

Nietzsche and the Value of Suffering—Two Alternative Ideals

I Introduction

What follows is a *partial* reconstruction of a central thread to Nietzsche's answer to the question of what our attitude toward suffering should be. I will argue that according to Nietzsche our attitude toward suffering should be one in which we embrace our suffering and attempt to take on as much difficult responsibility as possible. Such an attitude is to be coupled with an embracing of Nietzsche's alternative to what he calls the ascetic ideal. However, given Nietzsche's notion of the order of rank, it is clear that he does not think that this is a possibility open to all. This reconstruction is partial because it considers the value of suffering primarily as a means. Bernard Reginster provides good reason for thinking that suffering also has contributory value.¹ I will not address that aspect of suffering and power here.

Brian Leiter argues that before Nietzsche the ascetic ideal was the only means to give meaning to human suffering. While Leiter argues that the alternative Nietzschean ideal requires acknowledging that suffering has no meaning, I will argue that he is mistaken.

It should be noted that the aim of this paper is to reconstruct Nietzsche's views; *it is not to evaluate them critically* (this latter is a worthwhile project—it just isn't one carried out here). As such, this paper is not an endorsement of Nietzsche's views.

II Suffering as a Constituent of Life

“To live is to suffer”: this is only contentious if we thereby mean that to live is only to suffer. If we say that suffering pervades life, then that need not mean that there are no pleasures in life. Even still, is it true that for every individual, life will involve suffering? Other than those who are born and die a quick, painless death shortly thereafter, the answer is surely going to be yes. However, before we rightfully answer whether life automatically means suffering, we should say what is meant by suffering.

If we look at suffering as a genus, we can say that psychological suffering and physical suffering are its species.² It is easy to think of examples of both kinds.³ Under *mental suffering* we find depression, anxiety, fear, unsatisfied desires (perhaps even desire itself before it is satisfied), loneliness, loss, anguish, grief, separation, lamentation, distress, dissatisfaction, rejection, failure, hopelessness, stress, boredom, ennui, angst,

¹ In his excellent *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*. See especially chapters 3-6. This paper also leaves aside Nietzsche claims regarding suffering's being desired for its own sake, e.g., *the Will to Power*, 1041.

² There are of course many different ways one might categorize kinds of suffering. At one point, the Dalai Lama, for example, divides kinds of suffering by the kinds of causes: either avoidable or unavoidable. Examples of the former are war, poverty, and crime; examples of the latter are sickness, old age, and death. *Ethics For The New Millennium*, 133-4.

³ What follows is not meant to be an exhaustive list.

weltschmerz, existential malaise, and so on. While all of the above admit to degrees, one could argue that any degree of any of them constitutes suffering. *Physical suffering* presents more of a variety of clear and unclear cases of suffering due to degrees. There is pain—really the paradigm of physical suffering⁴—in its various degrees (passing a kidney stone to a mild, dull, almost unnoticed ache), hunger, which can range from mild discomfort to actual pain, itching in its various degrees (most of one’s body covered in a rash to the itch one offhandedly scratches), degrees of being too hot or too cold, being tickled until one cannot stand it, and so on.⁵

One becomes acquainted with more kinds of suffering the longer one lives. But even a very young, sheltered child has experienced many of the above kinds of suffering. At the very least, any child will experience hunger and unsatisfied desires; in all likelihood, however, a child will experience much more suffering. When we consider the full range of possible human suffering, it is hard to deny that to live is to suffer, as long as we do not mean that to live is only to suffer. However, it is not so clear that we can say that to live is to experience joy. For it seems quite clear from my experience, and that related to me by others, that it is far easier to suffer than to find joy, peace, or happiness.

III An Important Complication to Suffering

In section II, I listed many kinds of psychological and physical suffering; to those kinds of suffering we can add another: the suffering we experience due to our suffering. In its simplest form this might just be the lamentation of not being able to walk around as one would because of the pain from a sprained ankle. Such complications and additional suffering are significant. However, a more pressing problem is the way we feel when we cannot find a purpose or meaning for our suffering. Nietzsche writes that man’s problem, “was *not* suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, ‘*why* do I suffer?’ . . . The meaninglessness of suffering, *not* suffering itself, was the curse that lay over mankind so far—”.⁶ Indeed, in *Man’s Search For Meaning*, Viktor E. Frankl writes, “In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as

⁴ However, James Scott Johnston and Carol Johnston point out that, “Illness, disease and pain are not equivalent to suffering, though they may be the cause of it” (“Nietzsche and the Dilemma of Suffering,” 187). While this is probably right to a degree, we can still talk of physical pain itself being suffering without being too misleading. I suspect whether one suffers from pain depends upon the degree of pain and one’s attitudes toward that pain. This is, I take it, a main part of Buddhism, namely, that whether physical pain causes suffering is dependent upon one’s understanding of the nature and causes of suffering and the role of aversion and attachment in suffering.

⁵ There are of course difficult cases to decide for both species of suffering. Does the person who is born mentally handicapped suffer insofar as she is handicapped? It is easy to project suffering on to her, for we know, so to speak, what she is missing. But it is not so clear that she actually suffers, unless she is made aware of her handicap. We all experienced hunger pains, teething pains, diaper rash, etc. as babies; however, it surely is the rare individual who remembers any of these pains. So this raises two questions: one, does the baby really suffer in the sense that even a child suffers? Two, is memory and a certain level of cognitive ability necessary for suffering? It is not my intention to answer either question; rather, I wish only to point out some complications that may arise when considering suffering and to acknowledge that the notion of suffering is not completely straightforward.

⁶ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 28. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Nietzsche in this paper are to section numbers.

the meaning of a sacrifice....That is why man is even ready to suffer, on the condition, to be sure, that his suffering has a meaning.”⁷ Lack of such meaning creates a suffocating void, opening the door to suicidal nihilism.⁸ Suicidal nihilism is the essentially the idea that because there is no meaning to one’s suffering—and thus no reason or purpose for a central aspect of any life—death is just as welcome.

Assuming that Nietzsche is right about the central importance of the meaning of our suffering, we need to take it into consideration when asking about what our attitude toward suffering should be.⁹ As we will see, Nietzsche thinks that until he arrived the ascetic ideal was the only means whereby suffering could be given meaning. As Leiter does, I will argue that Nietzsche provides an alternative to the ascetic ideal.¹⁰ What the ascetic ideal and its Nietzschean alternative are will be the focus of our inquiry into what our attitude toward suffering should be.

IV What Should Our Attitude Toward Suffering Be?

How should we comport ourselves to the suffering we find in our lives? When touching a hot stove or confronted with danger, our natural reactions are to pull back, to flee, to find safety. In general it seems that we naturally shy away from discomfort and pain. The child laments his boring afternoon and the adult fears the impending death of a parent and the subsequent anguish the loss will bring, hoping and wishing they will never come. Suffering, it seems, is quite rightly seen as undesirable. However:

When a misfortune strikes us, we can overcome it either by removing its cause or else by changing the effect it has on our feelings, that is, by reinterpreting the misfortune as a good, whose benefit may only later become clear.¹¹

So, should we seek to abolish suffering as far as we can by removing its cause, or should we attempt to change our attitude toward suffering such that it is no longer seen as (always) undesirable?¹²

⁷ *Man’s Search For Meaning*, 117.

⁸ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 28.

⁹ Clearly not all of our day-to-day suffering brings in the question of meaning. I may feel extremely hungry before dinner, but such “suffering” does not cry out for meaning. Surely it is the more profound suffering—the loss of a parent, existential malaise, depression, etc.—that makes us ask, “Why do I suffer like this? What is this for?”

¹⁰ Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*.

¹¹ *Human, All too Human*, p108. Thinking of reinterpreting a misfortune as a good because it is a benefit implies treating the misfortune as having a positive instrumental value. Suffering’s instrumental value will be a central issue for us; but there is the question of whether it would be possible to see suffering as other than instrumentally valuable. The latter question will not be addressed here.

¹² The answers to these questions need not be mutually exclusive: it is quite possible that we might seek to avoid suffering as much as possible, but given that we will inevitably still suffer, we will not necessarily see that suffering as entirely undesirable. I will give reasons below for thinking that this is not really an option given Nietzsche’s position.

Taking Nietzsche seriously when he says that it is the meaning of our suffering that has been the problem, I will reconstruct the two possibilities found in Nietzsche's work for giving meaning to our suffering. The first possibility concerns a religious ethic that, according to Nietzsche, views suffering as undesirable, and which ultimately uses dishonest and harmful means to provide a meaning for human suffering. The second possibility concerns the affirmation of all aspects of life as a sheer act of will and involves giving meaning to suffering through acknowledging its necessary role in human growth, flourishing and greatness. Since the religious ethic sees suffering as undesirable and thus something ultimately to end, and the means it uses to give suffering meaning are ultimately dishonest, I will argue that *if* Nietzsche is significantly correct in both his attack on religious morality and his alternative ideal, we can take this as evidence that the avoidance of suffering is not the proper attitude. Unfortunately, I will not be able to address the question of whether Nietzsche is significantly correct in this paper.¹³ Secondly, given Nietzsche's positive alternative—one that embraces the necessary role suffering has for the betterment, flourishing, and greatness of human life—I will argue that we can take this as evidence that it is our attitude toward suffering that needs to be modified, i.e., we should modify it so that we no longer see suffering as something to be avoided. Because of this, the middle position of avoiding suffering when possible and then seeing its positive attributes when it does occur does not recommend itself. That is, since it will be argued that suffering has a positive and necessary role to play, to seek to avoid it as far as possible and then to acknowledge its positive aspects when it does occur, is really not to acknowledge and accept suffering's positive and necessary role. However, as we will see, all of this is complicated by the issue of what Nietzsche calls the order of rank.

V Religious Morality and the Easing of Suffering

To begin I will look at the possibility of desiring the abolishment or minimizing of suffering. There may be various ways that one might try to do away with or avoid suffering, but religion provides a good if not paradigmatic example of such a way. In his explication of basic Buddhist concepts, Kogen Mizuno writes, "The major purpose of all religions is to cure the illness of the spirit and create a wholesome, integrated psychological condition...[their] major task is the essential improvement of the psychological being to ensure spiritual health and immunity to spiritual illness."¹⁴ There are surely those who might disagree with this being the major project of religion; however, it is not objectionable that many people turn to religion for solace from their suffering.

In Buddhism we can most easily find a direct expression of the notion of abolishing suffering. At the center of the Buddha's teachings are what are usually called the four noble truths: "that life is suffering, that ignorance is the cause of suffering, that suffering can be eliminated, and that the Eightfold Path is the way to eliminate

¹³ However, in the appendix I briefly address the applicability of certain aspects of his critique of religious morality to Buddhism.

¹⁴ *Basic Buddhist Concepts*, 105.

suffering.”¹⁵ The Buddha is said to have been shaken out of his naïve view of life by viewing the suffering of sickness, old age, and death. It was upon seeing these that he realized the true nature of life. The Dalai Lama often says that all sentient beings desire happiness and freedom from suffering. For example, he writes:

...the more I see the world, the clearer it becomes that no matter what our situation, whether we are rich or poor, educated or not, of one race, gender, religion or another, we all desire to be happy and to avoid suffering. Our every intended action, in a sense our whole life—how we choose to live it within the context of the limitations imposed by our circumstances—can be seen as our answer to the great question which confronts us all: “How am I to be happy?”¹⁶

Here we find the idea that happiness and suffering are separate; the latter interferes with the former.¹⁷ We all want happiness, so we all desire freedom from suffering. Buddhism supposedly offers a way to achieve this freedom—a freedom which is ultimately to be found in enlightenment and the cessation of the cycle of births and deaths; however, Buddhism also tries to cultivate happiness and the cessation of suffering caused by such things as sickness and death even before enlightenment occurs and Nirvana is found.

We find a similar attitude toward suffering in Christianity. Regarding Christianity’s general attitude toward suffering, Nietzsche writes:

God created man happy, idle, innocent, and immortal: our actual life is a false, decayed, sinful existence, an existence of punishment— Suffering, struggle, work, death are considered as objections and question marks against life, as something that ought not to last; for which one requires a cure—and *has* a cure!—

From the time of Adam until now, man has been in an abnormal state: God himself has sacrificed his son for the guilt of Adam, in order to put an end to this abnormal state: the natural character of life is a curse; Christ gives back the state of normality to him who believes in him: he makes him happy, idle and innocent.—¹⁸

Suffering is to be overcome, abolished, or at least eased in this world, and certainly set right in the next world so long as one is saved through Christ. Through redemption we will be free of suffering and united with God in the next world.

If we are to abolish or ease suffering, it is crucial to know why we are suffering. According to the second noble truth of Buddhism, we suffer out of ignorance. Without

¹⁵ *Basic Buddhist Concepts*, 106.

¹⁶ *Ethics For The New Millennium*, 4.

¹⁷ To be fair, though, Buddhism does not say that you cannot be happy and suffer at the same time. Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “The seed of suffering in you may be strong, but don’t wait until you have no more suffering before allowing yourself to be happy. When one tree in the garden is sick, you have to care for it. But don’t overlook all the healthy trees. Even while you have pain in your heart, you can enjoy the many wonders of life—” *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, 5.

¹⁸ *The Will to Power*, 224.

going into detail, this ignorance essentially consists of holding mistaken views about desire (craving) and impermanence.¹⁹ So each individual is responsible for his own suffering—it is up to each sufferer to try to cultivate the right views about desire and impermanence, among other things: a task not so easily accomplished.²⁰ As we will see, according to Nietzsche, for the Christian, each individual is also responsible for the state of her suffering. According to Nietzsche, both Buddhism and Christianity (though they are not alone in this) give meaning to suffering through the ascetic ideal.

In developing his critique of religious morality, Nietzsche writes that every sufferer naturally seeks the cause of her suffering. He believes that the sufferer seeks a guilty other upon whom the sufferer can vent herself in an attempt to relieve the suffering. According to Nietzsche, the ascetic priest tells the sufferer, in regard to there being someone to blame for her suffering, “Quite so, my sheep! Someone must be to blame for it: but you yourself are this someone, you alone are to blame for it—*you alone are to blame for yourself!*”²¹ To see what Nietzsche means here, we need to look at his discussion of *ressentiment*, the ascetic ideal, the ascetic priest, and how the ascetic priest uses the ascetic ideal to give meaning to suffering.

Nietzsche on the Ascetic Ideal and the Ascetic Priest

Let us go over the steps that lead to Nietzsche’s assertion that suffering acquires meaning through the ascetic priest and the ascetic ideal. In doing so, it is vital to realize that Nietzsche’s tongue is sharp and he likes to shock with his words. In addition, Nietzsche is fond of hyperbole. The point of this realization is that we should not let his vitriolic pronouncements distract us too much from the truth that *may* lie beneath them. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche introduces the terms “master morality” and “slave morality.”²² A main characteristic of this distinction lies in what is considered good and bad/evil for each. According to Nietzsche, it was the noble and powerful who established themselves and their actions as good in contrast to the low, the common, the plebian, which are bad.²³ In the master morality ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mean roughly ‘noble’ and ‘contemptible’ respectively. As Leiter emphasizes, the master morality begins with the good, calling the low and contemptible bad only secondarily.²⁴ In contrast to the noble, the Jews are born of slavery; it is with them that the “slave rebellion of morals” begins.²⁵ This moral rebellion of the slaves is marked by the inversion of prior values. They cry:

¹⁹ *Basic Buddhist Concepts*, 115-17

²⁰ In Buddhism this is further complicated by the belief that one’s karma has an effect on what occurs in one’s life.

²¹ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 15.

²² *Beyond Good and Evil*, 260.

²³ *Genealogy of Morals*, I 2ff.

²⁴ *Nietzsche on Morality*, 208.

²⁵ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 195. *Genealogy of Morals*, I 7. As Bittner points out, for Nietzsche the term ‘slaves’ is not restricted to slaves in the economic sense; the slaves are those who “wish to better their situation, but they cannot, because those better off are powerful enough to prevent it. So they set up values instead—slave values, that is.” “*Ressentiment*” 129. Hence, it is not the Jews alone that make up slave morality; rather, Nietzsche is making the claim that it is with the Jews that the slave revolt began.

“the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are blessed by God, blessedness is for them alone—and you, the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless to all eternity; and you shall be in all eternity the unblessed, accursed, and damned!”²⁶

With slave morality good is in contrast with evil, not the bad: as Leiter emphasizes, slave morality begins by designating what is evil—the noble, the powerful, the strong and high-minded—designating only secondarily the good as whatever is not evil.²⁷ Hence, with slave morality it is “the meek, the timid, the low-minded” that are good.

This slave revolt of morality is characterized by the inversion of prior values. The good of the noble becomes the evil of the slaves; the mediocre, the bad of the noble becomes the good of the slaves. This “begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge.”²⁸ This *ressentiment* is a psychological reaction to the unpleasant conditions of the slaves; it is expressed by a revaluation of values.²⁹ The slaves are weak and unable to take real action against their powerful, noble masters. In bitterness and hatred, the slaves can only create new values: they invert the values of the noble and powerful, thereby devaluing them: “Moral judgments and condemnations constitute the favorite revenge of the spiritually limited against those less limited—also a sort of compensation for having been ill-favored by nature...”³⁰ However, “in the broader sense...*ressentiment* is at work where people who are unhappy, who wish to improve their lot and who are incapable of doing so, invent a story according to which they really are well off.”³¹ In the case of the Christians, they tell themselves that it is *they* who are the blessed ones of God; it is *they* who are better off, for, as in Mathew 5:5, it is the meek that are the blessed inheritors of the earth. The masters for all their power are really evil and God will judge them harshly. But it is important to emphasize that *ressentiment* is not limited to Jews and Christians; it is found in all those who are unhappy and sick, where it is directed against the happy and healthy.³²

Let us now tie this together with the ascetic ideal, the ascetic priest, and suffering. Nietzsche writes that it is in beholding the ascetic priest that we “come to grips” with the problem of the meaning of the ascetic ideal.³³ But what are the ascetic priest and the ascetic ideal? Leiter notes that the ascetic priest is in many respects well represented by the early Christian proselytizers whose existence is tied to the success of the ascetic

²⁶ *Genealogy of Morals*, I 7.

²⁷ *Nietzsche on Morality*, 208.

²⁸ *Genealogy of Morals*, I 10.

²⁹ *Nietzsche on Morality*, 202.

³⁰ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 219.

³¹ “*Ressentiment*,” 130.

³² *Genealogy of Morals*, III 14.

³³ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 11.

ideal.³⁴ However, the ascetic priest is not limited to Christianity; he “appears in almost every age; he belongs to no one race; he prospers everywhere; he emerges from every class of society.”³⁵ A central characteristic of the ascetic priest is his negative valuation of life: this life and this world are to be transcended—used merely as a “bridge” to another existence. For the ascetic priest, life is “a wrong road...or as a mistake that is put right by deeds—that we *ought* to put right: for he *demand*s that one go along with him; where he can he compels acceptance of his evaluation of existence.”³⁶ According to Nietzsche, the life advocated by the ascetic priest appears self-contradictory through its denial of life, through its veneration of “ill-constitutedness, decay, pain, mischance, ugliness, voluntary deprivation, self-mortification, self-flagellation, self-sacrifice,” through the ruling presence of the most intense *ressentiment* that seeks “to become master not over something in life but over life itself, over its most profound, powerful, and basic conditions....”³⁷ This self-contradictoriness is merely apparent, however. The ascetic ideal comes out of the “*protective instinct of a degenerating life*” trying to sustain its existence. The ascetic ideal is a means for dealing with exhaustion and disgust with life; it is a means for giving meaning to one’s suffering.³⁸ The question is how the ascetic priest eases and gives meaning to the suffering of his followers.

The ascetic priest is the shepherd of the wretched; he has dominion over suffering.³⁹ As the shepherd of the wretched he is “a tool for the creation of more favorable conditions for being here and being man—it is precisely this *power* that enables him to persuade to existence the whole herd of the ill-constituted, disgruntled, underprivileged, unfortunate, and all who suffer of themselves....”⁴⁰ Nietzsche observes that there are many ways in which the ascetic priest deals with the pain of the sufferers: consolation of every kind is the “genius” of the ascetic priest.⁴¹ Nietzsche divides them into “innocent” and “guilty” means.

The first of the innocent means involves attempting to:

reduce the feeling of life in general to its lowest point. If possible, will and desire are abolished altogether; all that produces affects and “blood” is avoided (abstinence from salt: the hygienic regimen of the fakirs); no love; no hate; indifference; no revenge; no wealth; no work; one begs; if possible, no women, or as little as possible; in spiritual matters, Pascal’s principle *il faut s’abetir* [One must make oneself stupid] is applied.⁴²

³⁴ Nietzsche on *Morality*, 254-55.

³⁵ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 11.

³⁶ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 11.

³⁷ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 11.

³⁸ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 13, 28.

³⁹ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 15.

⁴⁰ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 11.

⁴¹ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 17.

⁴² *Genealogy of Morals*, III 17.

This is supposed to bring about a kind of hypnotization—something similar to the hibernation of animals. One removes oneself as far as possible from the traffic of life with all of its inevitable painful accidents. An example in Indian religion is the idea of trying to become one with Brahma, trying to effect a mystical union with God. By entering into this kind of “deep sleep” one achieves freedom from suffering, but at the cost of effectively removing oneself from this world.⁴³

The other innocent means are the following: *Mechanical activity*. By engaging in mechanical activity one’s consciousness is preoccupied by the activity, thereby excluding the suffering from one’s consciousness, often to a great degree. *Petty pleasure*. Often done in conjunction with mechanical activity, petty pleasure involves giving some pleasure to others through such activities as charity work. The “slight superiority” felt in helping others brings some happiness. Connected to petty pleasure is the “will to mutual aid,” love of one’s neighbor, and the desire for the formation of a community: “All the sick and sickly instinctively strive after a herd organization as a means of shaking off their dull displeasure and feeling of weakness...”⁴⁴ Further, the individual is distracted from her own concerns by focusing on the needs and wellbeing of the community.⁴⁵ All of this is encouraged by the ascetic priest.

The ascetic priest must protect the wretched from the healthy and the envy of the healthy, but primarily he must protect them from themselves, from the explosive accumulation of *ressentiment* that is a result of their suffering and envy of the healthy. He does this by a “guilty” means. Every sufferer seeks a cause, a culprit for his suffering upon whom the sufferer can vent his feelings; this venting deadens the pain. Nietzsche takes this narcotic effect to be the “actual physiological cause of *ressentiment*, vengefulness, and the like...”⁴⁶ But this venting requires an object upon which the sufferer can discharge his feelings of vengefulness. Indeed the sufferer looks about himself for a culprit—he becomes mistrusting and makes “evildoers” out of his friends and family.⁴⁷

But the ascetic priest redirects the *ressentiment* by means of a lie—by informing the wretched, the sick that they themselves are the cause of their suffering. It is here that the ascetic priest provides the sufferer with not only a means for deadening the pain but also a meaning for his suffering. Again, this is the ultimate problem of suffering according to Nietzsche: man’s “problem was *not* suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, ‘*why* do I suffer?’”⁴⁸ Leiter argues that by changing the direction of *ressentiment*, the ascetic priest gets the sufferer to “discharge his emotions against himself...by lacerating himself with feelings of guilt.”⁴⁹ The ascetic ideal is a valorization of self-denial: “The three great slogans of the ascetic ideal are familiar:

⁴³ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 17.

⁴⁴ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 18.

⁴⁵ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 19.

⁴⁶ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 15.

⁴⁷ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 15.

⁴⁸ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 28.

⁴⁹ *Nietzsche on Morality*, 260.

poverty, humility, chastity.”⁵⁰ Humans are creatures of desire, creatures whose instincts go against the ascetic ideal. Seeing this, the ascetic priest uses it to give meaning to suffering: suffering is punishment for going against the ascetic ideal.⁵¹ Man is made to feel guilty for transgressing the ascetic ideal—man as sinner deserves to suffer. With this, not only does suffering acquire meaning, one actually welcomes more suffering. Through the sorcery of the ascetic priest, “one no longer protested *against* pain, one *thirsted* for pain; ‘*more pain! more pain!*’ the desire of his disciples and initiates has cried for centuries.”⁵²

Nietzsche has various criticisms concerning the ascetic priest, his use of the ascetic ideal, and the “herd” that has accepted such things; however, two are of particular importance. The first is the idea that the ascetic priest with his various means of alleviating suffering only addresses suffering as such, not its actual causes.⁵³ The ascetic priest offers mere palliatives. Further, and what is worse, by use of the guilty means, the ascetic priest actually makes the sick sicker. Through his use of the guilty means of alleviating suffering, he makes the sick tame, weakened, refined, effete, and emasculated.⁵⁴ So, meaning is found for one’s suffering, and suffering is itself in some sense alleviated, but at the price of not really understanding suffering and ultimately increasing suffering.

To summarize, a vast majority of humans suffer; a vast majority of humans are sickly and unhappy. Their weakness and sickliness gives rise to *ressentiment*, but because of that very infirmity they are capable only of *ressentiment*—imaginary revenge. The ascetic priest sees this *ressentiment* as both dangerous if left to accumulate and as a way to give meaning to the suffering of the sick. While the sufferers naturally seek to ease their suffering, they also seek a guilty party to blame for their suffering. The ascetic priest convinces them that they themselves are that guilty party; they are guilty of transgressing against the ascetic ideal, the ideal of self-denial: poverty, humility, and chastity.

VI Nietzsche and the Possibility of an Alternative Ideal

Towards the end of *Nietzsche on Morality*, Leiter explains how the three essays of the *Genealogy of Morals* can be seen to form a whole. Leiter writes that Nietzsche’s discussion in the Second Essay of the combination of ‘bad conscience’ and ascetic religions leading to the production of guilt, leads into the Third Essay’s discussion of the use of guilt by the ascetic priest ultimately to give meaning to suffering and to block suicidal nihilism. Leiter then notes that in section 28 of the Third Essay Nietzsche claims that before the ascetic ideal there was no answer to the question “Suffering for *what?*” Before the ascetic ideal there was no meaning to suffering:

⁵⁰ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 8.

⁵¹ *Nietzsche on Morality*, 261.

⁵² *Genealogy of Morals*, III 20.

⁵³ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 17.

⁵⁴ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 21-22.

Apart from the ascetic ideal, man, the human *animal*, had no meaning so far. His existence on earth contained no goal; “why man at all?”—was a question without an answer; the *will* for man and earth was lacking; behind every great human destiny there sounded as a refrain a yet greater “in vain!” This is precisely what the ascetic ideal means: that something was *lacking*, that man was surrounded by a fearful *void*—he did not know how to justify, to account for, to affirm himself; he *suffered* from the problem of his meaning. He also suffered otherwise, he was in the main a sickly animal: but his problem was *not* suffering itself, but that there was no answer to the crying question, “*why* do I suffer?”⁵⁵

Key to Leiter’s interpretation is that, as he notes, “there is no distinction drawn here between the era of the Homeric Greeks, or the Romans, and the ‘Christian’ era, i.e., the ascetic era which encompasses the modern world as well.”⁵⁶ From this, Leiter concludes that the Greeks and Romans suffered and were themselves at risk for suicidal nihilism. As Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo* about the Third Essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, the ascetic ideal has been so successful, “because it was the only ideal so far, because it had no rival.”⁵⁷ This remark makes sense, Leiter contends, when we look at his interpretation of the Third Essay:

the triumph of the ascetic ideal is the product of the conjunction of 1) the absence of alternative ideals that render suffering meaningful and 2) the imperative (on pain of suicidal nihilism) to render meaningful the suffering that characterizes the human situation. Nietzsche’s heroic Greeks, who held bad conscience at bay, nonetheless suffered: and according to GM III: 28, they, too, lacked an answer to the fundamental, existential question of, “Suffering for what?” They, too, then had to succumb, eventually, to the attractions of the ascetic ideal, for that was the only device available so far for giving a meaning to suffering and thus blocking “suicidal nihilism.”⁵⁸

So, the idea is that slave morality triumphed because it produced the ascetic ideal, the first and only ideal available that could give meaning to human suffering.⁵⁹

Leiter notes rightly that if the ascetic ideal has been the only ideal so far available, the appearance of an alternative ideal would be of “enormous significance.”⁶⁰ Nietzsche writes concerning the ascetic ideal, “Above all, a *counterideal* was lacking—*until Zarathustra*.”⁶¹ So it seems Nietzsche sees himself as offering such a counterideal with his Zarathustra—an ideal that will be able to engage the question: “Suffering for what?” and thus be able to block suicidal nihilism. But what kind of ideal is Nietzsche offering?

⁵⁵ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 28.

⁵⁶ *Nietzsche on Morality*, 285.

⁵⁷ *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, p312.

⁵⁸ *Nietzsche on Morality*, 285.

⁵⁹ *Nietzsche on Morality*, 286.

⁶⁰ *Nietzsche on Morality*, 287.

⁶¹ *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, p313.

In his discussion of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes that the penultimate section of the fourth book of his *The Gay Science* contains “the basic idea of *Zarathustra*.”⁶² As Kaufman notes, the idea here referred to is the eternal recurrence. Nietzsche starts the discussion by writing that, “The fundamental conception of [*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is] the idea of the eternal recurrence, this highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable....”⁶³ To this Leiter adds that the embracing of the eternal recurrence would remove suicidal nihilism, since someone who is nihilistically suicidal is not going to want to repeat life eternally, but end it prematurely. From this Leiter concludes that the teaching of the eternal recurrence is the alternative ideal offered by Nietzsche through *Zarathustra*, “for whom, ‘Pain is *not* considered an objection to life’ (EH III: Z-1) and who ‘says Yes to the point of justifying, of redeeming even all of the past’ (EH III: Z-8).”⁶⁴ Further, Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* that if we “look down into the most world-denying of all possible ways of thinking”, free of the delusive force of religious morality, we may see the opposite ideal:

The ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably *da capo*—not only to himself but to the whole play and spectacle....⁶⁵

If the ideal that Nietzsche offers is the eternal recurrence and this ideal can stave off suicidal nihilism, there still remains the question of what meaning, if any, can be found for suffering in relation to the eternal recurrence.

According to Leiter, but without real argumentation, the whole-hearted embracing of the eternal recurrence requires an acceptance that suffering has no meaning. Instead of providing meaning for suffering, the willing of the eternal recurrence provides an alternative to the ascetic ideal as object of the will. Leiter quotes Nietzsche’s claim that the human will needs an aim and it would rather will nothing, i.e., the ascetic ideal, than not will. The eternal recurrence provides no meaning or justification for our suffering, but it does provide another aim for the will: rather than will the ascetic ideal, one can will the eternal recurrence of every pleasure and pain, every small detail of one’s life.⁶⁶ There is the problem, perhaps, that only the strongest can embrace the idea of the eternal recurrence, and therefore, the ascetic ideal will still be needed for the majority of “wretched souls.” But the willing of the eternal recurrence is at least a real and great possibility for those great human souls who are strong enough to handle its consequences.⁶⁷

It is at this point—that embracing the eternal recurrence requires an acceptance that suffering has no meaning—that I depart from Leiter’s interpretation of the

⁶² *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *Ecce Homo*, p296.

⁶³ *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *Ecce Homo*, p295.

⁶⁴ *Nietzsche on Morality*, 287.

⁶⁵ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 56.

⁶⁶ See for example, *The Gay Science*, 341, for a more complete description of the eternal recurrence.

⁶⁷ *Nietzsche on Morality*, 287-8.

Genealogy of Morals and Nietzsche's views on suffering and the eternal recurrence more generally. Whether willing the eternal recurrence requires accepting that suffering has no meaning will depend on what exactly we mean by "giving suffering meaning." In regard to the ascetic ideal, the meaning at issue seems to be that of the *reason* or *purpose* for one's suffering. The reason one suffers is because of one's transgressing the ascetic ideal—you're full of, and can't help but, sin according to the Christian; you're full of ignorance and craving according to the Buddhist. Furthering supporting this understanding of what it is for suffering to have meaning, suicidal nihilism threatens when there is no reason or purpose to one's suffering.

If the crux of the question of suffering's meaning comes to suffering's reason/purpose, then a case can be made that suffering can be given a meaning by way of acknowledging the necessity of suffering for greatness in human achievement and development. The necessity of suffering for human greatness is not a constituent of the willing of the eternal recurrence; however, it is consistent with it. One may will the eternal recurrence while simultaneously acknowledging the meaningfulness of suffering—its purpose, the need for it. Willing the eternal recurrence does not, *pace* Leiter, require accepting that suffering has no meaning. If this is right, then it is reasonable to conclude that Nietzsche did not see the two as incompatible. And, therefore, he did not take the willing of the eternal recurrence to require the acceptance that suffering has no meaning. Further, if Nietzsche is right about the eternal recurrence and the necessity of suffering, then our attitude toward suffering should not necessarily be one of avoidance or eradication.

VII A Nietzschean Justification of Suffering

If we are not to try to abolish all suffering, which ultimately amounts to merely avoiding suffering some of the time, then how can we view suffering as something fecund and necessary for the enhancement of life? Perhaps one way to change our view of suffering is through the sincere acknowledgment that suffering has positive aspects, some of which might be necessary for human greatness.⁶⁸ Nietzsche addresses the positive aspects of suffering from many different directions. Unfortunately, I will only look at two of them in turn.⁶⁹ First, there is the idea that suffering and joy (happiness) are inseparable; further, to enjoy great joy requires submitting oneself to (at least the possibility of) great suffering. Second, suffering makes one strong.

Suffering and Joy as Inseparable

⁶⁸ Clearly, then, those who do not view human greatness as a worthy goal, will not see what follows alternative as a viable option. Presumably Nietzsche would cast them aside as weak souls.

⁶⁹ The other main one that I am not addressing is the role that suffering plays in being creative and how creativity is considered a mark of the higher type for Nietzsche. See Walter A. Brogan, "The Central Significance Of Suffering In Nietzsche's Thought" in *International Studies in Philosophy*, Volume 20, 1988, pp53-62, for an interesting discussion of this issue. There is also the issue of self-overcoming in Nietzsche and the role that suffering plays there. Due simply to constraints of space, these important aspects cannot be addressed in this paper.

Commenting on what he calls the religion of pity, Nietzsche writes the following about suffering and happiness:

If you, who adhere to this religion, have the same attitude toward yourselves that you have toward your fellow men; if you refuse to let your own suffering lie upon you for an hour and if you constantly try to prevent and forestall all possible stress way ahead of time; if you experience suffering and displeasure as evil, hateful, worthy of annihilation, and as a defect of existence, then it is clear that besides your religion of pity you also harbor another religion in your heart that is perhaps the mother of the religion of pity: the *religion of comfortableness*. How little you know of human *happiness*, you comfortable and benevolent people, for happiness and unhappiness are sisters and even twins that either grow up together or, as in your case, *remain small* together.⁷⁰

Here Nietzsche plainly disparages the preference for comfortableness over pain: those who “worship” comfort know so little of happiness, for since happiness and unhappiness are twins, when you avoid unhappiness in your pursuit of comfort you avoid (great/true) happiness as well. The obvious question is why should we believe that happiness is so tied to unhappiness?

In “Nietzsche And Dostoevsky On The Meaning Of Suffering,” George F. Sefler offers a possible answer. Unfortunately without citing his quotations, Sefler writes that for Nietzsche it is a “philosophical prejudice” of the metaphysician to postulate “antithetical absolutes”; for every good or pleasurable concept there exists an opposite concept: pleasure and pain are paired but antithetical.⁷¹ Further, according to Sefler, the metaphysician has claimed the impossibility “of the generation of one absolute from its respective opposite.”⁷² Nietzsche, according to Sefler, thinks these prejudices need to be reexamined, the implication being that the metaphysician is wrong to postulate such absolute opposites and that pleasure and pain really are not opposites in this sense. But so presented the case for great pleasures requiring great suffering remains unconvincing. James W. Hillesheim, discussing Nietzsche and self-overcoming, writes that we must get rid of the “dualistic view of pleasure and pain.”⁷³ Appealing to Gilbert Ryle’s notion of a category mistake,⁷⁴ he calls this dualistic view of pleasure and pain a misclassification. In making the case on Nietzsche’s behalf that pleasure and pain really are connected, in particular for one engaged in self-overcoming, he cites a strange passage from Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power*:

⁷⁰ *The Gay Science*, 338.

⁷¹ “Nietzsche And Dostoevsky On The Meaning Of Suffering” 145.

⁷² “Nietzsche And Dostoevsky On The Meaning Of Suffering” 145.

⁷³ “Suffering and Self-Cultivation: The Case of Nietzsche” 176.

⁷⁴ For Ryle, a category mistake involves a misunderstanding of the kind of thing that something is. For example, if one were to be taken around to all of the buildings on a college campus and then ask, “Well, I’ve seen all the college buildings, but where’s the college?”, one makes a category mistake by thinking that the college is a different kind of thing than the buildings and the various goings on that occur there.

Nietzsche cites examples of pleasures in which a number of painful stimuli are necessary:

This is the case, e.g., in tickling, also the sexual tickling in the act of coitus: here we see displeasure at work as an ingredient of pleasure. It seems, a little hindrance that is overcome and immediately followed by another little hindrance that is again overcome – this game of resistance and victory arouses most strongly that general feeling of superabundant, excessive power that constitutes the essence of pleasure.

The opposite, an increase in the sensation of pain through the introduction of little pleasurable stimuli, is lacking; for pleasure and pain are not opposites.⁷⁵

Citing tickling and sexual tickling as examples of the combination of pleasure and pain hardly proves the case that great pleasure requires great pain. However, the idea we find here, that the constant overcoming of hindrances gives rise to feelings of excessive power, which in turn is the essence of pleasure, is important. It is at least plausible to view hindrances as, in some sense, displeasurable in themselves, and their overcoming as giving rise to feelings of power, which are, according to Nietzsche, the very essence of pleasure. If they are the essence of pleasure, or at least give rise to pleasure, it further seems plausible to say that the greater the hindrance, i.e., the greater the displeasure, the greater the feeling of power, and therefore, pleasure that will result. Further, we do find here some reason to disregard the idea that pleasure and pain are strict opposites. That is, Nietzsche points out that while certain kinds of pain will give rise to pleasure, certain types of pleasure will not give rise to pain in the same way.⁷⁶

If we accept the idea that overcoming certain hindrances can lead to pleasure, and that the greater the hindrance the greater the pleasure, we do not thereby have to accept that this is the only way to bring about great pleasure. That is, we do not have to accept it as the only means to pleasure unless we really take Nietzsche's assertion that the essence of pleasure is the feeling of superabundant, excessive power; and it is not obvious that Nietzsche is right about this.⁷⁷ It is easy to imagine great pleasures that do not require feelings of excessive power. For example, I can love my job, earn money by it, and then

⁷⁵ "Suffering and Self-Cultivation: The Case of Nietzsche" 176-77; *The Will to Power*, Kaufman and Hollingdale, 371.

⁷⁶ I write "in the same way" because it seems one might try to argue that excesses of pleasure, e.g., drug use, can give rise to pain in the form of addiction and all it entails. However, this is not the opposite of Nietzsche's example where the overcoming of pain brings about feelings of power and therefore pleasure. There does not seem to be any possibility of the overcoming of pleasure bringing about pain; it is even unclear if that idea is intelligible, for what does it mean to overcome pleasure in this sense. We might imagine being in ecstasy from a drug and somehow overcoming the pleasure, stopping ourselves from becoming an addict, but it is not at all obvious that this is the opposite of the case Nietzsche describes of the overcoming of pain leading to pleasure.

⁷⁷ In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche writes, "What is good? – All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man. What is bad? – All that proceeds from weakness. What is happiness? – The feeling that power *increases* – that a resistance is overcome" (2). So, a discussion of whether the essence of pleasure is the feeling of superabundant power would have to address Nietzsche's thoughts on the will to power; because it would lead us to far afield, this is not the place for such a project.

go on a wonderful vacation where everything runs smoothly: I relax, play, perhaps on a deeper level I commune with nature, and thereby experience great, non-shallow pleasure. Nietzsche could argue that such pleasures are not really pleasures after all, much like Socrates does in Plato's *Republic*, when he argues that physical pleasures are really illusions and therefore not real pleasures at all.⁷⁸ But without serious argumentation, such a move would be a cheap trick. Nevertheless, there is something to the idea of great pleasure being cultivated by the overcoming of great hindrances, even if it does not turn out to be the only means for experiencing great pleasure.

Sefler tries to tie pleasure and pain together in another way. Life, he writes, is "situational"; it is made up of interrelated elements whose configurations determine the meaning of the overall whole:

Elements of experience are such because of their relationality to their co-elements. Pain has no meaning "in-itself"; it is meaningful only in reference to pleasure....And...happiness has no meaning "in-itself," it is meaningful only in reference to suffering. If suffering were to disappear from the world, happiness would likewise disappear; that is, the happiness-suffering dimensions of life would combine into a constant, unchangeable state which would be indifferentiable.⁷⁹

We might agree that what pain means to us is dependent upon how it fits into the rest of our lives, including its relation to the pleasure we experience. If we feel our pleasures are mediocre and our pains significant, this may be a result of their relation. That is, the pleasure feels particularly mediocre in light of the great pain we experience, and the pain we experience is particularly significant in light of the meager pleasures we experience. Or it might be the case that after suffering a great pain, what would otherwise be a mediocre pleasure is experienced as something truly great. For example, our experience of a hot bath will surely be different depending on whether we have been doing manual labor all day or whether we are just bathing upon awakening.

However, it is not entirely clear that if suffering were to disappear, so would happiness. True, happiness may mean something different with the disappearance of suffering and thereby what was happiness strictly speaking disappears, but this does not seem to imply that we would not experience any kind of happiness or pleasure. If we live somewhere where the summers are around 100 degrees Fahrenheit and the winters around 15 degrees Fahrenheit, the great difference will surely color our experiences of hot and cold temperatures; nevertheless, if we lived somewhere where the temperature never got below 85 degrees Fahrenheit, we would surely still sweat and feel the heat, even if its "meaning" in some sense were to be different without the contrasting experience of the cold temperature. So, while it does not speak against their being opposites, we can accept that pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering are so connected that the qualitative experience of one colors our qualitative experience of the other in a reciprocal fashion.

⁷⁸ At 584c.

⁷⁹ "Nietzsche And Dostoevsky On The Meaning Of Suffering" 146.

In summary, it seems reasonable to say that pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering, are so related that they are in some sense “twins,” or at least not complete opposites, in the following ways. First, there are some cases where pleasure results from pain in the form of hindrances overcome: the greater the hindrance the greater the feeling of power and therefore pleasure. Second, while pain may give rise to pleasure in some cases, it does not seem that the opposite holds, i.e., pleasure overcome does not give rise to pain. Third, and this does not necessarily speak against their being opposites, pain and pleasure have a reciprocal relationship in which the experience of the one colors our experience of the other. This coloring of experience could go either way: the greatness of suffering may either increase or decrease our feeling of pleasure, and vice versa.

The question then is whether we have found reason to think we should not try to avoid suffering as far as possible. In the first case, unless superabundant, excessive feelings of power really are the essence of pleasure, it doesn't seem that the overcoming of hindrances is going to be the only way of achieving pleasure. And even if the essence of pleasure is as Nietzsche claims, it is not obvious that the overcoming of hindrances is the only way to achieve such levels of feeling. However, it does perhaps give reason to believe that there are instances of suffering that can bring about great feelings of pleasure. In the case of the reciprocal coloring of pleasure and pain, it gives reason to think that, at least in some cases, the experience of great suffering may be conducive to the experience of great pleasure. However, this reciprocal coloring does not seem to imply that we cannot experience great pleasure without great suffering. Therefore, we have been given reason to think that joy and suffering are connected in a way that implies they are not strict opposites, but not in a way that makes them wholly inseparable. Concerning the giving of meaning to our suffering, we might say that in those cases where suffering gives rise to great joy, insofar as we find a life of joy and happiness meaningful, we ought to find the suffering that allows for further joy to be meaningful as well, though perhaps only instrumentally. However, this is not altogether satisfying since it would not seem to be enough to stave off suicidal nihilism. So, let us now turn to other ways in which suffering is conducive to the enhancement of human life.

Suffering Makes Strong

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes:

Evil.— Examine the lives of the best and most fruitful people and peoples and ask yourselves whether a tree that is supposed to grow to a proud height can dispense with bad weather and storms; whether misfortune and external resistance, some kinds of hatred, jealousy, stubbornness, mistrust, hardness, avarice, and violence do not belong among the *favorable* conditions without which any great growth even of virtue is scarcely possible. The poison of which weaker natures perish strengthens the strong—nor do they call it poison.⁸⁰

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes that the unfree spirits want sympathy for those that suffer and want even to abolish suffering:

⁸⁰ *The Gay Science*, 19.

We opposite men, having opened our eyes and conscience to the question where and how the plant “man” has so far grown most vigorously to a height—we think that this has happened every time under opposite conditions, that to this end the dangerousness of his situation must first grow to the point of enormity, his power of invention and simulation (his “spirit”) had to develop under prolonged pressure and constraint into refinement and audacity, his life-will had to be enhanced into an unconditional power-will. We think that hardness, forcefulness, slavery, danger in the alley and the heart, life in hiding, stoicism, the art of experiment and devilry of every kind, that everything evil, terrible, tyrannical in man, everything in him that is kin to beasts of prey and serpents, serves the enhancement of the species “man” as much as its opposite does.⁸¹

And later:

You want, if possible—and there is no more insane “if possible”—to *abolish suffering*. And we? It really seems that we would rather have it higher and worse than ever. Well-being as you understand it—that is no goal, that seems to us an *end*, a state that soon makes man ridiculous and contemptible—that makes his destruction *desirable*.

The discipline of suffering, of great suffering—do you not know that only this discipline has created all enhancements of man so far?⁸²

And finally, “A species comes to be, a type becomes fixed and strong, through the long fight with essentially constant unfavorable conditions.”⁸³ These passages are clearly complex, and each has a role in its particular context. However, it is still reasonable to take away from these passages two basic points. First, that suffering and harsh conditions are required to make an individual great and fruitful. Second, that suffering, man’s evil to man, and harsh conditions in general are necessary to the advancement of humans as a species. The first point is plausible to a degree, for it does seem right to say that insofar as we are exposed to harsh conditions, we are forced to learn to overcome them or perish; in successfully overcoming adverse and painful situations, we naturally become smarter, stronger, and wiser.⁸⁴ We should remember that painful situations can be physical, psychological, or both; and thus, the strength gained need not be thought of as physical strength—one often gains a mental strength, a strength of will, a strengthened sense of one’s self and abilities. The second point is also plausible to a degree, for harsh

⁸¹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 44.

⁸² *Beyond Good and Evil*, 225.

⁸³ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 262.

⁸⁴ At least to some extent; it seems we could say the harsher the conditions overcome, the more one learns or the stronger one becomes. In *The Gay Science*, while discussing our tendency to exaggerate our pain and suffering, Nietzsche writes, “A loss is a loss for barely an hour; somehow it also brings us some gift from heaven—new strength, for example, or at least a new opportunity for strength” (*The Gay Science*, 326.) So, it is clear that Nietzsche does not think that through suffering or loss we become automatically stronger; rather, we have been “given” an opportunity for new strength.

conditions would weed out weakness, and through the reduction of weak individuals, their genes are removed from circulation. This is, of course, reminiscent of the idea of the survival of the fittest. When conditions are comfortable, those that may degrade the species are allowed to propagate. As with strength, weaknesses should not be thought of as only physical.⁸⁵

That harsh conditions somehow better both the individual and the species is surely only true to a degree. For example, when Nietzsche writes, “*Out of life’s school of war: What does not destroy me, makes me stronger*”,⁸⁶ this is clearly not universally true.⁸⁷ There are two constraints: first, there is a point of diminishing returns. If I am shot in the head, survive, but lose my memory, many motor skills, and the ability to fully grasp what is happening around me, I am not destroyed (killed) but I am surely not stronger because of it (though this will possibly depend on the second constraint). Conversely, if my cat scratches my hand by accident, the “suffering” I thereby experience will likely not be the kind from which I can become stronger. So, there are low and high degrees of suffering that seem to be ruled out. Second, even if what I suffer is only the loss of a pet, my job, or a hand, I am not automatically made stronger by living through it. There are times where all we can do is hold on as best we can, hoping that the pain will stop; in such cases we do not overcome the suffering, but just do our best to ride it out. Whether I come out stronger depends on what my attitudes towards suffering are and whether I can use those attitudes to see the suffering as an opportunity for growth and strengthening, and then whether I have the strength to carry out the growth. Concerning the strengthening of the species through harsh conditions, we can also imagine limiting cases. Conditions of great plague or natural disaster in which our strength of will and body are of no use are not going to be conditions under which the species is strengthened.⁸⁸ Further, it is not entirely clear why we should think murder and theft strengthen the species, as Nietzsche seems to claim.

⁸⁵ In the beginning of *The Gay Science*, section 4, entitled *What preserves the species*, Nietzsche approaches these issues from another angle. He concludes from that discussion: “One holds that what is called good preserves the species, while what is called evil harms the species. In truth, however, the evil instincts are expedient, species-preserving, and indispensable to as high a degree as the good ones; their function is merely different.”

⁸⁶ *Twilight of the Idols*, Maxims and Arrows, 8.

⁸⁷ None of this is to imply that Nietzsche thought what he wrote was a universally applicable maxim that went into effect automatically. Unfortunately this is an oft quoted statement—one that is used either to show Nietzsche was foolish or to show that we should think that suffering, regardless of the sufferer and the context, makes one stronger. Nietzsche writes, after all:

One must shed the bad taste of wanting to agree with many. “Good” is no longer good when one’s neighbor mouths it. And how should there be a “common good”! The term contradicts itself: whatever can be common always has little value. In the end it must be as it is and always has been: great things remain for the great, abysses for the profound, nuances and shudders for the refined, and, in brief, all that is rare for the rare. (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 43)

⁸⁸ Again, this is not to say that Nietzsche would have thought otherwise; furthermore, it is reasonable to think that to a degree, those who possess a great will and great physical strength have a better chance of surviving sickness. However, physical strength and will can only go so far depending on what the sickness is, and will help even less in cases of natural disaster.

Can we say now, as Hillesheim does, that since harsh conditions and suffering can “function as a psychological stimulant to further growth” that “Suffering is thus not without meaning; man’s suffering is transfigured by the knowledge that it serves a life-enhancing end”?⁸⁹ Or as Seffler says, in regard to an individual giving meaning to her suffering, “The proper way of understanding suffering, Friedrich Nietzsche proposes, is to acknowledge its existence and to give it a *positive* and *necessary* status within human life”?⁹⁰ We still have yet to look at the role of the eternal recurrence, which is what Leiter takes to be the center of Nietzsche’s offered alternative ideal to the ascetic ideal, yet at this point we can say, *pace* Leiter, that suffering can be given a meaning, we can answer the question “Why do I suffer?” with, “I suffer, not as a punishment, but in order to become better and stronger; it is up to me to use my suffering.” This answer differs in an important way from that of the religious answer, say, that of the Christian or Buddhist. Whereas they are backwards-looking, looking for a cause or reason for our suffering, our Nietzschean answer is forward-looking: suffering has meaning not because it is deserved but because of its possible life enhancing capabilities. Suffering is not to be endured as a deserved punishment, but embraced because it is pregnant with possibilities for growth and power.

We must, however, be careful with this answer. The idea that suffering is somehow justified through its life-enhancing capabilities does not mean that the great joy that may result from profound suffering is a justification for our suffering. At least this is not what Nietzsche wanted to say: “The more volcanic the earth, the greater the happiness will be - but it would be ludicrous to say that this happiness justified suffering *per se*.”⁹¹ But this brings to light another issue: if the joy that might result from suffering does not justify suffering, why should the strengthening aspect of suffering justify or give meaning to suffering? After all, if both happiness and enhancement are possible *results* of suffering, and happiness does not justify suffering, why should enhancement? For Nietzsche, the answer might be that human greatness is a goal, but human happiness is not. It is suffering, not happiness, that makes great. So, since happiness is not to be desired over suffering to begin with, any happiness that results from “volcanic earth” is not going to justify our suffering. But the life-enhancing aspects of suffering do give suffering meaning because human greatness is more desirable than human happiness.⁹² However, this possible response to suffering and its meaning is still incomplete. We must turn to further considerations.

The strengthening role of suffering in human life is another mark against religious morality for Nietzsche. He saw the strengthening of the species as desirable; or more precisely, he saw the cultivation of higher types of humans as desirable (more on this below). This is one of the reasons his tongue was so sharp in his polemic against religious morality. In previous sections we witnessed his reasons for considering the ascetic priest’s method of giving meaning to our suffering dishonest and harmful. Here we can bring forth another reason for his distaste for religious morality. We saw the

⁸⁹ “Suffering and Self-Cultivation: The Case of Nietzsche” p177.

⁹⁰ “Nietzsche And Dostoevsky On The Meaning Of Suffering” 145.

⁹¹ *Human, All too Human*, 591.

⁹² One might object to greatness being more desirable than happiness; such an objection plays into the issue of rank order, which we will address shortly.

various palliatives provided by the ascetic priest for his flock—a flock that consists of the meek, those who have twisted, or those who inherit the previously twisted, earlier valuations; and who have found ways to protect and propagate themselves despite their meekness. As such, Nietzsche sees them as weakening the species, and this is why he says of Buddhism and Christianity:

They seek to preserve, to preserve alive whatever can possibly be preserved...the *sovereign* religions we have had so far are among the chief causes that have kept the type “man” on a lower rung—they have preserved too much of *what ought to perish*...to preserve all that was sick and that suffered—which means, in fact and in truth, to *worsen the European race*....⁹³

So, here too, we see another reason against religious morality and its desire to ease suffering, its desire to give suffering a meaning through guilt. This is why, in the Preface to the *Genealogy of Morals* he asks, what if “morality would be to blame if the *highest power and splendor* actually possible to the type man was never in fact attained? So that precisely morality was the danger of dangers?”⁹⁴ Further, “Our weak, unmanly, social concepts of good and evil and their tremendous ascendancy over body and soul have finally weakened all bodies and souls and snapped the self-reliant, independent, unprejudiced men, the pillars of a *strong* civilization....”⁹⁵ Appealing to such remarks, Leiter argues that it is religious morality’s detrimental effects on the propagation and cultivation of the higher types of humans that causes Nietzsche to object so strongly to such a morality.⁹⁶ An important question now arises: are these higher types simply a result of any human’s ability to confront and benefit from harsh conditions, or are the higher types a product of harsh conditions and a certain predisposition to greatness? An answer to this question is all important in deciding what our attitude towards suffering should be. If we can give meaning to suffering by acknowledging its necessity and enhancing effects, but it is only a certain type that is capable of really benefiting from suffering, then whether one should embrace suffering or retreat to the shelter provided by the ascetic priest will depend upon one’s type.

Nietzsche and the “Problem” of Rank Order

Concerning profound suffering, Nietzsche writes that, “it almost determines the order of rank how profoundly human beings can suffer...Profound suffering makes

⁹³ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 62. The implication of such words seems to be horrifying, namely, that certain “weak” souls should be allowed to perish. If this is Nietzsche’s position, we rightly are horrified. However, it is not clear given other things Nietzsche says whether he really means to say that certain weak individuals should not be saved or whether they should not be saved out of a sense of compassion. There is unfortunately not space here to consider this question; but see *The Gay Science* 338 and *Beyond Good and Evil* 293 for some insight into Nietzsche’s views on compassion. The point is that we should not just assume from the quoted text that Nietzsche was a monster.

⁹⁴ *Genealogy of Morals*, Preface, 6.

⁹⁵ *Daybreak*, 163.

⁹⁶ Nietzsche on Morality, p114.

noble; it separates.”⁹⁷ But what is the order of rank and how does profound suffering help to determine the order of rank?

Nietzsche considers issues of rank order in a variety of ways and contexts. There are reasons for the order of rank and there are the ways in which it manifested. We begin by looking at its reasons. Primarily order of rank begins as a matter of physiology. An indication of this in Nietzsche: “Moral judgments and condemnations constitute the favorite revenge of the *spiritually limited against those less limited—also a sort of compensation for having been ill-favored by nature...*”⁹⁸ Richard Schacht writes:

Speaking very generally, Nietzsche argues that while human beings may be allowed to have a common human nature, which sets them collectively apart from all forms of merely animal life, they differ in ways so substantial and significant that the doctrine of their essential equality requires to be judged a myth. Some, he holds, have it in them to surpass others in various respects.... Those endowed with certain higher capacities others lack (either relatively or entirely), on his view, represent potentially ‘higher’ types in relation to the rest; and to the extent that these capacities are cultivated, developed and manifested in their lives, they are held actually to be ‘higher’ than others (including those in whom these capacities remain unrealized).⁹⁹

The idea, then, is that humans are fundamentally unequal in their capacities and capabilities because of their nature—because of their physiological make up, which affects both their physical and mental capacities. For Nietzsche, this inequality plays itself out so that there are higher types and lower types (and surely those in-between). We would probably want to add to this the idea that one’s upbringing and the conditions of one’s early development play important roles in determining the order of rank. As a corollary to our previous discussion of the idea that harsh conditions make one strong, we might want to say that the harsher the conditions one grew up in, the stronger one will be. But I do not mean to assert this as a truth that manifests itself ubiquitously or at all times.

Physiology may help to determine the order of rank by predisposing individuals to be a particular type, but aside from this there are various characteristics that Nietzsche takes to be criteria for differentiating higher from lower types. Profound suffering helps to determine the order of rank in two ways. First, those who are physiologically and psychologically predetermined to be strong enough to suffer well are separated out from the weaker types insofar as the latter do not suffer well. Second, for Nietzsche, a part of suffering well is that one is made noble by it. Having suffered profoundly, the sufferer acquires a knowledge of terrible places that he alone knows about; he is prideful of this knowledge. He needs to not be pitied, but “to protect [himself] against contact with obtrusive and pitying hands and altogether against everything that is not its equal in suffering.”¹⁰⁰ This pride and distaste for pity is the sufferer’s nobility. But this nobility

⁹⁷ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 270.

⁹⁸ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 219. My emphasis.

⁹⁹ *Nietzsche*, p327.

¹⁰⁰ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 270.

is surely only had by those who suffer well, by those who are higher in the order of rank. The lower types, too, have gained a knowledge of terrible places, but instead of feeling pride, they feel afraid—they crave the pity and safety of others.

Another way that the order of rank manifests itself is through the degree to which one reveres oneself. Nietzsche asks, “What does the word ‘noble’ still mean to us today?”¹⁰¹ Part of his answer is that it is not one’s actions, works, or the desire for what is noble, but rather *faith*. But this is not a faith in something outside oneself. The faith that determines the order of rank is, “some fundamental certainty that a noble soul has about itself, something that cannot be sought, nor found, nor perhaps lost. *The noble soul has reverence [Ehrfurcht] for itself.*”¹⁰² This faith in oneself is clearly juxtaposed to that of religious faith: a faith often sought by those without it, particularly in times of profound suffering. From this, we can say that the higher type has a faith in himself and his capabilities; he does not need help from others to bear his suffering, nor does he need their pity. Insofar as one has this faith in oneself, one is distinguished from those of a lower rank.

Importantly related to the idea that one’s ability to suffer well and one’s faith in oneself determine the order of rank, Nietzsche says that 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. He would even determine value and rank in accordance with how much and how many things one could bear and take upon himself, how *far* one could extend his responsibility.¹⁰³

If greatness is determined by the amount that one can take upon oneself, and if the weight of great responsibility is in some sense a difficult and thus sufferable weight, then one is great insofar as one can suffer great responsibility. This is not just any kind of suffering; rather, it is the desire to take on as much as one can. According to Leiter:

“What is noble?” Nietzsche again asks in a *Nachlass* note of 1888. His answer: “That one instinctively seeks heavy responsibilities” (WP: 944). So it was with Goethe: “he was not fainthearted but took as much as possible upon himself, over himself, into himself” (TI IX: 49). But the higher type does not seek out responsibilities and tasks arbitrarily. “A great man,” says Nietzsche, displays “a long logic in all of his activity...he has the ability to extend his will across great stretches of his life and to despise, and reject everything petty about him” (WP: 962).¹⁰⁴

Suffering makes noble, but the noble person suffers heavy responsibilities willingly. Conversely, then, the lower, the plebian, would rather take on as little responsibility as

¹⁰¹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 287.

¹⁰² *Beyond Good and Evil*, 287. *Ehrfurcht* means either deep respect or reverence.

¹⁰³ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 212.

¹⁰⁴ *Nietzsche on Morality*, 117.

possible, for responsibility is uncomfortable at best. Therefore, in addition to suffering well and having faith in oneself, the higher type willingly suffers as much responsibility as possible, thus further distinguishing herself from the lower types.

Let us look at one last aspect of the order of rank, an aspect that will tie in with our previous discussion of religious morality. Nietzsche writes:

None of these ponderous herd animals with their unquiet consciences (who undertake to advocate the cause of egoism as the cause of the general welfare) wants to know or even sense that “the general welfare” is no ideal, no goal, no remotely intelligible concept, but only an emetic—that what is fair for one *cannot* by any means for that reason alone also be fair for others; that the demand of one morality for all is detrimental for the higher man; in short, that there is an order of rank between man and man, hence also between morality and morality.¹⁰⁵

There is a great deal going on in this passage. Nietzsche is arguing against the idea that English utilitarianism should be viewed as right for humanity as a whole. Nietzsche wants to make clear that a desire for a universal morality is not only a bad idea—because of the order of rank—but also a dangerous one. The morality of the ascetic priest is dangerous to the higher type of man, for it is the morality of the meek and those that do not suffer well. And a morality that would be appropriate for the higher type would be dangerous for the lower type. Those in the lower ranks could not bear the burden of responsibility and suffering that comes with the higher type. This is, in part, why Nietzsche says that a further difference among people, one that further differentiates the order of rank, is their table of goods (what they take to be good) and what they take to be having something good. The higher type, for example, takes strength, self-reverence, and the ability to bear heavy responsibility as goods; the lower type takes timidity, humbleness, and altruistic ideals as goods (or poverty, humility, and chastity).

Much more could be said about the higher and lower types in Nietzsche’s writings. However, the point here has been to elucidate the reasons for, and manifestations of, the order of rank in relation to suffering. People are predisposed by nature to be higher or lower types. One’s subsequent experiences further mold one’s type. How the different types view and respond to suffering is a key aspect of what differentiates the higher from the lower types. The higher type not only can endure more suffering, but gladly takes on more suffering in the form of heavy responsibility. The higher type is self-assured and full of self-respect, and seeks to avoid being pitied. The lower type is just the opposite.

Now that we have a general sense of the difference of types and rank order, we need to address three issues. First, are Nietzsche’s views on the order of rank justified? Second, how does this relate back to our previous discussion of how suffering makes strong? Third, what does this mean in regard to what our attitude toward suffering should be? We will address these issues in this order.

The Question of Equality

¹⁰⁵ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 228.

As we have seen, Nietzsche essentially advocates inequality. In today's world of political correctness to advocate inequality is blasphemous. But however distasteful the idea might be, we should give it a fair hearing. To begin, it is undeniable that humans are born with greatly unequal natural characteristics, abilities, and capacities. I will not try to list all the ways, but some of them include size, physical strength, metabolism, genetic predisposition to disease, eyesight, mental acuity, ability to concentrate, general disposition, demeanor, and so on. It is true that if you are not naturally a fast runner, you can train very hard to improve; nevertheless, if you are not predisposed to being really fast or to having great endurance, regardless of how hard you train, someone who is predisposed to these things will be faster or have greater endurance.

We might be willing to acknowledge that people are physically and psychologically different, at which point we say that though they are different in body and mind, everyone should have equal rights and equal opportunities. But from what we have already seen, even this is repugnant to Nietzsche. For example, the higher types should have the right to rule, whereas the lower types are not fit to rule. Speaking disparagingly of those he takes to be falsely called "free spirits" in his time, Nietzsche writes, "the two songs and doctrines which they repeat most often are 'equality of rights' and 'sympathy for all that suffers'—and suffering itself they take for something that must be *abolished*."¹⁰⁶ Those who want to guarantee equality of rights and opportunity also want to do away with suffering. Their hearts bleed for the suffering and inequality that they perceive. They do not realize the importance and necessity of suffering, Nietzsche would say. This is not to say that there are not actual cases where individuals are done wrong. Racism, in the sense, for example, of taking an individual of one race to be boorish or stupid simply by virtue of being of a particular race, can rightly be seen as doing that individual wrong. However, there is also the case of the violation of the rights of the higher type by the lower type's calling for equality:

Today...when only the herd animal receives and dispense honors in Europe, when "equality of rights" could all too easily be changed into equality in violating rights—I mean, into a common war on all that is rare, strange, privileged, the higher man, the higher soul, the higher duty, the higher responsibility, and the abundance of creative power and masterfulness....¹⁰⁷

Equal rights, when preached by the lower type, mean the violation of the higher type's rights, since the equal rights preached by the lower type are befitting the lower type alone. Kaufman writes:

In our time...equality is confused with conformity—as Nietzsche sees it—and it is taken to involve the renunciation of personal initiative and the demand for general leveling. Men are losing the ambition to be equally excellent, which involves as the surest means the desire to excel one another in continued competition, and they are becoming resigned to being equally mediocre. Instead

¹⁰⁶ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 44.

¹⁰⁷ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 212.

of vying for distinction, men nurture a *ressentiment* against all that is distinguished, superior, or strange.¹⁰⁸

Wanting equal rights is a mark of shallowness¹⁰⁹—such a shallow thinker fails to see the depth of distinctions that lie in human natures. A great many people easily feel nervous when they see others excel; they do not like to be reminded that they are not equal. This can, perhaps, be seen in certain initiatives to do away with grades in school—the general desire by some to spare children, if not adults, the feeling of not being as good as someone else.

All this is not to say that the lower types do not have a necessary role to play. Concerning this, Schacht writes:

Differences in rank and greater and lesser worth are relative notions; and [Nietzsche] is far from considering even those he calls ‘the herd’ to have no significance (let alone negative significance) according to his revaluation. On the contrary, he insists upon the value of the human ‘herd’ – instrumental, to be sure, but substantial nonetheless....The herd animal ensures that life goes on, and establishes conditions through the exploitation of which the qualitative enhancement of life may occur.¹¹⁰

Similar to how we might say that if we are going to have the kind of society in which we live, regardless of whether it is capitalist or socialist, there are going to have to be those who fill the “lower” positions of society: for example, waste management positions and positions in the service industry. So too, the higher types in many ways stand on the shoulders of the lower types.

To our ears Nietzsche may sound like a beast, and we are perhaps quick to dismiss out of hand the ravings of a beast. If we find ourselves doing this, it is good remember Nietzsche also wrote the following:

When power becomes gracious and descends into the visible—such descent I call beauty.

And there is nobody from whom I want beauty as much as from you who are powerful: let your kindness be your final self-conquest.

Of all evil I deem you capable: therefore I want the good from you. Verily, I have often laughed at the weaklings who thought themselves good because they had no claws.¹¹¹

It is rightly difficult to swallow all of what Nietzsche has to say about higher and lower types. One very significant problem is the possibility of abuses of power and authority. One can easily imagine Hitler’s thinking of himself as a higher type and the Germans as the higher race—and it is such status that gives them the “right” to rule and

¹⁰⁸ Nietzsche: *Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, pp404-05.

¹⁰⁹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, 238.

¹¹⁰ Nietzsche, 388.

¹¹¹ *Zarathustra*, On Those Who Are Sublime, p118.

cull the herd of weaker types. Hitler was clearly and horrifyingly wrong. So part of the problem with adopting Nietzsche's views in regard to rank order is: Who is to decide who the higher types are? Clearly a democratic vote by all (including the "lower" types) would not be a satisfactory means for Nietzsche.

However, I do not think we have to endorse all of what Nietzsche says in regard to rank order if we are to acknowledge that there are natural differences among people and those differences predispose some for greatness and others for mediocrity. More to the point for our current discussion of suffering, those differences predispose some to being able to suffer well and others to be incapable of such feats.

The Question of Rank Order and Suffering

The more general question that we are concerned with is whether we can find an alternative ideal to the ascetic ideal: an alternative ideal that will give our suffering meaning. I am suggesting that our suffering can be seen to be meaningful insofar as it is necessary for certain kinds of joy and insofar as suffering in its many forms plays a necessary and important role for the enhancement of human life. On an individual level suffering provides an opportunity for the growth and strengthening of one's being. In these ways we can see suffering as meaningful. However, we must now take into consideration the order of rank for humanity. If some individuals are predisposed to suffer well and others poorly, and if suffering can be meaningful for its life enhancing qualities, and if those who suffer poorly cannot find opportunities for enhancement in suffering, then the alternative ideal of suffering as life enhancing is not going to be equally available to all.

We saw earlier that Leiter thinks that the eternal recurrence is the alternative ideal and that suffering does not actually have a meaning under this ideal. I have tried to argue that suffering can be given a meaning; however, it now seems that this possibility of giving suffering a meaning is reserved primarily for the higher types (not necessarily just the highest). Leiter comes to a similar conclusion about the eternal recurrence:

Of course...it is only the highest human being who can embrace the doctrine of eternal return; in that sense, the ascetic ideal will remain essential for the rest of humanity. But Nietzsche thinks it is at least possible for some – those higher human beings, presumably, who are Nietzsche's recurring concern – to avoid both suicidal nihilism and asceticism.¹¹²

So, the ascetic ideal still has a role to play insofar as it is the primary means for the majority of people to stave off suicidal nihilism. Therefore, whether Nietzsche's alternative ideal is the eternal recurrence, but without there being meaningful suffering, or whether his alternative ideal is as I have argued, it will not be an alternative equally available to all.

I have said little about the notion of the eternal recurrence except in connection with Leiter's interpretation of Nietzsche. It is now time to say more. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche writes:

¹¹² Nietzsche on *Morality*, p288.

The greatest weight.— What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!”

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?¹¹³

Relating this back to suffering, if one cannot embrace all that one lives through, which includes profound suffering, then one cannot embrace the idea of the eternal recurrence. In embracing the eternal recurrence one embraces every aspect of one’s life. I want to say that part of this embrace involves the recognition of the necessity and life enhancing aspects of suffering—the recognition that suffering thereby has a meaning. To my knowledge, Nietzsche does not say directly that suffering can or cannot be given a meaning through the acknowledgment and embracement of its necessary and life enhancing aspects. But it is clear that insofar as Nietzsche’s alternative ideal involves the eternal recurrence it also involves embracing one’s suffering:

My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendacious in the face of what is necessary—but *love* it.¹¹⁴

To live is to suffer; to be able to embrace one’s life means being able to embrace, to love, one’s suffering—one’s fate as a creature who is born to suffer.

Seeing our suffering as meaningful for its necessary and life enhancing aspects should mean a rejection of suicidal nihilism. For suffering would then no longer be without a meaning, which is the central motivating factor of suicidal nihilism; further, if we couple this alternative ideal with the eternal recurrence, we affirm life and thus do not want to end it.

¹¹³ *The Gay Science*, 341.

¹¹⁴ *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, p258.

The Question of What Our Attitude Toward Suffering Should Be

We have now come back to our original question. In looking at Nietzsche's philosophy, we have looked at two general attitudes toward suffering, two differing ways to give suffering meaning. The first way involved the ascetic ideal, which turned out to be a dishonest and harmful means, according to Nietzsche. Correlated with the ascetic ideal is the idea that suffering is to be avoided as far as possible: suffering is undesirable. Nevertheless, while suffering is undesirable, it is ultimately unavoidable.¹¹⁵ But worse than not being able to avoid suffering is not being able to see it as meaningful. The ascetic ideal provides a meaning, which is essentially that we suffer as punishment for our sins; however, this turns out to actually increase our suffering through our intense feelings of guilt. At first the guilt acts as a narcotic for our suffering, but it ultimately gives way to more suffering. If Nietzsche is correct, then the unavoidability of suffering, and the dishonesty and harmfulness of the ascetic ideal and its associated idea that suffering is undesirable, would be evidence that our attitude toward suffering should not be one of avoidance.

The alternative is to see the life enhancing attributes of suffering and its subsequent meaningfulness coupled with the eternal recurrence as a positive alternative ideal. It is an ideal that involves the wholehearted embracing of one's suffering, an attitude that seeks not to avoid suffering, but to see it as necessary and an opportunity for growth and strengthening. If Nietzsche is correct about this alternative ideal, then that is evidence that our attitude toward suffering should not be one of avoidance.

There is a problem, however. We are confronted with the possibility that this alternative ideal is not open to all. According to Nietzsche, there are some, the "lower types," who are predisposed to suffer poorly. What should they do? According to Nietzsche, they should stick with the ascetic ideal; however, I am reluctant to suggest that anyone stick with something dishonest and harmful. This leads to an important question that I must leave unaddressed: is it possible for a lower type to struggle to become a higher type? From what we have seen, Nietzsche probably would say no; but while a lower type, because of his natural capacities, may not be able to become one of the highest types, I do not see why he would not be able to become a type higher than before. Further, insofar as there is truth to what Nietzsche says, it will have profound implications for ethics: for example, in how we ought to treat others, in particularly how we ought to respond to the suffering of children and the sick.¹¹⁶

I said at the beginning of the paper that there is not a middle position between the two ideals available. That is, the attitude of avoiding suffering as far as possible and embracing it when it actually does happen, as it inevitably must, is not really a

¹¹⁵ Unless one can find enlightenment (Buddhism) or eternal union with God in the next life (Christianity).

¹¹⁶ In "Nietzsche and the Dilemma of Suffering" the authors attempt to argue that nurses should encourage their patients to make their pain their own instead of trying to always simply ease their patient's pain. They unfortunately ignore the important issue of rank order.

possibility. This is because to really adopt the Nietzschean alternative ideal, as I have tried to spell it out, is not compatible with trying to avoid suffering as far as possible, for reasons already given. Again this does not mean that one does not avoid an oncoming car or that one blithely walks into a pit of snakes.

In suggesting that our attitude toward suffering should be one of *amor fati*, I do not intend to imply that this is something easily done, even for those who suffer well. Further, I have attempted to cover much ground in this paper. In doing so, I have had to treat some subjects unequally and superficially. Additionally, I do not believe that I have done full justice to the subtlety and detail of Nietzsche's writings. Nevertheless, I hope to have at least outlined some of his main ideas and lines of thought accurately. Further, even if Nietzsche would not agree that suffering can be given a meaning in the way that I have taken him to, this does not mean that we cannot attempt to give suffering a meaning through the acknowledgement of the necessary and life enhancing roles it plays in our lives.

Appendix

What to Make of Nietzsche's Critique of Religious Morality Insofar as it Concerns Suffering.

It is not my intention in this paper to offer a real assessment of the correctness of Nietzsche's attack and description of religious morality in regard to the ascetic priest, the ascetic ideal, and the way the former uses the latter to give suffering meaning. However, I will say a few words concerning the extent to which Nietzsche's critique is applicable to Buddhism. A majority of Nietzsche's remarks are aimed at Christianity, though he does address Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. But given Nietzsche's childhood and initial studies in theology, the religion he was most familiar with was Christianity. So, while his criticisms of religious morality in general may be applicable to religions other than Christianity, we can still ask whether his remarks concerning the ascetic priest's redirection of *ressentiment* apply to religions other than Christianity: for example, Buddhism. Nietzsche's psychological remarks about *ressentiment* and those that suffer seem quite plausible. That is, it is reasonable that many—it need not be all—people when suffering do develop a desire to find the cause of their suffering and often they look for the cause in the form of another person: someone they can hold responsible for their suffering. The question, then, is whether in Buddhism we can find a version of the ascetic priest who redirects the *ressentiment* of the sufferer back onto himself and makes the sufferer feel guilty for transgressing the ascetic ideal in such a way that the sufferer's pain is deadened. It turns out that the notion of guilt found in Judeo-Christian ethics is not found in Buddhism. In Buddhism we find, rather, the notion of regret. Geshe Kelsang Gyatso writes:

it is important not to misunderstand what it means to regret our unskillful actions. We should not view the suffering we experience as an externally applied punishment for our sins; nor is it necessary to feel guilty, thinking we have offended some authority or force that is prepared to take revenge upon us. True regret is not concerned with such extraneous attitudes.¹¹⁷

Guilt is a self-centered emotion that actually interferes with changing one's ways. It is true that the Buddha is a kind of ascetic priest; but while the Buddha says that we are ultimately responsible for our own suffering, and while he may be seen as teaching the first innocent means of easing suffering—that which Nietzsche calls a kind self-hypnotization—concerning the cause of man's suffering, the Buddha does not say that, "he must seek it in himself, in some guilt, in a piece of the past, he must understand his suffering as a punishment."¹¹⁸

Suffering for the practicing Buddhist could perhaps be seen to be meaningful insofar as it shows the practitioner that his actions and thoughts are still unskillful, i.e., they lead to suffering because one has not sufficiently developed the right view of desire

¹¹⁷ *Meaningful to Behold: the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, 63.

¹¹⁸ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 20.

and impermanence, for example. So, though the Buddhist does not feel he is being punished for the transgression of the ascetic ideal, he still feels that the suffering is his own doing: it is caused by his continued ignorance and craving. While this recognition should bring regret in the form discussed by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, it is doubtful that this recognition produces the narcotic effect that Nietzsche sees guilt producing in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

It may be that Buddhism is a counter example to Nietzsche's argument that through the ascetic ideal *all* suffering was placed, "under the perspective of *guilt*."¹¹⁹ Unfortunately my exposition of Buddhism, and to a certain extent Nietzsche's thought, has been too superficial to say for sure. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that Nietzsche would consider Buddhism to be an ascetic religion, if for no other reason than that its main goal is to allow people to end the cycle of rebirths, for with each rebirth one must suffer another life. This notion of ending rebirths, while not exactly opposite, is nearly antithetical to Nietzsche's treasured idea of affirming life through the whole hearted embracing of the idea of the eternal recurrence.

¹¹⁹ *Genealogy of Morals*, III 28.

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