

HOW NOT TO AFFIRM ONE'S LIFE: NIETZSCHE AND THE PARADOXICAL TASK OF LIFE AFFIRMATION

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There is little question that one of the central aims of Nietzsche's philosophy is to engender the "affirmation of life."¹ In contrast to the forms of valuation that spring from "the degenerating instinct that turns against life with subterranean vengefulness" (*EH*, "The Birth of Tragedy," 2), Nietzsche seeks a mode of valuation that says "Yes to life" "without reservation, even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything that is questionable and strange in existence" (*ibid.*).² So, undoubtedly, one of the central exegetical issues for the student of Nietzsche is to unpack, both theoretically and practically, such an account of life affirmation.

This task is further complicated, however, by the simple fact that there are times at which Nietzsche seems to suggest that such a stance amounts to the wholesale affirmation of *all* of one's life. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, for example, he describes the "world-affirming human, [as one] who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever is and was, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity" (*BGE* 56). Further, in an oft-cited passage from *The Gay Science* Nietzsche declares,

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer. (*GS* 276)

And, finally in the last year of his productive life, he talks of the "Affirmation of life even in its strangest and sternest problems" (*TI*, "Ancients," 5). From such a set of passages, one might reasonably gather that life affirmation is tantamount to the unconditional, wholesale, and total affirmation of life.

Yet such an account of life affirmation, which necessitates the indiscriminate affirmation of *all* of one's life, "*what was and is*," seems to generate a paradox (*BGE* 56). In taking the character of Zarathustra as a case study, we might express the paradox in this way: Zarathustra's affirmation of life requires that he embrace the small man—the petty and vengeful soul—that nauseates him (*Z*, "The Convalescent," 2). Life affirmation, so understood, suggests that the genuine affirmer must say "Yes" to his life without changing any detail. So, it seems, the total or wholesale saying "Yes" to life forces Zarathustra to say "Yes," as it were, to that which he says "No."

The subject of this paper is the paradoxical task of life affirmation. The object of this paper is to show how *not* to affirm one's life. In other words I shall show, over the course of this essay, how some of the most recent attempts to dissolve the paradox of life affirmation come up short.

Before pressing on, however, I want to ward off the worry that this essay is merely negative in character. Rather than merely criticizing previous discussions of Nietzsche's conception of life affirmation, I hope to show the ways in which these attempts are instructive. I shall argue that, taken together, these three attempts show us how not to affirm our lives, which, by way of cumulative characterization, may get us closer to understanding what life affirmation of the sort Nietzsche unceasingly advocates really amounts to.

1. PERSONAL PROVIDENCE

The inscription to Nietzsche's autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, reads thus: "On this perfect day, when everything is ripening and not only the grape turns brown, the eye of the sun just fell upon my life: I looked back, I looked forward, and never saw so many and such good things at once. . . . *How could I fail to be grateful to my whole life?*" Indeed, in the first few chapters of this work, Nietzsche sets about explaining how seemingly dreadful events in his past have turned out for the best. Consider, for instance, the following remarks:

To become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion *what* one is. From this point of view even the *blunders* of life have their own meaning and value—the occasional side roads and wrong roads, the delays, "modesties," seriousness wasted on tasks that are remote from the task. . . . Considered in this way, my life is simply wonderful" (*EH*, "Why I am so Clever," 9).

In his case, the "*blunders* of life" are constitutive, which is to say that Nietzsche's life and the endlessly enchanting autobiography that recounts such a life would simply not have been possible without them.

From this, one might reasonably conclude that this is an example of how one ought to affirm one's life. It may go something like this: Nietzsche gives us the case study of his own life to show that instances of suffering may be justifiable—hence, affirmable—as a means of attaining some supreme good. This supreme good is what Nietzsche refers to as “the task,” in *Ecce Homo* (*EH*, “Why I am so Clever,” 9).

Indeed, many commentators on Nietzsche suggest that genuine life affirmation necessitates something of this order, namely, that genuine affirmation requires that “each person devise her own providence” (Risse 2009, 227). Julian Young offers the most fully developed version of this interpretive strategy, which suggests that life affirmation necessitates that one take the instances of suffering and justify them by “seeing a personal providence in one's life” (1994, 105). Such a task may be accomplished, Young argues, when one “discover[s] all events in one's past including apparent evils, apparently harmful events, to be not evils at all but rather ‘for the best,’ benefits, means of subsequent goods” (*ibid.*). That is, “the misery and frustration suffered . . . find their place and justification as something necessary” (Young 2004, 91), such that, on Young's reconstruction, the most excellent of life affirmers is one who views initially unwelcome instances of humiliation as justifiable in terms of some ultimate good or benefit.

Young's proposed interpretation of Nietzsche's view of life affirmation is tempting but mistaken. This reading is tempting precisely because it seems to help dissolve the paradox of affirmation. On this account, life-negating experiences are rendered justified through a constructed means-ends instrumentalism. Particularly, meaning is derived from a mode of personal providence. So, on this reading, a particularly objectionable instance is ultimately affirmable in light of the good end one is able to achieve. And this shows how one might say “Yes to life in its strangest and hardest problems” (*TI*, “Ancients,” 5). One might, as it were, perform a calculus of welfare and determine that, in the end and on the whole, one's life is affirmable. Accordingly, the “world affirming individual” for Young, “wants to have *what is and was* [that is, a set of the acutely painful events] repeated into all eternity” (*BGE* 56) on the grounds that it allows one to achieve some desirable end. Yet Young's solution to the paradox of life affirmation is mistaken because it rests on a misreading of the passage in question and, as a result, I shall argue, mischaracterizes Nietzsche's views.

There are two reasons that we may want to resist Young's interpretation. The first is that it appears to rest on a misreading of the passage in question. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche argues that, after metaphysical crutches of various kinds have been kicked away, we will be allured

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once more by a “dangerous seduction” (*GS* 277). The flirtation is not with divine providence, the notion that God has made for us the best of all possible worlds. For Nietzsche, this is one such aid we may have learned to walk without. Rather, “our hardest test” is to remain disenchanted with narratives of personal providence. Our “greatest danger of spiritual unfreedom” is to impose an interpretation on the past in which “everything that happens to us turns out for the best” (*GS* 277). Nietzsche expresses the thought as follows, and I quote him at some length:

Personal providence.—There is a certain high point in life: once we have reached that, we are, for all our freedom, once more in the greatest danger of spiritual unfreedom, and no matter how much we have faced up to the beautiful chaos of existence and denied it all providential reason and goodness, we still have to pass our hardest test. For it is only now that the idea of a personal providence confronts us with the most penetrating force, and the best advocate, the evidence of our eyes, speaks for it—now that we can see how palpably always everything that happens to us turns out for the best. Every day and every hour, life seems to have no other wish than to prove this proposition again and again. Whatever it is, bad weather or food, the loss of a friend, sickness, slander, the failure of some letter to arrive, the spraining of an ankle, a glance into a shop, a counter-argument, the opening of a book, a dream, a fraud—either immediately or very soon after it proves to be something that “must not be missing”; it has a profound significance precisely for *us*. (*GS* 277)

Indeed, in isolating this portion of the section, it seems as if Nietzsche is advocating a mode of personal providence in which we can interpret and ultimately justify instances of humiliation as something that “must not be missing” because they have “profound significance precisely for *us*.”

However, Nietzsche, in the same passage, goes further:

Nor should we conceive too high an opinion of this dexterity of our wisdom when at times we are excessively surprised by the wonderful harmony created by the playing of our instrument—a harmony that sounds too good for us to dare to give the credit to ourselves. Indeed, now and then someone plays with us—good old chance; now and then chance guides our hand, and the wisest providence could not think up a more beautiful music than that which our foolish hand produces then. (*GS* 277)

Recall, as Young argued, that one may construct a kind of redemptive script by which a particularly undesirable event is rendered meaningful, or perhaps justified, in terms of one’s present state. Rather, in importing our own practical and theoretical skills, we must not sideline accidents,

of both the happy and dreadful variety: “the beautiful chaos of existence” (*GS* 277). Nietzsche is concerned to show in this passage, contra Young, “that the accidental reality of the past is *falsified* by this kind of providential interpretation” (Loeb 2008, 178).

The second worry with Young’s solution of the instrumental account of justification is that it tends toward a wrong-headed view of genuine affirmation. Young maintains, for example, that, to affirm life, “one must be an artist; one must script for oneself such a personality that the vicissitudes of one’s past acquire a cumulative value rather like a well-constructed *Bildungsroman*” (2009, 440). Here, it is argued that genuine affirmation results from seeing a negative event as leading to some desirable end. Moreover, it might be maintained that such artistry does not rest on the idea of a providential plan, and, as such, it may better address the paradox in question.

Yet, to employ an instrumental account of life affirmation and argue that a particularly horrific event in one’s past is justifiable because it led to something valuable is problematic. Though this account is certainly consistent with the passages in which Nietzsche praises those that may be able to affirm their lives through a mode of self-stylization (*GS* 107, 290, 335), it is, nevertheless, hard to square with the moments in which Nietzsche sets up genuine affirmation as something that is beyond means-ends calculations (*GS* 276, 341; *BGE* 56; *EH*, “The Birth of Tragedy” 2; *EH* “Clever,” 9, 10; *EH*, “Dawn,” 1). If we were to draw upon two of Nietzsche’s most sustained discussions of life affirmation, *GS* 276 and 341, we would do well to note that the appeal to means-ends instrumentalism is absent. This suggests that there is an aspect of Nietzsche’s thinking that accounts for genuine life affirmation without, at the same time, justifying painful past events in terms of future goods. Instead, it can be argued that Nietzsche pushes “towards an affirmation of life that does not invoke a supreme good to which suffering is essential” (May 2011b, 91; see, for example, *GS* 276, 341; *BGE* 56; *EH*, “Clever,” 10; *EH*, “Dawn,” 1). In addition, as I shall show in the following section, Nietzsche’s notion of genuine life affirmation also excludes an unbridled, simply affective, “Yes” to life.

2. A TASTE FOR EVERYTHING

How might we characterize the ability to say “Yes” to life “even in its strangest and hardest problems?” (*TI*, “What I Owe to the Ancients,” 5) Commentators on Nietzsche have attempted to answer this query by claiming that genuine life affirmation is a purely affective matter. So understood, genuine life affirmation cannot be a cognitive matter. As such, this account maintains that life affirmation, of the sort Nietzsche

advocates, is achieved when one “give[s] full and complete expression to one’s drives. This might aptly be called naïve affirmation” (Gemes 2008, 462).

Ken Gemes has recently offered a version of this interpretive strategy. To start, he offers a typology of affirmation by making a tidy distinction between what he terms naïve and reflective affirmation. The former mode suggests that “to affirm life is to give full and complete expression to one’s drives” (Gemes 2008, 462). The latter mode, by contrast, claims that “to affirm life is to step back from it, reflect upon it, and then endorse it in all its details” (ibid.). This latter form is a kind of reflective affirmation. From these two modes of affirmation, Gemes suggests we might take Nietzsche’s view of life affirmation to be as follows:

Perhaps then Nietzsche’s idea is that for us moderns 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 or even a combination of naïve and reflective affirmation. As Nietzsche says: “We have to *learn to think differently*—in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more; to *feel differently*” (D 103). (Gemes 2008, 462)

Gemes’s interpretation is initially quite compelling. It is particularly persuasive because it shows how one might naïvely affirm existence without justificatory crutches of any kind. This account neatly circumvents the means-ends instrumentalism discussed in the previous section and that Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science*, clearly rejects (see, for example, May 2011b). Gemes’s solution suggests that one might naïvely, as it were, affirm existence without a supreme justificatory good, which may be employed to show that the instances of suffering in one’s life may be ultimately justified. Yet, if Gemes is right, it seems as if life affirmation indeed amounts to the injunction to “one day, a long time in the future” give “full and complete expression to one’s drives” (2008, 462). And so we would do well to query whether “yes-saying” of the sort Nietzsche envisions is best seen as what Gemes labels the naïve mode of affirmation.

Here it may be useful to look to the character type of the omnisatisfied, as presented in Part III of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, to determine whether naïve affirmation is Nietzsche’s preferred mode. Amid the section titled “On the Spirit of Gravity,” Nietzsche describes the omnisatisfied in this way:

Verily, I also do not like those who consider everything good and this world the best. Such men I call the omni-satisfied. Omni-satisfaction, which knows how to taste everything, that is not the best. I honor the recalcitrant choosy tongues and stomachs, which have learned to say “I” and “yes” and “no.” But to chew and digest everything—that is

truly the swine's manner. Always to bray Yea-Yuh—that only the ass has learned, and whoever is of this spirit (Z III 11 [2]).

Such omnisatisfied individuals have indiscriminate palates—they do not confront something that they do not like. Rather, they “chew and digest everything.” From this passage, we can gather that “a yes which does not know how to say no” is, as Deleuze rightly puts it, a “caricature of affirmation” (1983, 185). Accordingly, genuine affirmation does not require one to find everything to one's taste and, we might conclude, seems to be more than giving complete expression to one's affective states.

It may be argued that Gemes's account denies the form of indiscriminate affirmation Nietzsche criticizes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. That is, Gemes might argue that our drives are often fundamentally opposed to one another such that a scholar's “drive for knowledge” may be in conflict with a drive for recognition (*BGE* 6). Hence, giving full expression to one's drives does not necessarily imply the tasteless indiscriminate mode of affirmation. Nevertheless, we can resist the privileged position Gemes affords to naïve affirmation on textual grounds.

Let's return to the section we discussed above concerning the omnisatisfied, where Nietzsche claims, “I honor the recalcitrant choosy tongues and stomachs, which have learned to say ‘I’ and ‘yes’ and ‘no.’” If anything, this passage shows that Nietzsche praises those individuals who learn how to choose and select. Again, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, for example, he describes the “world affirming individual, [as one] who has learned not just to accept and go along with what was and is, but who wants it again and again *just as it was and is* through all eternity” (*BGE* 56). So, it follows that affirmation of the sort Nietzsche often advocates has a cognitive element insofar as we must *learn* how to affirm our lives. If this is right, then we need to say more about this cognitive dimension.

Defenders of Gemes's argument, however, might retort that Nietzsche's considered position on the matter of how genuinely to affirm one's life is that of naïve affirmation. Moreover, they may remind us that Gemes, in fact, acknowledges that “for us moderns naïve affirmation is no long 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 or even a combination of naïve and reflective affirmation” (2008, 463). So, defenders of this line of inquiry might worry that the insistence on retaining a cognitive dimension of life affirmation as a constitutive element of genuine life affirmation is, at best, being redundant, and, at worst, creating something of a straw argument. After all, Gemes clearly acquiesces to its role for us moderns.

Granting this worry, I nevertheless think that we may further problematize Gemes's argument by suggesting that there may be a worry

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in dividing up the naïve and reflective modes of affirmation in the way that he does. Let me explain.

It is clear that Nietzsche's use of the concept of "drive" is suitably broad and unique (see for example, Katsafanas 2013). We may be tempted to think of the drives as "cravings or urges" (ibid., 727). Yet arguably Nietzsche uses the concept rather differently. There is, Nietzsche tells us, a "drive to distinction" (*D* 30); "the drive to life" (*D* 72); "a drive for gentle sunlight, bright and buoyant air, southerly vegetation" (*D* 553); and "of hatred, envy, covetousness" (*BGE* 23). Further, "moralities are," Nietzsche informs us, "a *sign language of the affects*" (*BGE* 187). And, finally, to cite a rather different example, in offering a critique of "modern marriage," Nietzsche writes the following:

[O]ne does *not* establish a marriage on the basis of "love"—one established it on the basis of the sexual drive, the drive to own property (wife and child considered as property), the *drive to dominate* which continually organizes the smallest type of domain, the family, which *needs* children and heirs so as to retain, in a physiological sense as well, an achieved measure of power, influence, wealth, so as to prepare for protracted tasks, for a solidarity of instinct between centuries. (*TI*, "Expeditions," 40).

Hence, we might argue that Nietzsche's conception of some of the drives imbues them with "significant *cognitive* content. They may originate from internalized and redirected drives of a more primitive nature that are not themselves cognitive, but they have developed in such a way that they are now much more complex than them" (Welshon 2004, 147). Accordingly, the drives for Nietzsche are not merely *affective*. If this is right, then the distinction between the naïve mode and the reflective form of affirmation seems to collapse. It may breakdown because reflective affirmation is itself simply a product of drives, albeit ones with significant cognitive content.

There is another compelling textual reason that may cause some worry concerning the twofold typology of affirmation. For Nietzsche, there seems to be a reciprocity between the feelings or affects and judgments or evaluations: "feelings are nothing final or original; behind feelings there stand judgments and evaluations which we inherit in the form of feelings (inclinations, aversions)" (*D* 35). So, here, reflective affirmation would amount to an *ex post facto* justification—justification that, of course, has been "inherited in the form of feelings (inclinations, aversions)." So it would not follow that the mode of life affirmation that Nietzsche champions is a purely reflective mode of affirmation. The reason, of course, is that this sort of affirmation of life—"to step back from it, reflect upon it, and then endorse it in all its details"—is itself an

affective endeavor, albeit one that is infused with a fair bit of cognitive content (Gemmes 2008, 462).

3. SAYING “YES” TO THAT WHICH YOU SAY “NO”

Through the character type of Zarathustra, Nietzsche relays the “highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable” (*EH*, “Zarathustra,” 1). Consider, for example, the chapter titled “The Convalescent” in which Zarathustra’s animals ask, “[H]ow can this great destiny not be your greatest danger and sickness too?” (*Z*, “The Convalescent,” 2). Philip Kain has recently put forth an account of how this mode of affirmation might operate, and it is to this formulation that I now turn.

Kain’s argument is both sophisticated and compelling, so I quote it at some length:

[I]t makes little sense to expect anyone to want to relive a life of happiness or of great moments. The prospect of reliving such moments an infinite number of times would sap those moments of their meaning and significance. . . . Sooner or later all those great moments would begin to pale. They would become boring. They would be sapped of their greatness. Repetition deadens them. . . .

On the other hand, imagine yourself reviewing all the worst moments of your life—moments of meaningless pain and suffering. Then imagine going through them all again. And again. Now imagine that you are somehow able to say to yourself that you would not change any of those moments—that you would not change the slightest detail. . . . If you are able to face the pain in your life . . . you would begin to break the stranglehold this pain has had over you. You would begin to build up greater strength. You would begin to increase your power. . . . [I]t would turn moments of pain and suffering into moments of empowerment and thus give them a meaning. One would not tire of such moments—one could even relish their repetition. One might even create a new heaven out of one’s hell (Kain 2009, 61–62).

I take it that Kain’s argument has the following form: we miss the mark if we believe that the genuine affirmation of life consists solely in reliving the high points of great achievement. Rather, life affirmation amounts to finding a way to affirm that which was previously not affirmable.

Let us consider, for example, a particularly humiliating moment. On Kain’s account, the better disposed one is toward one’s life, the more likely it is for that person to reevaluate the moment of humiliation and turn it in to a moment of empowerment. In this way, that which one initially said “No” to, the moment of humiliation, becomes something that one can affirm as a sources of empowerment. Hence the moment of

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humiliation is given “a meaning,” and one would relish in its repetition (see Kain 2009, 61).

However, I take it that there is a worry concerning this approach, which I shall try to tease out. Yet in order properly to situate the worry with this account, let me say a bit more about how Kain’s account differs from the first approach we discussed in section 1, “Personal Providence.” The worry I would like to stave off is that Kain’s solution is just a deeper version of Young’s failed resolution. Recall that, for Young, those who are able to affirm their lives see “all events in one’s past including apparent evils, apparently harmful events, to be not evils at all but rather ‘for the best,’ benefits, means of subsequent goods” (1994, 105). That is, “the misery and frustration suffered . . . find their place and justification as something necessary” (ibid., 91) such that, on Young’s reconstruction, the most excellent of life affirmers is one who views initially unwelcome events as justifiable in terms of some ultimate good or benefit. Accordingly, the most important feature for our purposes here is that Young takes life affirmation to be tantamount to a rather simplistic means-ends instrumentalism. The central question remains: Is Kain’s version a deeper rendition of a kind of means-ends instrumentalism?

On Kain’s account, life affirmation seems to amount to whether one can turn a negative event into something positive, and, as such, we may be tempted to argue that Kain employs an instrumental mode of reasoning in asking the question: Can a person undergo humiliation, for example, as something positive? Yet Kain’s argument seems to be posing, implicitly at least, a different sort of question: Can a person affirm a negative experience as something negative? Recall Kain’s argument presented above, which suggests that genuine affirmation requires that one “turn moments of pain and suffering into moments of empowerment and thus give them a meaning. One would not tire of such moments—one could even relish their repetition” (2009, 62). Kain rightly hits upon the central interpretive puzzle: Is it possible to affirm a negative event as negative? If this is the case, then instead of employing a mode of means-ends instrumentalism, Kain’s account sidesteps this mode of reasoning altogether by noting that the affirmation of life requires us to affirm painful events as painful.

Further, Kain’s position, it is worth noting, is consistent with Nietzsche’s account of affirmation, at least as it is presented in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for there it seems as if Zarathustra’s affirmation of life requires that he say “Yes” to the small man—the petty and vengeful soul—that nauseates him (*Z*, “The Convalescent,” 2). Moreover, the task is not to turn his experience of the revolting small man into something positive but rather to affirm the small man *qua* small man as something revolting. So Kain hits on the fundamental issue, but the worry with

his interpretation is that it fails to offer an account of how one might manage this form of affirmation.

Christopher Janaway has, by contrast, offered a version of how one might in a nonparadoxical way affirm a negative experience as negative. Janaway proposes the following account of Nietzsche's notion of life affirmation,

the key to which is to distinguish pro-and con-attitudes of different orders. Numerous events in any life will be undergone, remembered, or anticipated with a negative first-order attitude; but that is compatible with a second-order attitude of acceptance, affirmation, or positive evaluation towards one's having had these negative experiences. If in some course of events one is, say, humiliated, one's experience is as such unwelcome, painful, and so on: obviously it could not be exactly a humiliation that one underwent, unless one's primary or first-order attitudes were set against, rather than for, the course of events. But instead of asking fruitlessly whether you can undergo humiliation as something positive, Nietzsche poses a different question: Would you be well enough disposed to want your life again, where that (second-order) wanting would embrace among its objects the particularly hateful and excruciating humiliation from which you suffered? Facing this question is intelligible, indeed humanly possible (Janaway 2007, 257–58).

Janaway's reading indeed has an explanatory advantage over Kain's account. Janaway can show how Zarathustra might affirm the small man *qua* small man, namely, as an entity that Zarathustra finds revolting. On Janaway's account, Zarathustra has a negative first-order reaction to the small man. Zarathustra's first-order attitudes are set against this type of person. The small man indeed nauseates him (*Z* III ii, 19). However, we can imagine that Zarathustra might say, "[an] ultimate, most joyous, most wantonly extravagant [second-order] yes to life" (*EH*, "The Birth of Tragedy," 2) where Zarathustra is well enough disposed toward his life to embrace among its objects the small man who nauseates him. In taking the two points together, we can see how it would be plausible, at least, to say "Yes," as it were, to that which one once said "No."

Janaway's version is indeed plausible if we view ourselves as isolated individuals. However, I worry that it loses its appeal once we recognize that the scope of Nietzsche's notion of the objects of that which must be affirmed is much broader. In *The Gay Science*, for example, Nietzsche suggests that life affirmation must be of a more inclusive sort:

Anyone who manages to experience the history of humanity as a whole as *his own history* will feel in an enormously generalized way all the grief of an invalid who thinks of health, of an old man who thinks of the dreams of his youth, of a lover deprived of his beloved, of the martyr

whose ideal is perishing, of the hero on the evening after a battle that has decided nothing but brought him wounds and the loss of his friend. But if one endured, if one *could* endure this immense sum of grief of all kinds while yet being the hero who, as the second day of battle breaks, welcomes the dawn and his fortune, being a person whose horizon encompasses thousands of years past and future . . . if one could burden one's soul with all of this—the oldest, the newest, losses, hopes, conquests, and the victories of humanity; if one could finally contain all this in one soul and crowd it into a single feeling—this would surely have to result in a happiness that humanity has not known so far: the happiness of a god full of power and love, full of tears and laughter. (*GS* 337)

Here Nietzsche is clear: life affirmation is generalized to include “the oldest, the newest, losses, hopes, conquests, and the victories of humanity.” Further, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes, “Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you have said Yes too to *all* woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said ‘You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!’ then you wanted *all* back” (Z, “The Drunken Song,” 10). It follows that, for Nietzsche, genuine affirmation requires that one say “Yes too to *all* woe”; as such, the object of affirmation plausibly includes not only one's own sufferings but that of others as well (*ibid.*). It seems that genuine life affirmation for Nietzsche encompasses “losses, hopes, conquests, and the victories of humanity” among its target objects (*GS* 337; see, for example, *HH* 157, *BGE* 302).

As noted above, Janaway's interpretation indeed offers a tidy account of how one might affirm (from the second-order, of course) one's idiosyncratic melancholies. However, given the foregoing, Nietzsche's version necessitates something of a rather different order. That is, in incorporating the totality of the past, it follows that concurrently claiming the sufferings of others is something that must not be missing. This is to move the goal posts, as it were, from the micro-level, to the macro-level.

Consider learning of a neighbor's unwelcome and painful domestic tragedy. Returning to Janaway's schematic, we would have a negative first-order reaction to the news. After all, unless it were negative, our first-order attitudes would not be set against the event. Next, we might well wonder whether we are well enough disposed toward our life to embrace among its objects our neighbor's unwelcome and painful domestic tragedy. Indeed, recall that, for Nietzsche, genuine life affirmation encompasses “losses, hopes, conquests, and the victories of humanity” among its target objects (*GS* 337). To return to our example, then, it appears that genuine life affirmation necessitates the second-order willing or affirmation of my neighbor's domestic tragedy as something that must not be missing.

Defenders of Janway's account might do well to argue that of fundamental concern is whether a person finds a way to affirm his or her life. Whether the events in need of a second-order interpretive framework concern the person herself or someone else is irrelevant. Yet Nietzsche's account of life affirmation seems to require us to embrace both modes (from a second-order perspective), and we may well wonder whether this is "humanly possible" or practically desirable (Janaway 2007, 258).

4. CONCLUSION

It has not gone unnoticed that Nietzsche takes the "affirmation of life" to be his defining philosophical achievement (see, for example, Reginster 2006, 26). I have attempted to make clearer Nietzsche's views concerning life affirmation by showing the ways in which one might fail, as it were, to affirm one's life genuinely. So, three brief points are worth making: first, one fails to affirm one's life genuinely if one invokes a simplistic means-ends instrumentalism. Rather, the genuine form of affirmation refuses to be placed under the yoke of a secular redemptive explanation. Second, one misses the mark of genuine affirmation if one indiscriminately says "Yes" to everything. Hence, the omnisatisfied provide us with a neat characterization of how not to affirm our lives. Third, and finally, it seems that the task of life affirmation requires that we affirm the terrible experience as something terrible. Yet, as Henry Staten puts the point, "Might there not be such a thing as terror so overwhelming that the sufferer cannot or will not affirm it, and in that case who can affirm it on his or her behalf?" (Staten 1990, 75–76). So we are, it seems, left to wonder whether second-order affirmations of this sort are "humanly possible" or practically desirable (Janaway 2007, 258).

If the foregoing arguments have been persuasive, then, at the close of this essay, we can note that Nietzsche's account of life affirmation is, at best, deeply paradoxical in nature. As such, there are at least three possible interpretive routes left for us to transverse. First, we could maintain that there is a viable resolution to the paradox, albeit not one of the four interpretations discussed in this essay. Second, we could conclude that there is no workable resolution to the paradox of life affirmation precisely because the philosophical challenge is to ward off the temptation to explain suffering away. Or, third, we could argue that the philosophical task of grappling with such a paradox is instructive and further maintain that exploration of this thesis may shed new light on the specific positive formulation of my question here: how one ought to affirm one's life. Further, understanding the question of life affirmation as a necessary paradox may better approximate a resolution to many of the questions raised here and, as such, take into account these many ways one ought not affirm one's life.

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Recently, Simon May has put forth an argument in favor of the second path. By way of conclusion, let me briefly sketch his case. It may be argued that one of Nietzsche's objectives in putting forth the goal of life affirmation is to offer a viable countermeasure to the interpretation of human existence offered by the ascetic ideal. The ascetic ideal presents itself as a solution to the meaninglessness of human suffering by offering an explanation that is "so universal that all other interests of human existence seem, when compared with it, petty and narrow" (*GM* III 23). This "monstrous mode of valuation" (*GM* III 11), "inclines us to despise and feel guilty about large areas of the natural self and its doings, and wish we were other than we are" (Janaway 2007, 243). The goal of life affirmation, by contrast, appears to offer a mode of valuation that affirms the whole of this life, without transcendent aids of any kind. However, when expressed in this way, the "counter-ideal of affirmation" appears beholden to the ascetic ideal insofar as it implicitly maintains that human existence is the sort of thing that is still in need of justification (see, for example, May 2011b). By contrast, one may argue that the task of the genuine life affirmer is

not to find a new answer, not informed by the ascetic ideal, to the question of the meaning of suffering. . . . The real challenge is to stop being obsessed with the question itself. The very preoccupation with the question remains a symptom of life-denial. (May 2011b, 100)

As such, if we follow this interpretive track, there is no workable solution to the paradox of affirmation because the paradox arises only when we are beholden to a mode of evaluation that arguably much of Nietzsche's work is aimed at getting us to do without.³

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Keywords: life affirmation, Nietzsche, paradox, providence, justification

NOTES

1. For a set of fine discussions of this issue, see Gemes 2008; Hatab 2005; Kain 2009; Loeb 2008; May 2011b; Nehamas 1985; Reginster 2006; Risse 2009; Staten 1990; and Young 2004, 2007, and 2009.

2. The following abbreviations are used in this paper for the titles of writings by Nietzsche: *BGE* refers to *Beyond Good and Evil*; *BT* refers to *The Birth of Tragedy*; *D* refers to *Daybreak*; *EH* refers to *Ecce Homo*; *GM* refers to *On the Genealogy of Morals*; and *Z* refers to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Further,

Nietzsche's works are referred to by section number and, where applicable, essay number, or title, as well. So, for example, *The Gay Science*, section 125, will be cited as (GS 125), while the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, section 27, will be cited as (GM III 27) and part 9 of the section of *Twilight of the Idols*, titled "Expeditions of an Untimely Man," will be cited as (TI, "Expeditions," 9).

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