk and hardship. For Augustine it is a life beyond this world: a life of *quies*, or eternal and perfect rest, which he sees both as the nature of God and as the highest good for which, in his ethics, life can strive. This end, this striving, is well expressed in Augustine's famous call to God right at the beginning of the *Confessions*: 'thou hast made us for thyself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee'.[7]

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When Nietzsche addresses himself to the question 'How can we affirm our own life wholeheartedly and so avoid falling into nihilism of either or both of these kinds?' his most consistent answer turns on this idea: that to affirm our life is to experience it as beautiful. Or at least to experience as beautiful certain presuppositions of (one's) life, such as its necessity.

In his early work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he famously proclaims that 'it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*' (BT, 5). In *The Gay Science*, a later work, we read that *amor fati* or being a Yes-sayer (*Ja-sagender sein*) – Nietzsche uses both these terms here – is 'to see as beautiful what is necessary in things' (GS, 276). Also in a middle period passage from *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche posits art as the 'counterforce' against the 'nausea and suicide' that honest looking at the nature of things would, he says, induce (GS, 107). *Twilight of the Idols*, a late work, posits 'art [as] the great stimulus to life' (TI, IX, 24), and this

[7] Op. cit. 1.

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thought is echoed in unpublished notes where Nietzsche speaks of art as 'the great seduction to life [and] the great stimulant of life […] the redemption of the sufferer' (WP, 853 – II). Only in his last published work, *Ecce Homo*, does affirmation get defined in terms that don't make explicit reference to beauty or art, or indeed to any sort of explanation or justification of suffering: *amor fati* is now expressed as 'wanting nothing to be different, not forward, not backwards, not in all eternity'. The goal here is not merely to bear what is necessary, still less to conceal it … but rather to *love* it (EH, II, 10).

Such thoughts raise two initial questions about Nietzschean affirmation of life. Firstly, what exactly is the object of affirmation? And secondly, is this affirmation consistent with also hating, negating, rejecting, aspects of one's life and of the world?

On the first question – what exactly is getting affirmed here? – if we read these passages carefully we see that in almost all of them the direct object of affirmation isn't in fact every single thing and event, but is rather a whole or a principle of some sort. This is variously posited by Nietzsche as existence, or fate, or necessity, or world, or life in general, or one's own life in particular, or the narrative or poem or aesthetic unity that we make of our lives. In *The Birth of Tragedy* it is existence and the world that are the objects of eternal justification. In the passage from *Twilight of the Idols* that I just cited it is life. In both statements on *amor fati*, the one in *The Gay Science* and the other in *Ecce Homo*, the proximate object of love is again necessity. Nietzsche could have talked instead of love of all things, but he chooses, in the main, to speak of love of fate or necessity. And constitutive of loving fate or necessity is that I do not expect individual events and things to be other than they are, even if I negate or despise them.

But – turning now to my second question – is life-affirmation really consistent with negating or despising aspects of one's life and the world? The child who gets accidentally run over. The brick that drops on the passer-by and kills her. Auschwitz. The answer, it seems to me, is clearly Yes: life-affirmation is consistent with negating or despising aspects of one's life and the world. To love a whole does not entail that I separately love each and every one of its parts. I can love my child but not love or find beautiful everything that he does, from taking drugs to becoming a violent criminal. I can love life without loving the death camp. I can love a work of art, or life experienced as a work of art, and find beauty in the whole, without needing to do so in every one of its individual parts taken alone. Indeed not only is affirmation or love consistent with such negative attitudes; these negative attitudes arguably test love's resilience and genuineness. What I am suggesting, in other words, is that

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affirmation of life can only be an attitude towards life, or my life, considered as a whole – or towards some condition of the possibility of life as a whole – however we conceive that whole.

This is, I think, especially true of an aesthetic affirmation, such as Nietzsche avows again and again. Nor is he the first in the history of philosophy to offer an aesthetic affirmation of existence that sees beauty in the whole, and so can affirm the whole despite the undeniable horror of many of its parts. Again, no less a figure – and no less a seeming opponent of Nietzsche – than Augustine does just this. Nietzsche, whose thinking is saturated by Lutheran Protestantism, which is in turn heavily indebted to Augustinian thought, sounds remarkably like Augustine praising the beauty of Creation as a whole, which he regards as an ordered work of art of which even Hell and the eternal damnation of sinners is an indispensable part. 'That which we abhor in any given part [of the universe]', says Augustine, 'gives us the greatest pleasure when we consider the universe as a whole'.[8]

As it turns out, most of Nietzsche's thinking on the affirmation of life does go together (and is entirely consistent) with despising or saying No to particular events in life. Indeed, he himself obviously detests and says No to much about the world as he finds it – the motivations and functions of 'slave morality', the so-called 'last man', the 'religion of comfortableness' and a great deal besides – without, he claims (at least *qua* life-affirmer rather than *qua* revaluer of all values) wishing to have lived another life free of those realities. 'We immoralists', he says, though we make it 'a point of honour to be affirmers', do also negate, albeit 'not easily' (TI, IV, 6).

Nietzsche's wish to be an affirmer evidently doesn't commit him to saying that there is only one sort of value – namely, good – and that everything is good in one way or another. Not only does he disvalue a great many things; but, more fundamentally, his very project to revalue all values presupposes just such a No-saying – an ethical No-saying and an aesthetic No-saying – to much of the world in which he finds himself. Indeed he explicitly recognizes this, speaking of the task he set himself in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> After the Yes-saying part of my task had been solved, the turn had come for the No-saying, No-doing part: the revaluation of our values so far [...] (EH, III, 'Beyond Good and Evil', 1)

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[8] Augustine, *Of True Religion* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1959).

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In short: there is clearly room within a Nietzschean ethic of affirmation for saying No to particular events and experiences. With a crucial proviso: that such No-saying does not go together with resentfully expecting those events and experiences to be, or to have been, otherwise, positing imaginary worlds in which they are indeed otherwise, inventing faculties or categories or realms like metaphysically free will or noumenal freedom that supposedly enable them to be otherwise, and ascribing moral guilt to agents for their failure to act upon such putative freedom to *do* otherwise. The morality that Nietzsche takes aim at is not defined by saying No to things about the world; it is defined by a will to nothingness that resentfully expects things to be other than they are, a will that at the limit demands a world purified of those fundamental preconditions of life, such as loss and transience, that give rise to suffering and hardship and boredom and whatever else we say No to; a will for which the horrors of life become an objection to life's own preconditions.

Now admittedly, in Nietzsche's characterization of the affirmer of 'eternal recurrence' – that is, of the idea that our lives and everything will be repeated identically to all eternity – it does seem that each individual event is indeed a direct object of affirmation. As Nietzsche puts it, 'The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight.' But as so often with Nietzsche things aren't as clear as any single sentence might suggest. The very next sentence seems to claim that what is affirmed is my own self and life as a whole: 'Or how well disposed would you have to become to *yourself* and *to life* to crave nothing more fervently [...]?' (GS, 341, my italics).

Whatever affirmation of eternal recurrence really involves – and I am not much clearer on this than I was when I first read Nietzsche, though I am sympathetic to Heidegger's claim that it reflects a metaphysical manner of thinking – when we come to his formulations of *amor fati* we get the sense that what I affirm is, as I suggested, the *necessity* driving and structuring my life as a whole, and indeed all life – and that in affirming this necessity I *ipso facto* affirm particular events, even those I despise or say No to, insofar as they are inextricable parts of the whole.

This idea, that in affirming the whole – my life and its necessity; or my life as a unity, aesthetically or otherwise experienced – we can in a sense affirm even those particular events that we despise, seems to be explicitly articulated by Nietzsche in a passage from *Twilight of the Idols*. In discussing one of his highest types, Goethe, and what he

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calls 'the highest of all possible faiths', that of Dionysus, he identifies the core stance of this 'faith' as follows:

> only the particular is loathsome […] all is […] redeemed and affirmed in the whole. (TI, IX, 49)

So we seem to have it from Nietzsche in black and white: we can affirm our life – indeed affirm it in the 'highest possible' way – while hating particular events and experiences within it.

In other words, we take joy in the whole on account of its beauty as a whole or on account of seeing beauty in the necessity that has given rise to it. And, when viewed in the light of this beauty, whatever we loathe is redeemed in virtue of its belonging to the whole. Those particular events and experiences that we despise when we look at them individually can be affirmed, and to that extent redeemed, when – and only when – we become able to view them in the light of this beauty that we see in the whole or in the necessity governing the whole.

To be clear: what we despise is affirmed not because in the light of the whole we cease despising it in its particularity and instead come to see it as beautiful, but only because we now see its necessity to the whole. Ultimately we see that to will the whole is, *ipso facto*, also to will the individual events that make it up, though this doesn't mean that we would or could ever value or will them as individual events in their own right.

It is worth noting that, on this picture, determinism, in the full sense in which Nietzsche thinks of it, becomes a redemptive concept – just as in the old order 'free will' was such a concept. Whereas back then the capacity freely to choose a life dedicated to God over a life dedicated to profane goods, to pursue virtue over vice or *caritas* over *cupiditas*, to atone for one's sins, and the like, were all part of the conceptual apparatus of redemption, now the deepest possible acceptance of the determined necessity of life is what redeems the past, including all its losses and sufferings.

'Acceptance', we must emphasize too, is not the same as resignation, any more than affirmation is synonymous with valuation. It is experienced as the power to square up to reality, to look it in the face, to confront it – including its horror. When the music of a composer like Franz Schubert confronts the fact of death it does not speak of resignation in the face of death, and nor, evidently, does it seem to value death as a good thing that is preferable to the absence of death. Rather, acceptance of death's determined necessity as part of the order of life becomes a moving statement of vitality on the part of

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life, which understands that in valuing life as a whole it affirms the death that is inseparable from it.

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To sum up where we have got so far: I believe that, at least in his middle and later work, from *The Gay Science* to *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche offers us elements of a powerful conception of life-affirmation, though, as I will explain in a moment, not one that goes far enough, including by his own lights. Here is what he is telling us:

(1) To affirm life is to love, or see beauty in, or take joy in, one's life as a whole, experienced as necessary (or fated) in all its elements.
(2) The direct object of affirmation is the *necessity* of the individual's life. The life-affirmer experiences this necessity – this majesty of fate, as it were – as beautiful.
(3) To affirm my life is consistent with loathing, or 'saying No' to, particular experiences or events within it.
(4) Those experiences or events can nonetheless be affirmed *qua* inextricable parts of the whole.
(5) Despite saying No to particular events or experiences the life-affirmer has no will to consider alternatives to the actual life he or she lives. This is crucial: insofar as we affirm necessity we cannot have expectations of living a life other than the one we live, and in that sense it is possible that life-affirmation and Nietzsche's project to revalue all values do come apart. To expect to be elsewhere, and especially in a radical elsewhere, where the preconditions that structure this life no longer obtain, is a paradigmatic symptom of the will to nothingness. Indeed, the type who exemplifies that will is the 'ascetic priest' – who, Nietzsche tells us, is precisely 'the incarnate wish for being otherwise, being elsewhere, indeed, he is the highest pitch of this wish, its essential ardour and passion' (GM, III, 13).

These five features of the affirmative stance are genuinely non-moral, in Nietzsche's own terms. But there are other aspects to his thinking on life-affirmation that remain tethered to precisely the moral world that he wishes to revalue – and to that extent are not themselves life-affirming.

Firstly, as we have seen, there is his repeated talk of needing to be seduced or stimulated to life – not, of course, through seeing life as a bridge to another world but rather through art or beauty (e.g. WP,

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853 – II) – where art or beauty are used either to conceal reality, as in *The Birth of Tragedy*, or as a counterforce to the 'nausea and suicide' that honest looking at reality would induce, as in *The Gay Science* (GS, 107). Indeed, for Nietzsche, art plays a role in seducing us to this world and its trials that is closely analogous to the role that, according to him, God and his earthly agent, the priest, play in the Christian moral order.

Secondly, Nietzsche is, through much of his writing, determined to give suffering a meaning, to vindicate it, in terms of a higher good of which it is constitutive, or a precondition. In other words, he is determined to offer an atheistic theodicy, albeit one that explains or justifies suffering in terms of a good that he considers not to be motivated by the will to nothingness. Such a good is, paradigmatically, creativity in art and values, the achievement of personhood, and, in general, any 'enhancement' of humanity (BGE, 225).

As I mentioned at the outset, both of these closely related ways of thinking – the expectation that we need to be seduced to life and the employment of a theodicy-like explanation or justification of suffering for this purpose – are, in their conceptual form, right out of the playbook of traditional morality and especially Christian morality. Thus when Nietzsche says of 'great suffering' that 'only *this* discipline has created all enhancements of man so far' (*Ibid*.) he closely follows the traditional Christian argument, articulated by, for example, the Greek-speaking Church Father, St Irenaeus (c. 130–202 CE), that hardship and pain are needed for soul-making, for the self-creation of the individual, so that he or she may attain more perfect states of being.[9] Or when St Paul says 'we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope' (Romans 5:3–4),[10] his thinking bears more than a passing resemblance to Nietzsche's.

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By contrast, I claim that a stance towards life that genuinely affirms it would not be so powerfully colonized by the desire to explain or justify suffering. Let me give three reasons why I take this to be so.

Firstly: if affirmation is to be conceived as a form of love, as it clearly is in Nietzsche's conception of *amor fati*, then we would not

[9] John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 211–215, 253–255.

[10] Cf. II Corinthians 12:7–10. Cited in Hick, op. cit., 357.

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expect it to depend critically on explaining or justifying whatever is being affirmed – my life, my vocation, my suffering – for example through a calculus of welfare that issues in an all-things-considered attitude to it. On the contrary we would expect the affirmative stance to evince *no* urge to engage in such assurances. Instead, it would take joy in the existence and reality, in the quiddity as it were, of its object – joy that is not underpinned by calculations of the ulterior value to us, or to it, of the object's failings, however painful or unsightly or regretful we find them. One motive, after all, for seeking to justify something is that we are unsure of our commitment to it, or we fear that there is something wrong with our commitment to it. The will to justify involves, experientially, detachment from, perhaps even mistrust of, its object (essential of course though that detachment is when we are reflecting on the worth of our goods and practices, on how to live our life best and so on). It is the position of the observer who stands back and reaches judgements. Crucially, it presupposes that justification *can* fail – and so that there is the alternative of saying No – in other words of negating.

The second problem with the urge to justify suffering is that it is, or can be, in effect yet another way of trying to do away with it – which is the very urge that Nietzsche rightly deems 'absurd' (BGE, 225). For suffering most fundamentally *isn't* about obstacles or pain *per se*. It is about desperate helplessness, vulnerability, uncertainty – in ourselves or witnessed in others. Why did it strike? Why me? How bad will it get? What consequences will it have? Will it ever end? To interpret suffering as Nietzsche comfortingly does – as constitutive, say, of creative activity, so that to will the latter is to will suffering – is still to be in the business of abolishing precisely the impotence, the interpretative vacuum, that gives suffering its bite, by telling ourselves that we have in fact willed it, that its consequences are desirable, and indeed that they are not merely desirable but perhaps belong to the greatest goods of which we can conceive. And to that extent it is, as I said, still to be in the business of abolishing suffering itself. For suffering interpreted as valuable and willed is no longer suffering.

Thirdly: it is in any case a fact that the suffering that poses the greatest challenge to affirming one's life is precisely that which cannot credibly be justified – and which goes on stubbornly resisting all attempts to discover its value or beauty. We can't deny that such suffering exists, whether of natural or man-made origin, such as disasters of a sufficient order to destroy all conditions for flourishing – an event, for example, that destroys an artist's entire ability to create; a mental illness that forces the writer to put down her pen forever; an accident in which all your children die. Not to mention

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such realities as Auschwitz or Pol Pot. The challenge of affirmation ultimately exists, and has always existed, because of, and in relation to, the existence of such horrors, and not those that can be shown to foster creativity and heroism and soul-making.

To see how to rise to *this* challenge of suffering that eludes all justification we should look not to Nietzsche but to Job. Job explicitly refuses the appeals of his wife and friends to justify or even explain the horrors that God has inflicted on him – for example to interpret these horrors as punishment for transgression against God, or as gaining Job in the end more than he lost. He also refuses to seek a distraction from – or, as Nietzsche would put it, a 'counterforce' to – the nausea he feels towards these undeserved horrors of life.

The point about Job's suffering is that it does not lead to any discernible higher or net good. He has lost all ten of his children, and though at the end of the story God finally gives Job peace and progeny in abundance – 'twice as much as he had before' (Job 42:10), we are told – these gifts cannot vindicate Job's losses; and, significantly, neither Job, nor God when he comes to speak, claims that they do vindicate them. And yet his immediate reaction is one of ebullient acceptance: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (Job 1:21).

Job's friends find this affirmation completely absurd. His suffering, they explain to him, must have a meaning. As one of them, Eliphaz, asks: 'Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?' (Job 4:7). Meanwhile, his wife urges him to give up the struggle to live such a nightmarish life in such a nightmarish world, curse God and die, thus answering Camus's question about suicide in the affirmative. Indeed, she presents suicide as a matter of 'integrity' under the circumstances.[11] But he answers her with another statement of remarkable affirmation, saying simply: 'Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' (Job 2:10). For those who live after the death of God, read 'fate' or 'necessity' instead of 'God'.

In other words, rather than searching for suffering's meaning or value, Job points to an ideal of how to be given the existence of suffering. This is the ideal of doing without answers to the questions, 'How can I find value in my suffering?' or 'What is the meaning of my suffering?', questions that Nietzsche insists *must* be answered. Indeed it is the even harder ideal, or better still disposition, of not

[11] Job 2:9, where Job's wife asks: 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.'

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asking the question in the first place – of being strong enough to live without clinging even to the unanswered question – and instead accepting that the dreaded event has become another manifestation of the necessity that governs your life, a necessity that you celebrate.

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There are, I think, few better examples of how Nietzsche struggles to overcome morality, with its guiding will to nothingness, than his philosophy of affirmation. As we have seen, he cannot go all the way in abandoning the conceptual forms of traditional Christian ways of affirming one's life or the world in spite of its horrors. In particular, he steadfastly insists on ascribing suffering a meaning and purpose (GM, III, 28). Only towards the end of his creative life does he seem to acknowledge, albeit not explicitly, that the challenge of affirmation is how to say Yes to the world without that Yes being secured either by veiling the world's horrors, or by finding a counterforce to them, or else by turning them via an atheistic theodicy from a negative into a positive. He achieves this fuller affirmation, in particular, in his formulations of *amor fati* and in what are almost his last published words, where he praises the capacity to look at unvarnished reality without seeking the protection of illusions: 'How much truth does a spirit *endure*, how much truth does it *dare*?' he asks. 'More and more that became for me the real measure of value [...] error is *cowardice*' (EH, Preface, 3).

No mention here of power, or will to power, as the ultimate standard of value, let alone of the value of falsehood and deception. The key is truth: without looking at things as they are – without being free of the urges to conceal, or beautify, or justify the horrors of the world, urges that he had previously celebrated – there is no genuine affirmation. Perhaps this is what Nietzsche is getting at in his Delphic remark a little later in this last work, in which affirmation seems to take a remarkably cognitive turn. The 'ultimate, most joyous [...] Yes to life', he says there, 'represents not only the highest insight but also the deepest, that which is most strictly confirmed and borne out by *truth and science*.' (EH, III, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 2, my italics).

This Yes to life, he tells us, is a 'Yes-saying without reservation', 'even to guilt, even to everything that is questionable' (EH, III, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 2) – including, one can only assume, even to everything that is questionable for Nietzsche, such as slave morality. Such unreserved Yes-saying must be in insoluble tension with the rebellious, critical drives – for example those that impel Nietzsche's

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hatred of morality and mediocrity, and his will to beautify the ugly and to revalue all values. We should resist the urge to reconcile his final ideal of affirmation, *amor fati*, with his rejection of morality in the name of life-enhancement – and, relatedly, the urge to attribute to him a neat ideal of a unitary self consistently governed by a stable master drive or disposition. Life-affirmation and life-enhancement are not necessarily reconcilable. For the disposition to say Yes to life entails, as Nietzsche himself recognizes, 'rejoicing [...] even in the very sacrifice of its highest types' (EH, III, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 3): those capable of maximizing life-enhancement. In other words, the life-affirmer will be prepared, at the limit, to rejoice in the destruction and sacrifice of everything she values most highly if, as Nietzsche puts it, she is to achieve this 'most wantonly extravagant yes to life' (EH, III, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 2).

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In conclusion, I suggest that to affirm one's life is to take joy or pleasure, or to see beauty, in one's life as a whole conceived as necessary in all its elements. To affirm life in general is similarly to endorse life conceived as necessary in all its elements.

And the principal disposition of the life-affirmer is to be able to love his life without this love depending on successful explanation or justification of his sufferings – for example, as constitutive, or as a precondition, of his supreme good.

The stance of the life-affirmer can be further characterized as follows:

- The primary object of affirmation is the individual's whole life hitherto, or life viewed as a whole from the perspective of that individual.
- To affirm my life, or life in general, is consistent with loathing, or 'saying No' to, particular experiences or events within it.
- Those experiences or events can nonetheless be affirmed *qua* inextricable, or 'necessary', parts of the whole.
- Despite saying No to particular events or experiences the life-affirmer has no will to consider alternatives to the actual life he has.

The real challenge, it seems to me, is not to find yet another answer to the question of the meaning or purpose of suffering – an answer that, as Nietzsche repeatedly suggests, might be couched in terms of enhancing one's creativity, achieving selfhood, or other goods that are no longer structured by metaphysical dualism, in hoc to the

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ascetic ideal, or motivated by *ressentiment*. The real challenge is to stop being obsessed with the question itself. The very preoccupation with that question remains a symptom of life-denial – even if it results in a revaluation of suffering that now hails as good what was previously condemned as bad, or deems beautiful what was once denigrated as ugly. In many ways Nietzsche regards that preoccupation as part and parcel of the will to nothingness that has driven European morality and sensibility since Plato. And yet so much of his thinking remains enslaved to that very question. One wonders, therefore, what our ethics and sensibility would look like if the question were to be demoted – or even experimentally struck off the agenda altogether.

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