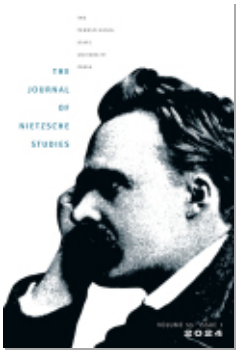
Nietzsche on Morality and the Affirmation of Life ed. by Daniel Came (review)



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contrast, depicts processes in which bare self-assertion, being accountable to oneself, gaining a measure of oneself by comparison to others, and relating oneself to "any ideal and imaginative events" (*GM* II:18) all require radical innovation.

I suspect that some criteria of interpretive success would be that the object of Nietzsche's critique is sufficiently general that it includes a wide range of social practices (at least widely accepted moral positions, but also epistemic and cultural practices that Nietzsche takes to be implicated); Nietzsche's interest in the historical emergence of morality should be reflected in the critique; and the critique shouldn't depend on contingencies of what makes individuals feel less weak or on essentialist claims about function. I do not think that *The Will to Nothingness* satisfies these criteria.

Daniel Came, ed., *Nietzsche on Morality and the Affirmation of Life*

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Daniel Came's most recent edited collection features original essays from leading figures in the field. As most of its chapters are well-written and well-argued, it will interest Nietzsche scholars generally. It's difficult to narrow the volume's intended audience much further than this, however. The source of this difficulty is not merely titular, though one wonders what aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy could *not* plausibly be yoked under the dual headings of "morality" and "life affirmation." Rather, the difficulty stems from a shortcoming of Nietzsche's. As Came puts the point in his introduction, "Nietzsche is greatly more forthcoming in his diagnosis of the life-denying nature of morality than he is about what should replace morality and in particular the type of life-affirming attitude which might then ensue" (7). The underdeveloped character of Nietzsche's positive

pronouncements about life affirmation leaves many questions unanswered, the most basic of which might be, "What exactly is it to affirm life?" (7). This collection admirably attempts to tackle such questions head-on by foregrounding Nietzsche's "practical-existential concern with the value of existence" (4)—even if, in resisting the temptation to delve ever deeper into the complexities of Nietzsche's critical enterprise, this approach risks leaving some specialist concerns aside.

In light of the inchoate nature of Nietzsche's remedy for life denial, a volume taking life affirmation as its starting point can be forgiven if its contributions are somewhat scattered. Four chapters in this collection—authored by Gemes, Hassan, Huddleston, and Janaway—identify distinct obstacles to Nietzsche's project of life affirmation and explain how Nietzsche might overcome them. Three others—written by Came, Stern, and Kanterian—overlap in arguing that Nietzsche's notion of life affirmation is deeply confused at best and fatally flawed at worst. Two remaining chapters, by Reginster and Clark, are functionally close readings of *GM*. Below, I discuss the standout essays by Gemes, Came, Huddleston, and Stern, which straightforwardly interact with one another. I then comment on the volume's remaining essays.

In his chapter, Gemes suggests that Nietzsche's concern with nihilism emerges after *HH,* whereas his earlier works express a Romantic preoccupation with cultural renewal. While Reginster analyzes nihilism as a cognitive state of disorientation or despair (*The Affirmation of Life* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006]) and Pippin analyzes nihilism as a waning of erotic desire (*Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010]), Gemes contends that these forms of nihilism are downstream from a more fundamental condition of *affective* nihilism that becomes fully manifest with the advent of Christian morality. (Kaitlyn Creasy's work on affective nihilism goes unmentioned.) Gemes then rightly observes that nihilism does not merely subtend overt expressions of life denial, as Nietzsche also "characterizes *the need* to ask reflective questions about the value of existence as a pathological symptom" of nihilism (29, emphasis added; see also *GS* P:2; *TI* "Socrates" 2; *TI* "Morality" 5). This presents a problem for Nietzsche's life-affirming ambitions. For, even if the ancient Greeks and *GM*'s nobles can accomplish "naïve affirmation," which is "more an affective state than a consciously avowed cognitive belief" (28–29), it is unclear whether we late moderns can do the same. Moreover, Nietzsche's

challenge of affirming the eternal recurrence (*GS* 341) seems to require the sort of reflective, cognitive assessment of life that Nietzsche diagnoses as nihilistic. I would have liked for Gemes to have examined Nietzsche's indictment of *judgments* about life in more detail, as this seems crucial for delimiting Nietzsche's project of life affirmation. In any case, Gemes concludes by suggesting that *Z* might strive to incite "deep poetic inspiration [. . .] among those who [can] hear rightly" (35), thereby helping these select few overcome affective nihilism. This might be Nietzsche's best strategy for facilitating life affirmation.

Came is less confident that Nietzsche's critique of morality allows him to affirm life. His chapter begins by showing that, throughout his works, Nietzsche aims "to vindicate the goodness or desirability of life in the face of suffering" (41). Although Nietzsche seeks to exonerate *life*, rather than *God*, Came aligns this ambition with the Christian tradition of theodicy: both projects respond to a shared "*psychological* problem" rooted in "a kind of primordial anxiety" about whether suffering undermines philosophical optimism (44). Like Gemes, Came also maintains that "the very need to provide a theoretical justification of existence is motivated by a need for reassurance and to assuage uncertainty, and hence is a sign that things have already started to break down," such that Nietzsche must "*dissolve* the problem of theodicy altogether" to accomplish life affirmation (49). Unlike Gemes, however, Came contends that "emancipation from the need for theodicy is itself a theodicy" (56). His argument to this effect largely rests on Nietzsche's declaration that "value judgements concerning life, for or against, can ultimately never be true: they have value only as symptoms. [. . .] *The value of life cannot be estimated*" (*TI* "Socrates" 2). On Came's reading, this brash statement cannot amount to the epistemic claim that "the value of life cannot be known." If this is "logically equivalent to the claim that all value judgements about life are systematically false," Nietzsche's claim violates the law of excluded middle: if "life is good" is false, then "life is bad" is true, and vice versa (51). One might try to avoid this misstep with a metaethical reading on which Nietzsche claims that value is a non-instantiated property. But non-instantiated properties have truth conditions (statements predicating non-instantiated properties to objects are *false*), whereas Nietzsche's claim that judgments about life's value can *never* be true implies that such judgments lack truth value altogether (52). Came takes the metaethical

point to be closer to Nietzsche's considered view but notes that it renders all rational arguments for life affirmation unjustified. What's more, insofar as *concern with* life's value is symptomatic of a life-denying condition, Nietzsche's attempt to dissolve the need for theodicy remains within Christianity's nihilistic worldview.

Despite agreeing with much of Came's analysis, I have two reservations about his conclusion. First, while I read *TI* "Socrates" 2 as making an epistemic point, I take Nietzsche's implicit reasoning to be that the value of life cannot be known because "life" is not a cognizable object to which we can sensibly apply predicates. As he writes later in *TI*, "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" (*TI* "Morality" 5). Now, if Nietzsche's point is that "life" cannot be cognized, then value judgments about life cannot be true. But this interpretation neither violates the law of excluded middle nor entails any metaethical consequences. Consider an analogous statement: "comparisons of squared-circles' areas can never be true." This does not violate the law of excluded middle—as though *denying* that one squared-circle's area is larger than another entails *affirming* that the former is smaller than the latter. The problem at hand is more basic. The analogous statement also does not imply that dyadic properties such as "larger than" are not instantiated. Granted, this interpretation does render all *judgments* about life unjustified. But if one shares Gemes's view that Nietzsche aims to incite affective life affirmation, this might not be damning. Second, I fail to see why attempting to dissolve the need for theodicy is itself a theodicy. Arguments can assume some theoretical backdrop without endorsing the backdrop itself. As I read him, Nietzsche writes to Judeo-Christian audiences. His arguments about the impossibility of justifying judgments about life's value are *internal* to the Judeo-Christian paradigm, which (i) values truth unconditionally (*GS* 344; *GM* III:23–25), and thus can be swayed by rational argument, and (ii) is *already* troubled by life's value. If such arguments undermine cognitive judgments about life's value, this might help Nietzsche's readers realize the need for unreflective, affective life affirmation.

Even if one entertains my reconstruction of Nietzsche's indictments of judgments about life, this approach must be squared with the eternal

recurrence, which seems to demand a reflective assessment of life's value. Huddleston's essay is instructive here. Huddleston begins by arguing against a cosmological interpretation of the eternal recurrence on the grounds that this is not unequivocally Zarathustra's view, that Nietzsche's view may be distinct from Zarathustra's, and that the cosmological reading undermines the eternal recurrence's existentially transformative import. Huddleston then considers two ways of understanding the eternal recurrence as a thought experiment. According to a first, "deflationary" approach, the eternal recurrence does not require that one affirm *each and every part* of life. Huddleston dismisses this approach as at odds with Nietzsche's articulation of *amor fati* (*EH* "Clever" 10) and with his insistence that trivial aspects of existence should be affirmed (*GS* 341). On a second, "vindicatory" approach, the eternal recurrence requires that every aspect of life be affirmed as *parts* of a metaphysically interconnected whole that conditions the affirmer's personal identity. Huddleston argues that this reading is unsupported by Nietzsche's metaphysical sketches and irreconcilable with Nietzsche's critical streak. He then advances his own view, on which Nietzsche's challenge invites us to *admire the character* of one who responds to the thought of the eternal recurrence affirmatively. From here, Huddleston sets himself the difficult task of explaining how eternal recurrence affirmation might testify to an admirable character even if such an affirmation is merely momentary. While I am dissatisfied with Huddleston's resolution of this particular issue, his general approach suggests that Nietzsche's aim in formulating the eternal recurrence is to incite reflection *not* on life's value but on the attitude of an individual who might (momentarily) respond to this thought with unconditional affirmation. Huddleston suggests that this (over)reaction is likely unjustified—but that's beside the point. What is crucial is that the eternal recurrence aims to incite admiration for the kind of individual who is unreflectively disposed toward life affirmation.

Nietzsche's detractors might remain dissatisfied. Stern, for one, argues that "for reasons internal to his own philosophical aims, Nietzsche's [pursuit of natural] affirmation is fatally flawed" (170). Stern's chapter begins by reconstructing Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, taking it to claim that because Christian morality devalues natural instincts, it *thereby* implies that "Life, as a whole, is bad" (172). Stern takes Nietzsche to offer two arguments against this kind of inference. First, "a 'frame of reference' argument: value-judgements about life as a whole [. . .] cannot reasonably be made,

because we cannot have the appropriate frame of reference to make such judgements" (172; see also *TI* "Socrates" 2; *TI* "Errors" 8; *GS* 346). Second, a "'life-psychology' argument": "in expressing an anti-natural thought [about life] what must really be going on is that Life is making a judgement, through us, about itself" (172; also see *TI* "Morality" 5; *GS* P:2). Unfortunately, the "frame of reference" argument does not merely undercut Christian morality. It also renders affirmative judgments about life (whether these affirm natural instincts or all past and present events) unjustified. What's more, the "life-psychology" argument seems to make life affirmation (now understood only as the affirmation of natural instincts) unavoidable. Even if Christian morality expresses a sick mode of life, it expresses life nonetheless—and Nietzsche "owes us an account of why being guided by a sick or malfunctioning Life is *objectionable*" (185). If we charitably grant Nietzsche some account of why his idiosyncratic notion of "health" is preferrable to sickness, yet another problem arises: Nietzsche's criticisms of Christianity as a sickness undercut his ability to accomplish "the endorsement of total affirmation" (189). Stern concludes that Nietzsche's account of life affirmation is doomed.

Perhaps I am among those whom Stern charges with "showing that [Nietzsche] is right by any means possible, including ignoring his philosophical claims and commitments" (189). But I read Stern's contribution as amounting to a *reductio* against attempts to pursue life affirmation *cognitively* and *rationally*. Stern is at pains to disambiguate various senses of "life" in Nietzsche's work. ("Life" sometimes refers to individuals' existences, to the "personified force" that judges through us [172], to "forces, instincts or powers as they operate naturally," and to all "past and present events" [177].) Yet rather than extending the frame of reference argument beyond judgments about life's *value* to the concept of life *simpliciter*, he seems to attribute this ambiguity to Nietzsche. Stern also repeatedly characterizes life affirmation and life denial as *judgments* requiring *assent* (172–73; 179–81). As far as I can tell, nothing in Stern's analysis vitiates an affective, rather than reflective, form of life affirmation.

The chapters by Gemes, Came, Huddleston, and Stern are not the only strong essays in this collection. Hassan's chapter persuasively shows that Reginster's earlier analysis, on which suffering might be affirmed as a constituent part of a valued whole (*The Affirmation of Life*), fails to capture Nietzsche's claim that suffering *itself* might be valuable. Hassan

remedies this shortcoming by suggesting that suffering might *contribute to* the value of a larger whole, such that suffering's value *becomes* positive in certain contexts. He illustrates the point with the vivid example of Homeric heroes whom we admire on *aesthetic*, rather than rational, grounds. Janaway's chapter is also strong. Against the tendency to refine the *object* of life affirmation, Janaway asks after the *subject* that affirms life. He demonstrates that Nietzsche attributes such yea-saying to suprapersonal phenomena (various cultural products) and subpersonal elements (drives, instincts) that mutually inform one another. This reciprocal interaction of sub- and suprapersonal elements shaping persons' outlooks suggests that affective life affirmation may require a certain cultural milieu, one lacking during Nietzsche's lifetime. I did not find Kanterian's chapter especially compelling, unlike Hassan's and Janaway's contributions. While Kanterian helpfully reviews many of Nietzsche's ambivalent, and at times ostensibly conflicting, statements about Christianity, Came and Stern's contributions, I think, more forcefully argue for the pessimistic conclusions that Kanterian draws about Nietzschean life affirmation.

Two outliers of the volume are functionally close readings of *GM*. Reginster's chapter argues that *ressentiment* is distinct from envy, revengefulness, and suffering. As such, *ressentiment* supports a view of the will to power as an independent source of human motivation: individuals experience *ressentiment*, roughly, when they cannot exercise effective agency. Clark's essay argues against the familiar reading of *GM* III as an account of the causal genesis of the ascetic ideal and in favor of an interpretation on which *GM* III is concerned with the ideal's *normative value*, which might address the needs of the sickly animals that Nietzsche takes humans to be. While those familiar with Reginster's and Clark's works will not be disappointed by these chapters, I suspect that those *unfamiliar* with their works will find them wanting as standalone pieces.

Readers interested in clarifying Nietzsche's often opaque statements about life affirmation will profit considerably from this collection. While those specializing in some narrow aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy or other might not find the volume as useful, *Nietzsche on Morality and the Affirmation of Life* refreshingly returns our attention to Nietzsche's positive philosophical ambitions, making it a welcome contribution to extant studies of Nietzsche.