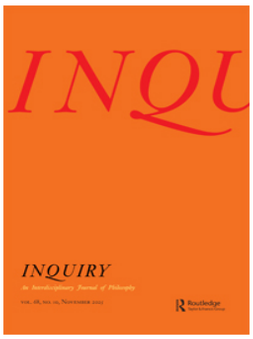

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Nietzsche's perspectives on suffering

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ABSTRACT

Suffering figures in a number of related and sometimes overlapping themes throughout Nietzsche's works, from *The Birth of Tragedy* to the works of his last productive year: representing suffering artistically so as to affirm life, undergoing suffering, inflicting it, witnessing it, inflicting it on oneself, seeking redemption through it, interpreting it retrospectively and giving it significance in one's life, wanting to prevent it in others and resisting that desire, allowing it to happen to oneself and to others, and seeking it out as a challenge to overcome. The article argues that when we examine the diverse contexts in which Nietzsche discusses suffering, we should conclude that asking after *the* value of suffering for Nietzsche is mistaken. Part of Nietzsche's contention against the 'morality of compassion' is the very assumption that there is such a thing as *the* value of suffering. Nietzsche espouses what has been called *normative contextualism*: whether any instance of suffering has positive, negative, or indifferent value will vary according to context or the relations it stands in to other events and attitudes. According to Nietzsche's method of perspectival inquiry, we understand suffering better by engaging with ways in which suffering calls upon a range of affective responses.

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1. Introduction

In the Preface to *On the Genealogy* of *Morality* Nietzsche states that his major target for revaluation from the time of *Human, All Too Human* onwards was 'the value of compassion and the morality of compassion' (GM, Preface, 6).[1]

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[1]The following abbreviations and translations are used in this article: A = *The Anti-Christ*, trans. Judith Norman, in *The Anti-Christ*, *Ecce Homo*, *Twilight of the Idols* and Other Writings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; D = *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997;

Given that compassion (*Mitleid*) is the incentive to remove or alleviate suffering, a central aim of Nietzsche's is to call into question the evaluation of *suffering* that motivates this 'morality of compassion'. Elsewhere he addresses its advocates directly: 'You want, if possible (and no "if possible" is crazier) *to abolish suffering*. And us? – it looks as though we would prefer it to be heightened and made even worse than it has ever been!' (BGE 225); '[S]hould you experience suffering and displeasure as evil, hateful, deserving of annihilation, as a defect of existence … how little do you know of the *happiness* of man' (GS 338). It may look as though Nietzsche seeks a simple reversal: suffering is good and to be welcomed as an enhancement of existence. But I shall question that assumption. Suffering is indeed a central theme throughout his works, from *The Birth of Tragedy* to the works of his last productive year. Or rather, it figures in a number of related and sometimes overlapping themes: representing suffering artistically so as to affirm life, undergoing suffering, inflicting it, witnessing it, inflicting it on oneself, seeking redemption through it, interpreting it retrospectively and giving it significance in one's life, wanting to prevent it in others and resisting that desire, allowing it to happen to oneself and to others, and seeking it out as a challenge to overcome. I shall argue that when we examine these diverse contexts in which Nietzsche discusses suffering, we should conclude that asking after *the* value of suffering for Nietzsche is mistaken.

Part of Nietzsche's contention against the 'morality of compassion' is the very assumption that there is such a thing as *the* value of suffering. We should not expect to find him replacing the judgement 'suffering is bad in itself' with the judgement 'suffering is good in itself'. One reason for this is that Nietzsche espouses what Bernard Reginster has called *normative contextualism*: 'the view that the significance of some aspect of life is determined by the context formed by at least some other aspects' (Reginster 2006, 216). Applying this to suffering, we may say that, for Nietzsche, whether any instance of suffering has positive, negative, or indifferent value will vary according to context or the relations it stands in to other events and attitudes. For him, occurrences that are classifiable as suffering are not universally or generically 'bad' or 'good' in virtue of falling under that classification. Nietzsche says, '[w]here basic issues about value or lack of value are concerned, people with convictions do not come into consideration. Convictions are prisons' (A 54). Believing in the truth of 'suffering is bad in itself' or 'suffering is intrinsically evil, hateful and worthy of annihilation' (see GS

EH = *Ecce Homo*, trans. Judith Norman, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; GM = *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998; GS = *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; KSA = *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, 15 vols., ed. Colli and Montinari. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967; TI = *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Judith Norman, in *The Anti-Christ*, *Ecce Homo*, *Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

338) would surely be examples of the convictions he wishes us to be freed from. But it is arguable the 'suffering is good itself' would also be an imprisoning judgement. Nietzsche's common approach to suffering is to evoke *diverse affective attitudes* toward it in different contexts. This, if we take him at his word, is his method of perspectival inquiry – '*the more* affects we allow to speak about a matter, … that much more complete will be our "concept" of this matter, our "objectivity"' (GM III: 12). We understand suffering better, not by making simple judgements of good and bad, but by engaging with ways in which suffering calls upon sadness or fulfillment, fear, resentment, or gratitude.

In what follows I first examine Nietzsche's critique of the morality of compassion (Section 2). Then I raise the question whether Nietzsche can avoid accepting the common ethical view that suffering is bad in itself (Section 3). Next (Section 4), I consider some recent accounts by Bernard Reginster and Patrick Hassan, who argue that Nietzsche recognizes a non-instrumental positive value to suffering construed as 'resistance to the will in striving', where suffering is an essential part of what is valued. In Section 5 I remark on the limited and possibly non-standard nature of the examples of 'suffering' central to those accounts, but suggest that Hassan's 'organic whole' schema, in which suffering has no invariant value outside of specific wholes to which it contributes, can be applied in principle to all cases of suffering. Then (Section 6) I shall look at Nietzsche's prevalent practice of presenting cases of suffering using *affective* language. While each affective passage evokes an evaluative attitude toward suffering, the result is plural and ambivalent: (a) there are kinds of suffering to which Nietzsche evokes positive affective attitudes, (b) kinds to which he evokes negative affective attitudes, and (c) kinds to which he evokes both positive and negative attitudes simultaneously. Finally, in Section 7, I argue that Nietzsche's approach to suffering can be seen as offering a riposte to pessimism, but also to 'theodicy'. If Nietzsche succeeds in countering the monolithic judgement that suffering is bad in itself, he removes at source the need for any overarching 'justification' of suffering along with the motivation to pronounce that life is not worth living.

2. Revaluation and the 'morality of compassion'

In well-known passages in the Preface to *On the Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche announces his opposition to the 'morality of compassion [*Mitleids-Moral*]':[2]

[2]Since *Mitleid* is also legitimately translated as 'pity', English-language commentators dispute whether Nietzsche's target is pity or compassion. In favour of 'pity' as Nietzsche's (at least predominant) conception, see Cartwright (1988), von Tevenar (2007), Richardson (2020, 268–277), Kirwin (forthcoming). For 'compassion', see Clark and Swensen (1998, 124–125), Frazer (2006), Özen (2021), Janaway (2022,

> In particular the issue was the value of the unegoistic, of the instincts of compassion, self-denial, self-sacrifice, precisely the instincts that Schopenhauer had gilded, deified, and made otherworldly until finally they alone were left for him as the 'values in themselves'. (GM Preface, 5)

The chief problem with morality for Nietzsche here concerns 'the *value* of compassion and the morality of compassion' (GM Preface, 6), and it is these values that Nietzsche goes on to say must be called into question. Nietzsche follows Schopenhauer's view concerning what compassion is supposed to be,[3] namely 'the wholly immediate *sympathy* [*Theilnahme*], independent of any other consideration, in the first place towards another's *suffering*, and hence towards the prevention or removal of this suffering' (Schopenhauer 2009, 200). Schopenhauer does indeed make this the sole criterion of moral value, saying, 'Only insofar as an action has sprung from compassion does that action have moral worth: and every action that proceeds from any other motives whatever has none' (Schopenhauer 2009, 200). Hence an attitude toward *suffering* is at the heart of the challenge Nietzsche proclaims toward moral values at the start of the *Genealogy*. What must be called into question is morality's presumption that preventing or removing suffering is of supreme value, a view that is grounded in the implicit claim that suffering is bad in itself.

'The morality of compassion' may refer either to something akin to Schopenhauer's view, namely that an action is morally good *only if* it proceeds from the agent's compassionate motivation to alleviate the suffering of others, or to a weaker view that actions are, other things being equal, morally good *if* they spring from such a motivation. Nietzsche speaks also of the 'religion of compassion'. He calls this outlook a 'religion' because he finds it to be widely 'preached' by many of his contemporaries ('no other religion is preached any more', BGE 222). Sometimes the expression refers to Christianity specifically (A 7). But more often he has in mind a broader, figuratively religious outlook which he attributes to Schopenhauer, Socialists, a supposed 'new Buddhism' in Europe, 'hysterical little men and women' of his day, and 'our whole literary and artistic decadence from St Petersburg to Paris, from Tolstoy to Wagner'.[4] This 'religion of compassion' has adopted the moral principle that suffering is 'evil, hateful, deserving of annihilation' (GS 338) and made compassion into '*the* virtue, the foundation and source of all virtues' (A 7). If people are guided by this principle of virtue, they will

98–103). Özen argues that since Nietzsche is attacking Schopenhauer's conception of *Mitleid*, which is generally agreed to coincide most closely with 'compassion', we must view Nietzsche as missing his target if we see him as attacking 'pity'. John Richardson has suggested (private communication) that Nietzsche is indeed targeting Schopenhauer's conception, but that he aims to show that it is really pity.

[3]Nietzsche is, however, also sceptical of Schopenhauer's assumption that *Mitleid* is a wholly disinterested concern with the suffering of the other (see D 14, 118, 133, 138; GS 13).

[4]See BGE 202; GS 377; A 7.

consider there to be reason to remove or lessen any suffering purely because it is suffering, and even consider themselves under an imperative to do so: 'the "religion of compassion" … commands them to help' (GS 338).

Part of the danger Nietzsche detects in Schopenhauer's valorization of the unegoistic instincts of 'compassion, self-denial, self-sacrifice' is that Schopenhauer made them into the 'values in themselves [*Werthe an sich*]' (GM Preface, 5). Elsewhere he writes: 'people found *higher* value – what am I saying! *value in itself*! – in the typical signs of decline and conflicting instincts, in "selflessness"' (EH, 'Destiny', 7). Behind the opposition to these specific values of compassion and selflessness is a more fundamental questioning of the assumption that any values can be both universal and unconditional: '"Virtue", "beauty", "goodness in itself [*an sich*]", goodness that has been stamped with the character of the impersonal and universally valid – these are fantasies and manifestations of decline' (A 11). By the same token Nietzsche does not simply flip over into viewing egoistic instincts as good in themselves: 'Selfishness is worth only as much as the physiological value of the selfish person: it can be worth a lot or it can be worthless and despicable' (TI, 'Expeditions', 33). Likewise, there is no such thing as 'health in itself' (GS 120), and 'what helps feed or nourish the higher type of man must be almost poisonous to a very different and lesser type' (BGE 30). We should expect, therefore, that for Nietzsche there is no single value that attaches to suffering 'in itself' simply in virtue of its being suffering. The reason why it is mistaken to consider suffering 'hateful and evil' is, he says, that its significance for the sufferer cannot be determined except in relation to the whole particular and personal 'inner sequence and connection' of which it is a part (GS 338). Suffering's value will depend on whose the suffering is, what relations it stands in to other events, and how it is interpreted. Hence the claim that Nietzsche adheres to what we have called normative contextualism. The answer to the question whether we have reason to want suffering cannot be answered in a global, generalizing fashion, but must always depend upon the relations in which a particular instance is situated.

3. Suffering as not bad in itself

A widely held assumption in philosophical ethics and in commonsense thinking is that suffering is intrinsically bad: that suffering qua suffering (regardless of its possible good consequences, justifications, or other relations in different contexts) is in itself bad. Nietzsche appears to oppose this view. For example, he supports the view that pain is no objection to life (EH, 'Zarathustra', 1), states that it is a mistake to consider suffering 'hateful, deserving of annihilation' (GS 338), that it is 'crazy' to want to abolish suffering, and that 'it looks as though we would prefer it to be heightened and made even worse than it has ever been!' (BGE 225). But is it even coherent to think that suffering is not bad in itself?

Nietzsche never gives any analysis or explanation of what constitutes suffering (*Leiden*). Without attempting such an analysis here, we may still ask whether there are any criteria for something to be an occurrence of suffering. I shall assume that an experiential state or episode, in order to be suffering, must be *negatively undergone*, that is to say it must at least be disliked by the sufferer. Derek Parfit states: 'When we are in pain, what is bad is not our sensation but our conscious state of having a sensation that we dislike. If we didn't dislike this sensation, our conscious state would not be bad' (Parfit 2011, 54). It seems reasonable to assume that nothing can be a case of suffering unless it presents itself aversively in experience. Suffering is, I shall say, always phenomenally bad – it feels bad to suffer, we dislike it, its presentation within our subjective experience is negatively valenced; as it occurs, we are averse to it. It is arguable that Nietzsche agrees with this, at any rate: I take it to be the import of his many descriptions of sufferings as 'hard', 'terrible', 'gruesome', 'hell', and so on. There would be little point in insisting on the novelty of 'saying Yes to life in its *harshest* problems' (TI, 'Ancients', 5) or 'willingly seeking out the … *dreadful* sides of existence' (KSA 12:10[3].p. 455),[5] if the 'harsh' and the 'dreadful' elements of life were in fact ones we already like to undergo, or ones that struck us in a hedonically neutral way, leaving us perfectly at ease with them. However, Nietzsche seeks to break the link between suffering's phenomenal badness and its customarily assumed normative badness. That is to say, for him we cannot infer from something's being an instance of suffering to the judgement that we have reason not to want it. Breaking this link is sufficient to motivate his well-known theme that suffering is not an 'objection to life' – as against Schopenhauer and other philosophical pessimists with whom he continues to be in dialogue. In the view of the pessimists, suffering is pervasive and ineliminable in life and every suffering is in itself such that we have reason not to want it. On that view, even if we do not go to Schopenhauer's extreme of concluding that our entire existence is 'something that should not be' (Schopenhauer 2018, 592), the value of life at least begins to look questionable and Nietzsche's desideratum of 'saying Yes' to life becomes less motivated. Nietzsche's counter, I suggest, is that while it is phenomenally bad to undergo suffering, that does not provide reason for us not to want suffering, nor reason to devalue life to any degree on the grounds that suffering is pervasive and ineliminable in it.

For Nietzsche, it is not just that we may lack a reason for not wanting suffering; he thinks that we, at least sometimes, have reason to want it. Nietzsche is clear that we sometimes *do* want it: 'The human being … does *not* negate suffering in itself: he *wants* it, he even seeks it out, provided one shows him a meaning for it, a to-this-end of suffering' (GM III: 28,

[5]Emphasis added in both quotations.

translation modified); and he proclaims those 'dreadful and questionable sides of existence' as 'desirable … for their own sake' (KSA 12:10[3].p. 455). One way to read these comments is in terms of instrumental value. For example, we have reason to accept the pain and anxiety in undergoing some kind of medical procedure because they are instrumental toward the final value of our continued health. Our having any reason to want the pain and anxiety is derivative from our having reason to want continued health. Some have portrayed Nietzsche's positive evaluation of suffering in this way. Parfit says:

> He [Nietzsche] writes for example, that "profound suffering makes noble", and is the source of all great achievements. Such suffering would be *instrumentally* good by having good effects. That is compatible with the view that all suffering is *intrinsically* or in itself bad. (Parfit 2011, 571)

Michael Brady likewise, while linking Nietzsche with the claim that 'suffering is necessary for one to develop and express the virtuous traits that constitute *strength of character*' and that 'the strong and noble will seek out suffering and hardship, so that they can display their strength in overcoming it' (Brady 2018, 101), comments 'we can admit that these forms of suffering *are intrinsically bad* … and yet still hold that suffering of this kind … has significant instrumental value in its own right' (Brady 2018, 87, my emphasis).

It is hard to resist the idea that suffering is normatively bad because of its very nature, its phenomenal badness. The nature of Nietzsche's headaches surely gave him reason not to want them and to seek remedies. However, he appears either to deny that suffering is intrinsically bad in this normative and motivating way, or to place no significance on such intrinsic badness, or, most likely, not even to recognize the category of intrinsic badness. As Brian Leiter has put it, '[t]he value of suffering, according to Nietzsche, is only extrinsic' (Leiter 2002, 131). If we could imagine convincing Nietzsche that suffering, because of the way we experience it, is normatively bad in itself in the sense that it always gives us *some* reason not to want it, he would at the very least insist that it is mistaken to treat such reasons as primary or over-riding. In his view, if you thus insolate sufferings from their contexts, you are on the path to 'stripp[ing] the suffering of what is truly personal' (GS 338), not realizing that 'suffering … has been the sole cause of every enhancement in humanity so far' (BGE 225), and 'well on the way to turning mankind into *sand*' (D 174).

4. Recent accounts of the value of suffering

If for Nietzsche the significance of any suffering rests on its extrinsic value, must he recognize only its instrumental value? Some recent accounts have argued that for Nietzsche the positive value of at least some suffering is

not merely instrumental. Bernard Reginster has offered an account of Nietzsche's affirmation of suffering which rests on the admittedly paradoxical notion that we want obstacles to what we want. According to this account, *will to power* is 'the desire for the *overcoming* of resistance in the pursuit of a determinate desire' (Reginster 2006, 136).[6] If one desires the overcoming of resistance to the fulfillment of a desire, one must desire that there be such resistance in the first place. Reginster states explicitly that 'suffering is the experience of such resistance' (Reginster 2007, 37), and so he presents this as an account of the value of *suffering*: 'The revaluation of suffering is grounded in the claim that the difficulty of an achievement, or the fact that it involves overcoming resistance, is an essential part of what makes it a great achievement' (Reginster 2007, 45). We may query whether it is right to equate difficulty or resistance with suffering – a point I shall pursue below. For now, note that Reginster's equation of the two leans upon a formulation of Schopenhauer's, which says 'When an obstacle is placed between [the will] and its temporary goal, we call this inhibition *suffering*' (Schopenhauer 2010, 336). If we assume that one indeed *suffers* when one wants an obstacle as part of wanting to achieve one's goal by overcoming it, then part of what one wants in such a case is one's own suffering.

For Reginster the resistance (or suffering) here has not merely instrumental value, but rather *contributory* value (see Reginster 2006, 297). It is part of a whole that has value, where the value of the whole would not remain were the part to be absent. Where does that leave us with the value of the part, i.e. the suffering? Patrick Hassan (2022, 2023, 249–252) has recently built on Reginster's account, using the theoretical model of an *organic whole*.[7] Accepting Reginster's assumption that the desired 'resistance to the will in striving' (Hassan 2022, 125) is a case of suffering, Hassan asks: how does the value of the *suffering* contribute to the value of the whole complex of achieving a goal by experiencing and overcoming suffering? He proposes that we use a distinction originally drawn by Jonathan Dancy (2003) between two ways in which the value of a part may relate to the value of the whole: the part may be an *enabling condition* or a *contributor*. An enabling condition would retain its own value whatever it became part of: something bad then might in some contexts enable the whole of which it is part to be good. If Nietzsche conceived suffering as relating to a flourishing life as an *enabling condition*, then he would still leave room for the conventional moral theorist's view that the suffering in an overall flourishing life is something normatively bad.[8] By contrast, if a part of a valuable whole is conceived as a *contributor*, it 'changes its value depending on the context. A particular

[6]Reginster's later view of will to power (Reginster 2021) focuses instead on the desire to be an efficacious agent. I discuss the earlier view because it offers a prominent account of the affirmation of suffering.
[7]Janaway (2017a) uses a similar notion in a slightly different way. See also Delon (2024).
[8]Shaver (2024, 301–303) supports the view that suffering remains bad in a good organic whole.

thing, X, may be of negative value in one context, but upon forming a whole in another context can increase or decrease in value' (Hassan 2022, 118).

An analogy may help. A vivid yellow brushstroke in a van Gogh painting is a contributor to the positive (aesthetic) value of the whole painting. But the brushstroke in other connections need not have the same value. Placed anywhere in Vermeer's *View of Delft* it would be bad and contribute to a bad whole; as an accidental dab on a wall, it might be neither good nor bad. Applying this structure to Nietzsche's views on suffering: just as the brushstroke retains its vividness across context, so suffering retains its phenomenal badness; but it can be normatively *good* in a temporal and causal whole in which resistance is creatively overcome and normatively *bad* when it forms part of a sequence that is just misery, unrewarded effort, and failure. This provides a model according to which suffering, when considered in detachment from the whole of which it is part, has no invariant value. If this model can be applied to all suffering, the fact that an occurrence constitutes suffering cannot determine its value, or whether it would be good to prevent it. That may be sufficient to call into question the core assumption of the morality of compassion, that suffering is bad in itself regardless of context.

5. The suffering that matters

These accounts by Reginster and Hassan give rise to the query mentioned in passing above: are they really accounts of the value of *suffering*? It is not clear that Nietzsche would accept *resistance to the will* as a sufficient condition for suffering, or that we should do so. When I deliberately take on 'a recalcitrant puzzle [that] is an obstacle to the desire to understand' (Reginster 2007, 37), it is not obvious that I am thereby suffering (more likely I am experiencing absorption in a fulfilling challenge). Or in a simpler case, if I am wanting to cross the road and a light changes to red, stopping me from walking, I may be fleetingly a little impatient, but does that constitute suffering on my part? A further objection arises if we apply the equation of suffering and resistance to Reginster's earlier account of cruelty, according to which the infliction of suffering on someone else promises an increase in the feeling of power 'because it promises resistance to overcome, namely the will of the other, which necessarily rebels against the suffering inflicted upon it' (Reginster 2006, 143). If *all* resistance to our goals is suffering, then the cruel person suffers inasmuch as they experience resistance from the will of the victim. But to say that this feeling of resistance constitutes the cruel person's *suffering* is a counterintuitive result on the usual understanding of 'suffering' (not to say offensive to the victim). So while some resistances to our will are without doubt rightly classifiable as suffering, there are reasons to question whether they all are.

Suppose, however, that we provisionally accept Schopenhauer's idea that any resistance to the will constitutes suffering. Still, not all suffering exhibits the pattern of willing and resistance that Reginster and Hassan have focused upon, where the resistance is itself desired as part of an achievement one sets oneself as an agent. In a great many sufferings we are patients, not agents. The sufferings are not sought out or desired but rather are purely adventitious from the point of view of the sufferer, cutting right across our desires rather than being part of what we desire. When Schopenhauer states that 'all suffering is nothing other than unfulfilled and thwarted willing' (Schopenhauer 2010, 390), he doesn't have in mind only cases of agential achievement that encompass a desired resistance. 'Willing' is for him a very wide category:

> [W]e will not resist counting all desiring, striving, wishing, longing, yearning, hoping, loving, enjoying, rejoicing and the like, no less than not-willing or resisting, and detesting, fleeing, fearing, being angry, hating, grieving, suffering pain, in short all affects and passions, among the manifestations of willing as well; for these affects and passions are simply movements … of one's own will that is either restrained or released, satisfied or unsatisfied, and they all relate in multiple variations to the attainment or non-attainment of what is willed, and to enduring or overcoming what is detested. (Schopenhauer 2009, 38)

Thus it seems – very plausibly – that yearning for something that never happens, say, or undergoing a physical attack out of the blue, or being afraid of being attacked, will in Schopenhauer's sense be cases of unsatisfied, restrained, or thwarted willing, and hence of suffering. But in these cases the 'thwarting of the will' is not something that is desired as part of any goal. Take also the case of illness, a salient source of suffering for Nietzsche himself. It seems reasonable to suppose that the blinding headaches Nietzsche underwent thwarted his will to be healthy and work uninterruptedly. But whatever value he later found in his illness – being 'almost tempted to ask whether we can do without it at all' (GS Preface 3) – it would be questionable to suppose that he wanted his headaches or strove after them for the sake of the challenge.[9]

In seeking a revaluation of suffering, Nietzsche is opposing the pessimist assumption that suffering is intrinsically an 'objection to life'. But resistances to the will that are desired as a component of achievement are not the cases of 'suffering' that pessimists tend to cite. Admittedly, Schopenhauer presents an a priori[10] argument for pessimism – that thwarted willing is suffering, that will is our essence, and hence that thwarted willing must permeate the whole of life. But when he turns to a posteriori grounds, he confronts the would-be optimist with what happens in 'the hospitals, military wards, and surgical

[9]Ian Kidd has interpreted Nietzsche as declaring 'an imperative to *seek out* illness' (Kidd 2012, 507, my emphasis). But the evidence offered for that is to my mind not clear.

[10]The argument is '*a priori* in the pre-Kantian sense: it proceeds from our essence as will (which is prior) to its manifestations in the world, i.e. to human life (which is posterior)' (Simmons 2024, 284).

theatres … prisons, torture chambers and slave stalls … battlefields and places of judgement, and … all the dark dwellings of misery that hide from cold curiosity' (Schopenhauer 2010, 351). In the face of this panorama, the 'sufferings' that are a valued part of what an agent wills in pursuance of a goal – something welcomed as a 'difficulty' or 'challenge' – seem a rather insignificant minority within the class of sufferings. The hardships integral to Michelangelo's achievement in the Sistine Chapel are not a paradigm case of any recognized 'problem of suffering'; nor are the advocates of universal compassion for sufferers likely to be foreground the difficulties that mountain climbers, philosophers, and many others embrace in their chosen activities. If Nietzsche were offering a revaluation only of a minority of cases (which themselves at best count minimally as sufferings), and if those cases are not the ones that matter most from the point of view of pessimists and the 'morality of compassion', then Nietzsche's revaluation of the latter is not on target.

Hassan considers his own reconstruction of the value of suffering to be limited, as he says Reginster's was, to '*a particular kind of suffering*: resistance to the will in striving' (Hassan 2022, 125). However, the limitation is arguably unnecessary. Hassan's 'contributor' account can in principle apply to all sufferings. Recall Nietzsche's suggestion that if you try to abstract a particular suffering – of any kind, one assumes – from any 'sequence and interconnection' in which it occurs, you lose any appreciation of its significance for the person to whom it occurs. If we take that to mean that *any* suffering has no invariant value across contexts, then, while a particular unwanted suffering would have been bad as part of one sequence, as part of another it can be good. Again, take Nietzsche's own illness. In the Preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science* he writes at some length about the 'advantages that my erratic health gives me' (GS 3): 'such pain', he says, 'makes us *deeper* … . [O]ne emerges from such dangerous exercises in self-mastery as a different person, with a few more question marks, above all with the *will* henceforth to question further, more deeply … . We know a new happiness' (GS 3). If we take Nietzsche at his word, his painful ill health became an indispensable part of a sequence of events in which there occurred a form of psychological growth, growth that would not have happened without the illness. But the same suffering might counterfactually have occupied a different sequence in his life: depression, self-pity, a shutting down of aspiration, and the end of his career. In reality (accepting Nietzsche's testimony as honest and accurate) the illness contributed to a good whole; in the counterfactual case, there is no good whole for it to contribute to. Applying the 'contributor' model, in which '[a] particular thing, X, may be of negative value in one context, but upon forming a whole in another context can increase or decrease in value' (Hassan 2022, 118), allows us to say that Nietzsche's illness was good (or had positive significance) because of the 'sequence

and interconnection' it became part of, although it would have been bad (or had negative significance) in other sequences.

Hence there seems to be no reason in principle not to apply Hassan's organic whole model to all kinds of suffering. Doing so suggests a revaluation of suffering that is as radical and controversial as Nietzsche hoped. Much (perhaps even most) suffering can turn out to be bad because of a bad sequence of events it is part of, but for Nietzsche – and this is still a challenging and potentially troubling view – we cannot consider it bad, in the normative sense, simply because it is suffering. Nietzsche can regard some suffering – even profoundly undesired and passively endured trauma – such as becoming paralyzed, being sexually assaulted, experiencing repeated bipolar episodes[11] – as good features in an individual's life *if* they are necessary parts of an 'inner sequence and interconnection' that leads to psychological growth. So we need represent him neither as saying (implausibly) that undergoing suffering is good 'in itself', nor (in line with the conventional view) that it is bad 'in itself': its phenomenal badness does not, in his view, determine its significance. This is a theoretical construction, not only going beyond what Nietzsche says, but couched in terms he may not have recognized. But it is compatible with his warning not to regard suffering as an evil that must be removed from life; it is not restricted to the minority cases where resistance is taken on as a challenge to our agency; and it saves Nietzsche on the one hand from saying wildly that suffering is universally or generically good, and on the other hand from lacking an alternative to the conventional view that suffering is, as Parfit said, '*intrinsically* or in itself bad' (Parfit 2011, 571).

One consequence of this way of reading Nietzsche is arguably that it throws doubt upon the frequently made claim that Nietzsche is offering a kind of 'theodicy'. 'Theodicy' here must of course be understood much more broadly than its original Leibnizian theistic sense. Daniel Came champions a 'theodicy' reading of Nietzsche which he characterizes thus: 'he always maintained … that the dreadful aspects of the human and natural worlds call for something like a theodicy, a mode of justification that would allow the troubled soul to find a place in them' (Came 2006, 41).[12] In a later piece Came writes:

[11]These are all examples cited in recent psychological literature on the phenomenon of psychological growth following trauma. See Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), 10, Joseph (2011), 70, Jamison (1997, 218–219).

[12]Others have argued that Nietzsche starts out with a kind of theodicy in *The Birth of Tragedy*, but later abandons that project, or at least tries to do so. (See Geuss 1999; May 2011). Although Came defends a theodicy reading, he acknowledges that the later Nietzsche 'seeks to undermine the conceptual presuppositions of the whole project of theodicy' (2022: 50). Still others reject the idea that Nietzsche was ever involved in any project that it is meaningful to call a theodicy (See Janaway 2017b; Gardner 2013, 605, n. 15; Hassan 2022, 92–93; Berry 2024, 1223, 1228). It can be argued that even in *The Birth of Tragedy* the term 'justified' is misleading because Nietzsche is seeking not 'a rational or cognitive warrant … for continuing to live' but an '*affective* or emotional attachment to life' (Leiter 2018,

> [T]wo assumptions underpin this project of theodicy: first, suffering not only is of negative value but also poses a special problem for the overall value of life … ; and second, any putative solution to this problem will take the form of the identification of some principle, reason, or overarching purpose in terms of which suffering can be seen to be justified. (Came 2022, 39)

I would argue that Nietzsche makes neither of these assumptions in his mature work. A crucial part of his revaluation of values is to call into question the claim that suffering is (generically or universally) of negative value. He thinks a 'special problem' over the value of life arises only for those who are too weak and over-protective to free themselves from the conviction that suffering is bad in itself. Freeing ourselves from that conviction would, for Nietzsche, remove the grounds for lamenting existence as an error and curse, but would also remove the need for there to be any overarching purpose, reason, or principle to 'justify' suffering.

6. Affective perspectives

We have seen that for Nietzsche a principal target for revaluation is the conviction, essential both to the 'morality of compassion' and to pessimism, that suffering is bad in itself and should be removed from life to whatever extent possible. We have argued that a theoretical model in which suffering has no invariant value across contexts is compatible with Nietzsche's revaluative aims. However, when we look at Nietzsche's practice in his writings, we find that, rather than enunciating any such theory, or offering ' … is good' or ' … is bad' judgements about suffering, he often instead uses language that is expressive of *affective attitudes*. In some contexts these attitudes are pro, in others con, and in others pointedly ambivalent. I want briefly to illustrate this important aspect of Nietzsche's writing, using passages that are very familiar in the literature. What I think is less explored is the bearing Nietzsche's approach may have on how we conceive of his attempted revaluation of values.

Andrew Huddleston has recently written that the goal of revaluation (*Umwerthung*) 'is not simply to reach some cognitive conclusion …. It is more so to try to influence our emotional responses, dislodging or destabilizing our affective attachment to some values and stoking our attachment to other values' (Huddleston forthcoming).[13] What I am trying to illustrate here is a similar but distinct way of conceiving revaluation. I shall bracket the question whether Nietzsche is trying to influence 'our' emotional responses. Whether or not that is the case, he at least uses language that is

156). Likewise, in later writings Nietzsche's 'saying Yes' is not necessarily any cognitive act such as judging or assenting to a philosophical claim such as 'life is good' or 'there is reason to live'.

[13]Huddleston allies himself to some extent with views expressed in Janaway (2007). I do not seek to revisit those views here.

expressive of affects, such as joy, sadness, indignation, or the feeling of power. I say, 'Nietzsche's language is expressive of … ' rather than 'Nietzsche expresses … ', which latter formulation might be taken to refer to emotional states undergone by Nietzsche. I remain agnostic about the relationship of any such occurrent psychological states to the texts we read, and I focus instead on the affective tone conveyed by the authorial voice in those texts. So here I am positing neither affects aroused in the reader, nor the intention to arouse such affects, nor affects occurring as psychological states of Nietzsche himself. What I am identifying is affective language which is strikingly diverse in the attitudes it evokes. Nietzsche has given us notice that he considers this a fruitful method of understanding in general:

> *the more* affects we allow to speak about a matter, *the more* eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter, that much more complete will be our "concept" of this matter, our "objectivity". (GM III: 12)

When the 'matter' at hand is suffering, we do well to examine it through a multiplicity of affects, which 'speak' to us through Nietzsche's use of language. Since, as Nietzsche insists, the propensity to make value judgements 'has a prehistory in your drives, inclinations, aversions, experiences, and what you have failed to experience' (GS 335), it is in his affective expressions that we are likely to find his most fundamental orientations toward suffering. And these orientations are many. Bertrand Russell's dismissive comment that Nietzsche 'likes the contemplation of pain' (Russell 1947, 800) is just one example of missing the mark by failing to notice Nietzsche's affective perspectivism. Nietzsche no more merely 'likes' suffering than he judges suffering to be 'good in itself'.

Take the passages on the 'nobles' in GM I. Nietzsche gives glorifying descriptions of their 'boldness', citing their 'appalling lightheartedness and depth of desire in all destruction, in all the delights of victory and of cruelty' (GM I: 11). His vocabulary is expressive of conflicting affects compacted together. The nobles' affective state is marked as lighthearted, but it simultaneously evokes horror (*entsetzliche Heiterkeit*); their exploits are 'hideous' (*scheusslich*); their mood is jubilant, but they are monsters (*frohlockende Ungeheuer*). The world of Homer is both glorious and gruesome (*herrlich, aber ebenfalls so schauerlich*). In this case Nietzsche spells out the reason for the ambivalent descriptions in blatantly obvious terms, relativizing them to the different participants in the cruel events. The suffering is appalling to those on the receiving end of it, glorious to those who exhibit their strength and freedom through inflicting it. He ends by advocating that we embrace the ambivalence: 'who would not a hundred times sooner fear if he might at the same time admire, than *not* fear … ?, (GM I: 11). Similar points apply to the famous 'seeing suffer' and 'making suffer' passages in GM II. While using exaggeratedly celebratory language in his portrayal of the 'festival' of

cruelty in past ages, and language expressive of regret that in our time we have 'grown ashamed *of man*' (GM II: 7), Nietzsche also applies negatively charged descriptions to the same past practices, such as 'gruesome [*schauerliche*] sacrifices' and 'repulsive [*widerliche*] mutilations' (GM II: 3), and plays up how repugnant all this is to 'modern humans, which is to say us' (GM II: 7). Nietzsche claims that the 'naïve human of earlier times' was not critical of these cases of suffering, because to them the suffering had a meaning, and that '[w]hat … arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering itself but the senselessness of suffering' (GM II: 7). To us, this kind of cruelty must lack the attraction it had in the past and be liable to cause indignation, because we can no longer find in it the meaning it had in the earlier context.

In the same breath Nietzsche mentions that suffering is likewise not meaningless for 'the Christian, who has interpreted into suffering an entire secret salvation machinery' (GM II: 7). Across a range of passages from writings of the 1880s Nietzsche says of Christianity that it used 'torments of the soul … on an unheard-of scale and continues to preach this species of torture' (D 77), that it perpetrated 'the most horrible form of inhuman cruelty' that it 'massacres physically and psychologically' (EH, 'Clever', 3), and that it reduced its medieval adherents to the condition of animals in a zoo, 'stuck in a cage, locked up inside all sorts of horrible ideas' (TI, 'Improvers', 2). Whereas in earlier times there was 'pure innocent misfortune', 'only in Christendom did everything become punishment, well-deserved punishment: it also makes the sufferer's imagination suffer, so that he feels himself morally reprehensible and cast out. Poor mankind!' (D 78). Here the affective tone is one of dismay. Nietzsche's affective stance is resolutely negative toward the suffering he sees as inculcated by Christianity. In describing the highest pitch of self-cruelty to which Christianity has risen by harnessing the internal self-aggression of bad conscience, his text is expressive of exasperation and sadness: 'Oh, this insane sad beast man! … All of this is … of such black gloomy unnerving sadness that one must forcibly forbid oneself to look too long into these abysses' (GM III:22). This puts paid to any notion that Nietzsche regards all suffering positively. He evokes sadness and indignation about these instances of suffering because he cannot find meaning in them and more importantly thinks that no one should do so: once belief in God is discredited, we must 'reject Christian interpretation and condemn its "meaning" as counterfeit' (GS 357). The sufferings of guilt and self-punishment then become simply lamentable.[14]

[14]Commentators have claimed that Nietzsche is in favour of some forms of compassion (see, e.g., Reginster 2006, 185; Panaïoti 2013, 187). For disagreement, see Özen (2021); Berry (2024); Janaway (2022); Janaway (2026). Nietzsche's evocations of sadness and indignation toward some suffering can be seen as manifesting forms of benevolence or fellow-feeling that need not be equated with compassion; his conception of an 'inverted compassion [*umgekehrtes Mitleid*]' (BGE 225) is distinct from compassion because it favours allowing rather than preventing suffering.

Nietzsche's characterizations of the sufferings of self-cruelty are, however, also marked by affective ambivalence. On the one hand, Nietzsche uses dramatic language inflected with negative affect to describe the suffering of the human who had invented bad conscience, the one who

> impatiently tore apart, persecuted, gnawed at, stirred up, maltreated himself; this animal that one wants to 'tame' and that beats itself raw on the bars of its cage; this deprived one … who had to create out of himself an adventure, a place of torture, an uncertain and dangerous wilderness – this fool, this longing and desperate prisoner. (GM II: 16)

On the other hand, the whole account is mixed with positive resonances, so that the question whether the suffering of self-cruelty merits positive or negative responses can have no clear answer. Bad conscience represents a momentous leap in human complexity and potential, so that it can be both a 'sickness' and a 'pregnancy' (GM II: 19). Along with the 'self-torment', 'something so new, deep, unheard of, enigmatic, contradictory, and *full of future* had come into being that the appearance of the earth was thereby essentially changed' (GM II: 16). Nietzsche even suggests that this process gives rise to 'a wealth of disconcerting beauty' (GM II: 18).

The process of self-cruelty has two poles, active and passive, and the one human being is both sufferer and perpetrator. When Nietzsche writes elsewhere that 'there is abundant, overabundant pleasure in your own suffering too, in making yourself suffer' (BGE 229), it is the 'making' side that counts. The active side is creative and 'artistic', making something new out of raw material. Hence Nietzsche again uses hybrid expressions that are affectively ambivalent: the process of 'imposing form' on oneself is, for example, 'horrifying-pleasurable' (*entsetzlich-lustvoll*) (GM II: 18). Nietzsche equates this creative side of self-cruelty with the actions of a supposed 'race of conquerors and lords' who actively coerce a population into an organized state in the first place (GM II 17). It is the same 'instinct for freedom' that 'is at work in those violence-artists and organizers and builds states' and 'inwardly, on a smaller, pettier scale … creates for itself a bad conscience' (GM II: 18). This 'instinct for freedom', is, Nietzsche says, 'speaking in my language: will to power' (GM II: 18). The allegation is that even when 'the selfless, the self-denying, the self-sacrificing' punish their instinctive selves, they gain a pleasure that 'belongs to cruelty' (GM II: 18). So we might reflect that even the 'insane sad beast' suffering the torment of inexpungible guilt before God, who at first sight is just the sad, passive victim of suffering, still has the instinct of will to power and is expressing it by interpreting the cruder manifestations of its own will to power as evil and sinful.

Nietzsche's least ambivalent treatment of self-cruelty concerns the intellectual conscience. This follows the same pattern of one part of the self aggressing against another, but now '[the] instinct of cruelty is transmuted

to the epistemic domain' (Alfano 2019, 277). Nietzsche portrays the possessor of the intellectual conscience as exercising cruelty toward the 'fundamental will of the mind' (*Grundwille des Geistes*) which 'constantly tends towards semblances and surfaces' (BGE 229):

> the inquirer [*der Erkennende*], by forcing his mind to inquire [*erkennen*] *against* its own inclination … will prevail as an artist of cruelty and the agent of its transfiguration. Even treating something in a profound or thorough manner is a violation, a wanting-to-hurt the fundamental will of the mind, which constantly tends towards semblances and surfaces, – there is a drop of cruelty in every wanting-to-know [*Erkennen-Wollen*]. (BGE 229, translation modified)

Nietzsche views the truth-seeking of honest intellectual inquiry as the infliction of stress and discomfort on the more primitive part of one's own mind. 'This is a type of cruelty on the part of the intellectual conscience and taste, and one that any brave thinker will acknowledge in himself assuming that he has spent as long as he should in hardening and sharpening his eye for himself and that he is used to strict discipline' (BGE 230). From the active side, of course, the inquirer will be gaining a feeling of power from inflicting this suffering. In this context, then, self-cruelty is associated with courage and pride. Forcing oneself to inquire what lies behind one's tendency to listen to a moral conscience (see GS 335) might begin to free one from the other, pernicious form of self-cruelty that lies in feeling sinful.

7. Conclusion

We have argued that when Nietzsche calls for a revaluation of moral values, a central target is what he calls the morality of compassion. According to the morality of compassion, suffering is normatively bad in itself: any instance of suffering is such that, qua suffering, we have reason to remove it from our lives. Nietzsche counters this not by claiming that suffering is good in itself but by implicitly adopting the view that suffering has no invariant normative value across different contexts. He acknowledges that suffering has what I have called phenomenal badness, but rejects the presumption of conventional morality that what is phenomenally bad must be normatively bad.

We examined reconstructions of Nietzsche's revaluation of suffering according to which resistance to the will is valued as an essential part of the process of achieving what an agent wills. It is questionable whether this kind of resistance coincides neatly with what is customarily thought of as suffering, and it is not clear that Nietzsche accepts the broader Schopenhauerian conception of suffering as any form resistance to willing. Even if we accept this broader Schopenhauerian conception, a great deal of the suffering that is of concern to philosophical pessimists and proponents of the morality of compassion does not comprise a *willed* resistance that forms part of an agent's goal. Limiting the account to that kind of resistance

leaves open the possibility that other forms of serious, profoundly unwanted suffering are intrinsically bad and acquire any positive value only instrumentally, in the manner of Parfit and the morality of compassion. That would leave Nietzsche lacking a revaluation of the majority of the suffering that matters most to his opponents.

However, we argued that on the organic whole model proposed by Hassan, there is no need to limit suffering to willed resistance to an agent's goals. If suffering can contribute positive value to a whole without having invariant value across all contexts, it can become good, and hence something it turns out the sufferer has reason to want in their life, because of relations it stands in to a later sequence of events and states. Outside of those relations, it could have been bad for the sufferer, but it is not normatively bad simply on the grounds of its being a case of suffering. This, I have suggested, would give Nietzsche a substantial revaluation of the value of suffering: it potentially encompasses all kinds of suffering. Hence it would be mistaken to ask what *the* value of suffering is for Nietzsche.

However, Nietzsche's own approach to the issue is clearly not to build a theoretical model in which a contributor to a good organic whole can be good without having invariant value in other wholes. Instead, as I have exemplified with a few instances, Nietzsche evaluates different instances of suffering through language expressive of affects. Nietzsche announces this as his preferred method in his much-discussed, though (as I argue) underappreciated, passage on perspectival inquiry in GM III: 12. For him, our best 'grasp' or 'concept' (*Begriff*) of suffering is gained not through an affect-less intellectual 'objectivity', but by multiplying our affective perspectives. It is the very multiplicity of these perspectives that calls into question the monolithic judgement on the value of suffering espoused by the morality of compassion and exploited by philosophical pessimism.[15]

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