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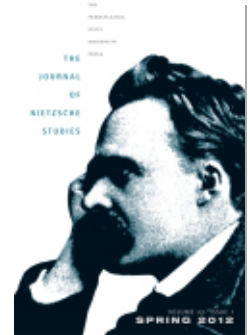
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Metaethics and Nihilism in Reginster's *The Affirmation of Life*

NADEEM J. Z. HUSSAIN

ABSTRACT: Bernard Reginster, in his book *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, takes up the challenge of figuring out what Nietzsche might mean by nihilism and the revaluation of values. He argues that there is an alternative, normative subjectivist interpretation of Nietzsche's views on nihilism and revaluation that makes as much sense as—indeed, he often clearly leans toward thinking that it makes more sense than—a fictionalist reading of Nietzsche. I argue that his arguments do not succeed. Once we have looked carefully at the details of the positions and the arguments ascribed to Nietzsche, the fictionalist option is the more charitable interpretation of the texts. I focus on the metaethical issues that play a central role for Reginster in his articulation of Nietzsche's nihilism and Nietzsche's strategy for overcoming nihilism.

It is not a simple matter to determine either what Nietzsche means by “nihilism” or what he thinks we should do about it. To start with, there seem to be many different nihilisms discussed in different places in Nietzsche's writings.¹ Furthermore, though he seems at times to accept positions we might be inclined to think of as nihilistic, he also presents himself as showing us, or at least some of us, a path beyond nihilism.² The following famous passage from a draft preface, part of one of the many plans for works to be entitled *The Will to Power*, dramatically captures both of these facets:

He that speaks here . . . has done nothing so far but reflect: . . . as the first perfect nihilist of Europe who, however, has even now lived through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself. . . . For one should make no mistake about the meaning of the title that this gospel of the future wants to bear. “*The Will to Power: Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values*”—in this formulation a countermovement finds expression, regarding both principle and task; a movement that in some future will take the place of this perfect nihilism—but presupposes it, logically and psychologically. . . . For why has the advent of nihilism become *necessary*? Because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals—because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what value these “values” really had.—We require, sometime, *new values*. (KSA 13:11[41])³

I have attempted elsewhere, in “Honest Illusion,” to make sense of Nietzsche’s views on nihilism and the creation of new values by ascribing to him what can be regarded as a form of fictionalism about values.⁴ The label “fictionalism” can be misleading here. The label is often taken to suggest a view on which the requisite fictions are quite easy to come by: just pretend, we might say while explaining the rules of cricket to someone, that the salt shaker is the batsman and the pepper mill the bowler. However, I defend a view according to which the aim of Nietzsche’s revaluations is to create honest *illusions* of value. Illusions are different from mere pretenses. Merely pretending that the fork in the glass in front of me is bent is different from experiencing the illusion of a bent fork created by filling the glass with water. Such an illusion is honest for the vast majority of us since we know that the fork is not in fact bent. Creating an honest illusion of value thus involves much more than merely pretending that something is valuable. Or so I have argued.

Now Bernard Reginster, in his book *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, also takes up the challenge of figuring out what Nietzsche might mean by nihilism and the revaluation of values. However, he argues that there is an alternative interpretation of Nietzsche’s views on nihilism and revaluation that makes as much sense as—indeed, he often clearly leans toward thinking that it makes *more* sense than—the fictionalist reading of Nietzsche. Not surprisingly, I do not think his arguments succeed. The task of this article is to show precisely where I think Reginster goes wrong. In order to do this I focus on the metaethical issues that play a central role for Reginster in his articulation of Nietzsche’s nihilism and Nietzsche’s strategy for overcoming nihilism. I begin by summarizing his intricate argument before turning to my objections.

I. Nietzsche’s Nihilisms

Reginster distinguishes between two kinds of nihilism in Nietzsche. The first kind follows from the realization that there are no “objective values,” that “nothing really matters.” For “human beings who need their lives to have meaning, this lack of normative guidance spawns nihilism, understood as *disorientation*.”⁵ This form of nihilism is constituted by a metaethical claim about values. Though he does not use the label, this is what normally gets called an error theory in metaethics.⁶

The second kind is the nihilism of *despair*. Here a conviction that our highest values cannot be realized in this world leads to an ethical claim: “It would be better if the world did not exist” (*KSA* 13:11[61]).⁷ Reginster claims that nihilism as despair “is Nietzsche’s primary conception of nihilism” and that it is the overcoming of this nihilism that Nietzsche takes to be his fundamental task (*AL* 28). What leads to despair is the value judgment that suffering is bad

combined with the fact that life essentially involves suffering. Nietzsche wants to overcome this kind of despair by engaging in something called a “revaluation” of existing values.

All this, of course, presents a puzzle. Nihilism as despair makes sense only if one does *not* accept an error theory since despair makes sense only if one *does* think that some evaluative judgments are true—for example, that suffering is in fact bad. But then, Reginster asks, “what are we to make . . . of the other version of nihilism, disorientation, which is also undeniably to be found in [Nietzsche’s] writings, and which conflicts with the conception of it as despair?” (AL 34).

“How,” he asks, “are we to make sense of this fundamental ambiguity in Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism?” (AL 34). Here is the outline of Reginster’s answer. He suggests

that one inviting form of revaluation consists in showing that the nihilistic values lack the sort of objective standing on which the legitimacy of any value depends. It does overcome despair, since . . . there is [then] no reason to deplore the unrealizability of values that are deemed illegitimate. However, this strategy proves unsatisfactory, because it trades one variety of nihilism (despair) for another (disorientation). (AL 34)

However, according to Reginster, Nietzsche believes that the inference here to nihilism as disorientation is a mistake because it depends on some “erroneous assumption” or other (AL 69). Here is how Reginster summarizes one version of the relevant inference and identifies the corresponding erroneous assumption:

If there are no objective moral facts for our moral judgments to report, these must be the expressions of a merely subjective “perspective.” And if this is all they are, they lose their normative authority. But this inference rests on the assumption that the legitimacy of our values depends on their objective standing, their independence from our subjective perspectives. I will call this assumption *normative objectivism*. (AL 26)

Now many of the terms used here—“objective,” “subjective,” “normative authority,” “legitimacy,” “standing,” “perspective,” and even, in this context, “expression”—are terms that different philosophers choose to use in different ways. Further, when philosophers claim to be unearthing some shared, more or less ordinary language concept the concept behaves very much like an essentially contested concept.⁸ Thus part of the task of this article will be to determine whether there are plausible understandings of these terms that allow Reginster’s arguments to go through. I suggest not.

Back, then, to the supposed erroneous assumptions. In Nietzsche’s writings, Reginster claims, we find “two very different proposals” for how to respond to the purported inference to nihilism as disorientation. The first proposal is what Reginster calls “normative subjectivism.” This “is essentially a denial of normative objectivism” (AL 69). The second proposal, the one I have defended elsewhere, is what Reginster calls “normative fictionalism”: “This second

proposal, by contrast, does not reject normative objectivism but claims that the objective values that have been found not to exist can be replaced by fictionalist simulacra of objective values" (*AL* 69).

According to Reginster, Nietzsche does not choose between these proposals and thus, as Reginster puts it later in his book, "Nietzsche's views on metaethics remain ambiguous" (*AL* 100). This does not really matter, however, Reginster argues, since on either proposal we have managed to eliminate disorientation. Of course, we still have to face the problem of despair. The problem of despair will require a substantive reevaluation of the value of suffering. On either proposal, though, says Reginster, our metaethical investigations will have shown us what is required to justify evaluative claims and thus, in particular, what it takes to justify a set of values that result in suffering now being valuable. Once we have managed this, then we will no longer have any reason to despair and will have overcome the kind of nihilism Nietzsche is centrally concerned with.

II. Error Theory

Now to the problems I see in all this. Despite Reginster's reference to the ambiguity in Nietzsche's metaethical views, in the end Reginster clearly leans toward normative subjectivism as being at least the way Nietzsche should have gone. This, I want to argue, is a mistake. Once we have looked carefully at the details of the positions and the arguments ascribed to Nietzsche, the fictionalist option is the more charitable interpretation of the texts.

In order to see the problems we must return to those troubling terms—"objectivism," "subjectivism," and their ilk—and try to unpack what they might come to. Normative objectivism, recall, is the view that the "legitimacy of our values" or the "normative authority of a value depends upon its objective standing" (*AL* 26, 58). Talking of the legitimacy of a value or the normative authority of a value has the unfortunate tendency of suggesting that something could be a value but nevertheless somehow fail to have normative authority; for example, it could really be the case that suffering is bad, but that somehow badness could fail to have normative authority. I see no reason for thinking this, and I see no reason for ascribing this view to Nietzsche. The better way, then, is simply to talk about whether there are any values, or, even better, whether our evaluative claims are true. Now, as the talk of *objective* standing suggests, the question here is what *kind* of facts make our evaluative or normative claims true. Normative objectivism is the view that the kind of fact that makes evaluative claims true is objective facts—whatever that means. In any case, this is a metaethical view about what we are doing when we make an evaluation. According to this view, we are making a claim about objective evaluative facts. Nihilism as

disorientation, then, is the error theory that denies that there are any such facts and claims that our evaluative judgments are, therefore, systematically false.⁹ As Nietzsche puts it,

All the values by means of which we have tried so far to render the world estimable for ourselves[,] . . . all these values are, psychologically considered, the results of certain perspectives of utility, designed to maintain and increase human constructs of domination—and they have been falsely *projected* into the essence of things. (*KSA* 13:11[99])¹⁰

Or elsewhere: “In the entire evolution of morality, truth never appears: all the conceptual elements employed are fictions” (*KSA* 13:14[115]).¹¹ Like other error theories, this error theory is a combination of a semantic claim about what evaluative language purports to be about, namely, objective value facts, and an ontological claim that denies such facts.

At this point certain differences between normative subjectivism and normative fictionalism begin to matter. Normative fictionalism is completely compatible with the error theory. It accepts that the correct account of our current practices takes them to involve false beliefs but suggests that these false beliefs be replaced by make-believe.¹² Fictionalism thus does not require disowning the error theoretic claims about our evaluative practices.

Normative subjectivism, on the other hand, is identified by Reginster as the rejection of the semantic claim about our evaluative language that leads to error theory. Thus ascribing normative subjectivism and an error theory to Nietzsche would be interpreting him as having contradictory views. This leads us to the first oddity in Reginster's overall interpretation of Nietzsche. There are some standard ways of dealing with the apparent presence of two contradictory views in an author. One way is to reinterpret the textual evidence for one of the views and show that in fact, when interpreted correctly, the textual evidence does not support the ascription of that view to the author. But Reginster *does not* take up the strategy of showing that all the passages he cites in order to defend an ascription of an error theory to Nietzsche do not in fact support that ascription. Perhaps for good reason, since, as I have argued elsewhere, this is not easy to do.¹³ The other standard way to handle such situations is to argue for a developmentalist view. The error theory, one might argue, was a view that Nietzsche held at one point but then gave up. But Reginster does not do this either. Again, there is good reason for not attempting this, since the error theoretic claims are not constrained to one period of Nietzsche's work.¹⁴ Thus we are left with the ascription of contradictory views to Nietzsche as long as we insist on normative subjectivism. The solution, of course, is only to ascribe fictionalism to Nietzsche. Round 1 to the fictionalist.

Further problems occur when we take a look at why Nietzsche—at least when, according to Reginster, he is in his normative subjectivist mode—supposedly thinks that the semantic claim of the error theory is false. Reginster here appeals

to Harold Langsam.¹⁵ He takes on Langsam's ascription to Nietzsche of the following argument: "Normative objectivism itself represents a value judgment, which is legitimate only if it is objective. Given that the nihilist himself denies the existence of objective values, it follows that his own normative objectivism is illegitimate" (*AL* 70). The error theory is to be rejected, according to this argument, because it contradicts itself. The problem, of course, is the premise, namely, that normative objectivism itself represents a value judgment. As normally construed the relevant claim in an error theory is a descriptive claim about what our moral judgments are about. It is something that we figure out by examining our practices of making evaluative judgments. And indeed this is precisely how Nietzsche talks of it:

Moral judgments agree with religious ones in believing in realities which are no realities. [...] Moral judgments, like religious ones, belong to a stage of ignorance at which the very concept of the real and the distinction between what is real and imaginary, are still lacking; thus "truth," at this stage, designates all sorts of things which we today call "imaginings." Moral judgments are therefore never to be taken literally: so understood [that is, literally] they always contain mere absurdities. (*TI* "Improvers" 1)

Or compare the comments I cited about moral judgments involving false projections or their conceptual elements being fictions. These are all the typical semantic claims of the error theorist—moral judgments are beliefs in particular realities—combined with the typical ontological claims—these realities believed in are no realities: "*There are altogether no moral facts*" (*TI* "Improvers" 1). There is no indication here that Nietzsche takes the semantic claim—what Reginster calls normative objectivism—to be anything other than a metaethical semantic claim *about* our evaluative practices.

Now, of course, there are *some* philosophers who insist that such metaethical purely semantic claims are not really possible—that all one can make are evaluative or normative judgments here. Most of these contemporary thinkers—many of whom see themselves as inspired by various Kantian themes—in fact usually distance themselves from the label "metaethics" because they see themselves as attacking a fundamental presupposition of much of contemporary metaethics. Whether they are right or wrong, the point remains that their view is very, very controversial.¹⁶ It is hardly the kind of dominant philosophical view that one feels some pressure to ascribe to Nietzsche on grounds of charity. This is only made worse by the fact that Reginster and, for that matter, Langsam, do not give us any arguments for thinking this view is true, let alone give compelling textual evidence for ascribing it to Nietzsche. Thus, I suggest, there are no good grounds for ascribing Langsam's argument against normative objectivism to Nietzsche. Thus there are no good grounds, as far as this argument goes, for thinking that Nietzsche thinks the error theory is false. Again fictionalism does not require giving up on the error theory. And so round 2 to the fictionalist.

III. Objectivism and Subjectivism

As I have already noted, I think it becomes clear over the stretch of Reginster's book that though he officially claims, at least at some points, that Nietzsche does not choose between subjectivism and fictionalism, Reginster leans toward ascribing subjectivism to him. Here is one place this turns up:

A fictionalist account of evaluation involves, to begin with, a claim about the *existence* of values. Thus, Nietzsche's arguments . . . , though allusive at best, suggest that considerations like explanatory minimalism and ontological parsimony ought to lead us to deny the existence of objective values. Fictionalism about value, however, also owes us an account of the *nature* of values. After all, we must have *some* idea of what kinds of things objective values would be if they did exist, in order to be able to act "as if" there are such values. Unfortunately, Nietzsche has little to offer on the nature of objective values. (*AL* 98)

In contrast, the "subjectivist version of his strategy" supposedly *does* propose "an account of the nature of values" (*AL* 98). Reginster's text certainly suggests that an invidious comparison is being drawn here to the detriment of fictionalism. In any case, I *do* now want to draw an invidious comparison between the two, though one that is, so to speak, the other way around.

Note first something odd about how Reginster has set things up. It is *not* just *fictionalism* that has to tell us "what kinds of things objective values would be if they did exist" (*AL* 98). Anyone committed to an error theory has to tell us "what kinds of things objective values would be if they did exist," since otherwise we would not be able to argue that, given what is actually in the world, they do not exist, or so at least I have argued in "The Return of Moral Fictionalism." Furthermore, if subjectivism is the denial of normative objectivism, then the *subjectivist* also needs to tell us what he or she is denying. If we want to know what Nietzsche has to offer on the nature of objective values we just need to turn to the parts of Reginster's book where he ascribes the error theory to Nietzsche and where he articulates normative subjectivism on behalf of Nietzsche. This means that Reginster is committed to Nietzsche's having quite a bit to say about the nature of objective values. For Reginster then to claim that "Nietzsche has little to offer on the nature of objective values" is thus, I suggest, odd and misleading. He should at least remind us of all that has been and will be said and then show that this is still too little. However, to the degree that it is too little, this will count equally against the ascriptions of error theory and normative subjectivism. So no blows landed against fictionalism in round 3.

Now indeed, when we do turn to the sections in Reginster's book on the error theory and normative subjectivism we find quite a bit about what is supposed to be distinctive about objective values. In fact, we find enough to show that it is very unclear how normative subjectivism, as Reginster describes it, can actually be an alternative to normative objectivism.

So what are objective values supposed to be and what is the subjective alternative supposed to be? Now, as I have indicated, the terms “objective” and “subjective” can be tricky. As a result, I am going to proceed slowly. Reginster points to various texts to argue that, according to Nietzsche, an objective value would have to be a value that has an “origin,” as Reginster puts it, that is “external,” where being external is a matter of being “independent of the agent’s will” (AL 56): “Values have an external origin when they are *metaphysically independent* from the contingent contents of the human will, that is to say, when their nature is not conditioned by that will” (AL 56). The will, according to Reginster’s interpretation of Nietzsche, is just “the set of the particular drives, inclinations, or other proclivities with which this individual finds himself” (AL 56). Thus what matters is that the value be metaphysically independent from the motivational states of the agent. He gives an example: “If the value of compassion is a divine decree, or a Platonic Form, then its nature is not affected by the contingent contents of an agent’s will” (AL 57). Here is how I would put the point. The truth of the claim

(1) Compassion is good.

does not depend on my having any particular motivational states. The value of compassion is objective if the truth conditions for (1) are, for example, either of the following:

(2) God commands, “Be compassionate!”

(3) Compassion is part of the Platonic Form of the Good.¹⁷ So far so good, but here is where things get tricky. Consider the following value judgment:

(4) Nadeem is a bad person.

Let us imagine that someone is making this claim because they know that I systematically, in violation of the tenth commandment, covet my neighbor’s wife. Some minority scriptural exegetes aside, coveting is a matter of having a desire. And so part of what makes the evaluative judgment expressed by (4) true is that I in fact have certain desires. Its truth does depend on my motivational states.

But surely none of us thinks that somehow this shows that divine decree accounts of the relevant values are any less “objectivist” than we thought they were. My motivational states may be part of what makes (4) true, but crucially its truth also depends on other things. It depends on the commandment, something that is not up to me and so is “objective” rather than “subjective,” as we are inclined to say. Here is the crucial conclusion to be drawn: we do not get subjectivism just because desires are part of what make an evaluative claim true. We do not even get subjectivism if it turns out that given certain desires it is metaphysically necessary that certain evaluative claims are true; surely whether it is metaphysically necessary that God issues the commands he does cannot affect whether such a divine decree account would be objectivist in the relevant sense.

So what could subjectivism be? Well, one classic possibility is “naturalist reductive realism.” Standard-issue naturalist reductive realists claim that evaluative and normative judgments are actually just judgments about our mental states.¹⁸ To say that something is good is just to say that, for example, I would desire it if I had full information. Evaluative judgments look as though they are ascribing metaphysically problematic “external” or “objective” properties to things, but actually they are just judgments about our own psychologies. Such views are meant precisely to avoid the kinds of arguments Reginster ascribes to Nietzsche for an error theory, namely arguments that appeal to explanatory minimalism and ontological parsimony. Since, so the naturalist reductive realist claims, normative and evaluative facts are completely constructed out of facts of psychology, explanatory minimalism and ontological parsimony generate no pressures to get rid of them. But they are still facts; hence, the title “realism.” And, in some sense, the facts are facts about “subjective” “internal” things and so perhaps this view should count as a form of subjectivism. We might call it subjective realism.

Now, at times, Reginster comes perilously close to ascribing such a view to Nietzsche.¹⁹ This is particularly true when Reginster takes Nietzsche to be following Schopenhauer closely. Schopenhauer writes, “In short we call everything good that is just as we want it to be,” and Schopenhauer takes himself to be giving the “meaning of the concept *good*.”²⁰ The subjectivist view that would follow most naturally from this is the view that “*X* is good” just means “*X* satisfies a desire of mine.” Or, as Reginster puts it, determining that “‘*X* is good’ for an agent simply requires determining whether or not the agent has a desire whose satisfaction is favored by *X*” (*AL* 99). This looks for all the world like a form of naturalist reductive realism.

However, Reginster cannot consistently ascribe any such view to Nietzsche. Such views have traditionally faced some version of the open-question argument, and Reginster explicitly endorses the open-question argument and uses it to eliminate a different, more Aristotelian, naturalistic interpretive possibility—one in terms of the function of the human—later in his book (*AL* 153–54). So on pain of contradiction he had better not ascribe such a naturalistic reduction to Nietzsche.

Furthermore, despite what Reginster seems to think, the account does not fit with a strand of Nietzsche’s view that Reginster himself emphasizes, namely, the suggestion that evaluative judgments are “interpretations” of the world from the viewpoint of our desires (*AL* 75, 98). After all, on such a reductive account evaluative claims are just straightforward psychological claims. They are not interpretations in any interesting sense unless all psychological claims are interpretations.²¹ They are claims about which objects would satisfy our desires. Our making them requires no special standpoint—no special evaluative or affective perspective.²²

Oddly enough, Reginster does not explicitly see the problem created by the open-question argument for the reading that takes Nietzsche as following Schopenhauer closely. Instead he considers the following worry for this account: “In defining values in terms of desires, it does not so much explain the normativity of values as it explains it away, for it appears to erase all meaningful difference between merely feeling inclined toward an end and judging that we ought to pursue it” (*AL* 99). There is, of course, a difference between having a desire for something and believing that that something satisfies a desire of mine, but I take the real worry to be that our value judgments, according to this theory, no longer play any critical role in assessing our desires.²³

Reginster attempts to modify the simple reductionist view by picking up on what he takes to be suggestions in the following passage from Nietzsche’s notebooks:

The whole conception of an order of rank among the passions: as if the right and normal thing were for one to be guided by reason—with the passions as abnormal, dangerous, semi-animal, and, moreover, so far as their aim is concerned, nothing other than desires for pleasure—

Passion is degraded (1) as if it were only in unseemly cases, and not necessarily and always, the motive force; (2) in as much as it has for its object something of no great value, amusement—

The misunderstanding of passion and reason, as if the latter were an independent entity and not rather a system of relations between various passions and desires; and as if every passion did not possess its quantum of reason—. (*KSA* 13:11[310])²⁴

Reginster reads this as suggesting “that a desire can be ‘ranked’ according to the ‘relations’ it bears with the rest of our ‘desires and passions’” (*AL* 99). “Unfortunately,” Reginster continues, Nietzsche “does not specify what sort of relations he has in mind. But desires with better relations, so to speak, than other desires with which they conflict would have a higher normative ranking, and thus would stand to them as what I ought to do against what I am ‘merely’ inclined to do” (*AL* 99).

Now, I have to admit that I do not quite see how this notebook passage is evidence for ascribing to Nietzsche such a theory (what to make of it instead is a good question, of course). Perhaps more importantly, any such attempt to add on to the simple reductive picture faces a fundamental dilemma. Either this additional material, these supposed relations that determine the rank of desires, are themselves nonnormative—clearly naturalistically respectable psychological relations, say—or they are normative and evaluative relations. If the former, then we still have a reduction to the psychological that faces the open-question argument and does not give Reginster what he wants, namely, the idea that our evaluative judgments are somehow interpretations of the world from the standpoint of our affects (cf. *AL* 75). If the latter, then we do not know whether

we actually have an alternative to normative objectivism. Just the fact that the truth of evaluative claims depends in part on our desires does not settle this. That is the point of the discussion of coveting. Thus we have no viable alternative to normative objectivism yet. Round 4 to the fictionalist.

IV. Normative Subjectivism and Internalism

When we turn to Reginster's discussions of the justification of evaluative judgments, I think we finally come to see why no plausible account of normative subjectivism will be forthcoming. Recall that Reginster thinks that the discussions of metaethics are important because they help us see what kind of justification will be needed for the actual revaluation of power later in his book. When he turns to this issue in chapter 4, he seems to think that what he calls "(Humean) *motivational internalism*" provides a strategy for establishing the value of power that "fits in with normative subjectivism" (*AL* 150–51, 157). He suggests that he is simply deploying a standard metaethical principle, and indeed the following definition that he gives fits with standard metaethical usage: "Something cannot be valuable for an agent unless the agent is capable of caring about or desiring it" (*AL* 155).²⁵ So construed it is merely a necessary condition on something's being valuable for an agent. The principle constrains our story of the nature of the relevant evaluative facts but does not provide such a story. And so construed it is completely compatible with normative objectivism.²⁶

Somehow, as far as I can see, Reginster manages to confuse motivational internalism with a very different claim or set of claims. He writes, "This principle, together with the claim that human beings do desire power, would lead to the conclusion that power is a good" (*AL* 151).²⁷ But this is just to confuse a necessary condition with a sufficient one. And I suspect that this confusion also lies behind the following statement, made just after Reginster offers his definition of internalism:

The normative authority of a value judgment therefore depends on contingent psychological features of the agent to whom it is addressed, such as his needs and desires, his patterns of affective response, and his inherited "moral prejudices" (*GS* 380) or "a particular spiritual level of prevalent judgments" (*WP* 254), all of which form his evaluative perspective. (*AL* 155)

A couple of points: as I argued in the previous section, that a desire is a necessary condition for the truth of some normative claim does not tell us what all makes the claim true. Thus, for all that has been said, the normative authority of the value judgment, even if motivational internalism is true, depends as much on my contingent psychological features as the judgment that Nadeem is a bad person depends on my coveting. In other words, for all that has been said, it does not

depend on my psychological features in any way that represents an alternative to normative objectivism.

Furthermore, notice how Reginster slides from desires to full-blown evaluative and normative judgments. That dependency is not part of standard-issue motivational internalism and particularly not part of one that has the tag “Humean” added up front. But even if we threw those in, we would not yet have an alternative to normative objectivism. Think back to my coveting example. No doubt if I *believe* that I should just ignore my father now that he has spent all his money and has none left for me, I am not exactly doing a stunning job at living up to, this time, the fifth commandment.

What Reginster is really thinking of here, I suspect, is internalism in the epistemic sense. It is important to see that internalism in this sense does not follow from motivational internalism. There are large stretches of the book that are meant to be articulations of normative subjectivism and that are best read as part of an extended defense of some form of epistemic internalism. That is to say, he argues for a particular account of the norms that should govern our practices of justifying normative judgments. Here is how he puts the view at one point:

It is rational to challenge a judgment . . . [to ask for its justification] only if there actually are *substantiated* reasons to consider it questionable. . . . Given that these reasons are rooted in other commitments the agent happens to have, it is a purely *contingent* matter whether this agent actually has such reasons, and therefore whether a given value judgment is fully justified or not. (AL 81)

These thoughts then become the basis of Reginster’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s perspectivism that, I take it, is part of normative subjectivism. But I am not sure that Reginster is bearing fully in mind his own earlier warning not to confuse nihilism as disorientation with skepticism (AL 25–27). Normative objectivism is a claim about what our judgments are about—what kinds of facts are required in order for them to be true. Arguments from explanatory minimalism and ontological parsimony are then used to show that there are no such facts. All of this is quite compatible with the above-proposed epistemic norms for justification. After all, it is the semantic and ontological claims that constitute the error theory that will undermine the agent’s value judgments. Of course, it is a contingent matter whether any particular agent accepts the error theory and thus a contingent matter whether any particular agent’s evaluative judgments will be undermined. Nonetheless, this theory of justification does not do anything to counter the threat of disorientation, since that threat is only faced by those who accept the error theory in the first place, and this perspectivist, internalist theory of justification, for all that has been said so far, does nothing to undermine the semantic and metaphysical claims that constitute the error theory.

We get closer to something that might when we consider Reginster’s response to someone who asks how the agent’s perspective is itself justified. Reginster responds:

I might raise questions about *some aspects* of the perspective, and answer them by invoking *other aspects* of it. We may not, on the other hand, raise *wholesale*

questions about the justification of a perspective. Thus, I may not gather up *all* the components of my perspective, and ask, from the outside as it were, whether I should subscribe to them in the first place. This question is incoherent, for I lose my grip on what would even count as an answer to it. As soon as I leave my perspective, I deprive myself of the terms in which not only to answer, but also to raise, questions about justification. (*AL* 82)

However, the standard-issue naturalistic error theorist does rely on, so to speak, an aspect of his perspective to make his semantic and ontological claims about a different aspect. He does not try to leave all aspects behind. To put the point in more familiar terms, he takes up the theoretical perspective on his evaluative practices.²⁸ Nietzsche, like any error theorist, would grant that much is required before one is in a position to defend an error theory.²⁹

What Reginster needs is a view that is often pushed by the metaethical malcontents mentioned already, namely, that there is a deep mistake in thinking that our moral practices can be approached in anything like a spirit of scientific, theoretical investigation—in the spirit of, for example, empirically minded linguistic or anthropological investigators. Slogan: there is no “sideways-on view” of our moral practices. It is very hard to make sense of such views, let alone find compelling arguments for them.³⁰ Reginster has not, as I have suggested, succeeded in articulating why such sideways-on views are impossible. As with the other views of the metaethical malcontents, given their embattled status, we are hardly forced to ascribe them to Nietzsche on grounds of charity. The textual evidence in Nietzsche’s case is also hardly supportive. After all, Nietzsche again and again seems to be happy to make claims about all our evaluative judgments from what surely looks precisely like an empirically minded linguistic and anthropological perspective.³¹

In this context, Reginster points to Nietzsche’s admittedly puzzling statements about the value of life.³² Here are the central passages:

A condemnation of life by the living remains in the end a mere symptom of a certain kind of life: the question whether it is justified or unjustified is not even raised thereby. One would require a position *outside* of life, and yet have to know it as well as one, as many, as all who have lived it, in order to be permitted even to touch the problem of the *value* of life: reasons enough to comprehend that this problem is for us an unapproachable problem. When we speak of values, we speak with the inspiration, with the way of looking at things, which is part of life [reden wir unter der Inspiration, unter der Optik des Lebens]: life itself forces us to posit values; life itself values through us when we posit values. From this it follows that even that anti-natural morality which conceives of God as the counter-concept and condemnation of life is only a value judgment of life—but of what life? Of what kind of life? I have already given the answer: of declining, weakened, weary, condemned life. (*TI* “Morality” 5)

And:

Judgments, judgments of value, concerning life, for it or against it, can, in the end, never be true: they have value only as symptoms[;] . . . in themselves such judgments are stupidities. One must by all means stretch out one’s fingers and make the attempt to grasp this amazing finesse, *that the value of life cannot be*

estimated. Not by the living, for they are an interested party[, . . . and not judges; not by the dead, for a different reason. (*TI* “Socrates” 2)

Now Reginster wants to use these passages to defend an ascription to Nietzsche of some version of the view I have been criticizing. He does this by making the following claim:

It is necessary to remember that the “life” whose value cannot be judged designates here the *perspective* from which evaluation alone is possible, and not life as a *sequence of events and experiences*, which can of course always be the proper object of an evaluation. Judgments about the value of life must here be understood to be judgments about life as the perspective. Such judgments require stepping “outside” of this perspective, which makes evaluation simply impossible. (*AL* 83)

But I have to say that I just do not see this in the passages quoted. It seems clear to me that, in fact, Nietzsche is talking about life as the usual sequences of events and experiences. Both passages suggest some kind of epistemic bias—an interested optic—generated by living or by the particular kind of life one is living. This plus our inability to “know it as well as one, as many, as all who have lived it”—in other words our inability to have enough *information*—prevents us from being in a position to come to any justifiable conclusion about it. Reading the rejection of sideways-on views into these passages just seems a real stretch.

Thus Reginster’s discussions of the nature of justification also do not present us with an articulated, philosophically, or textually plausible version of normative subjectivism. Round 5 to the fictionalist.³³

V. Fictionalism

I conclude with a discussion of one of Reginster’s central objections to fictionalism, that it is “of no help against nihilistic despair.” He writes:

Supposing, then, that all moralities are games of make-believe, it seems as though one is as good as any other. If the functional role of a morality . . . is to give our life a sense of purpose or direction, for example, the old Christian morality should do as well as any other. . . . Their fictional character alone can therefore not explain [Nietzsche’s] insistence that the old Christian values are harmful, that we ought to reject them and adopt new values in their stead. (*AL* 100)

Two things: first, it is not actually clear that Nietzsche needs to think that Christian morality would survive the transition to a fictionalist simulacra. I suspect there will have to be some differences between believing and make-believing in order to ground ascriptions of make-belief as opposed to belief.³⁴ Reginster himself quotes, a couple of pages earlier, a nice passage that suggests what these differences might be for Nietzsche:

Precisely because we are at bottom grave and serious human beings . . . , we need all exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish, and blissful art lest we lose

the freedom above things that our ideal demands of us. It would mean a relapse for us, with our irritable honesty, to get involved entirely in morality and, for the sake of the over-severe demands that we make on ourselves in these matters, to become virtuous monsters and scarecrows. We should be able also to stand above morality—and not only to stand with the anxious stiffness of a man who is afraid of slipping and falling any moment, but also to float above it and play. (*GS* 107)³⁵

Or as Nietzsche puts it in the preface to *The Gay Science*:

In the end, lest what is most important remain unsaid: from such abysses, from such severe sickness of severe suspicion, one returns *newborn*, having shed one's skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a tenderer tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more childlike and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before. (*GS* P:4)

These passages capture the light, mocking playfulness that, I suggest, would tend to be part of a fictionalist practice—or that at least Nietzsche might reasonably think would. Whether the seriousness of guilt and indignation, indeed the seriousness of Christian morality as a whole, is compatible with this playfulness is not obvious.

Second, if the agent feels despair, then she is motivated to do something about it. As long as she still believes that suffering is bad, then despair may only move her to give up on life. But if, thanks to the error theory, she no longer *believes* that suffering is bad, then the despair that might come with the pretense that suffering is bad is itself surely a motivation to create a different honest illusion, perhaps precisely the one that Reginster recommends, namely, regarding suffering as good. Of course, the fictionalist cannot really claim that the agent ought so to revalue, and this seems to be Reginster's objection. This, I want to end by suggesting, should really be quite surprising. Through much of his book, Reginster bemoans, on the behalf of normative subjectivism, our unwillingness to take seriously the motivational states that constitute our contingent psychologies. Our fictionalist now points out that those in despair, as a matter of their contingent psychologies, will be motivated to adopt a fictionalist revaluation of suffering. The contingent motivation is all there is to it. No need for oughts or reasons. In the end, it is in fact Reginster who fails to take our contingent motivations seriously and clings to the trappings of rationalism in a most un-Nietzschean way.

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NOTES

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comments by the other critics at that session, Maudemarie Clark and Ivan Soll, and from Bernard Reginster's responses to our criticisms. Thanks, finally, to R. Lanier Anderson for organizing that event.

1. Alan, White, "Nietzschean Nihilism: A Typology," *International Studies in Philosophy* 19.3 (1987): 29–44.

2. For an apparent endorsement of a nihilistic position, see *HH* 32–33 and *TI* "Improvers" 1.

3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 3–4. Other translations of Nietzsche's works cited in this article include *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982), and *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974). I should emphasize that Nietzsche never did complete any of the planned projects that were to appear under the title *The Will to Power*. The selections from Nietzsche's notebooks issued under the title *The Will to Power* by Nietzsche's various editors are not the fruits of one of Nietzsche's planned projects.

4. For a defense of this interpretation of Nietzsche, see my "Honest Illusion: Valuing for Nietzsche's Free Spirits," in *Nietzsche and Morality*, ed. Brian Leiter and Neil Sinhababu (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 2007), 157–91.

5. Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 8. Hereafter *AL*.

6. For a description of such metaethical theories, see Alexander Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 111–27.

7. Translated as *The Will to Power* 701, qtd. in *AL* 28.

8. For the notion of an essentially contested concept see W. B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1956): 167–98. The situation is made somewhat worse by Reginster's introduction of the phrase "descriptive objectivism" for "the view that there are objective values" (*AL* 10). I find this phrase misleading and so avoid it in this article; it suggests what is not intended here, namely, that descriptive claims are about objective facts. It is cleaner, I suggest, to distinguish between our theory of what values must be like if they exist (normative objectivism or some alternative) and our view about whether values exist (understood, of course, in terms of whatever is the correct theory about what they must be like).

I should note that Reginster's description in this context of the relationship between fictionalism and descriptive objectivism is misleading given the absence of certain other crucial distinctions. He argues that the fictionalist strategy "averts nihilistic disorientation by proposing to conceive descriptive objectivism as a form of make-believe" (*AL* 10). This would be true of what is sometimes called "hermeneutic fictionalism," but it is not true of the form of fictionalism that Reginster discusses in his book. The form of fictionalism he discusses is sometimes labeled "revolutionary fictionalism." A hermeneutic fictionalist interprets the current discourse in fictionalist terms while the revolutionary fictionalist proposes fictionalism as a reform. We are usually hermeneutic fictionalists about contemporary adult "Santa Claus" discourse, and some have proposed hermeneutic fictionalism for other, more surprising, areas of discourse, such as talk of "sakes" (e.g., "I did it for John's sake, but not Jill's"). However, Reginster addresses only revolutionary fictionalism, though not under that label. And a revolutionary fictionalist straightforwardly denies what Reginster calls descriptive objectivism. For more on these distinctions see Jason Stanley, "Hermeneutic Fictionalism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 25.1 (2001): 36–71, and Nadeem Hussain, "The Return of Moral Fictionalism," *Philosophical Perspectives* 18.1 (2004): 149–87.

9. More precisely that, as Miller puts it, "the positive, atomic sentences" are false: "The error-theorist will of course say that non-atomic moral sentences . . . can be true: 'It is not the case that murder is wrong'" (*An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, 110 n. 2).

10. Translated as *The Will to Power* 12.

11. Translated as *The Will to Power* 428.

12. As I have mentioned, this is thus a form of revolutionary fictionalism.
13. See my "Nietzsche and Non-Cognitivism," in *Nietzsche, Naturalism and Normativity*, ed. Simon Robertson and Christopher Janaway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
14. There is a third possible strategy: take the error theoretic claims to be restricted to a subset of all evaluative and normative claims, namely, the domain of *moral* evaluative and normative claims. A lot of the passages that support an ascription of an error theory to Nietzsche do seem to emphasize moral judgments, and so this is a tempting strategy. I argue against it on textual grounds in my "Honest Illusion." In any case, Reginster does not take up the strategy and, again, for good reason since, it turns out, it would conflict with his strategy for reevaluation.
15. Harold Langsam, "How to Combat Nihilism: Reflections on Nietzsche's Critique of Morality," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 14.2 (1997): 235–53.
16. For discussion of one such view, see Nadeem Hussain and Nishi Shah, "Misunderstanding Metaethics: Korsgaard's Rejection of Realism," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 1, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 265–94.
17. Or something like that.
18. For a more extended description, see Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, 178–242.

19. This is the kind of view Brian Leiter basically ascribes to Nietzsche (*Nietzsche on Morality* [London: Routledge, 2002], 105–12). It is not quite clear whether Reginster sees how close he comes to Leiter's view. Part of the problem is that Reginster says things that suggest that he does not quite understand Leiter's view. He correctly takes Leiter as arguing that "Nietzsche accepts the objectivity of what he calls 'prudential' values" (*AL* 274 n. 10). I take it that the "he" refers to Leiter and I take it that the use of "objectivity" here is meant to track Leiter's use of "objective." Leiter talks in this context of there being an "objective fact of the matter" about what is prudentially good for a person and he equates this with realism about judgments of prudential goodness (*Nietzsche on Morality*, 147). However, Reginster continues his discussion of Leiter as follows: "Prudential value is defined in terms of the flourishing of beings of a certain type: whatever is conducive to their flourishing . . . is 'good' for beings of that type. The normative significance of such prudential values is, however, very limited. For one thing, it cannot by itself provide the sort of normative guidance to which the nihilist aspires. For flourishing can indeed provide such guidance only if it is itself valuable, and, unlike the value it underwrites, its value cannot be a prudential value. For another thing, it is also worth asking whether prudential values can be values at all, whether they can possess real normative significance, without assuming the non-prudential value of flourishing itself" (*AL* 274 n. 10). This suggests that prudential value is essentially instrumental value and that the end relative to which prudential value is instrumental value is the end of flourishing. The value of flourishing then looks as though it needs some independent grounding. But this is to misunderstand, or misrepresent, Leiter's position. Leiter's position becomes clear once we recall his appeal to Peter Railton's theory of prudential good ("Facts and Values," *Philosophical Topics* 14.2 [1986]: 5–31). Such a theory attempts to give an account of what is good for a person, period—not what is instrumentally valuable for achieving some independently valuable end. In attempting to develop a theory about what is good for a person we do *use* the notion of flourishing, but the result of our investigations is the set of facts about what is good for a person. If it turns out, for example, that being a philosopher is good for me, then this is just a fundamental evaluative truth. It does not depend on some other account of why flourishing is good. Rather, this fact tells me that being a philosopher partially constitutes my flourishing. The use of the adjective "prudential" is meant to mark a contrast with, on one side, merely instrumental value and, on the other, some perhaps more substantive notion of what is morally good. (For a more detailed and careful explication of such views, see Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*.)

Whether such a relational account of the good is an interpretively plausible view to ascribe to Nietzsche, particularly when Leiter adds that for Nietzsche "what counts as flourishing is *relative to type-facts* about that person" (*Nietzsche on Morality*, 106, second emphasis mine), is

another matter. Reginster elsewhere raises worries about this: “Nietzsche himself never relativizes the notion of flourishing, which is at the core of the prudential conception of the good, to one or another type of man. On the contrary, he always speaks of ‘human flourishing’—‘the highest power and splendor actually possible to the type man’” (review of Brian Leiter, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality* [London: Routledge, 2002], *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* [2 January 2003], <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23223-routledge-philosophy-guidebook-to-nietzsche-on-morality>, accessed 4 January 2012).

For my own views on how to interpret Nietzsche on flourishing, see my “The Role of Life in the *Genealogy*,” in Nietzsche’s “*On the Genealogy of Morality*”: *A Critical Guide*, ed. Simon May (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 142–69.

20. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols., trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), 1:65, qtd. in *AL* 98. Hereafter *WWR*, cited by volume and section number.

21. I am bracketing certain complexities that might arise were we to interpret Nietzsche as holding a more hermeneutical view of mental state ascription. I think this is fair since Reginster does not bring up this possibility. For a discussion of interpretationalist tendencies in general in Nietzsche, see my “Nietzsche’s Positivism,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 12.3 (2004): 326–68. In contemporary philosophy such positions are often associated with Donald Davidson (see, e.g., “Mental Events,” in Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events: Philosophical Essays of Donald Davidson* [Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1980], 207–27.).

22. In my “Honest Illusion,” I give other textual reasons for thinking that it is implausible to ascribe such subjective realisms to Nietzsche.

23. In the end, I would argue, this objection, once fully spelled out, will not actually turn out to be that far from what was at the heart of the open-question argument anyway.

24. Reginster cites *The Will to Power* 387.

25. So construed it is one kind of motivational internalism, namely, what Stephen Darwall labels “existence internalism” (“Reasons, Motives, and the Demands of Morality: An Introduction,” in *Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches*, ed. Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 308–9).

26. After all, Plato is arguably a good example of such an internalist. Perhaps I am not taking the label “Humean” seriously, and it is true that when Reginster first uses the label “motivational internalism,” he gives what might be a stronger version of it: “An agent has a reason to act only if she has a desire that will be served or furthered by her so acting” (*AL* 151). This is stronger if the agent has to have the desire already and cannot acquire it through deliberation. Indeed, in the ensuing discussion Reginster seems to require that it be a “preexisting desire” (*AL* 151). In any case, my more general points in the body of the text are not affected.

27. For an attempt to reconstruct and then criticize this kind of argument—what Leiter calls the “Millian model” in light of its apparent resemblance to John Stuart Mill’s argument for the principle of utility—on the behalf of other Nietzsche interpreters, see Brian Leiter, “Nietzsche’s Metaethics: Against the Privilege Readings,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 8.3 (2000): 281–87.

28. As Nietzsche would be the first to insist, we have multiple perspectives within us. It is indeed our will to truth, a contingent fact about us, that leads us to the conclusions of the error theory that in turn undermine our evaluative judgments. Of course, if I were allowed no “perspective,” (or “perspectives,” I would say) from which to begin my investigations, then no doubt it is true that I could not arrive at the error theory.

29. Pace some thinkers, even the practical inescapability of any particular normative judgment will not do much. This, if anything, will be grist to the fictionalist’s mill.

30. Nadeem Hussain, “Norms in Action: Metaethics and the Neo-Kantian Critique,” unpublished ms.

31. For example, *HH* P:6; *GS* 299, 301; *TI* "Improvers" 1; *KSA* 13:16[83]. Many of these are precisely the passages that Reginster brought in to support the ascription of normative objectivism to Nietzsche in the first place, and they are precisely the ones that still need to be explained away, as I argue in the second section.

32. For my interpretation of these passages, see my "The Role of Life in the *Genealogy*."

33. I have ignored various fancier metaethical possibilities, like noncognitivist or response-dependent views that would have made the dialectic of this paper more complicated. My main excuse for ignoring them is that Reginster does not explicitly bring them up. For all I have argued here, some interpretation of Nietzsche along one of these lines might both capture the spirit of Reginster's normative subjectivism and be a plausible interpretation of Nietzsche. For one attempt at ascribing noncognitivism to Nietzsche, see Maudemarie Clark, "Nietzsche and Moral Objectivity: The Development of Nietzsche's Metaethics," in *Nietzsche and Morality*, 192–226. For some general worries about noncognitivist readings of Nietzsche, see my "Honest Illusion," 160 n. 6, and my "Nietzsche and Non-Cognitivism."

34. For more on the differences between believing and make-believing, see my "Honest Illusion."

35. Qtd. in *AL* 95.