14 Nietzsche's Ethics of Affirmation*

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Those who turn to Nietzsche's works are often drawn to his position as an outsider in the philosophical tradition, critical of the views of others. But Nietzsche's reader cannot help asking whether he was advocating a more substantial, positive ethical vision. If there is an answer, it is probably something called 'the affirmation of life'.

Typically, when we describe something, now, in English, as 'life-affirming', it is something which made us feel good about life – *in general*, that is, without regard to a specific situation or circumstance. Often, a so-called 'life-affirming' story features a character who faces misfortune, disadvantage or adversity and does not merely survive, but triumphs. Nietzsche might have approved of the 'life-affirming' character in this contemporary sense. His remark, 'what does not kill me makes me stronger' (TI, 'Maxims', 8; also EH, 'Wise', 2), has proved one of the most memorable encapsulations of this ideal. I will stress in this chapter that this ordinary notion is not typically what Nietzsche had in mind when he spoke of the 'affirmation of life'. But it is close enough that it prompts questions which are relevant to Nietzsche's view. A life-affirming experience (in the modern sense) makes us feel that life, in general, is good. Now, as a matter of fact, do we think that life, in general, really is good? If so, the life-affirming experience tracks an important truth, perhaps reminding us when we forget. If life is awful – or if we simply cannot say anything about life's 'goodness' at such a general level – then the feeling that life is good might amount to deception. The life-affirmer can reply that, even if life is awful (or neutral), we might as well feel good about it. But at least some of us, one supposes, would prefer to feel good about life only if life has earnt it. Our ordinary, contemporary notion of affirmation pushes us towards the question of whether life, as a whole, is good.

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That question was the focus of the so-called *Pessimismusstreit* ('pessimism dispute'). In German-speaking circles, the *Pessimismusstreit* was one of the most provocative and wide-reaching public, intellectual debates of the era, already raging in the 1860s and continuing to prompt lengthy books and articles long after Nietzsche had ceased to be able to write.[1] It was, in other words, one of the dominant currents in Nietzsche's adult, intellectual life and he expected his reader to know about it. It was in this context that 'affirmation' became important, initially as a technical term in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. 'Affirmation' was therefore not a term that Nietzsche had invented himself and nor did it carry all of its modern, English connotations. This paper presents three variants of Nietzschean affirmation. But, to appreciate any of them, we will need to begin with the pessimism dispute itself.

SCHOPENHAUER, PESSIMISM AND AFFIRMATION

As we have seen, the central question of the pessimism dispute was: is life, taken as a whole, good? Optimists thought that it was good; pessimists thought that it was bad. To that extent, the term 'pessimism' is misleading. First, it has little in common with the modern sense of expecting things to turn out for the worst: for pessimists, everything was already bad. Second, although it literally suggests '*worst*-ism', pessimists did not necessarily think that ours is the worst possible world. Arthur Schopenhauer sometimes made that claim, but elsewhere he certainly appears to allow for a world worse than our own. Eduard von Hartmann, typically considered a pessimist, thought ours was both bad and the *best* possible world.[2] To qualify as a pessimist, 'bad' was good enough. The focal point of the dispute was Schopenhauer's set of pessimist arguments. His grounds were the necessity and all-pervasiveness of suffering, which easily overwhelmed any fleeting pleasures. Suffering was associated, in particular, with desire: to be without the object of our desire is unpleasant; to get what we desire may provide minimal respite, sure to be followed

by (unpleasant) boredom and the immediate generation of another desire.[3]

Two further features of Schopenhauer's pessimism should be noted. First, Schopenhauer's metaphysics depended on the thought that the 'Will', the blind, restless basis of all things, operates through us and constitutes us: in some sense, we just *are* will. The Will or (synonymously, Schopenhauer says) the 'Will-to-Life'[4] – the force which blindly controls all things, inorganic and organic, such that the world continues as it is – sets goals on our behalf. To speak anachronistically, the Will programmes certain desires into us for its own purposes. These desires may be good for the Will, but they are not good for us. Thus, the Will is hostile to our interests. Since the Will governs nature, Schopenhauer claims that what is natural for us is also hostile to our interests. For example, the Will wants human life to continue, so it implants in us sexual desires and the desire to have children.[5] These are natural desires. But, Schopenhauer argues at length, we would in fact be better off not being natural, that is, not seeking sexual satisfaction and not having children. Second, Schopenhauer ruled out any fundamental historical change in our predicament: his metaphysics (and, he thought, the empirical evidence) showed the impossibility of any development or improvement in this fundamental state of affairs. A change in our predicament would require a change in the nature of the Will; yet it is in the nature of the Will that it does not change.[6]

We can summarise this briefly, with reference to three questions, to which we shall return throughout our discussion:

1. Is life, as a whole, good or bad?
2. Is life (or the Will, or nature) hostile to the interests of the individual?
3. Is meaningful historical change possible?

Schopenhauer answers: bad, yes and no. He introduced the terms 'affirmation' and 'denial' of the Will to describe ways of behaving in relation to this situation. To 'affirm' the Will(-to-life) is to go along with what the Will implants in us as values and desires, which make

life possible. To 'deny' the Will is to struggle against such values and desires. Affirmation and denial of life, then, are ways of behaving in relation to what the Will (or life, or nature) wants from us.[7] Thus, in Nietzsche's intellectual context, 'saying yes to life' should not be understood primarily as embracing or celebrating life, as we might now think of a 'life-affirming' experience; nor is it a matter of having the thought that life is good: rather, it should primarily be understood as saying 'Yes, Ma'am!' (or: 'Affirmative!') to life's orders. This was the technical sense in which the term was used at the time. For example, since (as we have seen) the Will implants sexual desire in us, against our interests, so that life can repeat itself, acting on these desires is to affirm ('Yes, Ma'am!') and abstaining from sex is to deny ('I cannot comply!'). Indirectly, Schopenhauer thought, the one who affirms these implanted values affirms life *as a whole*, because they affirm the Will which creates life as a whole. Such universal affirmation need not be and usually is not conscious. But at its highest or most complete, Schopenhauer said, affirmation might mean the desire constantly to repeat one's life just as one had experienced it.[8] Schopenhauer's admiration for Christian asceticism is based on the thought that it encodes denial: the Will implants in us the desire for sex, power and riches; the ascetic is chaste, obedient and poor. Schopenhauer – and, later, Nietzsche – takes Christianity's story about the afterlife to be transparently false, at least to a critical, contemporary readership, but nonetheless powerful because it encourages us to disobey life's orders.

We must therefore maintain the distinction between Schopenhauer's diagnosis (pessimism) and his cure (denial). To be an optimist or a pessimist is to have an explicit, reasonably well-formulated view about whether life as a whole is good. Philosophies and religions are optimistic or pessimistic; most ordinary people don't take a view. But all of us, to some extent, affirm or deny, regardless of our explicit views. Affirmation and denial, we have seen, may be read off behaviours: two young lovers express the purest affirmation of life, whether or not they take a philosophical stance on pessimism.

Further, we cannot assume that affirmers are optimists or that deniers are pessimists: the Christian ascetic may say that, of course, life as a whole is wonderful because it enables him to achieve blessedness. His *behaviour*, however, is the purest denial. Some pessimists, as we shall see, advocated affirmation.

RESPONSES TO SCHOPENHAUER

Plenty of ink had been used up on these questions by the time Nietzsche began to consider them and it is worth emphasising that he followed the dispute closely: he read not only Schopenhauer, but many lesser-known and now obscure figures, together with commentaries on the dispute. The following summarises some positions with which he came into contact over the course of his career.[9] There were three major lines of response to Schopenhauer. First, there were pessimists who wished to refine or alter Schopenhauer's account. Three such figures were Eduard von Hartmann, Philipp Mainländer (a pseudonym for Philipp Batz) and Julius Bahnsen. For Hartmann, historical progress was evident and was, in a sense, what his rough equivalent of Schopenhauer's 'Will' (the 'all-one unconscious') wanted, through us, to achieve: rather than aiming at individual denial, we ought to throw ourselves into the historical world-process, safe in the knowledge that doing so would lead to a redemptive end of history. Throwing ourselves into the world-process was, Hartmann said, the affirmation of the will to live.[10] On Mainländer's account, we are at least permitted to assume that the universe is literally the decaying corpse of a single, original, god-like being: it freely chose to die, turning itself into the universe as we know it, which is slowly and inevitably disintegrating. Historical change is therefore a given. A will to death is evident (he claims) in the inorganic realm and it explains even the apparent will to *life* in the organic world, because life uses up the limited energy of the universe. As in Hartmann, then, doing what the will-to-life wants (affirmation) in fact brings about the ultimate, inevitable redemptive end. But, opposing Hartmann, Mainländer thinks that individual denial of life gets the job done more efficiently:[11] he hanged himself shortly after completing his main work, using copies of his own

book as a platform. For both Mainländer and Hartmann, the Will's interests are not *ultimately* hostile to our own, since following them logically to the end leads to redemptive nothingness. For Bahnsen, the world is certainly bad and meaningful historical progress is an illusion. He broadly rejects a single, Schopenhauerian Will in favour of many individual wills. The individual will is so deeply riven with internal contradiction and opposition that it offers opposing impulses with respect to any goal. Schopenhauerian affirmation or denial is consequently impossible: there is no clear set of orders that the 'Will' gives to us, such that we could obey (affirm) or disobey (deny) them. Indeed, the will wants both to affirm and to deny itself.[12] The best response was comic distance or a futile, tragic-heroic stand.

Second, there were those who defended a version of optimism, though it was rare to find it explicitly named as such. David Friedrich Strauss, in a much-read book which Nietzsche attacked in the first of his *Untimely Meditations*, seemed to think that, even without theism, we gladly submit ourselves to the evident reason, law and order in the universe.[13] He also displays a faith in historical and scientific progress which Schopenhauer had ruled out, together with a view that the universe was in some sense on our side. Eugen Dühring argued that no abstract, depersonalised judgement is possible about whether or not life is good. But in effect, he thought, an individual's judgement about the value of *her* life, and by extension life as such, is derived from her aggregate of positive and negative experiences.[14] He argues that for most people this aggregate will be positive. For most people, then, life, as a whole, is good. Those features of life to which the pessimist objects are either atypical or they are necessary for the appreciation of life, such that it is incoherent to imagine a good life without them. Atypical, for example, would be the negative experience Schopenhauer wrongly describes as the fate of all lovers. Necessary for any pleasurable life is the backdrop of death, the knowledge that it comes to an end. Like Strauss, Dühring's optimism is linked to scientific progress: the more we understand and control, the more we are likely to value life positively.

A final category of response was to reject the entire dispute as groundless. A common but contested argument for rejecting the dispute was that we have no frame of reference with which to judge how good or bad the world is, *as a whole,* because we have nothing with which to compare it.[15] Notice that to reject a roaring public debate as completely groundless might seem ineffective without some attempt at explaining its appeal. *Some* account of the causes of confusion should therefore be offered, and such an account might tell us something about ourselves: Friedrich Lange, for example, suggested that, despite the world having no intrinsic value either way, we naturally compare it unfavourably with a poetically beautiful image (and hence become pessimists) or poeticise it ourselves, leaving out the darker elements (and hence become optimists).[16]

In general, Nietzsche was satisfied with none of these responses yet sympathetic to all. The pessimists were right to emphasise the horrors of existence; but Nietzsche rejects Schopenhauerian denial, Hartmann's teleology and Bahnsen's noble futility. The optimists were right in aiming to celebrate and endorse life, and right, too, in denying that widespread human suffering should be taken as an objection to life. But they were wrong to think they could prove life's value and they tended to downplay life's truly horrifying features. Those who rejected the dispute as groundless were right – there was something inherently misguided about it – but they had failed to explain what it was, and hence did not see its significance. These are generalisations. Nietzsche's views changed over time and different stances jostle with one another, even in the same works. Although Nietzsche did not distinguish in this way, we shall examine three broad variants of Nietzschean affirmation, which emerge in roughly chronological order: aesthetic justification; total affirmation; natural affirmation.

FIRST VARIANT: AESTHETIC JUSTIFICATION IN *THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY*

In BT, Nietzsche presents a pessimistic realisation at the start of Western cultural history: it begins with the implicit insight that,

because living is so bad, it would be better not to have been born (BT 3). This is the so-called 'wisdom of Silenus', which Schopenhauer had already identified as evidence that life's misery was known long ago.[17] In the face of this insight, Nietzsche claims, the Greeks try out various responses, including the creation of the Olympian gods and Socratic, rational analysis. Both of these strategies help their adherents to cope, but they do so only in a limited way and for a limited time, primarily because they do not confront the underlying reality: this reality is BT's rough equivalent of Schopenhauer's Will, the 'Primordial Unity' (BT 1). Our everyday world is best understood as an artistic illusion, which the Unity creates for its own pleasurable relief.

For simplicity, I have categorised BT as offering 'affirmation', but in fact BT offers only 'justification' of life. Indeed, on the only occasion in which Nietzsche uses the word 'affirmation' in BT in anything like the relevant sense for this discussion, he is clearly using it in the Schopenhauerian sense of embracing worldly interests and he does *not* explicitly endorse it (BT 21). What is the difference? In Schopenhauer, the world is *both* just *and* bad.[18] It is bad because of the burden of suffering on individuals. But it cannot be *unjust*, where injustice entails suffering on the part of innocents or the unpunished causing of the suffering of others: from the broadest perspective, only the Will is responsible for suffering and only the Will experiences the suffering only it produces. By analogy, it is as if, for Schopenhauer, one can either exist as a justly being-punished-murderer or not exist at all. Existing as the former is bad because everyone is a murderer; but it is not unjust, because no murderers go unpunished and no one who is punished is innocent. The affirmer is merely the one who obeys life's commands, therefore one who (in the analogy) chooses to keep on murdering. We might naively expect 'seeing that the world is just' to go hand in hand with 'affirming the world', but this brief acquaintance with Schopenhauer's philosophy explains why it does not.

BT accepts the brunt of Schopenhauer's diagnosis of the world as bad-and-just, while avoiding *both* his cure (denial) and its opposite

(Schopenhauerian affirmation). This is achieved through art, which can enable us to take on something like the Unity's point of view, experiencing its delight in creating and enjoying our everyday lives. The world is 'justified' to me-as-Unity: 'I' (when merged with the Unity) create the everyday world, perform it, spectate it, and it is not unjust. Still, the diagnosis is broadly pessimistic for me-as-everyday-individual. Like ascetic, Schopenhauerian denial (and unlike Schopenhauerian affirmation), merging with the Unity implies a distancing from everyday, individual, worldly desires, which are shown to be relatively insignificant. Unlike Schopenhauerian denial, merging is an experience of creative delight and, indeed, art is a means for staving off denial. In the simplest case of aesthetic justification, the Greek lyric poet fully merges with the Unity and comes to see his everyday self as worthy, because he (as everyday human) gives the Unity (with which he has temporarily merged and which grounds his everyday self) such intense pleasure (BT 5–6). In tragedy, the account is similar, but more complicated: participants do not experience themselves as merging with the Unity as such, but rather with creatures called 'satyrs', male companions of the god Dionysus, who share some but not all of the Unity's characteristics and some but not all of our everyday characteristics (BT 7–8).

The 'justification' on offer in BT leaves a great deal open, which we can see with reference to the three questions set out above. Overall, of course, Nietzsche's suggestion is that human life, as a whole, is bad: this was Silenus' insight, while the teaching of tragedy is 'profound and pessimistic' (BT 10). But is it everyday life only that is bad, or is it the Unity as well? Silenus only suggests the former: it is better not to have been born (as an individual human). If so, then badness attaches merely to the less-than-real aesthetic production: the Unity – which is the more real part of the world and of us – is left untouched by the complaint. This matters, as we know, because in BT we can merge with this not-bad Unity: life is not bad *as a whole*. If the condemnation of life extends to the Unity, then life as a whole is indeed bad. But Nietzsche doesn't seem to think that: the Unity experiences, at the *bare*

minimum, a constant, intense, quasi-sexual pleasure (BT 4), albeit a pleasure which is the response to or relief from pain. Even a world in which my sufferings are not for nothing, in which they occur for the enjoyment of some permanently pleasured spectator (let alone one who is, in some deeper sense, also me), might be thought better than a purely mechanistic world in which I count for nothing, or one in which the divine takes no interest in me. In important respects, then, *BT*'s diagnosis differs from Schopenhauer's and is not pessimistic.

As for the possibility of meaningful historical change, the situation is similarly ambiguous. On the one hand, the Unity is meant to be unchanging and eternal. On the other hand, it experiences differing levels of satisfaction corresponding to our own activities and we are, BT assures us, about to recapture the heights of justificatory aesthetic understanding with the work of Richard Wagner. As for whether nature is hostile: since the breakdown of our everyday illusions is pleasurable for the Unity, and there is some suggestion that the tragic experience is natural or naturally sanctioned, we might be tempted to think that the Unity welcomes the justification that comes from merging with it, as long as merging does not lead to denial. On the other hand, the message Nietzsche draws from the original Oedipus and Prometheus myths is that, at heart, insight into and merging with the Unity is a great offence against nature and hence against the Unity, for which we can expect punishment (BT 9). These ambiguities will be replayed in later accounts of affirmation, as we shall see.

BT offers in many ways the most complete response to pessimism, just because, like Schopenhauer and his followers, it has a detailed metaphysics. Most readers will not find this metaphysics compelling. Indeed, some have argued that Nietzsche himself does not intend it to be taken at face value, though the matter is far from settled: the problem has been finding a convincing account of what else he was up to.[19] In any case, Nietzsche would shortly abandon this account of justification. As we shall see, abandoning it would lead to new affirmations and new concerns, although it would not resolve all of the old ones.

SECOND VARIANT: TOTAL AFFIRMATION

The second variety of Nietzschean affirmation sets the goal of affirming exactly what BT denigrates as less-than real: all that has been, all that is, and all that will be. We can call it 'total affirmation' (my label, not Nietzsche's). The goal of total affirmation is registered most memorably in Nietzsche's notions of eternal recurrence and *amor fati* ('love of fate'), though it also appears in other places.[20] These two ideas first appear in his writings at about the same time, towards the end of 1881, and they remain to the very end even though, as we shall see, not all of his background assumptions are constant. Typical of total affirmation is the description of *amor fati* as follows: 'that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity' (EH, 'Clever', 10). Note that while Schopenhauerian affirmative behaviour *implicitly* affirms all of life, Nietzschean total affirmation appears to demand *explicit*, total affirmation.

Amor fati and eternal recurrence make their first published appearances in part four of GS: *amor fati* in the opening aphorism and eternal recurrence in the penultimate aphorism. The last aphorism, immediately after the introduction of eternal recurrence, mimics the opening of *Zarathustra*, the next work Nietzsche would write. Total affirmation plays an important role in Z which, in part, tells the story of Zarathustra grappling with its demands. A fully satisfactory account of total affirmation might therefore be expected to work through the plot of Z, but the ambiguities of the text have resulted in little consensus.

Eternal recurrence amounts to the idea that all things, down to the very last details, repeat exactly as they are, in exactly the same order, eternally. The affirmative challenge is to take pleasure in this thought throughout our lives, not merely at particularly joyous moments. In the case of *amor fati* – a term Nietzsche uses relatively infrequently – the demand appears to be to love whatever has happened to you. So understood, a joyous response to the eternal recurrence would presumably necessitate *amor fati*, since an affirmation of

all things would include an affirmation of fate. It might appear as though loving fate – understood as my own personal fate – would be a weaker demand, since it would not require me to affirm every brutal historical event which took place before I was born. It is likely, however, that Nietzsche would not permit us to draw this distinction. Part of his motivation for Total Affirmation seems to have been his view that all things are interconnected, such that one cannot coherently wish for a change in one event or element, without wishing for a change in all: 'nothing in existence may be subtracted, nothing is dispensable' (EH, 'BT', 2; also Z IV, 'The Sleepwalker Song'; TI, 'Morality', 6; TI, 'Errors', 8).

Readers who restrict themselves to Nietzsche's published works will find little to suggest that Nietzsche thought of the eternal recurrence as anything more than a thought experiment to separate the affirmative sheep from the nay-saying goats. If you are happy about the prospect of living your life again (and again), you affirm life; if you feel tricked out of an 'afterlife', even the sort of redemptive afterlife of eternal nothingness offered by Mainländer, then you are probably a life-denier. Zarathustra puns by referring to metaphysicians and religious believers as *'Hinterweltler'*, that is, 'beyond-worlders' or 'hinterworlders' (Z I 'hinterworldly'). This invented term sounds identical to the word *'Hinterwäldler'* ('hillbilly' or literally 'backwoodsman'): a *Hinterweltler* is someone who believes in *Hinterwelten* ('beyond-worlds') like heaven, while the play on *'Hinterwäldler'* suggests these are backward attitudes. Eternal recurrence anchors us firmly in this world, with no recourse to any *Hinterwelt.* Since 'beyond-world' is one literal translation of the Greek terms that form the word 'metaphysics', Nietzsche's derogatory language suggests opposition to metaphysics in general. However, the crucial point is not whether one has any metaphysical beliefs, but whether one has chosen or invented those beliefs in order to denigrate this-worldly life. The Homeric Greek view, expressed by Achilles when dead and in the underworld, was that it would be better to be alive, working as a slave to a nobody, than to be the king of all the dead below: *anything* this-

worldly is better than the best of the beyond (*Odyssey*, 11.489–91). The Homeric Greek *believes* in a *Hinterwelt* – Achilles is, after all, speaking from one – but he would nonetheless welcome eternal recurrence, because the *Hinterwelt* is worse, not better, than the everyday world. The Christian *Hinterwelt* affords little hope of welcoming eternal recurrence. Jesus advises his followers to build up their treasures in heaven, not on earth. Eternal recurrence renders this a retirement fund for the eternally employed.

As an indication of whether one's worldview falls on the affirming or negating side, eternal recurrence therefore has some plausibility. What is more, the question of whether one would welcome a repeat of one's life was a trope of the *Pessimismusstreit*.[21] Undoubtedly, though, Nietzsche read many serious discussions of eternal recurrence as a real, cosmological doctrine and he tried out proofs in his unpublished notes (see KSA 13: 14 [188], pp. 374–6 (WTP 1066); also KSA 11: 36 [15], pp. 556–7 (WTP 1062); KSA 12: 10 [138], pp. 535–6 (WTP 639)).[22] A plausible reconstruction of his clearest line of argument goes as follows: the world contains finite elements; finite elements can only be combined in finite ways; time is infinite; therefore, some combinations of the world's finite elements will repeat infinitely. This yields the eternal recurrence of *one* combination. Nietzsche adds that 'between every combination and its next recurrence all other possible combinations would have to take place, and each of these combinations conditions the entire sequence of combinations in the series' (KSA 13: 14 [188], pp. 374–6, following the translation in WTP 1066). He has shown that at least one combination must repeat infinitely: call this 'C'. If each total state of the world uniquely conditions the following state, then the repetition of C will necessitate the repetition of whatever the state after C was last time C occurred ('C+1'), and the fact of C's return necessitates C+1 and all intermediary states up to the (already proven) repetition of C, which necessitates C+1 again, and so on. Now we have an eternal recurrence of all things. Nietzsche's appeal to determinism – each condition conditioning all of the others – is noteworthy, since he not infrequently expresses scepticism of some kind

about it (GS 112). A fuller account would need to take on his metaphysical views about causation, which are far from clear. Even the first part of his argument, so reconstructed, is unsound: finite elements can in fact be combined in infinite ways.[23] For our discussion of affirmation, it probably does not matter to what extent Nietzsche held a cosmological doctrine of eternal recurrence. Nor is it clear how the matter could be settled. The fact that his proofs remained unpublished does not mean that he found them unconvincing: the proof above is from a very late note and he may have been intending to use these cosmological arguments for his planned magnum opus.[24] An earlier note suggests that merely a belief in the possibility of recurrence would in itself have a profound effect, akin to the thought of hell (KSA 9: 11 [203], pp. 523–4). Perhaps that is all he needed.

How does total affirmation relate to our three guiding questions? We might expect it to be based on the claim that life, as a whole, is good, hence to be affirmed totally. Nietzsche's remarks, especially from the middle period, are confusing on the question of life's value, but he does not take an *optimistic* view, preferring to say either that there is no answer, or that a favourable valuation is only possible through ignorance, or even that full confrontation with the truth would be disappointing. (For a compact tour of remarks on the subject, compare HH I 28, 29, 32, 33. See also KSA 10: 6[1], p. 232; 7[210], p. 307; KSA 11 40[44], pp. 651–2.) Overall, his most frequent line is that judgements about the value of life, optimistic or pessimistic, are simply illegitimate. Nietzsche uses a 'frame-of-reference' argument (as described above): we cannot compare the world to anything else, so we cannot know its value (TI, 'Morality', 4–5; TI, 'Socrates', 2; TI, 'Errors', 8; GS 346; also HH I 32). It is highly unlikely, then, that Nietzsche's intention was to ground total affirmation on the claim that the world, as a whole, is good. This in itself might not rule out a kind of optimism: as we have seen, Dühring, although optimistic, could have agreed that an *overall* judgement about life was impossible, while maintaining that the average individual judgement should be that life is good. In part, as we saw, this was because, for Dühring,

a valuable life is inconceivable without some of life's apparently objectionable features. Nietzsche was also taken with the thought that apparently objectionable features of life (conflict, resistance, suffering or displeasure) were necessary. Once we understand this, we see that to desire their complete eradication is ultimately to desire the end of life.[25] But this does not in itself show that such features are *good*. Generally, Dühring thought that increased knowledge about life goes hand in hand with an increasingly positive view of life, whereas Nietzsche was always suspicious of such an assumption. As for the other questions set out at the start: in the middle period, at least, Nietzsche certainly does not agree with Schopenhauer that there is no significant historical change (HH I 2) and since (again, in the middle period) he does not see nature as dictating values to us (GS 301), he is unlikely to view it either as hostile or as friendly with respect to our interests. Nietzsche would later change his tune about the latter, and his views on the former became less clear-cut.

Sticking to his middle works, then, Nietzsche has removed the following: the possibility of a justified judgement about the value of life; a 'Will' or nature which implants values into us; and any trace of an ahistorical account of the human predicament. Earlier, we saw that 'affirmation' and 'denial', in the Schopenhauerian context, depended on the notion of a 'Will' or nature implanting values in us akin to life giving orders which we obey or disobey. Now Nietzsche has jettisoned naturally implanted values: we do not receive any orders. Consequently, we might expect him to drop the notions of affirmation or denial altogether. Instead, he *nonetheless* asks us to affirm, now apparently understood as explicit, total affirmation. In doing so, he is at least confronted with a problem of motivation: why would we want to affirm (or deny) totally? Neither Schopenhauer, nor Nietzsche in BT, needed to answer this question. For Schopenhauer, as we have seen, all of us affirm or deny: we can't help it, because we can't help reacting to the values that the Will implants in us. It is no good saying 'I neither affirm nor deny' if you are, for example, in love, or seeking personal gain, or raising children, or assiduously avoiding all of these

things. For Schopenhauer, even feeding yourself is an affirmation of sorts. BT's historical account *begins* with some awareness that the Unity-guided everyday life is unsatisfactory: to survive, we need to respond. These elements having been removed, affirmation and denial now look optional: we could choose neither.

Indeed, once choosing neither has become an option, it begins to look like an appealing one. Nietzsche's more recent readers have found it hard to imagine, as an ethical ideal, explicitly affirming all things, where that includes the worst atrocities of history. There are two thoughts here. First, it would be difficult, even with the best will in the world, to affirm every last detail: fate is unlovable. Second, even if such affirmation were achievable, it would, at least to some, look highly questionable.[26] 'Stockholm syndrome' is the name we give to the condition that some captives reputedly experience when they fall in love with their captors. Presumably Stockholm syndrome, supposing there really is such a thing, would amount to a 'syndrome' because we would like to *treat* the sufferers: we do not envy them for their ultimate, affirmative achievement. Conversely, the resilient, liberated captive does not seem to get anything terribly wrong when she makes the most of her life but admits that, all in all, it would have been better not to have been locked in that basement. If I am not forced merely to affirm or deny life monolithically, then taking a pass looks appealing. Perhaps because he lived in different times, Nietzsche does not appear to conceive of the affirmation of atrocities as a major obstacle to total affirmation. More challenging to him, it seems, is the prospect of affirming those types of people he despises (Z III 'the convalescent'; KSA 9: 11 [183], p. 512) or the errors which are necessary for life (HH I 32; GS 107). Whether our concern is with atrocities or with our epistemic frailties, what we are confronting is the problem of how to affirm the objectionable: the problem of unlovable fate.

A Nietzschean response can be constructed in two different directions. First, recall the interconnection of all things. Nietzsche claims that 'there are only necessities' (GS 109; also KSA 12: 10 [138], p. 536). Once this premise is accepted, he thinks, *any* denial of one

thing becomes a denial of all things (TI, 'Morality' 6) – including of the denier herself. The resilient captive who regrets only her captivity but affirms everything else is akin to someone who denies triangular polygons but affirms trilateral ones: denial of one in fact means denial of the other. Nietzsche also seems to have thought, plausibly, that living without evaluating is completely impossible (HH I 32). Since we cannot opt out of evaluating, and any particular negative evaluation entails total negation, we might as well choose total affirmation: choosing neither is no longer an option. This strategy is not without difficulties. First, the move from partial denial via necessary interconnection to necessary denial looks hasty. The necessity binding all events together is not obviously such that their disconnection is impossible in the way that quadrilateral, triangular polygons are impossible. Accepting the interconnection of all things means accepting that, as it happens, this world offers no configuration in which the day you fell in love is not interconnected with the Amritsar massacre. But still, you might protest, there *could* have been one without the other in a way that there could not be four-sided triangles. Second, even supposing we accept that interconnection takes us from partial denial to total denial, the same ought to be true of affirmation. If partial denial entails total denial, then partial affirmation entails total affirmation: if all things are interconnected, then why shouldn't affirming the day you fell in love be sufficient for affirming the Amritsar massacre? Nietzsche himself occasionally offers this affirmative variant, which tells us that he was at least close to recognising this problem (Z IV 'the drunken song', 10; KSA 12: 7 [38], pp. 307–8). If, in the average life, one is likely to affirm some elements and deny others, it follows that, over the course of a life, one will likely both affirm and deny all things. Occasional total affirmation now looks easy, but at the cost of making most of us both total affirmers and total deniers, which would fail to offer any coherent goal. Perhaps Nietzsche would encourage us to become *exclusively* partial-therefore-total affirmers or merely to improve our ratio of total affirmation to total denial. But the motivation to 'improve' is lost:

most of us are, at worst, merely *inconsistent* in totally affirming and totally denying over the course of our lives. In any case, this does nothing to solve the problem of unlovable fate.

Second, then, we might look more closely at the language of affirmation, especially in GS (parts I–IV). Nietzsche often connects art with affirmation (KSA 11: 40 [60], pp. 660–1), but in GS (I–IV) in particular Nietzsche advocates an artistic response to the world and to oneself. An affirmation of the world as it is when *artistically* presented has seemed more plausible.[27] But it is clear that the 'artistic', for Nietzsche, includes falsification. *Amor fati* requires making something (i.e., fate) beautiful; making things beautiful – Nietzsche could not be clearer – permits and perhaps demands falsification.[28] In as much as artistic presentation of the world is permitted or required for affirmation, and artistic presentation includes falsification, affirmation of all things might not exactly mean affirmation of all things as they in fact are, but rather affirmation of an artistically manipulated presentation of things. This strategy, too, does not come cheap. For one thing, it does not solve the motivational problem. The affirmer is permitted to falsify: still, why affirm? The affirmer resembles a daydreamer or wishful thinker, celebrating things as they in fact are *not*. There is also a psychological problem: how can I deceive myself into affirming a picture of things I know to be distorting? Nietzsche can point to clear cases in which we put unpleasant thoughts out of our mind: the knowledge of our inevitable death is a good example (GS 278). But it is not clear how I could *choose* to do this for all troubling thoughts.

THIRD VARIANT: NATURAL AFFIRMATION

What I am calling 'natural affirmation' is present most clearly from 1886 onwards, although it has its roots in earlier material.[29] Towards the end of his writing career, a shift occurs in Nietzsche's thinking. Whereas GS had declared that there were no natural values, the later works take on a more Schopenhauerian line, according to which 'life' – also understood as 'nature' or, on occasions, the 'will to power' – *can*

helpfully be thought of as a force implanting values in us (TI, 'Morality', 5). As in Schopenhauer, to affirm is just to go along with the values life implants: 'the measure', Nietzsche writes in a note, 'is how far a man can say Yes to nature in himself, – how much or little he has to resort to ["the church's"] morality' (KSA 12: 10 [165], p. 553). Now Nietzsche begins to speak of values as 'natural' or 'anti-natural', where the former accord with life's goals and the latter do not (e.g., TI, 'Morality'; EH, 'Destiny', 7; A 24–6). (Having values which accord with nature is equated with 'Naturalism in morality'; this is often how Nietzsche uses the term 'naturalism' in his later writing. See TI, 'Morality', 4.) His diagnosis is that Christian and Christian-like values are anti-natural, whereas the values of his favoured cultures are natural or (equivalently) healthy. There is some though by no means full overlap in the details of what life 'wants' from us in Schopenhauer and in later Nietzsche: selfishness, sex and procreation. Schopenhauer advocates denial; Nietzsche, affirmation. Natural and total affirmation sit side-by-side in the late Nietzsche, and there is the hint that he intended to connect them as Schopenhauer had: the (natural) affirmation of the forces which produce life entails the total affirmation of what those forces produce, implicitly but no longer explicitly (e.g., TI, 'Ancients', 4–5).

Nietzsche, we saw, denies that any ultimate optimistic or pessimistic judgement can be made. But the thought that 'life' operates through us in order to control our values adds a dimension. If life controls our valuations, then what are we to make of people – Schopenhauer or ascetic Christians, for example – whose values express the thought that life is bad? The obvious answer is that life itself made them value in this way. But why would life make a person express the view that life is bad? Something at least very peculiar is going on. By way of analogy, imagine that the British Diplomatic Service – an organisation whose very function is to protect British interests abroad – began to make announcements claiming that Britain was a malign and contemptible nation which ought to be the subject of boycotts and sanctions. An observer would presumably conclude either that this was group derangement or that it was

a strategy in Britain's perceived best interests. Nietzsche sees not only official pessimists, who declare that life is bad, but also ascetics and deniers who oppose selfishness, sexuality and power-seeking, as peculiar instances of life at least apparently objecting to itself. Since Nietzsche, as we have seen, treats conflict and suffering as natural and unavoidable, he argues that opposition to suffering as such (as, for example, in Schopenhauer's pessimistic arguments) is also a peculiar, anti-natural opposition to life (BGE 259; GM II:6–7). I'll refer to the following as his 'life-psychology argument': apparently life-negating behaviour is, really, life opposing itself. The argument does not show that ascetics are wrong to act this way: it merely assures us of their peculiarity. A great deal of GM III is devoted to explaining how and why life or nature operates, to its own advantage, through ascetic artists, philosophers and priests, while making them *appear* anti-life (i.e., ascetic). To the question of life's hostility to our interests, we can imagine what Nietzsche would want to say: that it is not hostile. Natural moralities are preferable to anti-natural moralities, and therefore it is in our interests to go along with nature. As for historical progress: we are currently in an anti-natural phase and Nietzsche suggests that we can and should move beyond it (EH, 'BT', 4). Regarding the history and the hostility questions, we shall see that his answers are problematic.

Few are now likely to sign up to Nietzsche's account of life (or power) as a force that operates through us to determine our values. This kind of idea was much more common in an intellectual environment dominated by Schopenhauer.[30] But, that aside, the problems with natural affirmation can be boiled down to two questions. First, why would we want to affirm in this way? The most obvious answer is that being natural is *nicer* for us: sex and eating are pleasures and, we might think, a morality which allows or encourages their enjoyment would be nicer than a morality which stigmatises them. Sometimes Nietzsche suggests this (GM II:24; A 11). At other times, though, he suggests the opposite: being 'natural' can be extremely difficult and even the desire for 'niceness', comfort, or pleasure is treated with

suspicion (GM P:6; GM III:7; TI, 'Morality'). The potential undesirability, to us, of what Nietzsche considers in 'life's' interests is vividly brought out in his notes, in which he tries out the idea that those who are not, as he sees it, life-worthy (the weak, sick and so on) should be prevented from procreating. Furthering such types, he thinks, would be against the interests of life: 'to bring a child into the world, in which you yourself have no right to be, is worse than taking a life' (KSA 13: 15 [3], pp. 401–12, my translation; see also 23 [1], pp. 599–600; 23 [10], pp. 611–2). This is one of the places where Nietzsche's darker side cannot easily be separated from his central philosophical aims.

The second difficult question is: how, in principle, could we *not* affirm? Life is always operating through us to determine our values, such that apparent life-deniers are just peculiar life-affirmers: this, recall, was the life-psychology strategy operating, for example, in GM III. But does that not guarantee that I am *always* maximally affirming, whatever I do, and so I don't need to worry? Nietzsche could hardly embrace such an apathy-inducing conclusion, because his message is that at least some people are less life-affirming than they could be, hence historical progress is possible. The problem, then, is that Nietzsche requires life's control of our values to be both total, for the life-psychology argument to work, and *not* total, so that affirmation is not inevitable.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We began with the observation that the ordinary notion of 'life-affirming' denotes the feeling that life, as a whole, is good, especially in relation to the overcoming of adversity. While there is a trace of this in all three of Nietzsche's accounts, we have seen that they conceal a variety of distinct commitments. Notice, for example, that in each case 'life' indicates something relevantly different: the artwork that is everyday existence and perhaps its artist; the interconnected totality of things; the natural force which operates through us, determining our values. Consequently, life's affirmation (or, in BT, 'justification') means   different   things: communing   with   the   world-artist's

perspective, joyously welcoming every last detail, or adopting a 'natural' morality. Affirmation becomes philosophically substantial, but for this reason it is also open to substantial objections. While I have not explored every avenue of response, I have tried to give some indication as to why it is doubtful that affirmation, in any way that Nietzsche understands it, can function for us as a significant ethical ideal.

NOTES

* Thanks to Sebastian Gardner for helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.
1. The best account of the *Pessimismusstreit* is undoubtedly Beiser (2016). Readers may also wish to consult Sully (1877). This is a contemporary, Anglophone account, which Nietzsche himself read in French translation.
2. Hartmann (1869: 644ff).
3. Schopenhauer (1969) vol. 1, Book 4, especially sections 57–9.
4. Schopenhauer (1969) vol. 1, Book 4, 54, p. 275.
5. Schopenhauer (1969) vol. 2, ch. 44.
6. Schopenhauer (1969) vol. 2, ch. 38.
7. Schopenhauer (1969) vol. 1, sec. 60.
8. Schopenhauer (1969) vol. 1, sec. 54, p. 284.
9. For the details of what Nietzsche read and when, in relation to these authors, see Brobjer (2008).
10. Hartmann (1869: 638). Hartmann's 'all-one unconscious' in fact comprises what he calls 'Will' and 'Idea', which is meant to synthesise Schopenhauer and Hegel. On Hartmann's philosophy, see Gardner (2010); Beiser (2016).
11. Mainländer (1879: 316–58).
12. Bahnsen (1872: 52); Slochower (1932: 377).
13. Strauss (1895; sec. 44).
14. Dühring (1865: 1–51).
15. For examples and discussion, see Beiser (2016: 172–6).
16. Lange (2010, vol. 3: 335–62).
17. Schopenhauer (1969), vol. 2, ch. 46, p. 585.
18. Schopenhauer (1969,) vol. 1, sec. 60, 63.

19. See Han-Pile (2006); Gardner (2013: 601–6); Daniels (2013: 60–71).

20. For a selection of passages encouraging total affirmation, see: Z II 'On Redemption'; EH, 'BT', 2–3; EH, 'Clever', 3; EH, 'Z', 8. For eternal recurrence, see e.g. GS 341, Z III 'on the vision and the riddle', Z III, 'The Convalescent', BGE 56, EH, 'BT', 3; KSA 13: 16[32], pp. 492–3. *Amor fati:* GS 276; EH, 'Clever', 10.

21. See Schopenhauer (discussed above; also (1969) vol. 1, 59, p. 324); Hartmann (1869: 534); Dühring (1876: 366); Vaihinger (1876: 152).

22. For discussion of textual influences on eternal recurrence as a cosmological doctrine, see Stack (1983: 25–50); Small (2001); Brobjer (2008: 160–3).

23. Small (2001: ch. 7).

24. See Brobjer (2006: 294).

25. Two contemporary influences on Nietzsche's view were Roux (1881) and Dumont (1876).

26. Adorno (2005, Section 61: 97–8).

27. Anderson (2005).

28. Compare GS 276, GS 299, GS 107 and GS 290. For discussion, see Stern (2013).

29. For a more substantial discussion of natural affirmation and its role in Nietzsche's later philosophy, see Stern (forthcoming a) and Stern (forthcoming b).

30. See Schnädelbach (1984: ch. 5).