

# *The Agonist*

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Well, then, it's Yes all around:  
Some strange moments in the Third Essay of the *Genealogy*<sup>1</sup>

Lawrence J. Hatab  
Old Dominion University

In Section 7 of the Third Essay, Nietzsche offers the remarkable claim that Schopenhauer was not actually a pessimist, even though he wanted to be one. What can this mean, given that Schopenhauer identified his philosophy as a pessimistic denial of meaning in life? After his discussion of Schopenhauer's ascetic pain-killing maneuver, Nietzsche alerts us to "the other side of the account," which amounts to a naturalistic perspective on Schopenhauer's pessimism: in other words, independent of Schopenhauer's metaphysical position on the nature of "reality" and its meaninglessness, Nietzsche asks about Schopenhauer's own personal posture as a pessimist, about what it means to *live* in that posture. He begins to articulate how even pessimism from this standpoint is a form of will to power that gives meaning to life in an agonistic relation to antithetical forces (in Schopenhauer's case, sexuality, women, and Hegel). Nietzsche claims that Schopenhauer *needed* these enemies to *avoid* becoming a pessimist. How so? The full implications of unadulterated pessimism would seem to subvert any impulse to *participate* in a meaningless existence; yet Schopenhauer lived a long, engaged, productive life of vigorous opposition to "optimism," especially a life of writing sophisticated books for a reading public, of bringing the wisdom of pessimism to bear on how people should think and live. This is why Nietzsche says that Schopenhauer's enemies "held him tight and kept seducing him back to existence." As a result, Schopenhauer was able to cure sheer

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<sup>1</sup> The following is taken from my forthcoming book: *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), Ch. 5.

nausea and find his own kind of “happiness.” Such, I think, is Nietzsche’s naturalistic redescription of pessimism that begins to articulate the distinction he made in *GM* III.1 between *willing* nothingness and *not willing*.

Nietzsche then moves beyond the “personal case” of Schopenhauer to consider philosophers in general (which he calls coming “back to our problem”). He claims that “as long as there are philosophers on earth” they exhibit an “irritation and rancor against sensuality.” Owing to this posture against the immediacy of natural experience—whether it be in the service of transcendent aims or simply the more modest project of bringing conceptual order to sense experience—Nietzsche says that philosophers have always been partial to the ascetic ideal, to the self-castigation of natural sensuality. He even makes the seemingly reductive claim that a *genuine* philosopher is marked by such ascetic tendencies, without which one is only a *so-called* philosopher (I leave aside the difficult question of whether Nietzsche is including himself in this typology).

Nietzsche then completes his naturalistic account of the seemingly *anti*-natural impulses in philosophy. These impulses are simply another form of will to power. Like all animals, the “*bête philosophe*” instinctively aims for optimal conditions of power in the midst of obstacles to these conditions. The agonistic structure of will to power accounts for a philosopher’s *aversion* to sensuality (and things like home life) in the service of a stimulating *freedom* for a life of thought. The ascetic *ideal* names precisely this kind of power over natural forces that opens up the power of thinking. As in the case of Schopenhauer, the ascetic ideal in philosophers is not actually a form of life-denial, but an *affirmation* of a life marked by “the highest and boldest intellectuality (*Geistigkeit*).” Nietzsche adds, however, that affirmation here only applies to a particular kind of life, because the philosopher “affirms *his* existence and *only* his existence.”

Yet with the claim that pessimism and asceticism, from a naturalistic perspective, are not actually a form of life-denial, we run up against two daunting questions: 1) What are we to make, then, of Nietzsche’s frequent charge that these postures *are* a form of life-denial? 2) If these postures are not life-denying, what, if any, is the difference between

their form of “affirmation” and Nietzsche’s own ideal of life affirmation? The text must surprise us at this point, and these perplexing questions have not, I think, been adequately recognized or engaged in the scholarly literature. And the problem emerges again in a later section.

In Section 13 Nietzsche says that the “self-contradiction” of an ascetic “life *against* life” is only an apparent contradiction, only a provisional expression and interpretation, indeed a “psychological misunderstanding” of the *reality* of the situation, which is presented as follows: Even though the ascetic ideal may perceive itself as against life (this would be its metaphysical vision), from a naturalistic standpoint he claims that this ideal “*springs from the protective and healing instincts of a degenerating life*, which uses every means to maintain itself and struggles for its existence.” In other words, when some forms of life are degenerating, are losing a more original natural vitality, life itself will engender different strategies (of power) to prevent an utter abnegation of life (suicidal despair, for instance). That is why Nietzsche says that the ascetic ideal is only a *partial* depletion of life instincts, the *deepest* of which “have remained intact” and which continually fight against sheer depletion “with new remedies and inventions.” The ascetic ideal is “one such remedy” that struggles against a death-wish and thereby works “for the *preservation* of life.” Proof of such a preserving force, we are told, is the historical success of this ideal that came to rule humanity with extensive power, especially whenever civilizing developments brought a “taming” of the human animal.

Nietzsche calls the ascetic priest “the incarnate wish for being-otherwise, being-elsewhere.” But the *power* of such wishing is distinct from something “elsewhere” because it is a “binding” to life that makes the priest an *instrument* for life, for creating “more favorable conditions for being-here and being human.” The priest’s power makes him the creative champion and leader of the herd by shaping their life-resentment into a meaningful form of existence. This is why Nietzsche says that the ascetic priest is only an “apparent enemy of life.” His negating posture “actually belongs to the really great *conserving* and *yes-creating* forces of life.”

So once again: What is the difference between ascetic “affirmation” (yes-creating forces) and Nietzsche’s own ideal of life affirmation? Addressing this question will also provide another angle on the continuing ambiguity of Nietzsche’s critique of life-denying values. The problem at hand is that Nietzsche stands for life-affirmation, and at the same time, throughout his writings he discusses other beliefs that are life-preserving, life-enhancing, life-promoting, and even yes-saying, while these beliefs are often the ones he attacks as life-denying. What is going on here? For the sake of economy, I want to suggest a distinction between *life-affirmation* and *life-enhancement*, where the former is Nietzsche’s ideal and the latter can be attributed even to ideals that are life-denying in Nietzsche’s sense.<sup>2</sup>

In order to build this distinction I must back up a bit and reiterate the complex genealogy of master and slave values, where *both* are instances of creative will to power; indeed, where the slave mentality seems to be a prerequisite for spiritual cultivation (*BGE* 188) and the creation of an advanced culture. As we have seen, the master-slave distinction may have clear delineations at first, but it begins to get complicated in the context of cultural creativity and Nietzsche’s brand of higher types, who could be understood as an “interpenetration” of master and slave characteristics combined in a “single soul” (*BGE* 260). To be precise, most slave instincts are simply forms of brute resentment, and so Nietzsche singles out *creative* slave instincts as instruments of culture; only certain individuals will carry slavish elements in a higher direction. The priest type, for instance, is weak in a worldly sense, but strong in will to power by *creating* values that promote the sick and castigate the healthy (*GM* III, 15).

From the standpoint of creative will to power, there is a notable overlap between master and slave; indeed, the creative conflict between master and slave forces is called the most decisive mark of a higher, more spiritual nature (*GM* I, 16). Consequently, even the

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<sup>2</sup> Two textual instances of these terms can be noted: enhancement (*Erhöhung*) in *BGE* 257, and affirmation (*Bejahung*) in *EH* III, Z, 1. Nietzsche does not offer a precise, formal distinction along these lines in his discussions. Yet I believe that the distinction is clearly implied in the texts.

“evil” that designated the destructive threat of the master is now recapitulated in creative disruptions of established conditions.

The strongest and most evil spirits have so far done the most to advance humanity: again and again they relumed the passions that were going to sleep—and they reawakened . . . the pleasure of what is new, daring, untried. . . . Usually by force of arms, by toppling boundary markers, by violating pieties—but *also by means of new religions and moralities* [my emphasis]. In every teacher and preacher of what is *new* we encounter the same “wickedness” that makes conquerors notorious, even if its expression is subtler and it does not immediately set the muscles in motion, and therefore also does not make one that notorious. What is new, however, is always *evil*, being that which wants to conquer and overthrow the old boundary markers and the old pieties. (GS 4)

Innovators are the new object of hatred and resentment (Z III, 12, 26), they are the new “criminals” (TI 9, 45), the new “cruel ones” (BGE 230), the new perpetrators of “war” (GS 283). In sum, cultural creativity is made possible by a “crossing” of master and slave characteristics, so that not everything in the latter is “slavish” and not everything in the former is “noble.” In the end, therefore, the creator-herd distinction is *not* equivalent to the master-slave distinction; there are overlaps, but the crude domination found in the original condition of the master cannot be considered the primary focus of Nietzsche’s analysis of creative types.

We need to recognize a general insight operating here: For Nietzsche, *any* development of culture out of natural conditions and any innovation will require a dynamic of discomfort, resistance, and overcoming, i.e., a contest with some Other. Nietzsche asks us not only to acknowledge this dynamic but to be wary of its dangers, which are indicated in traditional constructs and their *polarization* of a conflicted field into the oppositions of good and evil, truth and error. The ascetic ideal in the end represents the desire to escape the difficulty of incorporating the Other (*as other*) into one’s field of operation.

Affirmation, for Nietzsche, is anything but comfortable and pleasant; it means taking on the difficulty of *contending the Other without wanting to annul it*. The bottom line in Nietzsche’s genealogy, then, is that *every* perspective is mixed with its Other, because a

perspective needs its Other as an agonistic correlate, since opposition is part of a perspective's constitution. Conflict, therefore, is not simply to be tolerated; affirming oneself requires the affirmation of conflict, since the self is not something that is first fully formed and then, secondarily, presented to the world for possible relations and conflicts. The self is formed *in* and *through* agonistic relations. So in a way, openness toward one's Other is openness toward oneself.

Life-affirmation, in Nietzsche's strict sense, requires an affirmation of otherness, which is consistent with the agonistic structure of will to power, and which is consummated in coming to terms with eternal recurrence: the endless repetition of every instance of life, including those that one opposes. Life-denial stems from a weakness in the face of agonistic becoming, an incapacity to affirm the necessity of otherness. Yet life-denying perspectives are life-*enhancing* because they further the interests of certain types of life who have cultivated their own forms of power that have had an enormous effect on world history. So, for example, Christianity is life-enhancing (see *A* 34-35, 39-40) but not life-affirming. Life-denying perspectives exhibit *local* affirmations of their form of life; this is why the ascetic priest can still be called a "yes-creating force." As we have seen, even philosophical pessimism is a stimulus for (a certain kind of) life. The sheer absence of life-enhancement would amount to *suicidal* nihilism (*GM* III, 28). Short of suicide, then, all forms of life aim to will their meaning, even if that meaning is a conviction about the meaninglessness of (natural) life. This helps explain an interesting fact: Religions that yearn for a deliverance from earthly life still forbid suicide. Even Schopenhauer, who saw life as an absurd error, argued against suicide.<sup>3</sup>

Nietzsche's conception of life-affirmation goes far beyond life-enhancement; it aims for a *global* affirmation of all life conditions, even those that run counter to one's interests. We will have more to say about this matter shortly, but to keep our bearings we need to keep in mind the following distinctions: 1) that between life-enhancement and suicidal nihilism, and 2) that between life-affirmation and life-denial. Nietzsche can extol the

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* Vol. I, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), pp. 398-402.

value of life-denying perspectives because of their life-enhancing power.<sup>4</sup> But he can challenge these perspectives as falling short of life-affirmation.

Returning to Section 13, Nietzsche associates the ascetic ideal's life-enhancing power with human "sickliness" (*Krankhaftigkeit*). At first there seems to be a clear indication here of Nietzsche's critical posture against "degenerating life" that is consummated in the ascetic priest. Indeed, the historical success of ascetic power is called proof that the prevailing model for human existence "up until now" has been a symptom of sickness and alienation from natural life. As usual, however, this polemical position is not without ambiguity. The yes-creating power of asceticism provides life-enhancing meaning for a "sick animal." In fact mankind is *the* sick animal compared with all other animals. The implication is that animal life is normally a more natural health and that the human animal develops a kind of natural illness. Then Nietzsche asks: What *causes* this sickness? Here is where things again get complicated.

Nietzsche begins by correlating, even identifying, human sickness with something valorous: Humans are more sick in being more uncertain and changeable; also in being *unfestgestellter*, which can be translated in several ways—as more undetermined, indeterminate, unsecured, unestablished, or unrealized. In *Beyond Good and Evil* 62, Nietzsche calls humankind *das noch nicht festgestellte Thier*, which can be rendered "the animal yet to have an identity." Given Nietzsche's predilection for conditions of becoming, such characterizations can hardly be problematic in principle. In fact, Nietzsche connects human sickness with seemingly admirable qualities (viewed from his standpoint):

He is *the* sick animal: where does this come from? Certainly he has dared more, innovated more, braved more, and has challenged fate more than all the rest of the animals taken together: he, the great experimenter with himself.

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<sup>4</sup> Moreover, within life-enhancement Nietzsche tends to distinguish *healthier* forms (e.g., the Greeks, the Renaissance) from *sicker* forms (e.g., Christianity). The former are closer to Nietzsche's sense of life-affirmation, but not necessarily up to its full demands.

Nietzsche then calls humankind the “eternal-futurist,” whose strength (*Kraft*) is an unstoppable urge to the future that “inexorably digs into the flesh of every present like a spur.” Right away Nietzsche adds: “How could such a courageous and rich animal not also be the most endangered, the most profoundly and extensively sick of all the sick animals?”

What are we to make of this intricate mix of characterizations, especially when it includes elements that seem to accord with Nietzschean virtues (daring, innovation, experimentation)? I think the reference to the future and its “injury” to the present gives us a clue. The temporality of experience seems to dictate the courage that elevates humans over other animals. Surely animals are *in* time, but humans seem to be aware *of* time in a special way. Animal life appears to be more immersed in the immediacy of present circumstances and instinctive behavior. For humans, the “non-being” of the future and the past have a *presence*, as shown in our capacity to anticipate and recall events that are not yet or no longer present. The ability to perceive *otherwise* than the present accounts for human innovation and experimentation, but it also calls for an abiding courage to withstand the continuing force of negation entailed by temporal awareness. Human experimentation also carries a comprehension of the possibility of failure, and so our projects can be haunted by finitude in a way that instinctive behavior is not. More generally, the awareness of death in the midst of life—even without any present threat—gives human existence a special burden. The condition of animals is also mortal and thus tragic in the end, but humans are *conscious* of tragic mortality, even at times of safety and success, and so they can incorporate a tragic awareness into their very sense of life, for better or worse.

I believe that such an orientation on time explains why Nietzsche combines bravery, endangerment, and sickness in his account of human existence. Unlike other animals, humans are “set loose” from the instinctive immediacy of brute nature by “exceeding” the present in a perception of past and future conditions—the creative potential in this excess recalls the remark (in *GM* II, 19) that bad conscience is a sickness in the manner

of pregnancy. Yet temporal experience in this way is infused by negations of present “being,” and so the human animal is marked by an intrinsic *insecurity* that registers at every level of life. For humans, temporal becoming is not just a fact of nature, it is also a tragic burden pressed upon our experiences and sense of meaning.

Nietzsche concludes the section with a reiteration of the life-enhancing power of the ascetic ideal. The burden of temporal experience can produce epidemics of being “fed up” with existence, which can threaten to obviate human participation in life. Yet Nietzsche claims that such a despairing condition can exhibit so much power that it becomes a new “fetter” to life. The No to life “brings a wealth of more delicate Yeses” that compels the ascetic type to *live* (in a different way). Perhaps I can summarize Nietzsche’s analysis in the following manner: Humans are first and foremost embedded in the *first nature* of animal life. The *second nature* of temporal experience engenders both the greater capacities of the human animal and the burden of tragic awareness. This burden can produce the *counter-nature* of the ascetic ideal, through which “life struggles with death and *against* death.” Yet from a naturalistic standpoint, even this ideal can be driven by primal life drives to find alternate routes of power and life-enhancing strategies in a counter-natural posture. We must keep in mind, however, that within this “positive” analysis of ascetic life-*enhancement*, there remains Nietzsche’s own critical counter-posture of life-*affirmation*, which comes to reassert itself in subsequent sections of the Third Essay.