HEALTH AND GREAT HEALTH: NIETZSCHE ON OVERCOMING SICKNESS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation was motivated by a desire to not only gain clarity in Nietzsche’s manifold use of the notion of sickness, but also to better understand the ideal of health that runs through his writings. Given this goal, I begin by identifying the primary kinds of sickness that animate Nietzsche’s critical project. Having identified three types of sickness in his writings, I then turn to offering an account of how Nietzsche attempts to address these forms of sickness. Finally, having completed the task of understanding health—which forms the three central chapters of the dissertation—I conclude by moving to what Nietzsche calls “the great health,” which can be understood as moving beyond mere health.

In chapter one I identify three kinds of sickness—the sickness of bad conscience, the sickness of life negation, and the sickness of enervation—which I argue are the central to understanding Nietzsche’s critique of morality. According to this diagnosis, people suffer from several problems, including pervasive feelings of guilt and self-hatred, a tendency to devalue the world and life, and a false sense of human good that results in enervation. Nietzsche’s work can be read as an attempt to diagnose, understand, and address these problems.

Chapter two begins my analysis of how Nietzsche works to treat the three forms of sickness identified in chapter one. I proceed by reconstructing an account of how to treat the first form of sickness, that of bad conscience, as well as the pervasive feelings of guilt and self-punishment that follow. Surveying several tentative ideas Nietzsche offers on how this problem might be addressed, I conclude by arguing that the path to a “good conscience” is paved via a kind of philosophical therapy, which aims to reorient how we look at guilt and failure, thereby initiating a psychic transformation.
Chapter three turns to an examination of how to address the problem of suffering and meaninglessness, offering an account of how a person might learn to love life, despite what is strange, questionable, and terrible. I argue that with §334 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche offers a model of how a person might learn to love life. First, a person must work to understand life; then, through good will, patience, and openness to life, she becomes used to it; and finally, enchanted by life, she comes to love life for what it is.

Chapter four turns to Nietzsche’s attempt to address the problem of enervation. The problem lies with a weakened will, which is attributed to the goal of eliminating suffering, as well as other values Nietzsche associates with modernity. The solution Nietzsche offers can be understood as an attempt to strengthen the will. Through his discussion of the will to power, which, following Reginster, can be understood as a will to overcome resistances, Nietzsche can be understood as advocating the need for appropriate forms of resistance and challenge in a person’s life.

I conclude by examining what Nietzsche calls “the great health”, which he describes as “the ideal of a human, superhuman well-being” (GS 382). Health can be understood as the process whereby a person continuously works to eliminate the negative factors that undermine health. Nietzsche also recognizes a further process beyond mere health, which he calls “the great health.” This great health can be understood as the ongoing development of the positive elements of health. Among the notions that Nietzsche intimates are part of great health, I focus on four such elements: overflowing abundance, cheerfulness and laughter, living experimentally, and forgetting.
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CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM OF SICKNESS

1.1 Introduction

"What is it that I in particular find utterly unbearable?" Nietzsche asks. "That something deformed comes near me; that I should have to smell the entrails of a deformed soul!" (GM I.12). Nietzsche’s rhetoric may surprise us here. But as he continues, he expresses his basic worry: "the reduction and equalization of the European human conceals our greatest danger" (ibid).

Nietzsche makes it clear that there is something deeply troubling about both modern humanity as it is presently constituted, and the direction in which he sees it headed. Human beings are beset by several serious problems, including pervasive feelings of guilt and self-hatred, a tendency to devalue the world and life, and a false sense of human good that results in enervation. Nietzsche’s work can be read as an attempt to uncover, understand, and remedy the situation.

Even a cursory reading of Nietzsche’s writings reveals great concern and alarm about humanity’s health. He alternately describes human beings as unhealthy, sick, degenerate, declining, deformed, decadent, out of sorts, and failed. Nietzsche reiterated the point that the majority of human beings are sick time and time again. Sickness, Nietzsche claims, has become part of humanity’s nature, leading him to proclaim that “man is the sick animal” (GM III.13). This will undoubtedly surprise us, as Nietzsche surely intends. Nietzsche expresses genuine

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1 Nietzsche recognized all too clearly the problem of sickness. In fact, as he frequently alerts us, he himself had been sick. The nature of Nietzsche’s sicknesses is a subject unto itself. His many physical ailments are well-documented, as are the various spiritual sicknesses he suffered, e.g., the dominating influence of Schopenhauer, Wagner, and pessimism. Each of these sicknesses was, as Nietzsche recognized, to his benefit, for having overcome his sicknesses, he is able to offer an account of sickness as one who has experienced it, fought the deepest despair, and prevailed. Accordingly, in possession of the perspectives of both the sick and the healthy, Nietzsche claims to be in a unique position to diagnose this problem (EH I.1). However, one might challenge Nietzsche’s supposedly privileged position on understanding sickness, as his experiences, e.g., the spiritual sickness of being dominated by Schopenhauer and Wagner, were not the same kinds of sickness that the majority of people have experienced.

2 See GM III.1. Nietzsche notes that “[t]he European distinguishes himself with morality because he has become a sick, sickly, maimed animal” (GS 352). Similarly, Nietzsche speaks of “the entire herd of the deformed, out of sorts, short-changed, failed, those of every kind who suffer from themselves” (GM III.13). Or, as Nietzsche says elsewhere: “comparatively speaking, humans are the biggest failures, the sickliest animals who have strayed the most dangerously far from their instincts” (A 14).
alarm, and through his writings wishes to emotionally affect and alarm us, and therein to get us
to genuinely reflect on our condition.

The preface to the *Genealogy* articulates the basic nature of Nietzsche’s project, as well
as the primary concern underlying his investigations. This project necessitates the investigation
of the multifarious conditions in which what we might call Platonic-Christian morality has
developed. ³ Nietzsche claims that this is knowledge we have hitherto lacked, because the origin
and value of our values has never been questioned. Nietzsche considers imperative the need to
question both morality and our values. ⁴

Nietzsche then expresses a worry that the values we have traditionally held to be good
might be “a danger, a temptation, a poison, a narcotic through which perhaps the present were
living *at the expense of the future*” (GM P.6). Nietzsche expresses the concern that Platonic-
Christian morality—taken as unquestionably good—might be hindering us, if not positively
harming us. ⁵ Nietzsche’s expectation is that a proper understanding of Platonic-Christian
morality—including its aims, its methods, and its effects—is necessary to overcome the sickness
that it represents. Prior to any effective treatment, we must understand the nature of the sickness.
Nietzsche investigates in what ways human beings are sick, the extent of the sickness, and what
is causing the sickness. Only once these questions have been answered—thereby providing a

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³ Nietzsche recognizes that there have been many moralities, but his target is clearly directed at what we
might call Platonic-Christian morality, a notion that will become clearer over the course of this chapter. A
contrasting delineation of the scope of Nietzsche’s critique can be found in Leiter, who holds that
Nietzsche’s target is “morality in the pejorative sense”, which encompasses a broader scope than
Christian, Kantian, or utilitarian morality. See Leiter, 2002, chapter 3. Leiter admits that Nietzsche most
frequently attacks these targets, but that there are particular descriptive and normative components that
Nietzsche directs his critique against. Leiter argues that Nietzsche’s critique is primarily directed against
any morality that holds individuals have free will, that the self is transparent, and individuals are all
sufficiently similar to warrant one moral code. Each of these theses can be ultimately attributed to the
Platonic-Christian conception of human beings. Accordingly, when I speak of morality I will have in mind
Platonic-Christian morality, which includes the values of modernity.

⁴ See GS 345, where Nietzsche notes that “no one until now has examined the *value* of that most famous
of all medicines called morality; and for that, one must begin by *questioning* it for once.”

⁵ Nietzsche asks whether “morality would be to blame if a *highest power and splendor* of the human type
… were never attained?” (GM P.6).
better understanding sickness—can the other part of the project begin: working to treat and overcome sickness.

Nietzsche’s investigations uncover not just one type of sickness, but rather three different types of sickness that have affected humanity. Specifically, I argue that Nietzsche diagnoses the following types of sickness: (1) the sickness of bad conscience, which leads to the devaluation of the human, pervasive feelings of guilt, and the need for and legitimization of self-punishment; (2) the sickness of life-negation, which is precipitated by the problem of suffering, and leads to the devaluation of life and the world in favor of a world beyond; and finally, (3) the sickness of enervation, which is characterized by a weakened will, leaving a person who aims at small, easily attainable goals like pleasure, ease, and comfort, and not willing to become something greater.

With the question of sickness before us, I proceed in this chapter as follows: I begin with some preliminary remarks surveying some of the ways Nietzsche talks about sickness more generally. In section 1.3 I turn to the first of the three main forms of sickness Nietzsche diagnoses, the sickness of bad conscience, where I offer an account of the nature of this form of sickness. Section 1.4 continues in the same vein, offering an account of the sickness of life-negation. The final form of sickness, the sickness of enervation, is the subject of section 1.5. I conclude by offering some summary remarks on the development of the three main types of sickness, address the positive aspect of sickness, and then briefly give an overview of the topics I will examine in chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5.
1.2 Preliminaries

Nietzsche, undoubtedly aiming to get our attention, refers to “the majority of mortals” as “the physiologically failed and out of sorts” (GM III.1). This is a provocative charge, one which will be met with incredulity. Elsewhere Nietzsche notes not just the ubiquity of sickness, but its normality (GM III.14). Given these claims, there are many questions that need to be answered about the how to understand the various forms of sickness, how they might related, and what causes them. With respect to the three forms of sickness I have identified in Nietzsche’s works, those questions will be answered below in sections 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5. At the same time, there are some more general themes and issues that warrant a brief survey, helping to situate some of Nietzsche’s concerns with respect to sickness.

First and foremost, understanding sickness in Nietzsche’s writings is invariably complicated by the fact that Nietzsche uses the term “sickness” to refer to many different kinds of sickness. As I will argue, there are three primary forms of sickness about which he is particularly concerned: the sickness of bad conscience, the sickness of life-negation, and the sickness of enervation. However, Nietzsche often uses the term “sickness” metaphorically too; and sometimes he uses “sickness” to refer to physiological sickness.

Physiological sickness is not Nietzsche’s primary concern, though given his experience with various forms of illness—from debilitating migraines to intense stomach problems—his life is an interesting example. There is no doubt that Nietzsche knew physiological sickness all too well. When he talks about the illnesses he experienced, as he does at length in the 1886 prefaces to *Human All Too Human* and *The Gay Science*, he rarely addresses his ailments with any detail.⁶

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⁶ That is reserved for his letters, as the index of *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche* shows. To take one evocative example from a September 1881 letter to Overbeck, Nietzsche writes, “I am desperate. Pain is vanquishing my life and my will. What months, what a summer I have had! My physical agonies were as many and various as the changes I have seen in the sky. In every cloud there is some form of electric charge which grips me suddenly and
Rather, he talks about his subsequent periods of recovery, his gratefulness for recovery, how sickness acted as a stimulus, and the bright future that he saw ahead. Nietzsche seems to have seen a connection between his physical ailments and his intellectual or spiritual ailments. I believe it is no coincidence that during the time of some of his more severe physical ailments that he began to turn away from the dominating influence of Schopenhauer and Wagner, both of whom constituted for Nietzsche a kind of spiritual sickness.\(^7\)

While providing a useful example in various ways, Nietzsche’s experiences of his physical and psychological illnesses are not representative of all people. Nonetheless, his meditations in the prefaces to *Human All Too Human* and *The Gay Science* raise a question worth pondering: what is it people think about when ill? Recovery, the return of health, the means of overcoming or alleviating the illness—all of these things capture a person’s mind when ill. Depending on the severity of the illness, people may reflect on their pain and suffering, as well as their mortality. People can become optimistic, seeing something positive about the prospects of pain or death. On the other hand, people can also become pessimistic, lamenting their situation, seeing something unfair about their suffering. Almost invariably people begin to reflect on their lives and the meaning of their suffering.

Arthur Danto offers a helpful remark that shows the impact that physiological sickness and suffering can play in a person’s life. He distinguishes two kinds of suffering: (1) what he calls extensional suffering, which is the purely physiological suffering that humans undergo, e.g., the physical pain that a person experiences as cancer ravages her body; and (2) what he calls intensional suffering, i.e., the psychological suffering that arises from a person’s attempts to

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\(^7\) See the preface to HH, especially sections 1, 4-7. Cf., EH HH 1, 4-5.
come to terms with the ways she suffers. Danto says that what he calls intensional suffering consists in an interpretation of what he calls extensional suffering. He continues:

“The main sufferings human beings have been subject to throughout history are due to certain interpretive responses to the fact of extensional suffering. It is not clear that Nietzsche believes he can deal with extensional suffering. But he can deal with intensional suffering, thus helping reduce, often by a significant factor, the total suffering in the world. For while extensional suffering is bad enough, often it is many times compounded by our interpretations of it, themselves often far worse than the disorder itself.”

Why might this be so? As Nietzsche argues, and I think quite correctly, people seek some kind of explanation for why they are sick and suffering. And failing to find a satisfactory answer, or arriving at an incorrect answer, they increase their suffering. Nietzsche recognized that how we respond to physiological sickness plays a significant role in our general psychological well-being. Thus we should keep in mind that while physiological sickness is not Nietzsche’s primary interest, it is never far from his purview. In fact, part of his project is to see what can be done to prevent the harmful and irrational interpretations people have of their illnesses.

That people experience sickness and pain is a brute fact about human existence; as such, suffering registers for many as a question mark against existence. Pain and sickness cause suffering, giving rise to a kind of existential sickness, a fact which necessitates some kind of explanation, lest the meaninglessness further infect people. For example, the harrowing cries of

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9 “To calm the imagination of the invalid, so that at least he should not, as hitherto, have to suffer more from thinking about his illness than from the illness itself—that, I think, would be something! It would be a great deal! Do you now understand our task?” (D 54)
pain and the omnipresent stench of death during the bubonic plague in Europe in the middle of the fourteenth-century: for what reason, man asked, do we suffer so? Sickness and the suffering necessitate some kind of response: though we often attempt to do so, we cannot simply ignore this fact. My psychological well-being demands some kind of account of why the world is filled with sickness and suffering, to say nothing of why I specifically suffer. As Nietzsche claims, any kind of meaning at all, even a meaning that carries with it even greater suffering, is better than no meaning at all. One aspect of Nietzsche’s project will be to show that this is not a good response, let alone the only effective response to the problem of suffering.

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Turning to what it is that causes sickness, Nietzsche offers a number of speculative answers about how humanity has become sick. Sometimes Nietzsche seems to take sickness as a simple fact of life. Nietzsche also suggests that the development of society and the new constraints placed upon humanity contributed to humanity’s sickness by creating a conflict between our animal nature and our social nature. Oftentimes Nietzsche identifies morality—most notably Platonic and Christian morality—to be the causes of humanity’s sickness. We should thus not expect one simple answer, but rather different explanations for different kinds of sickness, as I will attempt to show in sections 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5.

At the heart of the matter, Nietzsche discerns in human beings a fundamental tension in their being, pushing and pulling us in different directions. We vaguely feel a kind of

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10 This claim fits with one of the arguments Nietzsche offers against morality. Nietzsche’s critique of morality consists of a number of arguments directed at various aspects of Platonic-Christian morality, including (1) the fact morality stultifies higher humanity and excellence with demands that are contrary to human nature; (2) the fact that morality rests upon mistaken presuppositions, including erroneous conceptions about human agency and ontological errors about values; and (3) the immorality of morality, which has suspect motives and sets the good of the group against the individual. Turning to the three primary sicknesses I argue Nietzsche is concerned with, he explicitly states that the Greeks were able to keep one form of sickness, the sickness of bad conscience, at bay. The other two forms of sickness seem to be absent in Greek culture, at least according to Nietzsche’s analysis. This suggests that the types of sickness he diagnoses ultimately owe their origins to Platonism and Christianity.
incompleteness that both wants to be complete, but is at the same time is spurred by this incompleteness. This quality is at once the source of much discomfort and sickness, but also one of the sources of our potential. This is a point that must not be overlooked, for Nietzsche spoke often of the value of sickness, specifically that, for some people, it could be a spur to a higher health. (I return to this point below.)

When reflecting on humanity, Nietzsche speaks of “the unsatisfied, unsatiated one … the one yet unconquered, the eternally future one who no longer finds any rest from his own pressing energy, so that his future digs inexorably like a spur into the flesh of every present” (GM III.13). The human condition seems to be such that, in virtue of having risen above our basic animality, human beings are a conflicted, sick animal. Not only do the demands of our animality conflict with the demands of society, but Nietzsche contends that, no longer guided by our animal instincts, we have entrusted ourselves to our consciousness, which is believes is still young and prone to mistakes, and thus not the best guide (GS 11); we have developed desires that we are often unable to satisfy; we have become attuned to life beyond the present, continually haunted by the past, and by the uncertainty of the future. Elsewhere, Nietzsche refers to human beings as “the undetermined animal” (BGE 62). All of these characteristics of our being point to the unique position human beings are in, full of potential, but also experiencing self-torment which routinely undermines our ability to become something more.

We can imagine Nietzsche also saying that human beings are future-directed animals. As a valuing, future-directed being, we can understand the fact that, within a recalcitrant world, we are creatures who are often unsatisfied. In effect, the many developments, choices, experiments,

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11 Relevant to his assessment of human beings, Nietzsche remarks in full, that “with humans as with every other type of animal, there is a surplus of failures and degenerates, of the diseased and infirm, of those who necessarily suffer. Even with humans, successful cases are always the exception and, since humans are the still undetermined animals, the infrequent exception” (BGE 62).
12 Cf., GM II.16.
and successes and failures that have made man into the interesting animal he is, pregnant with possibilities, have also brought the potential for ever greater challenges, new uncertainties, new desires that cannot be satisfied, and with these, new forms of suffering. For these reasons Nietzsche holds that such an animal could not help but be so deeply sick and psychologically tortured. When understood in this way, we should not be surprised that human beings are sick animals.¹³

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In connection with talk about what human beings are, as well as how Nietzsche diagnoses the majority of human beings as sick, there is a worry that must be mentioned, though it will only be fully addressed over the course of the chapter. The worry is that Nietzsche’s diagnosis of sickness, instead of capturing an objective problem, simply latches on to a particular social construct that was emerging in the nineteenth century to denigrate what he does not like. If Nietzsche’s critique is just an expression of his preferences, then his critique would have little to no force.¹⁴ There is the worry that Nietzsche has not only drawn on pre-existing social constructions of sickness, but has also helped enable its social construction. The question, then, is whether Nietzsche is guilty of this charge or is engaged in a project that avoids this criticism.

One of the goals of this chapter, as well as those that follow, is to show that Nietzsche is offering an objective account of the nature of sickness and health. That is to say, he will show that sickness and health are not dependent on our values and beliefs, but rather that they are

¹³ “For man is sicker, more unsure, more changing, more undetermined than any other animal, of this there is no doubt—he is the sick animal” (GM III.13).
¹⁴ For example, in History of Madness, Foucault argued that whereas mental illness was accepted in the Middle Ages, once it became medicalized during the Enlightenment, madmen (formerly mystics or village idiots) became subjects that had to be removed from society and treated. The issue that Foucault illuminated was that the notion of a madman was itself a social construction. That is to say, without the institution of a mental asylum, as well as the narrative that creates the madman, there would not be madmen as we know them today. William Schroeder voiced this general criticism to me, and his treatment of Foucault in his Continental Philosophy: A Critical Approach helped to clarify the basic point Foucault was making in works like History of Madness, The Birth of the Clinic, and Discipline and Punishment on the social construction of various social distinctions.
grounded in our nature as human beings. Thus one aim will be to show that Nietzsche’s notions of sickness are rooted in something real and do not fall prey to the criticism that sickness is merely a social construct. Among the various forms of sickness Nietzsche diagnoses, I will seek to show that there is an underlying physiological basis, which can be understood as objectively grounding the various forms of sickness.

With this in mind we should consider that Nietzsche was aware of the ways in which various ideas were socially constructed (of course this would not necessarily make him immune to misusing them). Furthermore, Nietzsche can be understood as criticizing the dominant standards of health and sickness in western civilization. For example, Nietzsche levels his criticisms against how health and sickness were conceived within the Platonic-Christian tradition, offering pointed criticism of the ways it “improves” us. While criticism was at the fore, Nietzsche’s project was more than just polemics, it was diagnostic. After his diagnostic work he could move on to his positive project, a project that sought to help us overcome what had gone wrong with human well-being. Thus part of Nietzsche’s project is to show what well-being is for human beings.

To that end, part and parcel of this diagnostic project were the genealogies Nietzsche undertook to uncover the natural development(s) of morality, seeking to show the disjointed twists and turns that have brought us the institution of morality as it is today. Thus we should keep in mind that while he was prone to hyperbole and might purposely write in hyperbole and criticisms, he is working against the dominant institutions that have already decided what it is for a person to be good and healthy or evil and sick. While acknowledging that Platonic-Christian

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15 See GM III.21 and TI VII.2, where Nietzsche elaborates on how morality “improves” man. Morality “improves” humanity, where “improves” should be understand as meaning “they become weak, they become less harmful, they are made ill through the use of pain, injury, hunger, and the depressive affect of fear.” This “caricature of a human being” is “sick, miserable, full of malice against himself, hating the drive for life, suspicious of everything that was still strong and happy” (TI VII.2).
morality has worked for many people, Nietzsche’s project should be understood as trying to set right what was flawed and has ultimately hindered humanity. Among those sicknesses that have harmed and hindered humanity, I now turn to offering an account of one of the main forms of sickness Nietzsche is interested in diagnosing and treating, the sickness of bad conscience.

1.3 The Sickness of Bad Conscience

In essay two of the Genealogy Nietzsche turns his attention to “the psychology of the conscience”, which he later describes as, “the instinct of cruelty that is turned inwards after it cannot discharge itself outwards anymore” (EH GM). Grounded in the repression, redirection, and extirpation of the instincts and drives, Nietzsche describes what he calls bad conscience, or “the consciousness of guilt” (GM II.4). I will argue that the development of bad conscience, i.e., consciousness of guilt, is one of the major types of sickness that Nietzsche diagnoses in his writings. Nietzsche describes this sickness as “the greatest and most uncanny of sicknesses … one from which man has not recovered to this day” (GM II.16). At the core of this sickness is the fact that man turns against himself. Bad conscience is not simply man turning against himself though; rather, he believes this action is both warranted and good, because he sees it as justified punishment for his irredeemable guilt.

Nietzsche’s treatment of guilt, bad conscience, and “related matters” in essay two of the Genealogy is one of his most diffuse discussions, which makes painting a clear portrait of bad

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16 There is some debate about whether or not bad conscience and consciousness of guilt are the same thing or different. Risse (2001) and Leiter (2002) hold that there is a difference. I agree with Ridley (2005) and Janaway (2007), that, while Nietzsche at times seems to make some conceptual differences, the two are the same. Janaway offers the best account explaining Nietzsche’s diffuse discussion and the reasons why bad conscience and consciousness of guilt are the same. At the same time, I also agree that, while Nietzsche targets the effects of the internalization of man, as Janaway and others attest, Nietzsche’s primary target of criticism is bad conscience as consciousness of guilt. See also May (1999).

17 He goes on to say that “here there is sickness, beyond all doubt, the most terrible sickness that has thus far raged in man” (GM II.22). Interestingly, elsewhere Nietzsche says “it is a sickness, bad conscience—this admits of no doubt—but a sickness as pregnancy is a sickness” (GM II.19). This points towards the positive aspects of the internalization of man, insofar as it made man a deeper, more interesting animal, with a hitherto unseen future before him.
conscience no easy task. Given the interweaving threads of the second essay, I do not claim to present a complete treatment of the many issues it deals with, but instead focus on explicating the basic problems that arise with bad conscience.\textsuperscript{18} The goal in this section is to clarify the ways in which bad conscience is a sickness; with a clear diagnosis of the issues at hand, this will ideally point us towards what might be done to overcome this sickness.

Within the essay Nietzsche offers two theses, which can be seen to structure the nature of bad conscience.\textsuperscript{19} Nietzsche begins by telling us that guilt and conscience have their origin “thoroughly and profoundly drenched in blood” (GM II.6). While this may be difficult to accept, especially with our modern sensibilities, people recognized that seeing others suffer and making others suffer both felt good; cruelty, Nietzsche claims, is pleasurable. Here we have Nietzsche’s first thesis, which he takes to be an empirically justifiable claim: human beings have a deep-seated drive to take pleasure in cruelty.

While Nietzsche had raised the question about the origin of bad conscience in section 4, he does not venture an answer until section 16. Prior to his answer he offers a second thesis which he calls “the internalizing of man.” This thesis claims that “all instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly turn themselves inwards” (GM II.16). At this point Nietzsche owes an explanation for what brings about “the internalizing of man,” because he needs an account of why instincts would no longer be able to discharge themselves outwardly. He claims that this occurs because of “the pressure of that most fundamental of all changes he ever experienced—the change of finding himself enclosed once and for all within the sway of society and peace” (ibid). With this change “all at once all of their instincts were devalued and


\textsuperscript{19} Janaway (2007) was crucial for breaking down Nietzsche’s position into two basic theses that combine to create his explanation of the origin of bad conscience. See chapter 8 for a concise and thoughtful account of bad conscience.
‘disconnected’”\textsuperscript{20}; nonetheless, “those old instincts had not all at once ceased to make their demands” (ibid). Thus without recourse to any other means of discharging one’s instincts, they are turned against the individual.\textsuperscript{21}

At last Nietzsche explains the origin of bad conscience: “Hostility, cruelty, pleasure in persecution, in assault, in change, in destruction—all of that turning itself against the possessors of such instincts: \textit{that} is the origin of ‘bad conscience’” (GM II.16).\textsuperscript{22} The two theses Nietzsche offered are combined to explain bad conscience. In virtue of the facts that (1) human beings take pleasure in inflicting cruelty, and (2) under the constraints of civilization, which demands the extirpation of this and other instincts, man’s instinctive drive towards cruelty is turned inwards back upon himself. Thus we have what Nietzsche characterizes as a sickness “from which man has not recovered to this day, the suffering of man \textit{from man, from himself}” (ibid).

At this point it appears as if Nietzsche’s explanation of bad conscience is complete: human beings are creatures who take pleasure in inflicting cruelty, and, denied other outlets, direct this cruelty upon themselves.\textsuperscript{23} This is undoubtedly a kind of sickness, a sickness with us still today. But as Leiter and Janaway point out, the internalization of cruelty need not have manifest itself in feelings of guilt. This is where the final element of the account that Nietzsche

\begin{itemize}
  \item In the end, “the creature ‘man’ finally learns to be ashamed of all of his instincts” (GM II.7).
  \item Nietzsche continues by noting that these instincts often “had to seek new and as it were subterranean gratifications” (GM II.16). Here one might object that, given the importance of culture and society, there were surely other avenues through which one could give vent to those instincts that were denied their usual outlet. Nietzsche has even gone so far as to note how the redirection and sublimation of these very instincts are the preconditions for civilization and culture. For example, he writes that “almost everything we call ‘higher culture’ is based on the spiritualization and deepening of cruelty” (BGE 229). Keeping in mind that Nietzsche is giving an account of the period when civilization and culture are first emerging. I think this gives an answer as to why there were not yet other outlets available.\textsuperscript{22}
  \item Nietzsche adds a section later: “This instinct for freedom [will to power], forcibly made latent … driven back, suppressed, imprisoned within, and finally discharging and venting itself only on itself: this, only this, is \textit{bad conscience} in its beginnings” (GM II.17).
  \item Nietzsche later remarks in the third essay of the \textit{Genealogy} that “[t]he previous treatise briefly suggested its origins [the feeling of guilt]—as a piece of animal psychology, no more: there the feeling of guilt first confronted us in its raw state as it were” (GM III.20).
\end{itemize}
offers enters, specifically, the idea that the origin of guilt evolves from the concept of debt, an insight Nietzsche draws from the etymological link between debt [Schulden] and guilt [Schuld].

“The critical question is how a consciousness of debts turned into a feeling of guilt” (Leiter, 2002; 236).

Early in the essay Nietzsche argues that feelings of guilt and personal obligation had their origin in the creditor-debtor relationship (GM II.8). To explain how feelings of guilt arise, in section 19 Nietzsche returns to his earlier discussion of the relationship between the debtor and creditor. This relationship takes various forms, including the relationship between the community and its members, and more important to Nietzsche’s argument, the relationship between the past members of a society and its current members. As a people become more powerful, the debts owed to one’s ancestors grows, until these same ancestors become gods. Nietzsche states that “for several millennia the feeling of debt toward the deity did not stop growing” (GM II.20). At the end of this process is Nietzsche’s explanation of the moralization of debt: “the entanglement of bad conscience with the concept of god” (GM II.21).

Human beings find themselves indebted to a god they cannot possibly repay. Human beings are in the wrong, they are responsible for this, and yet there is nothing that can be done to settle this debt. With this we see the moralization of guilt. May helpfully defines “guilt, in its most general form” as “a highly reflexive feeling of regret or inadequacy at failing to honour one’s obligations” (May, 1999; 57). Man is guilty against God: his very nature is defective and an affront to God. As Janaway helpfully clarifies, “it belongs to the human essence to be transgressive against absolute values [God], and so the consciousness of guilt is inbuilt.

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24 See GM II.4-8. Nietzsche begins his account with the thesis that “that central moral concept ‘guilt’ had its origins in the very material concept ‘debt’” (GM II.4).

25 Leiter argues that Schuld should be translated here as debt and not as guilt. In the context, this makes sense. Thus the conclusion would be that Christianity elevates (maximally) the feeling of debt, as opposed to guilt (which has not been explained). See Leiter, 2002; 238.
perpetual, and profound” (Janaway, 2007; 139). Humanity’s drive to cruelty is then harnessed as a legitimate form of self-punishment, and taken to its extreme in self-torture. Animal instincts are reinterpreted as evidence of guilt against God, in such a way that there can be no atonement (GM II.22). Human beings become transfixed by an ideal that reinforces their guilt and utter defectiveness, about which they can—seemingly—do nothing.

With Nietzsche’s introduction of the debtor-creditor relationship, he attempts to explain naturalistically how it is that human beings have developed deep-rooted feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Nietzsche’s account on these issues is rather diffuse, and he is assuredly at his most speculative here, but in offering the story he gives, he addresses how it is that human beings have come to have a perverse need for inflicting pain on themselves, as well as feeling guilty for their nature.

We have a sickness that “has come to its most terrible and most sublime pinnacle” (GM II.19). Beginning with the delight in making-suffer and the fettering of man’s instincts, adding the evolution of guilt from the creditor-debtor relationship, we come to a destructive piece of anti-nature where man’s instincts, an affront to God, were turned against him. Man has not only

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26 May writes that “[b]ad conscience and guilt are moralized … when they are blamed on, or interpreted in terms of, some putatively innate corruption of human nature (or, more generally, of ‘life’ or ‘the world’) which one must therefore strive to suppress, extirpate or ‘transcend’” (70).

27 One might imagine a scenario in which, if people merely took pleasure in inflicting pain upon themselves, then there would not be the profound sickness Nietzsche diagnoses. However, in giving justification for the infliction of pain, human beings see themselves as deserving of it, and with that, they find themselves inherently in the wrong. To justify self-torture human beings find themselves guilty of failing to live up to certain values—values that are not their own.

28 In sections 20-22 Nietzsche makes reference to the Christian God, e.g., “The rise of the Christian god as the maximum god that has been attained thus far therefore also brought a maximum of feelings of guilt [debt] into appearance on earth” (GM II.20). Nietzsche is clearly not arguing that only Christians have bad conscience or that no one experienced consciousness of guilt prior to Christianity. See Ridley (2005) and Janaway (2007) for full treatments of this issue. Risse (2001) offers a contrasting view. Nietzsche’s general interest is in the origin and nature of bad conscience, which is something he believes all people suffer. At the same time, as the aforementioned quote indicates, there is something about “Christianity’s stroke of genius” (GM II.21) that creates the fever pitch of guilt that makes Christianity’s approach the worst.

29 As Janaway succinctly explains: “[W]e need to be cruel to ourselves, so we invent the notion of ourselves as wrongdoers in order to legitimize the self-cruelty; then in order to sustain the notion of ourselves as wrongdoers we
found himself guilty, but there is no possibility of atonement; out of a debt that cannot be repaid he has constructed a punishment through which he tortures himself without relenting; he has erected an ideal that continually reiterates his unworthiness. For these reasons we can understand why Nietzsche laments that this “is a kind of madness of the will in psychic cruelty that has no equal” (GM II.22). If the second essay of the Genealogy ended with section 22, the account Nietzsche offers would leave us with a deeply pessimistic view about our future prospects. However, against our expectations, as some of the closing sections indicate, there is some reason to hope about humanity’s promise.30

Nietzsche describes the sickness of bad conscience as the “most terrible” sickness, turning a person against herself. Accepting Nietzsche’s account as credible, we should take stock of where this sickness leaves us. First and foremost, there is no going back; we must acknowledge that this sickness cannot be undone. Whatever humans do next, bad conscience is the inevitable starting point. But that does not mean nothing can be done to address this sickness. For example, given the domestication of human beings, internalization seems inevitable, but the repression or redirection of instincts need not be harmful.31 To repress instincts that had hitherto constituted human strength and well-being would undoubtedly cause great pain and precipitate great changes, but as Nietzsche himself notes, this made human beings interesting and pregnant with a future, for new developmental possibilities opened up that would have otherwise been

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30 See GM II.16, which Nietzsche concludes by saying that “man has been included among the most unexpected and exciting throws of dice played by Heraclitus’ ‘great child’, call him Zeus or fate,— he arouses interest, tension, hope, almost certainty for himself, as though something were being announced through him, were being prepared, as though man were not an end but just a path, an episode, a bridge, a great promise . . .”

31 However, the needless extirpation of our instincts is something Nietzsche condemns unequivocally. In contrast, Nietzsche sees much potential in the sublimation of one’s natural instincts. For example, the instinct for cruelty can be put to positive use, as it has been in the creation of culture. Similarly, the sexual instinct can be put to positive use, as Nietzsche suggests it was with respect to art. But the problem in the case of bad conscience is that the instincts are not sublimated under the service of something higher and life-affirming, but rather something anti-nature and thus harmful.
impossible. In a similar way, the notion of guilt is not in itself bad, for there are assuredly times when a person fails to live up to a particular expectation before her and should feel guilt. And finally, neither being cruel nor taking pleasure in cruelty are inherently bad. For example, the ascetic’s self-discipline often incorporates cruelty, yet this very asceticism and self-discipline are things Nietzsche values.

1.4 The Sickness of Life Negation

Within Nietzsche’s treatment of bad conscience are a handful of references to the question of suffering. This issue is left untreated within the discussion of bad conscience, only to be dealt with in the third essay of the *Genealogy*. Suffering is ubiquitous, routinely affecting both the physical and the psychological aspects of our lives. However, this is not what makes suffering a problem; rather, the problem is its meaninglessness. When there is no reason or deeper meaning for suffering, this cuts into human being, leading to a devaluation of the world and life, because people require a meaning for suffering.

Given the ubiquity and meaninglessness of suffering, what Nietzsche calls the ascetic ideal responded. It can be understood as a structural turning away from the values of this world,

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32 “With the appearance on earth of an animal soul turned against itself ... something so new, deep, unheard of, enigmatic, contradictory, and full of future had come into being that the appearance of the earth was thereby essentially changed” (GM II.16). Nietzsche goes on to say that “bad conscience is a sickness, there is no point in denying it, but a sickness rather like pregnancy” (GM II.19).

33 “What actually arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering in itself, but rather the senselessness of suffering” (GM II.7). Interestingly, Nietzsche notes that there were times when suffering had an explanation and was neither meaningless nor a mark against existence; rather, cruelty was a stimulus and joy of life. “When suffering is always marshalled 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” (GM II.7). I will return to this issue within this chapter, and in much greater detail in chapter III, which examines Nietzsche’s understanding of life and how humanity might come to affirm it.

34 “The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering itself, was the curse that thus far lay stretched out over humanity” (GM III.28). “What actually arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering in itself, but rather the senselessness of suffering” (GM II.7).
in which one rises above them, fostering hatred of the world.\(^{35}\) The ascetic ideal offered a comprehensive interpretation about the meaning behind our suffering, as well as a more general meaning for man’s will and existence.\(^{36}\) While humanity was rescued by this ideal, Nietzsche saw that it expressed “an aversion to life” (GM III.28). Thus, while the ascetic ideal rescues man from one form of life-negation, specifically the problem of suffering, it has the repercussion of inculcating a different set of life-negating values. Specifically, it fosters a negative attitude towards desire, the body, and the world. As Nietzsche discovers, the ascetic ideal is, at the core, a devaluation of the various natural endowments constitutive of human beings.\(^{37}\)

Nietzsche’s analysis leaves us with a powerful disjunctive claim, where both of the disjuncts lead to the devaluation of life: either life is devalued (i.e., life is worth less, potentially so much so that it does not matter) because it is filled with meaningless suffering, or life and its essential elements are devalued because of the meaning the ascetic ideal gives suffering. As Nietzsche’s diagnosis continues, he claims that the ascetic ideal under the Christian interpretation has failed, which brings us to our current crisis. Having eliminated the second disjunct, life is, at least for some people, once again devalued for being filled with meaningless suffering. Nietzsche’s diagnosis, if I have reconstructed it correctly, points to the seemingly inevitable conclusion of life-negation.

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\(^{35}\) Nietzsche says the ascetic ideal expresses a “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” (GM III.28).

\(^{36}\) As Nietzsche says, man’s “existence on earth contained no goal; ‘to what end man at all?’—was a question without answer; the will for man and earth was lacking” (GM III.28). The ascetic ideal fills the great void surrounding humanity. Interestingly, Nietzsche goes on to say that, “[t]hus far it has been the only meaning”. This seems to sit in tension with his understanding of the Greeks, who did not suffer from meaninglessness, and thus did not need the power of the ascetic ideal. One way of distinguishing the Greeks from the Christians, is to note that the Greeks had an explanation behind suffering, but there was no meaning for it. In contrast, the interpretation of Christianity gives an explanation, as well as a complex meaning behind suffering and life.

\(^{37}\) Additionally the ascetic gives rise to an even more potent form of life-negation, which ultimately sees this life as nothing more than a means to an other-worldly existence.
To better understand what, according to Nietzsche’s diagnosis seems the inevitable, life-negating conclusion to which humanity is fated, let us look at the above disjunction in greater detail. Part of what we learn from Schopenhauer and in BT is that suffering and life are indelibly intertwined. This indubitable fact necessitates that one come to terms with suffering one way or another. As Nietzsche writes, the “diseased animal” man suffers, in a myriad of ways, but “suffering itself was not his problem, rather that the answer was missing to the question: ‘to what end suffering?’” (GM III.28). The problem of suffering commands our attention and demands an answer. This is because the inexplicable fact of suffering has the potential to undermine our trust in life. Whether or not life actually deserves our trust is a different question. As I will argue in chapter 3, Nietzsche presents an alternative view in which love of life can be cultivated such that trust in life takes a radically different form.

Given the ubiquity of suffering, “every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering” (GM III.15). The fact of the matter is that people need reasons for why suffering occurs, because with reasons they can endure life because the suffering (and so life) has meaning.38 The first reason why humanity devalues life is due to the ubiquity of suffering. Meaningless suffering is such a powerful mark against existence that it provides sufficient grounds for concluding it is best not to live.39 Suffering is not the sole evidence presented to indict life though. Life is also seen to be inhospitable to the kinds of values we take to be

38 See GS 1, where Nietzsche writes at length about the need for believing in a purpose to life. The “teachers of the purpose of existence” help to instill the belief in meaning. “Man has gradually become a fantastic animal that must fulfill one condition of existence more than any other animal: man must from time to time believe he knows why he exists; his race cannot thrive without a periodic trust in life—without faith in the reason in life!”
39 Nietzsche writes, “Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and tribulation, why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you not to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon” (BT 3). Of course, as evidence shows, the vast majority of people are not following this advice.
valuable, and for this reason life is similarly indicted\(^{40}\). To look upon the world and see what is strange and questionable, a world filled with strife, horror, and death, is to look upon a world that one would generally prefer to be otherwise. For many people, such a world is one which deserves to be condemned.

The ascetic ideal, as manifest in the Christian interpretation of existence, rescues humanity: “In it suffering was interpreted; the enormous emptiness seemed filled; the door fell shut to all suicidal nihilism” (GM III.28). Under the power of the ascetic ideal the devaluation and negation of life continued, albeit in a different form. Not only did the ascetic ideal and the emphasis on a life of self-denial give man a meaning, it also brought “new suffering with it, deeper, more inward, more poisonous, gnawing more at life” (GM III.28).\(^{41}\) This suffering arises from the internal discord that each person feels under the interpretation the ascetic ideal offers, particularly in the explanation of the cause of this suffering. Given the need for some reason behind suffering, the ascetic ideal offers a simple explanation: each person is the reason for her own suffering; we deserve it.\(^ {42}\)

With this account we have an explanation and interpretation of suffering, which rescues humanity from suicidal nihilism, while at the same time giving rise to more poisonous feelings that have had an even more harmful effect. What I have sought to emphasize is that not only does the problem of meaningless suffering create an attitude of life-negation, so too does the meaning the ascetic ideal attaches to suffering, arguably an equally bad form of life-negation.

\(^{40}\) “What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer” (WP 2).

\(^{41}\) Thus Nietzsche writes that “there is hardly anything else … that has pressed so destructively upon health … as this ideal” (GM III.20).

\(^{42}\) “Man, suffering from himself in some way or other, physiologically in any case, somewhat like an animal locked in a cage, uncertain why, to what end? desirous of reasons—reasons alleviate—desirous also of cures and narcotics” (GM III.20). And the reason is clear: ‘I am suffering: for this someone must be to blame’—thus every diseased sheep thinks. But his shepherd, the ascetic priest, says to him: ‘That’s right, my sheep! someone must be to blame for it; but you yourself are this someone, you alone are to blame for it—you alone are to blame for yourself!’” (GM III.15).
We can fill out our understanding of the second form of life negation by looking at the ways it is manifest in Nietzsche’s writings. At the most basic level, Nietzsche contends that Platonic-Christian morality “negates life” (CW, P). That is, moral values, by their nature, both condemn life and express demands contrary to life. We can delineate the various ways in which this negation manifests itself. The first form of negation is the fact that the moral values of the Platonic-Christian tradition condemn this life. That is, these values are created with the explicit purpose of condemning this life as imperfect and inhospitable to their realization in this world. Within the basic Christian moral picture, this world is at best an imperfect transitional stage and means to a transcendent reality. This hope for another world need not express hatred of this world, but it expresses a clear devaluation of this world and this life. Nietzsche focuses much of his criticism on this particular point.

The second way Nietzsche finds moral values to be life-negating also looms large in his writings. Values can also be life-negating to the extent that they foster a declining type of life, either by condemning the presuppositions of life or by opposing the development of life. Nietzsche held that moral values in the Platonic-Christian tradition are opposed to life, insofar as they undermine and inhibit self-overcoming. Additionally, notions like God, the “true world”, soul, sin, hell, free will, and reward and punishment had long been targets of Nietzsche’s

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43 Nietzsche argues that Christianity expresses “hostility to life, a furious, vengeful enmity towards life itself” (BT ASC.5). Within this hostility we find not only disgust and weariness for this life, but the hidden “belief in ‘another’ or ‘better’ life”. Nietzsche takes this to express “[h]atred of the ‘world’” (ibid).

44 Bernard Reginster focuses on and holds as primary the fact that life-negating values cannot be realized in this world. “Strictly life-negating values are, in other words, values that are necessarily unrealizable in this world” (46). Reginster continues by noting that life-negating values are invented to condemn life, and this fact explains why they cannot be realized in this world. Thus, while Reginster focuses on the fact these values cannot be realized in this world, he acknowledges that what explains this fact is that these values are invented to condemn life. I find it peculiar then that he argues the fact these values cannot be realized is the primary way they are life-negating, for the primary life-negating feature is that they are invented to condemn life.

45 For that reason, the Christian picture is not as negative as the Platonic picture, while holds this world to be mere appearance, a corrupt world to be overcome. See Plato’s Phaedo for a vivid account of his condemnation of this world. This can also be seen in fragments attributed to Pythagoras, who had considerable influence on Plato.
criticism. All of these notions, Nietzsche argues, purport to improve humanity, but in fact “suck the blood out of life itself”. That is to say, they are concepts hostile to life; they are fictions “invented to devalue the only world there is”; they make the body sick and aim to extirpate the instincts (EH IV.8).

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Having examined meaningless suffering and the interpretation of suffering that the ascetic ideal and Christianity advocate, we have seen that in either case, life-negation results, albeit different manifestations of life-negation. Thus, as I have argued, the devaluation and negation of life is inevitable within the Platonic-Christian interpretation of existence. This conclusion follows from a simple argument: either life is devalued because of the problem of suffering, or life is devalued by the interpretation offered by the ascetic ideal. The second premise can be either of the disjuncts. Accepting these premises, life-negation is the inescapable conclusion.

For a long time the ascetic ideal under the Christian interpretation of existence was able to combat the problem of suffering by offering a complex account explaining why we suffer. However, the costs of this interpretation were high, including pervasive feelings of guilt, a devaluation of one’s body and instincts, and ultimately a devaluing of life and this world, all of which significantly stultifies one’s potential for self-development. Beyond these significant problems—which ought to make one question just how sustainable this interpretation was—the Christian interpretation, with its purported high estimation of truth, was doomed to undermine

46 Taking this collection of values into account, we can understand how Reginster would hold such values to be “unrealizable”, but once again, this is a fact dependent on the more important fact that such values were invented to condemn this world. Thus, it is difficult to see how the primary reason these values are life-negating is their unrealizability. This fact is a repercussion of their having been invented to condemn this world.

47 Ultimately, Nietzsche’s position is that this conclusion is predicated on a false dichotomy. The argument of chapter 3 is that an alternative to life negation is possible, specifically a life affirming position predicated on a love of life.
itself, Nietzsche suggests, by containing the seeds of its own overcoming.\textsuperscript{48} His claim is that as the Christian interpretation comes undone, the problem of suffering will reassert itself. For the majority of people, Nietzsche notes, this failure has yet to be recognized. For some, this failure has been recognized to a degree, but the wide-ranging repercussions have not been understood. That is to say, for the majority of people, the death of God, as well as its significance, remains an event still too distant.\textsuperscript{49}

What follows from this event is a question of great significance, a question that returns us to the point with which this section began. In a world filled with suffering, must we inevitably succumb to life-negating, or is it possible to affirm life in spite of all that is strange, terrible, and questionable? One of Nietzsche’s primary concerns is with offering an account such that people need not turn away from life, but rather learn to love it.

Modern humanity thus finds itself in a precarious position. With the changes precipitated by Christianity, humanity has developed a deeper, richer psychology, transforming us in ways hitherto unimagined, making human beings more interesting, and full of new potential.\textsuperscript{50} At the same time, human beings are now both more prone to suffering, but also to suffering in more insidious ways. The need for some coming to terms with suffering thus becomes all the more imperative with the self-overcoming of the Christian interpretation, because we seem to have been left with the view that the world and life have no value.

Worse yet, modernity, instead of adopting a stance towards suffering that was able to affirm it as part of life—as opposed to holding suffering as a reason to condemn existence and adopt life-negating values—has instead adopted a set of values and a stance towards suffering

\textsuperscript{48} See GS 357 and GM III.27. Nietzsche succinctly and powerfully articulates the self-overcoming of Christian morality. “One can see what it was that actually triumphed over the Christian god: Christian morality itself, the concept of truthfulness that was taken ever more rigorously” (GS 357). Because of this highly refined intellectual conscience, belief that God has given meaning is now dishonest, it goes against our conscience, it violates our taste.

\textsuperscript{49} See GS 108, 125, and 357.

\textsuperscript{50} See GM I.6 and II.16.
where the goal is to eliminate it as much as possible. On the face of it this does not seem like a problematic goal. However, as I will argue in the next section, one of the highest values of modernity is the elimination of suffering, a value that is, in Nietzsche’s eyes, opposed to life. How this all unfolds is the subject of the next section.

1.5 The Sickness of Enervation

At this point we come to the final form of sickness that Nietzsche diagnoses, what I have called the sickness of enervation. What Nietzsche identifies as a form of sickness is instead believed to constitute progress for humanity; at the core it is the movement toward the goals of pleasure, ease, and comfort. I will argue that for Nietzsche what he criticizes as modern “progress” veils a significant problem, as these goals weaken and undermine humanity’s will, which is an essential part of what it is to be human. More than that, a strong will is necessary to become something greater, which Nietzsche takes to be a particularly important goal for humanity.

We can best understand this form of sickness as enervation, or the loss of vitality, which leads to a weakened will and a kind of failure of desire. This can also be understood as the diminution of man, a process that Nietzsche saw occurring before him. A frightening, but possible repercussion of this process which Nietzsche saw occurring around him was that the day would soon come when humanity was no longer able to aim for what we have it in us to become. Nietzsche expresses concern that a time could come when humanity no longer had the strong will to live up to what it had the potential to become.

If Nietzsche is correct that people do not see modern “progress” as a form of sickness, then he owes an account about how humanity would come to accept a set of values which were in fact harmful. Part of the problem is that this form of sickness is so deeply embedded within
the values of modernity that we do not see it as a problem at all. The other part of the problem is that the values of modernity are seen as good. Consider what Nietzsche identifies as the highest values of modernity: the elimination of suffering, equality and equal rights, democracy, and compassion. That many people would find these values to be harmful seems unlikely. According to Nietzsche, these values mask themselves under the idea of “improving” humanity.\(^51\) Thus what Nietzsche finds in modern humanity is nothing more than a “caricature of a human being” (TI VII.2).\(^52\)

What further prevents us from seeing the sickness of enervation and the harm modernity’s highest values have caused is that these values are not in themselves examples of sickness. No one would claim equality and equal rights are inherently bad. Nietzsche does not make such a claim; rather the problem he identifies lies in the uses these values are put to, as well as the end these values ultimately give rise to: a weak, enervated will.\(^53\) Thus, instead of working towards what man has it in him to become, the highest values of modernity are used as a means to pleasure, ease, and comfort.

For example, Nietzsche laments that the well-being that comes from the elimination of suffering “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!” (BGE 225). Nietzsche paints an evocative portrait of what this type of human being looks like in the Last

\(^{51}\) Nietzsche admits they “improve” humanity; however, his understanding of “improvement” means “the same as ‘tamed,’ ‘weakened,’ ‘discouraged,’ ‘sophisticated,’ ‘pampered,’ ‘emasculated,’ (hence almost the same as injured)” (GM III.21).

\(^{52}\) Nietzsche continues his characterization of the “caricature of a human being”, describing him as “sick, miserable, full of malice against himself, hating the drive for life, suspicious of everything that was still strong and happy” (TI VII.2). See TI “‘Improving’ Humanity” for a succinct treatment of Nietzsche’s criticisms. Elsewhere Nietzsche describes modern humanity as “tame domestic animals” (GM II.6).

\(^{53}\) Nietzsche noted on various occasions that many of the values he criticizes can have a positive value Nietzsche notes that compassion has a place (e.g., BGE 293), and that equality is an idea that applies among equals (TI IX.48). The elimination of suffering is a slightly more complicated issue, as there are decidedly different forms of suffering, some of which have a positive value (e.g., the suffering that comes with self-overcoming) and some that do not (e.g., the suffering we inflict on ourselves under the auspices of the ascetic ideal; see GM III).
Man, a portrait that is clearly designed to awaken us from our stupor and shame us into seeing that we are headed towards the diminution of human being.

Nietzsche begins, through the guise of Zarathustra, by alerting us to the fact that the "soil is still rich enough for [planting the seed of man’s highest hope]. But one day this soil will be poor and tame" (Z P.5). His worry should be clear: the time is coming when men will no longer be able to create beyond themselves, when there will be no further self-overcoming, when man’s desire and will has been extirpated. As Gooding-Williams succinctly states, “Wholly satisfied and without suffering, the last man has no desire to achieve something he has not achieved or to make himself into something he is not.” Believing themselves to have achieved what humanity has sought, the Last Men do not desire anything beyond easily attainable goals.

In book three of Zarathustra, “On Virtue That Makes Small”, Nietzsche (Zarathustra) expands upon and elucidates his description of the Last Man. Specifically looking to see if man has become greater or smaller, Zarathustra concludes, sadly, that “everything has become smaller!” The cause of their becoming smaller is due to “their teaching on happiness and virtue”, which aims at mere “contentment”. Eliminating suffering is of the utmost importance: “At bottom these simple ones want one simple thing: that no one harm them”. Thus Zarathustra concludes that these people are mediocre, because they hold quiet contentment and the elimination of suffering to be their goals. Such goals simply contribute to their becoming smaller, just as they accelerates the time when they will no longer be able to create beyond themselves.

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54 For the time being Nietzsche sees that “humanity has still not exhausted its greatest possibilities” (BGE 203). But as he saw all too clearly, with the diminution of man on the horizon, humanity is moving ever closer to losing such possibilities. Thus the urgency of Nietzsche’s rhetoric: modern man is traversing a dangerous path to “the end”. “Is greatness possible today?” (BGE 212).
55 Robert Gooding-Williams, Zarathustra’s Dionysian Modernism, 88.
Part and parcel of the goal of the happiness of the Last Man is the contentment that comes with having achieved the elimination of suffering. With that, one need only sit back and enjoy a life of pleasure, ease, and comfort. In virtue of this Zarathustra condemns these small men for having lost the ability to will anything beyond small, easily attainable goals. Thus Nietzsche laments that "today the will is weakened and diluted by the tastes and virtues of the times" (BGE 212). The ubiquity of this type is a cause of great concern for Nietzsche, for it shows both how seductive and successful the goals of the Last Man are to modern man.

Having explained the worries Nietzsche holds about where modernity might be headed, I now turn to showing how the effort to eliminate suffering achieves something very different from what was intended. While the goals of pleasure, ease, and comfort were the ends towards which people aimed, in achieving this, their success brought them much more. Specifically, Nietzsche argues that in working to eliminate suffering, when the one thing which has enhanced humanity—suffering—is removed, it causes enervation and a weakened will.

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We have seen the general goals of modernity: pleasure, ease, and comfort. Nietzsche criticizes modernity because “what they want to strive for with all their might is the universal, green pasture happiness of the herd, with security, safety, contentment, and an easier life for all” (BGE 44). At the same time, Nietzsche identifies the elimination of suffering as one of the highest values of modernity. All things considered, the high value placed on the elimination of suffering should not be surprising. Throughout this chapter I have sought to show how Nietzsche identifies suffering as one of the most profound problems. As such, the problem of suffering warrants some kind of response.

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56 Coming from “the happiness of weaklings, from resignation” Nietzsche notes how “[t]his modernity made us ill—this indolent peace, this cowardly compromise, the whole virtuous filth of the modern yes and no” (A 1).
Nietzsche’s account identifies a change in modernity’s strategy regarding how to address the problem of suffering. Having failed to offer an explanation of suffering that did not ultimately lead to the devaluation of life—as was the case with the meaning given to suffering under the ascetic ideal—modernity has progressed to a new way of treating suffering. If suffering cannot be given a satisfactory explanation that makes it meaningful and therefore something that can be endured, the obvious way to try and deal with it would be to attempt to eliminate it. This is precisely what Nietzsche identifies: modernity “view[s] suffering itself as something that needs to be abolished” (BGE 44).57

Modernity’s goal of completely eliminating suffering is something Nietzsche finds both laughable and a portent of a forthcoming calamity.58 On the one hand, he finds the goal of eliminating suffering to be misguided, because he regards suffering as part and parcel of life itself. On the other hand, Nietzsche identifies suffering as essential to humanity’s enhancement; without what he calls “the discipline of suffering” (BGE 225), people would not become what they had it in themselves to be. Thus we find that Nietzsche recognizes immense instrumental value in suffering. People need some kind of suffering in their lives in order to develop. Nietzsche claims that “the discipline of suffering” has been, and will continue to be, “the sole cause of every enhancement in humanity so far” (ibid). In other words, humanity has grown best under conditions opposite those valued today.

But there are other reasons why abolishing suffering is a problematic goal, for Nietzsche worries about humanity’s enervation, which he holds would follow directly from the elimination of suffering. After all, Nietzsche’s argument is simple and to the point; he reasons that if suffering is “the sole cause” of human development, and modernity works to abolish suffering,
then human development will be stultified. The supposed “progress” that comes with the elimination of suffering, he worries, will actually result in a loss of vitality and undermine humanity’s ability to engage in self-enhancement. Accordingly, suffering must not be eliminated, but rather should be retained.

One might object that retaining suffering sounds ridiculous, almost as absurd as if Nietzsche were to advocate increasing suffering in the world! At the same time, one might also object that the possibility of successfully eliminating all suffering is absurd, and thus Nietzsche is getting worked up over nothing. Finally, one might reasonably demand that Nietzsche offer some clarification about what kinds of suffering are valuable and what kinds of suffering, presumably, even he regards as lacking any value whatsoever. Setting aside these concerns for the present—I return to this issue in chapter 4—let us try to understand Nietzsche’s concerns.

The frequent imagery of a taut bow and tension necessary for shooting for the farthest goals indicates Nietzsche’s strong belief in the need for resistance and the general agonistic element necessary for the self-enhancement of humanity, an element intricately connected to the suffering a person undergoes. What we need to understand, according to Nietzsche, is that there is something healthy in suffering, something that drives us forward, that keeps us eternally dissatisfied and thus eternally striving to overcome our current state. Thus, where the goal is the total elimination of suffering, Nietzsche finds a formula for disaster, depriving humanity of one of the necessary elements of self-enhancement and thus potential greatness. There is no drive forward, but rather contentedness; there is no dissatisfaction, only quiet contentment; there are no strong wills, only weak wills; there is no self-overcoming, only mediocrity masquerading as progress.
1.6 Whither Humanity?

With an understanding of the three central types of sickness that Nietzsche has diagnosed, now is the time to take stock of the main features of the three types of sickness examined above. To begin, we find humanity suffering from the sickness of bad conscience, in which people are plagued by pervasive feelings of guilt and engage in various forms of self-punishment, leaving them in a state of self-hatred and psychological disarray. If this was not enough to make man a thoroughly fractured being, Nietzsche also diagnoses what I have called the sickness of life-negation, a kind of existential sickness which arises with humanity’s reaction to the problem of suffering. This sickness drives man to an extreme form of life-negation in which life is devalued. Craving a meaning for this suffering, humanity succumbs to the ascetic ideal, which offers an explanation of his suffering. However, the ascetic ideal also turns a person against the world and life. With the devaluation of life and this world, we have the sickness of life-negation in its most common form.

As the Platonic-Christian interpretation of existence starts to come undone, we find humanity at a pivotal moment. Beset by various forms of sickness requiring some kind of response, humanity turns to values Nietzsche associates with an enervated, weakened will and the elimination of suffering. With this we return to the point with which we began, where Nietzsche laments that “the stunting and leveling of European man conceals our greatest danger” (GM I.12). This is where Nietzsche saw humanity headed: “today we see nothing that wants to expand” (ibid). Working to abolish suffering, enervated modern humanity aims at small, easily attainable goals, like pleasure, comfort, and ease. For this reason Nietzsche expresses great worry about where man is headed, lamenting what he sees as the diminution of humanity.
Understanding the various ways in which the particular forms of sickness manifest themselves, not only helps us understand the many intricate threads of Nietzsche’s overall critique, but also illuminates the specific problems that Nietzsche seeks to overcome. Each type of sickness manifests a specific form, from the devaluation of the self, to the devaluation of the world and life, to a misguided sense of human good that results in enervation. Understanding both the ways in which humanity has become sick and the nature of the respective forms of sickness is only the diagnostic part of Nietzsche’s project.

One final aspect of Nietzsche’s diagnosis, only briefly intimated above, has to do with the following remark: “And as for illness: are we not almost tempted to ask whether we can do without it at all?” (GS P.3). Nietzsche recognized that there was, as peculiar as it may sound, a positive aspect to sickness. Reflecting on the value of sickness, Nietzsche declared several times that there is a sense in which we cannot do without it. He clarified how sickness could have a positive aspect when he declared that “sickness can actually be an energetic stimulus to life” (EH I.2). More than that, sickness acts as a spur to higher health. I will return to this idea in chapter 5, where I go on to examine the idea that sickness has a positive role to play in the cultivation of both health and the great health.

Having talked about Nietzsche’s diagnostic project, it should not be forgotten that he often emphasized how his project consisted of two parts, a destructive and a creative part. The role of philosophical physician who diagnoses the ills of modern humanity is only one of Nietzsche’s roles. The diagnosis is necessary for the subsequent project of working to overcome the various forms of sickness, which is the other half of Nietzsche’s fundamental project. I have sought to elucidate the three principle targets of the diagnostic-critical part of Nietzsche’s

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59 See HH P, HH II.356, D 114, GS P.1-4, 120, GM III.9, CW 5, P, EH I.1-2, and III.1 where Nietzsche talks about the value of having been sick and the higher health that emerges from experiencing sickness and overcoming it. Schacht (1983) and Richardson (1996) both emphasize this point.
project, which will set the stage for the affirmative project. The affirmative part of Nietzsche’s project can be understood as articulating his conception of health, and, having an understanding of how he conceives of health, I turn to examining his elusive notion of “the great health.”

In the positive part of Nietzsche’s project, I will argue that he presents various means for overcoming the forms of sickness he has diagnosed. This will be the focus for the next three chapters. In chapter two I will argue that Nietzsche offers a handful of strategies in the second essay of the *Genealogy* which suggest the kind of philosophical therapy that is required to overcome the sickness of bad conscience and help to cultivate what might be called good conscience. In chapter three I will argue that Nietzsche’s conception of life affirmation, or love of life, is modeled on how we come to love. With that I believe Nietzsche offers a process that will help us address the problem of life-negation and illustrates how we might come to love life, despite the presence of suffering and all that is strange, questionable, and terrible. I will then argue in chapter four that Nietzsche’s notion of the will to power, with its emphasis on overcoming resistances and self-overcoming, offers a means of overcoming the sickness of enervation by inculcating a strong will via what he calls “the discipline of suffering”. Finally, having shown how the notions of good conscience, love of life, and the will to overcome resistances contribute to a person’s health by removing various negative elements, in chapter 5 I will show how Nietzsche believes these elements are superseded by a rare, higher notion of health, what he calls “the great health,” a portrait of Nietzsche’s conception of super-human well-being. With this ideal in view, reflecting at the end of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche looks upon what lies before him and asks: “how could we still be satisfied with *modern-day man*?” (GS 382). This is one of the questions he is at pains to get humanity to ask.
CHAPTER 2: NIETZSCHE ON INNOCENCE, GOOD CONSCIENCE, AND RELATED MATTERS

2.1 Introduction

Having surveyed and distinguished the sicknesses that collectively characterize what I called the diminution of humanity, our attention now turns to Nietzsche’s responses. Just as Nietzsche often invokes images of sick, decadent, failed human beings, so too does he repeatedly invoke images of various types that had turned out strong, powerful, and healthy. There is no doubt that, as a general goal, Nietzsche seeks to overcome the continued diminution of humanity that has been precipitated by the various sicknesses to which people have succumbed. More generally he seeks to inaugurate a revaluation of values that helps to put humanity on a path to health, culminating in what he calls the great health, or “the ideal of a human, superhuman well-being” (GS 382).

To speak of the ideal of great health is to get far ahead of ourselves though, for much work needs to be done to create the conditions for the possibility of this new health. Given the various forms of sickness Nietzsche diagnoses, there is much work to be done to treat these sicknesses. Having illuminated the specific sicknesses, what needs to be done is clear: Nietzsche must offer responses so that people no longer see themselves as guilty, worthless, and deserving of punishment; so that people no longer look at the world and life as worthless and redeemed only by a transcendent world; and so that people no longer resign themselves to a life of apathy and lassitude.

60 “But from time to time grant me … a glimpse, grant me just one glimpse of something perfect, completely finished, happy, powerful, triumphant, that still leaves something to fear!” (GM I.12). See also GS 382, GM II.24, TI IX.49, and EH I.2 for three of the more evocative images Nietzsche paints of strong, vital, healthy types.
The present concern in this chapter will be on constructing an account of Nietzsche’s strategies for treating the first of these problems, what I called the sickness of bad conscience.\textsuperscript{61} The primary problems that arise with this sickness are pervasive feelings of guilt and the continuous need to engage in self-punishment. In conjunction with these two major concerns, Nietzsche seeks to disabuse us of various related issues, including the devaluation of all that makes us human, specifically the instincts, the body, the senses, and desires. Similarly, he seeks to disabuse us of the moral world view—including ideas of God, free will, sin, and punishment—which legitimizes not only our devaluation of the human, but also legitimizes our propensity to self-punishment and torture.

While Nietzsche is quite vocal about the smorgasbord of problems related to the problem of guilt, he often comes across as tentative about how we might genuinely free ourselves from deep feelings of guilt, bad conscience, and the related notions that reinforce such feelings. Beyond mere diagnosis, Nietzsche offers explicit suggestions in the second essay of the Genealogy about what might be done to reduce, if not eliminate feelings of bad conscience and consciousness of guilt. These suggestions are not only brief and tentative, but Nietzsche questions their efficacy at the same time he is offering them. He nonetheless seems to hold out the possibility that at some point in the future we might completely overcome not only belief in God, but also the concepts that rest upon and reinforce belief in God, including sin, free will, punishment, and guilt.

\textsuperscript{61} On the other hand, for all of the problems it has caused, the sickness of bad conscience has transformed humanity into something it otherwise could not have become. For this reason Nietzsche recognizes the immense value of bad conscience because of the new “developmental possibilities” it has opened up. “Let us immediately add that … with the appearance on earth of an animal soul turned against itself … something so new … and full of future had come into being that the appearance of the earth was thereby essentially changed” (GM II.16). Nietzsche goes on to say that bad conscience is a sickness, “but a sickness as pregnancy is a sickness” (GM II.19). Speaking about GM II.16, Schacht notes that Nietzsche “is quick to draw attention to the potentiality and promise implicit in this development” (Schacht, 1983; 275). Following Schacht, Richardson (1996) and Ridley (1998) similarly emphasize this point.
Nietzsche suggests three strategies that might help people emancipate themselves from pervasive feelings of guilt. He begins by suggesting that a second innocence, freed from consciousness of guilt, might follow the spread of atheism; he then points out that the ancient Greeks were able to keep bad conscience and guilt at bay, which at the very least suggests that bad conscience and guilt were not inevitable, but rather a contingent development, which means that they could presumably be overcome; finally, Nietzsche raises the idea that we might someday affix bad conscience to all of our anti-natural feelings (e.g., belief in an afterlife), thereby overcoming pervasive feelings of guilt for our nature and natural inclinations. I will argue that, while each of these suggestions at the end of GM II is an intriguing idea, taken individually, Nietzsche is right to question their efficacy. For that reason I will argue that the three ideas collectively point to what ultimately needs to be done, overcoming the ascetic ideal which tethers us to the moral modality that enables and legitimizes pervasive feelings of guilt. The method through which Nietzsche seeks to slowly disentangle us from this deeply entrenched ideal and the deeply entrenched feelings of guilt: philosophical therapy.

With Nietzsche’s diagnoses and his goals before us, the rest of the chapter will proceed as follows: in section II I briefly summarize the problems of the sickness of bad conscience. The goal is to get a clearer sense of what needs to be overcome, which should help show how this might be accomplished. In section III I survey Nietzsche's treatment of guilt from 1878-1888, working to elucidate both his understanding of guilt as well as the crux of his critique. With an understanding of guilt in hand, in section IV I turn to an examination of the three strategies

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62 I take this from Frithjof Bergmann, “Nietzsche’s Critique of Morality”, who contrasts the modality of a code with its content. Referring to the [Platonic-Christian] moral modality Bergmann notes that “one could then say that the apparatus of agency, selfhood, freedom, responsibility, blame, and guilt furnished the accoutrements for the modality to which we are accustomed” (Bergmann, 1988; 34). William Schroeder offers helpful clarification of the notion of modality, explaining that it “seems to consist of [the following] elements”: “the breadth of the code”; “the relation of the code to the subject”; “the manner of enforcement”; “the metaphysical construction of the subject/agent”; “the ultimate goal of the code”; “the basic evaluative dimension”; and “the emotional tenor that pervades its experience of the code” (Schroeder, Lecture on Bergmann on Nietzsche, September 2005).
Nietzsche suggests in *Genealogy* II about how one might treat the sickness of bad conscience, looking at atheism, what we might learn from the Greek conception of the gods, and affixing bad conscience to our “unnatural inclinations”. I argue that, while the strategies Nietzsche offers are intriguing, they are also not likely to succeed without additional work, a fact he acknowledges. Importantly though, amidst these puzzling strategies, Nietzsche lays the groundwork for what might be done to precipitate their success. Finally, in section V, I lay out an account of Nietzsche’s philosophical therapy, beginning with an account of his therapeutic method, before turning to its application to the problems of guilt and self-punishment.  

2.2 Preliminaries

To get a better understanding of what might prove the best possible treatment to help us overcome the problems of pervasive feelings of guilt and the predilection for self-punishment, let us briefly summarize the details of Nietzsche’s diagnosis in the second essay of the *Genealogy*. At the end of the story Nietzsche finds that human beings have become “repulsive creatures who could not get rid of a deep displeasure with themselves” (GM III.11). Grounded in the internalization of man, his subsequent desire to inflict cruelty on himself, and legitimated by indebtedness to God, the sickness of bad conscience can be understood as a pervasive feeling of guilt, where one is, by one’s very nature, in the wrong, and for this reason one is turned against oneself, engaging in unrelenting self-torture.

This *deep* displeasure, marked by torturous feelings of guilt, is one of the primary targets of Nietzsche’s diagnosis. The qualification ‘deep’ points to a distinguishing feature of what Nietzsche targets: the *pervasive* nature of guilt, i.e., when displeasure with oneself, unrelenting

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63 While Nietzsche does not use the phrase “philosophical therapy”, his various practical suggestions can be understood as a kind of therapy, as will be shown below in section 2.5. What we might call the “therapeutic Nietzsche” has become an increasingly common reading. See Magnus (1988), Leiter (2002), Solomon (2003), Gemes (2006), Janaway (2007), Ure (2009), and Ansell-Pearson (2011).
feelings of guilt, and self-torture become a person’s natural state. A source of such guilt that continues to persist today can be seen in the common denigration of anything bodily, be it the body itself, as well as the desires, sexual or otherwise, that we attribute to the “flesh”. The natural feelings for many people with respect to the body, desire, and sex, are feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and repression.

Turning to the second major target of Nietzsche’s diagnosis, people’s predilection for self-torture, the goal seems straightforward enough: people must find a way to not only stop torturing themselves, but also stop creating reasons to torture and punish themselves. This may prove particularly difficult, if Nietzsche is correct that people welcome suffering as long as there is a reason for it. On Nietzsche’s diagnosis this is due to the fact that when certain drives (e.g., domination; control) are denied their former outlets they do not cease to make their demands, and with nowhere else to go, they turn inwards against the person.

Given these features of the sickness of bad conscience, the work that needs to be done is clear: human beings must learn to overcome both the poisonous feelings of guilt that chronically infect them, as well as the need to torture themselves under the auspices that it is a justified punishment. Nietzsche recognized that neither of these problems would admit of a quick or easy fix.

Given how entrenched our feelings of guilt are, given that many other related notions—God, sin, free will, responsibility, and punishment—help buttress these feelings of guilt, and

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64 This needs to be distinguished from more localized feelings of guilt. This distinction between “deep” guilt, and “locally reactive guilt” comes from Risse (2001). Like Risse, I believe Nietzsche’s primary concern lies with deep guilt, which he calls “existential guilt”, not with local guilt. More will be said about this in section III below.

65 For example, consider Plato’s claim in the Phaedo that “a man’s concern is not with the body but that, as far as he can, he turns away from the body towards the soul” (64e). Plato goes on to say that the body is a hindrance in the search for knowledge, as it is a source of deception (65b). Similarly, in Matthew 26:41 we find that “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak”.

given how habituated we have become to torturing ourselves, nothing less than a complete revision of our moral modality is necessary. To this end, one might ask, how do we work to completely supplant a moral modality that has become second nature? As Nietzsche was wont to say, before one could create a new edifice, one must first destroy the edifice in place. How then might we destroy the moral modality of the ascetic ideal that feeds our belief about our own guilt and helps to legitimize self-torture? We need to learn to think differently, Nietzsche says, which includes seeing fictions for what they are. To this end he engages in a kind of philosophical therapy. I believe it is this project which has the greatest likelihood of helping a person overcome both belief in guilt and the ideal that sustains it, to say nothing of our predilection for beating ourselves up.

2.3 Guilt in Nietzsche’s Writings

Despite the centrality of bad conscience and guilt in essay two of the *Genealogy*, elsewhere Nietzsche spends comparatively little time on the subject. This is surprising, and may lead one to underestimate the significance of guilt as a target in Nietzsche’s overall critique of morality. However, as I sought to show in chapter one, pervasive feelings of guilt and bad conscience are a serious problem Nietzsche seeks at once to understand and overcome. In spite of the fact Nietzsche offers no sustained analysis or evaluation of guilt elsewhere in his writings, the forays against guilt he does undertake can nonetheless sharpen our understanding of his critique. Having a better understanding of Nietzsche’s critique should also provide insight into how guilt might be treated, which is our overarching goal.

Surveying his writings from *Human All Too Human* through *Ecce Homo* we find a consistent view of guilt. One of Nietzsche’s primary claims, which he frequently notes, is the idea that guilt derives from false or imaginary causes. As such, guilt is used to inveigh against
humanity’s natural inclinations. Nietzsche also expresses concern that, along with other notions like sin and punishment, guilt is used “to block every elevation and ennoblement of humanity” (A 49). Nietzsche’s central claim about guilt can be seen in an evocative aphorism from GS:

“Although the shrewdest judges of the witches and even the witches themselves were convinced of the guilt of witchcraft, this guilt still did not exist. This is true of all guilt” (GS 250, emphasis mine).

Nietzsche’s point is clear: while the feeling of guilt is real, there is no real justification for it. If the feeling of guilt is due to imaginary causes, then it is a mistake to feel guilty. Moreover, to believe in guilt, he later says, is to corrupt the soul (A 58). This is in line with his belief that guilt is a means to devalue the human. Given this position, Nietzsche states his goal in a remark in 1888, where he says that “we immoralists in particular are trying as hard as we can to rid the world of the concepts of guilt and punishment and cleanse psychology, history, nature, and social institutions and sanctions of these concepts” (TII VI.7).

That his goal is to cleanse human psychology, and to get us past not only belief in guilt, but also the conceptual machinery that posits and reinforces belief in guilt, points to the therapeutic nature of his positive project.

With his emphasis on the idea that there is no justification for guilt, one might worry tension exists between these claims and Nietzsche’s naturalistic account about the origin of guilt lying in the material concept of debt. This apparent tension can be resolved if, as was briefly noted above, we distinguish between what Risse calls locally-reactive guilt, i.e., “a responsive

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67 “The concepts of guilt and punishment … invented against science”, they are “lies through and through”, and are used “to destroy people’s senses of causation.” For these reasons Nietzsche pronounces guilt as a crime meant “to block every elevation and ennoblement of humanity” (A 49).
68 If there was any ambiguity in Nietzsche’s position, he remarked in a note that “we immoralists prefer not to believe in ‘guilt’” (WLN 10 [108]).
69 Nietzsche first presents this thesis in GM II.4. “The feeling of guilt, of personal obligation … had its origin … in the oldest and most primitive relationship among persons there is, in the relationship between buyer and seller, creditor and debtor” (GM II.8).
“attitude” which “captures a tension in one’s agency that arises from a local failure”\(^{70}\), and existential guilt, which is “a condition that shapes one’s whole existence” and includes “a persistent feeling of imperfection” (Risse, 2005; 46). Risse argues, rightly I believe, that Nietzsche is not particularly concerned with locally-reactive guilt, but instead directs his attention to existential guilt. Existential guilt, or what I have called a pervasive feeling of guilt, is the kind of guilt that Nietzsche diagnoses as grounded in a fiction and thus unjustified.\(^{71}\) Similarly, belief in the inherent corruption of human nature, which legitimizes feelings of existential guilt, is likewise diagnosed as a fiction. Existential guilt is the locus of Nietzsche’s concern, and, in virtue of how deeply harmful it is to humanity, must be overcome.

The distinction between locally-reactive and existential guilt, while never explicitly stated by Nietzsche, is clearly at play in his work. Having pointed to existential guilt as Nietzsche’s true target, Risse goes on to add that Nietzsche’s “vision of the future of humanity can accommodate [locally-reactive] guilt” (Risse, 2005; 46). More than that, May claims that Nietzsche is not—and could not be—arguing for the complete abolition of all forms of guilt. “The elimination of such guilt would be impossible: for guilt is an entirely natural—indeed, inevitable—feeling on the part of the self-responsible individual who has failed to respect standards to which he or she is loyal” (May, 1999; 68). In line with common sense, May suggests that locally-reactive guilt is an indelible part of human life and may also play a positive role in a person’s life. In line with Nietzsche’s emphasis on self-discipline and self-mastery, May continues, noting that “guilt plays a major role in inducing the individual to persevere with arduous ethical ambitions that, for Nietzsche, are indispensable to life-enhancement” (ibid).

\(^{70}\) Risse then adds that it is “an experience of reprehensible failure in response to specific actions”.

\(^{71}\) One might question whether all forms of pervasive guilt are unjustified. For example, one might imagine a situation in which a person is responsible for a great number of deaths, causing him to experiences pervasive feelings of guilt because of the sheer magnitude of the number of deaths. This guilt could become all-encompassing, and yet be justified. This kind of example will be addressed below, after some important distinctions about the kinds of existential guilt have been made, and after examining what we might call Nietzsche’s rehabilitated notion of guilt.
How then are we to understand guilt here? May helpfully defines guilt as “a highly reflexive feeling of regret or inadequacy at failing to honor one’s obligations” (May, 1999; 57). Reginster offers a definition of ordinary guilt, describing it as “the diminution of one’s worth as a person experienced when one falls short of certain normative expectations” (Reginster, 2011; 57). There is no reason to believe Nietzsche would have any serious qualms with these accounts. Furthermore, both May and Reginster capture the basic idea of Nietzsche’s account in GM II 4-6. This is the form of guilt that maps on to what Risse called “locally reactive guilt”, and it is this form of guilt which is not the problematic kind of guilt under Nietzsche’s diagnosis. The problem is the pervasive feeling of guilt, i.e., existential guilt.

Returning to Nietzsche’s understanding in “On the Pale Criminal”, he offers a penetrating analysis of the debilitating sickness of one kind of existential guilt. In doing so, he also intimates the more honest idea of locally-reactive guilt. In this section Nietzsche writes of a person who was able to perform an action, but could not live up to it once it had been done. In these cases, the sting of conscience is powerfully felt. As Nietzsche sees it, the criminal commits an act and should be done with it. However something after the act cuts into him, filling him with consciousness of guilt. “An image made this pale human pale”, Nietzsche says. “He was equal to his deed when he committed it, but he could not bear its image once he had done it” (Z I.6). This is the “madness” Nietzsche refers to that comes after the act. But it is not just guilt for this one act, but instead becomes all-consuming. The worry is that, as the criminal is unable to face up to his actions, the action comes to define him, where “the exception reversed itself to the essence” (ibid). In this type of case the criminal becomes poisoned by bad conscience: feeling that he has not only violated the values of society, but is perpetually in violation as guilty, the criminal

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72 Elsewhere Nietzsche laments that “often enough the criminal is no match for his deed” (BGE 109). Cf., TI I.10, where Nietzsche writes: “Don’t be cowardly about your actions! Don’t abandon them afterwards!—The pang of conscience is obscene.”
comes to violate his own values, e.g., by later accepting society’s values as his own. The madness of which Nietzsche speaks comes to infect the criminal in his thoughts, his deeds, and his image of himself. He is now guilty through and through.

But there is more to it, according to Nietzsche’s analysis, for he also talks about another form of “madness” related to his act. Nietzsche calls it madness “before the deed”, as it comes with the motive prior to the act. Despite an apparent thirst for “the bliss of the knife”, the pale criminal convinces himself that he undertook the act not for the blood his soul wanted, but rather to rob his victim. Peculiarly, Nietzsche claims that this way the criminal would not have to be ashamed of his act. Nietzsche seems to be gesturing at a point he would examine in the second essay of the *Genealogy*: the aggression-instinct has been denied its natural outlet with the advent of society. Thus we see a person who exhibits the guilt that comes with the pressures of being a part of society and the repression of his animal instincts. The pale criminal feels a twofold sting of guilt: both for what he was doing, which he sought to cover up with his purported motive, and for allowing the exception to become constitutive of who he is.

The problematic form of guilt, as Nietzsche sees it, is a deep sickness, pervasive and all-consuming, and it is this kind of existential guilt that Nietzsche seeks to understand and treat. While not explicitly distinguished by Nietzsche, there appear to be two kinds of existential guilt that he diagnosed, what we might call inherited guilt and developed guilt. In virtue of its name, inherited guilt should be clear enough; it is the kind of guilt that we take to be part and parcel of who we are. Then there is what might be called developed guilt, which is the kind of guilt Nietzsche diagnosed in “On the Pale Criminal”, where a singular act comes to define a person.

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73 This comes out in what Nietzsche refers to as madness “before the deed”, where the criminal persuades himself prior to the act that he was not aiming to kill, but rather to commit robbery. As Nietzsche describes the pale criminal, he is haunted by the image of the deed; what he is pointing to in the madness before the deed is that the feelings of guilt he feels are compounded by how he feels guilt regarding the motivation of his act.
More than defining a person, this kind of guilt develops to the point where it torments a person unremittingly.

Beginning with inherited guilt, we have what is a deeper kind of existential guilt. As Nietzsche describes it in the *Genealogy*, it is defined by a “hatred of the human”. People have inherited pervasive feelings of guilt towards the very things that constitute human being: the animal in man, the instincts, the body, the sensual, and desires. This is a peculiar aspect of human psychology that persists today with people’s attitudes towards sexuality and the body. One can trace this denigration of the body back through the history of Christianity all the way back to Plato.\(^7\) This kind of guilt, to which many people are subject, often unbeknownst to them, arises in response to our supposedly corrupt nature. Cal Trask, in Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, is an example of someone suffering from a deep sense of inherited guilt.\(^5\) He feels that there is something dark inside him, something that makes him gravitate towards cruelty, and thus something for which he feels continuous guilt. Upon learning the truth about his mother, a woman who can be best described as a sociopath, Cal feels that he has inherited the same basic nature, essentially confirming his beliefs. He thus looks at himself as fatally flawed, that his path is determined for him, and that he must somehow atone for his inherent guilt.\(^6\)

To get a clearer view of developed guilt, we can look to Tom Hamilton in *East of Eden*. His sister, Dessie, had been experiencing stomach pains, which she described as a pain that “scampered up from her side and across her abdomen, a nibbling pinch and then a little grab and then a hard catch and finally a fierce grip”, during which “the outside world was blotted out” (Steinbeck, 393). Despite trying to hide her excruciating pains, Tom inevitably sees her pale and

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\(^7\) For example, see Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* and Plato’s *Phaedo* and *Republic*.

\(^5\) Belief in original sin is one example of the supposed corruption of our nature. Steinbeck offers an evocative meditation on the idea of original sin and the generational transmission of sin and guilt in *East of Eden*.

\(^6\) Interestingly, the Trask family servant, Lee, acts as a therapist for Cal Trask, ultimately getting Cal to see that neither his supposed inherited dark nature, nor his various acts of wanton cruelty, define him. Rather, through his actions, Cal can forge his own destiny.
in obvious pain, at which time he gives her a concoction of “good old-fashioned salts”
(Steinbeck, 402), which he believes will help treat her stomach pains [what he believes to be a
stomach ache, based on what his sister has told him]. However, her condition immediately gets
worse, he contacts a doctor, who upbraids him for what he had given her, and then she dies.
While the cause of death is not revealed, Tom believes that he caused his sister’s death and is
beset by profound feelings of guilt. This one event in his life comes to define Tom; as Nietzsche
said, the exception became the essence. These feelings become so pervasive that Tom
reinterprets much of his life, e.g., his frequent daydreams about future projects, as well as his
inability to carry them through to fruition, as a series of failures for which he is guilty. In
essence, because of one particular failure, Tom comes to look upon his entire life as a failure, for
which he feels an all-encompassing guilt.77

These two examples from East of Eden capture precisely the deep sickness that needs to
be treated: pervasive feelings of guilt and the will to self-punishment. Having diagnosed the
problem, Nietzsche would proceed to characterize this guilt in the same way that he
characterized the guilt of so-called witches: even though the witches, Cal Trask, and Tom
Hamilton all felt guilty, this guilt had no justification; it was grounded in imaginary causes. We
have seen Nietzsche’s diagnosis, just as we have seen his explanation for such guilt and self-
torture in GM II. What we most desire from Nietzsche is an account of how to successfully treat
it.

With respect to this final question, there is evidence that Nietzsche was not entirely
certain if existential guilt could be fully overcome, certainly not in the immediate future, nor

77 One might counter that these two kinds of existential guilt are exceptions and not the rule. Examples like the ones
Steinbeck offers are, I would argue, not uncommon. The nature of guilt was clearly one of Steinbeck’s concerns in
East of Eden, and his novel taps into concerns that have been the source of meditation as far back as the book of
Genesis. Such examples show that people do have a tendency to turn an isolated act into an act that defines them,
just as people have a tendency to see themselves as inherently corrupt. And for both of these reasons, people come
to see themselves as irrevocably guilty.
what measures might be most effective in freeing people from deeply entrenched feelings of guilt. This seems to be the case in a note from 1888, titled “Redemption from all guilt”, where Nietzsche writes that “we halcyonians especially are trying with all our might to withdraw, banish, and extinguish the concepts of guilt and punishment from the world, when our most serious endeavor is to purify psychology, morality” (WP 765). While Nietzsche and those like him are trying, Nietzsche never offers an explanation of how one might purify psychology or redeem people from guilt. It is one thing to point out that we have been seduced by a fictitious psychology, but it is another thing altogether to untangle ourselves from the grips of a fictitious psychology that has held us captive for millennia. Ultimately, this project is an ongoing project, as Nietzsche recognized.

One could argue that one of the goals of the Genealogy is cleansing psychology, though this goal animates Nietzsche’s writings from Human All Too Human onwards. Furthermore, if we understand “cleansing psychology” as part of Nietzsche’s therapeutic project, we can understand most of his writings as being engaged in philosophical therapy in one way or another. However, prior to explicating the therapeutic method that runs throughout Nietzsche’s works, and just what it needs to “cleanse”, our attention will turn to the specific strategies he briefly contemplates at the conclusion of the second essay of the Genealogy. In these three passages Nietzsche directs our attention not only to three strategies, but within these three strategies he points to the ideal that reinforces pervasive feelings of guilt and our tendency to torture ourselves, and thus what ultimately needs to be done to overcome this particular sickness.

2.4 A Survey of Strategies

Towards the end of the second essay of the Genealogy Nietzsche ruminates on three ways a person might overcome the sickness of bad conscience. He surveys these three ideas with great
brevity, never devoting more than a page or two to each respective idea. Furthermore, he never goes into any detail on how to put these ideas into practice. He makes a few remarks about the potential success of these strategies, pointing out that, at best, they seem to be strategies for which humanity is not yet ready, though we may be ready at some time in the future; at worst they are not likely to succeed. Given the pessimism about these strategies, one might wonder why Nietzsche mentions them at all. It seems highly unlikely that Nietzsche would suggest three ideas that he feels are non-starters. Thus we find a puzzle about what we should take from the suggestions Nietzsche offers at the end of *Genealogy II*.

My claim is that, while these suggestions might not work on their own, they point us in two related directions. First, they point to what Nietzsche saw as necessary for overcoming feelings of existential guilt: a new ideal to overcome the ascetic ideal (which helps entrench the moral modality that supports existential guilt, among other insidious feelings). Secondly, the strategies suggested in *Genealogy II* point to more general approach on how we might work to free ourselves from the clutches of the ascetic ideal: philosophical therapy. More than that, Nietzsche’s therapeutic practices work to transform a person’s beliefs, emotions, and her general approach to life, and thus offer a means of treating pervasive feelings of guilt and the need to engage in self-punishment. The aim of this section will be to examine and elucidate what Nietzsche had in mind in suggesting atheism might initiate a “kind of *second innocence*” (II.20); what he was trying to convey in saying that “there are more noble ways of making use of the fabrication of gods than for this self-crucifixion and self-defilement of man” (II.23); and what is necessary to successfully separate bad conscience from humanity’s natural inclinations and wed it to humanity’s unnatural inclinations (II.24).
Atheism

“Assuming that we have by now entered into the reverse movement, one might with no little probability deduce from the unstoppable decline of faith in the Christian god that there would already be a considerable decline in human consciousness of debt [Schuldbewusstseins] as well; indeed the prospect cannot be dismissed that the perfect and final victory of atheism might free humanity from this entire feeling of having debts to its beginnings, its causa prima. Atheism and a kind of second innocence belong together” (GM II.20). The idea here is fairly clear: if consciousness of debt [Schuldbewusstseins] is predicated on indebtedness to God that can never be repaid, for which human beings are eternally in the wrong, then no longer being indebted to God would reduce and ultimately eliminate feelings of this indebtedness. It stands to reason that if there is no God to be indebted to, then there should be no feelings of indebtedness. Thus Nietzsche concludes by saying that atheism goes together with a new innocence, free from the pervasive feelings of debt [guilt] human beings feel.

Given the inference Nietzsche draws, one cannot help but look at the religious climate today and ask what went wrong with his prediction. There are good reasons to think that “the unstoppable decline of faith in the Christian god” was greatly exaggerated. Already in the 1880s Nietzsche saw both that belief was not being undermined, as well as the reason for this.

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78 I agree with Risse (2001) and Leiter (2002) that Schuld should here be translated as ‘debt’, as Diethe translates it, and not as ‘guilt’ as Kaufmann, Smith, and Clark & Swensen translate it. First, ‘debt’ fits the context of section 20 and the preceding section, and makes the context of section 21 clearer, when Nietzsche introduces the moralization of debt into guilt.

79 One might question if the Christian’s experience of God is grounded in this indebtedness about which Nietzsche talks. If it isn’t, then it seems that a different explanation of the feeling of guilt is in order. Given the belief that existence is a gift from God, to say nothing of the belief that God sacrificed his son for humanity, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Christian’s experience of God is one of infinite indebtedness, as Nietzsche surmises.

80 Europe may have become progressively less and less religious, though it is not clear if there has been a decrease in feelings of guilt. In comparison, the United States and the Middle East seem to have seen an increase in fundamentalist Christian and Islamic beliefs. Not surprisingly, pervasive talk of sin, responsibility, guilt, and punishment mark these cultures. Not only does this infect the people who genuinely believe in it, but the constant barrage of religious language can affect those who seek to overcome it. That this is so points to the possibility that such beliefs have become a deeper part of us than we realize.
People do not have any real understanding about what the death of God means. The problem goes deeper, a fact which Nietzsche also recognized: for even with the decline in the belief in God, most people still needed it, and thus the belief persists. These facts go some way in explaining the apparent failure of the diminution of feelings of guilt at present, though they do not preclude a genuine change in the future. However, the problem runs deeper still.

In theory the atheist rejects the whole God-centered world and all of the related elements, including not only God, but importantly, the atheist should also reject many conceptions of free will, responsibility, sin, guilt, reward, punishment, and the afterlife. What is most peculiar—and most problematic—is how deeply embedded in our psyche consciousness of God has become, to say nothing of all the associated beliefs that are part of the moral modality. The depth to which these ideas are embedded constitutes a serious challenge, suggesting why atheism might not be wholly effective in overcoming bad conscience. People may come to profess that they no longer believe in God, but the rest of the moral modality remains firmly in place.

As a telling example, let us recall how Nietzsche diagnosed Schopenhauer, who was an ardent atheist who still believed in the basic moral edifice that was supported by belief in God. People fail to understand that with the destruction of the foundation—God—everything else should crumble with it. “If you break off a main tenet, the belief in God, you smash the whole system along with it” (TI IX.5). However, the fact of the matter is that the destruction of the foundation did not bring down everything else with it. Nietzsche was clearly aware of this problem, for he noted already in 1882 that, while God is dead, like the madman, he had come too soon. “Given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his

81 See GS 343 for a concise statement of Nietzsche’s concern that the recognition and understanding of the death of God has not arrived yet. In GS 125 Nietzsche offers a similar, albeit more poetic assessment about how “this tremendous event is still on its way”.
82 See GS 347.
shadow” (GS 108). Thus we should expect that many of the related beliefs, like belief in sin, free will, responsibility, punishment, and guilt will remain part of our moral landscape. For these reasons we can understand how pervasive feelings of guilt have not subsided in any significant way.

Nietzsche clearly anticipated that the “shadows of God” would remain for the foreseeable future, and he had a clear understanding why this was the case. Nietzsche notes how “for many people’s power of comprehension, the event is itself far too great, distant, and out of the way even for its tidings to be thought of as having arrived yet” (GS 343). But the claim that is most relevant here is that only a select few “know at all what this event really means—and, now that this faith has been undermined, how much must collapse because it was built on this faith, leaned on it, had grown into it—for example, our entire European morality” (ibid). What follows, he goes on to say, is a long period of destruction. One could justifiably question if this period of destruction has in fact followed. At most, the battle continues to be fought.

While Nietzsche was able to see that the repercussions of the death of God were still to come, we can question if atheism would precipitate a second innocence. The fact of the matter is that people are still prone to overwhelming feelings of existential guilt. Given that, we want to know why atheism fails to precipitate a new innocence, where we are free from pervasive feelings of guilt. Ridley notes, interestingly, that “it is certainly part of Nietzsche’s project, then,

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83 Nietzsche made very clear one of the tasks that lay before him: “And we—we must still defeat his shadow as well!” (GS 108). The question is how to defeat this “shadow”. Intriguingly, five years later Nietzsche would write “that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable—is already starting to cast its first shadow over Europe” (GS 343).

84 Interestingly, as Nietzsche noted in TI IX.5, the very death of God would result in (Christian) morality becoming more entrenched. “They [the English] have got rid of the Christian God, and now think that they have to hold on to Christian morality more than ever”. Nietzsche makes a suggestive remark when he observes that “it seems to me that the religious instinct is indeed growing vigorously” (BGE 53).

85 Pippin helpfully explains Nietzsche’s point, stating that “it is certainly true that these atheists do not yet appreciate that a great more of the stability of their moral lives is affected by the ‘death of God.’ They do not appreciate that their whole picture of human psychology, human sociality, and virtually all nonreligious value is now threatened, that belief in God cannot be so isolated and simply given up” (Pippin, 2010; 51, 13n).
to show how the valuations of Christian morality can survive the advent of atheism, at least for a
time” (Ridley, 2005; 42). With this, Ridley goes on to say, we see that part of Nietzsche’s project
is also to show how guilt can similarly withstand the advent of atheism. 86 Beyond Ridley, several
commentators, including May, Risse, Leiter, Owen, and Hatab, have sought to address this very
question.

May notes that, even with the advent of atheism, Nietzsche saw that the religious instinct
was too deeply embedded in humanity, and thus it was left “untouched” by atheism (May, 1999;
38). May goes on to say that “atheism, in the simple sense of not believing in a deity, is
insufficient to abolish belief in [timeless, absolute, impartial] standards; and so such atheism will
not, itself, lead to a ‘second innocence’” (May, 1999; 68). Owen offers a clear and concise
statement of the core issue: “the decline of belief in God does not weaken our sense of guilt
because we remain captivated by a metaphysical picture (what Nietzsche will address in the next
essay as ‘the ascetic ideal’) in which this moralized concept of guilt is held in place” (Owen,
2007; 109). May and Ridley capture Nietzsche’s basic point: our Platonic-Christian-based values
are too deeply a part of us to be summarily destroyed by the advent of atheism alone.

Leiter offers an additional thought on the issue, writing that “the concept of ‘debt’ [guilt]
has been ‘moralized’ in a way that makes it invulnerable to atheism” (Leiter, 2002; 239). To say
that debt [guilt] is invulnerable to atheism just reiterates the question, for we want to know why
guilt is invulnerable to atheism, why moralization has this effect. Leiter asks the question about
the “entanglement” of belief in God and guilt, and why no longer believing in God fails to
eliminate feelings of guilt. Getting to the crux of his interpretation, Leiter claims that
“Nietzsche’s implicit suggestion is that this drive towards self-torture is too powerful a psychic

86 Surprisingly, in Ridley’s excellent book on the Genealogy, Nietzsche’s Conscience, he remains silent on the
claims of GM IL20.
force for a mere cognitive proposition, like the denial of God’s existence, to have any force” (Leiter, 2002; 240).

Hatab also considers Nietzsche’s suggestion that a “second innocence” might follow the ascendance of atheism. Hatab explains that it is unlikely to succeed “because of the two-track development of religion joined with ‘moralization,’ with the internalization of debt and guilt culminating in bad conscience” (Hatab, 2008; 103). Hatab elaborates by pointing to “a distinction between mere religious ‘belief,’ which might succumb to the force of modern atheism, and moral-religious values that are not a matter of mere cognition but the full shaping of a meaningful way of life” (ibid). That is to say, it is not religious belief, e.g., belief in god, that atheism will be unable to overcome, but rather the “moral-religious values” that have developed in tandem with belief in god.

According to May, Owen, Leiter, and Hatab, Nietzsche’s suggestion is beset by an almost insuperable problem: our entrenched belief in the whole Platonic-Christian moral modality. Is this reason though to downplay Nietzsche’s apparent optimism? As Risse asks, “what we want to know is whether there is a hope for us to leave the bad conscience behind” (Risse, 2001; 70). Risse goes on to characterize Nietzsche’s message as one that evinces optimism, while making clear that we need to be cautious. Reflecting on Nietzsche’s optimism and confidence, Risse reasons that in time, perhaps in 200 years as Nietzsche imagines, this development will be underway. That is to say, people will have come to recognize and understand the full scope of the death of God, including all that must perish with it. However, Risse is right to note that just as the advent of bad conscience was a change of great magnitude, its disappearance would...

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87 In a latter adumbration on this, Leiter reiterates that “the reason, then, that atheism cannot defeat the moralized concept of ‘debt’ is because the reasons for this moralization—the drive to self-torture that grows out of the bad conscience as internalized cruelty—are so powerful in the psyche that they make real atheism impossible. Indeed, the suggestion appears to be that belief in God has become an epiphenomenon of the will to self-torture; giving up belief in God, by itself, would simply not affect the deep, underlying structure of internalized aggression that originally gave rise to that belief” (Leiter, 2002; 241).
likewise be a great change. The big question is what needs to be done to precipitate a genuine understanding of what the death of God means.

The problem, as Nietzsche has worked to get us to see, is that for two millennia we have had the entire Christian salvation machinery—God, sin, free will, responsibility, guilt, punishment—burned into our being. To simply remove God from the story will not immediately undo everything that comes with it, for the entire system is too deeply a part of us. The crucial task is figuring out how to treat a problem that has had two millennia to root itself in our psychological make-up. In light of the problems with mere atheism as the cure, the work that needs to be done should be clear. Hitherto people have simply ripped off the top of the weed, without any consideration that the root system, much larger than the weed we see above the soil, is still deeply embedded in the soil. What needs to be done is to dig out the root of the weed, for then and only then will the weed be completely removed. Similarly, the roots on which guilt grows must be completely removed.

People need to see that atheism alone is not a sufficient condition for overcoming belief in and/or feeling of existential guilt, though it seems to be a necessary condition. More work needs to be done to completely untangle a person from the whole moral modality to which we adhere. Nietzsche not only recognized this, but has the resources to address this issue. The

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88 Pippin equates “pale atheists” with the “last man” (see Pippin, 2010; 30). This seems right to me, and helps explain the superficial “comprehension” of the meaning of the death of God that we see in GS 125 and elsewhere. Pippin thus reminds us of the reaction to the madman’s claim about the death of God, for the madman’s audience mock the announcement, indicating their thoughtlessness. These “pale atheists” are clearly missing the significance of the event announced, a worry Nietzsche was right to express. Pippin goes on to say that “Nietzsche goes out of his way to suggest that what we normally regard as ‘atheism’ is far too simplistic a description of what it would be truly to ‘incorporate’ this truth [that God is dead]” (Pippin, 2010; 50). Nietzsche was surely right to say that “if we simply called ourselves godless (to use an old expression), or unbelievers, or even immoralists, we would not think that these words came near to describing us” (GS 346).

89 One might here ask: how it is that people have overcome the Platonic-Christian moral modality? Legitimately one could ask: has anyone genuinely and completely overcome the Platonic-Christian moral modality?
suggestion about the additional work that must be undertaken has been repeatedly emphasized: philosophical therapy.

**The Greek Gods as a Model**

In roughly one page, Nietzsche makes an intriguing observation in GM II.23 that suggests an alternative way of treating, if not avoiding, the problem of existential guilt. He begins by noting “that there are more noble ways of making use of the fabrication of gods”. That is, the gods need not be used as a means for self-punishment, nor as a legitimization of self-punishment. The gods can be put to a positive use, like the Greek gods, whom Nietzsche characterizes as manifestations of the animal in man, the very things that Christianity would go on to devalue with its conception of God. Nietzsche notes that the Greek gods represent a different ideal from the Christian ideal.  

In contrast to Christianity, which exploits bad conscience and legitimizes man’s self-punishment, the Greeks “used their gods precisely to keep ‘bad conscience’ at arm’s length”.

In this enigmatic section, what is Nietzsche trying to suggest with his reference to the Greeks and their gods? On the one hand, he reminds us that there are alternative conceptions of gods, conceptions which can be put in the service of humanity’s well-being, as opposed to conceptions that are both the source and a constant reminder of humanity’s supposed corruption. Nietzsche says that the Greek gods were able to deify the animal in man, whereas the Christian God condemns the animal in man, simultaneously inculcating feelings of guilt for this very animal nature. The upshot is that there are conceptions of gods that need not belittle us. Nietzsche concludes the section by pointing to how “bad things” were explained for the Greeks:

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90 Leiter (2002) points to the fact that whereas Christianity operates under the ascetic ideal, the Greeks had a different ideal, which helped keep the consciousness of guilt at bay.

91 “The Greek gods, these reflections of noble and autocratic human beings in whom the animal in man felt itself deified and did not tear itself apart, did not rage against itself!” (II.23).
“a god must have beguiled him”. Thus the cause of doing bad should not be attributed to man, but rather to the gods.\textsuperscript{92} Nietzsche concludes the section by noting that it was not man who would feel the sting of guilt, but rather the gods who took guilt upon themselves.\textsuperscript{93}

All the same, this recognition fails to offer a strategy on how to overcome pervasive feelings of guilt. While Nietzsche exclaims in A 19 that there has not been a new god in two thousand years, there is no reason to believe he is asking us to create new gods that can be put in the service of ennobling humanity. Setting aside the implausible idea that this is the aim of GM II.23, what else, if anything, can we take from this passage? There are a few points to take from this section, a series of minor points about the Greek gods, as well as an important general conclusion pointing to what needs to be done to effectively treat pervasive feelings of guilt.

Starting with the minor points Nietzsche makes about the Greek gods, we can draw the following three conclusions about the Greek gods: (1) they were not used to legitimize self-punishment; (2) they did not serve to devalue humanity; and (3) they could be used to shoulder the bulk of the blame, so that individuals were not left to suffer it alone. Given the differences between the Greek gods and how the Greeks saw themselves versus the Christian God and how Christians see themselves, Nietzsche claims that how we conceive the gods is a reflection of how we look at ourselves. Interestingly, Nietzsche later explained that how we look at ourselves influences our conception of the gods (A 16-18). If this is the case, then we can infer that pervasive feelings of guilt would have existed prior to the Christian God, for God was conceived to reflect this feeling people already felt. Furthermore, we then have reason to conclude that

\textsuperscript{92} “In this manner the gods served in those days to justify humans to a certain degree even in bad things, they served as causes of evil—in those days it was not the punishment they took upon themselves but rather, as is more noble, the guilt…” (II.23).

\textsuperscript{93} One might question how plausible an interpretation of the Greeks this is, and May does just that, pondering “whether or not these particular conjectures are sound—and it is questionable, for example, whether Homer’s gods really claimed the guilt for worldly evil” (May, 1999; 97).
there was something grounding the pervasive feeling of guilt prior to belief in the Christian God. What grounds these feelings should be clear by now.

As noted above, Leiter suggests that while Christianity operates under the ascetic ideal, the difference with the Greeks is that they did not, and for that reason they were able to keep feelings of guilt at arm’s length. Nietzsche intimates that, instead of operating under the ascetic ideal, as Christianity does, there have been other ideals; importantly, this suggests there can be other ideals in the future. The point to take then is not that there are alternative conceptions of the gods, but that there were, and are, alternative ideals (behind alternative conceptions of the gods). I argued above that Nietzsche’s suggestion about atheism points us to the role the ascetic ideal plays in grounding the Platonic-Christian moral modality, and that for atheism to be victorious, the ascetic ideal must be overcome. In light of this, we should notice how GM II.23 not only shows that there are alternatives to the ascetic ideal, it also conveys the need for a new ideal, even if at this point Nietzsche has said very little about its nature. In GM II.24-25 Nietzsche goes on to say a little more about this new ideal, while also offering further thoughts about what needs to be done to overcome pervasive feelings of guilt.

Reversing Bad Conscience

In the penultimate section of the second essay of the *Genealogy* Nietzsche offers his third and final suggestion on how we might overcome the sickness of bad conscience. Nietzsche begins by asking a series of questions, including whether he is here creating or destroying an ideal. In response he reiterates a common motif in his thought: for an ideal to be created, an ideal must first be destroyed. He proceeds to remind us that our history is defined by continued self-

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94 Janaway’s interpretation seems right: the Christian God helps to legitimize feelings of guilt and the self-torture with which we punish ourselves; that is to say, the whole Christian interpretation legitimized feelings people had already developed. More than that, we have further evidence why no longer believing in God would suffice to free one of pervasive feelings of guilt.

95 One key point Nietzsche gestures at is that this new ideal will not devalue the human, nor will it be justification for man’s self-punishment.
punishment. For too long humanity has looked upon its natural inclinations as something evil, and thus something for which we should not only be ashamed, but something for which we are deserving of punishment. Nietzsche then makes it clear that it is the ideal supporting this worldview which he seeks to destroy, that is, the ideal which devalues humanity, as well as the senses, the body, the drives, desires, and all that makes man a human being. While he does not name this ideal yet, as he has been intimating in the closing sections of GM II, he makes it very clear that it is the ascetic ideal that is his target.

With the target clearly before us, Nietzsche quickly offers a suggestion on how to overcome “all ideals hostile to life, ideals of those who libel the world” (GM II.24). One might imagine a “reverse attempt”, he suggests, working “to wed to bad conscience the unnatural inclinations”. Nietzsche ponders whether we could come to a point where we felt guilty for our belief in the beyond and in the devaluation of the human, and thus beat ourselves up for such beliefs. This idea seems straightforward on the face of it, though there are obvious questions that arise. For example, by what means would we turn our beliefs upside down such that we came to feel guilt for what had hitherto been our highest values? If we compare this to abruptly changing one’s feelings about enjoying the taste of a food one had hitherto found genuinely repulsive, the difficulty of what Nietzsche is asking becomes all too clear. One can no more decide to suddenly enjoy the taste of a food that one has always found repulsive than one can suddenly feel good about the things one has always felt bad about.

96 “The unnatural inclinations, all those aspirations to the beyond, to that which is contrary to nature, contrary to the body, the drives, desires, and which makes man a human being” (GM II.24).
97 Setting aside this obvious difficulty, Nietzsche’s seemingly straightforward idea has vexed many readers. Several commentators find Nietzsche’s suggestion in GM II.24 not only wishful thinking, but also nigh impossible. For example, Ridley (1998) characterizes Nietzsche’s suggestion as advocating that one “learn to feel bad about oneself for one’s transgressions against immanence” (Ridley, 1998; 134). Ridley goes on to note the interpretive difficulties of Nietzsche’s suggestion, to the point that Ridley concludes that “the idea is incoherent” (ibid). Ridley offers a detailed set of distinctions through which he attempts to clarify the various ways that Nietzsche uses the idea of ‘bad
Nietzsche does not find the idea incoherent, nor does he seem to think that the task is an impossible one, though he does question if this is possible at present. Initially he questions if anyone would be strong enough for such a tremendous task. “For this goal one would need a different kind of spirits than are probable in this of all ages” (GM II.24). Nietzsche concludes that such an undertaking would necessitate great health. Nietzsche, realist that he is, expresses uncertainty about whether such a type is at all possible today, but adds that “he must one day come” (ibid). Setting aside questions about the possibility of such a type, as well as when he might come, given the central concern of this chapter, it behooves us to consider how having the great health would help a person overcome the sickness of bad conscience. Additionally, how would the great health help a person “wed to bad conscience the unnatural inclinations”?

While Nietzsche does not directly address any of these questions, the questions are, in a sense, asking of Nietzsche something that misunderstands the crux of GM II.24. Great health does not help a person overcome the sickness of bad conscience; a person who has great health has already overcome this sickness. If we consider GS 382, we find that the person of great health is operating under a different ideal than the ascetic ideal. As Nietzsche makes clear in GS 382, the ideal he has in mind, an ideal his associates with Zarathustra, is an ideal that inverts and

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Ridley discerns a “raw” form of bad conscience, a bad form, and a good form in Nietzsche’s various uses. In the end Ridley claims that “the only way that Nietzsche’s model of conscience could be squared with having one’s natural inclinations entirely out from under the ‘evil eye’ would be to have no conscience at all” (Ridley, 1999; 135). Risse briefly mentions Nietzsche’s proposal and remarks that “just what this would mean is hard to figure out, in particular since it is clear that it must be a process, undoing the bad conscience” (Risse, 2001; 70). Hatab captures the concern more succinctly, noting that Nietzsche’s suggestion is confusing, before going on to say that “if the natural inclinations stem from bad conscience, then the remedy of bringing bad conscience to these inclinations amounts to curing bad conscience with bad conscience” (Hatab, 2008; 105). Hatab finds it peculiar that the weapon to be used against bad conscience is bad conscience. This gets at a serious problem, as Nietzsche seems to want to continue using the very means (feeling guilty in a moralized sense) he desires to eliminate. However, like Ridley, Hatab ponders whether bad conscience admits of different kinds, here examining Nietzsche’s reference to an “active” bad conscience before pondering if there is a life-denying sense and a more neutral sense. In the end Hatab essentially throws his hands up and concludes that whatever Nietzsche might have in mind with this “reverse attempt”, the idea seems at best a future one. In contrast, May (1999) briefly adumbrates Nietzsche’s account, without noting any incoherence to the idea proposed. May concludes that “bad conscience is not only residually present in this great figure [the redeeming human of the great love and contempt] but is essential to his historic task” (May, 1999; 69). At the very least Risse is right in describing this process as involving a momentous change.
supplants the values extolled by the ascetic ideal. Thus we could conclude that this person would feel guilty about adhering to the values of the ascetic ideal. In contrast to the gloomy seriousness of the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche’s counter-ideal “is the ideal of a spirit that plays naively”. As essay two of the *Genealogy* draws to a close, Nietzsche speaks about “redemption from the curse that the previous ideal placed upon it [reality]”, as well as all that had to grow out of this ideal, i.e., the devaluation of the human, the world, and life.

Here one might interject that we have strayed far from the primary topic, asking what this has to do with overcoming pervasive feelings of guilt. As I have sought to show, Nietzsche recognized that the prospect of overcoming pervasive feelings of guilt and the need to engage in self-punishment will not be accomplished solely with a localized treatment, e.g., mere atheism. Given how entrenched existential guilt is, how it is buttressed by a host of related notions—God, sin, free will, responsibility, and punishment—that are part and parcel of the entire Platonic-Christian moral modality, nothing short of overcoming the whole modality will completely eradicate the host of problems Nietzsche diagnoses. In overcoming the ascetic ideal we should, in theory, also overcome the pervasive feelings of guilt and the drive to self-torture that were valorized by this ideal. Successful treatment of existential guilt and the need to engage in self-punishment necessitates getting to the bottom of the matter and addressing the problem at the foundation.

*Connecting GM II.20, 23, and 24*

Individually, the three ideas Nietzsche suggests at the end of GM II are at best modest suggestions about how one might possibly attempt to overcome pervasive feelings of guilt. And

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98 There is no doubt that the ideal to which Nietzsche continuously refers as an ideal that can overcome the ascetic ideal is the ideal he associates with *Zarathustra*. Not only does the second essay of the *Genealogy* conclude with a reference to *Zarathustra*, but Nietzsche later remarks that “there was no counter-ideal—until Zarathustra” (EH GM).
yet Nietzsche seems to dismiss these ideas as quickly as he raises them, or point to the fact the time has not yet come for them now. This creates the puzzle noted at the beginning of section IV.

We have seen how Nietzsche raises the prospect of a second innocence precipitated by atheism in GM II.20, only to then all but deny the possibility in the following section. The reference to the Greek gods in GM II.23 is not so much a suggestion about how to keep bad conscience at bay, as it is an example of people who plausibly managed to keep it at bay. And we could no more return to the Greek gods than create new gods modeled on them. Thus we might wonder just what we can possibly take from the idea of GM II.23. Finally, in GM II.24 we find Nietzsche’s suggestion to wed bad conscience to our unnatural inclinations. Beyond the question of just how this might be accomplished, beyond the possible incoherence of the idea, it is not clear how this would address the sickness under consideration. Furthermore, Nietzsche goes on to say that to accomplish this goal we would need a different type, people stronger than the people of today. Overall, despite Nietzsche’s claim that this type must come someday, GM II ends with uncertainty. It seems unlikely that Nietzsche would simply raise a series of strategies that were bound to fail. This ought to give us pause. Let us not forget that in Ecce Homo Nietzsche described the conclusions of the essays as “ending with absolutely terrible detonations, a new truth visible between thick clouds” (EH GM).

To come to a stronger conclusion about the “new truth visible between thick clouds” that Nietzsche has in mind, we should ask what, if anything, the final sections of GM II have in common. As I have sought to show, despite the apparent inadequacy of each suggestion, all three do share a common element: a gesture at the ascetic ideal and the need for a counter-ideal to overcome it. Atheism is not likely to work, because guilt and the mechanisms that keep it in place, including the ascetic ideal, have become too entrenched. The Greeks are an important
example of a people who were not overwhelmed with pervasive feelings of guilt, and this was
due in part to the fact they did not live under the influence of the ascetic ideal. Finally, in the
penultimate section of GM II, despite initially raising the idea of using bad conscience against
anti-natural ideals, Nietzsche seems to be directing our attention to his proposed counter-ideal to
the ascetic ideal, an ideal he associates with Zarathustra.

If this is correct, Nietzsche’s implicit suggestion raises more questions than it answers, for it is one thing to see what Nietzsche is building towards at the end of GM II, but it is quite another to see how overcoming the ascetic ideal is supposed to help us overcome pervasive feelings of guilt at present. Nietzsche is uncertain and tentative about the nature of this counter-ideal. Furthermore, just like the victory of atheism, this ideal is clearly a future ideal, as the time for the ideal is not the present. In the immediate future this does not leave us with the most optimistic stance on overcoming our pervasive feelings of guilt and predilection for self-torture. Nietzsche’s assessment is clear: to genuinely overcome the sickness of bad conscience and its associated problems, we must overcome the entire moral modality that keeps this in place. This will, of course, take time; for this reason we should not be surprised that Nietzsche repeatedly talks about this as a future event. If we are honest about the task before us, we should expect nothing less than a long, arduous task to completely liberate ourselves from the reach of the ascetic ideal.

To reiterate the obvious criticism, many will ask what this does for the present, particularly the pervasive feelings of guilt from which we suffer today. There are good reasons to believe Nietzsche was not only aware of this pressing issue, but that he has also given us an example of what needs to be done in the present. We can understand Nietzsche’s project as having two related, but separate goals. As we have seen, there is the global goal, overcoming the
ascetic ideal and associated values it supports, God, sin, free will, responsibility, punishment, and guilt. There is also a local goal, overcoming pervasive feelings of guilt and the need to self-torture. While these are ostensibly two separate goals, given the interconnectedness of the problems, working to overcome one of the problems will invariably help work to overcome the other problem. Nietzsche recognized this with the attempt to overcome pervasive feelings of guilt and the need to overcome the entire moral modality that supports the notion of guilt. Working on the local problem of guilt, though it may not be completely effective in eliminating guilt, will help to loosen the grip of the ascetic ideal. Just as the ascetic ideal reinforces guilt, so too does guilt reinforce the ascetic ideal. As a means of treating these problems, just as working against the ascetic ideal will help overcome feelings of guilt, so too will working to overcome feelings of guilt help loosen the grip of the ascetic ideal.

Throughout Nietzsche’s critical project, be it his genealogical method, his internal critique of morality, even the hyperbole, parody, and satire he uses against the Platonic-Christian moral modality, part of this project has been to uncover the errors that have been at the foundation of many common moral beliefs. This critical project has the basic aim of working to free people from the aforementioned moral modality. Similarly, Nietzsche’s therapeutic project seeks to disabuse us of feelings of guilt. It is to this topic that we finally turn our attention.

2.5 Philosophical Therapy

In essay two of the *Genealogy* Nietzsche suggests some intriguing ideas about how we might work to overcome pervasive feelings of guilt. A new atheism carries with it potential, but atheism alone is not likely to succeed, as Nietzsche recognized. The project of affixing bad conscience to the unnatural inclinations suffered from the deep implausibility of asking us to “rewire” ourselves. These ideas succeed to the extent that they intimate an alternative method of
treating pervasive feelings of guilt. Nietzsche’s therapeutic project sought to realistically treat guilt and bring about a new kind of innocence. Thus the project of philosophical therapy offers the best treatment, and the strongest possibility, for overcoming the sickness of bad conscience in the long term.

Nietzsche remarks in D 103 that “we have to learn to think differently—in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: to feel differently”. This succinct remark encapsulates the project at hand. Nietzsche’s point is straightforward, illuminating how our beliefs, e.g., in God, sin, guilt, punishment, and so forth, have left us psychologically tethered to thinking a particular way. And thinking the way we do, within the constraints of a particular moral modality, has significantly impacted the way we act and feel, leaving us sick and suffering. Thus, prior to successfully treating the damage inflicted by our beliefs, we must come to think differently about a whole cluster of mutually supporting beliefs. Philosophical therapy is an omnipresent, albeit understated part of Nietzsche’s project designed to help change the way we think, thereby laying the groundwork for a psychic revolution.

Reading Nietzsche as a philosophical therapist has become common, with philosophers such as Bernd Magnus, Ken Gemes, Christopher Janaway, and Keith Ansell-Pearson having identified this element of Nietzsche’s project. To understand how this project works we can turn to Magnus, who sees “[Nietzsche’s] texts as self-referentially illuminating diagnostic tools” (Magnus, 1988; 153). Magnus continues by noting that Nietzsche’s texts also serve as “an

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99 “The interpretation … brought new suffering with it, deeper, more inward, more poisonous, gnawing more at life: it brought all suffering under the perspective of guilt” (GM III.28).


101 Magnus reads Nietzsche as a kind of psychoanalytic therapist, who assumes that the reader-patient is ill and unlikely to grasp the nature of her illness; to think, perhaps, that she is not ill; that she came to the “physician” for different reasons than she acknowledges; and that she will resist treatment, consistently obfuscating the situation at hand (Magnus, 1988; 154).
invitation to look at the data from a given, altered perspective” (*ibid*). Janaway helpfully elaborates on these ideas, pointing out that “the first part of the therapeutic process is to diagnose the functions that such evaluations (concepts, beliefs, desires, emotional attachments, and aversions) fulfil for those who make them” (90). In essence, Nietzsche’s philosophical therapy effectively begins with his many diagnoses, where the nature of the illness is determined. Once the nature of the illness has been determined, the difficult part of the project, treatment, begins: getting a person to think differently and then getting her to feel differently.

Ansell-Pearson, in his afterward to *Dawn*, has written a thoughtful commentary that captures both the diagnostic and the positive goals of Nietzsche’s therapeutic project. The positive notion of philosophical therapy, which Ansell-Pearson takes from Pierre Hadot, is “centered on a concern with the healing of our own lives” (381). While vague, this captures part of Nietzsche’s positive project. Ansell-Pearson continues by characterizing Nietzsche’s philosophical therapy as working to emancipate man “from fear, superstition, hatred of the self and the body, the short cuts of religion, and the presumptions of morality” (366). Ansell-Pearson is surely correct to highlight the goal of healing in Nietzsche’s thought, as it is a goal that is under-appreciated. Nietzsche is clearly working to help humanity overcome “hatred of the human” in all of its manifestations, just as he is seeking to demystify the world.

Ansell-Pearson continues, describing Nietzsche’s goal as the “search for an authentic mode of existence (398) and “new possibilities for life” (407). These are surely goals, at the end

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102 To help achieve this, Magnus highlights that the reader must be attentive to not only what Nietzsche has to say, but also the way Nietzsche says it. This point will be dealt with below.

103 Janaway continues, explain how “the second part of the therapeutic process is to overcome the need to hold the evaluative attitudes one has inherited, and to create new evaluations which are expressive of one’s own strength, unity of character, or affirmation of life” (91).

104 *Dawn*, as found in the 2011 Stanford UP translation of the critical edition of Nietzsche’s writing.

105 Elsewhere Ansell-Pearson describes this therapeutic element as part of a larger project aiming at demystification (384) and freeing us from our delusions (378). Janaway identifies the same goal, noting that in “Nietzsche’s mature writing, and the *Genealogy* in particular, aim to release the reader from the ‘illness’ allegedly manifest in adhering to moral evaluations of a Christian or post-Christian nature” (91).
of which we might characterize Nietzsche’s goal as helping humanity regain a joyful existence. This is a distant goal, of course, a goal that is preceded by several intermediate goals. We can identify one of Nietzsche’s goals by keeping in mind the primary issue at hand, overcoming pervasive feelings of guilt. As this is our present concern, we can characterize one of Nietzsche’s intermediate goals as attaining a more measured, more realistic view of ourselves, our agency, and our place in the world. If this can be accomplished, we should be able to ward off, if not prevent debilitating feelings of guilt. The simplest formulation of a key part of Nietzsche’s project has already been articulated: we need to learn to think differently. And Nietzsche has identified many of the areas where we need to learn to think differently.

Having laid out Nietzsche’s therapeutic goals above, we can turn to how he works to effect such changes. Nietzsche recognized that both argumentation and direct evidence against a belief routinely fail to convince a person. For these reasons, Nietzsche informs us that he does not refute, he puts on ice. Similarly, he said that it is not our reasons that refute something, but rather our taste. The question then is how Nietzsche works to accomplish the task of changing a person’s tastes. One of Nietzsche’s strategies, as a number of commentators have identified, is to affectively engage people, to which I will turn momentarily. Nietzsche’s affective engagement, as well as his general provocations, aims at creating an inner tension, getting people to smell the “bad air”, and arousing feelings of disgust.

106 Recent studies in psychology have shown that people obstinately stick to their beliefs in the face of contradicting evidence. Given this peculiar quirk of human psychology, an alternative strategy is necessary to get people to change their beliefs. See Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler’s “When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions” in Political Behavior, June 2010, Volume 32, Issue 2, pp 303-330. This article explains the “backfire effect”, where “individuals who receive unwelcome information may not simply resist challenges to their views. Instead, they may come to support their original opinion even more strongly.”

107 A 53, EH HH.1

108 For example, Nietzsche writes that “what decides against Christianity now is our taste, not our reasons” (GS 132).

Nietzsche had remarked that his writings reflect “the most multifarious art of style that anyone has had at his disposal”, necessary to “communicate a state, an inner tension of pathos” (EH III.4). Nietzsche’s stylistic display ranges from strident polemics, to the use of irony, to parody, and to hyperbole. This “multifarious art of style” was essential to Nietzsche’s provocations, as the disgust and inner tension he sought to arouse were fundamental to the success of his project. To the degree he can arouse disgust and inner tension, Nietzsche has set the groundwork for changes in belief, taste, and ultimately a psychic transformation.

Janaway, in his insightful treatment of Nietzsche’s philosophical styles and the ways he affectively engages his readers, focuses on Nietzsche’s use of rhetorical devices designed to provoke the reader and her affects. Janaway remarks that Nietzsche “sets out to embarrass, amuse, tempt, shame, and revolt the reader” (91). The expectation is that, when successful, Nietzsche will have not only emotionally affected us, but in doing so will have unveiled something hitherto veiled, forcing a person to genuinely reflect on her value commitments. It is, of course, one thing to provoke one’s readers, for that is not a difficult task. It is another thing to provoke one’s readers in such a way that the discomfiture they feel triggers deep psychic upheaval, forcing a genuine reevaluation of their values and commitments.

This brings us to the crux of the matter, how Nietzsche’s rhetoric could be put into service to create psychic tension, thereby provoking people to genuinely reflect on their values, and ideally, precipitating changes in a person’s deeply held values. Janaway offers some ideas on how this might be done before turning to a compelling example in essay one of the Genealogy:

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110 As Ansell-Pearson describes it, Nietzsche engages his readers by dramatizing the issues “through a series of parables, thought experiments, imagined conversations, and the like” (Ansell-Pearson, 2011; 373). Through this Nietzsche makes “his work an unsettling provocation for both his philosophical antagonists and his readers” (Ansell-Pearson, 2011; 374).
“Detach people from their practice of making moral judgments, thereby enabling them to feel non-moral inclinations and aversions. … Show them the inherited affects of which these [moral] judgments are the ex post facto rationalizations. … Provoke affective responses in them, and invite them to reflect on the explanation for their having them” (99).

As an example of how this works, Janaway argues that Nietzsche makes his readers uncomfortable through his characterizations of the noble and the slave types. Focusing on his description of the nobles, he describes them as “monsters” who act in “hideous” ways, evincing “horror”. Janaway is surely right that Nietzsche’s descriptions evoke feelings of disgust from our modern standpoint.111 Yet at the same time, Nietzsche’s language also evinces different reactions from the reader, who may see the nobles as exhibiting various admirable qualities. And it is this mixed response, feelings of disgust and admiration, which can get the reader to reflect on her value commitments.112 Similarly, as the recognition of who triumphed over the “evil” nobles becomes clearer, Nietzsche’s readers “become conscious of himself or herself as an inheritor of affects whose origin is ‘slavish’” (Janaway, 2007; 101). This can bring about genuine rumination

111 Janaway writes that with GM I.14 Nietzsche turns his attention from “a past-directed enquiry into a critique who focus is the here and now, the present attitudes of the reader” (Janaway, 2007; 103). Janaway is right to note this aspect of Nietzsche’s writing in the Genealogy, the oscillation back and forth between the historical and the present, a strategy very evident in GM I.12, where Nietzsche clearly addresses the problems of modernity.
112 Furthermore, we (the reader) get to see the contradictory claims denigrating the power of the nobles, while at the same time seeing the desires of the weak as themselves being rooted in a desire for power. Power is, on the one hand, condemned in the strong, and yet at the same time coveted by the weak. As Janaway describes it, feeling the pull of these two claims the reader will feel disgust. He continues by noting how “barbaric domination over others makes us uneasy; a value system whose origin is in a drive to domination over others, but which pretends that its origin is in something ‘higher’, should trouble us as much, or more” (Janaway, 2007; 102).
on one’s value commitments, the kind of thinking differently that is necessary to learning to feel differently.  

While we find evidence of Nietzsche doing this in the *Genealogy*, what we want to see is concrete examples showing that this kind of therapeutic work can bring about genuine changes. Evidence suggests that this method of affective engagement does work, as can be seen in a recent example. Studies have shown that when people try to reason with others about the supposed connection between vaccinations and autism, they have been unsuccessful in convincing those who are opposed to vaccinations to change their beliefs. Reasoning with people “that their belief is not scientifically supported often backfires”, as contradicting evidence can actually help to reinforce a false belief. One of the issues is that people focus on the supposed risks of vaccines. Instead of focusing on the risks of getting vaccinated, the study sought to convey the risks of *not* getting vaccinated. By seeing images of what could happen to their children if they opt against vaccination, and by hearing accounts from parents of disease-stricken children, people’s attitudes towards vaccinations changed in a positive way. Where reasoning and argumentation fail, a person can be emotionally affected by seeing harmful effects and what will horrify, both of which can generate the psychic tension needed to precipitate reflection, new beliefs, and a psychic transformation.

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113 “If [Nietzsche’s] reader has arrived at and adheres to his or her values in the manner hypothesized by Nietzsche’s moral psychology, then Nietzsche’s chosen way of writing is well calculated to begin the process of detaching him or her from those values and enabling the revaluation he prefigures in the Preface to the *Genealogy*” (91).

114 [https://news.illinois.edu/blog/view/6367/234202](https://news.illinois.edu/blog/view/6367/234202) See “Countering Antivaccination Attitudes”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 112:33 (2015): 10321-10324. See also “When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions” in *Political Behavior*, June 2010, Volume 32, Issue 2, pp 303-330. This article explains the “backfire effect”, where “individuals who receive unwelcome information may not simply resist challenges to their views. Instead, they may come to support their original opinion even more strongly.”

115 “A previous study attempted to moderate people’s anti-vaccination views using a variety of approaches, including challenging anti-vaccine fears and sharing science-based information about the dangers of preventable diseases. All of the approaches failed” (*ibid*).

116 In Camus’ “Reflections on the Guillotine”, we have another example of how seeing the horrors of something firsthand can precipitate a radical reorientation in ways argumentation does not seem capable. Camus recounts that his father went to witness the execution—which he supported—of a man who had killed a family of farmers. “What
In a similar way, Nietzsche shows the negative effects that follow from belief in God, sin, and guilt, often in evocative, deliberately provocative ways. It is one thing to try and overcome feelings of guilt by arguing that God does not exist, or arguing that our grandiose conceptions of free will and responsibility are misguided and need revision. It is quite another thing to read accounts of people cruelly punished for being witches, or hear accounts of people tormented by guilt because they believe their natural sexual desires are impure and a sign of something deeply wrong with them. Nietzsche’s rhetoric clearly aims to get a visceral reaction from his readers. Only in seeing the harmful effects of such beliefs will people begin to question these deeply held beliefs.

Nietzsche’s texts effectively become the “therapist” with whom the reader is conversing. Through a patient reading of Nietzsche’s texts, the reader is engaging in a similar kind of therapy to that which one might undergo with an actual therapist. Of course, Nietzsche’s writings differ from an actual therapist in that a therapist can offer personal responses to a patient, whereas Nietzsche’s writings cannot. Nonetheless, if the reader does as Nietzsche asks, if she slowly works through the text, if she genuinely ruminates on the issues at hand, the text can take on a more personal nature. As the goal is cleansing a person of her psychological disorder, Nietzsche suggests that one must slowly work through the problems. This is what Nietzsche’s texts he saw that morning he never told anyone. My mother relates merely that he came rushing home, his face distorted, refused to talk, lay down for a moment on the bed, and suddenly began to vomit. He had just discovered the reality hidden underneath the noble phrases with which it [execution] was masked” (Camus, 175; 1960).

117 A particularly good example of this can be found in GM I.15, where Nietzsche quotes Tertullian and Aquinas. While Nietzsche might not be focused on showing us the harmful effects of beliefs—though one could easily argue that taking joy in the profound suffering of others is an indicator that a person’s moral compass has been deeply corrupted—he is presenting an example clearly intended to horrify us. In GM I.15 Nietzsche quotes Tertullian and Aquinas about the bliss Christians will feel in paradise, a bliss magnified by seeing the torment of the damned. Reading Tertullian at length about the great joy experienced in seeing the damned suffer should be unsettling to the reader, thereby creating psychic tension or discomfort. There are, no doubt, many questions that could be asked about GM I.15, e.g., whether the Aquinas and Tertullian passages Nietzsche has quoted are truly representative of Christianity. One might also worry that some Christians will read the passages from Aquinas and Tertullian and agree with them, delighting in the torment of the damned. In such cases we see that what might be used to provoke, horrify, and create psychic tension, can backfire and generate radically different emotions.
frequently do. They are not only diagnostic, but they also work to illuminate perspectives we typically do not see, let alone think about.

More than that, through a kind of affective engagement, Nietzsche creates the possibility of getting a person to feel an inner tension, which, if felt, can lead to genuine reflection on her value commitments. For example, if Janaway is correct, Nietzsche expertly unveils the drive for power, which we condemn in the nobles, as underlying our values of good and evil. If we genuinely feel this tension, instead of just pushing our awareness of it away, then we are forced to reflect on our value commitments. Thus we see that one of the goals lies with getting people to not only feel this tension, but to force people to reflect upon it.

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Having elucidated Nietzsche’s general therapeutic strategies, our attention can return to guilt, applying Nietzsche’s lessons to this particular case. To begin, we should recall that the object of Nietzsche’s criticism is existential guilt, i.e., the pervasive, debilitating feeling of guilt that, as Risse describes it, is “a persistent feeling of imperfection” and thus “a condition that shapes one’s whole existence” (Risse, 2005; 46). As May and Risse have rightly noted, what Risse called “locally reactive guilt” is neither Nietzsche’s target nor something we would want to eliminate, as it can play a positive role in a person’s life, depending on the person and the situation. What then would Nietzsche have us do to overcome the pervasive feeling of guilt?

The first lesson, the new perspective which Nietzsche hopes to open our eyes to, which he reiterated time and time again, is that existential guilt is, in most cases, nothing more than a

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118 “A system of values which exists to fulfill (in imagination) the drive towards power should falsely pass itself off as in opposition to the drive towards power” (Janaway, 2007; 105-106).

119 May echoes this, describing “moralized guilt” as “when guilt becomes conceived as constitutive of life” (May, 1999; 59).
belief in a false or imaginary cause. People may believe they are naturally imperfect or corrupt, and people may believe a particular action comes to define them as forever guilty, but Nietzsche argues that this is not so. Echoing a line from D 103, we can succinctly capture Nietzsche’s position as follows: “I deny existential guilt as I deny alchemy, that is, I deny its premises; but I do not deny that there have been those who believed in its premises and acted in accordance with them.” It is one thing to point out that existential guilt has no legitimate justification (and thus should not be felt), but quite another to get a person to a point where she not only acknowledges that such guilt is grounded in imaginary causes, but also feels an inner suspicion and disgust toward this belief in guilt. Both the cognitive and the non-cognitive changes are necessary to get to a point where a person is no longer crushed by pervasive feelings of guilt.

One of the strategies that can help precipitate these changes in a person is affective engagement. As Janaway explains Nietzsche’s therapeutic approach, one of Nietzsche’s goals is to communicate an inner tension. We have seen this at work in essay one of the Genealogy, where the reader comes to feel the tension between her inheritance of certain values, for which she feels admiration, but at the same feels disgust. The person feels an inner tension, which, at a minimum, forces reflection on her values. The rhetorical detonations of GM I do not seem to have any obvious analogues in GM II, which might actively work to create the same inner tension that we find in the first essay. Given that, how does Nietzsche affectively engage the reader on the question of existential guilt?

There are good grounds for thinking that, in certain horrific cases, e.g., Truman’s decision to authorize dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when most high-ranking U.S. military officials felt their use was unnecessary, pervasive feelings of guilt can undoubtedly arise. In such a case, these feelings would have a legitimate justification, differentiating them from the imaginary causes, e.g., indebtedness to God, Nietzsche criticizes. See GM I.14 for an excellent example of Nietzsche’s rhetoric, where he unveils the disquieting origin of many cherished virtues like justice, humility, patience, and so forth, in hatred, revenge, cowardice, and a desire for power. The closest Nietzsche comes to GM I.14 might be in GM II.18, where he tells us of the pleasure the “selfless, the
While GM II seems to lack the same “increasing unrest” present in GM I, there are unpleasant truths rumbling in the distance (EH GM). Existential guilt (and plausibly, locally-reactive guilt too) is shown to not only have its foundation in indebtedness, but as Nietzsche points out, its origin was “drenched in blood” (GM II.6). This might give the reader pause. Toward the end of the essay Nietzsche builds on this claim, emphasizing that indebtedness to God reaches a fervor pitch when God sacrificed himself for humanity’s sins and guilt. Nietzsche describes this as “the paradoxical and horrifying remedy” (GM II.21). This sacrifice should give the reader pause, not only for how paradoxical it is, but also for how gruesome a remedy it is. And yet, it is not an actual remedy, but rather deepens the sickness, resulting in “the will of man to find himself guilty and reprehensible to the point that it cannot be atoned for … to be tangibly certain of his absolute unworthiness” (GM II.22). Another disconcerting tension is brought to light: “in this night of torture and absurdity the cry love resounded … of redemption in love”. Those who understand Nietzsche’s illuminations will “turn away, seized by an invincible horror” (ibid). If Nietzsche is able to convey the absurdity of the whole Christian salvation machinery, God sacrificing himself, humanity’s absolute worthlessness, the self-punishment humanity subjects itself to, and the idea that it was all done out of love, then we should feel a profound inner tension. This should force a person to begin to reflect on her feelings of guilt and everything that supports these feelings. More than that, feeling this tension can help to precipitate the psychic transformation that ultimately needs to occur to free a person from existential guilt.

While creating an inner tension through affective engagement is a start, Nietzsche’s therapy also aims to “cleanse psychology” in other ways. Broadly speaking, Nietzsche’s critical project works to show us that with the death of God, not only the edifice, but everything that it self-denying, the self-sacrificing feel from the very start: this pleasure belongs to cruelty”. The unegoistic as a moral value, Nietzsche concludes, derives from the will to self-punishment. Thus one might acknowledge Nietzsche has cast a shadow over selflessness, making people get their first glimpse of an uncomfortable truth.
supports, must also fall. However, as we saw above, and as Nietzsche quickly recognized, knocking over the first domino does not immediately get the rest of the dominoes to fall. Thus to merely remove God (or certain conceptions of agency, freedom, and responsibility) from the picture will not immediately free us from dark, pervasive feelings of guilt.

Recognizing the difficulty of the full work that needs to be done, initiating both a cognitive and a psychic transformation, one of Nietzsche’s initial goals is to awaken us to the full significance of the death of God. People need to intellectually comprehend the ramifications of the death of God, but ultimately, people need to emotionally supersede the need for God. While removing God from the picture is no easy achievement, Nietzsche reasons that existential guilt should begin to diminish when a person has accomplished the psychic transformation he has in mind. If a person can bring about a genuine emotional catharsis necessary for a complete psychic transformation, this would help make ideas of God, original sin, humanity’s innate corruption, and guilt all lose their hold on a person.

Here one might question just how much of a problem deeply-rooted existential guilt is in modernity. While fewer people today are susceptible to the belief that we are innately corrupt because of religious reasons like original sin, there can be no doubt that many people continue to see themselves as deeply guilty, even inherently guilty. We can attribute this to how deeply entrenched guilt consciousness is in human beings. Though it persists, there is no longer any

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122 Bergmann succinctly explains what Nietzsche is at pains to communicate about the death of God: “the entire coterie of concepts [free will, responsibility, punishment, guilt] that articulate morality are in the same position as that in which common agreement places the idea of ‘sin’”, which is “by definition nothing other than the transgression of a commandment pronounced by God” (Bergmann, 1988; 37). Bergmann then concludes that, as God goes, so too must belief in transgressions against God’s commandments. Applying this to guilt, Bergmann rightly points out that “it was highly defined and specific, and it was only possible in the web of quite particular stories and ideas” (Bergmann, 1988; 37). In effect, like Bergmann and others have argued, these concepts can no longer apply at present in the ways they did in the past. To retain these concepts as if nothing had changed is to commit a serious error. “The claim is that the connection is conceptual, that the full meaning of any of these terms … cannot be captured or restated if one separates them off the belief in God” (Bergmann, 1988; 38). Similar arguments can be found in Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958), MacIntyre’s After Virtue (1981), and Williams’ Shame and Necessity (1993).
need for the religious supposition to explain such guilt. The sources of deeply-rooted guilt are abundant today.\textsuperscript{123} This can be seen all the time, as a person’s sense of self is routinely crushed by everyday failures, generating deep feelings of guilt. A person who has caused a calamitous disaster almost invariably feels intense guilt. Following Sartre, there is the gaze of the Other, so pervasive in modern life, which can deeply affect the way we look at ourselves and our actions.\textsuperscript{124} As Rousseau diagnosed modernity, we are constantly comparing ourselves to others, seeing the ways in which we do not live up to our own (corrupted) normative expectations, which leads to feelings of inadequacy and guilt. This brings us to what may be the most frequent source of existential guilt.\textsuperscript{125}

One of the most common reasons people feel existential guilt is because a local failure is unjustifiably generalized into a global failure. As we saw above, the case of Tom Hamilton in \textit{East of Eden} illustrates this development: because of a local failure (if it was even that), Tom Hamilton inferred that he was inherently guilty, which pushed him to commit suicide. This example points to the second lesson to take from Nietzsche, that we should not generalize local failures into global failures that are taken to be indicative of a person’s existential guilt. As we saw in section III, Nietzsche’s discussion in “On the Pale Criminal” diagnoses this very point.

\textsuperscript{123} In talking with a colleague, she noted that the demands of being a mother and the dean of academic affairs have often precipitated feelings of intense guilt that she is not being the best mother to her children that she could be. When she is unable to reconcile these two aspects of her life, guilt casts a pall over her and everything she does. Recognizing how this is only one aspect of her life, and thus does not define her, helps to alleviate these feelings. She added that understanding life will go on even when she misses her daughter’s recital, and that another recital will be forthcoming, similarly helps to alleviate feelings of guilt that can otherwise quickly subsume her. While my colleague put to use various strategies that helped to alleviate, and possibly prevent, overwhelming feelings of guilt, the fact she would still occasionally feel this way suggests that she was still under the influence of the moral modality Nietzsche seeks to overcome.

\textsuperscript{124} See \textit{Being and Nothingness}, particularly Sartre’s discussion of “The Look” in Part Three, Chapter One, section IV.

\textsuperscript{125} This is only one of the many problems Rousseau diagnoses in the First and Second \textit{Discourses}. See \textit{Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men} for Rousseau’s remarks on the problems that stem from comparing ourselves with others, as well as conjectural remarks on the cause.
describing the madness that drives a person to such reasoning.\footnote{It is one thing to illuminate that people do have a tendency to reason this way, but an important question that needs to be answered is: why do we reason this way? One possibility about why a person concludes that one act (the exception) comes to define who she is may be a direct result of a fragmented understanding of her self, as well as a narrow understanding of the role of situational factors in any given act. People are quick to place responsibility for an act on themselves or others. More than that, as Nietzsche said in \textit{Daybreak}, “guilt is always sought wherever there is failure” (D 140).} People need to understand that who they are is not defined by a single act, that it is a kind of madness to reason this way.

Beyond that, Nietzsche points to the need to better understand not only our motivation for acting, but in acting, we must learn to live up to what we do, difficult as it may be. Achieving this kind of self-understanding and self-confidence would help to prevent the roots of existential guilt from growing in us.

Even for the person who develops this new self-understanding and learns how to live with her actions, there are times when her actions may bring about unintended and unexpected consequences, consequences which can be horrific, leaving her crushed by what has happened. Given this unpredictability, people may find themselves in situations where they develop pervasive feelings of guilt. Such feelings arise not only because people generalize local failures into a global failure, but also in virtue of the horrific consequences. One might thus criticize Nietzsche for not acknowledging how an unpredictable world impacts a person’s feelings of responsibility and guilt. Nietzsche was aware of both the unpredictability of the world as well as our prejudices with respect to agency and responsibility. Part of his project was to help us to see when responsibility and guilt were justified and when they were unjustified. In cases where something unexpected and horrible happens, while there may be grounds for feeling some degree of fault, the inference that one is thus guilty is unwarranted.

Thus we see that not only do we generalize local failures into global failures, but we fail to even distinguish mere failures from those things for which we should feel guilt. Nietzsche is surely right that we are prone to egregious errors in reasoning about our own agency. Given this,
part of Nietzsche’s project is to disabuse us of such errors. For example, we need to learn to distinguish those things for which we should feel guilt from those for which we should not. To return to Tom Hamilton’s case, there can be no doubt that he is the recipient of bad luck.\textsuperscript{127} Not knowing the nature of his sister’s sickness, a sickness she was always dissembling, there should be no doubt that he was not responsible for her death. Whatever failure(s) Tom committed, while he may acknowledge some degree of fault, he errs when he infers that he was solely and completely at fault. More than that, it is a terrible inference to conclude that his failure made him guilty beyond the possibility of atonement.

One might ask how it is that we are to distinguish acts that our own versus those that we should not claim as our own. This would go a long way towards helping a person discern when she should feel guilt and when she should not. Knowing when an act is truly one’s own can be quite difficult, as we saw in Tom Hamilton’s case. There is no doubt that people are prone to bad reasoning, but people also routinely avoid engaging in any serious self-evaluation. Given this, an important lesson to take from Nietzsche is that people need to engage in genuine self-evaluation. Even when we engage in serious self-reflection, our motives and desires are frequently more hidden than people realize, or want to realize. This seriously complicates the task of knowing which acts are my own and which acts are not.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{127} Here we see one of the lessons that can be taken from Nietzsche’s discussion of the Greeks in GM II.23 and how instead of feeling guilty for an act that had gone wrong they looked at the situation as arising from “foolishness” and “lack of understanding”.

\textsuperscript{128} To help facilitate this, Nietzsche draws a lesson drawn from the Stoics, who offer a suggestion about how we might come to see our actions in a new way. “Nietzsche recognizes that a therapy of the (painful) emotions is possible only through some kind of cognitive reorientation—or shift—in our evaluative judgments of such events” (Ure, 2009; 66). To gain genuine insight into our reasons for action, as well as what we may or may not be responsible for, we need to see experiences in a detached, objective manner, moving past biases against ourselves and the need to find someone (ourselves) responsible. According to Nietzsche, “we adjudge the value and meaning of an event more objectively when it happens to another than we do when it happens to us”. Thus Nietzsche contends that we need “to view our own experiences with the eyes which we are accustomed to view them when they are the experiences of others” (D 137). This will help us achieve not only a new perspective on our experiences, but in doing so will help us see our failures in a clearer manner. Ideally this will help us avoid immediately inferring guilt where failure occurs. While this may offer a helpful way to look at our acts and ourselves in a different light,
Nietzsche frequently questioned to what degree we could know the cause(s) of our acts. Bergmann highlights this difficulty with the helpful example of artistic inspiration, noting that “one does not know where one’s best ideas come from—which chance encounter, which fragment of an overheard conversation, which whiff of passing air, may have triggered or inspired them” (Bergmann, 1988; 43). This might be qualified by noting that “one does not always know”, and for this reason it seems questionable to feel completely responsible for one’s best ideas. However, that is not reason to summarily dismiss any responsibility. We should cultivate a more measured view of responsibility, just as we should cultivate a more measured view of the kind(s) of guilt that a person should feel. This point can be seen across many areas of life, not just the artist in Bergmann’s example. The complex web of connections in scientific research, or athletics, to take two straightforward examples, should make us question just how careful we should be about attributing responsibility to a particular scientist or athlete. The same can be said about attributing responsibility and guilt in any situation.

Athletic competition provides an example from which we might draw other important lessons. To take a common example, if a basketball player misses a game-winning shot at the end of the game, or a baseball player strikes out with the tying run at third base, the players often there are reservations to keep in mind, for we may judge others more fairly than we judge ourselves, but all too often we can be much harsher on others than we are on ourselves. If we adopt this harsher perspective on ourselves, the potential for holding ourselves responsible and ultimately finding ourselves guilty at all costs only increases. In effect, the way we judge others can be a useful model, but it needs to be used with caution.

See D 115, 116, 119, 130, and GS 335. How then, one might interject, can I learn to engage in critical self-evaluation about whether or not I am responsible and guilty if I cannot know the cause(s) of my acts? Bergmann notes that something close to “divine omniscience” would be needed to truly adjudicate whether a person was or was not responsible and guilty in a given situation.

It is one thing to understand the limits of one’s responsibility, but coming to feel the limits of one’s responsibility does not always follow such understanding. While understanding is an important element in overcoming pervasive feelings of guilt, understanding alone will not bring about this change. Nietzsche’s treatment of the topic suggests that understanding can only get us so far; coming to truly feel the limits of one’s responsibility takes not only time and effort, but a complete psychic transformation.

The ideas of acknowledged fault and degrees of fault, and their contrasts with responsibility and guilt, I owe to William Schroeder. Over the course of several conversations he helped me to see the ways in which a person can acknowledge her faults, take responsibility for them, and yet avoid succumbing to feelings of guilt. This idea, I came to see, was a much healthier alternative to the poisonous kinds of guilt that Nietzsche sought to overcome.
beat themselves up about such failures. Interestingly though, players often quickly come to acknowledge their failures (as local) and move on, even using their failure, heartbreaking though it was, as an impetus for self-improvement. At the same time, the ability to forget—a point Nietzsche briefly highlights at the beginning of essay two of the Genealogy—is of the utmost importance, for a successful athlete cannot allow themselves to be undermined by past failures.  

While some athletes continue to beat themselves up for a local failure, transforming it into a global failure, this seems less common. And it is rare to hear that an athlete feels pervasive feelings of guilt about being responsible for a devastating loss. This seems a more measured view of failure, but more than that, it seems a justified view given the misplaced importance on that late-game plays, decisions, and errors. For example, statisticians have shown that missed shots late in an NBA game are no more important than earlier missed shots in a game. In the same way, we should work to reach a point where we can acknowledge our failures, forget them or learn from them, and ultimately move past them, though this is all much easier said than done.

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133 The value of forgetting is not unique to Nietzsche’s later writings, as he had emphasized the value of forgetting and its role in a person’s psychological health as early as the Untimely Meditations, particularly HL and SE. To take one example, Nietzsche writes that, “it is always the same thing that makes happiness happiness: the ability to forget” (HL, 1). Nietzsche goes on to say that “forgetting is essential to action of any kind” and that “it is altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting” (ibid). One must learn to forget things, lest one be crushed by the past.  

134 The infamous Bill Buckner case in the 1986 World Series offers an interesting example about failure, responsibility, and guilt. With the Red Sox holding a 5-3 lead in the bottom of the tenth inning, the Mets hit three consecutive singles to get within 5-4. At that point a wild pitch brought home another runner, tying the game at 5-5. Then a ground ball was hit to Buckner at first, which he misplayed, allowing it to go between his legs, giving the Mets a 6-5 victory in game six of the World Series. Buckner had lost the game, and ultimately the World Series, so the reasoning went, despite the fact that the Mets had only tied the World Series at 3-3. The Red Sox would collectively lose game seven of the World Series, yet Buckner is widely regarded as the reason the Red Sox lost the World Series. That one man and one play—in game six, no less—should be seen as the primary reason for Boston’s loss, is to completely inflate the importance of one act amidst a complex web of related acts. No one remembers the other two errors that occurred for the Red Sox, though they were equally important in the overall outcome of the game. Two decades later Buckner recounted that “I have come to the understanding that it is here to stay, so I try to look at it in a positive way. Everybody still remembers me, they say, ‘Yeah, he was the guy that made the error, but he was a pretty good player.’ So I guess that is a positive about it.” (Retrieved from http://espn.go.com/mlb/news/story?id=2615471) Instead of being poisoned by pervasive feelings of guilt, and despite the vitriol directed at him for misplaying a ground ball, Buckner was able to take a more comprehensive view of his act as one among many others that make him who he is; the error does not define him, and he does not evince any guilt about his failure.
The example of how athletes handle responsibility and failure illuminates some important lessons that should translate to everyday life. (1) One should acknowledge a failure and move on, which may occur quickly or may take more time; (2) in some cases one simply has to learn to forgot certain failures, lest they paralyze future action or develop into full blown guilt; on the other hand, (3) some failures can be used as an impetus to self-improvement; (4) this necessitates taking a more measured view of not only one’s responsibility in a given situation, but also (5) recognizing the many situational factors that play a role in a given outcome, some of which can be known and some which cannot, but which are outside of one’s influence.

At the same time, we have to learn to distinguish guilt from failure, just as we need to be able to distinguish failure from bad luck. Part of this project involves looking at failure in a new manner, understanding that genuine failure, for which we should acknowledge our fault (and possibly the localized guilt that follows), differs from failure that warrants no real acknowledgement. Related to this is the need to prevent local failures from transforming into existential guilt, as people frequently allow to happen. Thus there is good reason to be attentive to local failures, as Nietzsche suggests localized feelings of guilt can overwhelm a person, particularly a vulnerable person, and develop into pervasive feelings of guilt. People need to develop a new attitude towards such failures. One suggestion about how we might accomplish this is making sure that there is something in our lives that is positive, be it one’s work, one’s friends and loved ones, or art. Such things can help to insulate us from feelings of negativity and guilt taking root. The idea is that having something positive to support us, we are less susceptible to falling off the cliff into existential guilt. With respect to these pervasive feelings of guilt, what people need to realize is that there are no legitimate reasons for finding ourselves to be inherently
corrupt, there are no singular acts that come to define us as perpetually guilty, and thus there are, in most cases, no reasons to feel pervasive feelings of guilt.

In essence, the new attitude towards failure that a person has to cultivate is one where failure is recognized as part and parcel of life; where a person acknowledges her fault, but accepts that the failure is not constitutive of who she is; where a person acknowledges that the limits of responsibility are not always something we can know, nor can a person know all of the causes of her acts. Nietzsche advocates taking a more nuanced perspective on our failures and those times we feel inadequate, such that we recognize such feelings as localized, and thus learn to live with them. With that comes a time when we achieve a standpoint where our faults and failures are seen as mere failures and nothing more; they do not become things for which we feel pervasive feelings of guilt and deserving of self-punishment. As Nietzsche recognized, “guilt is always sought wherever there is failure” (D 140); what needs to be done is to sever that connection. If the therapeutic work described above is successful, then a profound affective shift, possibly even a psychic transformation, should occur. Having learned to think differently, through much work a person slowly comes to feel differently, no longer susceptible to the negative feelings of existential guilt.
CHAPTER 3: LEARNING TO LOVE LIFE

3.1 Introduction

That Nietzsche, the self-proclaimed “advocate of life” (ASC 5), placed immense value on life, is a point made immediately clear in his writings. But how he understood life, what he meant when he referred to life, and how it functioned as a criterion of value is a matter of much debate. Throughout Nietzsche’s writings he makes many forays into the disparate ways we understand life. For example, he contemplates the basic nature of life; he examines individual human lives as well as different types of human lives; he sought to understand both how a person’s life influences her values, and what a person’s values indicate about her life; he examines the relation between life and valuing; and finally he considered how life can be hindered and harmed.

Among Nietzsche’s many concerns with life, life affirmation holds a place of primacy. We should understand life affirmation as his response to the problem of life negation, though it is more than just a response to this problem: it is an ideal. Given the importance of life affirmation, the primary goal in this chapter will be to examine and evaluate Nietzsche’s account of how a person might come to love and affirm life. I will argue that Nietzsche’s account of how we learn to love offers a paradigm of how we might come to a genuine love of life despite all that is strange, questionable, and terrible in life.

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135 Nietzsche also describes Zarathustra as “the advocate of life, the advocate of suffering, the advocate of the circle...” (Z III.13).
136 The best work that sought to clarify the significance of Nietzsche’s treatment of life can be found in Schacht (1983), Hunt (1991), Reginster (2006), May (2011), and Richardson (2013). See also Hussain (2011) for an examination of the role life plays in the Genealogy.
137 Schacht (1983) writes that two of Nietzsche’s most basic concerns are “the idea and possibility of a total ‘affirmation of life’ and of the world (as they are, rather than merely as one might wish them to be), and with the emergence of an enhanced form of life strong and rich enough to stand as a ‘justification of life’” (261). Solomon (2003) writes, “There is little question that the ultimate aim of Nietzsche’s philosophy is ‘the affirmation of life,’ but what this vague phrase means is by no means obvious” (201). Finally, Reginster (2006) writes that “Nietzsche regards the affirmation of life as his defining philosophical achievement” (2).
In §334 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche discusses how one comes to love a piece of music in all its strangeness and oddity. More than a discussion of how one comes to love music though, Nietzsche says this is how we learn to love everything we love. Using this passage as a guide can help illuminate how a person might come to love life in all its questionableness, and with that, the nature of life affirmation. I begin with a brief gloss on the particular movements that Nietzsche lays out in GS 334, as it offers a schematic for the development of this chapter. The movement begins with a person working to know and understand something, after which she puts forth good will and patience to cultivate an openness to that thing, during which time she slowly becomes accustomed to it, and in the final movement comes to love it for what it is. I take this to tie together Nietzsche’s ideas on life affirmation that he presents during the 1880’s, including important ideas like eternal recurrence and *amor fati*.

This chapter will follow the broad outline of the movement Nietzsche presents in GS 334 on how one learns to love. With this passage as a guide, I will show how Nietzsche’s many disparate forays into life can be collectively understood as part of a strategy about how to respond to the problem of life negation.\(^{138}\) I begin in section 3.2 by elucidating the first movement in how we learn to love, that is, by learning about a given thing. In this section I survey how Nietzsche understands the concept of life.\(^{139}\) In doing so I try to distinguish and organize the disparate threads throughout his writings. Despite the frequent poetic-metaphorical language, the talk of biological life, and distinctly human life, I conclude that Nietzsche understood life to be defined by resistances, struggle, and self-overcoming. With this in hand, in section 3.3 I turn my attention towards the second movement in how we learn to love, focusing

\(^{138}\) The sickness of life negation is such that, in Nietzsche’s eyes, the need to both understand and revalue life becomes imperative.

\(^{139}\) The idea is that, in order to support Nietzsche’s revaluation of life and initiate the movement towards love of life, we must illuminate his understanding of life.
on the role good will, patience, and kindheartedness play. These virtues help a person cultivate what Nietzsche took to be necessary in learning to love, specifically an openness to life. In the main section, section 3.4, I examine what it means to love and affirm life. The central argument of this section uses the aforementioned paradigm of how a person learns to love, in conjunction with Nietzsche’s notions of eternal recurrence and *amor fati*, to present a new reading of life affirmation.

Through the model of how we learn to love, I argue that Nietzsche offers a realistic account of how a person develops a new understanding of the nature of life, cultivates an openness to life, and finally how a person comes to a genuine love of life. It is this new love of life, signified in the ideal of life affirmation, where we find Nietzsche’s vision of the ideal orientation towards life. What is more, with this, we have Nietzsche’s answer on how to overcome the life-denying standpoint of the sickness of life negation.

### 3.2 Learning About Life

The first step in learning to love is to work towards understanding the thing in question. Our concerns lie with life. To begin, we must survey, collect, and clarify Nietzsche’s disparate pronouncements on the nature of life. Not only is this an important task, it is also a difficult one given the multiplicity of ways in which Nietzsche discusses life. At the same time, we must not forget that this is only the first step on how one learns to love.\(^{140}\) Given the present concern with responding to the challenge of life negation, the task at hand is to come to the most honest understanding of life possible. There is the possibility that an honest view of life could prove to have harmful effects, as we will examine below. However, coming to an honest view of life is a

\(^{140}\) “First one must *learn to hear* a figure and melody at all, to detect and distinguish it, to isolate and delimit it as a life in itself” (GS 334).
crucial step, for to fail in this first task would undermine the possibility of coming to a genuine love of life.

What is life, according to Nietzsche? As intimated above, it is obvious that there are a number of ways one might answer this question.\(^\text{141}\) Does Nietzsche have the notion of an individual life in mind? Does he have types of life in mind? Does he mean the life process? Schacht helpfully distinguishes the “biological-scientific” sense of life from the “experiential-psychological” sense of life (1983; 234). Richardson divides these two divisions further, raising the question of Nietzsche referring to life in the biological sense, the sense of what it is to be a human being, the phenomenal sense, the personal sense, and what he calls the poetic sense (2013; 759).

While there is no doubt that clarifying the different senses of life in Nietzsche’s thought is important in itself, there are further considerations to keep in mind. One consideration has to do with the role that life might play in Nietzsche’s philosophy. For example, a common answer is that Nietzsche offers an account that life is will to power, and uses this to ground his conclusions about the good for human beings.\(^\text{142}\) While I am sympathetic to this argument, I will not be pursuing this line of thought here.\(^\text{143}\) Instead, I will work under the guiding idea that Nietzsche seeks to understand life with the ultimate goal of learning to love life. After a person comes to an understanding of life, she can then work towards becoming accustomed to it, and

\(^{141}\) Michael Thompson’s “The Representation of Life” offers an interesting meditation on ways of answering this question. Thompson describes the various “abstract categories” we might focus upon when considering life: “that of a concrete individual; of a thing’s being a part of something; of order or organization; of one thing’s following another in a process; of a thing’s doing something” (47). Nietzsche seems to use life in all of these ways, focusing on the life of the individual, various types of life, e.g., the noble, the slave, the priest, the artist, and the life process.

\(^{142}\) This argument is made in various forms by Schacht (1983), Hunt (1991), Geuss (1997), and Richardson (2013). Not surprisingly, their arguments focus on the claim that life is the will to power and use that to ground Nietzsche’s evaluation of sick and declining life contra healthy and flourishing life. While I am partial to this argument, I think there is also something else important going on with Nietzsche’s investigation of life. It is, in some ways, a related point, but a point focused on coming up with a response to the sickness of life negation.

\(^{143}\) I turn to an examination of the will to power in chapter 4.
finally coming to affirm and love life as it is, including both what is beautiful and what is terrible.

*Nietzsche on Life: A Survey of His Writings*

Nietzsche’s various forays into understanding life might best be described as offering a poetic-metaphorical account of life, as a brief survey will show. For example, in his early writings he describes life is "that dark, driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself" (UM II.76); at the beginning of his mature philosophy Nietzsche ruminates on the question ‘what is life?’ by describing it as “continually shedding something that wants to die … being cruel and inexorable against anything that is growing weak and old in us” (GS 26); in Zarathustra, where his description of life reaches its most poetic-metaphoric, Nietzsche describes life as "that which must always overcome itself" (Z II.12); and in his late works Nietzsche often writes that “life is will to power” (BGE 13, 259; cf., GS 349; GM II.12; TI IX.14; A 6). Speaking in this poetic-metaphoric language, his answers often leave us with more questions. Nietzsche was well aware of the difficulty of the questions before him, as was clear from his initial attempts to elucidate the abstract notion of life, to say nothing of the frequent appeal to metaphors and images in describing life. I will begin by looking at Nietzsche’s first serious forays into the nature of life in Zarathustra, after which I will turn to surveying his post-Zarathustra works. As we will see, the metaphoric-poetic language of Zarathustra gives way to a clearer description of life in the works that follow.

As I will argue, what it is to be a living being, or something growing, might best be characterized by self-overcoming. With Nietzsche’s description of life he subsequently

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144 Nietzsche frequently used the word ‘growth’ to characterize life when it is well-functioning. Self-overcoming better captures the idea he has in mind, and, as we will see below, avoids some of the problems the unqualified use of ‘growth’ carries. While more will be said about self-overcoming below, the notion gets a more substantive treatment in chapter 4.
unveils its fundamentally amoral nature, which will undoubtedly alienate the majority of people who continue to hold the prejudice that life unfolds according to a moral order. For what is strange, questionable, and terrible often strikes a person as something that should be other than it is. If this is how life appears to people, it will be reason enough to desire a better world than this one, driving them to life negation. Nietzsche’s goal, however, is to give an honest account of life, to learn about it, and see how it should be understood. He wants to undermine what drives a person to deny this life in favor of some life beyond. One might object that an honest glance at life will, in unveiling what is strange and terrible, drive people further away from life. Thus the first step towards learning to love life seems like it will simply exacerbate the problem. Part of Nietzsche’s task then must be to show how an honest view of life can turn a person away from life negation and starting on the path to life affirmation.145

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In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, when 'Life' is personified and speaks to Zarathustra, Nietzsche provides a strikingly rich account of life, despite Life's stated desire not to reveal her secret to Zarathustra. The goal before us is to take the highly poetic-metaphorical language and translate it into a simpler, more straightforward account, so as to get a clear conception of Nietzsche’s understanding of life.

How then does Life characterize herself when speaking to Zarathustra? In “The Dance Song” Life speaks in a most elusive way. Gazing into the eye of Life, Zarathustra begins by stating that Life is unfathomable; Life then seems to acknowledge this, only to later intimate there is something in her depths.146 Continuing, Zarathustra claims to talk of wisdom,

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145 A related question involves when genuine honesty is called for and when “honest illusions” might be necessary. Nietzsche clearly oscillated back and forth between the value of honesty and the value of illusion. See GS 107.

146 Z II.10. Writing on this section of *Zarathustra*, Richardson (2013) helpfully notes “the image of depth” which signifies that “we can’t see to the bottom, above all, of what [life is] for, of [life’s] purpose or meaning”. As he
questioning whether it is beautiful or evil, noting that it is stubborn, as well as seductive. In response Life inquires if Zarathustra is taking about her or Wisdom. Just as Life surmises, surely Nietzsche is offering a brief characterization of how people perceive Life, being filled with much that is beautiful, but also much that is evil. And yet, before anything has been conveyed with any clarity, Zarathustra once again sinks into the unfathomable. Thus, we see that his earliest attempt to seriously fathom life brings more questions than answers.

Two sections later in “On Self-Overcoming”, Life opens up considerably. This is also where Nietzsche offers his first substantial discussion of the will to power.\textsuperscript{147} Initially the will to power is characterized as “the unexhausted begetting will of life”.\textsuperscript{148} At this point Zarathustra realizes that in order to be understood he must speak of life and everything that lives as he has seen it. Zarathustra discerns that life is marked by commanding and obeying. Wondering if he had “crept into the very heart of life”, Zarathustra states that wherever he found the living, there he found the will to power. Continuing, Zarathustra quotes Life herself, who elusively characterizes herself as "that which must always overcome itself". Life elaborates on this, noting that it has been characterized as a "drive to a purpose, to something higher, more distant, more manifold". Life here becomes coy, noting that she "would rather perish than renounce" her secret. And yet she continues, characterizing herself as struggle, becoming, as “purpose and the contradiction of purposes”, as creating something and then opposing that very creation.

Later in the third part of Zarathustra, Life reappears in “The Other Dance Song”. Zarathustra, having looked into the eyes of Life, paints an evocative image of her, noting both

\textsuperscript{147} Montinari (2003) claims that the will to power “is simply another way of saying ‘life’, of designating ‘life’” (81).

\textsuperscript{148} Montinari (2003) claims that the will to power “is simply another way of saying ‘life’, of designating ‘life’” (81).
his love and fear of Life. Ponderingly, he asks who would not love Life, and yet who would not hate life? These two questions, particularly the latter, will prove to present the basic challenge Nietzsche must address. In the course of her response, Life chides Zarathustra for not loving her enough. Given Zarathustra’s struggles to come to terms with the eternal recurrence, Life’s rebuke to Zarathustra is revealing about what Nietzsche was beginning to think about life and whether or not it could be affirmed. Finally, the section ends with Zarathustra whispering into Life’s ear; and while we are not told what he says, Life’s surprise indicates that he has told her that he knows of the eternal recurrence.

Beyond the abundant poetic-metaphoric language that marks Zarathustra as a whole, Life is both forthcoming and illuminating here, despite her continuing coyness. There is no doubt that Nietzsche is working to paint a picture of how we perceive and understand the life process, and that any picture will of necessity invoke metaphor and bold imagery. Nietzsche does offer a characterization here that, once unpacked, sits in harmony with the less poetic-metaphoric statements he makes in his subsequent published writings, to which we will turn shortly. All together, the basic portrait of life that Nietzsche offers in Zarathustra is one in which life is defined by: (1) struggle; (2) continuous change, captured in the notion of becoming; likewise made determinate in (3) the interplay of creation and destruction; (4) purpose and then a new, contradictory purpose that has superseded the previous purpose; and most mysteriously, that (5) life is will to power.\footnote{Then there is the question of how eternal recurrence relates to life, an issue that Life intimates in “The Other Dance Song”. More will be said about the significance and role of eternal recurrence below.}

Breaking Life’s characterization down into these individual descriptions reveals what Nietzsche means by the esoteric notion that life is "that which must always overcome itself”. Life is inherently a movement, a continuous process of becoming, moving along “crooked paths”; in
its movement life encounters and at times seeks resistances and obstacles, attempting to overcome them, and having done so, moves on to new challenges. As such, life’s movement is defined by “crooked paths” insofar as life’s paths often undermine themselves. In other words, for life to continue on a forward path, life must continually overcome itself. To not cast away certain parts of one’s life would be tantamount to stagnation. Nietzsche appeals to the metaphor that life is akin to creation to make his point: just as a creation is completed and set aside for the next project, so too does life move through a cycle of continuous creation. The same reasoning underlies Nietzsche’s characterization of life as becoming. In effect, life is defined by a cycle of struggle, overcoming, and in a word Nietzsche frequently uses, growth.

Nietzsche’s post-Zarathustra works, while they might not be models of clarity, do offer a less poetic, more philosophical account of life. Focusing on Beyond Good and Evil we find Nietzsche describe the life process, elements of distinctly human life, and the various ways human life is served, in a rich assortment of ways. On the subject of the former, Nietzsche reiterates the claim from Zarathustra that "life is will to power" (BGE 13, 259). In one of his most provocative descriptions of the life process, Nietzsche states that "life itself is essentially a process of appropriation, injuring, overpowering . . . oppressing, being harsh, imposing your own form, incorporating, and ... exploiting," for these are simply part of what it is, in essence, to be alive (BGE 259).\(^{150}\) In developing the basic claims about the life process presented in Zarathustra, Nietzsche offers much the same picture outlined above, albeit with a caveat that is surely designed to shock us: exploitation, he says, “belongs to the essence of being alive”. What is more, wanting to “grow, spread, grab, win dominance”, is a consequence [Folge] of “the will

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\(^{150}\) This idea is reiterated in what might be even harsher terms in GM II.11, where Nietzsche writes that “life acts essentially—that is, in its basic functions—in an injuring, violating, pillaging, destroying manner and cannot be thought at all without this character”, continuing by speaking of “the true will of life—which is out after power” (GM II.11). Already in the Untimely Meditations Nietzsche had noted that, “To live and to be unjust is one and the same thing” (UM II.76).
of life” (ibid). Nietzsche provocatively emphasizes how exploitation and domination are part and parcel of life and the way it functions.\(^{151}\)

Continuing our survey of BGE, we find an intriguing multiplicity of ways in which Nietzsche approaches and understands human life. Nietzsche begins by stating that perspectivism “is the fundamental condition of life” (BGE P, 34). Contrary to the traditional philosophical importance placed on the unquestionable value of truth, Nietzsche holds that life can be served by untruth, deception, and appearance (BGE 2, 4, 34); similarly, ignorance and stupidity may be necessary for joy in life (BGE 24, 188). Not surprisingly, there are many dangers in life, dangers which can undermine even the strongest (BGE 29). A common concern Nietzsche expresses is that one can take revenge against life through falsification (BGE 59), where revenge is sought because lower types suffer from life as if it were a disease (BGE 62). As Nietzsche often advocated—contrary to the ideals of modernity—conflict and war can act as a stimulus to life (BGE 200); less surprisingly, art can help us endure life (BGE 28); similarly virtue, music, and reason can make life worth living (BGE 188); surprisingly, so too can religion (BGE 61). Given this diverse assortment of claims, one might wonder how they all fit together. While it is a general point, Nietzsche seems to be offering a selection of the various ways in which life can be served, for better or for worse.

Diving quickly into Nietzsche’s account of life in his post-BGE writings—book V of The Gay Science, the Genealogy, and the 1888 writings—we find fewer pronouncements on the nature of life. Nonetheless, when Nietzsche does talk about life in these works, he reiterates, in essentials, the same as what he offers in BGE. For example, Nietzsche adds that “the truly basic

\(^{151}\) One might object that by introducing notions of exploitation and domination, Nietzsche has gone beyond talk of self-overcoming, and introduced something new with respect to life. However, if we are attentive to what he says, domination and exploitation are simply the [potential] consequences of growth (i.e., self-overcoming). GS 118 offers a clear example of what Nietzsche has in mind. Nietzsche is asking us to be honest about this, difficult though it may be. As a cell dominates another cell, or a lion dominates a wildebeest, so too can we understand a human being dominating another human being in various daily activities.
life-instinct … aims at the expansion of power” (GS 349). The struggle that is life “revolves everywhere around preponderance”. Thus he concludes the passage by repeating an earlier claim, that the will to life is the will to power. In the Genealogy he reiterates again that “the essence of life” is will to power” (GM II.12). Like in BGE 259, life is characterized as “attacking, infringing”, but Nietzsche also adds that “the will of life appears active and form-giving” (ibid). Finally, speaking of the “law of life”, Nietzsche reiterates the idea that the essence of life is “the law of the necessary ‘self-overcoming’” (GM III.27). Interestingly, he adds that this same law of life wills it that “all great things perish through themselves, through an act of self-sublation [Selbstaufhebung]” (ibid). Finally, in The Antichrist Nietzsche offers a concise account of life, stating that it is “an instinct for growth, for endurance, for the accumulation of force, for power” (A 6). As is clear from this short survey,152 not only does Nietzsche develop his understanding of life on a number of levels, but he comes to a number of definite conclusions on the nature of life and what it is to be a living being.

Understanding life

Given the various descriptions of life—most notably in Zarathustra and BGE—what are we to take from Nietzsche's broad survey? Having elucidated the ideas from Zarathustra above, we can see that Nietzsche is working in his post-Zarathustra writings to develop and clarify his initial poetic-metaphoric insights further. Thus we see both a restatement of many of the ideas presented in Zarathustra as well as many new ideas about distinctly human life. If we place Nietzsche’s thoughts on life in the context of how one learns to love, we can see repeated

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152 Similar claims are made in Nietzsche’s notebooks at the time, as a brief selection of notes accumulated in The Will to Power illustrates. “For this is the doctrine preached by life itself to all that has life: the morality of development. To have and to want to have more—growth, in one word—that is life itself” (WP 125). “But what is life? Here we need a new, more definite formulation of the concept ‘life.’ My formula for it is: Life is will to power” (WP 254). These ideas are further corroborated in Nietzsche’s unpublished writings, e.g., WP 642, 647, 689, 695, 704, and 706. Given the explicit connections Nietzsche makes between life and the will to power, it is tempting to turn to an explicit examination of the will to power. However, I refrain from delving into Nietzsche’s notion of the will to power here, as it is the focus of chapter 4.
attempts to genuinely learn about life. This is most obvious in Nietzsche’s presentation of Zarathustra’s conversations with Life. Similarly, Nietzsche’s attempts to learn about life in BGE show him working to present an unvarnished description of what it means to be a living thing. In each case, the goal is to learn about and attempt to understand life.

What we find in Nietzsche’s description is that the life process has been “stamped with slanderous intentions” (BGE 259), and thus often appears immoral. However, he is quick to point out that life itself is neither moral nor immoral, neither good nor evil; rather, life is fundamentally beyond good and evil. We should no more slander life for being evil than we should condemn an erupting volcano or a bird of prey eating a little lamb. The belief that life is evil or immoral betrays the ideals of modernity, ideals which Nietzsche finds harmful and is working to overcome. More than that, a condemnation of life as evil and immoral indicates to Nietzsche that the estimation comes from someone who exhibits a declining life.

Given the descriptions Nietzsche offers, what are we to make of it all? To begin, we must keep in mind that he is offering a purported description of life. Nonetheless, one might object that he fails to remain value-neutral with his description of life, for Nietzsche clearly lets his values infect the account he offers. To be fair though, we should not forget that one of his tasks is to challenge the way life has traditionally been conceived, to say nothing of how it has traditionally been valued. Ideally, the reader will keep this in mind and evaluate the merits of Nietzsche’s claims. He clearly wants us to think about his claims, to think about the way life unfolds; for all too long humanity has looked at life under the belief it operated according to some moral order. If we can learn that this is not the case, then, presumably, we will have made progress. In the end, Nietzsche is simply asking us to see that, from a descriptive standpoint,

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153 Nietzsche is quite explicit about this, writing in 1886 that “life is essentially something amoral” (BT ASC.5).
living things behave by exploiting, growing, and dominating in various ways. To take one example, let us consider the following:

“Is it virtuous when a cell transforms itself into a function of a stronger cell? It has to. And is it evil when the stronger cell assimilates the weaker? It also has to; this is necessary for it, since it strives for superabundant replenishment and wants to regenerate itself” (GS 118).

One might object that Nietzsche is selectively choosing examples to support his claim while ignoring the great beauty and harmony of nature. In Nietzsche’s defense, he could respond that those who ignore the exploitation, domination, and destruction of life that occurs are the disingenuous ones. And there is plenty of evidence to support Nietzsche’s claim that life can be decidedly ugly. Stephen Jay Gould presents a particularly evocative example with the ichneumonid wasp, where

“The mother wasp seeks another insect, usually a caterpillar, as a host for her young. She then either injects her eggs into the host’s body, or paralyzes the host with her sting and then lays the eggs on top. When the eggs hatch, the larvae eat the living, often paralyzed, host from the inside—but very carefully, leaving the heart and other vital organs for last, lest the host decay and spoil the bounty” (Gould, 2002; 183).

If my argument is correct, then getting people to see the basic characteristics of what it is to be a living being, including what is ugly and painful, is a necessary step.

Nietzsche is undoubtedly being deliberately provocative in emphasizing the supposedly "immoral" aspects of life, given how often he notes these particular features when talking about
life. There is surely a purpose for his provocations. On the one hand, Nietzsche’s examination of life shows that it is a dynamic process of continuous struggle, involving not only conflict, but also appropriation and exploitation. Setting aside the rhetoric, this is assuredly Nietzsche’s way of highlighting life’s essential features of struggle and self-overcoming. Life is, without question, filled with much that can be questionable and terrible, all of which may make us recoil and condemn it. The point Nietzsche is trying to drive home is that this is no reason to condemn life. Getting to this point is not easy though. However, like much in life, as we learn more about it, the more it becomes familiar, the less frightened we are by it. If all goes well, we will then see that we have no reason to condemn it. However, while there are many instances where understanding something formerly unknown or misunderstood helps to remove our fear, this is not necessarily always the case. We will have to see if Nietzsche has the resources to meet this concern, as it could prove to be a serious problem.

Regarding human life, we learn that what is valuable for life is defined by the perspectives or interests of individuals and groups. A particularly prevalent part of Nietzsche's account of life is that many things, e.g., art and science, as well as things we normally take to be detrimental to the interests of life, like deception and appearances, or conflict and war, can serve the interests of life. Just as there are many different types of human life, e.g., the artist, the philosopher, the scholar, the master, the saint, the priest, and the slave, so too are there many ways in which each of these types of life can be served. More will be said about what it means to “serve life” in the next section; but the key point is that when Nietzsche is talking about serving
life, the kind of life he has in mind is human life, and the concern he has is how things can help preserve, promote, enhance, and affirm different types of human life.\footnote{While Nietzsche’s writings in the 1880s frequently suggest the kind of human flourishing he has in mind is reserved for a select portion of humanity, there are also times, e.g., Schopenhauer As Educator, where he argues that all types of human life can become something greater than at present.}

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Understanding that one of Nietzsche’s goals is to disabuse us of thinking that life is evil and immoral, connects to a seemingly unrelated point about the relation between life and valuing. Nietzsche contends that “life itself forces us to posit value”.\footnote{“When we talk about values we are under the inspiration, under the optic, of life: life itself forces us to posit values, life itself evaluates through us, when we posit values” (TI V.5). Elsewhere Nietzsche asserts that “life could not exist except on the basis of perspectival valuations and appearances” (BGE 34).} In essence, to live is to value, that is, to live is to have certain commitments, to be for certain things and against other things. If it is the case that we create value and that life has no intrinsic value, then it would be clear that judging life to be bad or good is an error. Thus, if Nietzsche could show that it is human beings who infuse life with value by valuing it, he would have demonstrated the mistake in believing that life is evil and immoral and should be other than it is.\footnote{Granted, one of the challenges here is convincing people that this notion of value is good enough. This may be a daunting task, given that Platonism and Christianity have taught us that values are objective and unchanging. A good, comprehensive survey of Nietzsche’s metaethics can be found in Robertson (2009).}

Nietzsche claims that “without esteeming the nut of existence would be hollow” (Z I.15). That is to say, life would be hollow if there was no valuing; it would not be recognizable as life in the way we understand life. In other words, valuing and having commitments is, in a certain way, what makes life life for human beings. While Nietzsche’s metaethical views are not entirely clear, much evidence suggests that he holds the world and life to have no intrinsic value.\footnote{“Whatever has value in the present world has it not in itself, according to its nature—nature is always value-less—but has rather been given, granted value, and we were the givers and granters! Only we have created the world that concerns human beings!” (GS 301).} Life and everything that makes life what it is gets its value from us. Human beings are the sources of value.\footnote{Given this fact, we should not be surprised Nietzsche goes on to say that man is “the}
being who measures values, who values and measures” (GM II.8). Through human valuing the value of the world is created and thereby illuminated. “Only through esteeming is there value” (Z I.15). The world and life are not in themselves evil and immoral; rather, through human valuing, we have made the world and life evil and immoral.

To take a good example, let us consider Nietzsche’s claim that, insofar as people have decided to judge the world and life to be ugly, they have made the world and life ugly (GS 130). Once again, we find him saying that we did not discover the world and life to be ugly because it was ugly in itself, we made it ugly through our valuations. If Nietzsche can get us to see this point, then he will have made progress in getting us to move beyond judging the world and life to be evil and immoral. If he can succeed in doing that, people will be more open to learning about all that is strange and questionable in the world. And this can help us overcome holding a life negating perspective while laying the foundation for cultivating a love of life.

Beyond offering a window into his metaethics and his critique of life-devaluing values, Nietzsche’s position on life and its connection to the nature of values plays an integral role in his diagnosis of those who are sick. As we saw in chapter one, Nietzsche holds that a person’s value judgments should be understood as signs and symptoms about a person’s life (BGE 187, TI II.2). If valuations are, as Nietzsche claimed, “physiological requirements for the preservation of a particular type of life” (BGE 3), a pessimistic person who laments that life is no good tells me nothing about life itself, but does tell me something about both her life, whether she is healthy or sick, and why certain values are necessary for her preservation. This makes sense if values come from a person instead of inhering in things themselves. At the same time, Nietzsche’s position

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159 A decade earlier Nietzsche had stated that “the word ‘Mensch’, indeed, means the measurer” (WS 21).
160 Nietzsche expands upon this point in a Nachlass fragment 11[73], which states that “the viewpoint of ‘value’ is the viewpoint of conditions of preservation and enhancement”.
suggests a kind of value standard about what constitutes a good or bad, healthy or sick life for a person, a standard deeply connected to a person’s physiology.

In his later writings Nietzsche links health and what is good for ‘growth’. However, Nietzsche never goes into much detail about what constitutes growth in the context of life, though he does offer some general ideas.\textsuperscript{161} The basic idea he espouses is that when life is functioning properly, it exhibits growth. In contrast, when life is not evincing growth, but rather decline, then it is not functioning as it ought. Life, human and otherwise, can thus be assessed as either ascending, where life is growing, or as declining, where life is atrophying. This is a fairly vague account of growth, and the various related descriptions that growth is associated with appropriating and incorporating, or that things grow strong and hard during struggles and pain, do not illuminate this important idea as much as we would like.

Schacht helpfully says that growth, which is “taken to be the primary characteristic of all life that is flourishing rather than declining” (1983; 248), includes both the accumulation and discharge of force; it “involves a dialectic of assertion and assimilation” (\textit{ibid}). Or, as we have seen Nietzsche often emphasize, growth, like life, involves struggle. Importantly, Schacht emphasizes that growth is not to be understood in a merely quantitative way. That is to say, just because something has grown quantitatively, that does not necessarily qualify it as good.\textsuperscript{162} For example, cancer is a growth, but we do not take it to be good. Nietzsche however typically refers to growth as an unqualified good, never considering that some forms of growth are problematic. He likewise identifies life with growth, albeit in an unqualified way. Like life, Nietzsche often

\textsuperscript{161} Another ideal associated with the vague idea of growth is that life should flourish or prosper. Nietzsche himself makes very few explicit references to flourishing in his published writings, the most notable example being in section 3 of the preface to the \textit{Genealogy}, where he asks if good and evil have contributed to human flourishing or diminution. Other references can be found in GS 1 and 347, as well as GM II.10, II.12, III.11, and III.19. The German \textit{gedeihen}, at times translated as “to flourish”, is alternately translated as “to thrive” or “to prosper”.

\textsuperscript{162} This is a point repeatedly emphasized to me by William Schroeder, who helped me to see that not all growth is good.
associates power with growth. This association provides a helpful qualification, for the presence of power can offer some insight into the direction growth must take to be considered good. His treatment of power helps us see that growth aims not at some static end-goal, but is rather a continuous overcoming beyond what something is at present. As we saw Nietzsche remark about life in Zarathustra, growth is similarly marked by “purpose and the contradiction of purposes”. To take the most evocative image Nietzsche offers, genuine growth is continuous self-overcoming.\textsuperscript{163}

For Nietzsche, a healthy life is a life marked by self-overcoming. We have already seen most of the particulars, viz., the need for resistance and struggle, which act as a stimulus and propels this self-overcoming. The process of struggle ideally helps integrate and unify the individual, though there is also a risk involved in this experiment that is life. Attaining the goal is not an end state however; rather, it is a spur to something new. Thus Nietzsche's frequent appeal to the unified relationship between creating and destroying; there cannot be one without the other, and a healthy life evinces both.

This is contrasted with examples of dysfunctional, impoverished life, which, given its circumstances, seeks mere preservation. We have already seen what the impoverished individual looks like: this type evinces a desire for rest and peace; she evinces a distrust of life and her instincts; she chooses what she believes to be good for herself, but which is actually harmful; she shows a weakness of will; in effect there is a state of disintegration and a focus on mere self-

\textsuperscript{163} Self-overcoming is clearly an important notion in Nietzsche’s thought, and for that reason it is an image that warrants careful attention. In order for self-overcoming, will to power, and life to receive the attention each deserves, and to prevent running them all together conceptually, I defer saying more about self-overcoming until chapter 4, where it is discussed in the context of will to power. Given the associations between these different notions, it might seem artificial to pry them apart. However, examining these notions separately will not only help clarify the types of sickness Nietzsche diagnoses, it will also provide insight into how these respective sicknesses might be treated.
preservation within such individuals. Instead of seeking resistance and struggle, which normally acts as a spur to greater development, the impoverished seek to still the waters. Creativity and power may be lacking, as well as a unifying will. As we will see below, all of these symptoms can be read from the values that the declining types of people esteem.

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Having surveyed Nietzsche’s treatment of the nature of life we have moved from what was a very poetic-metaphoric description about the life process into something more concrete. Distilled to its core, life is defined by struggle, change, self-overcoming, and the continuous interplay of creation and destruction. Given the nature of this abstract characterization, we should not be surprised that life is described more concretely with language that captures its harshness, brutality, and ugliness. Beyond this account of the life process, some of the features of distinctly human life have been illuminated, including some of the ways through which people cope with what is strange and questionable in life. While our understanding of the various senses of life has become clearer, we must now consider what end Nietzsche has been pursuing in his investigations. While Nietzsche undoubtedly has several tasks before him, including critiquing unhealthy forms of life, and laying out visions of healthy forms of life, we must remember that one of the basic goals in his investigations into life is to better understand life as such. Part and parcel of that project is to illuminate life as such to his readers.

Under the framework of GS 334, I have sought to show that Nietzsche’s goal is for us to learn about life so that we might understand it better, become better acquainted with it, and become open to it, all with the ultimate goal of learning to love life. Such is the path to life affirmation. Having worked to illuminate how Nietzsche believes we should understand life, we

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164 Another particularly helpful account comes in Nietzsche's description of the slave types in the first essay of the *Genealogy*. This type is paradigmatically sick, exhausted, distrustful, resentful, life-denying.
can turn our attention to the next stage of the movement towards life affirmation; that is, we can turn our attention to the kind of attitude necessary for loving life.\footnote{Just as there is a cognitive element involved in learning to love, i.e., learning about the warp and woof of life, so too is an affective (non-cognitive) element involved. More will be said about this relationship below in IV.C.}

3.3 Patience, Good Will, and Openness to Life

Having surveyed Nietzsche’s treatment of life, with an aim towards getting a better understanding of the nature of the life process as manifest in human lives, we have made our way through the first movement of how a person learns to love life. This brings us to the second movement, about which Nietzsche says: “one needs effort and good will to stand it despite its strangeness; patience with its appearance and expression, and kindheartedness about its oddity” (GS 334). Nietzsche emphasizes the need for effort, good will, and patience in learning to love. Applying this to life, Nietzsche is asking us to be open and ready to respond to life. We need to be at once patient and attentive to its strangeness, but also open to the way life can challenge us.

Coming to a deeper, richer understanding of life, we have seen Nietzsche describe life in ways that might, in light of the unflinching honesty, cause people to deny what Nietzsche says, to turn away in horror or disgust. This is a distinct possibility, as even Nietzsche must acknowledge; as such, we must evaluate if there is a satisfactory response to this issue. One potential response can be seen in Nietzsche’s suggestion about the need to endure life’s travails. As he says with respect to a new piece of music, “one needs effort and good will to stand [ertragen, endure] it despite its strangeness” (GS 334). On the face of it, with his emphasis on ‘standing’ or ‘enduring’ something, Nietzsche seems to be suggesting there will there be times one must simply endure something questionable or terrible. In light of the ugliness and suffering in life, the call to endure it would seem to be a reasonable response. Given what Nietzsche intimates, I suspect there may be something important about enduring a thing, even if it is only
vaguely hinted at here. This stance works in some contexts, e.g., enduring a piece of atrocious music, but that is not to say it will work in all contexts.

Enduring something suggests a stance that is both passive and defensive; it has greater affinity with a focus on self-preservation. Against this defensiveness Nietzsche advocates that something else is needed. The real emphasis lies with a kind of openness, as the possession of good will, patience, and kindheartedness suggests. Just as Nietzsche says we need to be open and receptive to a new piece of music, so too must we be open and receptive to life. More than openness is needed though; in keeping with his high estimation of activity, Nietzsche implicitly suggests that instead of passively undergoing life, a person needs to be actively engaged with life, ready to take on its challenges.

To see out how this might work, let us flesh out the details of Nietzsche’s example of a melody in a piece of music. His description that the music is strange and odd (experimental) nicely mirrors the way life and the world look to most people. A piece of music can be different from what we expected, it can be avant-garde, and thus it can surprise, even startle us. For these reasons the piece of music can initially be difficult to understand, and certainly difficult to get into; accordingly, we may find ourselves very much “enduring” it, and the last thing we would attribute to it would be any kind of beauty. However, with effort, patience, and good will, the music reveals itself to us, at times losing the strange quality that had once kept us at a

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166 Of course, one might be patiently enduring something, withstanding the blows, as one gathers strength and determination for some future project. In this case, it stands to reason that Nietzsche would see value in endurance, albeit only as a temporary stage.

167 I owe William Schroeder particular thanks for getting me to see beyond Nietzsche’s reference to standing or enduring something. After obstinately clinging to my focus on enduring something, and patiently reading and rereading GS 334, the richness of the passage revealed itself, opening the way for a more thoughtful reading. I came to see that enduring life was too defensive and withdrawn from life, whereas Nietzsche advocated an openness and active engagement with life.

168 Public reaction to Wagner’s Zukunftsmusik is a good example of music that surprised, startled, and offended, as was the reaction to the atonal music of Arthur Schönberg. Even the reaction to pop music, for example The Beach Boys’ Pet Sounds, or The Velvet Underground & Nico, can be one of surprise and uncertainty, shock and disgust. Underlying this we often see a stylistic shift, where the new music betrays our expectations. Just as Nietzsche describes in this passage, our good will and patience usually—though not always—reward us in these situations.
distance, but at other times retaining the strangeness, yet losing what made it seem so foreign and off-putting.

Similarly, much in life is often different than expected, such that it often surprises and confounds us with its strangeness before we get to know it. More than that, life can be harsh and ugly. As we have also seen, for these reasons life can inspire anxiety and dread; people begin to wish it were different and ultimately adopt a negative view of life. One might object that the attitude towards new, challenging music does not translate to the harsher elements of life. There is the worry that, even as one becomes more familiar with the harsh and ugly parts of life, it will not get any less frightening or nauseating. It is one thing to be open to life and to engage it with good will, working to transfigure what is harsh and ugly, but it is another thing for this kind of transfiguration to genuinely occur. Thus we would not be in the wrong to question if Nietzsche’s claim is that we can learn to love anything with enough patience and good will. Nietzsche will need to say more if his account of how we learn to love will be truly applicable to what is harshest and most terrible in life.

Nietzsche continues by mentioning the appearance and expression of a piece of music, so let us consider the way a piece of music appears and how it is expressed. Music invariably unfolds over time, first one movement, then another movement, sometimes repeating itself, but only slowly revealing itself to us. More often than not we need repeated listens to really hear everything that is going on in a given piece of music. There are parts that are immediately appealing, parts that seem to be a bridge to something greater, parts to which we are indifferent,

\[169\] Nothing in GS 334 suggests that we can learn to love all things, nor does it suggest there are things we cannot learn to love. Given this, one might then object that life is not something we can learn to love. This objection will be addressed below. Additionally, if there are things that cannot be loved, we need to try and discern what it is that distinguishes what we can learn to love from what we cannot learn to love.
and parts that are ugly. All of these twists and turns contribute to our overall reception of the
music, be it positive or negative.

The appearance and expression of life follows a strikingly similar movement, as life is
filled with great crescendos and decrescendos, periods of calm and periods of tempest, moments
of dissonance and moments of harmony. In essence, life is filled with much that is beautiful,
much to which we are indifferent, and much that is harsh and ugly. Within the many twists and
turns of life, the point Nietzsche seems to be communicating is that life fully reveals itself to us
slowly over time. As with music, we need to be attentive to life, we need to be patient with it,
and we need to face it instead of turning away, lest we get little more than an incomplete view of
it. Nietzsche still has not offered any reasons to believe that the revelations life gives us as a
reward for our good will and patience will not make life look increasingly unsettling, harsh, and
ugly.

The virtues Nietzsche recommends as essential in learning to love—effort, good will,
patience, kindheartedness, openness, and receptivity—can certainly reward us in many contexts.
If he is right, the same virtues that help us come to appreciate a piece of music or fall in love
with another person can help affect the same change in our orientation towards life. For just as a
new piece of music surprises us and challenges us, so too does life. However, life presents far
greater challenges than even the most avant-garde, dissonant piece of music ever could present.
One need only consider natural disasters, diseases, and wars to see how much uglier life can be.
How are we to respond to the worst that life has to offer? Furthermore, can we be genuinely
prepared to respond in the ways Nietzsche describes?\footnote{170}

We must be patient and ready to face life, just as we must honestly face it, and we must
do so with good will. To this point Nietzsche has said nothing about how a person might

\footnote{170} I will be turning to this question and a related question below in sections 3.4.4.1 and 3.4.4.2.
realistically generate this good will in the face of what is ugly, harsh, and terrible. Insofar as we are open to life and ready to be challenged by it, we create the conditions where we may become used to it and where we expect it. But we are right to see that this is not enough, for merely becoming used to and enduring life’s travails is not to meet them with good will. Furthermore, what does it mean to become used to natural disasters, disease, and war? Is that something we want? Beyond that, should we understand Nietzsche as saying that we can learn to love anything with enough patience, openness, and good will? Our intuitions suggest that, just as there are things we cannot become used to, so too are there are things that cannot be loved. If the goal is to love life, to be enchanted by it, Nietzsche is moving far beyond what we find in the second movement of how one learns to love. As we have seen, there are significant hurdles to pass over to achieve this kind of expansive love. To explain how a person might overcome these hurdles and learn to love life, the most difficult movement, we now turn our attention.

3.4 Loving Life

Introduction

Having made our way through the first two movements described in GS 334, we have progressed from encountering and learning about something strange, to cultivating good will, patience, effort, and openness towards it. This brings us to the final stage of the movement Nietzsche describes. He writes:

Finally comes a moment when we are used to it; when we expect it; when we sense that we’d miss it if it were missing; and now it continues relentlessly to compel and enchant us until we have become its humble and enraptured lovers, who no longer want anything better from the world than it and it again (GS 334).
Among the things that immediately stand out is the fact that, while GS 334 does not explicitly invoke eternal recurrence, Nietzsche clearly gestures at eternal recurrence when he speaks of “no longer want[ing] anything better from the world than it and it again”. Additionally, Nietzsche concludes that “we are always rewarded in the end … as it gradually casts off its veil and presents itself as a new and indescribable beauty”, which ought to give us pause.

The implicit reference to eternal recurrence suggests that it might help illuminate our understanding of how a person comes to love. This seems reasonable in light of Nietzsche’s claim that eternal recurrence is "the highest possible formula of affirmation" (EH, Z.1). Thus we may have some guidance or direction about how a person comes to love and affirm life by examining the eternal recurrence. Whether or not eternal recurrence is a vehicle to loving life, there is clearly a profound transformation between enduring life, accepting life, and finally loving life. The central issue then is how a person is transformed; what occurs that precipitates a new, joyful, loving engagement with life? Careful attention to GS 334, read in coordination with amor fati and eternal recurrence, will give us a better understanding of how a person learns to love.

In this section then, the central task of the chapter looms: offering an account of what life affirmation is, and then reconstructing how Nietzsche believed a person might come to love life. I begin by examining the final movement of learning to love in GS 334, after which I turn my

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171 Here we come across another substantial difference between Nietzsche’s example of a piece of music and life. It is one thing to want to hear a piece of music again and again, but at some point, odds are good that a person will tire of even the best music, at least for a spell. Clearly Nietzsche would not want this feeling to arise with respect to life, as growing tired of life would signify that something had gone wrong. In this section we will see just what it is that distinguishes a person’s desire for life from a desire for all other things.

172 Applied to life, even as we come to understand it better, as well as get used it, there is no guarantee that it will become beautiful, particularly what is terrible. Oftentimes as we learn more about the horrors in life, they look worse. What kind of beauty could lie in the ugliest parts of life? There is also the possibility that as what is strange, terrible, and questionable becomes better known, it will become increasingly mundane, leaving people indifferent, possibly resigned to life. All of this makes Nietzsche’s claim appear increasingly less plausible. Overall, Nietzsche’s claim that we are always rewarded seems implausible. Fortunately, nothing seems to ride on the claim we are always rewarded. There are more challenging problems to come as we work to clarify how a person might come to love and affirm life, problems I will return to in section D below.
attention to *amor fati* and eternal recurrence. Having looked at the final movement of GS 334, *amor fati*, and eternal recurrence, I turn to several pressing questions and potential problems for Nietzsche’s view as I have reconstructed it. Among these questions, I examine if a person can genuinely become used to life, what it means to love life, how it is that life is said to reward us, and finally, and most problematically, I look at the issue of loving [affirming] what is terrible in life.

**Learning to Love Life**

Having discussed how a person learns to love a piece of music, Nietzsche concludes GS 334 by saying that “it is just this way that we have learned to love everything we now love”.

While one might contest the idea that this is how we learn to love everything, my contention is that with GS 334 Nietzsche offers a model of how a person can learn to love *life*. This fits with one of Nietzsche’s overall themes in GS to help cultivate a new, joyful orientation towards life.

The first task is to elucidate the “way that we have learned to love”. Nietzsche describes the final movement as follows: “finally comes a moment when we are used to it; when we expect it; when we sense we’d miss it if it were missing; and now it continues relentlessly to compel and enchant us until we have become its humble and enraptured lovers”. Vague though it may be, Nietzsche does seem to capture part of the basic phenomenology of falling in love. Opening ourselves to someone new, a time comes when we are used to her, which leads to a familiarity where we come to expect her, where she becomes the horizon that orients our life. This leads to the kind of attachment that creates a sense of loss when she is not present. What is of particular interest is the description of being “compelled” [Zwang] and “enchanted” [Zauber], which suggests that we are moved involuntarily, as if under a spell. We should not be surprised then that Zarathustra says, “There is always some madness in love. But there is also always some

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173 Note that this does not commit Nietzsche to the view that everything can be loved or is worth loving.
reason in madness" (Z I.7). While it would not be incorrect to say that we play some kind of role, it is also the case that, in becoming a humble and enraptured lover, we are pushed and pulled by forces beyond our control.

With this description before us, we must try and make sense of how this would apply to life. While it is one thing to describe this process in the context of learning to love a piece of music or another person, one might question if a person can learn to love life in this way. In the course of this transformation, first we become “used to it”, Nietzsche says. We might alternatively think of this as being accustomed to life, even comfortable with life. But how many people can say they are used to life, let alone comfortable with it? One might object that a person cannot become used to life. The key is not so much that a person becomes accustomed to life, but that she begins to see the value in what had initially seemed strange and forbidding. No longer fearing it, she welcomes it. I return to this issue below.

Many people, seeing only a world that often looks purposely cruel, do not open themselves up to the world and life and try to get to know it. They may actively work to not get used to life. In doing so, they forestall the possibility of learning to love the world, seeing it instead as something negative. A person can come to “expect” life, to see life as the horizon that

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174 Given statements like this, one wishes Nietzsche had said more about the nature of love, specifically how he understood a good and valuable kind of love (in contrast to something like the neighborly love that he so frequently criticized). Han-Pile (2009) makes just this point. Nietzsche may talk about love a lot, e.g., references abound throughout The Gay Science and Zarathustra, but he never says anything about the nature of this love. It is one thing to say that Zarathustra came down from the mountain out of love for humanity, but that does not say anything about the nature of this love. And to say that it is an overflowing love, while an evocative image, is vague and raises more questions than answers. Han-Pile offers a compelling argument that the kind of love Nietzsche has in mind is not eros, but rather agape. There are reasons for thinking Nietzsche has a different model of love in mind, something grounded in his understanding of “the gay science”. Pippin says that we can understand “the gay science” as “a kind of poetry, a love poetry meant to call to mind an extremely idealized love” (Pippin, 2010; 41). Following this idea, Dreyfus & Kelly helpfully write of the poets of Provence that they “developed a new understanding of love”, understood as neither eros nor agape. “This new kind of love involved total devotion to a person who became the center of your life. Indeed, in the troubadour tradition your beloved actually gives you your identity. Without her you would cease to exist as the person you have become in loving her. You understand who you are entirely in relation to her, and therefore you are ready to die for her” (2011; 129). This is a topic well worth further investigation, but which would take us beyond the scope of this chapter.
orients everything else. While it may seem strange to talk of missing life, we can understand what it would mean to miss the horizon that orients a person. Finally, for those who open themselves up to the world and life, who courageously look upon the world and life, they learn that, while there is much that is terrible in life, they discover that life can compel and enchant, transforming us into “enraptured lovers” of life, and revealing “a new and indescribable beauty”.

With the entire movement before us, one might interject that Nietzsche has not explained how a person learns to love life. While this is not an unexpected feeling, expecting an explanation is to misunderstand what Nietzsche is offering. Love eludes explanation; as Nietzsche’s treatment shows, it is a lived experience. That Nietzsche should have chosen learning to love music, something so dear to him, suggests a few things. First, this example should make it very clear that learning to love is not something that occurs through careful deliberation. Secondly, let us recall that Nietzsche described GS as “the most personal of all my books”. Thus we may be entitled to surmise that the account of learning to love that Nietzsche offers in GS 334 is his description of how he had learned to love. We should not read this meditation as something abstract and impersonal, but rather a personal account of his own experiences.175

As a person learns to love, a transformation occurs within the person. What is more, this transformation leads to a point where the world and life are thereby transfigured, just as the person is transformed. Nietzsche concludes by saying that what is strange, “gradually casts off its veil and presents itself as a new and indescribable beauty” (GS 334). We become open to the

175 Han-Pile makes the same point, albeit in the context of loving fate specifically. “Nietzsche does not offer any reasons to try to convince us of the desirability of loving fate, but a reflective description of how things appear to someone who is in such a state.” She continues, “Correlatively, what may have looked like arguments or requirements for the erotic love of fate are in fact observations about the sort of experiences entailed by the state once it is achieved in its agapic form” (234; emphasis mine).
world and life, thereby opening ourselves to the possibility of both love and beauty, even in the midst of a world and life that is filled with much that is hateful and ugly.

**Toward Affirmation: Amor Fati and Eternal Recurrence**

One of the motivating ideas in this chapter is that Nietzsche’s response to the hatred of life he diagnosed lies in his notion of life affirmation, or love of life. Given the primacy Nietzsche accords eternal recurrence in EH Z.1, and its role in the project of life affirmation, there can be no doubt that the idea of life affirmation [loving life] is fundamental for Nietzsche. Granting this, Nietzsche seems to take it as given that learning to love life and affirm it is possible.

As we have seen in proceeding through the movements of how one learns to love, there is still much clarificatory work to be done, as questions abound. We must examine in greater detail how to understand life affirmation [loving life]. Then we must consider more carefully how a person might come to love and affirm life, i.e., what precipitates the transformation where a person achieves an attitude of life affirmation. Finally, we must examine whether life affirmation can succeed as a response to the problem of life negation Nietzsche diagnosed. To begin to address these questions, our attention now turns to an examination of two important ideas in Nietzsche’s thought, *amor fati* and eternal recurrence.

**Amor fati**

Nietzsche’s notion of *amor fati* seems like it can offer some clarification on the subjects of both love and affirmation. However, as with much in Nietzsche, both understanding the idea of *amor fati* and what role it plays are by no means easy. Nietzsche introduced the notion of *amor fati* at the beginning of book IV of GS, writing that his “dearest wish” was “to learn more
and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them” (GS 276). The kind of love Nietzsche wants from this point on is *amor fati*. One might wonder why this has become Nietzsche’s “dearest wish”. While he never explicitly addresses this, if we take into account the preface to GS, it is likely that what precipitated this new outlook was his experience of sickness and pain, as well as the newfound health he experienced.

While Nietzsche first mentioned this idea in 1882, he did not return to it until 1888, when he described *amor fati* as his “formula for greatness”. As he characterizes *amor fati*: “you do not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity” (EH II.10). Once again, the love he speaks of is a love of necessity. Relevant to the present discussion, Nietzsche goes on to dismiss two alternative reactions to necessity. It is insufficient to tolerate necessity, just as it is mistaken to conceal it; neither of these standpoints indicates any kind of love. To achieve greatness, one must *love* necessity, one must love everything as it is.

Later in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche says that “Necessity does not hurt me; *amor fati* is my innermost nature” (EH CW.4). What is of interest is that in 1882 Nietzsche described *amor fati* as his “dearest wish”, he now describes *amor fati* as something he has achieved. If Nietzsche has genuinely achieved this state (even if believed he was on the path to achieving it), he could presumably offer some guidance on how one might similarly achieve *amor fati*.

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176 Nietzsche concludes the passage by saying: “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!” Given the frequency of Nietzsche’s no-saying between 1882-1888, one might reasonably conclude Nietzsche that he failed to become a Yes-sayer. One might then also conclude that Nietzsche, despite his wishes, did not succeed in becoming the life-affirming person. I will return to this issue below in the conclusion.

177 Nietzsche would essentially repeat this: “What my innermost nature tells me is that everything necessary, seen from above and in the sense of a great economy, is also useful in itself,—it should not just be tolerated, it should be loved … *Amor fati*: that is my innermost nature” (NCW Epi. 1).

178 Beatrice Han-Pile brought this to my attention: “Amor fati is now presented in the first person, and not as an ideal but as a realised state (‘my inmost nature’, ‘the bottom of my nature’). Nietzsche does not offer any reasons to try to convince us of the desirability of loving fate, but a reflective description of how things appear to someone who is in such a state” (Han-Pile, 2009; 234).
As with much in Nietzsche, it is one thing to state a point, it is another to explain; and Nietzsche does little to explain how it is he might have achieved *amor fati*. How does a person come to love everything as it is, backwards and forwards? There is no answer to this question. Han-Pile comments on how Nietzsche is not offering a prescriptive account of how one can achieve *amor fati*, rather, Nietzsche is offering a descriptive account of his own achievement. In light of this, is there anything we can conclusively draw about *amor fati* from his example? To answer this, we must try to answer several other questions first.

To begin, we must try to make sense of how *amor fati* is a “formula for greatness”. Nietzsche says it is “not want[ing] anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity” (EH II.10). If the suggestion was that we accept a state of affairs, this much seems within a person’s control. But Nietzsche makes it clear the formula is asking something more, for he goes on to add, revealingly, that neither tolerating [*ertragen*, enduring] necessity nor concealing it will do; one must love it. What would it mean to [choose to] love necessity and fate? Putting the question in this way effectively brings us back to how one learns to love. It is not the case that one simply decides by rational deliberation to love, or through sheer force of will, wills love. Rather, one *learns* to love; it is something we play a role in, but simultaneously undergo.

What Nietzsche describes is clearly a goal and an ideal. Thus, while *amor fati* is an intriguing ideal, it is just that, an ideal. And while it does seem to help fill in the account about how a person might love life as a whole (despite all that is strange and terrible), *amor fati* does not provide a “formula of greatness”, but rather highlights the end goal. As we have seen, love must be learned; so too must love of fate be learned. The question then is: how does one learn to
love fate? And this brings us back to one of the primary challenges with Nietzsche’s position: how does one learn to love a life filled with so much that is strange and terrible?

_Eternal Recurrence_

One of the pressing challenges for Nietzsche is to articulate how a person might move beyond a life negating standpoint to a life affirming standpoint. For that matter, there is also the issue of how a person might go beyond enduring, accepting, or resigning herself to life. Several variations focusing on the eternal recurrence ‘test’ have been proposed as to how this might be accomplished.\(^{179}\) No doubt spurred by Nietzsche’s claim that the eternal recurrence is “the highest possible formula of affirmation”, this is an understandable interpretation. However, it does not seem to explain how one would come to achieve an attitude of life affirmation; rather, it merely helps a person diagnose their individual standpoint towards life at a particular time.

Consider the question the demon asks regarding how one would react to the idea of the eternal recurrence: “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’” (GS 341; emphasis mine).

Nietzsche here suggests that one need only have “a tremendous moment” in one’s life to affirm one’s whole life. But as the passage continues, Nietzsche then suggests an alternative: “Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for nothing more fervently …?” As the passage concludes, Nietzsche seems to place the emphasis on one’s life and life more generally, which is quite different from a great moment. Nietzsche seems to overlook

\(^{179}\) For significantly more detailed discussions of the eternal recurrence, see Soll (1973), Magnus (1978), Nehamas (1985), Clark (1990), Anderson (2005), and Reginster (2006), all of which present thoughtful and nuanced treatments. Chapter 5 of Reginster gives a good, critical overview of the various readings offered by the aforementioned interpreters.
the obvious possibility that a person could react to the thought of eternal recurrence with indifference and apathy. Similarly, he seems to overlook the fact that the vast majority of people would, knowing what they had done in their lives, desire something radically different.

What we can take from this is that how a person reacts is primarily a sign about whether or not that the person has achieved an attitude of life affirmation. How a person reacts says nothing about what it is that gets them to a point where they can react with joy to the idea of the eternal recurrence. Nietzsche, as if aware of this, does add that, if the idea of the eternal recurrence “gained power over you”, then it would transform you. This directs our attention towards an important question that needs to be answered: how might the thought of the eternal recurrence gain power over a person? Nietzsche does not offer an explanation why or how thought of the eternal recurrence would gain power over a person. All we learn is that if it did gain power over a person, it would transform her. Thus, while “The Greatest Weight” is a deservedly famous passage in Nietzsche’s corpus, it leaves much to be explained both with respect to the eternal recurrence and achieving an attitude of life affirmation.

Fortunately, Nietzsche makes some intriguing suggestions about how we might address these questions. First of all, we can also read GS 341 as a confrontation, in that most people are probably going to react negatively to Nietzsche’s question about wanting this again—if they react at all. This confrontation can act as an impetus to the project of self-cultivation required to answer the question affirmatively. If this is the case, there is certainly great value in “the greatest

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180 A representative example of this can be found in Reginster, who writes: “You affirm [your] life if you react with joy to the prospect of its eternal recurrence” (Reginster, 2006; 202). He continues, adding a little more substance to the idea when he says that “to advocate the affirmation of life, then, is to exhort compliance with a distinctive ethical imperative: live your life so as to become able to welcome its eternal recurrence” (ibid). What such a life is like is not something Nietzsche could say, but more can assuredly be said about just how one ought to live. Leiter says that, “a person affirms his life in Nietzsche’s sense only insofar as he would gladly will its eternal return” (Leiter, 2002; 119-120). Clark, says that “a joyful reaction [to eternal recurrence] would indicate a fully affirmative attitude towards one’s … life”, which is an attitude “Nietzsche wants to promote” (Clark, 1990; 251).
weight”, but primarily in the way it works as a confrontation and an impetus to do something with one’s life.

Nietzsche also suggests in the passage that one is not reacting to the thought experiment; rather, when he asks “have you once experienced a tremendous moment”, what is at stake is whether or not one has achieved something special, a defining moment in one’s life. The suggestion is that it is this rare, defining moment that makes one’s life something worth affirming. Connecting this second suggestion to the first, one might find that one’s life contains no tremendous moments, which could be an impetus to new projects and that one defining achievement. At the same time, as Nietzsche was aware, there is the possibility that a person may, upon recognizing the absence of any defining moment, be crushed.

In the end we find that, while the presentation of eternal recurrence in GS 341 promisingly offers a few suggestive ideas on the question of life affirmation and how one might learn to love life, it generates more questions than it provides answers. It is to these, and other questions, that we now turn.

*Can We Become Used to Life? Can We Affirm Life?*

Having worked to elucidate the different movements about how one learns to love life, there are several questions and potential problems identified above that now need to be addressed. (1) How could a person become used to life, particularly the preponderance of the questionable and terrible? For most people, this seems to be asking for too much, and oftentimes when a person does become used to the travails and sorrows of life, the resulting attitude is one of resignation or indifference, which is surely not what Nietzsche hopes to cultivate.

This leads us to the difficult question we have been building toward: (2) how could a person come to affirm life, particularly what is questionable and terrible, which seems required
by the “the greatest weight” test? There are many things in life that are, on the most charitable reading, nearly impossible to accept; more than that, the thought of ever becoming accustomed to such things should strike us as deeply disconcerting. Given these difficulties, it seems the height of folly to ask that a person love what is questionable and terrible, let alone desire such things again and again. These are not easy tasks, as Nietzsche knew very well. And they seem to cast doubt on whether a person could come to truly love life in the way Nietzsche suggests.

_Can We Become Used to Life?_

Nietzsche writes that “finally comes a moment when we are used [gewöhnt, accustomed] to it”. While we can understand what it means to become used to a new piece of music, it would be something altogether different to become used to life. Nietzsche offers a general idea of what it means to get used to something, explaining that “what we are used to” is what is familiar, what “we no longer marvel at it”; it is what “makes us feel at home” (GS 355).\(^{181}\) Taking this as a starting point, the concern is that, given that life is full of what is questionable and terrible, it is not clear why anyone would want to “feel at home” in this world.\(^{182}\) Additionally, it is doubtful that we want to get used to evil such that we longer marvel at it as something extra-ordinary. In light of these issues, Nietzsche’s position needs to be carefully examined, to see what it means to become used to life and how one achieves this, and to see if the aforementioned problems can be circumvented.

We can begin to address these questions and get a clearer picture of the stance a person must come to by considering another stance about which Nietzsche spoke. One of the things that

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\(^{181}\) “The familiar means what we are used to, so that we no longer marvel at it; the commonplace; some rule in which we are stuck; each and every thing that makes us feel at home” (GS 355).

\(^{182}\) And history is filled with those who have argued we are not at home with this world. One need only look at the writings of Pythagoras, Plato, and St. Paul to see that this standpoint is not at all uncommon.
Nietzsche observed is that people work to simply *endure* life.\(^{183}\) In virtue of the fact life is beset by pain and suffering, many people take life to be evil, and thus desire that it be other than it is. In spite of this, many people do begrudgingly accept the world before them, to the degree they endure it. This seems to signify something of an achievement to Nietzsche, at least in comparison to those who would turn away from life in despair and resignation. On the other hand, he does not look at the ability to endure suffering as much of an achievement.\(^{184}\) Thus we can conclude that facing the world, and enduring it as it is, is not something Nietzsche holds with much esteem (even if it might have some limited value). Many people do simply put their heads down, endure life’s hardships, and get on with their lives.\(^{185}\) But this does not seem to be what Nietzsche has in mind by “becoming used to life”.

To get a clearer understanding of how a person becomes used to something, we can consider an example when a person is not used to something, e.g., a sibling’s dog. There is a kind of tentativeness around the dog, which is understandable given that the dog is unknown and unfamiliar to the person. This becomes more understandable when we learn the person has had a fear of dogs that dates back to a childhood incident. The person does not “feel at home” around dogs, certainly not around a large dog like a Rottweiler or a Doberman. There might be feelings of defensiveness and dislike, perhaps something as strong as disdain. In the presence of one of these dogs, the person responds by doing his best to avoid the dog, and when in contact with the

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\(^{183}\) Horstmann goes so far as to say that the “starting point for almost everything Nietzsche was interested in … can be nicely summarized in the form of the question … ‘how are we to endure life?’” While it may be fair to describe this question as a *starting point*, it is not the primary goal in Nietzsche’s thought. Horstmann makes this point in his thoughtful and illuminating introduction to *Beyond Good and Evil* (xvi).

\(^{184}\) Interestingly, Nietzsche notes that life is not that hard to endure (GS 325). He also thinks, somewhat surprisingly, that “the great majority endure life without complaining overmuch” (HH 33). Perhaps more surprisingly, he notes that “we are able to endure a fairly large amount of unpleasure” (D 354).

\(^{185}\) This attitude, if it can be called as such, presents an intriguing case, about which there are many questions. To genuinely answer these questions, we would need to know more about such types. For example, is the person who endures life simply indifferent to it? How does this differ from being resigned to life? Nietzsche did not view the attitude of resignation as positive, but rather something to be overcome. On the other hand, we should consider if there is something of merit we should laud in the person who endures life, determinedly going about her business, come what may. Does this not show a change in her stance that has some value?
dog, to simply bear the interaction and extricate himself as quickly as possible, while constantly wishing no dogs were present. We can see that this person is closed off to the dogs.

Over time, as the person gets to know the dogs, as they become more familiar, he becomes more open to them, his anxiety and cautiousness begin to slowly recede, he may actively seek them out, and the possibility of positive feelings arise as he comes to know the dogs better. At the core, he learns to respond to the dogs in a better way, no longer closing himself off. He neither withdraws from their presence, nor does he resign himself to their presence, nor does he wish the situation were otherwise. Through increased familiarity, something questionable and strange “loses” the negative qualities because his stance towards the dogs has changed. That is to say, by cultivating the openness Nietzsche talks about in GS 334, putting forth effort and good will, patience and kindheartedness, the person learns to respond better.

To talk of getting used to a dog, despite a fear of dogs is one thing. Similarly, talking about life in the abstract may make the process seem straightforward, but will this apply to more difficult cases? Can we become used to the seemingly endless string of terrorist attacks across the globe, or to the preponderance of natural disasters? Perhaps more importantly, would we want to become used to such events? There is an important difference between the examples offered: with respect to music and a sibling’s dog, in each of these cases there is a good to be gained from becoming used to them. This contrasts with vicious terrorist activity and devastating natural disasters, things which often do not even directly have anything to do with us. In these

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186 Of course, there is the concern that certain conditions prevent this, e.g., the person’s childhood fear of dogs is too strong, such that any interactions with dogs simply exacerbate her fear. In the end, the dog may always appear menacing. This is the persistent worry we have seen several times above, a worry that extends to life: it may simply appear too menacing, too ugly, too difficult to be loved.
cases, we would find something awry if a person got used to such events; we take it that it is
good to be angered by such things.

Terrorism provides a helpful example which may allow us to capture the attitude
Nietzsche seems to be working to articulate. For decades, the people of Israel have grown
accustomed to terrorism, to the point where schoolchildren are taught to avoid suspicious
packages, where people comport themselves as if such attacks could happen at any time, all
leading to terrorism has become part and parcel of their lives. What is revealing about this
example is something that is not ordinary has, in one sense, become commonplace, part of the
background in life in Israel. Yet, at the same time such actions retain both what makes them
extra-ordinary and bad. And this is how we want things to be, for we would find something
wrong if people became used to such events such that we perceived them as ordinary and part of
daily life.

In each case, be it a piece of music, a dog, or terrorism, the key is that we need to listen to
what is before us. We need to be open to it, acknowledge the ways it can challenge us, rise to the
challenge, and meet it on its own terms. Putting forth this effort will help remove certain barriers
to life, helping us learn how to respond appropriately, astutely, and in a timely manner; perhaps
we may come to feel at home with it. We can see in each of these examples that a different kind
of responsiveness is needed if we are to become used to these things in the proper way. What I
expect from a piece of music will differ from what I can expect from a dog. We take it that a
piece of music or a dog is a good thing (though it need not be), while terrorism is a bad thing.
Having the right stance is integral, as the stance one enters a situation with will dictate how we
respond to it, particularly if we respond in a good way or a bad way. For example, responding to
terrorism in the same way one responds to a dog would be responding in the wrong way.
Taking all of this and generalizing to life, to become used to life in the right way requires learning about life, just as it requires being open to life. Being open to life will be particularly important, as we need to be able to bear it, while simultaneously responding to it in the right way. The right kind of stance, as Nietzsche says, is one in which the person comes with effort and good will, patience and intelligence. With this stance we are in position to listen to life, acknowledge what is good about it, but also acknowledge the ways in which life can both challenge us and terrify us. In the latter case, we need to learn to bear it better, while at the same time acknowledging that we do not want to get used to it in such a way that it loses what makes it extra-ordinary. Putting forth this effort will help remove some, but not all barriers to life, helping it become something with which we feel at home, while also acknowledging that there is something extra-ordinary about life.

*Can We Affirm the Terrible in Life?*

The biggest challenge that arises from Nietzsche’s view has to do with what “The Greatest Weight” demands of us, as it seems to require that a person affirm things she would find nearly impossible to affirm, if not impossible. How, the objection goes, could one possibly affirm something as horrific as the bubonic plague that devastated Europe in the fourteenth-century, killing an estimated one-third of the population, or the Terror Famine of the Ukraine in 1932-1933, in which Stalin systematically starved to death 3-5 million people, and possibly as many as 6-8 million? Our intuitions are that such events cannot be affirmed, that we should not want to affirm such events, and that Nietzsche is deeply misguided if he thought otherwise.

This issue is more complicated than it initially appears, for it is not clear if Nietzsche would have us love and affirm one’s own life, as the question of the greatest weight suggests, or
if, as he suggests at times, we are to love and affirm existence as a whole. The former is difficult enough, while the latter poses an even greater challenge. For example, Nietzsche spoke of “saying yes to life, even in its strangest and harshest problems,” (TI X.5). Thus he might very well be asking us to affirm life as a whole. Alternatively, one could read Nietzsche as presenting the idea of affirmation with respect to the events of one’s own life, viz., that one affirm all of the events in one’s life. This too is hard. Even this minimal version leads to the same basic objection: one cannot possibly affirm the terrible events in one’s own life. If this is the case, then Nietzsche’s notion of life affirmation has a serious problem.

Nietzsche was aware of this issue and the general difficulty of affirmation in a world rife with pain and suffering. We see him grappling with this problem as early as The Birth of Tragedy, where he claims that “only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified” (BT 5); we see the issue as the dramatic centerpiece of Book III of Zarathustra, as Zarathustra wrestles with the difficulty of affirming his “most abysmal thought”; and we see it in Nietzsche’s discussions of amor fati and Yes-saying in the 1888 writings. Given his awareness of the issue and his various attempts to address the issue, it is reasonable to infer that he felt this challenge could be successfully met. The challenge is to see just how this might be addressed consistent with the goal of affirming life.

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187 A statement from the Nachlass makes the most explicit statement of this idea: “If we say Yes to a single moment, this means we have said Yes not only to ourselves, but to all existence” (WLN 7[38]).
188 Nietzsche repeats this statement in EH BT.3. The enormity of what he is asking can be clearly seen in his call for “an unreserved yea-saying even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything questionable and strange about existence” (EH BT.2). See also EH Z.6.
189 Anderson, in “Nietzsche on Truth, Illusion, and Redemption” (2005) reads Nietzsche as advocating this “minimal version” (197). Anderson acknowledges however that one could read Nietzsche as suggesting the stronger version about the world as a whole.
190 And yet Nietzsche speaks of a type who he claims does just that! “The tragic artist is not a pessimist,— he says yes to the very things that are questionable and terrible, he is Dionysian …” (TI III.6).
191 I will return to the dramatic confrontation of “On the Vision and the Riddle” in the conclusion, as Nietzsche here offers a rich portrait of Zarathustra’s struggle and redemption.
There is nothing in GS 334 that directly addresses how one might learn to love what is “heaviest, blackest”. As we have seen, GS 334 advocates putting forth the effort and good will to endure what is strange, after which we become used to it, and in the end we are enchanted by it, to the point where it “casts off its veil and presents itself as a new and indescribable beauty”. If Nietzsche is suggesting that everything strange and terrible in life somehow reveals itself as beautiful, then surely he is mistaken. It is one thing for an atonal composition by Schönberg to be unveiled as a thing of beauty, but quite another for the bombing of civilians to be seen in this way. The fact of the matter is that much that is strange, questionable, and terrible, cannot be unveiled as something beautiful. Furthermore, in light of the way Nietzsche describes the world and life, if the veil was lifted, it is a distinct possibility life would look even more terrible, not beautiful.

Evidence suggests Nietzsche was aware that not all things are loveable, as he speaks of “everything we now love” as what “we have learned to love”. While the statement is ambiguous, there is no reason to think that he is claiming all things are lovable. This returns us to the main issue: how can a person come to love life, given that life is filled with so much suffering, so much that is questionable, so much that is terrible?

One way we might be able to navigate this problem is by turning our attention back to Nietzsche’s notion of amor fati. With Nietzsche’s first remark about amor fati, he writes about wanting to attain a deeper understanding between “what is necessary in things” and “what is beautiful in them”. Importantly, Nietzsche sees in this a way to help make things beautiful. He later elaborates on what amor fati means, saying it is not wanting anything to be different, not

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192 “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 makes things beautiful. Amor fati: let that be my love from now on!” (GS 276).
even the tiniest grain of sand.\textsuperscript{193} In focusing on the importance of each event in one’s life, that they all contribute to who and what one becomes, one comes to understand that “nothing is dispensable”. Nietzsche intriguingly characterizes this idea as “a formula of the highest affirmation”.\textsuperscript{194} The basic idea is that a person’s life, and everything in it, can be affirmed by being taken as a whole.\textsuperscript{195} One might object here that, if this is what Nietzsche is asking of us, he seems to have a weaker position, as a person does not affirm certain things for what they are, but only as a part of a greater whole. Alternatively, in the discussion of eternal recurrence, we saw the idea that one tremendous achievement in a person’s life is what redeems her life. In light of these concerns, we must evaluate if the significance of particular acts would be diminished when taken as part of a whole.

Nietzsche’s belief in the interconnectedness of events offers a response showing that it is misguided to be concerned about the significance of particular acts being diminished when taken as part of the whole. For example, in Zarathustra, Nietzsche asks if “you ever said Yes to one joy?” If so, he replies, “then you also said Yes to all pain.” This is because “all things are enchained, entwined”.\textsuperscript{196} The implication is that to change one particular detail would have repercussions on other details in a person’s life. Nietzsche saw this with respect to his own life,

\textsuperscript{193} “My formula for greatness is amor fati: that you do not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity. Not just to tolerate necessity, still less to conceal it—all idealism is hypocrisy towards necessity—, but to love it …” (EH II.10). See also BGE 56.

\textsuperscript{194} “[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 joyful, effusive, high-spirited yes to life is not only the highest insight, it is also the most profound … Nothing in existence should be excluded, nothing is dispensable” (EH BT.2).

\textsuperscript{195} Anderson (2005) and May (2011) both read Nietzsche as advocating affirming a person’s life as a whole. Anderson writes that “a person’s life … can be redeemed by being brought into a whole that the person can affirm”, which is achieved “in virtue of [each event’s] essential contribution to the meaning of the whole story” (Anderson, 2005; 200). May notes that “the proper object of affirmation is not the particular event as such but rather my whole life of which the particular event is an inextricable part” (May, 2011; 95).

\textsuperscript{196} “Have you ever said Yes to one joy? Oh my friends, then you also said Yes to all pain. All things are enchained, entwined, enamored —“ He continues, stating that “if you ever wanted one time two times … then you wanted everything back!” (Z IV.19.10). Likewise, GS 341 implies that all things are interconnected.
as he emphasized throughout EH; he expressed thankfulness for the travails and sicknesses in his life, as they helped him see his task. The idea is that even those events in a person’s life which she detests play a role in the overall whole of her life: to weed out an event she laments and wishes was otherwise would be to change her life into a different life, which is not at all consistent with the idea of life affirmation.\footnote{As an example Anderson appeals to Jimmy Carter, who suffered a resounding defeat in the 1980 presidential election, only to reemerge as a great moral force with his work to eliminate disease, reduce poverty, and advance civil rights. Had Carter not suffered a crushing defeat in the election, all that he would go on to accomplish would likely not have occurred. The suggestion Anderson takes from Nietzsche is that even such terrible moments in a person’s life “can be redeemed by being brought into a whole that the person can affirm” (Anderson, 2005; 200). Integrated into the whole of one’s life, those events which, taken in isolation, could not be affirmed, may be affirmed. More than that, without his defeat in the election, the Carter we know today would not be. As Nietzsche claimed, all things in a person’s life are indispensable.}

Nietzsche’s position suggests that to affirm the whole of one’s life is to redeem even what she detests and laments.\footnote{See Z II.20, “On Redemption”. Elsewhere Nietzsche writes that “everything is redeemed and affirmed in the whole” (TI IX.49).} This strongly suggests a person can affirm her life, while detesting certain lamentable moments within her life. At the same time, insofar as affirming the whole affirms all that is necessary to the whole, the lamentable moments are themselves affirmed, and this is done without wishing them to be otherwise.

At this point we must consider whether a person can affirm life and yet say no to certain experiences, as the evidence offered above seems to suggest. There is much in Nietzsche that suggests, while his dearest wish was become only a Yes-sayer, he knew life necessitated No-saying. Thus, while his rhetoric at times says that the person who had achieved a point of affirming life says only Yes, Nietzsche actually knew better.\footnote{“I know the joy of destruction to a degree proportionate to my strength for destruction,— In both cases I obey my Dionysian nature, which does not know how to separate doing no from saying yes” (EH IV.2).} Given the basic challenge about the implausibility of having to affirm all events in one’s life, seeing that Nietzsche acknowledges the need for No-saying is what we would hope his position entails.
While Nietzsche spoke of *Daybreak* and *The Gay Science* as affirmative books, there was much in them that was critical. He also explains that even with all of his No-saying, Zarathustra is “the opposite of a no-saying spirit”. Likewise, Nietzsche adds how he “contradict[s] as nobody has ever contradicted before”, but is nonetheless “the opposite of a nay-saying spirit” (EH IV.1). Nietzsche routinely emphasized that his work included a No-saying part. Having said this, Nietzsche proceeds to restate the basic problem: “how someone with the hardest, most terrible insight into reality … can nonetheless see it not as an objection to existence … but instead find one more reason in it for himself to be the eternal yes to all things” (EH Z.6).

We find clarity in a particularly revealing statement found in *Zarathustra*, a statement which captures what we would expect from him with respect to Yes-saying and No-saying. Zarathustra states how an indiscriminate taste is “not the best taste”. Rather, he esteems “the obstinate, choosy tongues and stomachs, which have learned to say ‘I’ and ‘Yes’ and ‘No’” (Z III.11).\(^{200}\) This should not surprise us, as it not only fits with the many things Nietzsche said ‘no’ to as part of his critical project, but it also fits with his basic sense of taste. Overall then, evidence strongly indicates that a person who loved and affirmed life could nonetheless say No to at least some of what was terrible in life.

One last issue is that this might seem to be in tension with the earlier claim that even the terrible, detestable events in one’s life are essential in making a person’s life hers. How can one detest what is essential, and yet ultimately affirmed in the whole? We have seen that affirming life does not entail that we see everything in life as good. To take an example, there seems to be no inconsistency in detesting the endless revisions that go into writing a dissertation, while at the

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\(^{200}\) Nietzsche concludes by saying that “chewing and digesting everything – that is truly the swine’s style! To always say hee-yaw – only the ass learned that, and whoever is of its spirit!” (Z III.11).
same time acknowledging that careful, continued revising is essential to a good dissertation. I can love the dissertation without loving the revision process.

3.5 Conclusion: A New Love of Life

Nietzsche discusses love throughout his writings, though precisely how he understands love is by no means clear. However Nietzsche might be conceiving love, it is a new love that he is after with the love of life. This new love is, as he emphasizes, a different kind of love. What makes this love different? As Nietzsche recognized, life is filled with much that is strange, questionable, and terrible, a fact which does little to inspire feelings of love or trust. As Nietzsche goes on to say, “life itself has become a problem”. This should not make us gloomy though, for “love of life is still possible—only one loves differently. It is like the love for a woman who gives us doubts” (GS P.3). In the same way that loving such a woman is risky, loving life is similarly risky.

This is one of those evocative and enigmatic passages that make Nietzsche a joy to read and meditate upon. We would not expect “the love for a woman who gives us doubts” to inspire much confidence. And it is true, life can be frightening and dangerous, but that does not mean love of life is impossible. Nietzsche immediately adds that this does not make us sullen; in fact, “the attraction of everything problematic” (GS P.3) captures the eye of the type Nietzsche has in mind. This may be putting the cart before the horse though, for an attraction to what is problematic seems to presuppose a person has already achieved the kind of life-affirming standpoint Nietzsche has in mind.

Having explained the various stages that culminate with a person learning to love life, the goal in this conclusion is to tie together the various threads and see what the life-affirming

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201 Pippin helpfully writes that “the gay science is, then, a knowledge of erotics; not so much a knowledge of what love is as how to love and so live well” (Pippin, 2010; 35).
person looks like. The person who has achieved a genuine love of life is transformed. The transformation encompasses a fundamental change in a person’s attitude and orientation towards life; it is a way of living, a celebration of life.

While the idea of life affirmation is something of an elusive notion, Nietzsche talks about “the ideal of the most high-spirited, vital, world-affirming individual” (BGE 56), who is enamored by the idea of eternal recurrence. Reflecting on the idea of the high-spirited [übertüchtigsten; carefree, exuberant] person, we find a person who is able to triumph over challenging experiences, and does so in a high-spirited manner. Nietzsche uses übertüchtigsten in GS P.1 to refer to his triumph over the winter and the return of health, gratitude, and joy that brought, all the while being aware of the winter that he patiently resisted. This experience Nietzsche recalls captures the kind of equilibrium and fortitude of the high-spirited person. An additional feature of affirmation, related to this high-spiritedness, can be seen in EH BT.2, where Nietzsche writes of “this final, most joyful, effusive, high-spirited [übertüchtigste] yes to life”. Here Nietzsche refers to another notion common in his mature works, fullness and overfullness. This overfullness gives a person the ability to withstand what would harm other people. As such, it gives a person a well-spring to draw from (as well as an overflow to give). At the same time, it signifies a confidence and joy in the person’s activity.

Taking these remarks into account, as well as what we learn from Nietzsche’s account of learning to love, we can supplement the portrait of the life-affirming person. This person comes to understand life, seeing everything in it with an honest eye, seeing the basic connectedness of it all; this person does not reject life as a whole (even if certain particulars in life are detested), but rather desires the world as it is; hardened by the struggles and resistances that are part and parcel of life, she cultivates personal strength (as opposed to an attitude of resignation); this person
exhibits cheerfulness, carrying the self-knowledge that she is capable of overcoming problems and challenges, that she has risen to hard tasks before and is prepared to do so again; accordingly, she is open to life and its challenges, engaging life through risk-taking (as opposed to adopting a defensive and withdrawn orientation towards life); she knows she must be ready and strong enough to rise to the challenges life brings, while maintaining her equilibrium; and finally, this person not only comes to see the beauty in the totality of life, but also helps to redeem what is questionable and terrible in the world through her defining achievement(s).²⁰²

Life affirmation is for Nietzsche at once both a radical transformation in the individual, and simultaneously a transformation of life and the world. We can get a clearer picture of this twofold transformation by examining a crucial passage from Zarathustra, “On the Vision and the Riddle”.

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As Nietzsche depicts the mysterious vision of a snake that had climbed down the shepherd’s throat, Zarathustra tells him to bite the head off. The shepherd does so and overcomes what is “heaviest, blackest” and becomes “a transformed, illuminated, laughing being” (Z III.2). We see here Zarathustra’s [Nietzsche’s] horror at what willing the eternal recurrence entails, i.e., the smallest in life, the most terrible in life. Nietzsche expressed disgust at the thought of affirming what seemingly cannot be affirmed. Like the shepherd in his vision, Zarathustra will later overcome his nausea at the idea of eternal recurrence and the repetition of everything small.²⁰³ Both the shepherd and Zarathustra were able to come to terms with what they found

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²⁰² As we saw above, this beauty can have different sources. Nietzsche explains how the person who has “an overflow in procreating, fertilizing forces capable of turning any desert into bountiful farmland” (GS 370). With this description Nietzsche illustrates the transformative capabilities of one who has achieved an attitude of life affirmation. This is undoubtedly rarified air of which Nietzsche speaks.

²⁰³ While it takes the entirety of Book III to capture Zarathustra’s struggles with these issues and how everything unfolds, see “On the Vision and the Riddle” and “The Convalescent” for crucial moments. Part III of Lampert (1986) gives a thoughtful, illuminating reading of the meaning of what Zarathustra undergoes and how these
most nauseating. Despite the examples of the shepherd and Zarathustra, it is not clear how such events are to be affirmed, or whether everyone will be up to the challenge to affirm what is terrible in their respective lives.

If we stop and reflect on how Nietzsche describes the shepherd, we can get a little closer to understanding how Nietzsche believes he can address the problem of affirming what is terrible in life. At the same time, we get more insight into the nature of a life-affirming person. Setting aside the question of how the shepherd is transformed, his transformation is characterized in such a way that he is “no longer human”, evincing “a laughter that was no human laughter”. These are strong words, and could easily be misinterpreted. At the core, the idea Nietzsche is trying to convey is that this person would, from our perspective, appear “no longer human”. After all, to be able to laugh at what is “heaviest, blackest” in life not only appears inhuman, but strikes us as undesirable.

While the quality Nietzsche is after can be elusive, we do find him give expression to the basic idea at other times in his writings. That is to say, he envisions a type who has attained a point where what is strange, questionable, and terrible simply does not impact him. That is, “what is evil ... and ugly almost seems acceptable because of an overflow in procreating, procreating ...” (v). This brings us back to the primary issue: how is it that a person is transformed? As it is chronicled in Book III, Zarathustra spends much time working towards this moment. For example, one might read this as an indication that the shepherd, being “no longer human”, has become an Übermensch. Lampert (1986) and Gooding-Williams (2001) both offer solid arguments against the idea the shepherd has become an Übermensch.

Lampert describes the laughter as “so sovereign and so singular that [Zarathustra] is haunted by the need to laugh that laughter possible” (169). For this to happen, Lampert says Zarathustra must “enact the chilling scene that made laughter possible” (170). This occurs in “The Convalescent”, near the end of Book III, when Zarathustra summons his most abysmal thought “and how that monster crawled into my throat and choked me! But I bit off its head and spat it away from me” (Z III.13).
fertilizing forces”.

The life-affirming person simply is not shaken and thrown off balance in the way most people are shaken at the sight of what is terrible. For some, this may come across as a deeply undesirable trait, and laughter might not seem to adequately convey what Nietzsche has in mind, but in laughter there is something that captures the joyfulness and cheerfulness he esteemed. At the same time it indicates the achievement of a person who has, through his transformation, rendered what is strange and terrible something she can face, something she sees herself as equal to its challenges, and in doing so remains undaunted by it. Thus we see that, one possible way Nietzsche responds to the problem of affirming what is terrible, is to attain a radically new standpoint where what is terrible is no longer daunting. In effect, the person is transformed and stands energized and ready to rise to the occasion.

There is another issue that arises in light of what Nietzsche says in “On the Vision and the Riddle”. How does the kind of transformation and standpoint of the shepherd cohere with the account of learning to love? Additionally, how does a standpoint where what is “heaviest, blackest” is beneath a person fit alongside the idea that a life-affirming person can detest what is strange and terrible? It seems like Nietzsche is offering two substantially different ideals in these two accounts. Given that, one might think that the account I have offered grounded in GS 334 has erred in conceiving how a person learns to love and affirm life.

The apparent inconsistency between these two ways of conceiving life affirmation vexed me until a distinction that Ken Gemes made came to mind. In his review of Reginster, Gemes makes a distinction between what he calls “naïve affirmation” and “reflective affirmation”. Naïve affirmation is what we find in Nietzsche’s description of the noble types in essay one of 

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207 “He who is richest in fullness of life, the Dionysian god and man, can allow himself not only the sight of what is terrible and questionable but also the terrible deed and every luxury of destruction, decomposition, negation; in his case, what is evil, nonsensical, and ugly almost seems acceptable because of an overflow in procreating, fertilizing forces capable of turning any desert into bountiful farmland” (GS 370).
the *Genealogy*. In contrast, reflective affirmation, which he associates with “The Greatest Weight” passage, is what is available to humanity in light of our Judeo-Christian history.

The account of how we learn to love that I have presented would clearly be a case of reflective affirmation. I see no reason why we cannot read the shepherd’s transformation as an example of naïve affirmation. This distinction helps explain the incongruity between the two accounts. Interestingly, Gemes goes on to speculate that “naïve affirmation is no longer possible and the best we can aim for is reflective affirmation, with the idea that one day, a long time in the future, we may again be capable of naïve affirmation” (Gemes, 2008; 462-463). Given the ways of the noble type and the shepherd, it is a peculiar suggestion that Gemes makes: do we have a desire to be like them? Is it even a live possibility? By all accounts, reflective affirmation seems to be a more desirable model. Is our ideal a barbarian or a Goethe?

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To look again at the kind of affirmation Gemes calls reflective, we can turn to what Nietzsche said about Goethe, as an example of someone who may have successfully learned to love life and achieved a standpoint of life affirmation. I believe the description will be a fairly convincing endorsement for reflective affirmation. While Nietzsche spoke of Goethe regularly and with high regard, the passage which best captures the ideal of life affirmation can be found in TI IX.49:

A spirit like this who has become free stands in the middle of the world with a cheerful and trusting fatalism in the belief that only the individual is reprehensible, that everything is redeemed and affirmed in the whole—*he does not negate anymore* (TI IX.49).

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208 See BGE 260 and GM I.10.
209 In fairness to Gemes, he also considers the possibility that in the distant future we could have a kind of hybrid naïve-reflection affirmation.
210 Brobjer (1995) documents that Goethe is the most frequently mentioned figure in Nietzsche’s writings. See Appendix 2.
Given this description, we should not be surprised to see many of the ideas that have come up in this examination of affirmation and love. There is cheerfulness and a trust in fate, which is essentially Nietzsche’s notion of *amor fati*. We see Goethe “does not negate anymore”, though we have already seen that Nietzsche did not hold negation and life-affirmation to be opposed. After all, he expresses the idea that the whole can redeem specific things that are repugnant.

Earlier in this passage, Nietzsche offers great praise of Goethe, saying “he put himself squarely in the middle of [life]”, “he did not despair”, and that he “was a convinced realist: he said yes to everything related to him”. With this brief description of Goethe we see many of the key elements of life affirmation detailed above.

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What then has Nietzsche taught us in his investigations of life? I hope to have illustrated how his work is marked by a concerted attempt to show how one might come to love and affirm life. I have reconstructed one account of how Nietzsche addressed the sickness of life negation with his account of life affirmation, noted potential problems, and worked to show how he could respond to these problems. This brings us to our final concern, which is an important question: can Nietzsche’s vision of loving life—life affirmation—genuinely help a person overcome a life-negating standpoint towards the world and life?

Nietzsche undoubtedly thought that his notion of life affirmation could bring a person to a point where she loved and affirmed life, even as Nietzsche acknowledged that it was not an easy transformation. He was very clear that loving and affirming life was a significant challenge, with many obstacles to overcome, most notably all that is questionable and terrible in life. The question is not one that can be easily answered.
How might we evaluate Nietzsche’s notion of life affirmation then? Does it show that love of life is genuinely possible in the face of so much that is terrible in life? The only way to answer these questions is to look at a person’s life. We must set aside arguments and look at a person’s lived experience to see if this person genuinely loved life. But even that carries with it a challenge, as we cannot see into a person’s heart. However, in looking at a person’s actions and how she comports herself, we can draw informed conclusions.

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At times Nietzsche seems to offer himself as an example of someone who sought to affirm life.\textsuperscript{211} The evidence however is not at all clear, as Nietzsche also intimates that he had not succeeded in achieving life-affirmation. We need only look to his resentment to see a man who struggled. Whether or not Nietzsche achieved the affirmative, loving standpoint he sought, even if he was unsuccessful in this, his writings can nonetheless offer insight into the nature of life affirmation. Thus, it is academic whether or not Nietzsche’s characterization is an honest and accurate portrait of himself, for it still speaks to the characteristics of the life-affirming person (even if it does not genuinely speak of Nietzsche). As he says, “my writings speak only of my overcomings” (HH II P.1)

There is no doubt that Nietzsche had been seduced by Schopenhauer’s pessimism, which he was cured of through his sickness (HH P.5). Likewise, he acknowledges that he fell under the spell of nihilism, though he notes that he outgrew it (WP P.3). Nietzsche also recognized that having experienced pessimism and nihilism were important for his self-development; “nothing is indispensable”. The tremendous sicknesses he suffered made him question both his convictions and life itself, and yet he found a wealth of invaluable insights from having wrestled with such sicknesses (GS P.3, EH I). Similarly, his sickness and subsequent recovery, characterized by

\textsuperscript{211} Leiter (2002) holds that by Nietzsche’s own standards, he affirmed life (120).
feelings of high-spiritedness (GS P.1), precipitated a new joy (GS P.4). More than that, as he also says his sickness showed him the way both to himself and to his task (HH II P.4).

Despite all that he had suffered, through his strength of will, Nietzsche reveled in the challenges life threw at him, forcing him to rise above what he thought capable, even as life brought him one disappointment after another. He wrenched insights from what would have felled stronger men. In both the prefaces of 1886 and *Ecce Homo* we find a man who had suffered much and, to his apparent surprise, not only endured his torments, but resiliently emerged a stronger, transformed man, grateful for the purpose that propelled him forward and the defining achievements he had accomplished.

We would be mistaken to think that Nietzsche has given us a prescriptive account of how one can achieve life-affirmation—that idea would be anathema to him. However, through his writings and his example, he has given us a descriptive account of his personal experiences—and possibly others’ experiences (HH II P.6). Nietzsche has not only given us a helpful model on how we learn to love, but we also have a powerful example of a man who sought to live according to his ideal. As he asks in the preface to EH, “*how could I not be grateful to my whole life?*”

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212 Solomon (2003) quotes this statement by Nietzsche and says, “that is all of the life-affirmation one really ever needs” (206).
CHAPTER 4: THE WILL TO POWER, OVERCOMING RESISTANCES, AND THE VALUE OF SUFFERING

4.1 Introduction

In chapter one I claimed that enervation is perhaps the most insidious form of sickness. It is marked by a weak will, where pleasure, ease, and comfort are among humanity’s highest values. In virtue of these features, the sickness is such that it leads to the belief there is no problem. Nietzsche does not explicitly propose a treatment for this form of sickness, only offering various hints and suggestions about what \textit{might} be done to address this sickness, e.g., strengthening one’s drives and making them consistent with one another. He does not appear to offer a comprehensive strategy. In critiquing modernity, its highest values, and its underlying ideal, Nietzsche makes it clear that a new ideal is needed, an ideal he associates with \textit{Zarathustra}.\textsuperscript{213}

Beyond \textit{Zarathustra}, Nietzsche indicates we might look to conceive this new ideal in the will to power, which is regularly juxtaposed to the ideals of modernity.\textsuperscript{214} Bernard Reginster’s recent interpretation of the will to power as “the will to overcoming resistance” (Reginster, 2006; 126) provides a new understanding of the will to power, and with that, an improved framework for both understanding and addressing the sickness of enervation. I argue that Reginster’s interpretation helps illuminate the sickness of enervation in a new way, thereby putting us on the path to addressing the problem. If the will to power is the will to overcome resistance, we can now recognize that modernity lacks a strong will, i.e., a will which aims to overcome resistance and challenges.

\textsuperscript{213} See GM II.24, GS 382, and EH GM.

\textsuperscript{214} Elsewhere, and with greater emphasis, Nietzsche identifies the eternal recurrence as the locus of the counter-ideal he seeks. Evidence suggests that both the will to power and eternal recurrence are important parts of Nietzsche’s overall attempt to address the different forms of sickness he diagnoses.
With a new understanding of the nature of the sickness of enervation, we can identify a distinct, if not fully developed, response to this sickness. At the heart of the matter, what Nietzsche identifies as the highest values of modernity—most notably the elimination of suffering, but also the emphasis on compassion, equality, and democracy—are such that they have undermined the spirit [will] of modern [bourgeois] humanity, enervating the will through the removal of resistance [suffering], leading people to be satisfied with a misguided notion of happiness. Nietzsche’s response then is to inculcate a strong will, disciplined by suffering and continued engagement with resistance and challenges, whereby people find happiness in the very process of overcoming challenges.

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With these issues in mind I turn to laying out a case that the will to power is the basis of Nietzsche’s response to the sickness of enervation. In section II I begin by offering a brief survey of the will to power in Nietzsche’s published writings in order to provide an orientation of how he presents and understands the notion. Important features of the will to power are: its relation to overcoming, that it connects what is difficult with what is praiseworthy, and that it seeks out resistances to overcome. Having surveyed Nietzsche’s treatment of the will to power, in section III I turn to Bernard Reginster’s effort to substantiate the idea that the will to power can be understood as “the will to overcoming resistance”. Focusing on the idea that the will to power is the will to overcoming resistance, section IV elucidates the new insights into the sickness of enervation, specifically that it can now be understood as evincing a will to avoid resistance and suffering. With this insight about weak, enervated wills, I propose in section V that the way to

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[215] I make no claim to investigate the will to power as a metaphysical doctrine, as this falls outside the purview of the problem I am working to resolve. There are several thoughtful, philosophically rigorous treatments of this topic, most notably Schacht (1983, 2000), Clark (1983, 1990, 2000), Richardson (1996, 2000), and the more recent work by Clark & Dudrick (2012) and Katsafanas (2013).
address the problem would be to direct a person toward resistance and suffering, under the assumption that this will inculcate a strong will. This is in accord not only with Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the sickness of enervation, its cause embedded in the values of modernity that emphasize reducing [eliminating] resistances [suffering], but also his claim that what has helped to enhance humanity has been “the discipline of suffering”. In virtue of this seemingly counter-intuitive claim about the value of suffering, I conclude by highlighting and addressing several criticisms against the view of Nietzsche’s position that I have reconstructed.

4.2 The Will to Power in Nietzsche’s Published Works

Nietzsche’s first published reference to the will to power came in 1983 in part one of *Zarathustra*, with two subsequent references in the second part of *Zarathustra*.\(^{216}\) After Zarathustra’s metaphorical description of the will to power in “On Self-Overcoming”, the locus of Nietzsche’s pronouncements about the will to power occur in BGE.\(^{217}\) In the works that followed, from the *Genealogy*, to the newly composed fifth book of GS, to the works of 1888, Nietzsche continued to refer to the will to power with regularity, albeit never with the level of detail found in BGE.\(^{218}\) Sometimes the post-BGE references are informative and revealing, e.g., TI X.3, where Nietzsche intimates there are drives other than the will to power; sometimes the statements are provocative, e.g., in GM II where Nietzsche reiterates the notion of domination of

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\(^{216}\) See “On the Thousand and One Goals”, “On Self-Overcoming”, and “On Redemption”. I survey Nietzsche’s remarks on the will to power in these passages briefly below. In what can be read as a cautionary remark, Clark notes that, “because Zarathustra’s conception of life as will to power is too metaphorical and anthropomorphic to take seriously as a literal account of the essence of life and gives us no reason to assume that Nietzsche accepts it, we would naturally look for Nietzsche’s own doctrine of the will to power in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the first book published after *Zarathustra*” (Clark, 1990; 212). While Clark makes a reasonable point about the will to power in *Zarathustra* when juxtaposed with BGE, one can proceed carefully and work to draw some lessons from the metaphorical pronouncements in *Zarathustra*, particularly when they are reinforced by things Nietzsche would go on to say in later works.

\(^{217}\) Nietzsche refers to the will to power in fifteen sections of BGE, sections 9, 13, 19, 22, 23, 36, 44, 51, 186, 198, 211, 227, 230, 257, and 259 of BGE.

\(^{218}\) Nietzsche refers to the will to power in seven sections of GM, sections II.11, 12, 18, III. 7, 11, 15, and 18; in book five of GS he makes one reference, section 349; in TI there are six references, sections IX. 9, 11, 14, 20, 38, and X.3; in A he makes seven references, sections 2, 6, 9, 16, 17, 24, and 52; there is one reference in the Epilogue to CW; and in EH he makes five references, sections P.4, BT.4, CW.1, IV.4, and IV.7.
others; sometimes the passages adumbrate earlier ideas, e.g., that life is will to power; and other passages only casually refer to the will to power in the context of other discussions.

Throughout, Nietzsche paints a picture that is alternately provocative, metaphorical, frustrating, and fascinating. However, if we are patient readers, we are regularly rewarded for our efforts. When we take stock of the common ground between the many claims he makes about the will to power, we find a rich body of ideas. In what follows I do not claim to offer anything close to an exhaustive examination of the will to power, but rather a broad survey that seeks to get a clearer view of dense terrain. I begin by briefly surveying the metaphorical accounts Nietzsche offers about the will to power in *Zarathustra*, before turning to the more straightforward treatment Nietzsche offers in *BGE*, *GM*, and the works of 1888.

Nietzsche’s first presentation of the will to power in “On the Thousand and One Goals” comes in the context of a discussion about valuing. Nietzsche writes that “[a] tablet of the good hangs over every people. Observe, it is the tablet of their overcomings; observe, it is the voice of their will to power” (Z I.15). Interestingly, the will to power is described as a kind of overcoming, though we should be careful to note that Nietzsche is speaking here of a collective will to power, indicating not just a people’s strengths but also its aspirations. \(^{219}\) It should not go unnoticed what Nietzsche says next, for he describes whatever is difficult for a people as “praiseworthy”, “good”, and “holy”. Admittedly, Nietzsche’s remarks in Z I.15 do not say all that much about the will to power, but we do learn that some kind of overcoming is significant, just as we learn that what is good is connected to what is difficult.

In book two of *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche gives us two more pronouncements on the will to power, pronouncements which are frequently presented metaphorically. At the beginning of “On

\(^{219}\) Kaufmann, already tipping his interpretive hand, goes so far as to say that “the will to power is thus introduced as the will to overcome oneself” (200).
Self-Overcoming” Nietzsche writes of the “wisest ones” that their ‘will to truth”, which he calls a “will to thinkability of all being”, is in fact a will to power. Then we learn that a people’s good and evil are intimately connected to the will to power. As he continues, Nietzsche refers to the will to power as “the unexhausted begetting will of life”. On the connection between living and valuing, he notes that “wherever I found the living, there I found the will to power”. And finally, Nietzsche has ‘Life’ conclude her speech by stating that “only where life is, is there also will; but not will to life, instead—thus I teach you—the will to power!”

There is undoubtedly a lot going on in this section, much of it rather elusive, which is not surprising, given that Zarathustra describes what Life says as a secret. While it is difficult to draw clear conclusions from each of these claims, there are several conclusions which can be justifiably drawn. For example, the title of the section suggests some connection between the will to power and self-overcoming, even if the nature of the connection is not yet clear. While it is far from clear what it means, Nietzsche tells us that life is will to power, a claim he asserts time and time again in subsequent works. Perhaps most importantly, we learn of a connection between living, valuing, and the will to power, though the nature of this connection is not yet clear.

These elliptical claims are followed by one final treatment of the will to power in “On Redemption”. Nietzsche begins by writing of the fragments of human beings that he sees, finding

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220 As Nietzsche goes on to say of “the wisest ones”: “you still want to create the world before which you could kneel” (Z II.15).
221 “Your will and your values you set upon the river of becoming; what people believe to be good and evil reveals to me an ancient will to power” (ibid).
222 Life concludes by reiterating Zarathustra’s claim about the connection between valuing (esteeming) and the will to power. “Much is esteemed more highly by life than life itself; yet out of esteeming itself speaks—the will to power!”
223 Lampert goes so far as to say that “this most extensive speech on will to power in Zarathustra serves the purpose of the narrative or of Zarathustra’s education; it does not serve the purpose of explaining will to power” (Lampert, 1986; 119). Lampert reads “On Self-Overcoming” as pointing towards “On Redemption”, which is concerned with the teaching of the eternal recurrence. He continues, asserting that “the title of this chapter that unriddles philosophy as will to power might seem to encourage a limited interpretation of will to power as simply an injunction to human beings to overcome themselves, to practice honorable self-mastery or independence” (Lampert, 1986; 120). Thus he concludes that “‘On Redemption’ shows that the teaching of the eternal return is subsequent to, and dependent on, the discovery of will to power, Nietzsche’s fundamental discovery” (Lampert, 1986; 149).
“mankind in ruins”, before Zarathustra claims that “the now and the past … is what is most unbearable to me”. The redemption of which Nietzsche writes is humanity’s redemption from the spirit of revenge, particularly “the will’s unwillingness towards time and time’s ‘it was’”. As Nietzsche writes, the way to do this is to transform “it was” into “thus I willed it”. Late in the passage Zarathustra states “that will which is the will to power must will something higher than any reconciliation [with time]”, before he abruptly cuts himself off.

In light of the elusive, metaphorical discussions of the will to power in *Zarathustra*, there is some reason to agree with Clark about the need to look to BGE for Nietzsche’s treatment of the will to power, for it assumes a newfound importance that it does not appear to have in *Zarathustra*, to say nothing about the greater clarity in BGE. Overall, there are several questions we desire answers for in BGE, hoping Nietzsche expands on the elliptical remarks of *Zarathustra*. What does it mean to say that life is the will to power? What is the nature of the connection between valuing and the will to power? What is self-overcoming and what does it have to do with the will to power?

Within the first part of BGE we read what might appear to be disconnected ideas about the will to power, ideas which may lead to greater confusion instead of greater clarity. However, when examined more carefully, Nietzsche’s treatment in the first part of BGE reveals a

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224 “For that mankind be redeemed from revenge: that to me is the bridge to the highest hope” (Z II.7).
225 “The conclusion implied, but not named, in Zarathustra’s formulation of the problem of redemption is that the will to power that wills the past, and hence wills what is higher than all reconciliation, wills eternal return” (Lampert, 1986; 147). Lampert argues in much greater detail for his reading of “On Redemption” as a pivotal chapter of *Zarathustra* on pp. 140-151. If Lampert is correct in his reading, then Nietzsche’s final reference to the will to power is here primarily a stepping stone to the central teaching of *Zarathustra*, the eternal recurrence. I do not agree with Lampert that the treatment of the will to power in “On Self-Overcoming” merely points toward the eternal recurrence. Rather, as evidence strongly suggests, both the will to power and eternal recurrence are integral to Nietzsche’s overall attempt to address the different problems he diagnoses. Accordingly, they are important elements of how a person might overcome the different forms of sickness and achieve health.
progression of ways the will to power may be put to use explaining various phenomena.\textsuperscript{226}

Among Nietzsche's many characterizations of the will to power in Part One of BGE, we learn that philosophy is "the most spiritual will to power" (9)\textsuperscript{227}; "life itself is will to power" (13)\textsuperscript{228}; morality can be understood as "a doctrine of power relations" (19); nature can be interpreted as will to power (22); and finally, in the concluding section of Part One, that psychology is to be understood "as morphology and the doctrine of the development of the will to power" (23). The next reference to the will to power occurs in section 36, which gives a detailed account regarding how the will to power might be a general explanatory principle of the world.\textsuperscript{229} Given all that Nietzsche surveys in Part One, we might conclude that it is just a hodgepodge of ideas, without any discernable order or purpose.\textsuperscript{230} On the other hand, we should not forget that all of these pronouncements occur in the first part of BGE, “on the prejudices of philosophers”, which suggests the tentative nature of these claims.\textsuperscript{231} In the end, Nietzsche suggests that we might get

\textsuperscript{226} For a much thorough treatment of part one of BGE, see Clark & Dudrick’s *The Soul of Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil* (2012), which offers a rich, albeit idiosyncratic reading of BGE, with an emphasis on Nietzsche’s supposed “esoteric” philosophy. For a thoughtful critique of Clark & Dudrick’s “esoteric Nietzsche”, see Schacht (2014).

\textsuperscript{227} Nietzsche reiterates that "the most spiritual will to power" is philosophy (227). True philosophy, as opposed to "philosophical labor" is creative, it legislates, and it is driven by the will to truth which is will to power (211).

\textsuperscript{228} Nietzsche also reiterates the idea that the essence of the world is will to power (BGE 186, 259, GM II.12).

\textsuperscript{229} See Clark, 1983 (reprinted in Leiter/Richardson eds., 2001) and 1990, chapter seven for her treatment of the various manifestations of the will to power in BGE, as well as a full argument against attributing the argument in BGE 36 to Nietzsche. Clark argues that Nietzsche cannot have held this argument to be true, given the hypothetical nature of the argument, as well as reliance on premises that he demonstrated as untenable elsewhere, e.g. "immediate certainties" and the causality of the will. She would later revise her argument, noting that she does not accept all of the claims she made in 1990, e.g., that Nietzsche rejects the causality of the will. See Clark & Dudrick (2012), pp. 229-243. Clark & Dudrick go on to argue that BGE 36 can be read esoterically, illuminating "the will to power as a theory of the soul" (231). Schacht, Owen, and Richardson provide insightful critical responses to Clark on the will to power, as well as offering an illuminating discussion of the status of the will to power and how to read BGE 36, in *International Studies in Philosophy* 32:3, 2000.

\textsuperscript{230} Lampert (2001) argues that there is in fact a distinct order to what Nietzsche has to say, an order which culminates in section 36, where Nietzsche attempts to prove the veracity of the doctrine of the will to power. This interpretation seems reasonable, but as we will see, it is not at all clear if Nietzsche "proves" the doctrine of the will to power. It strikes me as more likely that, following Clark, Nietzsche does not at all prove the doctrine of the will to power.

\textsuperscript{231} On the one hand, we could read this entire chapter as Nietzsche critically pointing to the prejudices that have kept philosophers from understanding psychology, morality, and nature how they ought to be understood. On the other hand, Clark and Dudrick (2012) argue that this is only a surface reading, and that what Nietzsche expects his “best readers to grasp eventually” (156), is that the chapter deals with the “pre-judgments” or values that are essential to philosophy. See pp. 32, 42, and 156.
a better understanding of psychology under the guiding light of the will to power, just as it might illuminate morality, which I will try to show below.

Nietzsche further characterizes the will to power throughout BGE in his explorations of religion, morality, and psychology. Several passages reveal new elements of the will to power Nietzsche did not present in either Zarathustra or Part One of BGE. One of the more intriguing discussions about the will to power occurs in section 51, where Nietzsche speaks about the will to power present in the saint. Here we find “a force that wants to test itself through this sort of conquest”. That is, the saint’s self-conquest, with power turned inwards, is recognized as “strength of will”. From the perspective of the strong noble type, accustomed to external manifestations of power, they see something of a wholly new kind, but recognize it as power all the same.\footnote{This key stipulation about internalized power is perhaps best summarized in TI IX.9, where Nietzsche says that "the highest feelings of power and self-assurance achieve expression in a grand style". Cf., GS 290.} This is surely an evocative example, one that forces us to ask some questions. We can understand why the saint’s asceticism would capture the attention of the powerful nobles, unaccustomed as they were to sublimated forms of power; but what is it that motivated the saint to engage in such self-conquest in the first place?

We could understand the saint as wanting to test himself. Likewise, we could understand him as needing to dominate something, and without anything external to dominate, the saint turned against himself. These are plausible answers, supported by other claims Nietzsche makes, e.g., the internalization of man presented in GM II. One can also surmise that the saint felt some form of inner dissatisfaction, perhaps the powerful pull of a drive that the saint had repudiated, but nonetheless felt, which warranted some kind of action to address it. Nietzsche identifies this internal dissatisfaction, self-contempt, or tension as something that is missing in modernity.
The idea of self-conquest can be seen later in BGE, where Nietzsche characterizes “the commanding element (whatever it is) that is generally called ‘spirit’” as something that "wants to dominate itself and its surroundings, and to feel its domination" (BGE 230). Nietzsche continues by describing this “truly masterful will” as a binding, subduing, and domineering will. Here we get a glimpse of the language of domination that arises several times in BGE and GM, language which has suggested the more unpalatable readings of the will to power as power over others (even as it is introduced in the context of self-control). Elsewhere, Nietzsche talks of transforming a life-will into a power-will, before claiming that harshness, danger, experimentation, “everything evil, terrible, tyrannical, predatory, and snakelike in humanity” (BGE 44) have helped humanity grow the strongest. The association of the will to power with domination is not uncommon in Nietzsche’s writing, which makes it imperative that we do not unfairly whitewash what he says, but rather work to understand the significance of such pronouncements.

Nietzsche elaborates on the motif of domination in BGE 259, speaking at his most provocative when he talks about life more generally. He begins by describing life, which “is precisely will to power”, as "appropriating, injuring, overpowering . . . oppressing, being harsh, imposing your own form, incorporating . . . exploiting” (259). This particular description is frequently cited when discussing will to power, pointing to the ugliness with which Nietzsche’s notion is easily associated. Before rushing to judgment on one of the uglier claims Nietzsche

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233 "’Exploitation’”, Nietzsche goes on to say, “does not belong to a corrupted or imperfect, primitive society: it belongs to the essence of being alive as a fundamental organic function; it is a result of genuine will to power, which is just the will of life.” See sections 9, 13, 22, 23, and 44 in BGE for similar, albeit brief statements. Nietzsche similarly characterizes life this way in GM, e.g., II.11, where he describes life as essentially functioning violently, injuriously, exploitatively. As he writes in GM II.12, “everything that occurs in the organic world consists of overpowering, dominating, and in their turn, overpowering and dominating consist of re-interpretation, adjustment”. TI IX.14 adds the idea that life is, among other things, abundance and struggle.  

234 Some, like Katsafanas, try to dismiss Nietzsche’s rhetorical choices. “It is important not to be misled by the surface connotations of the term ‘power’. In ordinary discourse, the claim that people will power would suggest that
makes, let us consider the significance of why he characterizes the will to power and life in this manner. As he asks, “what is the point of always using words that have been stamped with slanderous intentions”? Once we understand why he uses such language, we should garner further insight into the will to power.

In general, Nietzsche contends that life, as an embodiment of the will to power, naturally grows, spreads, and dominates. To be harsh and overpowering is precisely what we would expect if someone were engaged in most kinds of contest. Consider Muhammad Ali in his prime: to say that he dominated and overpowered his opponents would be an understatement.235 Ali clearly evinced great power in the many challenges he overcame. However, as Reginster points out, while it is tempting to define power in terms of domination or control, it is a mistake to do so. “Increased control or domination, or developed abilities or capacities, are natural and frequent consequences of the pursuit of power” (Reginster, 2006; 138).236 To consider a more innocuous example, Nietzsche also uses this language to talk about one animal “appropriating” or “exploiting” another animal. It is part and parcel of being alive; a living creature seeks sustenance.237 At the heart of the matter, life exists at the expense of other life; that is simply a consequence of living, not its defining feature.

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235 An exception would be Ali’s use of the rope-a-dope strategy against George Foreman in 1974. But even in that fight, Ali’s ultimate aim was to overcome Foreman. Instead of using brute force—where Foreman exceeded him—Ali cleverly used Foreman’s overpowering force against him.

236 Reginster continues, stating that, “to be successful, the effort to overcome resistance will indeed require ever greater abilities and capacities, and when successful, it will result in some sort of increased control and domination. But, as I have argued, it would be a mistake to see in those common and perhaps necessary consequences of the pursuit of power its very essence” (Reginster, 2006; 138-139).

237 “Is it virtuous when a cell transforms itself into a function of a stronger cell? It has to. And is it evil when the stronger cell assimilates the weaker? It also has to; this is necessary for it, since it strives for superabundant replenishment and wants to regenerate itself” (GS 118).
At the same time, there can be no doubt Nietzsche intentionally chose the rhetoric of power, domination, and overpowering to confront his readers by being as provocative as possible. Nietzsche repeatedly called on his audience to be careful readers, and his drafts show a writer who carefully chose his words, so we must take his rhetorical choices seriously. With that in mind, there can be no doubt that his provocative rhetoric about domination, overpowering, and exploitation—rhetoric emblematic of the strong, noble type—is purposely juxtaposed against the “tame”, weakened, “improved” humanity he sees today.

Given the regularity of this juxtaposition, we must ask ourselves why he is doing so, and what he intends to show. On the one hand, Nietzsche seems to be playing the part of the gadfly, trying to wake us up, to get us to see that things are not as good as they are believed to be. It is not coincidental that so much of the rhetoric about domination, overpowering, and exploitation comes in the context of Nietzsche’s critique of modernity. His rhetoric is part of this very critique of modernity; it aims to shock the reader, while also shaming her; and ideally, it will get her to reflect on her values and the values of modernity more generally.\(^\text{238}\)

On the other hand, while we are likely to cringe when Nietzsche extols harshness, overpowering, and domination—which he undoubtedly expects—there is an additional point to this rhetoric. When it is put into the proper context, Nietzsche’s point is clear: there can be value to harshness and domination, arguably for what they bring to the table: resistance.\(^\text{239}\) Not surprisingly, many passages concerned with the will to power emphasize the idea of resistance. For example, Nietzsche identifies strength with “a desire to overwhelm, a desire to cast down, a desire to become lord, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs” (GM I.13). Thus,

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\(^{238}\) As Nietzsche puts it in *Zarathustra*, his rhetoric carries a mix of love and contempt. “Oh my soul, I taught you contempt that does not come like a gnawing worm, the great, loving contempt that loves most where it has the most contempt” (Z III.14).

\(^{239}\) We can understand the value of resistance in the context of Nietzsche’s concern: to see where “the ‘plant’ man has grown the strongest” (BGE 44).
“strong natures need resistance, that is why they look for resistance” (EH I.7). In contrast, Nietzsche identifies an incapacity for resistances with weakness and the morality of the evangel (A 29). Values opposing conflict and resistance, he says, would be “hostile to life, an attempt to assassinate the future of man” (GM II.11).

Freedom, another word for the will to power, “is measured by the resistance that needs to be overcome” (TI IX.38). Good is identified with what enhances feelings of power, while genuine happiness—to be contrasted with the “wretched contentment” Nietzsche routinely criticizes—is “the feeling that power is growing, that resistance has been overcome” (A 2). Similar remarks can be found in Nietzsche’s notebooks, all of which attest to the value of what is harsh, as well as the need for resistance, which are integral to self-overcoming and the development of higher humanity.

Having surveyed Nietzsche’s various treatments of the will to power from Zarathustra to the 1888 writings, we find much that is metaphorical and elusive, just as we find much that is provocative and allusive. Nonetheless, there are many important ideas to be drawn from this brief survey: the will to power is related to overcoming; will to power connects what is difficult with what is praiseworthy; will to power is related to a people’s good and evil; will to power is equated with life; self-conquest is one instantiation of will to power; will to power involves domination; and will to power seeks out resistances to overcome. Overall, Nietzsche says a great
deal about the will to power during 1883-1888. Before concluding this survey of the will to power, it should prove fruitful to reiterate a point intimated several times so far.

There are good reasons for thinking that Nietzsche’s continuous effort to oppose modernity to the will to power is not coincidental, but rather intentional. The failure of modernity’s values stands in relief when juxtaposed against the will to power and the ideal Nietzsche associates with it. In EH Nietzsche explicitly characterizes BGE as “a critique of modernity” that sought to present an “opposite type” to what was hitherto perceived as the good person, e.g., the person who exhibited selflessness. The will to power—along with the two other central ideas from Zarathustra, the eternal recurrence and the Übermensch—is emblematic of this opposite type.

To take one final example contrasting the ideal associated with modernity and the ideal Nietzsche associates with the will to power, we can look at a passage from 1888, A 6:

“I consider life itself to be an instinct for growth, for endurance, for the accumulation of force, for power: when there is no will to power, there is decline. My claim is that none of humanity’s higher values have had this will,—that nihilistic values, values of decline, have taken control under the aegis of the holiest names.”

The contrast is made strikingly clear, even if Nietzsche is speaking with excessive hyperbole here: modernity’s higher values have been detrimental to humanity.

243 See BGE 22, 44, GM II.12.
244 EH BGE 2. Similar references are common in BGE and GM. See BGE 44, 203, 260, and GM I.12. See also TI IX.38 and EH CW.1.
245 Nietzsche seems to have gotten lost in his rhetoric here; in more calm, collected moments it is unlikely he would say that “none of humanity’s higher values have had this will”. To take an obvious example, it seems unlikely that he believes the Presocratic Greeks fall under this criticism. Nietzsche seems to be talking about “none of [modern] humanity’s higher values” in A 6.
Much of the strong rhetoric of the will to power should be read just as Nietzsche says in BGE 22, as an opposite mode of interpretation contra the modern spirit. What is more, Nietzsche clearly alludes to the opposite intentions behind this interpretation in BGE 22. That he describes this as only “interpretation” might be cause for skepticism, but that it is only his interpretation need not undermine the force of his claims. After all, depending on the goal at hand, different values would achieve different ends, a point Nietzsche noted on several occasions.246

What then are Nietzsche’s opposite intentions in interpreting the world and life as will to power? I have already answered this: to help humanity overcome the sickness of enervation and the spirit of modernity with all of its associated problems—a weakened will; small goals like pleasure, ease, and comfort; squeamishness and timidity; and an aversion to suffering and resistances—and put humanity on a path that would lead to positive development and self-enhancement.

4.3 Reginster and “The Will to Overcoming Resistance”

In The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism (2006), Bernard Reginster offers a new reading of the will to power. Playing a central role in the basic project he attributes to Nietzsche—responding to the problem of nihilism—Reginster understands the will to power as “the will to overcoming resistance” (126). He continues by pointing to the fact that Nietzsche contrasts the will to power from the will to happiness, which he takes to support the claim that “the will to power is not a will to the state in which resistance has been overcome” (126). That is to say, the goal is not the satisfaction of some desire that will lead to enduring happiness (a claim which will prove important in responding to the modern notion of “happiness” as a kind of static goal or end state). Rather, as Reginster proposes, Nietzsche would have us understand the will

246 See the note attached at the end of essay one of the Genealogy, where Nietzsche writes “something, for example, that clearly had value with regard to the greatest possible longevity of a race . . . would by no means have the same value if it were an issue of developing a stronger type.”
power as a kind of continuous striving. At the same time, the will to power is not merely a will to there being resistances to overcome or resistances that perpetually frustrate a person. As Reginster points out, rightly, if this were the case, there would never be any development, but simply unending frustration. Reginster thus reiterates that “the will to power … is a will to the very activity of overcoming resistance” (127). It is this feature that Reginster finds to be common among all that Nietzsche associates with the will to power.247

While explicating his interpretation Reginster offers a number of valuable observations and marshals a fair amount of evidence for interpreting the will to power in this way.248 For example, he observes that if we look at BGE 259, which can sound extremely harsh to our modern sensibilities with its description of life as “appropriation” and “exploitation”, what Nietzsche is actually saying is that appropriation and exploitation are a consequence of pursuing power, not necessarily the basic nature of power. Recognizing this fact can temper Nietzsche’s rhetoric, while clarifying the basic descriptive claim he is making. Seeing this point helps legitimate Reginster’s interpretation of the will to power and the direction he takes.

On the other hand, some of what Register says can come across as puzzling, most notably what he refers to as “the paradox of the will to power”, whereby “the satisfaction of the will to power requires dissatisfaction” (133). However, Reginster, seemingly aware of what Pippin would later critique as “a paradox so extreme as to court parody” (289), clarifies his remark by pointing out that “Nietzsche is not saying that the pursuit of the will to power is self-defeating or self-undermining”. Rather, the supposed paradox Reginster identifies simply points to a salient feature of the will to power: “it is a kind of desire that does not allow for permanent (once-and-

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247 Reginster refers to GM I.13 and WP 704 as common examples that reveal power as operating against something that resists. I have made reference above to these and other passages that highlight the importance of resistance.

248 Reginster does frequently appeal to notes from The Will to Power to support his view. See pp. 16-20 for his explanation about using these unpublished notes.
for-all) satisfaction” (138). This captures an important element of Nietzsche’s view, and is an element that should not be unexpected, given that he is working against the idea of permanent satisfaction. The will to power should be understood as a kind of continuous striving that importantly seeks challenges and resistance. This reading strikes me as correct in describing power as an activity, specifically “the activity of confronting and overcoming resistance” (136).\(^{249}\)

To explain this, Reginster develops an idea about how we can understand the will to power, by looking at how it relates to other desires. As he has argued, the will to power is a desire to overcome resistances. Reginster points out that this particular desire has no content.\(^{250}\) What gives it content is a first-order desire, e.g., solving a difficult philosophical problem, or vanquishing the tennis foe who repeatedly beats you. Thus the will to power necessitates a desire for something beyond power. Reginster succinctly captures the idea he sees in Nietzsche: “The will to power will not be satisfied unless three conditions are met: there is some first-order desire for a determinate end, there is resistance to the realization of this determinate end, and there is actual success in overcoming this resistance. But then, the conditions of the satisfaction of the will to power do indeed imply its dissatisfaction” (136).

Reginster’s account directs our attention, rightly I think, to an important element of Nietzsche’s notion of the will to power, pointing to the role of overcoming resistance. However, as Robert Pippin rightly points out, while Reginster gestures at the importance of self-overcoming in understanding the will to power, he never develops this line of thought. In a footnote Reginster offers something of an explanation of the importance of self-overcoming

\(^{249}\) “Power, for Nietzsche, is not a state or a condition, but an activity, the activity of confronting and overcoming resistance” (136).
\(^{250}\) Reginster writes that the will to power is “a desire for the overcoming of resistances in the pursuit of some determinate first-order desire” (132).
when he says that “overcoming itself … is what makes life worth living” (299, footnote 14). The question that needs to be answered is how overcoming makes life worth living, which will be pursued below.

Accepting Reginster’s new interpretation of the will to power, we have a new way to understand a key element of Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the sickness of enervation. If will to power is the will to overcome resistance, then we can see how Nietzsche identifies the will to engage resistances and challenges as what is missing in modern humanity. This fits with Nietzsche’s basic critique as I have presented it. In light of this, we have identified an important feature of human life that needs to be addressed.

Robert Pippin offers several criticisms of Reginster’s account, and in doing so helps to clarify how we should understand the will to power. Pippin finds Reginster’s formulation that one must actively desire resistance to a particular goal to be illogical, in that no one reasons that they want a particular end, but would prefer that it not be achieved easily. In support of Reginster’s claim, there are many pursuits where, while resistance might not be actively willed, resistance is expected as a necessary element in the project with which a person is engaged. Additionally, if a pursuit is too easy, a person rarely takes the task seriously. For example, no athlete expects to get better against competition that offers little to no resistance; similarly, no musician expects to improve continually learning simple pieces of music that pose no technical challenge whatsoever. As the above examples show, resistance and challenge are necessary for improvement. Whether or not a person actively desires resistance or a challenge misses the point: resistance and challenge are part and parcel of genuine development.

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252 Pippin further criticizes as “sparse and far from clear” (288) the evidence Reginster appeals to as support for his reading: “Whatever I create and however much I love it, soon I must oppose it and my love” (Z II.12). This passage does not say that one must be simultaneously for something and opposed to it; rather, one opposes what one loves soon afterwards, a fact which any artist knows all too well.
Pippin is clearly aware of this, for as he continues he speaks of a milder reading of how we should understand Nietzsche's talk about resistance. Pippin says that “one simply must concede that the pursuit of any truly worthy goal, pursued in the service of some higher order desire, will inevitably confront great, difficult obstacles” (288). Reginster at times expresses a milder reading of the sort Pippin here articulates, which suggests that the two are not as far apart on this issue as Pippin seems to think. Despite Pippin’s criticisms of the paradoxical nature of the will to power that Reginster emphasizes, there is much in Reginster’s account that is insightful and helpful. We must heed Pippin’s critique and recognize that, while Reginster overstates the supposed paradox in the will to power, he is right in illuminating the idea that it is a will to overcome resistance.

Pippin criticizes Reginster’s account for advocating a person seek out “as much resistance and suffering as possible”. While Reginster’s language does at times seem to suggest this, in his more careful moments this is not the position he lays out. Nonetheless, Pippin is right to articulate a more measured view that understands the need for resistance as “welcomed tests of one’s resolve and ability” (289). However, I would go further and say that such tests are not just welcomed as tests; as Nietzsche’s writings indicate, such “tests” [challenges] are necessary for the development of a strong will.

In his review of Reginster Pippin effectively directs the focus towards what might be called internal resistances, which he describes as internal dissatisfaction.²⁵³ While this is undoubtedly important in Nietzsche’s thought—one need only consider his repeated remarks about the need to cultivate self-contempt—Pippin overlooks how various forms of external

²⁵³ Pippin writes that “Nietzsche recommends an ‘internal’ creation of one’s own distress, which again sounds like an exhortation to a constant self-dissatisfaction in the service of a constant ‘self-overcoming’” (Pippin, 289). He goes on to say that self-overcoming can be understood as “the ability to foster in oneself constant dissatisfaction with one’s own achievements” (289, note 15).
resistance [suffering] play an important role in a person’s life, particularly the person’s development, self-enhancement, and the cultivation of a strong will.

Important sources of resistance and challenge in a person’s life are ubiquitous: a recalcitrant world, one’s competitors throughout life (be it one’s siblings, one’s athletic opponents, or one’s intellectual adversaries), one’s teachers, and one’s friends, to enumerate some of the more obvious examples. In light of this, one might wonder how it is that for one person these sources of external resistance register as challenges to be taken on, while for another person these same sources of resistance register as insurmountable obstacles fraught with needless suffering, to be avoided at all costs.

This is but one of many difficult questions that will require further investigation. Most importantly, we desire an account addressing how to strengthen the weakened, enervated wills of modern humanity, such that people can achieve something more than small goals and make their lives worth living. To answer this key question, we must build on Reginster’s insight that the will to power is “the will to overcoming resistance”. Developing this idea, so that we might gain an understanding of both the nature of this sickness and how to address it, is the project of the next two sections.

4.4 A New Understanding of Enervation; A New Prospect of Treatment

I now turn to constructing the outline of a Nietzschean response to the sickness of enervation, using Reginster’s insight that the will to power is “the will to overcoming resistance” to address the sickness Nietzsche diagnoses. For our purpose, Reginster’s analysis of the will to power helps to illuminate the nature of the sickness of enervation. Specifically, we can now see that this sickness manifests itself in people whenever they avoid resistance and challenge. The sickness is choosing goals that require only the most minimal forms of challenge. Thus the
sickness of modernity, presenting as a weakened, enervated will, can be understood as a kind of weakness of will [i.e., an aversion to overcoming resistances].

Having used the phrases “weakness of will” and “weakened will”, it is important to note that this is not the traditional problem of weakness of the will mentioned by Socrates and addressed by Aristotle.\textsuperscript{254} Nietzsche diagnoses in modernity what might alternatively be described as an atrophied will, i.e., a will that has lost its strength and vitality through limited use. Katsafanas notes that “the claim that we will power is not a claim about what we will; it is a claim about how we will” (Katsafanas 2013; 161).\textsuperscript{255} Accordingly, Nietzsche’s real interest is in strong and weak wills.\textsuperscript{256} A strong will then, is one that aims to overcome resistance in the course of pursuing some end. In contrast, a weak will is one that aims at ends that specifically avoid resistance. Such a will has succumbed to willing goals that are too easily attained.\textsuperscript{257}

To better understand the issue, we can turn to an intriguing remark Nietzsche makes in the \textit{Genealogy} that “man would much rather will nothingness than \textit{not} will” (GM III.28). What is of interest is Nietzsche’s claim that human beings would prefer to will anything, even the nothingness he identifies as “the beyond”, God, and “the \textit{true} life” (A 7, 18, and 43), than not will. This passage suggests that the problem does not concern the presence or absence of willing, but rather lies in the nature of willing. Willing nothingness seems to be an example of a weak will, aiming at small goals like repose or self-preservation. Nietzsche’s point then is that

\textsuperscript{254} Interestingly, in the 1888 writings, Nietzsche does discuss when people come to desire and prefer things that are not good for them. He alternately calls this decadence and corruption, which is “to choose instinctively what is harmful for yourself” (TI IX.35). “The instinct is weakened. People are attracted to things they should avoid” (CW 5). “I call an animal, a species, an individual corrupt when it loses its instincts, when it chooses, when it prefers things that will harm it” (A 6). “Complete decadents always choose the means that hurt themselves” (EH I.2).

\textsuperscript{255} Katsafanas points out that Heidegger makes much the same point, that “it \[will to power\] comprises an elucidation of the essence of will itself” (Katsafanas, 2013; 171).

\textsuperscript{256} Nietzsche writes that “nothing is as timely as weakness of will” (BGE 212). Elsewhere he says that “in real life it is only a matter of strong and weak wills” (BGE 21). Nietzsche elaborates on the problem of weak wills in TI V.2, writing that “he weakness of the will, or, to be exact, the inability not to react to a stimulus, is itself just another form of degeneration”. See also TI VI.3, 7, TI VIII.6, A 14, 50, and EH I.6.

\textsuperscript{257} This claim can be tempered by the fact that Nietzsche recommends progressively strengthening the will, beginning with more attainable goals at first, and working one’s way up to more challenging goals.
humanity is not lacking in will, but in the right kind of willing. The right kind of willing, according to Nietzsche would be the will to overcoming resistances. It does not posit a particular goal, but a particular kind of willing.

That human beings would accede to “small goals” may seem puzzling unless we understand the allure of such goals. Some of these goals are: pleasure, ease, and comfort. Granting that these are common goals, we should not be surprised about their allure, as any hedonist from Epicurus to Bentham would point out. Additionally, we could look to the account Nietzsche offers in essay one of the Genealogy and the triumph of slave values to explain how such “small goals’ can become dominant. Nietzsche’s analysis suggests that an enervated will leads a person to will small goals, and that having small goals then enervates a person’s will. It stands to reason that, as a person becomes accustomed to these small goals, at some point, she will likewise become conditioned to desire only small goals. Each conditions the other. The problem of “small goals” typically producing enervation should be evident; they condition people to be satisfied with this shallow version of “happiness”, i.e., “wretched contentment”.

We can better appreciate Nietzsche’s concern about the harm of small goals by considering how he understands happiness. Katsafanas highlights an important distinction in the way Nietzsche looks at happiness. Katsafanas points out that Nietzsche criticizes the idea of happiness as a state. Rather, happiness is best conceived as a process. Happiness results when

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258 By “small goals” I mean goals that are too easily attained, that offer little or no challenge.
259 “What they want to strive for with all their might is the universal, green pasture happiness of the herd, with security, safety, contentment, and an easier life for all” (BGE 44).
260 Where the “notion of happiness corresponds to that of a medicine … it is a notion of happiness as primarily rest” (BGE 200). N also characterizes this goal of happiness as aiming at putting “an end to the war that he is” (ibid). Elsewhere N describes the goal as the time “when there is nothing more to fear” (BGE 201). Reginster writes that “happiness is often conceived in terms of fulfillment: the complete satisfaction of all of your desires, the state in which nothing is left to be desired” (Reginster, 2007; 33).
261 See Z P.3, II.2, III.5, BGE 200, TI I.12, A 1-2, WLN 11[75], and WLN 14[174]. Nietzsche “argues that happiness is not a state at all, happiness obtains when we are engaged in efficacious pursuit of a goal, not when we attain the goal” (Katsafanas, 2013; 173). Katsafanas points out that “recent psychological research strongly supports” Nietzsche’s claim (Katsafanas, 2013; 174). Reginster likewise adds that “Nietzsche’s conception of
a person is engaged in a continuous process, e.g., the process of playing a piece of music or playing a game of chess. As Nietzsche says about happiness, it is “the feeling that power is growing, that some resistance has been overcome. Not contentedness, but more power; not peace, but war” (A 2). Since the will to power is “a kind of desire that does not allow for permanent … satisfaction” (Reginster, 2006; 138), we can understand one of the symptoms of the sickness of enervation as the desire for just that: permanent satisfaction.262

Thus, we see that people have mistakenly come to believe that happiness is best understood as a state to be achieved, a state of permanent satisfaction, a state with no suffering, i.e., a state with neither resistance nor challenge, but rather pleasure, ease, and comfort. This goal of permanent satisfaction is, in some sense, the “ultimate” goal, a goal which undermines having goals. Against this Zarathustra advocates we think of goals in a different way:

That I must be struggle and becoming and purpose and the contradiction of purposes – alas, whoever guesses my will guesses also on what crooked paths it must walk!
Whatever I may create and however I may love it – soon I must oppose it and my love, thus my will wants it. (Z II.12)

Goals are such that what matters is their pursuit; though we have to be careful not to take this to mean that achieving the goal is unimportant, for the goal is important. When I play a game of tennis, I strongly desire to win (otherwise playing makes very little sense). However, the activity

happiness in terms of the successful confrontation of difficulty has recently found empirical confirmation in research on the psychology of happiness” (Reginster, 2007; 33, footnote 19). See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience (1990).

262 David Foster Wallace, in his excellent essay “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” (1997), more or less captures this very idea when he describes the goal of the passengers on the cruise he is documenting as desiring a permanent vacation. In his critique, Wallace notes the idea he has seen in the brochure: “RELAXATION BECOMES SECOND NATURE”. This helpfully captures part of the problem that Nietzsche diagnoses.
is what is most important; after all, in having the desire to win, I am not going to remain satisfied with a victory, I am going to want to test myself once again in competition.  

In light of Reginster’s elucidation of the will to power, we can now confidently say that the problem is that people who have weak wills are people who are avoiding resistances. Having gained a deeper understanding of the nature of a weakened, enervated will directs us to a potential means of addressing it.

One might object that, if we look around, we do not see lassitude and apathy in people, but rather counter-examples of energy and engagement which seem to undermine Nietzsche’s criticism. There is no doubt that there are many who have taken on the world and its problems with tremendous energy, casting aside the goals of pleasure, comfort, and ease. However, this seems to be the minority, further highlighting the lassitude and apathy of the majority who are content with their small pleasures. Beyond that, if we take literature and film to accurately capture the zeitgeist, we have evidence suggesting the listless, bored, modern human being is widespread.

We can address this objection in another way by reflecting on Nietzsche’s general concern: he expresses worry that having small goals will hinder our ability to become something greater; that is to say, aiming at pleasure, ease, and comfort will undermine the potential for human excellence. Additionally, Nietzsche is concerned that the presence of the Last Man

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263 Small goals, presumably, could lend themselves to continual testing. However, given their level of ease, they tend not to be tested because there is little reason to do so. For example, if my goal is to get up off my couch and go brush my teeth, and I do it, I do not feel like that is worth doing again. [But a small goal like beating a video game level may actually inspire me to work at it. In some ways, the matter is really about continual testing, and small goals tend to preclude this for various reasons. Thus we see that the problem is the nature of certain kinds of goals, not merely their smallness.]

264 “Beware! The time approaches when human beings no longer launch the arrow of their longing beyond the human, and the string of their bow will have forgotten how to whirl!” (Z, P.5).
type will undermine those who have it in themselves to be something greater. Thus we see Nietzsche worries both about the harmful impact that having small goals has on the person, as well as the harm on other people.

“Today, the will is weakened and diluted by the tastes and virtues of the times” (BGE 212). This claim should not surprise us, given Nietzsche’s strident critique of modern morality. Specifying the cause of the problem is one thing, offering some type of treatment to address it is another thing. While Nietzsche does not offer an explicit method of treatment in these passages, he hints at what needs to be done. For one, if a people’s tastes and virtues are part of the problem, then a potential solution would be to cultivate and create new tastes and new virtues. Of course, that is easier said than done. And it is not necessarily a task for everyone. However, this is the task of Nietzsche’s philosophers of the future.

Fortunately, Nietzsche has more to say that is relevant to the issue. In a discussion of new philosophers, he says, perhaps naïvely, that they are the ones who will not only initiate the creation of new values, but also “teach humanity its future as its will, as dependent on a human will” (BGE 203). What can go unnoticed however, is that Nietzsche then hints at more concrete ways of accomplishing this task. He continues, pointing out that conditions could either be created or exploited to help strengthen the will. Nietzsche points to a complacent culture as part of the problem, after which he intimates various conditions that could be exploited to help strengthen the will, e.g., a legitimate cultural threat—he speculates that Russia may be such a threat—war, or internal political strife (BGE 208). These speculations, vague as they may be, nonetheless point to the need for challenge and resistance in life, both at the cultural and individual level. Articulating how this might work is the subject of the next section.

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265 “Then the earth has become small, and on it hops the last human being, who makes everything small” (Z P.5). Nietzsche expresses a similar sentiment in the *Genealogy*, where he expresses concern that the sick “undermine life among humans” and “call into question our confidence in life, in man, in ourselves” (GM III.14).
4.5 The Therapy of Suffering and Resistance: Attempt at a Solution

Humanity has small goals, Nietzsche charges. People desire the repose of pleasure, ease, and comfort. He diagnoses that the will is weakened by our current tastes and virtues. This leads to the condemnation and desired abolition of resistances and challenges [the very things which prevent people from attaining the state of repose they desire]. Addressing the problem of modernity’s weak wills, Nietzsche says that “strength of will and the hardness and capacity for long-term resolutions must belong to the concept of ‘greatness’” (BGE 212).

In virtue of these issues, the central question is obvious: what can be done to get people to see that the goal of mere pleasure, ease, and comfort, is no recipe for genuine happiness; that eliminating all resistance and challenge [to the extent this is possible], only weakens the will; that small goals and weak wills inevitably diminish human beings? Given the problems he diagnoses, we would expect Nietzsche to offer some kind of account about how it is that a person could achieve the strength of will necessary for greatness and self-enhancement. We can look at a handful of select passages which clearly state not only what is at issue, but, if I am correct, point to what Nietzsche believes needs to be done to help a person overcome settling for small goals and become something greater.

To begin we can turn our attention to BGE, where Nietzsche both diagnoses the problem and offers a response. Having criticized hedonism, utilitarianism, pessimism, and eudemonianism, and then scoffed at their understanding of pity, Nietzsche says “we see how humanity is becoming smaller, how you are making it smaller!” (BGE 225) He then expresses exasperation about the idea of abolishing suffering before capturing the nature of the problem:
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! (ibid)

Having offered a concise statement of the problem he has diagnosed, Nietzsche makes it clear that instead of abolishing suffering, he would prefer to not only retain it, but to increase it.266

This claim, Nietzsche recognizes, will sound strange and alarming to most people. He continues, explaining why suffering, resistances, and challenges are necessary:

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 disciple of great suffering? (Ibid)

Nietzsche’s claim is straightforward and to the point: if the goal is enhancement and becoming something greater, then what is necessary is “the discipline of suffering”, i.e., more resistance in a person’s life.

Lest one think that this passage is an outlier that is not representative of Nietzsche’s position, elsewhere he emphasizes the same point. For example, earlier in BGE, having criticized the modern ideals of equality, sympathy [Mitgefühl], and the elimination of suffering, Nietzsche

266 “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 even worse than it has ever been!” (BGE 225)
goes on to say he is opposed to the elimination of suffering. Having seen “where and how the plant ‘man’ has grown the strongest” (BGE 44), he holds the reverse position, that suffering has helped enhance humanity. Among those things that Nietzsche identifies as important to human development are:

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. (*Ibid*)

What is needed is “prolonged pressure”, constraint, and danger. But even all of this, he goes on to say, does not accurately capture what he has to say.  

These passages and many others help clarify why Nietzsche values suffering and ill-treatment in the world: suffering, resistances, and challenges contribute to a person's development, helping her become stronger.  

Resistances, obstacles, and challenges all are necessary, he claims, for development and self-enhancement. Self-contempt motivates. Part of the problem, Nietzsche says, is that the very things that are good for us—suffering, obstacles, resistances—are the things we have sought to eliminate and avoid. Thus Nietzsche laments that

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267 In a famous note from fall 1887, Nietzsche powerfully expresses what he means, offering the following: “On the kind of men who matter to me I wish suffering, isolation, sickness, ill-treatment, degradation—I wish they may become acquainted with deep self-contempt, the torment of self-mistrust, the misery of the overcome: I have no compassion for them, because I wish them the only thing that today can prove whether a man has any value or not—his ability to stand his ground …” (WLN 10[103]).

268 Perhaps harshness and cunning provide more favorable conditions for the origin of the strong, independent spirit and philosopher” (BGE 39). “A species originates, a type grows sturdy and strong, in the long struggle with essentially constant unfavorable conditions” (BGE 262). “The continuous struggle with constant unfavorable conditions is, as I have said, what causes a type to become sturdy and hard” (*ibid*). Nietzsche remarks that “order of rank is almost determined by just how deeply people can suffer”. He continues, noting that “profound suffering makes you noble; it separates” (BGE 270). “Look for the highest type of free human beings where the highest resistance is constantly being overcome” (TI IX.38). He says that “strong natures need resistance, that is why they look for resistance” (EH I.7). In several notes from late 1887 / early 1888, Nietzsche goes on to describe “unsatisfaction” as “life’s great stimulus” (WLN 11[76]) and that “the effect of that unpleasure is to stimulate life—and to strengthen the will to power” (WLN 11[77]).
people have “abandoned the regions where it was hard to live” (Z P.5). Having acquiesced to the allure of pleasure, ease, and comfort, people have turned away from resistances and challenges.

What should be clear is that Nietzsche is saying to those who advocate the elimination of suffering: you’ve got it all wrong, eliminating suffering is not the solution, but just another manifestation of the problem. The best course of action is to take suffering on, to welcome it as a necessary means to becoming something greater and self-enhancement. And since people seem determined at all costs to avoid suffering and resistances, Nietzsche is going to advocate that such resistances not only be kept, but that they be not only emphasized but heightened at both the cultural and individual level.

Nietzsche is advocating nothing less than a revaluation of suffering. Beyond advocating for a revaluation of suffering, Nietzsche is also advocating that resistances, obstacles, and challenges become unavoidable in life, thereby making it necessary to engage them [in a positive way]. In a world filled with suffering, resistances and challenges, they come to us whether we want them or not. Part of Nietzsche’s project is to get people to welcome such obstacles and challenges. Few would argue with Nietzsche that life is filled with resistance and suffering: the bigger issue has to do with how a person responds to it. The problem is that, as we have seen, all too often people respond to suffering and resistance in ways which are harmful to them, e.g., by resigning themselves to it, by turning away from it, or by working to eliminate it, even if they are unaware of the negative effects of doing so. Nietzsche has to show that suffering and resistances are not “evil”, but rather that they are valuable, ought to be welcomed, and thereby put to positive use in the service of self-enhancement.

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269 "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. As Nietzsche sees it, the good lies in the activity of overcoming resistance—it is the will to power. From the standpoint of the ethics of power, suffering is not just something that … individuals have to go through in order to be happy; it is rather part of what their very happiness consists of" (Reginster, 2006; 231).
In light of Nietzsche’s unusual campaign for suffering and resistance, we need to consider precisely how to understand what he is advocating. After all, to claim that the world needs not to abolish suffering, but rather *more* suffering, seems absurd. Against the idea of welcoming suffering, the desire for abolishing suffering seems considerably more reasonable.

How then ought we to understand Nietzsche’s claim here? Additionally, how is it that Nietzsche understands suffering? Reginster helpfully writes that “suffering is the experience of resistance to the satisfaction of desires” (Reginster, 2006; 233).\(^{270}\) While this is no doubt an idiosyncratic understanding of suffering, evidence strongly suggests this is what Nietzsche has in mind when he talks about suffering.\(^{271}\)

If we understand resistances and challenges as being more or less equivalent to suffering, or at least as the primary cause of suffering—which Nietzsche seems to hold—then we can understand Nietzsche as criticizing modernity by saying, “if you want to abolish suffering, then you abolish resistances. And if you want to abolish resistances, then you abolish the means through which a person develops into something greater”. Against that, Nietzsche wants to retain suffering in the world, and the reason why is clear: he wants to retain resistances and challenges because they are necessary for self-enhancement.

As we attain some clarity about how Nietzsche understands suffering and why it is valuable, there are several other questions and objections that need to be addressed. To begin, there is the objection that, against Nietzsche’s argument that resistances [and suffering] should be not only preserved, but enhanced in life, the real problem is the overabundance of resistance and suffering in life. If the problem is that humanity is becoming smaller and may soon no longer

\(^{270}\) “As I have used the term strictly, *suffering* refers to the displeasure that results from resistance to the satisfaction of our desires” (Reginster, 2006; 234).

\(^{271}\) I address Nietzsche’s idiosyncratic understanding of suffering below, including the potential for misunderstanding it creates, as well as how it admits of a potentially damning criticism of Nietzsche’s position.
have the ability to become something greater, then it is mistaken to identify what is causing this with the *absence* of resistance and suffering. Rather, the cause of this problem is the overwhelming presence of resistances and suffering in the world, which undermines us, mentally and physically, invariably pushing people beyond their breaking point. Having been continually pushed beyond what they are capable of, people understandably long for shelter from the storm. And it is this state of affairs—unrelenting, punishing suffering—that drives people to the “small goals” of pleasure, comfort, and ease, not too little suffering.

Additionally, if Nietzsche thinks that the world has been [even modestly] successful in its goal of eliminating suffering, then he is deeply mistaken. More than that, if he thinks that it is the *absence* of suffering that has enervated and diminished human beings, then once again Nietzsche has erred in what he identifies as the cause of enervation and diminution. There are few things that have greater power to cut people down and level them than profound and needless suffering does.\(^{272}\) For when a person’s energy is entirely focused on self-preservation, the ability to engage in projects of self-enhancement has been cut off.

Finally, one might charge that Nietzsche does not understand the [potential] impact of suffering. We can imagine myriad examples of suffering that neither contribute to any accomplishments nor have any value whatsoever; rather, these examples are all deeply debilitating and undermine the ability for any kind of development or self-enhancement. For example, the child slowly starving to death in Bangladesh; the family displaced and struggling to survive in the face of a protracted civil war from which there is no escape; the terminally ill patient whose body is being ravaged by cancer as death draws ever closer. The list is seemingly endless with examples of great suffering from which there is no escape. What is more, it is not

\(^{272}\) It is important to note that this kind of leveling is not the same as the diminution that Nietzsche diagnoses as being caused by the sickness of enervation.
only a mistake to try and conceive these examples as situations where a person could use her suffering as an impetus to greatness, but it seems wrong to do so. These examples seem to represent clear cases of what might be called irredeemable suffering.

Despite his continued engagement with the problem of suffering, to say nothing of his own debilitating physical suffering, Nietzsche never addressed cases of this sort, what I have called irredeemable [or needless] suffering. Given that he never addressed such cases, we have grounds for criticizing what seems to be a serious omission. In virtue of his apparent lack of interest in cases of irredeemable suffering—as evidenced by his lack of engagement with the issue—is there anything in Nietzsche’s thought that indicates how he might have assessed this type of suffering?

As a starting point, we can look to his remarks in Zarathustra “On Free Death”, in which he talks about dying at the right time. There is much of interest in “On Free Death”, though much of it goes beyond the scope of the current discussion. Among the relevant things Nietzsche has to say, he speaks of “[dying] at the right time” (Z I.21). Nietzsche is fairly straightforward, albeit it in a way that sounds extremely harsh to our modern sensibilities: many people never truly live, and thus the best thing for them is to die. We can reasonably conclude that those who are born into a situation where their lives are beset by nothing but extreme poverty, starvation, disease, and slow death, are those who Nietzsche genuinely feels would be better off dying quickly.273

This is not the only place where Nietzsche shows recognition of needless and irredeemable suffering. Elsewhere Nietzsche talks of the sick and suffering in a way that conveys

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273 Against this we can imagine a terminally ill person suffering debilitating pain in her final weeks who could nonetheless produce a profound piece of art, the culmination of her life’s work. Thus we might say that it is up to the individual what she does with her life even in the face of needless suffering. In contrast are cases like the child starving to death who, because of a situation he has no control of, is structurally unable to accomplish anything as he struggles to preserve a life he may have come to see is unlikely to be saved. In light of cases like this, more will have to be said to properly delineate what I have been calling irredeemable suffering. I return to this shortly.
a different kind of suffering from the suffering he identifies as valuable. In BGE 62, for example, Nietzsche indicates that the religions of suffering preserve what ought not to be preserved, taking sides with the failures of life. Nietzsche goes on to suggest that the best thing for them would be to die at the right time. Thus we see that, while Nietzsche finds suffering to be valuable, he clearly identifies a particular kind of suffering which is not an impetus to self-enhancement. In other words, against the positive kinds of suffering Nietzsche values, he does recognize a form of suffering that is irredeemable and debilitating, even if this kind of suffering is not where his interests lie.

To speak of “irredeemable suffering” leads to another issue that needs to be addressed, specifically how to distinguish the “good” suffering Nietzsche values, from the “bad” suffering Nietzsche is aware of, but with which he is not concerned. Katsafanas recognizes that this is an issue and tries to distinguish “good” suffering from “bad” suffering. He characterizes good suffering as "suffering associated with achievement", while bad suffering is "suffering associated with conditions such as disease or hunger". We can see what Katsafanas is aiming at, but he does not fully succeed in delineating good and bad suffering by appealing to disease and hunger as examples of bad suffering. After all, hunger and disease, while apparently irredeemable, could be the impetus a person needs to achieve something greater. Nietzsche’s life is evidence that a person can experience debilitating sickness and still persevere to accomplish great projects, as Nietzsche did with his writings. What we want is some kind of definition that will capture and delineate all forms of “good” suffering from “bad” suffering. Accordingly, I will provisionally

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275 “With humans as with every other type of animal, there is a surplus of failures and degenerates, of the diseased and infirm, of those who necessarily suffer.” The religions of suffering, including Christianity, “have preserved too much of what should be destroyed” (BGE 62).
276 In a footnote, Katsafanas writes that “there is an important difference between the suffering associated with achievement, and the suffering associated with conditions such as disease or hunger” (Katsafanas, 2013; 194, footnote 28). However, Katsafanas never elaborates on the nature of this difference, but takes it as given.
define “good” suffering as suffering that leads to accomplishment, while we can understand “bad” suffering as irredeemable, debilitating suffering which [definitively] undermines a person’s ability to accomplish things.

Consider the following pair of examples: in the first case, we can imagine a student who is continually challenged by his teacher, given various intellectual challenges, which demand careful attention and thoughtful reflection from the student, but at the same time cause significant mental anguish on the student, as she works to address these challenges. The obstacles and resistances before her push her to her limit, but in the end she masters difficult material, sees the faults in the argument(s), and is able to offer an insightful creative solution to the philosophical problem. The resistances highlighted in this example strike us as good or valuable, insofar as they are necessary for the intellectual accomplishments of the student, leading to her self-enhancement.277

In contrast are cases such as a captured prisoner of war being tortured, a child dying of leukemia, or a person dying of starvation.278 In these types of cases we would be mistaken to say the suffering presents itself as a challenge like the previous example. Rather, the challenge is the preservation of one’s life, which is being destroyed by suffering that is needless, excessive, irredeemable, and debilitating.

If what distinguishes good, valuable suffering from bad, undermining suffering is whether or not the person is able to accomplish what she aimed at, then it would appear a person can only know if suffering is valuable after the fact. However, this does not seem right. It would

277 One can point to all sorts of real-world examples where a person suffered greatly and was able to use that suffering as an impetus to do good in the world, like the examples of Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Malala Yousefzai.

278 There are also trickier cases, like the case of a Tibetan monk self-immolating in protest of Chinese policies, which seem to be examples of irredeemable suffering, but which could also be seen positively by Nietzsche, insofar as the act can be an impetus to others. In “On Free Death” Nietzsche does extol the value of what he calls “the consummating death”. The consummating death is “a goad and a promise to the living. The consummated one dies his death, victorious, surrounded by those who hope and promise” (Z, “On Free Death”).
appear that bad suffering is not simply suffering that leads to the inability to accomplish something. For example, I might get something of value out of a failed attempt to climb a mountain or a tennis match that I lose. Thus, if I can take something valuable even from failure, then the suffering is not necessarily bad. Bad suffering must somehow be debilitating, as in tasks that are so difficult they overwhelm me, or tasks which prevent me from engaging further challenges [as the examples in the previous paragraph would presumably do].

In the end, drawing the distinction between good and bad suffering is not going to be easy, but as I have sought to show, it can be done. However, we can draw some general conclusions. First off, Nietzsche does seem committed to recognizing the distinction. Secondly, what constitutes good or bad suffering is going to be dependent on the person, as what will be appropriate for one, will not necessarily be appropriate for the other. And finally, in virtue of the fact Nietzsche’s goal is self-enhancement, it would seem that, while good suffering is to be valued, retained, and heightened, bad suffering ought to be removed to the degree that it can. Insofar as bad suffering could prevent one from benefitting from good suffering, Nietzsche ought to recognize that certain kinds of suffering are best eliminated.

This brings us to a related concern: how do we discern the right amount of resistance [suffering] for a given person? One might look to Nietzsche’s aphorism, “From life’s school of war” for an answer, as he famously wrote, “what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger” (TI I.8).279 Elsewhere Nietzsche writes that “the strength of a spirit would be proportionate to how much of the “truth” he could withstand” (BGE 39).280 While these are intriguing claims, they do not satisfactorily address the question; rather, they simply restate the issue. How do I know what will

279 Against Nietzsche’s reasoning in this aphorism, Robert Solomon has replied that “that which doesn’t kill me most likely leaves me debilitated” (Solomon, 2003; 32).
280 This was an idea Nietzsche routinely returned to in his notebooks. “The measure of a man is how much of the truth he can endure without degenerating” (WLN 35[69]). “‘How much ‘truth’ can a spirit endure and dare?” — a question of its strength” (WLN 10[3]).
make me strong as opposed to killing, or debilitating me? How do I know how much I can endure?

The success of a Nietzschean “resistance therapy” hinges on the person not being crushed by the weight of the challenges and resistances thrown at her, but rather being able to typically meet the challenge(s) and develop into something greater. Just as the lack of resistance is inimical to a person’s development, so too is excessive resistance injurious to a person, potentially catastrophically so. What is necessary is having some understanding of just what a person is capable of and directing her to challenges that are appropriate.

Here we can imagine a person experimenting and working to figure out what works best for her. This idea has some merit, given Nietzsche’s high estimation of the value of experimentalism and risk-taking. However, just as a person will go to a physician to have an expert diagnose what is wrong with her, we can see the value of having a trained eye directed at diagnosing what is best for a person. After all, just as a person is often unable to accurately diagnose what is at issue with her, so too will a person struggle to discern precisely what the right level of challenge and resistance is necessary for her. As we have seen, the goal is to find a genuine challenge, where the resistance is neither negligible nor impossible to overcome. In an effort to become a better tennis player I will avoid playing against children—who would be no competition at all—just as I will avoid playing Roger Federer—whose serves would probably prove impossible to return. The task is to find the right level of resistance such that it proves genuinely challenging and allows a person to develop as she struggles against these resistances.

This is where we can look to two of Nietzsche’s “physicians”, whose expertise can assist a person in discerning the right amount of resistance for her to take on in life. The first figure I have in mind is the rare type Nietzsche identifies at the end of BGE, the genius of the heart.
More common than the genius of the heart is the “Nietzschean” friend. Each of these figures has the unique ability to discern what is necessary for a person’s development in a way that the person is not. Thus we have two potential answers as to who will be able to help determine the right kind and the right amount of resistance necessary in a person’s life, so that they might work to engage resistances and develop a strong, powerful will.

To begin, let us turn to Nietzsche’s conclusion to BGE, where he talks about the genius of the heart. This passage shows both what is required to inspire a person, while simultaneously showing just how difficult this is to achieve. Most important for our concerns, the genius of the heart “knows how to descend into the underworld of every soul” (BGE 295). The person Nietzsche describes is extra-ordinary, and embodies a tremendous understanding of the depths of human being. Nietzsche’s description of the genius of the heart is of a person who is able to get people to learn to listen, who imparts the taste for new desires, and perhaps most importantly, is able to guess the hidden treasure in a person’s soul.

Divining the gold buried in the mud of a person’s soul, the genius of the heart is precisely what would be needed to help wake people up from their self-induced hibernation. Beyond adopting the role of an enlightened therapist, there is more the genius of the heart does. Nietzsche continues, describing a person “that enriches everyone who has come into contact with it … they are made richer in themselves, newer than before … full of hopes that do not have names yet, full of new wills and currents” (BGE 295). In essence, Nietzsche describes a person who both diagnoses and inspires. The genius of the heart is overflowing with wisdom, which pours forth to others, helping them in myriad ways, ways essential to their becoming something greater.

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281 Such a person is needed for the simple fact that, as Nietzsche often reminded us, each of us is farthest from himself, a fact which can help explain how we are unknown to ourselves (GS 335 and GM P.1). If this is the case, then what could be more important than someone knowing us in the way the genius of the heart knows us?
Given the portrait Nietzsche paints of the genius of the heart, it is easy to see precisely how this figure could help a person understand her present strength of will and direct her toward the most appropriate kinds of challenges that she needs to confront so that she might become something greater. In effect, the genius of the heart will be able to discern exactly how much a person can handle, and keep her from taking too much on. Additionally, the genius of the heart exhibits many other abilities that will be beneficial to a person struggling to overcome small goals, be it by inspiring a person, strengthening her, or imparting new desires.

While the genius of the heart is the rarest of persons, there is another type of person that Nietzsche extols, a type significantly more people are fortunate to have in their lives: the Nietzschean friend. A complete account would require a rather lengthy treatment, but the essentials relevant in the context of this section are fairly straightforward. The Nietzschean friend aligns with Nietzsche’s high estimation of resistances and challenge, of hardness, joy, and self-overcoming. Important in the present context, this ideal friend can serve an important role by helping to identify resistances and challenges that might be appropriate.

In a nutshell, the ideal friend is not merely someone we know, have affection for, who shares our interests, and is, in effect, another version of oneself. Nietzsche deconstructs this notion, and in doing so builds up the notion of a friend who is one’s competitive partner in life, who pushes one, and with that, the friend can be a kind of bridge to one’s higher self.282 “In one’s friend one should have one’s best enemy. You should be closest to him in heart when you strive against him” (Z I.14).283 Through an agonistic engagement with one’s friend, one can work to become what one can become what one has it in oneself to be. In essence, the Nietzschean

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282 “Nietzsche’s vision of true friendship is agonistic, fighting against the friend’s self-satisfaction in favor of his higher self” (William Schroeder, manuscript, chapter 2, p.17, 2005).
283 “If one wants a friend, then one must also want to wage war for him: and in order to wage war, one must be able to be an enemy” (Z I.14).
friend is an ideal form of resistance in the world. Given that resistance and challenges in life are essential to a person’s development, it is easy to see the value of such a friend.

That the Nietzschean friend can play this role should not at all be surprising. What we would hope from Nietzsche is an explanation about how it is the friend can push a person, in the right ways, to help her strive towards becoming something greater. Fortunately, Nietzsche gives a response to this question. The friend is someone who a person is challenged by, someone a person competes with, and as such, the friend pushes a person to improve; the friend can be a mirror to one’s self, which allows a person to see her flaws and what must be overcome, as well as her strengths, all of which a person may not clearly see in herself. Beyond that, the friend can motivate a person as a source of inspiration. Ideally, the friend can help to elevate a person, as would be expected with any kind of competition, where one tries to best the other, a challenge which necessitates one be at one’s best.

As we see, the Nietzschean friend answers our earlier question about knowing the right level of resistance by actually *being* the right level of resistance and challenge. At the same time then, through competition with one’s friend, one can learn about one’s abilities, both one’s strengths and weaknesses, helping to calibrate what is challenging and what is not. In this way, as Nietzsche briefly detailed in HH 368, the friend acts as a ladder to one’s higher self.²⁸⁴

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Finally, having sorted through various problems about how to understand Nietzsche’s project, the nature of suffering and resistances, and how to know the right level of suffering to take on, there is one last issue. We can imagine many people who recognize that resistances and challenges can be beneficial to them, but who nonetheless decides that pleasure, ease, and

²⁸⁴ “One is in a state of continual ascent and for each phase of his development finds a friend precisely appropriate to it” (HH 368).
comfort are more attractive goals. How is Nietzsche to address this issue? There is a lot that could be said in attempting to address this issue on Nietzsche’s behalf, for it is a question of considerable importance in the context of his project of combatting the sickness of enervation. However, I believe we can conclude by looking at the note Nietzsche affixed to the end of essay one of the *Genealogy* for a concise response to this concern. In this note he reflects on the value of different values, pointing to the need to ask the question “value for what?”

Something, for example, which obviously had value with regard to the longest possible life-span of a race (or to the improvement of its abilities to adapt to a particular climate, or to maintaining the greatest number) would not have anything like the same value if it was a question of developing a stronger type.

As we have seen, Nietzsche’s concern has been to overcome the diminution of humanity and develop a stronger type, a project I have shown necessitates suffering and resistances. Given Nietzsche’s statement here, he concedes that, depending on a person’s goals, different people will hold differing values. This may seem a troubling concession on Nietzsche’s part.

But this is not the end of the story though, for Nietzsche ironically concludes the note by saying that he will leave it to the English biologists to infer that “the longest possible life-span” is more valuable. Against that, he points to the real task before philosophers: to determine “the rank order of values”. From Nietzsche’s perspective, what constitutes the higher value could not be clearer: “the discipline of suffering”—a life with resistances, obstacles, and challenges—is necessary for enhancing humanity, and against a life of pleasure, ease, and comfort, it is to this project that mankind should turn.
CHAPTER 5: THE GREAT HEALTH

5.1 Introduction

Having surveyed the different forms of sickness that beset humanity in chapter one, and reconstructed Nietzsche’s responses in chapters two, three, and four, the final task is to investigate Nietzsche’s notion of the great health. As a general goal, Nietzsche seeks to overcome the ideals and values that have resulted in sickness and inaugurate both a new ideal and new values which will put humanity on the path to health. However, beyond the general goal of restoring humanity’s health by working to eliminate the negative elements in a person’s life, Nietzsche also appeals to a new ideal that he calls “the great health”, which he describes as “the ideal of a human, superhuman well-being” (GS 382).

Nietzsche’s notion of “the great health” is highly elusive, and the minimal treatment it receives can make the work of elucidating it rather difficult. For example, when Nietzsche says of the great health that it is “a health that one doesn't only have, but also acquires continually and must acquire because one gives it up again and again, and must give it up”, it is easy to furrow one’s brow in consternation. However, when read in concert with Nietzsche’s treatment of sickness and health, and when we understand that health should be understood as a process as opposed to a state, even the more perplexing statements Nietzsche makes can fall into place.

Given the nature of this new ideal, there are several questions that need to be addressed, but the most important questions are how to understand the great health and how one might achieve it. Additionally, given what Nietzsche says about the great health, one might question why it is worth pursuing. I will argue that answers to these questions can be reconstructed from Nietzsche’s statements about the great health, read in conjunction with his related remarks about

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285 Together these sicknesses constitute what I called the diminution of humanity, which Nietzsche describes as “the reduction and equalization of the European human”, a concern he describes as “our greatest danger” (GM I.12).
four elements central to the great health: overflowing abundance, laughter and cheerfulness, living experimentally, and forgetting.

To answer these questions I will proceed as follows: section 5.2 begins by examining the movement from sickness to health, which ought to be understood as a process, and that so too is the movement from health to great health a continuation of this process. I briefly examine the puzzling question of how the great health could be stimulated by sickness. I continue in section 5.3 by examining Nietzsche’s remarks on “the great health” in HH P.4, GS 382, and GM II.24, with the goal of illuminating the basic features of the great health. Section 5.4 offers an examination of four key elements of the great health listed above, which I argue are central to understanding the great health. Understanding each of these elements not only illuminates the nature of the great health, but at the same time gives us insight into how the great health goes beyond mere health.

5.2 From Health to “The Great Health”

Collecting what has been argued in the previous three chapters, one way in which Nietzsche’s notion of health could be construed is as a kind of making whole, a self-connectedness and integration. This can be seen if we consider the different forms of sickness I have argued Nietzsche is most concerned with diagnosing and treating. There is the sickness of bad conscience [consciousness of guilt], which turns a person against herself in virtue of what she is and what she has done. Then there is the sickness of life negation, which is marked by a hatred of life, grounded in a rejection of all that is strange, questionable, and terrible in life. Finally, there is the sickness of enervation, which finds people under the spell of small goals that undermine the will and leave a person mired in mediocrity. I have argued that Nietzsche works
to address each of these sicknesses, offering “treatments” that can help eliminate these negative factors in a person’s life and make a person whole.

Instead of turning against oneself through guilt-driven forms of self-negation and self-punishment, Nietzsche advocates for a kind of self-affirmation, acknowledging one’s acts, and working to overcome the fragmentation that comes with rejecting parts of who she is, such that she brings herself and her past acts into a coherent whole. Similarly, Nietzsche works to overcome an attitude of life-negation by inculcating a love of life, such that a person can both affirm life and take it on without being overwhelmed by what is strange, questionable, and terrible in it. Finally, Nietzsche works to address the lassitude of modernity by cultivating a strong will, born of continued engagement with resistances and challenges.

Throughout this all, while the goal Nietzsche advocates is a kind of healing [integration] of the self, his notion of health ought to be understood as a continuous process. That is to say, health as Nietzsche conceives it is not an end state one reaches, but rather achieving health is an ongoing process, where a person is continuously working to eliminate the negative factors that impede health, be it a person’s self-alienation or her disconnectedness from life. More than that, the process can go beyond health, towards what Nietzsche calls the great health. The great health can thus be understood as an ongoing development of the positive elements of health.286

Another way of looking at their relationship is to understand health as a precondition for the possibility of great health. It would be a mistake, according to Nietzsche, to see the process as ending with health; instead, we should see how health and the great health are part of a [larger] process. One issue worth exploring then is how the elements of health—good

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286 I owe the idea that health can be understood as eliminating negative elements, while great health is incorporating positive elements, to William Schroeder, who thoughtfully and patiently discussed several important ideas about great health with me. My work in this chapter is greatly indebted to him, as his ideas not only helped clarify several opaque issues, but also influenced me to think through several other ideas in radically different ways, thereby strengthening the chapter.
conscience, love of life, and the will to overcome resistance—are related to, and inform, the elements of the great health. Additionally, we want to see how the great health builds on health and takes it higher. However, until the great health has been examined, the specific details of the relationship between health and great health will have to wait. I will clarify this in section IV.

That health and the great health would be related as parts of a basic process should not be surprising. Throughout his writings Nietzsche was continually ruminating on the nature of sickness, its impact on a person, and how she might work to not only overcome sickness, but also achieve and maintain health. Given the fluidity of a person’s health, it stands to reason that just as a person could oscillate between sickness and health, so too is there potential for a higher kind of health, a state in which a person is “supercharged” with health. This is where Nietzsche’s ruminations on the relation between sickness and health can prove illuminating. It is in exploring this relation, oddly enough, that we can begin to understand the relation between health and the great health. Part and parcel of this higher health includes having experienced and overcome sickness, a fact which Nietzsche—no stranger to sickness—emphasizes throughout his 1880s writings.287

287 See HH P, HH II.356, D 114, GS P.1-4, 120, GM III.9, CW 5, P, EH I.1-2, and III.1 where Nietzsche talks about the value of having been sick and the higher health that emerges from experiencing sickness and overcoming it. Schacht (1983) and Richardson (1996) emphasize this point. Schacht points to the important fact that Nietzsche's new health "is a different sort of 'health' from that which he takes to have preceded the onset of this sickness" (274). Thus Schacht later implies that sickness, on one level, instead of warranting outright condemnation, is an integral part of this new health. Building on this point, Richardson notes that "the overman wins through … suffering a higher health" (70). In the same way “sickness is [later] taken up into a 'higher health'” (133). Richardson later points out the need to accept “sickness as well as health”, such that the overman isn’t purely healthy (“though [his] values do favor health”). Nietzsche claims that “sickness itself can be a stimulus of life: it is just that you have to be healthy enough for this stimulus!” (CW 5). There is the question whether all forms of sickness can be genuine stimuli that lead to a higher health. In chapter 4 I distinguished good and bad forms of suffering, where the former were valuable forms of resistance that contributed to the strengthening of a person’s will, while the latter forms of suffering, what I called irredeemable suffering, lacked the positive value of good suffering (about which it is right to advocate their elimination). In the same way, there are good reasons for thinking that there are irredeemable forms of sickness, i.e., those which are so debilitating that they cannot be stimuli to health.
In brief, Nietzsche claims that “being sick is instructive” (GM III.9), for it allowed him to see things from the perspective of the sick. More importantly, when a person succumbs to sickness, Nietzsche claims it can act as an impetus to self-overcoming, as it was for him. Having experienced and overcome sickness, Nietzsche holds that a higher health has been won. Not only is this a bold statement to make, it invites several questions: (1) why does Nietzsche think health won from sickness is higher and better? (2) What makes this “higher health” an improvement over a person’s health prior to having succumbed to sickness?

The idea that a person wins a higher health via sickness may seem counterintuitive, but we can find an analogue that captures what Nietzsche seems to be trying to convey. After the H1N1 flu virus hit in 2009, a study found that among those who had caught this particularly virulent strain of the virus, some had developed a supercharged immune system. The reasoning was that due to the unique nature of the H1N1 virus, people’s immune systems created multiple kinds of antibodies to deal with the virus. Without having experienced the H1N1 virus, people would not have developed a supercharged immune system. In the same way, what Nietzsche seems to be suggesting is the idea that without experiencing sickness, a higher health could not be achieved. On the surface, that we need to have undergone sickness to achieve higher health should strike us as a questionable claim. But if we understand this claim along the lines of the

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288 “[S]omeone who has completely lost his way in a forest but strives with uncommon energy to get out of it again sometimes discovers a new path which no one knows” (HH 231), which Nietzsche offers as a possible explanation of genius. Similarly, one might surmise, great health arises in response to the pain and torment of sickness. See also HH 230 and 233 for similar reflections on the stimulus that sickness can be.

289 Nietzsche examined how the weak, sick, and degenerate could, because of this very sickness, try new things, and thereby actually initiate development and progress. Thus he can claim that progress is preceded by weakness and decline (HH 224). Similarly, the type of self-overcoming and development that Nietzsche would talk about in the 1880s is preceded by sickness and struggle.

way a person’s immune system becomes stronger and grounds a higher health in light of having undergone sickness, then Nietzsche’s claim is suddenly more intelligible and more plausible.

Reflecting on the value of sickness, Nietzsche concludes—surprisingly—that there is a sense in which we cannot do without it. A remark from 1885-1886 in the Nachlass can help shed some light on Nietzsche’s position. Reflecting on health and sickness, Nietzsche remarks that one of the yardsticks of health is “how much sickliness it can take upon itself and overcome—can make healthy. What would destroy more tender men is one of the stimulants of great health” (WLN, 2[97]). I began this section began by claiming that health is a process in which the various elements of sickness are eliminated. The overcoming of sickness brings an additional benefit: it stimulates higher health. He finds in sickness a specific kind of resistance to be overcome, one which acts as a stimulus to higher health in a person’s life. This aligns with his high estimation of engaging resistances and explains the otherwise counterintuitive need for sickness. Health as Nietzsche wants us to understand it would be radically different without the influence of sickness.

Not only is this a bold claim on Nietzsche’s part, but there is something puzzling about it too. If we understand sickness, health, and the great health on a scale, one would expect that health might be a precondition to the great health. Intuitively, it is not clear how sickness would contribute to the great health. What Nietzsche seems to be suggesting is that sickness is a kind of bridge between health and the great health. As I sought to show with the example of the H1N1 virus leading to supercharged immune systems, Nietzsche’s claim that sickness contributes to higher health becomes plausible. Furthermore, with this example, the reasons why higher and better health can be won from sickness become clear.
Having some sense that a higher health can be derived from sickness is one thing, but that the great health has the same relationship to sickness is another. Only in 1886, in the new preface to HH and the newly composed fifth book of GS, did Nietzsche begin to articulate a new conception of health—what he called “the great health”—and how it was to be understood. What might have precipitated the development of his ideas on the great health is unclear, though based on Nietzsche’s claims in the 1886 prefaces, one could speculate that he had experienced something unique after his unexpected recovery from his illnesses, i.e., the spiritual sickness related the influence of Schopenhauer and Wagner, and he sought to articulate the nature of this new experience, and where it might go if developed further.

Whatever the reasons that precipitated Nietzsche’s ruminations on the great health, he did begin to conceptualize the notion. We will see that the great health builds upon health and takes it higher by developing new key features. Where his understanding of health can be understood as eliminating various features of sickness, as we have seen, sickness plays an important role in achieving the higher health Nietzsche envisions. We have also seen that Nietzsche does not conceive of health simply as a state of well-being. This process-view of becoming healthier will be developed further with his analysis of higher health, as Nietzsche envisions a process that one is continually working to maintain and develop, lose and reacquire. This higher health includes something more than mere health, accentuating the positive factors in a person’s life. It is a kind of optimality that comes from a higher level of functioning, unburdened by negative factors, and healthy enough to overcome even the most difficult challenges. Collecting these

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291 Compare how health is traditionally conceived: since 1948 the World Health Organization has defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19-22 June, 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948.
ideas and much more, Nietzsche presents his most expansive account of what he calls “the great health” in GS 382, which is the focus of the next section.

5.3 “The Great Health”

While Nietzsche’s treatment of the great health is not extensive, there are a handful of references in his published writings: HH P.4, GS 382, GM II.24, and EH Z.2. Beyond these explicit statements, there are certain ideas that are integral to understanding the great health, e.g., overflowing abundance, which animate Nietzsche’s writings in the 1880s. Just like good conscience, love of life, and the will to overcome resistances illuminated our understanding of the health, so too are ideas like abundance and laughter, living experimentally, and overcoming sickness important to developing our understanding of the great health.

In early 1886, Nietzsche first broached the idea of great health in the preface to the new edition of *Human All Too Human*. In the context of overcoming a kind of spiritual sickness—related to his being dominated by Schopenhauer and Wagner—Nietzsche talks about “that tremendous overflowing certainty and health” (HH P.4), which we can understand as the goal towards which this process aims. And while he acknowledges that there is a long road from solitude and experimentation to this overflowing health, he does provide some insight into the nature of this goal.

As Nietzsche continues, he identifies other parts of this goal, including what he calls a “mature freedom of spirit”, which is glossed as “self-mastery and discipline of the heart”; there is also an “inner spaciousness and indulgence of superabundance”; and finally a “superfluity of formative, curative, moulding and restorative forces which is precisely the sign of great health” (*ibid*). While this passage is helpful insofar as it offers some insight into the nature of the goal
Nietzsche is trying to articulate, one might hope for more on the nature of this superabundance and overflowing health that Nietzsche envisions.

In describing some of the elements of the great health, Nietzsche gives us a little window into understanding this ideal and goal. What he is talking about here encompasses a notion of freedom grounded in self-mastery, or what might be understood as a kind of self-empowerment. Nietzsche goes on to identify an “inner spaciousness and indulgence of superabundance”, which is a fairly opaque statement. Fortunately, as he continues, there is some illumination, for this spaciousness and abundance is identified as something that helps to prevent a person from losing herself. How abundance might do this is not at all clear, but as Nietzsche later talks about a spaciousness of perspective—presumably born of this abundance—which allows a person to adopt a distanced standpoint on herself, something which ought to prevent her from losing herself. Finally there is a vast reserve of energy and strength, which generates confidence in one’s abilities, including the recognition that one can live experimentally, and in doing so will not lose oneself, because of the “restorative forces” which are part of great health.

While Nietzsche offers some insight into the nature of the great health here, what we would like from him is a more thorough account of what it is, and how a person might achieve this higher health. The preface to HH offers insight into what the great health is, and offers a basic roadmap of the transformative path one might take to achieve it, one aspect—the importance of sickness—which we have seen.

Nietzsche documents that during this transformation there are periods of experimentation, followed by periods of convalescence; the person undergoing this process develops a new perspective on things, seeing everything as if from on high; she goes further in convalescence, and during that time she “again draws near to life” (HH P.5). During this time she develops a
new view of herself, which opens her eyes such that she sees things in a completely new way than hitherto. Finally, Nietzsche recounts how “the free, ever freer spirit begins to unveil the riddle of that great liberation” (HH P.6). What she discovers is that the hardness, the renunciation of past reverences, was for a new end, where she becomes a master over herself. As the process reaches a plateau, Nietzsche describes how the free spirit can hold a manifold of perspectives, while also taking control of her “you shall” and thus learning just what she can do.

While there is much to take from the preface to HH, this is only Nietzsche’s first word on the matter, and he later supplements it. In the penultimate section of Book V of The Gay Science, Nietzsche expands upon many of the aforementioned ideas about “the great health”. It is with GS 382 that Nietzsche offers his most developed and sustained discussion of the great health.292 In this passage he explains the essential features of the great health, how it supersedes health, and finally, he intimates an answer about why a person should pursue great health.

Nietzsche begins the section by looking to the human beings of the future, as he often did.293 He goes on to speak of a new end, which necessitates “a new means, namely, a new health, that is stronger, craftier, tougher, bolder, and more cheerful than any previous health” (GS 382). By invoking the idea of a new health, Nietzsche implicitly condemns what we might call “the old health”, which, appealing to GS 120, might be characterized as the idea of a normal health that is the same for everyone. Additionally, this new health goes beyond Nietzsche’s notion of health represented in having a good conscience, love of life, and a will to overcoming resistances. The new health Nietzsche characterizes as “the great health” is a kind of optimality that builds on his notion of health and takes it higher.

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292 This is confirmed by a remark he makes in 1888: “I do not know how to explain this idea [the great health] better or more personally than I already did in one of the concluding sections of the fifth book of the ’gaya scienza’” (EH Z.2).

293 For example, Nietzsche refers to a new health in the preface to volume two of HH, describing the new health as “a health of tomorrow and the day after,” for “you predestined and victorious men, you overcomers of your age, your healthiest and strongest men” (HH II P.6).
Nietzsche then explicitly invokes the idea of “the great health”, which he characterizes as “a health that one doesn't only have, but also acquires continually and must acquire because one gives it up again and again, and must give it up!” While this certainly sounds strange, this language should not surprise us, given Nietzsche’s earlier remarks about the kind of higher health that a person wins through overcoming sickness.\textsuperscript{294} One must be ready to give up the lower form of health, though strictly speaking, it will have been taken up into a higher health. Furthermore, insofar as the great health is not something which, once attained, one always possesses, Nietzsche is saying that one gives up the great health. But this gives rise to another question: why must one give up the great health? What is it about this higher health that necessitates losing it to gain it?

If we look back to HH P.4, Nietzsche characterizes this health as something that one can lose as one tests oneself. Great health is both won and lost, and as it is won again, the reward is a higher health. Thus what we find in this passage offers credence to the idea that one of the things contributing to the great health is having undergone and overcome sickness. In the same way, the preface to HH tells us that the great health is born of letting go of previously held ideals, so that one might work toward higher, more difficult ideals.

Nietzsche goes on to speak of “we Argonauts of the ideal” (who are “dangerously healthy”) before he laments the sight of modern-day man, who pales in comparison to the ideal before him. Nietzsche then describes the new ideal as "a peculiar, seductive, dangerous ideal”. This ideal will strike many as peculiar insofar as it stands contrary to our understanding of health as an achieved state, whereas Nietzsche envisions the great health as a continuing process. At the

\textsuperscript{294} To talk of overcoming sickness already suggests Nietzsche’s discussions of self-overcoming, but to talk about the great health as something one gives up and reacquires again and again, makes the connection to self-overcoming explicit. “That I must be struggle and becoming and purpose and the contradiction of purposes” (Z II.12).
same time, for others it will appear a seductive ideal, as is evident in Nietzsche’s description of the over-rich world that unveils itself as the reward for those who strive for this ideal. But this is what makes it a dangerous ideal, for it is not necessarily for everyone; however, seduced by this ideal, but not strong enough for it, many will be crushed by it. Additionally, if we keep in mind the movement described in the preface to HH, we saw that the path to the great health is marked by periods of convalescence and new insights. Proceeding too quickly can be dangerous; one must take time to integrate a new ideal into what one has become.

Nearing the conclusion of the passage, Nietzsche develops how he understands the great health, describing “the ideal of a spirit that plays naively”, which he explains is done “not deliberately but from overflowing abundance and power”. Thus we find Nietzsche once again appealing to the notion of abundance as a defining feature of great health. Compared to what has hitherto been esteemed as highest humanity, the person of great health possesses “a human, superhuman [übermenschlichen] well-being”. Given that, it “will often enough appear inhuman”, which goes to show just how exceptional this new health is in comparison to humanity’s present ideal. The splendor of this superhuman well-being is so great that the greatest things among human beings pale into insignificance. As is often the case, Nietzsche’s rhetoric can go too far as he tries to convey the nature of his new ideal. After all, the elements of health examined earlier—good conscience, love of life, and the will to power—are themselves extremely demanding ideals and significant achievements.

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295 Nietzsche intimates that the great health is not something everyone is capable of achieving, remarking that “we don’t readily concede the right to it to anyone” (GS 382). One might question what it means to say that a person either has or does not have the right to the great health. Of course there is the possibility that those who purportedly have no right to the great health could nonetheless work to achieve it. Whether or not they would be successful is another question. These are questions Nietzsche does not directly address, but strictly speaking, just because someone lacks the right to the great health, does not mean the ideal is off limits.

296 Note the connection to the final stage of the three metamorphoses, the child stage, about which Nietzsche writes: “The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a wheel rolling out of itself, a first movement, a sacred yes-saying” (Z I.1).
Nietzsche invokes the great health again at the conclusion of the second essay of the *Genealogy*. In the context of a suggestion about how a person might work to wed bad conscience to anti-natural inclinations, Nietzsche briefly talks of the type he believes would be necessary to perform this experiment, a type he goes on to identify as having the great health. Nietzsche gives a brief description of the great health, which emphasizes many of the same features used to describe the great health in GS 382. Fortunately, the characterization he presents also offers insight into some additional features of the great health.

Nietzsche begins by describing “spirits who are strengthened by wars and victories, for whom conquest, adventure, danger and even pain have actually become a necessity” (GM II.24). This statement should bring to mind what Nietzsche was calling for as a means to address the enervated wills of modern humanity. In essence, the person of great health needs what is difficult and demanding, i.e., what would be a genuine challenge. Note the subtle change: no longer is Nietzsche simply advocating a means of treating a weakened will, but now resistances and challenges have become a need. This can be seen as evidence of the relation between health and the great health, where the great health takes up an aspect of health and supersedes it.

Continuing, he notes that, more than needing challenges, “they would also need to be acclimatized to thinner air higher up, to winter treks, ice and mountains in every sense” (ibid). That is to say, Nietzsche highlights that the type he envisions is accustomed to what is harsh and challenging, which lends further evidence to the prior claim that the great health is “tougher … than any previous health”, just as it is a “dangerous ideal” (GS 382). The type fit for great health must be fully accustomed to what is difficult and demanding.

The final feature that “belong[s] to great health” is what Nietzsche describes as “a sort of sublime nastiness itself, a final, very self-assured willfulness of insight” (ibid). Setting aside the
“sublime nastiness [wickedness, malice],” which suggests something like a kind of divine unconcern, what should get our attention is that Nietzsche mentions self-assuredness or confidence. This confidence is what we would expect from someone who possesses an abundance of energy and restorative power. This type readily engages in actions that others would dismiss as audacious and even dangerous. Similarly, given the predilection for “wars” and being accustomed to what is difficult and dangerous, a person would need great confidence—almost verging on a lack of concern—about the risks before her, lest she be overwhelmed by these challenges.

Finally, Nietzsche returns to the great health in Ecce Homo, writing: “In order to understand this type [Zarathustra], you first need to be clear about what he presupposes physiologically: it is what I call the great health” (EH Z.2). Nietzsche then says that GS 382 offers the best explanation of the nature of the great health. In light of Nietzsche’s statement directing our attention back to GS 382 in order to understand the great health, this is a good time to take stock of what Nietzsche has said about the great health. Having surveyed the three main passages in which Nietzsche discusses the great health—HH P.4, GS 382, and GM II.24—a fairly clear portrait can be put together.

Nietzsche emphasizes several traits that illuminate how we ought to understand the great health. As he begins, the great health is something a person has, gives up and reacquires. This will undoubtedly sound strange, since we take health to be something we either have or something we lack when we are sick. But for Nietzsche, this process is an example of the kind of self-overcoming he identified as “the law of life” (GM III.127). Furthermore, as I argued in section II, the great health is such that it is continuously stimulated by sickness. Only by giving itself up can a higher health be won.
Importantly, there is an overflowing abundance of energy which animates the great health. In virtue of this abundance, the great health enables a person to act with supreme assuredness, just as it grants a person the ability to fearlessly tempt danger. Inculcating bravery and curiosity, the great health allows a person to experiment, so that she can move in the right direction for herself. And all the while, this person acts with a certain playful naïveté, at times a kind of divine unconcern. One might describe the overall picture Nietzsche presents as the picture of a person who lives at a higher level of functioning, rooted in abundance, where all things “merely human” do not affect her as they would all other types. Accustomed to what is harsh and challenging, this type needs what is difficult and demanding. The great health, Nietzsche is suggesting, is predicated on continuous testing, testing that at times may seem to veer dangerously close to recklessness.

Taking Nietzsche’s treatment of the great health, we have a summary account of this goal, one which helps us understand how Nietzsche conceives the idea. Additionally, we have a portrait of the person of great health, her basic characteristics and needs. The treatment in the preface to HH has addressed the great transformation about how the great health might be cultivated. Finally, one might question why a person would pursue such an arduous goal. Nietzsche does not directly answer this question, but the basic outline of an answer can be seen in GS 382.

Nietzsche writes of “a world so over-rich in what is beautiful, strange, questionable, terrible, and divine that our curiosity and our thirst to possess it have veered beyond control”. He goes on to ask how, with “such vistas” in sight and “a burning hunger”, how could anyone be satisfied with modernity? Nietzsche’s point is clear: those for whom he writes could not be satisfied. The reason why a person ought to pursue the great health is clear: this goal can help a
person become what she has it in her to become. As Nietzsche concludes the passages, it is here “that the real question mark is posed for the first time; that the destiny of the soul changes”. Nietzsche’s expectation is clear: who would not be tempted by this goal?

The portrait Nietzsche offers of the great health in HH P.4, GS 382, and GM II.24 offers an intriguing, tantalizing picture of this new ideal. As I have sought to show, there is much that can be learned from a handful of passages. One might nevertheless express concern that what purports to be a significant element of Nietzsche’s philosophy rests on a scant number of passages. Fortunately, while the explicit references to the great health are admittedly few in number, there are various ideas that Nietzsche appeals to, like abundance and the overflowing, which he routinely invokes beyond his treatment of the great health. That is to say, there are a number of important elements that are constitutive of the great health which, though they do not explicitly invoke great health, warrant our attention and ought to be examined and explicated. These ideas—abundance and the overflowing, living experimentally, laughter and cheerfulness, and forgetting—all inform Nietzsche’s understanding of great health. Understanding Nietzsche’s reflections on the great health is one thing, but more needs to be said about the essential features of the great health, so that how it goes beyond mere health can be further clarified.

5.4 Elements of “The Great Health”

Introduction

Having surveyed the handful of passages in which Nietzsche explicitly talks about the great health, I now turn to examining in greater detail some of the important elements that make up the great health. Specifically, I examine the idea of the overflowing, or abundance, which

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297 This concern has not stopped commentators from using a handful of passages in Zarathustra to construct an ideal out of the Übermensch, just as the appeal to GM II.2 has been the source for much work on the ideal of the sovereign individual. My contention is that, if we go beyond the handful of passages on the great health, there is much that Nietzsche says that supplements HH P.4, GS 382, and GM II.24.
Nietzsche regularly invokes in his writings from Zarathustra onwards; then I look at laughter and cheerfulness, a notion which Nietzsche long championed as reflective of an ideal orientation towards the world and self; I continue by turning to another idea that can be found throughout the writings of the 1880s, living experimentally; and I conclude with an examination of forgetting, which may seem out of place when juxtaposed against the other three elements, but which plays an important role in the great health insofar as it helps to uphold a person’s psychic order.

Once these different elements have been examined, I turn to clarifying the relationship between each of the other elements. Following an examination of how laughter, living experimentally, and forgetting fit into the coherent whole under the notion of the great health, I conclude by highlighting the parallels to good conscience, love of life, and the will to power, and more importantly, how the great health is a leap forward beyond the elements of health. What I aim to show is that the parallels between the structure of health and the great health should not be unexpected, but rather point to what I claimed at the outset, that is, that health and the great health are different stages of a process, where the great health is a higher optimality, clearing the way to the unexplored, open seas Nietzsche so frequently appealed to as a metaphor for what could lie ahead.

**Overflowing Abundance**

Nietzsche routinely invoked the language and imagery of abundance and the overflowing in his mature writings, including his discussions of the great health. As a first pass at understanding this idea, we should keep in mind Nietzsche’s contention that it indicates the possession of overflowing power.\(^{298}\) As we will see, while the language of power [or strength]

\(^{298}\) For example, in the context of the great health, Nietzsche talks of “the ideal of a spirit that plays naively … from overflowing abundance and power” (GS 382).
gets at part of the notion of abundance, we might better understand it as an immense reserve of energy. The task at hand is to clarify how the important but elusive idea of abundance ought to be understood, with an eye towards deepening our understanding of the great health.

In the 1880s appeals to overflowing abundance were manifold, going beyond the context of the great health. Examining Nietzsche’s use of this language in other contexts ought to help clarify the role of abundance with respect to the great health. Some of Nietzsche’s evocative imagery at the beginning of *Zarathustra* invokes this notion e.g., the overflowing radiance of the sun and “the bee that has gathered too much honey” (Z P.1). Elaborating on these images can provide some insight into how we should understand this notion of overflowing abundance, as well as how it comes to be.

Nietzsche begins by describing the overflowing radiance of the sun—of which Zarathustra joyfully partakes. Nietzsche then describes the overflowing wisdom that Zarathustra feels compelled to share, “like the bee that has gathered too much honey”. This is some of Nietzsche’s more evocative prose, though it is even more elusive. What common feature does the sun, honey bees, and Zarathustra share that might help us better understand the nature of the overflowing? Neither the sun, nor honey bees, nor Zarathustra should be understood as inherently “overflowing”, as they all have, in various ways, accumulated the very things they give away. If this is correct, then there are grounds for thinking that a person can cultivate the

299 Zarathustra continues speaking, asking to be blessed; he then adds, “bless the cup that wants to flow over, such that the water flows golden from it”. Interestingly, Nietzsche notes that the sun needs those for whom it shines, and Zarathustra and his animals readily took the “overflow” of sunlight. So too does Zarathustra need to bestow. Thus we see the importance of having recipients for what overflows. Later in Part One Nietzsche mentions the overflowing heart of the friend, after which he adds the same caveat about the recipients of an overflowing heart. “I teach you the friend and his overflowing heart. But one must understand how to be a sponge, if one wants to be loved by overflowing hearts” (Z I: “On Love of the Neighbor”).

300 At times Nietzsche intimates that those who have this overflowing abundance have it innately. See GM I.10-11 and EH I.2.
overflowing. However, before turning to the question of how it is that one might cultivate abundance, let us more deeply analyze Nietzsche’s passages.

Zarathustra, we are told, is “weary of his wisdom” and needs to share it with humanity. Undoubtedly, he was not born with this wisdom, evidence suggests it has been accumulating during his ten years in solitude in the mountains. That this overflowing wisdom has developed over time is uncontroversial, and it suggests what was said above: what is overflowing can be cultivated. More intriguing is the case of honey bees. Honey bees make honey, but to do so they must first collect nectar from flowers, which they then convert into honey. If we take the example of “the bee that has gathered too much honey”, what we learn is that abundance is the outcome of something one does with the resources one has acquired. Bees create an abundance of honey, the sun creates an abundance of light, Zarathustra creates an abundance of wisdom. There are several questions at this point: (1) What kind of abundance does Nietzsche envision? (2) What does this tell us about how a person might cultivate abundance? And (3) why do the examples Nietzsche presents focus on the fact one must give away one’s abundance?

Abundance is signified by the fact a person must give something away, which indicates that the sun, the honey bees, and Zarathustra are all examples of great abundance, but that much was already clear. Furthermore, they are all examples in which abundance was created or cultivated, though it is not clear how this was achieved. But these examples indicate it is possible. With these examples in mind, what can be said about how this abundance is cultivated? Before answering this question, it will be prudent to consider more precisely how to understand the kind of reserve of energy or force Nietzsche conceives when he talks about abundance, which may shed some light on what a person could do to cultivate an overflowing abundance.
Several examples come up where Nietzsche intimates that it is abundance which helps insulate a person from something harmful. Guilt and ressentiment are both mentioned as emotions to which a person is normally susceptible to, but their poisonous effects can be blocked by overflowing abundance.\(^{301}\) This suggests the kind of abundance Nietzsche envisions can be understood as a kind of psychological strength and spacious reservoir of psychic energy.

We can gain a better understanding of what Nietzsche wants to cultivate if we develop the idea with an analogy. Consider the noxious fumes that come from staining woodwork. In the space of a small, enclosed room, the fumes will undoubtedly be potent and noxious, affecting the person doing the staining. In contrast, if this work was done in a spacious, well-ventilated room, the potency of the fumes diminishes to where they are no longer a danger, which is signified by the fact one no longer notices the smell. The person who possesses this abundance is like a spacious, well-ventilated room; or, to repurpose a line from Whitman, we can understand the abundant person as large and containing multitudes. In virtue of this abundance and inner spaciousness, the person is not susceptible to those things that would poison and harm others.

With the example of ressentiment in mind, we can understand the role that overflowing abundance plays in a person’s psychic economy: it is a kind of supercharged psychological well-being. In virtue of this psychological well-being, this type is able to maintain distance and control over what would infect and poison others. Elsewhere Nietzsche claims that the overflowing abundant person is able to say yes to all that is questionable about existence.\(^{302}\) This suggests that what Nietzsche is thinking is something like a kind of psychological fortitude. It is like a kind of psychological or spiritual \([Geistig]\) insulation for a person. Where others would be

\(^{301}\) “Wherever a rich nature is presupposed, an overflowing feeling, a feeling of maintaining control over ressentiment, is almost the proof of richness” (EH I.6). See also GM I.10-11.

\(^{302}\) “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” (EH BT.2).
harm, the type Nietzsche envisions has so great a reserve of psychological strength that she is able to take on what life throws at her and emerge largely unscathed. The higher health Nietzsche envisions, grounded in the idea of overflowing abundance, might be understood as a kind of resilience; the person of great health has both a bountiful reserve of energy and the ability to regain her equilibrium and health after being tested.

While I have sought to keep talk of other related elements of the great health out of a discussion of Nietzsche’s understanding of abundance, there is much to suggest that abundance is foundational for the other aspects of the great health—laughter, experimentalism, and forgetting. Similarly, other virtues Nietzsche values are often described in ways that suggest they are animated by abundance. This same richness of excess energy [and strength] that insulates a person from psychological sickness also enables a person to take considerable risks. Abundance grants a person the freedom to act with a minimum of worry. One need not worry about squandering one’s energy, for one can lose much and still remain healthy. Courage, frequently extolled by Nietzsche, is said to have “a surplus of force” as its condition. Even compassion—about which Nietzsche offered many highly critical arguments—might be worth something in the overflowing person, because it will not multiply suffering in this case.

As a concluding remark, there is one issue that has not yet been addressed. We have seen textual evidence that indicates abundance can be cultivated, but Nietzsche does not offer an explanation about how a person might cultivate abundance. I return to this issue below in the conclusion, for only after examining laughter, living experimentally, and forgetting—when a more complete picture of the great health is at hand—will we be able to see what can be said on Nietzsche’s behalf regarding how to cultivate overflowing abundance.

303 “…With people who still knew a different sort of life—one that was fuller, more extravagant, more overflowing […] a lot can be risked, a lot can be challenged, a lot can also be squandered” (TI IX.37).
Cheerfulness and Laughter

While the notion of abundance is central to understanding the great health, it is not the sole feature of the great health. Nietzsche characterizes the great health as “stronger, craftier, tougher, bolder, and more cheerful than any previous health” (GS 382, emphasis mine). Describing health as cheerful or “more cheerful” is certain to confuse. How can health be cheerful? We can get a better grasp of what Nietzsche is after if we consider cheerfulness along with another notion he frequently invoked: laughter. In the case of cheerfulness and laughter, what Nietzsche seems to have in mind is being able to take a particular perspective on both what one has achieved and what one is going to do. One is able to take a step back, gaining a kind of distance from oneself and the world, and importantly, in virtue of this distancing, is able to laugh at it all.

The ideas of cheerfulness, gaiety, and laughter became increasingly important in the writings of the 1880s, a fact most evident in The Gay Science and Zarathustra. Both of these works convey a particular kind of spirit that was partially captured in Nietzsche’s notion of the free spirit. Cheerfulness captures Nietzsche’s ideal way of being attuned to the world. One way of looking at this attunement is that it shows how one can be within the world, while simultaneously viewing it from the vantage point of looking upon the world from a great height. Similarly, laughter signifies taking an Olympian perspective on the world and self. Thus we should not be surprised that Nietzsche writes that “laughing at something is the first sign of a higher psychic life”.

Kaufmann says, correctly I believe, that “for Nietzsche laughter represents an attitude toward the world, toward life, and toward oneself” (BWN, 422 footnote). What Kaufmann does not do is explain the nature of this attitude. Zarathustra admonishes the higher men, telling them to “learn to laugh at yourselves as one must laugh!” (Z IV.13.15). That the higher men need to learn to laugh suggests their inability to achieve the distancing perspective Nietzsche advocates.

This is a passage from Nietzsche’s notebooks which Kaufmann includes in his translation of BGE (BWN, 422 footnote).
To get a full understanding of the significance and nuances of both cheerfulness and laughter—which is central to Nietzsche’s positive ethical view—would necessitate more space than is available.\(^{307}\) However, a couple of examples from *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra* capture the basic idea that Nietzsche holds cheerfulness and laughter to signify. Just as a brief survey of *The Gay Science* reveals an emphasis on cheerfulness, so too does a brief survey of *Zarathustra* reveal the importance of laughter. Cheerfulness arises when a person sees the new vistas and new possibilities opening before her. It is a particular disposition towards both self and world, marked by a kind of lighthearted care.\(^{308}\) Revealingly, Nietzsche would say in the preface to the *Genealogy*, cheerfulness is a reward (P.7).\(^{309}\) The significance of laughter on the other hand signifies the transformation that allows a person to look at the world in a new way.\(^{310}\)

Nietzsche describes cheerfulness and laughter in such a way that they signify an orientation that a person comes to possess that is marked by a confident ability to take on all things that life throws at her in stride. While they need not always go hand in hand, cheerfulness and laughter might be understood as external manifestations of the basic feeling of abundance a person possesses. Interestingly, this orientation is not one a person can deliberately adopt, but


\(^{308}\) In talking about the meaning of “our cheerfulness”, Nietzsche writes “our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, forebodings, expectation”. He continues, noting “a new and barely describable type of light, happiness, relief, amusement, encouragement, dawn” in response to the news that “god is dead”. Importantly, Nietzsche captures the nature of this cheerfulness with a common image from his writings: “the sea, our sea, lies open again” (GS 343). Nietzsche speaks of a combination of gratitude and expectation, which is nonetheless tempered by a kind of uncertainty.

\(^{309}\) In the preface to GS, Nietzsche discusses the unexpected recovery he experienced, noting the cheerfulness and foolishness he is feeling. Yet underneath this cheerfulness lies the impact of his sickness, which informs the new cheerfulness he now feels. As I argued in section II, sickness plays a role in health and the great health, such that “one returns newborn” (GS P.4).

\(^{310}\) See GS 327 where Nietzsche contrasts the gaiety he values against the gloominess and seriousness usually valued in treating the types of problems he treats. See Z III.2, “On the Vision and the Riddle”, where the shepherd overcomes his nausea, is transformed, and laughs a laugh Zarathustra has never heard before, “a laughter that was no human laughter”, which Zarathustra desires to laugh one day. That this laughter is “no human laughter” and the shepherd is “no longer human”, which should call to mind Nietzsche’s claim that the great health would “often enough appear inhuman” (GS 382).
rather one that is part and parcel of who that person is. Accordingly, it is not something that one can be taught—though an advisor can point one in the right direction—just as it is not something one can be convinced of by argument. Learning to laugh is not something that happens all at once, rather it is something a person develops over the course of her experiences. How a person develops this orientation depends on being able to distance herself from her experiences, seeing them from a new standpoint, seeing the limits, and seeing what is beyond those limits. Being able to laugh in the way Nietzsche describes is something learned.

Returning to cheerfulness and laughter and the kind of attitude it exemplifies, Nietzsche locates it between dismissive frivolity which overlooks the importance of things, and a grave seriousness. Laughter, as well as the ability to laugh, signifies an assuredness in the person, who is thus ready to take on a particular challenge; knowing that she has overflowing abundance, she is confident she can accomplish the task at hand. Where an ordinary person would be overwhelmed by something tremendous, the person of great health, grounded in overflowing abundance and manifest in the almost divine unconcern of laughter, marked by an Olympian perspective on things, is able to rise to the occasion of the challenges she undertakes or has thrown at her. Importantly, should a person fail in the challenge she has taken up, necessitating she appeal to the vast reserve of energy that is the abundance that comes with great health, she is able to distance herself from the situation and look upon it with laughter instead of despair.

*Living Experimentally*

Having examined the overflowing abundance that underlies great health, as well as the cheerfulness and laughter that marks the orientation of the person of great health, we come to living experimentally. Nietzsche frequently emphasized the importance of living
experimentally. We have already seen that having an abundance of restorative energy “grants to the free spirit the dangerous privilege of living experimentally” (HH P.4). Interestingly, Nietzsche adds that “with this principle in one’s heart one can not only live bravely but also live gaily and laugh gaily” (GS 324), showing the connection between living experimentally and being able to laugh. As with each of the elements of the great health, they are complementary. For Nietzsche experimentation was an enticement to life, but that is not all, for it is also a particular way of engaging life. Living experimentally can be understood as a kind of underlying principle guiding a person’s actions. Importantly, this must not be understood as arbitrary experimentation; rather, living experimentally has a kind of internal order to it, insofar as it involves proceeding in the best direction in light of what one has already tried and what one has accomplished.

To talk about proceeding in the best direction might seem to be putting the cart before the horse, as living experimentally suggests that a person does not yet know what she ought to do, that what is required is attempting and experimenting. After all, that is part of the rationale for undertaking an experiment. However, if we consider that scientific experiments are informed by the results of previous research, then this claim is no longer so puzzling. Nietzsche also offers a further constraint on the kind of experimenting he values when he talks about living dangerously and risk-taking; there is an element of risk in the task undertaken.

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311 “I find [life] 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” (GS 324). “‘Let’s try it!’ But I want to hear nothing more about all the things and questions that don’t admit of experiment” (GS 51). Nietzsche would later say, “I have already laid particular emphasis on the notions of tempting, attempting, and the joy of experimenting” (BGE 210). See also GS 319, and BGE 42.

312 Nietzsche also noted several times that, when sick, he instinctively knew what was best for him. While we are right to be skeptical of this claim, the idea suggests that there is a sense in which a person has some knowledge of the right direction to take. More importantly, the experience of sickness forced Nietzsche into unexplored directions, not only giving him further insight into what was good for him, but paving the way for his experimentalism.

313 See GS 283 for Nietzsche’s pronouncement to “live dangerously”, which he describes as “the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment”.
Not only is the ability to live experimentally a sign of great health, but it can also be productive of health. On the one hand, to be able to live experimentally signifies that one is abundantly healthy, for one is able to withstand those things that could otherwise undermine and exhaust one’s vitality.\textsuperscript{314} Having restorative powers grounded in abundance is one part of the great health. Importantly, if an experiment should go bad, as may happen, these restorative powers are able to help put a person back on the right path. On the other hand, living experimentally allows a person insight into just what her limits are, thereby helping her develop the knowledge required for genuine future experiments.

What we discover is that genuine experimentation requires that one have a reason for undertaking an experiment. Nietzsche advocated various kinds of moral experiments, for example, experimenting with the idea that what had hitherto been considered good might in fact be bad, and vice versa. There is a clear purpose behind the experiment here, for it may turn out that what was considered bad would actually help with the development of human flourishing. In contrast, if we imagine someone who just does something for the hell of it, or who just wants to try something new, would not be living experimentally according to Nietzsche’s understanding of the idea. There is no purpose behind the so-called “experiment”; it is arbitrary and capricious if there’s no reason for the experiment.

The value of living experimentally and its importance with respect to the great health should be clear. Each experiment, when guided by this goal, helps a person proceed on the next best path, be it moving further towards the goal by undergoing sickness, or being directed onto a path that helps a person cultivate a particular virtue they will subsequently need. Thus we can see

\textsuperscript{314} Nietzsche writes of “an intellectual preference for the hard, gruesome, malevolent and problematic aspects of existence which comes from a feeling of well-being, from overflowing health, from an \textit{abundance} of existence” (ASC 1).
why Nietzsche places great value on experimentation, for it is living in a self-directed, purposive way.

**Forgetting**

In what may seem a relatively unimportant remark on the nature of health, Nietzsche says that "forgetting represents a force, a form of strong health" (GM II.1). But if we keep in mind what he says shortly before this remark, that “there could be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hope, no pride, no present without forgetfulness”, this tells us that there is something of great importance with respect to the ability to forget. Importantly, Nietzsche says that forgetting should be understood as “an upholder of psychic order” (ibid). The claim I want to make is that forgetting, in ways that will become clearer in this section, is an important part of great health for the “psychic order” it brings a person. That is, forgetting is vital insofar as it is a kind of letting go of one’s past, including both what is bad and what is good, even as the past is taken up and incorporated as part of who one is. In effect forgetting might be understood as a continuous process of psychic archiving.

Nietzsche’s early essay on history extolled the value of forgetfulness, or living unhistorically (UM II.2). In the early essay on history, Nietzsche offers a series of strong remarks about the importance of forgetting. He expresses concern that what we do not forget often “returns as a ghost” and disturbs the present, bringing conflict and suffering to a person. Nietzsche goes so far as to say that “it is altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting”. For such reasons Nietzsche connects happiness to “the ability to forget” (UM II.2).

Nietzsche’s appreciation of the value of forgetting continues in the writings from the 1880s. Nietzsche contends that forgetting is necessary for a person’s psychological health. In *Zarathustra* we find him stating that “forgetting and passing by are the best wisdom” (Z III.9), a
position Nietzsche reiterates in his own voice in *Ecce Homo* when he describes the “well-turned-out person” as the type who “lets many things fall by the wayside” (EH I.2). This characterization might best capture the element that Nietzsche finds to be part and parcel of the great health. Nietzsche says that one of the problems of sickness is that a person “do[es] not know how to get over anything”, which makes memory “a festering wound” (EH I.6). A means of addressing this wound can be found in the cure of forgetting (BGE 269). Thus an important part of a person’s overall psychic health is having a mechanism that prevents things from burrowing into her psyche and poisoning her psychic health.

Now, accepting Nietzsche’s claim that forgetting is an important element of a person’s psychic order, the next issue that must be considered is how a person cultivates this kind of curative forgetting. It is obvious that a person cannot simply will to forget. Rather, as Nietzsche describes it, forgetting has become almost second nature. To get a sense of the ideal Nietzsche envisions, we can turn to a remark he makes about the noble type in the first essay of the *Genealogy*. What Nietzsche finds valuable is being “able to shake off with a single shrug a collection of worms that in others would dig itself in” (GM I.10). The ability to do this can be attributed to “an excess of formative, reconstructive, healing power that also makes one forget” (GM I.10). Talk about formative and restorative powers should call to mind one of the elements of the great health—abundance—that he mentioned in the preface to HH. Nietzsche seems to identify this same power with the ability to forget. Of course, that does not indicate how it is that a person is able to shrug things off.

The important question to be asked in response to this claim concerns how a person manages to possess such a force [power]. Why, one might ask, are so many poisoned by the sting

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315 Not surprisingly, this same trait appears in his descriptions of the noble type in the *Genealogy*, where a mark of strength is found in the “excess of formative, reconstructive, healing power that also makes one forget” (GM I.10).
of resentment, while some are not poisoned by the same sting? The short answer is that the latter possess other elements of the great health, including abundance and the elevation that comes with laughter, which insulates them from things that are far beneath them, which the former simply lack. Overall, the ability to forget seems to be grounded in the overflowing abundance this type possesses. Such a person would, in virtue of this abundance, stand beyond the reach of something like *ressentiment* and its poisonous effects. For *ressentiment* to take root in a person, she must be susceptible to feelings of powerlessness and hatred. However, if a person is in possession of this abundance, then she will have distanced and insulated herself from such feelings. Nietzsche’s reasoning suggests that the poisonous infection of *ressentiment* will be unable to take root, in virtue of the absence of the emotions that are necessary for it taking root in a person.

### 5.5 Conclusion

In the course of investigating abundance, laughter and cheerfulness, living experimentally, and forgetting, I have sought to elucidate how these disparate elements function as well as the roles they play in constituting great health. Throughout, Nietzsche seems to identify the foundation of the great health with what he alternately calls abundance and the overflowing. This abundance can also be understood as what unifies and energizes the notions of laughter and cheerfulness, living experimentally, and forgetting. Granting this, it suggests some interesting ideas; for example, there is the possibility that a healthy person, albeit without great health, might possess some—or all—of the elements of great health, albeit in a way that is not unified as it is with the person of great health. This should not surprise us, as the process-view of health Nietzsche holds is such that the elements of health and great health are connected and influence one another as a person acquires and gives up great health.
At the conclusion of the section on abundance I noted that the question of how a person might cultivate this overflowing fullness would be delayed until the other elements of great health had been examined. I return to that question now. While abundance grounds laughter, living experimentally, and forgetting, at the same time, as a person cultivates these elements of her psychic economy, they help to cultivate or “charge” the psychic energy that is Nietzsche’s notion of abundance. Abundance affects laughter, living experimentally, and forgetting, and in return, so too is abundance affected by these elements in a person. If there is any way in which abundance can be built up—and Nietzsche’s writings strongly suggest it can be cultivated—this kind of interplay is one way in which it can be done.

To get a clearer understanding of how this works, consider a person learning to play tennis. Initially tentative, she does not regularly go to her backhand, because it is a weak part of her game. However, as she is challenged and forced by necessity to develop her backhand, she develops this part of her game. But that is not all, for she simultaneously develops confidence in her overall game as she successfully uses her backhand. With greater confidence, she is more likely to use her backhand, further strengthening this element of her game. Her growing confidence allows her to push herself, to accept the challenges before her, and take risks (instead of playing it safe), to rise to the challenge, and continuously develop her game. While Nietzsche never explicitly explains abundance and the elements of great health affecting one another in this manner, this is a reasonable way to imagine how the development would unfold. As a person learns to laugh, to live experimentally, and to forget, so too does she cultivate the expansive reserve of energy Nietzsche calls abundance.
At the beginning of this chapter I claimed that the great health goes beyond mere health. Part of the way this works is that, where health can be understood as a project which aims at eliminating the negative factors in a person’s life, great health works in a different way, by building up the positive factors in a person’s life, such that one is able to achieve a higher health. Having examined Nietzsche’s understanding of the great health, as well as four key elements of the great health, we are in a position to see how it is that the great health goes beyond mere health.

To situate ourselves, we should recall the three main elements of health from the previous chapters: good conscience, love of life, and the will to power. Each of these three elements can be understood as eliminating a particular kind of negative factor in a person’s life. Laughter and cheerfulness, living experimentally, and forgetting can be understood as essential elements in achieving a higher health than the health developed through loving life, seeking out resistances and challenges, and cultivating a good conscience. That is not to say that these elements of health are completely supplanted by the elements of great health. Rather, the idea Nietzsche suggests has an undercurrent of Hegelian supersession, i.e., the idea of this higher health includes taking up what is overcome and retaining it, but in a transcended form. In other words, the higher health Nietzsche envisions not only builds up the positive elements of laughter, experimentalism, and forgetting, but in doing so takes up augmented forms of good conscience, love of life, and the will to power. How this works can be seen in the specific elements of great health and how they take key features of health, supplement them, and create something higher.

Love of life, or life affirmation, is Nietzsche’s response to the problem of life negation and the devaluation of life. Love of life is an orientation toward the world and life that a person is able to cultivate, which inculcates a new perspective on what is strange, questionable, and
terrible in life. No longer overwhelmed by these aspects of life, the person is instead open to life and ready to rise to the challenges life throws at her. Laughter also signifies a particular orientation towards life that Nietzsche values. There are noticeable differences between the two orientations, of course; love of life captures a kind of enchantment with life, just as it expresses how a person is energized by life. The orientation signified by laughter is something else altogether, capturing an Olympian perspective, in which a person is able to distance herself from life. In virtue of that distancing, she is able to laugh at both herself and life.

These two orientations seem worlds apart, with the former marked by enchantment and intimacy, whereas the latter is marked by a kind of distance. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how laughter could be higher than love. It would be easy to object that if Nietzsche thinks laughter is a higher orientation, then he has erred in his judgment of what constitutes a higher health. Against this, one could argue on Nietzsche’s behalf that, while love is undoubtedly a higher orientation, it is also more susceptible to distortion. The enchantment that makes love so energizing and alluring an orientation can also cause a person to see things in a distorted way in virtue of her investedness. Even taking this potential concern into consideration, it would be foolish to think that distance is higher than connection.

Nietzsche wants to retain the intimacy and investment of love. Laughter can be understood as superseding love of life when we see what it brings. Laughter adds additional context to the investment. If we imagine someone who thinks his beloved is the entire world, on the one hand we find this laudable, but there is also a sense in which making such an extreme claim is confused and worrisome. However, supplementing the intimacy and investment of love with an additional perspective can build on this love. Specifically, having the ability to take a distanced look at things, to laugh at one’s errors, one is able to see more clearly. Thus intimacy
and investment is not negated, rather, the investment is enhanced by the ability to step back. A higher kind of health can be found in the very distancing that is a hallmark of the orientation Nietzsche seeks to convey when he talks about laughter. I spoke of how the orientation Nietzsche identifies with laughter is marked by a kind of Olympian perspective, and it is this perspective which may be said to take love of life and make it into something higher.

The will to power can be understood as Nietzsche’s response to the problem of enervation and the weakening of the will. Recognizing how certain forms of suffering, i.e., certain kinds of resistances and challenges, have been essential to the project of self-enhancement, Nietzsche advocates that people engage resistances. By cultivating the will to take on and overcome resistances, a person can strengthen her will. Given the value Nietzsche sees in engaging resistances, we would expect that people would need to continue to engage such challenges, lest they succumb to the sickness of enervation again. This need might lead one to question how great health would supersede this need for resistance. Living experimentally shows how a person might engage the world in a different way that nonetheless continues to acknowledge the need for resistances, but goes beyond this general need to take on more personal challenges.

Living experimentally, or choosing the best course of action in light of what one has tried and done, directs a person to resistances and challenges in a different way. In both cases, whether guided by the will to power or living experimentally, a person will be directed towards resistances. The difference is the kind of resistance. Where the will to power indicates a general need for obstacles and challenges, insofar as this is what is needed for self-enhancement, Nietzsche’s conception of living experimentally directs a person to a more specific kind of challenge. Illuminated by what a person has done and, more importantly, what she needs to do,
living experimentally might be understood as involving more individualized or discriminating projects. Experimentalism is more attuned to a person’s values than simply engaging general resistances. Guided by what one ought to do next, these more personal challenges are necessary for cultivating and maintaining great health.

However, the more personal nature of living experimentally is not all that sets it beyond engaging basic challenges that mark health. Evidence suggests that the kind of experimentalism constitutive of great health involves taking on more challenging obstacles. In GS 382 Nietzsche alludes to the Argonauts, which can help clarify the way in which living experimentally takes up the idea of needing resistances, but goes beyond it. A sea voyage in the ancient world builds the level of challenge, as it is a genuinely dangerous undertaking, going over the horizon, sailing into the unknown. Not all challenges carry this degree of difficulty; there is something different about this quest. Given this new challenge, before undertaking a voyage like the Argonauts, there are various preliminary tasks that must be accomplished. People must be healthy enough for such a dangerous voyage. The general need for resistances helps to strengthen the will, which gets a person to a point where she can undertake the project of living experimentally.

Nietzsche says that being able to live experimentally is liberating (GS 324), for it opens a new perspective on the challenges before her. The kind of perspective unveiled by living experimentally can be seductive, tempting her to engage in the kinds of dangerous projects that are a part of this higher health. There is a reason Nietzsche describes the ideal of great health as a “seductive, dangerous ideal” (GS 382). Now a person sees the open seas that lie before her, tempting her to set sail. In effect, she engages more personal resistances and challenges that are necessary for great health, which she could not have taken on previously. Thus we see that resistances and challenges remain essential, but they now take on a new, more personal
dimension as she undertakes a new way of living guided by the idea that life can be an experiment.

Good conscience is Nietzsche’s response to the problem of bad conscience and consciousness of guilt. It is marked by a conscious attempt, through philosophical therapy, to rid a person of pervasive feelings of guilt and the need for self-punishment. Part of the project of philosophical therapy is to get people to avoid interpreting local failures as global failures indicative of existential guilt. The ability to forget, a kind of letting go of parts of one’s past, works to maintain psychic order, building on good conscience and superseding it. Before seeing how this works, a few points of clarification need to be made. First, the ability to forget is not to be understood as passive forgetfulness, where a person forgets important things, including potential lessons from her past; rather, the kind of forgetting Nietzsche values is an important element of the great health which actively helps to maintain a person’s psychic health. Secondly, forgetting deals with matters of significance, not with what is trivial or unimportant. There may seem to be only minor differences with the kind of psychic order cultivated by good conscience and forgetting. While the differences may appear small, there are important ways in which forgetting goes beyond having cultivated a good conscience. The ability to forget is indicative of a higher health to the degree that letting go of one’s past has become second nature.

Importantly, the kind of forgetting Nietzsche envisions is such that the past is taken up and incorporated as part of who one is. The nature of incorporation can be understood by an analogy with learning how to play a musical instrument. When a person first starts learning how to play the bass, there are all sorts of things she has to be consciously aware of, but as she gets better, much of what she has learned becomes second nature and need not be consciously attended to any longer. This knowledge is, of course, not forgotten, but rather it is taken up and
incorporated into her ability. As I have described it, the knowledge is archived. Where formerly she had to be attentive to the position of her fingers, in time this becomes natural; her fingers know exactly where to go without any conscious effort. So too with the kind of psychic order Nietzsche envisions with his notion of forgetting: certain things are archived. The things a person needs to let go of are forgotten. However, insofar as a person’s past is archived, strictly speaking it is not completely forgotten. Over time this process of forgetting becomes second nature, which helps insulate a person from certain things she has done. Forgetting is a self-activating process, whereas maintaining a good conscience is a more deliberate practice.

One way to understand forgetting is to highlight an interesting relation with experimentalism. Where experimentalism is predicated on knowing the next best path to take in light of what one has done, forgetting might be understood in a parallel way. Above I explained forgetting as a kind of letting go of one’s past. With this in mind we might understand the kind of forgetting Nietzsche is advocating as knowing what to let go of in light of where one is going and what one intends to do. Juxtaposing experimentalism and forgetting like this, a tension seems to arise between the kind of self-knowledge experimentalism assumes and the kind of forgetting necessary for psychic order. However, as I have sought to show, the kind of forgetting Nietzsche values is what might awkwardly be called a “knowing forgetting” or psychic archiving. Lessons are learned and integrated, but a person is able to let go of things, thereby removing the psychic clutter that builds up around a person and inhibits her, which can help to inform her of the best thing to do next.

Taking all of this into account, I have sought to show how the portrait Nietzsche offers of the great health can be seen as a significant development beyond health, working to build up the positive elements in a person’s life. What makes this a higher health is the fact it incorporates
important elements of health—the psychic order of good conscience; the open, affirmative stance of loving life; and the need for challenges and resistances—and builds upon them. Laughter and cheerfulness, experimentalism, and forgetting, unified and energized by abundance, all take up essential features of the elements of health and add to them, producing the great health. Animated by abundance, great health is a kind of optimality, where a person is operating at a higher level of functioning.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

List of Abbreviations:
I cite Nietzsche’s texts using an abbreviation and section number. Full publication detail is found in the works cited.

A The Antichrist
BGE Beyond Good and Evil
BT The Birth of Tragedy
CW The Case of Wagner
D Daybreak
EH Ecce Homo
GM On the Genealogy of Morality
GS The Gay Science
HH Human, All Too Human
TI Twilight of the Idols
UM Untimely Meditations
WP The Will to Power
WLN Writings from the Late Notebooks
Z Thus Spoke Zarathustra

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