

Fugitive Pleasure and the Meaningful Life:  
Nietzsche on Nihilism and Higher Values

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Penultimate draft

In an early text, Nietzsche tells us that philosophers have a distinctive and undeniably exalted role: their “proper task” is “to be lawgivers as to the measure, stamp and weight of things” (UM III.3).<sup>1</sup> Not *particular* things, though: Nietzsche does not imagine philosophers assessing the value of apples and trips to the countryside. No, the philosopher’s distinction “lies in his having before him a picture of life as a whole, in order to interpret it as a whole” (UM III.3). Philosophers are to take “existence” as a whole into view, and “determine its value”, asking “what is life worth as such?” (UM III.3) Put plainly: philosophers are supposed to assess the value or meaning of life.

That’s not a recognizable philosophical task for most of us. These heady goals can seem rather adolescent, indeed absurd—why think that anyone is in a position to make a global assessment about the value of life? What would the criteria for such an assessment be? How could it amount to anything more than an idiosyncratic expression of personality?

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<sup>1</sup> I cite Nietzsche’s texts using the standard abbreviations of their English titles: *A* is *The Antichrist*; *BGE* is *Beyond Good and Evil*; *D* is *Daybreak*; *EH* is *Ecce Homo*; *GM* is *On the Genealogy of Morality*; *GS* is *The Gay Science*; *HH* is *Human, All Too Human*; *KSA* is the *Kritische Studienausgabe*; *TI* is *Twilight of the Idols*; *UM* is *Untimely Meditations*; *Z* is *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. I use the Kaufmann and Hollingdale translations, though I have sometimes made minor modifications to their translations.

In his later texts, Nietzsche seems to agree with this assessment, rejecting his early view: “judgments of value, concerning life, for it or against it, can, in the end, never be true: they have value only as symptoms, they are worthy of consideration only as symptoms; in themselves such judgments are stupidities [...] *the value of life cannot be estimated* [...] For a philosopher to see a problem is the *value* of life is thus an objection to him” (TI III.2). So we might view Nietzsche’s early pronouncements about the meaning of life as juvenilia, soon set aside in favor of more sober philosophical tasks.

Yet that would be too quick. For Nietzsche devotes much of his mature work to diagnosing a putatively deep problem with modern culture: that it exhibits or fosters *nihilism*. And what is nihilism but a view about the meaning of life? In a notebook passage, we find Nietzsche writing that we are “on the point of tipping over into *nihilism*—into the belief in absolute *valuelessness*, that is, *meaninglessness*” (KSA 13: 7[54]). Today, I think we’re inclined to view nihilism as just the kind of wild flight of fancy to which the more extravagant philosophers have been tempted; it seems of a piece with those grandiose pronouncements about the meaning of life. What could possibly underwrite these judgments? Why aren’t they, as Nietzsche claims in the passage above, just an expression of a defective personality?

In this essay I want to suggest that Nietzsche’s concerns about nihilism, so far from a case of diffuse and easily dismissed brooding, constitute a focused and sustained investigation into an intriguing pathology of modern culture: that it is unable to sustain “higher values.” To make sense of that claim, we’ll need to unravel a number of strands in Nietzsche’s writing. We need to understand what higher values are and how they connect to his concerns about nihilism. In order to see why higher values are important, we’ll need to examine Nietzsche’s obscure remarks on will to power and happiness. In the end, though, I hope to show that this foray into Nietzsche’s most puzzling concerns is rewarding: for, if

Nietzsche is right, we have a commitment to instituting some set of higher values. The cost of not doing so is vitiating our deepest aims and precluding a central form of happiness.

I'll begin this argument in Section One, by showing that Nietzschean nihilism is the collapse of higher values and explaining what higher values are. Section Two asks why nihilism arises—why higher values are lost. Section Three examines the role and import of these higher values. Section Four turns to Nietzsche's conception of will to power, arguing that will to power commits us to having higher values. Section Five bolsters this argument by showing that without higher values, we are capable of only a fugitive and defective form of happiness.

## **1. Higher values**

### *1.1 A prelude on pessimism*

In order to understand Nietzsche's concerns, it helps to situate them within the philosophical climate of his day. Nietzsche was deeply troubled by Schopenhauer's argument that life has no genuine value:

Unless suffering is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim. It is absurd to look upon the enormous amount of pain that abounds everywhere in the world, and originates in needs and necessities inseparable from life itself, as serving no purpose at all and the result of mere chance. Each separate misfortune, as it comes, seems, no doubt, to be something exceptional; but misfortune in general is the rule. (1851/2001 II, 148)

For Schopenhauer, the ubiquity of suffering is no accident, nothing that might be corrected or set right; suffering springs of necessity from the nature of willing. In particular, Schopenhauer argues that suffering should be understood as unfulfilled willing: “we call its [the will’s] hindrance through an obstacle placed between it and its temporary goal, *suffering*” (WWR I, 309).<sup>2</sup> Happiness, by contrast, is nothing more than the momentary extinguishing of a desire:

All satisfaction, or what is commonly called happiness, is really and essential always *negative* only, and never positive. It is not a gratification which comes to us originally and of itself, but it must always be the satisfaction of a wish. For desire, that is to say, want, is the precedent condition of every pleasure; but with the satisfaction, the desire and therefore the pleasure cease; and so the satisfaction or gratification can never be more than deliverance from a pain, a want. (WWR I, 319)

Happiness is essentially negative: it is always the satisfaction of some desire, which had been generating pain until fulfillment; the satisfaction of a desire extinguishes the desire, eliminating pain and thereby generating a moment of happiness. But then the desire is gone, and the happiness with it. Thus,

This great intensity of willing is in and by itself directly a constant source of suffering, because all willing as such springs from want, and hence from suffering [...] Secondly, because, through the causal connection of things, most desires must remain unfulfilled, and the will is much more often crossed than satisfied.

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<sup>2</sup> I cite Schopenhauer (1844/1969) as WWR, followed by volume and page number.

Consequently, much intense willing always entails much intense suffering. For all suffering is simply nothing but unfulfilled and thwarted willing. (WWR I, 363)

Given the fact that willing engenders suffering, Schopenhauer counsels the abnegation of willing. The highest good is “the complete self-effacement and denial of the will, true willlessness, which alone stills and silences forever the craving of the will; which alone gives the contentment that cannot be disturbed...” (WWR I, 362). Perceiving the futility of life and the inescapability of suffering, we cease to will.

### *1.2 Nihilism: the highest values devalue themselves*

Schopenhauer’s gloomy picture troubles Nietzsche; throughout his works, Nietzsche struggles with questions that emerge from this view. But there is a subtle shift in his understanding of the problem. Schopenhauer thinks life is problematic because pain greatly outweighs pleasure; thus, he has a hedonistic standard and finds life wanting in terms of it. Nietzsche, however, comes to think that this focus on pleasure and pain is superficial.

It is not suffering or happiness that serve as fundamental objections or inducements to life; it is their interpretations. This is perhaps clearest in the *Genealogy*:

[Man] did not know how to justify, explain, affirm himself: *he suffered from the problem of his meaning*. He suffered otherwise as well, he was for the most part a diseased animal; but the suffering itself was not his problem, rather that the answer was missing to the scream of his question: ‘*to what end suffering?*’ Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does *not* negate suffering, he wants it, he even seeks it out, provided one shows him a meaning for it, a to-this-end

of suffering. *The meaninglessness of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse thus far stretched over humanity.* (GM III.28)

There are mundane ways of making Nietzsche's point: the fact that playing football generates some pain (through vigorous exertion, striving, contending with other players, and so forth) is not taken as an objection to football, but can instead serve as one more inducement to it. The fact that mountain climbing involves struggle, physical discomfort, moments of fear, and so forth is once again an inducement to it; the activity wouldn't hold the same attraction absent these features. So it's clear that particular types of suffering can be viewed as meaningful or justified, and hence sought rather than shunned. In the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche focuses on asceticism as a clear manifestation of this phenomenon: under certain religious interpretations, even severe physical suffering—mortification of self, self-flagellation, etc.—can appear attractive.

It's not especially surprising that under certain conditions pain is sought rather than shunned. However, Nietzsche's deeper point is that we're wrong to endorse the psychological generalization that individuals avoid pain and seek pleasure. Rather, we avoid pain *and pleasure* that we see as unjustified or meaningless, and we seek out pleasure *and pain* that we regard as justified or meaningful.<sup>3</sup> So it is facts about meaning, rather than the valence of sensation, that determines what we do. As Nietzsche puts it, "Man does not pursue happiness [*Glück*]- only the Englishman does that" (TI ii.12).

In light of this, Schopenhauer's diagnosis of life's status cannot be correct. For Schopenhauer life's status turns on the quantities of pleasure and pain: if pleasure were to

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<sup>3</sup> Or, more modestly, we might say that we are apathetic to pleasure that we regard as unjustified.

outweigh pain, life would count as justified.<sup>4</sup> For Nietzsche, these sorts of facts don't matter. Life could be problematic even if it were overflowing with pleasure and devoid of pain. What matters is whether we can regard particular activities—as well as our lives as a whole—as meaningful.<sup>5</sup> The preponderance of suffering is simply one particularly vivid factor that can push us toward a consideration of this question.

That brings us to nihilism. Like Schopenhauer's pessimism, the nihilist assesses life and finds it wanting. Nietzsche writes that "*nihilism* is the conviction of the absolute untenability [*Unhaltbarkeit*] of existence as far as the highest values one acknowledges are concerned" (KSA 12:10[192]). A nihilist judges that "everything is meaningless" (KSA 12: 2[127]) or that "there seems to be no meaning at all in existence, everything is in vain" (KSA 12: 5[71]). What inspires this judgment?

Many readers think Nietzsche defines nihilism as the absence of value. For example, Langsam writes that "nihilism is equivalent to the claim that there are no legitimate values in the world" (1997, 235). Havas defines nihilism "as the state one may said to be in when nothing truly matters to one" (1995, xiv). And Reginster claims that "nihilism is the view that all our values are devaluated" (2006, 25). Though there are important differences between these interpretations, they agree that the nihilist does not accept any evaluative claims: nothing is good, nothing bad, nothing right, nothing wrong. In that sense, existence is meaningless.

However, there's reason for skepticism about this reading. Nietzsche's texts are replete with apocalyptic pronouncements on impending nihilism: he warns that although

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<sup>4</sup> At least, this is what the bulk of Schopenhauer's writing suggests. However, on at least one occasion Schopenhauer offers an argument designed to show that even if pleasure outweighed pain, life would still merit repudiation; see WWR II, 576-7.

<sup>5</sup> For a subtle discussion of related points, see Gemes and Sykes (2014).

“this tremendous event is still on its way” (GS 125), it will bring about the collapse “of our entire European morality” (GS 343), thereby transforming our relations to ourselves and the world. When you think about it, though, concerns about valuelessness becoming widespread seem overblown. Certainly, we can imagine someone who tells himself that he doesn’t value anything, someone who reflectively rejects any candidate evaluative claims. But thinking we lack values doesn’t make it so. Nietzsche claims that our values are manifest in our emotions, in our habitual actions, in our dispositions and patterns of affect, even, he claims, in our sense-perceptions (GS 114). In order to shed values, we’d have to imagine—incoherently—a person who doesn’t have any affects, any patterns of evaluative response, any preferences, any ends or goals or aspirations, even any prioritizations of visual experience. This makes little sense.<sup>6</sup> At best, the nihilist so interpreted would be analogous to the severely depressed person, who finds nothing appealing, nothing enticing, nothing worth doing; he would be the person without affect, to whom everything is flat and neutral. It’s hard to believe that Nietzsche thinks there’s a real risk of this kind of state becoming widespread.

In light of this, it’s best to avoid interpreting nihilism as the complete absence of value. And the texts do support an alternative reading. In a notebook passage from 1887, Nietzsche offers the following definition of nihilism: “*Nihilism*: the goal is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer. What does nihilism mean?—that the highest values devalue themselves [dass die obersten Werthe sich entwerthen]” (KSA 12:9[35]/WLN 146). Nihilism occurs when the

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<sup>6</sup> One might reply that we can value things while reflectively regarding these values as unjustified. True, but even the person who has values while regarding them as unjustified still *has values*.



*highest values devalue themselves.* A nihilist, then, may value any number of things; but he lacks *highest values*.<sup>7,8</sup>

But what does Nietzsche mean by “highest value”? We might think he is discussing final values, things valued for their own sake. Indeed, we might think that Nietzsche is raising the problem with which Aristotle opens the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There, Aristotle suggests that if there is not “some end that we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for [all] other things,” then “desire will prove to be empty and futile” (NE I.2). Many of our activities are valued only instrumentally: I wipe up the mess in order to have a clean counter, I brush my teeth in order to avoid cavities, I put on a sweater in order to stay warm. But Aristotle points out that a life in which every activity is valued in this purely instrumental fashion would be meaningless. If each thing is pursued solely as a means to something else, if nothing is valued for its own sake, then all the bustle of activity is “empty and futile.”

It might seem that Nietzsche’s nihilist can be understood in these terms. The highest values, whose loss the nihilist laments, would be Aristotelian final values. So the nihilist would be the one who despairs at the possibility of final values, and concludes, with Aristotle, that all desire, all human activity, is empty and vain. Bernard Reginster offers an interpretation of this kind, writing that for Nietzsche, “the highest value is a condition of the value of lower goods” (2006, 35). The highest values, that is, are the values that endow other ends with their significance. To use Reginster’s example, “If moral value is the highest

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<sup>7</sup> Let me flag a complication. Nietzsche distinguishes between several types of nihilism and charts the historical or genealogical relationships among them. I believe that lacking higher values is Nietzsche’s *central* form of nihilism; but it is not the only form. For example, Nietzsche sometimes labels religions and philosophical views nihilistic if they involve negating or turning against life. Thus, he claims that Christianity is nihilistic even though it is replete with higher values. I won’t be focusing on these alternative forms of nihilism.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Pippin also focuses on this aspect of nihilism; see Pippin (2013, 189).

value, then the value of anything else, for example art, lies in the contribution it makes to moral ends: 'its highest value (e.g., as art) would be to urge and prepare for moral conversion' [WP 382]" (2006, 35). Thus, "the conditioned good loses its appeal in the absence of the conditioning good" (2006, 36).

On this interpretation, highest values are *intrinsic* and *foundational* values: intrinsic, because they are valued for their own sake; foundational, because they endow other ends with significance. If we consider some of Nietzsche's examples of highest values, we find some support for this reading. Here's an interesting passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

What is the greatest experience you can have? It is the hour of the great contempt. The hour in which your happiness, too, arouses your disgust, and even your reason and your virtue.

The hour when you say, 'What matters my happiness? It is poverty and filth and wretched contentment. But my happiness ought to justify existence itself.'

The hour when you say, 'What matters my reason? [...] It is poverty and filth and wretched contentment.'

The hour when you say, 'What matters my virtue? [...] All that is poverty and filth and wretched contentment.'

The hour when you say, 'What matters my justice? I do not see that I am flame and fuel. But the just are flames and fuel.'

The hour when you say, 'What matters my compassion? Is not compassion the cross on which he is nailed who loves man? But my compassion is no crucifixion.' (Z Prologue 3)

Here, Nietzsche presents as our greatest hour the time at which we question not particular or localized values, but our highest values, the values that have served as orienting ideals, the values that serve as a kind of bedrock in philosophical theories. The above passage singles out happiness, reason, virtue, justice, and compassion because they have served as highest values. Simplistically, we could say that Nietzsche is focused on the highest values proposed by Mill (happiness), Kant (reason), Aristotle (virtue), Plato or Augustine or Hume (justice), and Christianity or Schopenhauer (compassion). These are the goals that can, as he elsewhere puts it, “inspire faith” (KSA 12: 9[35]): they “promote the life of the species, *by promoting the faith in life*. ‘Life is worth living,’ every one of them shouts, ‘there is something to life, there is something behind life, beneath it; beware!’” In short, these higher values provide life with a meaning: “life *ought to be* loved, *because--!*” (GS 1).

So Nietzsche’s talk of “highest” values, together with these allusions to Mill, Kant, and others, might suggest a picture of the following kind: certain values are higher in the sense that they are (1) first in the order of justification and (2) at the top of a hierarchy. They are first in the order of justification in the sense that they are the condition of the values of all other goods; they are at the top of a hierarchy in the sense that they are seen as the most significant values. Those two features are linked in many of the philosophers to whom Nietzsche alludes. Take Mill: the highest value would be pleasure, in that all more particular values are derived from it and in that it is the only thing we want for its own sake.

Or consider Kant: autonomy would be a higher value in that all other valued ends must be manifestations of it and in that it commands a distinctive form of respect.

A similar reading might be suggested by GS 125, the famous passage on the madman who warns of the death of God. That madman asks his audience:

What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? (GS 125)

Notice that in this passage Nietzsche again focuses on a center of gravity, a focal point—what concerns him is not whether particular values evaporate, but whether there is any orienting goal, any center.

So it's tempting to read Nietzsche as endorsing a picture of the following form: values are hierarchically structured, with foundational values being both most important and a condition of all other values. The nihilist would then be the one who has nothing but instrumental values, and thus can find no foundation for life.

### *1.3 Distinguishing higher values from final and foundational values*

I think that's too simple, though. Higher values aren't identical to foundational values. An immediate problem with this reading is that Nietzsche clearly rejects the idea that values instantiate neat hierarchies. The tangled and conflicted structure of our evaluative landscape is a central theme in the *Genealogy*, and we can see this idea more pithily expressed in BGE 200's claim that modern individuals have "opposite, and often not merely opposite, drives and value standards that fight each other and rarely permit each other any rest."

Values aren't ordered in a single hierarchy. Nor does Nietzsche think that values can typically be derived from other values—BGE 186 is one of many passages rejecting that approach. So it would be peculiar if, in lamenting the loss of highest values, Nietzsche were concerned about the loss of a foundationalist picture of evaluative justification. His view must be subtler.

Of course, Nietzsche realizes that certain values instantiate *loose* hierarchies. We needn't be able to derive all or even most other values from the higher values, but these higher values do tend to support large clusters of value; they are not isolated. For example, the Homeric ethic, with its glorification of the noble warrior, prioritizes a cluster of values concerning strength, valor, courage, fortitude, steadfastness, a capacity for righteous anger, and so forth. It prioritizes them in the sense that it holds them up as ideals with a certain gravity, ideals beside which other ways of life, though also valuable, appear separate and less significant. This cluster of martial values isn't straightforwardly derived from the warrior ethic, nor is it obvious that any one of them is a condition of the others. Indeed, there's not *one* or even some definite *set* of foundational values from which the others are derived. But there is a cluster of central values. Loss of them—loss of the picture of the noble warrior as exemplary—wouldn't be so much a loss of a foundation as it would be a loss of a center of gravity, around which other values cluster. It would be the predicament to which the madman draws attention in GS 125. So we can reject the foundationalist picture of justification or conditioning without abandoning the hierarchical status of certain values.

Notice that just as values at the top of hierarchy need not be first in the order of justification, so too a value that is first in the order of justification need not be higher. A person could have a cluster of hierarchically ordered values that he regards as relatively unimportant. For example, we might imagine a casual adherent to Christianity, who goes

through the motions of accepting the hierarchically ordered Christian values, but does not let them play any significant role in his life, who subordinates Christian dictates to his whims and lets them be overridden by any passing fancy. This is, after all, the predicament of many of our contemporaries. So it's a mistake to think that a value's being foundational (a condition of other values) makes it higher.

I've argued that we need to keep apart the question of a value's place in a hierarchy and its place in a system of justification. Foundational values—values that condition many others—need not enjoy any particularly exalted place in a hierarchy. But once we see this, a deeper problem is revealed. Aristotle suggests that *if* there is at least one final value, then life will not be empty and vain. This is false. A life can be full of final values—full of things pursued for their own sake—but still empty and vain. The person who passionately pursues sensory pleasure or baseball or mountain climbing, valuing it for its own sake, may still see his life as futile.

#### *1.4 What is a higher value?*

I've argued that the higher/lower distinction does not correspond to the conditioning/conditioned distinction or the final/instrumental distinction. What, then, is it? I think there are several features of Nietzschean higher values. I'll simply list them, making some references to Nietzsche's texts. But we don't really need to rely on Nietzsche, here. I think we'll recognize that these features describe a certain type of value, a type that doesn't attract much philosophical attention despite its central role in human experience.

First, higher values are *demanding*: they present themselves as not to be weighed, not to be exchanged, not to be compromised, not to be attenuated. They demand strict compliance. This is not true of final values in general. Someone who values jogging and

reading intrinsically rather than instrumentally may still weigh these activities against one another, exchanging one for another; the fact that something is valued intrinsically does not prevent us from judging it less valuable than something else. Someone who values justice—who treats it as a higher value—would not trade a bit of justice for a more diverting jog. This is why Nietzsche writes, “moral values have hitherto been the highest values” (KSA 12:10[89])—it’s typically moral values that have been taken to possess this feature. So, too, he writes that “the highest values in whose service man *was supposed to* live, especially when they governed him with great difficulty and at great cost” (KSA 13:11[100]).

Charles Taylor has drawn attention to a related point by distinguishing between weak and strong evaluation. In weak evaluation, we make evaluative distinctions simply by weighing desires against one another. As Taylor puts it, we might weigh actions “simply to determine convenience, or how to make different desires compossible—he might resolve to put off eating although hungry, because later he could both eat and swim—or how to get the overall satisfaction” (Taylor 1976, 282). In strong evaluation, by contrast, “desires are classified in such categories as higher or lower, virtuous or vicious, more or less fulfilling, more or less refined, profound or superficial, noble or base...” (1976, 282). So in weak evaluation, we simply assess whether things are desired or perhaps how strongly they are desired. In strong evaluation, some desires, regardless of how intense they are, are judged to be worthless, base, contemptible, and so forth.

What are examples of strong values (or, as Taylor later calls them, “hypergoods”)? What, in other words, are values that command respect, awe, admiration, and devotion? Taylor’s examples are *being a warrior* in Homeric Greece, or *being rational* for Plato, or *striving for universal justice or benevolence* for us moderns (Taylor 1989, 19-20 and 64). (And we might add: being a jihadi, or a fundamentalist Christian, or an animal rights activist, or a strident

environmentalist, and one could go on and on.) These values are binding come what may. The agent sees them as not to be abandoned. Indeed, merely weighing one of these values against another would make it questionable that one actually treats them as higher values.<sup>9</sup>

This brings us to a second, closely related feature of higher values: conflict between higher values tends to be experienced by the agent as tragic. For most values, conflicts are of no real import: I value both a skiing vacation and a beach vacation, but it's no great tragedy when I realize that I must choose between them. Conflicts between higher values, though, create deep problems for the agent, problems that can't simply be brushed aside. Insofar as violation and compromise of a higher value is unthinkable, each side of the conflict presents default as base, contemptible, unjustifiable.

Third, these higher values recruit a characteristic suite of strong emotions. Nietzsche claims that "Every ideal presupposes love and hatred, veneration and contempt" (KSA 12:87 10[9]). He expands on this in another passage:

How manifold is that which we experience as 'moral feeling': in it there is reverence, dread, a touch as if by something holy and mysterious, in it is the voice of something commanding, something that takes itself more seriously than we do; something that elevates, kindles, or brings calm and profundity. Our moral feeling is a synthesis, a simultaneous resounding of all the lordly and subservient feelings that have shaped the history of our ancestors. (KSA 12:1[22])

Love, hatred, veneration, contempt, reverence, dread, awe: these are the emotions that Nietzsche associates with higher values (see also Z Prologue 3). These emotions are not

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<sup>9</sup> For empirical work on these topics, see Tetlock (2003), who demonstrates that there are certain values the weighing—or evening questioning—of which is regarded as taboo.



present in every case of valuation. I can have a lower value, such as an appreciation of fine wine, without experiencing any particularly powerful emotions concerning it. I enjoy it, I savor it; but it does not provoke contempt, disgust, or reverence.<sup>10</sup>

Fourth, higher values have an *import* that lower values often lack. They are values that are taken to terminate the question of why we engage in an activity, providing definite meaning for the activities they govern or lives that they regulate. They are taken to render an activity or a life meaningful. As Nietzsche puts it, each one of them says “life *ought to be* loved *because--!*” (GS 1).

Fifth, highest values have tended to be exclusionary. They have tended to crowd out and delegitimize other sources of value, presenting themselves as the only legitimate values. The proponent of the warrior ethic doesn’t see the proponent of the Christian ethic as merely embracing a different, equally valid view; he sees him as confused or contemptible.

Sixth, higher values tend to instantiate a community. In mandating strict compliance and requiring submission of the will, they can bind individuals to shared projects. I’ll say more about this below.

In short: a subset of final values are distinguished by their demandingness, susceptibility toward creating tragic conflicts, recruitment of a characteristic set of powerful emotions, perceived import, exclusionary nature, and their tendency to instantiate a community. These features are most familiar in religiously sanctioned values, but arise

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<sup>10</sup> A similar point is made in the following passage: “Much has been achieved when the sentiment has been at last instilled to the masses [...] that they are not allowed to touch everything, that there are holy experiences before which they must take off their shoes and keep away their unclean hands—this is almost the highest advance towards humanity. On the contrary [...] nothing is perhaps so repulsive as [modern individuals’] lack of shame, the easy insolence of eye and hand with which they touch, taste, and grope everything” (BGE 263). Nietzsche here draws attention to a sense of reverence that is most familiar in religious contexts.

elsewhere as well. When Nietzsche speaks of higher values, I suggest that this is what he has in mind.

### **3. The importance of higher values**

Suppose Nietzsche is right: suppose that highest values come to seem unsustainable. Why might that matter? What would be lost if all values were lower? In 3.1, I'll begin answering that question by considering a community that lacks highest values. In 3.2, I consider why this life without higher values is supposed to be problematic.

#### *3.1 The last man*

To see why higher values are important, let's examine Nietzsche's description of the "last man" in *Zarathustra*. The last man is supposed to be a manifestation of nihilism; he is the paradigmatic example of someone who has lost higher values. Here's how he is described:

The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest. 'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. [...] Becoming sick and harboring suspicion are sinful to them: one proceeds carefully. [...] One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing. One no longer becomes poor or rich: both require too much exertion. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion. No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels differently

goes into a madhouse ‘Formerly all the world was mad’, say the most refined, and they blink. [...] One still quarrels, but one is soon reconciled – else it might spoil the digestion. One has one’s little pleasure for the day and one’s little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health. ‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink.’ (Z Prologue 5)

Notice three important features of the last men. First, they have no shortage of values, including final values. They value comfort, satiety, warmth, happiness, mild and diverting work, lack of quarrel, and so on. Indeed, their values seem strikingly similar to the ones championed in our culture.

Second, the last men lack higher values (see Zarathustra Prologue 3, quoted above). They look on candidate higher values with bleak indifference. They lack the emotions characteristic of higher values, such as reverence, awe, and contempt; indeed, they find these emotions almost unintelligible (“formerly all the world was mad”). So Nietzsche’s last men constitute a community without higher values, without any ideals that inspire devotion and strict allegiance.

Third, Nietzsche repeatedly emphasizes that the last man avoids “exertion.” In other words, the last men are those who do not think we can justify any commitment to struggle, challenge, and difficulty. Any end whose attainment requires exertion is derided, and consequently the only acceptable ends are those that are readily attainable.

There’s a connection between these features: avoiding struggle is connected to the loss of higher values. Suppose you have many values, but think that that nothing is more valuable or more worthwhile than anything else. No values present themselves as

demanding, as not to be compromised; all can be exchanged or abandoned. Then it would be odd to remain committed to goals requiring strenuous exertion.

That is, suppose goal A requires only trivial exertions, whereas goal B requires great exertions. (We might let A be watching television and B be struggling to write a good novel.) Then, if you think that A and B are equal in value, it seems you have reason to choose A over B. You have reason to choose the easiest, most obvious, most directly attainable goals. You might cling to the more demanding goal without reason, merely because you find it desirable or enticing; but you wouldn't be able to justify this preference and would be prepared to set it aside as soon as your inclinations changed. Accordingly, there would be an aggregate tendency to shift toward more easily attained goals. And these are what thinkers have tended to label as base comforts—the trivial, immediately attainable pleasures of food, sex, television, and so forth.

So what Nietzsche means to suggest with the last man is that the loss of higher values leads to a complacent way of life, a defaulting toward comfortable and unchallenging values.

### *3.2 Is the last man supposed to be objectively unappealing?*

The last man is the one who lacks higher values and, accordingly, tends to pursue only easily attainable goals, goals which, moreover, he is always ready to abandon. It's plain that Nietzsche finds the last man problematic. Zarathustra precedes the introduction of the last man by saying "Alas, the time of the most despicable human being is coming [...]. Behold, I show you the *last man*." He then launches into the description above.

But *why* are the last men despicable? It's not obvious. After all, Zarathustra's audience reacts to the prospect of the last man with delight rather than contempt: "Give us

this last man, O Zarathustra,' they shouted. 'Turn us into these last men!' [...] And all the people jubilated [...]" Many of us probably have the same reaction: sure, the last man lacks a bit of fire, but is a peaceful, comfortable, contented life really to be shunned? After all, what's wrong with avoiding challenges and seeking only readily attainable pleasures?<sup>11</sup>

Suppose we find the last man appealing: we welcome the prospect of mild happiness and the alleviation of challenge. Is this wrong? Are we making a mistake? According to some interpretations of Nietzsche, we are not. It may be that Nietzsche himself prefers those who seek great challenges and accomplishments, but has no real objection to those who don't share this preference. Brian Leiter (2002) endorses a view of this form. If this were Nietzsche's view, his condemnation of the last man would be of limited philosophical interest—we have little reason to concern ourselves with the ungrounded preferences of a long dead man. It would be far more interesting if there were some good reason for Nietzsche's invectives against the last man.

Nonetheless, it's hard to see how the last man—how *we*—could be shown to be objectively problematic. Consider, for example, Robert Pippin's diagnosis of the last man. He writes that the last man's way of life

would count as a pathology if, without begging any questions, we could imagine such a life as inevitably threatening some form of self-contempt, practical incoherence, conflicts that cannot be resolved, or as being possible at all without these effects only via massive self-deceit. (Pippin 2013, 189).

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<sup>11</sup> It's important to note that the problem with the last man is not the strength or intensity of their desires. As Lanier Anderson remarks, "the last men's core desires for comfort and the absence of suffering might be arbitrarily strong or intense without ceasing to be objectionably small-minded. Indeed, the more intensely a person desires that, the more he betrays his pettiness" (Anderson 2013, 163).

I worry about each of these suggestions, though. Nietzsche treats self-contempt as constitutive of, or at least as a spur to, greatness (cf. BGE 257 and Z Prologue 3). Practical incoherence and irresolvable conflicts may be unavoidable.<sup>12</sup> And Nietzsche repeatedly claims that self-deception is, at least for most of us, a condition of life.<sup>13</sup> So while each of these conditions may seem unfortunate, it's not clear that Nietzsche thinks they are actually avoidable. They present no *distinctive* problem for the nihilist.

I think Nietzsche does have a reason for condemning the last man. But to see why, we'll need to do a bit more work, addressing his conception of will to power.

#### 4. Will to power and happiness

To see what's wrong with the last man—with the loss of higher values—we need to do several things. First, in 4.1, I explain what will to power is. 4.2 shows that will to power commits us to having higher values. With this groundwork, Section 5 will draw some connections between higher values, will to power, and happiness.

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<sup>12</sup> “Man has, in contrast to the animals, cultivated an abundance of *opposed* [gegensätzlicher] drives and impulses within himself: thanks to this synthesis, he is master of the earth... The highest man would have the greatest multiplicity of drives, in the relatively greatest strength that can be endured. Indeed, where the plant ‘man’ shows himself strongest one finds drives that conflict powerfully (e.g., in Shakespeare) but are restrained [*gebändigt*]” (KSA 11:27[59]). “A philosopher—if today there could be philosophers—would be compelled to find the greatness of man, the concept of ‘greatness’, precisely in his range and multiplicity, in his wholeness in manifoldness.... Precisely this shall be called *greatness*: being capable of being as manifold as whole, as ample as full [*ebenso vielfach als ganz, ebenso weit als voll sein können*]” (BGE 212).

<sup>13</sup> See Nietzsche’s famous remark that “We are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves, we *have* to misunderstand ourselves, for us the law ‘each is furthest from himself’ applies to all eternity” (GM Preface 1). In *Ecce Homo*, he writes, “where ‘know thyself’ would be the recipe for ruin, forgetting oneself, misunderstanding oneself, making oneself smaller, narrower, mediocre, become reason itself” (EH ii.9). See also HH I.491, HH II.223, D 115-116, and BGE 1-4.

#### *4.1 The nature of will to power*

Nietzsche makes several claims about will to power: first, it is manifest in the overcoming of challenges or resistances; second, it is insatiable and involves perpetual striving; third, it is a pervasive feature of human motivation. I'll explain these features in turn.

First, as Bernard Reginster has persuasively argued, will to power is the aim of encountering and overcoming resistance in the pursuit of some other, more determinate end (Reginster 2006). Consider some of Nietzsche's characterizations of will to power:

The will to power can manifest itself only against resistances; therefore it seeks that which resists it... (KSA 12:9[151])

The will is never satisfied unless it has opponents and resistance. (KSA 13:11[75])

What man wants...is an increase in power; out of that will man seeks resistance, needs something to oppose him . . . (KSA 13:14[174]/WLN 264)

[Strength or power is] a desire to overcome, a desire to throw down, a desire to become master, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs. (GM I.13)

As these passages indicate, will to power essentially involves seeking to overcome obstacles, resistances, or challenges that arise in the pursuit of one's ends.

Of course, everyone can agree that when we need to achieve some end, we aim at overcoming the resistance that blocks us from its attainment. But Reginster argues that Nietzsche is making a different point: he is claiming that we aim at overcoming resistance as

such. Crucially, Nietzsche presents the will to power as aimed not at the *attainment* of any particular end, but merely at the overcoming of resistances to ends.

We can see this if we consider Nietzsche's claim that the will to power involves perpetual striving: there is no state the attainment of which satisfies the will to power. Rather than seeking a tranquil state of achievement, will to power inclines us perpetually to seek more. Nietzsche often phrases this point in terms of self-overcoming: whenever some end is achieved, the agent immediately wishes to go beyond. BGE 73 tells us that "whoever reaches his ideal transcends it *eo ipso*." BGE 27 speaks of the "law of the necessity of 'self-overcoming' in the nature of life." In Zarathustra, Nietzsche puts the point more poetically: "And life itself told this secret to me: 'See', it said, 'I am that which must always overcome itself' " (Z II.12). In addition, Nietzsche often makes this point by contrasting will to power with the wish to abide in a certain state, or the desire to preserve oneself:

The wish to preserve oneself is the symptom of a condition of distress, of a limitation of the really fundamental instinct of life which aims at the expansion of power, and wishing for that frequently risks and even sacrifices self-preservation.  
(GS 349)

A condition once achieved would seem to be obliged to preserve itself—Spinoza's law of "self-preservation" ought really to put a stop to change: but this law is false, the opposite is true. It can be shown most clearly that every living thing does everything it can not to preserve itself but to become more— (KSA 13:14[121])



Nietzsche's will to power thesis, then, is the claim that we are motivated to overcome resistances, and that this motivation is not satisfied by our *having overcome* resistance; rather, we perpetually seek new resistances to overcome. So we have an independent motive for overcoming resistance, which inclines us toward activities that provide us with challenges to overcome.

So far, we might not find this particularly surprising: it seems clear that we sometimes do seek out challenges merely for the sake of overcoming them. But the third component of Nietzsche's account is the most counterintuitive: he argues that will to power is a pervasive feature of human action. He repeatedly claims that will to power is the "essence" [Wesen, Essenz] of willing. For example, he writes, "The genuinely basic drive of life [Lebens-Grundtriebes] . . . aims at the expansion of power . . . the will to power . . . is just the will of life [Wille des Lebens]" (GS 349). Or again, "All 'purposes,' 'aims,' 'meaning' are only modes of expression and metamorphoses of one will that is inherent in all events: the will to power. To have purposes, aims, intentions, willing in general, is the same thing as willing to be stronger, willing to grow—and, in addition, willing the means to this" (KSA 13:11[96]/WLN 217). "Everything that happens out of intentions can be reduced to the intention of increasing power" (KSA 12:2[88]/WLN 76).

I've argued elsewhere that Nietzsche understands will to power as a structural feature of all drive-motivated activity (Katsafanas 2013). Nietzsche believes that he can show that all drive-motivated activities aim not just at particular ends, but also at overcoming resistance. He also claims that all human activity is drive motivated. If correct, this entails that all human activity aims at overcoming resistance. Whenever a person acts, close examination will reveal not just direction toward some particular end, but also an aim of overcoming

resistance. I can't provide a defense of this complex and counterintuitive claim here. But suppose we grant it. What would that show us about the status of highest values?

#### *4.2 Will to power and the necessity of higher values*

The will to power is a putatively omnipresent aim that commits us to seeking and overcoming resistance. Absent the overcoming of resistance, then, our most pervasive aim will be frustrated. However, resistances that seem senseless or meaningless do not provide appealing opportunities for struggle. After all, projects such as repeatedly slamming my hand in a car door or putting rocks in my shoes would generate plenty of resistance for me to overcome, but would hardly strike me as worthwhile. These pursuits might gratify my craving for overcoming resistance, but would be seen as senseless and would frustrate many of my other aims.

So, in order to avoid frustrating our pervasive aim of power, we need to accept values that present at least some forms of struggle as meaningful. Recall that Nietzsche analyzes higher values as those that mandate submission of the will. It's clear, then, that if we accept higher values, we will be presented with opportunities for overcoming resistance: certain projects that demand great struggle will be seen as worthy of such struggle. We have many examples of this. The Homeric noble's glorification of the warrior ethic, the ascetic's praise of indifference to physical suffering, the modern devotion to compassion or justice—all of this would provide meaning to certain forms of challenge.

Suppose, though, that we have no such values; we value things, but only in a flat way. Then in any case in which achievement of a valued end requires struggle, we can always avoid that struggle and pursue some other valued end instead. I value, for example, attaining knowledge; but a particular subject looks difficult; so I switch to another valued end, such as

watching television. Given that these values are interchangeable, I can always weigh one against another, counting the fact that one involves more effort than another as a reason not to do it.

This leads to two problems: an individual one and a communal one. Start with the individual. Whenever resistance to the completion of a goal is encountered, the person without higher values will see abandoning it, or at least temporarily putting it on hold, as entirely justified, entirely rational. He may *not* abandon his goal. He may have a contingent commitment to it; he may remain committed to it just so long as he continues to enjoy it, just so long as the challenges encountered in its pursuit do not overly trouble him. But there can be nothing justifying a commitment come-what-may. The alleged commitments are always contingent, always conditional. This is why Nietzsche asks, “Who is there who still feels any strong attachment at all?” (HH I.23)

Lacking any real commitment to his goals, the person without higher values can see them only as governed by his tastes. And again, tastes can be fine: tastes can ground a preference for vanilla ice cream, or wine, or adventurous travel. What they cannot do is ground a commitment to genuine challenge. The tastes, being viewed by the agent as arbitrary, will tend—overall and in the long run—to change, shirting the agent toward easier goals.

This brings us to the communal problem: the lack of higher values makes bonds between individuals decidedly fragile. With no secure commitments to projects, joint endeavors become problematic, with individuals hanging together only insofar as their preferences are served by doing so. Thus, as Nietzsche puts it,

We live in the age of atoms, of atomistic chaos. In the Middle Ages the hostile forces were held together by the church and, through the strong pressure it exerted, to some extent assimilated with one another. When the bond broke, the pressure relaxed, they rebelled against one another. The Reformation declared many things to be adiaphora, domains where religion was not to hold sway; this was the price at which it purchased its existence: just as Christianity had already had to pay a similar price in face of the much more religiously inclined world of antiquity. From there on the division spread wider and wider. (UM III.4)

Individuals cannot engage in the shared projects that would truly lend their lives significance. Thus, Nietzsche despairs that the “fundamental belief [...] that man has value and meaning only insofar as he is *a stone in a great edifice*” is “dying out” (GS 356).<sup>14</sup>

I’ve emphasized two forms of contingency that arise for the agent lacking higher values: his commitments to his own activities, and his bonds to others, are exceedingly fragile. This contingency arises because lower values can be weighed against one another, exchanged, compromised; they do not *require* anything, any particular form of struggle, and particular form of overcoming. There’s nothing to which they really commit us. Accordingly, they can’t render struggle and devotion meaningful—for there are always alternatives to it. We might pursue resistance on a whim or as a passing urge, but we’d see no sense in this and experience no commitment to it. Our commitment to it would, in the

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<sup>14</sup> See Huddleston’s analysis of this point: he writes: “it is the better *Nietzschean* life—provided one cannot be a great Nietzschean composer or philosopher—to be a slave building the pyramids, a medieval serf building Chartres cathedral, or a peon sweeping Beethoven’s floor than to be a comfortable ‘free’ person in the culturally decadent, modern West” (Huddleston 2014, 141). “In devoting their lives to the collective project of culture, they truly come to flourish” (2014, 142, emphasis removed).

aggregate, be eroded, and our aim of overcoming resistance—our will to power—thereby frustrated.

## 5. Fugitive pleasure and the meaningful life

We're now in a position to put some points together. We've seen that nihilism is the loss of higher values. Higher values mandate strict compliance and recruit strong emotions, thus presenting struggle as meaningful. Loss of higher values gradually erodes commitment to struggle by presenting it as unjustifiable. So the last man has only fragile commitments to projects and can't remain committed to difficult endeavors. This frustrates will to power. In short, there's an essential tendency in our actions that favors adopting higher values and that is heightened and promoted by these higher values; moreover, absent these higher values its expression looks futile and it lacks opportunity for expression.

We might leave things here, resting content with a picture of the following form: Nietzsche has arguments purporting to establish that we're committed to manifesting will to power; doing so requires higher values; so, in losing higher values, we frustrate will to power. This, I think, is a large part of the problem. But there's an additional dimension to Nietzsche's argument, which bolsters it by showing that a particular form of happiness requires higher values. I'll end by discussing it.

Recall that Schopenhauer analyzes pleasure and pain in terms of willing and encountered obstacles. In particular, Schopenhauer writes, "We call its [the will's] hindrance through an obstacle placed between it and its temporary goal, *suffering*; its attainment of the goal, on the other hand, we call *satisfaction*, well-being, happiness" (WWR I, 309). Nietzsche accepts Schopenhauer's approach: rather than, say, trying to account for pleasure and pain in

terms of qualitatively distinct sensations, he too thinks they are best understood in terms of willing. However, Nietzsche believes that we need to distinguish two forms of happiness.

First, there is Schopenhauer's notion of happiness: happiness is the state in which we experience no obstacles to our willing. For Schopenhauer, the ultimate form of this would be not willing at all, as every episode of willing engenders obstacles. More generally, though, we can speak of happiness as a minimization of obstacles, struggle, and resistance.

Nietzsche calls this "the green pasture happiness of the herd, with security, lack of danger, comfort, and an easier life for everyone" (BGE 44).

But there's also a second form of happiness: the happiness involved precisely in experiencing and overcoming an obstacle. Focusing on this form of happiness, Nietzsche writes, "What is happiness?—The feeling that power is growing, that resistance is overcome. Not contentment, but more power [...]" (A 2). This is happiness as attaining, the happiness of overcoming, the happiness of the will's progress toward its goal. Thus: "my formula for happiness: a yes, a no, a straight line, a goal" (II i.44).

These two forms of happiness generate different conceptions of suffering. One conception is picked out by Schopenhauer: unhappiness is the experience of resistance to one's will, the experience of being impeded, blocked, or prevented from attaining the object of one's desire. However, insofar as we accept the second conception of happiness, there's an intimate connection between happiness and frustration of the will: the experience of happiness requires resistance, hence requires a particular form of suffering. Drawing attention to this point, Nietzsche writes

Man does *not* seek pleasure and does *not* avoid displeasure [...]. Pleasure and displeasure are mere consequences, mere accompanying phenomena—what man

wants [...] is an increase of power. Striving for this gives rise to both pleasure and unpleasure [...] Unpleasure has been confused with a particular kind of unpleasure, that of exhaustion, which does indeed represent a profound diminution and abatement of the will to power, a measurable loss of force. In other words: there is unpleasure as a stimulant to strengthen power, and unpleasure following a squandering of power [...] The psychologists' great confusion has lain in their failure to distinguish these two *types of pleasure*, that of *falling asleep* and that of *conquest* [...] (KSA 13:14[174])

Unpleasure or suffering can generate two different reactions: it can serve as an inducement to further willing; or it can mark an inability to go on, the inability to struggle against and surmount some resistance.

Thus, in presenting the opposing conception of happiness Nietzsche praises those who are “prepared to sacrifice human beings for one’s cause, not excluding oneself” (II ix. 38), who are willing to take on “difficulties, hardships, privation” (II ix.38). For

It is *not* the fulfillment [*Befriedigung*] of the will that causes pleasure [*Lust*] (I want to fight this superficial theory—the absurd psychological counterfeiting of the nearest things—), but rather the will’s forward thrust and again and again becoming master over that which stands in its way. The feeling of pleasure lies precisely in the non-fulfillment [*Unbefriedigung*] of the will, in the fact that the will is never satisfied unless it has opponents and resistance. (KSA 13.11[75])

So we have two forms of happiness: happiness as activity, as overcoming resistance; and happiness as passivity, as lack of activity, as lack of experienced resistance.

Nietzsche prefers the active form of happiness, and we can see why: it is a concomitant of expressing power, which he regards as our deepest aim. But notice that this Nietzschean form of happiness requires higher values. As I explained in the previous section, without higher values, expressions of will to power will seem, to the agent, as ultimately valueless. That is, striving to encounter and overcome resistances will seem senseless, and we will tend to default, instead, toward easily attained goals. In short, without higher values, only Schopenhauer's conception of happiness will make sense. We'll tend toward that; we'll tend toward experiencing happiness only in the avoiding of resistance, only in contentment, and not in struggle.

Yet, as Schopenhauer himself argued, this passive form of happiness is inescapably fugitive. It vanishes as soon as it arises, for some new obstacle, some new struggle, always presents itself. Indeed, the passive form of happiness begins departing as soon as it arrives. It is a happiness born of having no obstacles, no resistances to the will; but that frustrates our aim of encountering resistances, which soon arises again.

So we can compare two forms of life. There is Schopenhauer's vision, a life of fugitive pleasures without meaning, a life that we would do best to avoid, a life that will convince us that it is, he claims, better never to have been born. And there is Nietzsche's claim: we are pushed toward Schopenhauer's picture precisely to the extent that we have lost higher values. If we could sustain higher values—if we could avoid nihilism—then we could



return to a life perceived as meaningful, a life that promises not the bovine happiness of contentment but the active happiness of struggle, of accomplishment.<sup>15</sup>

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