

# “An unreserved yea-saying even to suffering”: A skeptical defense of Nietzschean life affirmation

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## Abstract

After examining the problem that gratuitous suffering poses for Nietzsche's notion of life affirmation, I mount a skeptical response to this problem on Nietzsche's behalf. I then consider an orthogonal objection to Nietzschean life affirmation, which argues that the *need* to justify life is symptomatic of life denial and show how strengthening the skeptical defense sidesteps this worry. Nietzsche's skepticism about our all-too-human, epistemic position thus aids his project of life affirmation in two ways. First, it suggests that we are unable to determine reliably whether a given instance of suffering is, in fact, gratuitous. Second, it provides a corrective to the moralistic need to redeem life, showing that all attempts to justify life as a whole are epistemically fraught. Before concluding, I examine Nietzsche's reasons for advancing such an epistemological argument and suggest how we might approach life affirmation in nonrational terms.

An abiding aim of Nietzsche's philosophy is the affirmation of life. His first publication famously seeks to justify existence as an aesthetic phenomenon. His middle works pursue life affirmation through the ideals of affirming life's eternal recurrence and *amor fati*—ideals that continue to operate in Nietzsche's last publications. Even in its most general form, the project of life affirmation faces an obvious obstacle: life is characterized by suffering.<sup>1</sup> In particular, gratuitous suffering, that is, suffering that contributes nothing to some valued end, poses a challenge to life affirmation, as, by definition, it does not figure in a larger project that redeems it.

In this article, I mount a skeptical defense of Nietzschean life affirmation against the problem of seemingly gratuitous suffering. After reviewing the problem gratuitous suffering poses for

<sup>1</sup>As my aim is not to resolve interpretive controversies surrounding Nietzsche's aesthetic justification of existence, or his ideals of eternal recurrence affirmation and *amor fati*, I will treat life affirmation in a general and broad sense. I will also assume that life affirmation is something undertaken by individuals, rather than life itself. For an objection to the latter reading, see Han-Pile (2018, pp. 448–449).

[Correction added on August 24, 2023, after first online publication. In Section 1.1, the block quote beginning with “With such cases of suffering in hand, Rowe...” has been formatted.]

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theists, as well as the response to this problem known as Skeptical Theism, I consider a parallel problem faced by Nietzsche's aim of life affirmation and construct a skeptical defense on his behalf. I then consider an orthogonal objection to Nietzschean life affirmation, which argues that the *need* to justify life is symptomatic of life denial. Addressing this objection requires strengthening the skeptical defense until it argues that attempts to appraise life's value are epistemically doomed. Nietzsche's skepticism about our all-too-human, epistemic position thus aids his project of life affirmation in two ways. First, it suggests that we are unable to determine reliably whether a given instance of suffering is, in fact, gratuitous. Second, it provides a corrective to the moralistic need to redeem life, showing that all attempts to justify life as a whole are epistemically fraught. Before concluding, I examine Nietzsche's reasons for advancing such an epistemological argument and suggest how we might approach life affirmation in nonrational terms.

## 1 | THE EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENT AND SKEPTICAL THEISM

### 1.1 | The Evidential Argument against theism

Perhaps the best-known argument against the Abrahamic God appeals to suffering as proof that an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being does not exist. In its deductive form, this argument fails.<sup>2</sup> For, it may be the case that God could not eliminate all suffering without compromising some greater good, such as free will.<sup>3</sup> In reply to this defense, atheistically minded philosophers advance inductive arguments against God's existence. These arguments concede that suffering is logically compatible with an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being but nonetheless maintain that some cases of suffering give us reason to doubt God's existence.

An influential formulation of such an Evidential Argument against God's existence comes from William Rowe (1979). Rowe's argument can be motivated by invoking two cases of horrible suffering. In the first, a fawn is trapped in a forest fire. The fawn is badly burned, lives in excruciating pain for several days, and dies. In the second case, a five-year-old is tortured and strangled to death. Such situations, while horrific, are not especially uncommon. These kinds of suffering are troubling for theists, as they seem to evade the standard defense, which argues that suffering is justified because it secures some greater good.

With such cases of suffering in hand, Rowe constructs the following Evidential Argument.

- (1) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (2) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering if it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (3) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being. (Rowe 1979, 336)

Premise 1 is an empirical claim that suffering that does not serve some greater good (or “gratuitous suffering”) exists. Premise 2 appeals to an essential commitment of Abrahamic religions—namely, that God is all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful—to argue that God would not permit gratuitous suffering. From these premises, it follows that gratuitous suffering provides reason to doubt that God exists.

<sup>2</sup>See Mackie (1955) for a deductive version of this argument.

<sup>3</sup>See Plantinga (1967) for a recent version of this defense that traces as far back as Augustine.

## 1.2 | Skeptical Theism

While the Evidential Argument has a deductively valid form, it remains inductive because premise 1 is not a conceptual truth but a claim requiring evidentiary support. It should be unsurprising that most theists reply to the Evidential Argument by targeting this premise: few theists are likely to deny premise 2, after all. To begin the attack on premise 1, note that it is justified by an inference such as this: as, (A) no good *that we know of* justifies some cases of suffering, we have good grounds for accepting (B) no good *could* justify some cases of suffering. This inference, sometimes called Rowe's Inference, is considered the weakest part of the Evidential Argument.

A persuasive objection to Rowe's Inference comes from Stephen Wykstra (1996), who calls it a "noseum" inference (as in, "I no-see-'em, so they probably don't exist"). Wykstra argues that noseum inferences are not always cogent. Consider, for example, an unfortunate novice playing chess against Bobby Fischer: Fischer might make a move that seems unjustified to the novice without the move being unjustified *simpliciter*; the novice just lacks the requisite knowledge to discern Fischer's reasoning. Examples such as this motivate Wykstra's contention that noseum inferences are only justified under a condition of reasonable epistemic access (CORNEA). That is, we are only justified in inferring "X does not exist" from "we don't see X" in cases where we have reason to believe that *if* X existed, we would be *likely* to see X. The question, then, is whether we have reason to believe that if *God* permitted some extreme suffering to secure a greater good, *we* would be likely, all things considered, to understand the justification that figures in God's reasoning.

The position known as Skeptical Theism argues that God could permit cases of suffering because they secure some greater good *without* humans knowing this fact.<sup>4</sup> This seems plausible enough: the epistemic position of humans vis-à-vis an omniscient being is certainly worse than that of the novice vis-à-vis Fischer. While it is tempting to take the Skeptical Theist to argue that premise 1 of Rowe's argument is *false*, the Skeptical Theist's defense is more modest than this. The Skeptical Theist merely claims that we should *withhold judgment* about premise 1, because we are uncertain whether it satisfies CORNEA. By arguing that we are not in the epistemic position needed to determine whether gratuitous suffering exists, the Skeptical Theist puts the ball back in the atheist's court. Seemingly senseless suffering remains compatible with God's existence, since more work is needed before we accept premise 1.

## 2 | THE EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENT AND SKEPTICAL LIFE AFFIRMATION

### 2.1 | The Evidential Argument against life affirmation

The Evidential Argument faced by theists resembles a problem faced by Nietzsche's project of life affirmation, construed even in its broadest sense. The problem concerns whether one can affirm life despite the existence of gratuitous suffering. Consider the following, roughly parallel argument:

(1\*) There are cases of extreme suffering that could have not occurred without compromising some greater good or causing equally bad or worse suffering.

<sup>4</sup>See Speak (2015, chap. 3) for an introduction to Skeptical Theistic responses to the Evidential Argument.

- (2\*) If life were worth affirming, there would be no cases of extreme suffering that do not contribute to some greater good or to the avoidance of equally bad or worse suffering.  
 (3\*) Therefore, life is not worth affirming.

Premise 1\* seems sufficiently plausible. In fact, the example concerning the 5-year-old occurred in Flint, Michigan, on New Year's Day 1986. Since cases of gratuitous suffering appear sadly common, it looks more promising to resist premise 2\* by arguing that Nietzschean life affirmation does not require affirming *each part* of life but only affirming life *as a whole*.

There are philosophical and textual reasons for thinking that the object affirmed under Nietzschean life affirmation is life as a whole. Philosophically, it would be wildly demanding to require that the life affirmer affirms, say, Auschwitz *in isolation*, whereas there may be some (perhaps minimal) hope that the life affirmer could affirm life as a whole *including* Auschwitz, which need not be affirmed in its own right. This approach also fits Nietzsche's texts. Notwithstanding his declaration that "I want only to be a Yes-sayer!" (GS, 276),<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche says "no" to many things: to Schopenhauer, the Last Man, Judeo-Christian values, Wagner, his sister, and so on. Perhaps, then, we can resist the Evidential Argument on Nietzsche's behalf by insisting that only life *as a whole* must be affirmed, as opposed to each of life's events *in isolation*.<sup>6</sup>

Even if Nietzschean life affirmation targets life as a whole and not each event in isolation, this does not weaken what is required for life affirmation enough to skirt premise 2\*. When Nietzsche writes of affirming life as a whole, he emphasizes that we must affirm this whole *without* desiring changes to any of its parts. For example, he describes "the most-high spirited, vital, world-affirming individual" as one

who has learned not just to accept and go along with what was and what is, but who wants it again *just as it was and is* through all eternity, insatiably shouting *de capo* not just to himself but to the whole play and performance, and not just to a performance, but rather, fundamentally, to the one who needs precisely this performance—and makes it necessary: because again and again he needs himself—and makes himself necessary. (BGE, 56; see also GS, 276)

This passage emphasizes the demandingness of life affirmation by contrasting one who *accepts* what was and is with one who *wants* what was and is. Nietzsche also stresses that the relevant disposition affirms life without desiring *any* change to life as a whole: the life affirmer wants life "again *just as it was and is*"—indeed, not just once more but "through all eternity." Lest we assume that the life affirmer merely desires the repetition of her *individual* life throughout eternity, Nietzsche further describes the life affirmer as "insatiably shouting *de capo*, not just to [her]self but to the whole play and performance."<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, even if life affirmation requires affirming life as a whole, as opposed to each part of life in isolation, the point remains that this whole must be affirmed *without* desiring changes to its parts.

<sup>5</sup>Abbreviations for Nietzsche's works are as follows: *The Anti-Christ* (2005a)=A; *The Birth of Tragedy* (1967)=BT; *Beyond Good and Evil* (2002)=BGE; *Daybreak* (1997)=D; *Ecce Homo* (2005b)=EH; *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1998)=GM; *The Gay Science* (2001)=GS; *Human, All Too Human* (1996)=HH; *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (2005c)=NCW; *Twilight of the Idols* (2005d)=TI; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2006)=Z.

<sup>6</sup>May (2011, pp. 95–98; 2016, pp. 216–218) and Merrick (2016, pp. 67–69) also conclude that the object of Nietzschean life affirmation is life as a whole.

<sup>7</sup>I take statements such as this to rule out the possibility that life affirmation operates within the local context of one individual's life. Also see EH, *Birth of Tragedy* 2, quoted below, and GS, 276.

Taken literally, the demand that we affirm “all things” includes gratuitous suffering. As this is rather counterintuitive, we might try dismissing the unrestricted scope of life affirmation as hyperbole: surely Nietzsche does not think that *suffering* should be affirmed. This attempt at evading premise 2\* is textually unviable. Nietzsche repeatedly includes suffering among the objects we must affirm. He describes “a formula of the *highest affirmation*” as being born of “overfullness, an unreserved yea-saying even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything questionable and strange about existence,” before claiming that “nothing in existence should be excluded, nothing is dispensable” (EH, *Birth of Tragedy* 2). Nietzsche describes his own affirmative disposition in similar terms.

What my innermost nature tells me is that everything necessary, seen from above and in the sense of a *great economy*, is also useful in itself,—it should not just be tolerated, it should be *loved* . . . *Amor fati*: that is my innermost nature.—And as far as my long infirmity is concerned, isn't it the case that I am unspeakably more indebted to it than I am to my health? (NCW, E:1)

Not only does Nietzsche stress that life affirmation requires “that everything . . . be loved,” in this passage. He also singles out his *suffering* as among the events he affirms. These passages are no outliers (GS, P:3, 12, 276, 338; Z, IV “Sleepwalker” 9, 11; BGE, 44, 225; GM, III:28; EH, “Destiny” 4, “Clever 10,” *Zarathustra* 3). Nietzschean life affirmation requires affirming life as a whole without change *including* the suffering that figures in it.

Gratuitous suffering presents a problem for this project. If Nietzschean life affirmation requires the affirmation of all of life without any changes, then suffering must be affirmed. And while some cases of suffering might be affirmed as contributing *something* to the value of life as whole, gratuitous suffering, by definition, makes no such contribution. It seems that Nietzschean life affirmation is too demanding to be realized in a world containing gratuitous suffering.

## 2.2 | Instrumental and constitutive affirmations of suffering

As Nietzsche seems to accept premise 2\*, we might try resisting premise 1\* to rebut the Evidential Argument against life affirmation. One means of doing this is to argue that suffering can be affirmed as *instrumental* to some greater good. Exercise, for example, produces some suffering (the tearing of muscle, loss of breath, etc.), but this is a means to greater health. Obviously, such a trivial example will not neatly redeem extreme forms of suffering. But, as Chris Janaway (2017a, pp. 82–83) observes while drawing attention to the phenomenon called “post-traumatic growth,” some individuals affirm extreme suffering as instrumental to enhancing their overall wellbeing. In such cases, individuals affirm their traumatic experiences, rather than wishing they had not occurred.

There are two problems with this strategy.<sup>8</sup> First, as a textual matter, the claim that suffering should be affirmed because of its instrumental value does not capture the full force of Nietzschean life affirmation. Granted, Nietzsche sometimes seems to affirm suffering instrumentally. He describes suffering as “the sole cause of every advancement in humanity” (BGE, 225) and claims that “in the great economy of the whole, the horrors of reality . . . are incalculably more necessary than that form of petty happiness called ‘goodness’” (EH, “Destiny” 4). But he also has Zarathustra tell us that true joy “thirsts for pain” (Z, IV “Sleepwalker” 11). Likewise, we have seen that he describes the highest affirmation as “an *unreserved* yea-saying

<sup>8</sup>Below, I consider a third problem for the instrumental affirmation of suffering, namely, that the need to justify suffering is symptomatic of life denial.

even to suffering” (EH *Birth of Tragedy* 2; emphasis added). Statements such as these suggest that, in his most triumphantly affirmative moments, Nietzsche aims to surpass the sort of means-end calculus operative in instrumental affirmations of suffering.<sup>9</sup> A second problem is that for this strategy to succeed, *every* case of suffering must be instrumentally valuable. Yet, neither the fawn nor the five-year-old grows as a result of their experiences. They die. What is more, it is not clear that *anyone else* derives instrumental value from their suffering.<sup>10</sup> So, gratuitous suffering remains and premise 1\* stands.

A second strategy for resisting premise 1\* draws on the work of Bernard Reginster, who argues that the ultimate aim of Nietzsche's revaluation of values is heightening the will to power. On Reginster's reading, “the will to power is the will to overcoming resistance” (Reginster, 2006, pp. 131–132), and resistance, defined as the frustration of some first-order desire, entails some degree of suffering (p. 133). From this, it follows that the ultimate good that Nietzsche attempts to secure requires suffering. But unlike the instrumental defense, which views suffering as a contingent means to some greater end, Reginster's reading construes suffering as a *necessary constituent* of the valued end (pp. 231–233).<sup>11</sup> Suffering therefore ceases to be a regrettable means to some end and becomes valuable in its own right.<sup>12</sup>

The constitutive defense of suffering countenances passages where Nietzsche dispenses with an instrumental valuation of suffering in favor of affirming suffering itself. While this avoids the first problem faced by the instrumental defense, the second problem persists.<sup>13</sup> For the constitutive defense to succeed, *every* instance of suffering must be affirmed as a necessary constituent in enhancing the will to power. But, as the cases of the fawn and the five-year-old illustrate, not every experience of suffering is overcome in a manner that enhances the will to power.<sup>14</sup> Hence, gratuitous suffering remains, leaving premise 1\* intact.

## 2.3 | Skeptical life affirmation

Rather than objecting to premise 1\* on the grounds that suffering is a contingent means to, or a necessary constituent of, some greater good, I will mount a skeptical defense of Nietzschean life affirmation. Like premise 1 of the Evidential Argument against theism, premise 1\* of the Evidential Argument against life affirmation relies on what Wykstra dubs a “noseeum” inference. That is, premise 1\* relies on reasoning such as this: as, (A) no good *that we know of* justifies some cases of extreme suffering, we have good grounds for accepting (B) no good *could* justify some cases of extreme suffering. Wykstra persuasively argues that this type of inference is only cogent in cases where CORNEA is satisfied. Absent CORNEA's satisfaction, (A) does not give us good grounds for accepting (B).

<sup>9</sup>Also see Merrick (2016, pp. 66–67) and Mollison (2021, pp. 189–190).

<sup>10</sup>Also see May (2011, p. 82).

<sup>11</sup>Hassan (2022) refines Reginster's view by distinguishing between treating suffering as an enabling condition (where suffering is valued as a part of a whole but not in itself) and treating suffering as a contributor (where suffering's value *changes* by figuring in a valued whole).

<sup>12</sup>Reginster's interpretation has shifted since his earlier stance. He now reads the will to power as “the drive to impose ‘one's own form’ on the world, or to bend it to one's ‘will’ (BGE, 259; Z, II ‘On Self-Overcoming’)” (Reginster, 2021, p. 5). As Reginster takes “full-fledged power” to require “conformity of world to the agent's will” and the exercise of “effective agency” (p. 65), this formulation arguably still considers suffering a necessary constituent of increases in power: the only proof of effective agency is that the world *resists* one's will, which Reginster's earlier work defines as a form of suffering. I set Reginster's recent interpretation aside, as its bearing on the present discussion is less straightforward than his earlier interpretation.

<sup>13</sup>Below, I consider another problem for the constitutive defense, namely, that the need to justify suffering is symptomatic of life denial.

<sup>14</sup>Came (2009, pp. 44–45) raises a similar objection to attempts to justify suffering by appealing to the will to power. Han-Pile (2018, pp. 450–454) and Janaway (2017b, p. 163) object to Reginster specifically on these grounds.



Nietzsche clearly would not put CORNEA to the same use as the Skeptical Theist. He has no interest in claiming that the limits of our epistemic position occlude our appreciating the justifications that might figure in *God's* reasoning when permitting seemingly gratuitous suffering. But appealing to CORNEA to resist certain inferences does not require theism. In fact, Nietzsche can put CORNEA to greater use than many theists because he is highly skeptical of our all-too-human, epistemic condition. His throughgoing doubts about the veracity of human cognition makes premise 1\* a more egregious noseum inference than premise 1 is to the Skeptical Theist, who maintains that nature is governed by divine rationality and that human understanding is an *Imago Dei*. Rather than trying to flesh out Nietzsche's complex epistemological position here, I will focus on two relevant cases where he doubts whether CORNEA is satisfied. First, Nietzsche is skeptical whether humans can reasonably appraise the role that suffering plays in an individual's psychological development. Second, he is skeptical whether humans can reasonably appraise the value of life as a whole. These points suggest that Nietzsche is amenable to a skeptical defense of life affirmation.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche castigates those who respond to suffering with compassion on the grounds that “our suffering is superficially construed” by these individuals. He goes on:

He [the compassionate person] knows nothing of the whole inner sequence and interconnection that spells misfortune for *me* or for *you!* The entire economy of my soul and the balance effected by “misfortune,” the breaking open of new springs and needs, the healing of old wounds, the shedding of entire periods of the past—all such things that can be involved in misfortune do not concern the dear compassionate one: they . . . have no thought that there is a personal necessity in misfortune; that terrors, deprivations, impoverishments, . . . and blunders are as necessary for me and you as their opposites; . . . that the path to one's own heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of one's own hell. . . . For happiness and misfortune are two siblings and twins who either grow up together or . . . *remain small together!* (GS, 338; see also GS, 12)

In the present context, this dense passage can be glossed in fairly simple terms: the compassionate person's assumption that they help others is dubious because “the entire economy of [another's] soul” is too opaque and complex for the compassionate person's appraisal of another's suffering to satisfy CORNEA. While it is tempting to infer from GS 338 that suffering's role in an individual's psychic economy is transparent to the individual *herself*, Nietzsche denies this. He insists that the “entire economy of [one's] soul” is also opaque from a first-person perspective.<sup>15</sup>

In a representative passage, he writes:

However far a man may go in self-knowledge, nothing however can be more incomplete than his image of the totality of *drives* which constitute his being. He can scarcely name even the cruder ones: their number and strength, their ebb and flood, their play and counterplay among one another, and above all the laws of their *nutriment* remain wholly unknown to him. (D, 119; see also D, 115; GS, 354)

Without wading into the weeds of Nietzsche's drive-psychology, we can observe how this passage, combined with the previous passage from *The Gay Science*, entails a powerful, skeptical

<sup>15</sup>For discussion of how Nietzsche views introspection as developmentally dependent on, and more superficial than, our ability to read others' minds, see Riccardi (2015).

conclusion. If suffering's role in an individual's psychic economy cannot be accurately appraised from a second- or first-person perspective, then we are rarely in the epistemic position needed to distinguish cases of seemingly gratuitous suffering from cases where suffering is instrumental to, or constitutive of, some greater good. Such appraisals do not satisfy CORNEA. For all we know, cases of seemingly gratuitous suffering might be instrumental to or constitutive of an individual's psychic development.

The foregoing defense expands the scope of instrumental and constitutive affirmations of suffering, so they might apply to seemingly gratuitous suffering. But it will not rule out *every* case of gratuitous suffering. Notwithstanding the complexity and opacity of her psyche, it is doubtful (to say the least) that the five-year-old grows because of her pain. At this point, it is crucial to recall that Nietzschean life affirmation does not require the affirmation of every event *in isolation* but the affirmation of every event in relation to life *as a whole*. Do we have reason to think that the child's suffering somehow contributes to the value of life as a whole?

The skeptical defense of life affirmation need not answer the foregoing question with a clear "yes." It only requires that we are not in an epistemic position to answer the question with reliable accuracy. There are passages from Nietzsche's corpus which argue that we *are not* in such a position. For example, he writes:

Value judgments on life, for or against, can ultimately never be true: they have value only as symptoms . . . *the value of life cannot be estimated*. Not by the living, who are an interested party, a bone of contention, even, and not judges; not by the dead for other reasons. (TI, "Socrates" 2; see also GS, P:2, 346; TI, "Errors" 8, "Morality" 5)

This passage argues that we cannot reliably appraise the value of life as a whole on the grounds that we cannot get "outside" life. Our epistemic position is too limited, too embedded, for us to satisfy CORNEA when appraising life as a whole. This point should be fairly pedestrian to Nietzsche's readers. He famously likens the notion of "knowledge in itself" to "an eye that must not have any direction," *en route* to concluding that "there is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival 'knowing'" (GM, III:12). But if our knowledge of medium sized dry goods is categorically limited by our perspective (where "perspective" can be understood as our spatial orientation *or* as the interests of our drives and affects), then it is impossible for us to occupy the sort of nonperspectival, "God's eye view" needed to appraise the value of life as a whole.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the foregoing quotation suggests that even if we combined *every perspective in history* when appraising life's value, the result would still be irredeemably limited to "the living, who are an interested party, a bone of contention, even, and not judges." Nietzsche's view about human cognition's limits therefore gives us reason to doubt whether CORNEA is satisfied when we try to appraise whether an instance of suffering is gratuitous in relation to life as a whole. As we cannot get "outside" life to assess the value of its parts, we should withhold judgment about premise 1\*.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Berry (2011, pp. 118–119) reads GM III:12 as excluding exhaustive knowledge about any object. The passage's spatial metaphor, she argues, implies not only that we cannot occupy a "view from nowhere" but also that we cannot occupy a "view from everywhere," as there is an upper limit to how many perspectives we can entertain about any object.

<sup>17</sup>Another response to the Evidential Argument against life affirmation might draw on the work of Alexander Nehamas, who argues that Nietzsche "seems to think that strictly speaking all properties are equally essential to their subjects and thus that there is ultimately no distinction to be drawn between essential and accidental properties at all: if any property were different, its subject would simply be a different subject" (1985, p. 155). Armed with this claim, sometimes called "superessentialism," one could argue that all instances of suffering are *necessary* to this life being what it is, such that no suffering is gratuitous. Nehamas's interpretation is objected to on various grounds, including (i) that Nietzsche is not committed to superessentialism and (ii) that superessentialism makes life affirmation *less demanding* by removing the possibility of alternative worlds that we must dismiss in favor of affirming *this* world (see Janaway, 2014, pp. 108–109). As I cannot enter into this debate here, I merely note that the skeptical defense does not require superessentialism.



### 3 | THE JUSTIFICATION ARGUMENT AND SKEPTICAL LIFE AFFIRMATION

#### 3.1 | The Justification Argument against life affirmation

The skeptical defense of life affirmation argues that we should withhold judgment about premise 1\* of the Evidential Argument. While some suffering *seems* gratuitous, our limited epistemic position blocks us from confirming this. For all we know, all suffering might be justified. At this point, another problem emerges. Call it “the Justification Argument.”

Simon May (2011, 2016) raises an especially clear version of the Justification Argument against the project of life affirmation. Drawing on Nietzsche's *Genealogy*, May observes “that man tolerates and even wills suffering providing he is shown a meaning for it—is just another expression of moral thinking and its religious roots.” Consequently, any attempt to affirm life by finding meaning in, or justification for, suffering is “a symptom of the very despair that [Nietzsche] diagnoses in morality” (2011, p. 80). May accordingly argues that overcoming morality requires more than considering life and suffering justified; it requires overcoming *the need for justification*. As he puts it: “the pose of assuming that ‘life’ or its suffering can be evaluated and justified is the pose of the life denier, *even if* he should end up giving it a positive value” (p. 87; see also May, 2016). So, while it is tempting to imagine the life affirmer appraising the value of life as a whole, including suffering, and concluding that life merits affirming, we must resist this impulse. A true life affirmer has no need for justification.

The Justification Argument's bearing on our discussion is straightforward. The skeptical defense of life affirmation might show that it is *possible* for seemingly gratuitous suffering to be justified. Nonetheless, this appeal to possible justification is symptomatic of a moralistic condemnation of life. It is only because one finds life *wanting* that she may be consoled by the skeptical defense of life affirmation. A genuine life affirmer, by contrast, has no need for this defense. The Evidential Argument against life affirmation simply does not gain traction for a genuine life affirmer because the thought that life as a whole might *not* be justified never arises.

#### 3.2 | A skeptical reply to the Justification Argument

As an exegetical matter, I think that May is right. Nietzsche *does* consider the need to justify life symptomatic of a moralistic position that finds life somehow lacking. Still, I do not think the Justification Argument requires abandoning the skeptical defense of life affirmation but *strengthening* it. To explain what I mean, let us revisit the relation between Skeptical Theism and the skeptical defense of Nietzschean life affirmation.

Recall that the Skeptical Theist appeals to CORNEA to argue that, for all we know, seemingly gratuitous suffering could be justified under some cost–benefit analysis employed by God, whose reasoning exceeds our own. The Skeptical Theist's suspension of judgment concerning premise 1 thus turns on a distinction between the natural limits of human reasoning and the unlimited, supernatural reasoning of God: the latter can appreciate justifications for suffering that the former cannot. In the preceding discussion, I suggested that a similar line of reasoning is open to Nietzsche. The limits of our epistemic position, I argued, prevents us from ruling out *possible* justifications for seemingly gratuitous suffering. I think this conclusion (now called: “the weak skeptical defense”) holds. But it fails to capture Nietzsche's full view. For, Nietzsche not only denies that some divine cost–benefit analysis governs life as a whole (GS, 109; BGE, 9; A 15); even more to the point, he takes the death of God to *eliminate* the possibility of the transcendent and supernatural perspective needed to appraise life as a whole. As a result, the question of whether a given

instance of suffering is gratuitous or justified is not just unanswerable *for us* (as it is for the Skeptical Theist). It is unanswerable *as such*. What I call “the strong skeptical defense” seeks to demonstrate this claim.

Nietzsche argues for the strong skeptical defense in another passage from TI. He writes:

A condemnation of life on the part of the living is, in the end, only the symptom of a certain type of life, and has no bearing on the question of whether or not the condemnation is justified. Even to raise the problem of the *value* of life, you would need to be both *outside* life and as familiar with life as someone, anyone, everyone who has ever lived: this is enough to tell us that the problem is inaccessible to us. When we talk about values we are under the inspiration, under the optic, of life: life itself forces us to posit values, life itself evaluates through us, *when* we posit values. (TI, “Morality” 5)

As I read it, this passage offers two arguments against attempts to appraise life's value. The first argument trades on a lack of fit between the *object* appraised—namely, life as a whole—and the *standpoint* of the appraiser: the former is global in scope, whereas the latter is categorically limited. The incongruity between these features, which both figure in appraisals of life's value, leads Nietzsche to conclude that “the problem of the *value* of life . . . is inaccessible to us.” His point is *not* that “from a cosmic standpoint suffering is meaningless,” or even “from a cosmic standpoint suffering is or is *possibly* justified.” Rather, his point seems to be that the notion of a “cosmic standpoint” is incoherent, is an oxymoron. Yet this standpoint is assumed when one claims that some instance of suffering could be eliminated without compromising some greater good. Hence, the argument gives us reason to think we cannot coherently appraise life as a whole, much less assess whether a given instance of suffering is gratuitous in relation to life as a whole. The argument therefore provides reason to resist premise 1\*.

The second argument advanced in the previous passage employs quasi-transcendental reasoning for the strong skeptical defense. If we accept Nietzsche's premise that “life itself forces us to posit values,” then life is a presupposition of all value judgments. This renders value judgments that negate life as a whole self-undermining: they renounce the conditions of their own possibility. Rather than bearing directly on premise 1\* (gratuitous suffering exists), this argument undercuts the antecedent of premise 2\* (*if life were worth affirming*, gratuitous suffering would not exist). We cannot rationally establish criteria under which life is (or is not) worth affirming, since life forms the condition for the possibility of evaluative judgments generally. Like the previous argument, this argument provides reason to think that life is not a suitable object for rational, evaluative assessment. I will examine the consequences this conclusion has for Nietzsche's project of life affirmation shortly. For now, note that the skeptical defense no longer appeals to *possible justifications* for seemingly gratuitous suffering. In its strong form, the skeptical defense provides an epistemological antidote to the search for such justification. It encourages us to *give up* the attempt to justify suffering in relation to life as a whole on the grounds that the presuppositions of this monumental task are incoherent from our impoverished epistemic position.

This strong, skeptical reply to the Justification Argument resembles a point made by Daniel Came (2009) when analyzing *The Birth of Tragedy's* project of providing an aesthetic justification of suffering. Came observes that Nietzsche rejects Socrates's attempt to offer a *rational* justification for life, which turns on the assumption that “rational thought . . . can penetrate into the depths of being” (BT, 15). Came then argues that Nietzsche considers the attempt to evaluate life according to rational criteria a form of life denial, presumably because life is irrational. He thus concludes that, for Nietzsche, we cannot know whether life is justified. This conclusion may not be as unsettling as it seems. Came writes:

That we cannot know whether the world is justified matters only if we think that we are in some sense *required* to align our evaluative stance vis-à-vis the world with the actual value of existence. It is this supposition of the traditional approach to justification that Nietzsche rejects; not because he thinks that awareness of our true situation is incompatible with a justification of the traditional kind, but because, first, such awareness is not available to us; and, second, because the whole demand for a justification to be true is part of a wider system of life-denying, Socratic valuations that Nietzsche explicitly rejects. (2009, pp. 46–47)

Came accordingly interprets *The Birth of Tragedy's* aesthetic justification of existence as “an epistemically neutral conception of justification—that is, a conception of justification that involves no commitment with respect to its own truth-value” (p. 47). Instead of operating rationally under a criterion of truth, *The Birth of Tragedy's* justification of life operates aesthetically under an *affective* criterion.

While Came and I agree that there is no rational answer to the question of whether or not suffering is justified, our accounts differ in two respects. First, Came limits his discussion to *The Birth of Tragedy*, whereas the skeptical defense draws from Nietzsche's later works (e.g., D, 115, 119; GS, 12, 228; TI, “Socrates” 2, “Morality” 5).<sup>18</sup> Second, and more importantly, Came's reading leaves Nietzsche vulnerable to the Justification Argument. Regardless of whether the justification is rational or aesthetic, the Justification Argument contends that the *need* to justify life is a form of life denial. The strong skeptical defense mounted here, by contrast, evades the Justification Argument. The point is not that justification for suffering is epistemically neutral. Rather, the point is that it is epistemically *impossible* for us to appraise suffering's value in relation to life as a whole. This does not mean that suffering is *unjustified*—but, again, that our epistemic position prevents our determining whether suffering *is or is not* justified. Thus, despite May's contention that the need to justify suffering is evidence that one is “still in the morality game” (2011, p. 78), the strong skeptical defense of life affirmation suggests that Nietzsche attempts to guide us *out* of “the morality game” by showing that the game's presuppositions are incoherent.

#### 4 | RATIONAL INCOHERENCE AND AFFECTIVE LIFE AFFIRMATION

Before concluding, I would like to consider two objections to my proposal. The first argues that Nietzsche simply is not concerned with rational coherence. As he has it: “belief[s], such

<sup>18</sup>Since starting this article, Came (2022, pp. 50–54) has commented on TI “Socrates” 2, arguing that its declaration that “value judgments concerning life, for or against, can ultimately never be true” violates the law of the excluded middle. (If “life is good” is false, then “life is bad” is true, or vice versa). To avoid this problem, we might take Nietzsche to argue that value is “a noninstantiated property” (p. 50). But noninstantiated properties still have truth conditions: statements that predicate noninstantiated properties to objects are *false* (pp. 51–52). Besides, even if we take Nietzsche to claim that “value judgements about life involve ascribing a property (value) to something (life) that could not possibly have that property” (p. 52), Came argues that this claim is distinct from claiming that life's value cannot be *known*, as “‘x cannot be known’ (at least) conversationally implies that ‘x could in principle be known’” (p. 52n28). He thus concludes that TI “Socrates” 2 confusedly runs together epistemic and metaethical points. In contrast with Came, I take TI “Socrates” 2's argument to concern—not whether value is instantiated, but—whether life as a whole is a cognizable object to which we can sensibly apply predicates. On this suggestion, the claim that “value judgements concerning life . . . can ultimately never be true” is analogous to claiming, say, that spatial comparisons about life can never be true. The claim “life is big” is false for the same reasons that “life is small” is false: both erroneously imply that we can get “outside” the whole of life, whereas Nietzsche insists “*there is nothing outside the whole*” (TI, “Errors” 8). I also see no reason why “the value of life cannot be known” implies “the value of life could in principle be known,” any more than the statement “the circumference of a squared circle cannot be known” implies “the circumference of a squared circle could in principle be known.” The reason the conversational implicature does not carry over to my interpretation is that I take Nietzsche's point to turn on the coherence of the object (life as a whole) as opposed to the instantiation of the relevant predicate (value). For an example latter sort of argument, see HH, I:28.

as taking something to be true, are (as every psychologist knows) trivial matters of fifth-rate importance compared to the value of the instincts” (A, 39; see also BGE, 4). Statements such as this suggest that the skeptical defense's focus on rational coherence misses the real question of whether attempts to justify life's value might serve a protective psychological function that promotes life. The second objection grants the strong form of the skeptical defense, which concludes that attempts to appraise life's value are epistemically fraught because life is not a cognizable object. However, the objection continues, this conclusion is too strong, for it would make Nietzsche's project of life affirmation hopeless as well. Let me take these objections in turn.

I concede that Nietzsche's ultimate criterion for evaluating judgments is not their truth but the extent to which they promote life. Nevertheless, we have seen that he considers the *need* to justify life evidence that one is in a life-denying condition: the project of justifying life is only attractive to those who find life wanting. But Nietzsche's explanation does not stop here. Consistent with his tendency to explain individuals' beliefs in terms of their drives and instincts, he claims that “value judgments on life” are “symptoms” of an underlying “*physiological*” condition (TI, “Socrates” 2; see also TI, “Morality” 5; BGE, 268). Thus, appraisals of life's value are not only life-denying in that they assume life is somehow lacking; they also give voice to life-denying *instincts*—a condition Nietzsche calls “decadence” (TI, “Socrates”). Now, a detractor might insist that judgments about life's value (true or not) nonetheless preserve the decadent's mode of life, and so they should not be criticized. This rebuttal only works if decadent individuals cannot be redeemed: if they can be led out of their life-denying condition, Nietzsche has reason to disabuse them of their judgments. For the sake of argument, though, assume that decadents are beyond recovery. On this suggestion, Nietzsche still has reason to argue against decadent judgments because he considers them *contagious*; they can harm otherwise healthy individuals. “The moral lie in the decadent's mouth says . . . ‘life isn't worth anything,’” Nietzsche writes. “A judgment like this is very dangerous, it is infectious,—it quickly grows in society's morbid soil into a tropical vegetation of concepts, now as religion (Christianity), now as philosophy (Schopenhauerianism)” (TI, “Skirmishes” 35). Hence, even if Nietzsche is not primarily concerned with the truth of evaluative judgments about life, he has reason to object to such judgments insofar as they promote a contagious and decadent form of life denial.

The second objection is that Nietzsche's arguments for why life as a whole is not a cognizable object undercut his own project of affirming life as a whole. This objection resembles another point discussed by several Nietzsche scholars—that Nietzsche's criticism of the *need* to justify life ostensibly opposes his own pursuit of life affirmation. Rather than concluding that Nietzsche's project is fatally flawed, though, these scholars argue that Nietzschean life affirmation should be understood as an *affective* condition, rather than as a product of reflective, cognitive judgments.<sup>19</sup> Exemplary here are the nobles of GM I, whose affirmation of life erupts “spontaneously” (GM, I:11; see also GM, I:10) and prior to developing complex inner lives (GM, II:16). This refinement of Nietzsche's view also addresses the present concern. Life as a whole can be affirmed despite the fact that it is not a cognizable object, provided that “affirmation” ceases to be understood as a reflective, theoretical commitment and is instead understood as something closer to an unreflective, emotional orientation. The affective orientation in question *assumes* that life is worthy of affirmation, rather than attempting to *conclude* that life merits affirmation by means of rational argument.

If Nietzsche's ultimate concern is not with the *truth* of judgments about life, and if his ultimate aim is to incite *unreflective* life affirmation, why does he present *epistemological*

<sup>19</sup>See May (2011, 2016), Merrick (2016), Came (2022), Gemes (2022), and Janaway (2022).

arguments of the sort analyzed here? This question can be answered, and the foregoing replies to the two previous objections can be buttressed, by attending to Nietzsche's presumed audience. Nietzsche's late modern readers, as he sees them, are heirs to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the normative core of this tradition, on his view, is a belief in the unconditional value of truth (GS, 344; GM, III:23–25). This sheds new light on the skeptical defense. Nietzsche's arguments about the rational incoherence of attempts to assess life's value may not reflect *his* considered values, but these arguments can still exert pressure those who value truth above all else. The skeptical defense of life affirmation, in other words, can be understood as an argumentative strategy *internal to* the Judeo-Christian evaluative paradigm.<sup>20</sup> This explains why he casts his argument in epistemological, rather than prudential, terms.

A similar point holds for why Nietzsche offers rational arguments to promote unreflective, affective life affirmation. While the nobles of GM I spontaneously affirm life, Nietzsche insists that we cannot return to such a condition: “a *regressive development* in any way, shape, or form is absolutely impossible. . . . We *have to go forwards*, and I mean *step by step further into decadence*” (TI, “Skirmishes” 43). The skeptical defense of life affirmation does just this. It turns the Judeo-Christian tradition's unconditional valuation of truth *against* the attempt to rationally appraise life's value, showing that all such attempts are epistemically faulty. Granted, this falls short of producing unreflective life affirmation, but it is a step in the right direction. As one of Nietzsche's middle works has it: “we have to *learn to think differently*—in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: *to feel differently*” (D, 103). In particular, the strong skeptical defense shows that allegedly gratuitous suffering does not pose a unique problem when assessing life's value, because the attempt to assess life's value *is already* irredeemably problematic. The resulting uncertainty about life, it merits emphasizing, does not preclude unreflective, affective affirmation. Nietzsche stresses this when commenting on his own suffering: “Life itself has become a *problem*,” he writes. “Yet one should not jump to the conclusion that this necessarily makes one sullen. Even love of life is still possible—only one loves differently. It is like the love for a [person] who gives us doubts” (GS, P:3). In its strong form, the skeptical defense of life affirmation not only shows that we cannot make heads or tails of the claim that gratuitous suffering exists. It invites us to abandon the project of trying to rationally assess life's value and thereby clears a path toward unreflective, affective life affirmation.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

The existence of seemingly gratuitous suffering seems to vitiate Nietzsche's project of life affirmation. However, I argued that Nietzsche's deflationary view of the power and accuracy of human cognition enables a skeptical defense of life affirmation in response to this objection. We are not in the epistemic position needed to determine whether an instance of suffering is, in fact, gratuitous. And while one might worry that the very attempt to justify suffering is itself a kind of life denial, the skeptical defense of life affirmation can be strengthened to the point of undermining such justificatory projects, showing that they are doomed due to our limited epistemic situation.

Similar to the way that the Skeptical Theist responds to the Evidential Argument by contending that theism is compatible with the existence of seemingly gratuitous suffering, I aimed merely to show that Nietzschean life affirmation is, in principle, compatible with seemingly senseless suffering. How an unreflective, affective affirmation of life might be cultivated remains an open question. Still, I hope that the skeptical defense mounted here puts the ball back

<sup>20</sup>I therefore disagree with Elgat (2017), who contends that Nietzsche thinks no rational argument could demonstrate that one's evaluative judgments are mistaken. If one espouses the value of truth, *reductio*-styled arguments should influence one's evaluative outlook. Compare GS 357, which describes the “discipline for truth” as eventually forbidding “the *lie* of faith in God.”



in the court of those who contend that seemingly gratuitous suffering, on its own, renders Nietzschean life affirmation impossible.<sup>21</sup>

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