

Nihilism and Creativity in the Philosophy of Nietzsche

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Abstract

Against some recent attempts to place Nietzsche within the nihilistic tradition, I argue here that Nietzsche was not a nihilist. The first part of the article provides an analysis of creativity and nihility as two aspects of the interpretative process. It also integrates this analysis of the interpretative process with Nietzsche's theory of affects, arguing that particular interpretative attitudes correspond to particular affective structures. The second part of the article shows that any attempt to categorize Nietzsche as a nihilist is based on confusing the healthy forms of interpretation and their corresponding aberrations. Nietzsche's position on creativity and interpretation ultimately suits more the anti-nihilist interpretative attitude and system of affects than any favorable description of a complete or perfect nihilist.

The attempt to produce a typology of nihilism in the philosophy of Nietzsche must start with a first distinction between it, nihilism, and what it, as a force, opposes and denies, human creativity. Nihilism as “the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability” is a force contrary to the will to create something that is valuable, meaningful and desirable (WP sec. 1). If there is any other type of nihilism, it can be understood only on the basis of this basic distinction. In its psychological manifestation, as a form of depression, we might say, nihilism refers to the experience of *nihility*. Certain events, such as the death of a beloved one or the failure to reach a goal we considered essential to our happiness, may cause nihility to “open up at the bottom of those engagements that keep life moving” (Nishitani 1982, 4). Things and gestures get disconnected. My car, bought and used to reach my job location, becomes meaningless if I see no point in performing my job duties. The text that is my life, made of interwoven things and events (car-job), gets ruptured. Nihilism is the inability to restore and reinvent, in one way or another, lost connections. What the

experience of nihilism denies is not simply a meaningful life, but all that, creatively, makes life meaningful.

Following the metaphor of life as a text, we could say, with Nietzsche, that nihilism, as a belief in meaninglessness, as the inference that “all interpretations are false,” is opposed to the interpretive activity, a process by which meaning is “introduced” (WP sec. 12, 1 and 604).¹ The Judeo-Christian interpretation, for example, allows us to see meaning and purpose in all creation. I can, through it, explain why flowers have colorful petals by applying the teleological grid of connections between it, the need to attract bees, and God’s goodness and providence. God is the universal hinge around which everything finds its place. Undermine the belief in God, and you will experience an essential loss that may very well make it very difficult to continue engaging the everyday routines of our everyday life. On the other hand, the belief in Santa Claus has a limited explanatory range, as it explains only why and how I find presents under the Christmas tree. Therefore, with the adoption of a God-centered interpretation, we literally introduce meaning, a particular meaning, in the world. The nihilism of the absolute denier takes all this away, and we are left with the *nihil* of a depressing nothing. If all interpretations are false, then nothing has any meaning, any purpose or reason to be what it is.

Given some recently published articles (Willinston 2001; Daigle 2004), there is an attempt to situate Nietzsche within the nihilistic tradition, not opposed to it, but as its self-proclaimed completion. This is partly due to Nietzsche’s ambivalence about the

nature of nihilism and partly to the vagueness of his theory of creativity. In my response to this attempt, the question of Nietzsche's nihilism is not reduced to problems of consistency, but is allowed to go to the core of the meaning of nihilism, as an activity and interpretation, that is still very much part of our world, today. New forms of dogmatism, whether religious or political or, even, perhaps, scientific, today only repeat the deeds and words of the forms Nietzsche complained about in his own time and society. To argue that Nietzsche was a nihilist, whether radical or perfect or complete, is to diminish the importance of his anti-nihilistic critique and to make it more difficult to see his proposed solution.

1. Nihilism and Creativity

Nietzsche is certainly ambivalent about the nature of nihilism. On one hand, as we are told in the preface of the *Will to Power*, the advent of nihilism is necessary not just in the sense of being inevitable, but in the sense of being a condition for new bursts of creative energy. On the other, nihilism is the greatest of dangers which requires "the greatest of struggles" (WP sec. 874 and 1054).² Nietzsche seems to be offering two versions of nihilism, for which he offers no conceptual discrimination: a type of nihilism favorable, or even necessary, to creativity, and one that prevents any creative effort. The first one, which we may call *pro-creative nihilism*, consists in indicating a phase of the creative process, necessary to it as destruction is necessary for construction. The other, more sinister, *contra-creative* aspect of nihilism makes the *nihil* of nihilism happen, signaling the end of human creativity, of history, of life. The attempt to conceive and theoretically justify a form of *pro-creative nihilism* has had

the unfortunate consequence of stretching the meaning of nihilism so much as to include that which nihilism opposes, a process equivalent to trying to make the opposite ends of a rubber-band touch by stretching it all around the planet. There is no such thing as *pro-creative* nihilism, as nihilism and creativity are utterly opposed. Therefore, the starting point to showing that *contra-creative* nihilism is a real danger and that *pro-creative* nihilism is just a theoretical blunder is to pinpoint the underlying mechanism responsible for creativity and to show how it is vulnerable to deadly attacks.

The System of Affects and Creativity

Nietzsche offers a physiological and psychological explanation of creativity in his theory of affects. Nihilism and creativity correspond to particular affective structures (WP sec. 1). In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche describes the coming forth of a new truth as a gradual movement from a state of quietude and coolness, to a state of “tremendous tension.” As he says, “in the midst of perfectly gruesome detonations, a new truth becomes visible every time among thick clouds” (EH 768). This description is bathed in the emotional, but in more than the sense of being an emotionally charged interpretation. All interpretations are only manifestations of a certain state of our affects (WP sec. 481 and 664).³ In fact, Nietzsche reiterates that the Who of our creative act is to be answered by pointing not to a subject that, understood as a unitary phenomenon and as a rational operating agent, he rejects,⁴ but to a system of drives and affects (BGE sec. 12; WP sec. 485). Each of these drives carries its own vision of the world, its own perspective and interpretation (WP sec. 481 and 670). If I am in a

generally bad (or good) mood, the world seems to adjust and go along with the quality of the mood. All is bad when I am in bad mood. This emotional engagement can find rational expression, as I refer to all car drivers who happen to cross my path as blasphemous non-believers or as drunken hedonists.

This is an interpretation that gives meaning to the world and arises from a particular emotional, affective state of being. The melancholic, the irate, the cheerful, and so on, are not just emotional states or personality traits, but ways of relating to the world. We can, as a matter of fact, be very creative in how we interpret the world, given the richness of our affects. Among such variety, what we call our interpretation, the one we speak of as representing our self, will be a manifestation of a necessary order among our affects. Nietzsche explains that each of these drives competes with the others in that each originates from and responds to the most fundamental drive, the will to power, but in sharing the same origin, they differ radically in their current manifestation. They “oppose or subject each other (join together synthetically or alternate in dominating).” They are in constant tension; their interacting mode is based on struggle and competition, among individuals or among groups (WP sec. 677). This differentiation is what allows us to engage the context successfully by means of creative manipulations. Lust for power may be dominant over, for example, sexual urges or hatred, which may be a ranking that is most suitable to face the challenges of particular circumstances. Each and all of them are essential to the creative process as a form of the will to power, but “the price of fruitfulness is to be rich in internal opposition” (TI “Morality,” sec.3).

Unsurprisingly, the great, the creative person is likened to a “bow with the great tension” (WP sec. 967). The creator is one who is able to order and control the affects, without losing the original tension but directing it to more creative enterprises. The tension between a strong sexual desire and the urge to write prose may result in very convincing love letters or in erotic novels, depending on which of the two comes to have the dominant position. If this internal struggle is not, at least temporarily, decided, “a man of profound mediocrity must result” (WP sec. 677). Control means to establish an “order of rank” which is a function of “quanta of power,” understood as referring to the power relationship automatically assumed by the affects present in one personality. If we had no clear order, we would lack operative ability, no aim, no willing: chaos would reign in the midst of total inactivity (WP sec. 855; Nehamas 1985, 182). A person who is easily distracted by her other desires and cannot concentrate on one goal for more than five minutes will fail to satisfy any of them. Willing is always willing something, but a “strong will” aims with “precision and clarity” at that “something,” while a “weak will” is nothing but “the multitude and disgregation of impulses and the lack of any systematic order among them.” Too much “oscillation” and too little “direction” results in the interruption of the creative activity (WP sec. 46).

Will to power is, of course, a drive among others and as the “most fearful and fundamental... must be held in check the longest.” The moral interpretation has that supervising function (WP sec. 720 and 966). It, too, arises from other drives and

originates from the same drive it checks. Affects and drives, then, have a built-in system of check and balance, each drive interacting and affecting others. No single drive seems to perform the role of sole organizer: it is a dynamic system in which equilibrium does not mean stasis, but *stability*. The difference between stasis and stability is very important to understand Nietzsche's theory of affects and creativity. A static system does not change, not even gradually. Some species, for example, seem to appear rather suddenly and remain unchanged for most or all of their stay on Earth. Other species change gradually, on the other hand, and show a stability that allows them to adapt climatic changes. They change without ever losing a necessary equilibrium. Essentially, creativity is never divorced from the need to maintain a stable system. Creativity is a function of the degree, determined by the "power that knows how to press these magnificent monsters [i.e., passions and desires] into service," of "free play and scope of... [our] desires" (WP sec. 933).

The birth of a new interpretation, understood as a system of affects with a clear ranking pattern, is preceded by a period of unrest, a destructive period, which is also part of the creative process. In order to establish a new government, the old one must be disassembled, and the parties of the old government can still find an even prominent place in the new one. The arrangement of our affects has to go through both movements, requiring, as described in BGE 230, the masterly courage to dwell in creative becoming. Will to power is driven by two basic forces: an *ascending*, constructive, manipulating, force whose "commanding something," whose "spirit... has the will from multiplicity to simplicity, a will that ties up, tames, and is

domineering and truly masterful....,” and a *descending*, destructive, force, a “sublime inclination of the seeker after knowledge who insists on profundity, multiplicity, and thoroughness....” This destructive movement leads us “back into nature,” back to original chaos (Granier 1977, 137).

Given this strict causal relation between our system of affects and creativity, how can human creativity be disrupted, even annihilated? What is a possible *contra-creative* strategy? Nietzsche seems to recognize a twofold strategy: one way is to remove the aim from willing, so that the system of affects is reduced to a chaotic mess (remove that and you will have eliminated willing as an “affect of the command” altogether) (BGE sec. 19; WP sec. 668; Nehamas 1985, 178); the other is to harden a certain affective structure as to make it impossible to change it. The second, dogmatic aberration of a healthy interpretative activity causes essential drives to disappear by universalizing and eternalizing an interpretation which denies them the possibility to exist. As Nehamas observes, this type of aberrant state can exist when, for example, some traits come to dominate totally over the others and “simply disregard their competitors and even refuse to acknowledge their existence:” this brings about a state of “self-deception” (Nehamas 1985, 183). The first, chaotic aberration, on the other hand, manifests itself most obviously in a personality that is entirely passive and unwilling. This is a form of *akrasia*, or weak will, characterized by the failed attempt to establish even a minimum of order among the struggling variety of traits and impulses. I beg to differ, though, with Nehamas’ identification of the second aberrant state, “self-deception,” with the dogmatic, and the second, *akrasia*, with the chaotic

(Nehamas 1985, 128). *Akrasia*, weakness of the will, is causally connected with both the chaotic and the dogmatic aberrations, as I will argue. Willing within the creative process is not only willing to interpret, but also willing to destroy. The dogmatic is an aberration in that it signals a weakness to perform the latter, while the chaotic is characterized by the inability to re-interpret. In both cases, it is the will to create that is made inoperative.

Textual Dynamism and its Chaotic Aberration

If we likened the creative process to a wave-like ascending and descending movement running along the invisible line of time, then at the top of this upward thrust, we could place the creation of a stable interpretation, that is, an interpretation that has come to be largely accepted by its own merits, showing, for example, a large degree of coherence and explanatory power. At the bottom, we find interpretations that have not yet reached maturity and are, therefore, quite dynamic, as they are quite pliable to interpretative manipulations. The danger is that, at both extremes of this movement, something may intervene to halt the necessary succession of ascending and descending stages. Once the ascension is completed, the temporary stability reached may give rise to a form of dogmatic fixation, while the temporary disorder of textual fragmentation may result in an inability to reverse the trend and re-create anew. These two aberrations of the creative process, the *dogmatic* and the *chaotic* respectively are instances of nihilism, that is, causes of the halting of meaning-bestowing activities.

If the end result of the interpretive process is “the masking of chaos,” as Granier

writes, a mask that is life itself, then a certain degree of chaos is necessary to life (Granier 1977, 139-40). Art itself becomes a particular way of constructing meaning, of reaching a stable interpretation, but the artist needs to draw from reality, or her imagination, the material that is to be part of the artwork. There would be no art without the rearrangement of heterogeneous material, whether it is sounds, colors or types of stone. On the other hand, in order to create something new, the artist has to return to an original heterogeneity, in which the old forms do not dominate her mental projections. The musician that has composed a great symphony must at least disassemble it into chords and basic rules of composition in order to free the mind from the constraints of the forms and ideas used to create that symphony. The creator is, then, not only the interpreter who gives the stable form of a text to a underlying chaos, but also the destroyer who makes possible the fragmentation of an old text. The creative spirit must remain aware of the chaotic element. "I say unto you: one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star. I say unto you: you still have chaos in yourselves" (Z 129).

The conservation of this awareness is a sign of a potentially creative life. So, Nietzsche welcomes the rigorous suffering of the creator who finds in himself the basic material for its creative efforts. Great men are inventive in finding "means of communication" which allow them to "give a single form to the multifarious and disordered; chaos stimulates them" (WP sec. 964). The creator needs chaos, or at least, it needs to not "limit the ways in which the world can be interpreted" (WP sec. 600). On the other hand, the creator needs also to be careful not to fall victim of a

paralysis of the will caused by the overwhelming richness of life. Nietzsche despises “tolerance toward oneself” which “permits several convictions...” “How does one compromise oneself today? If one is consistent. If one proceeds in a straight line. If one is not ambiguous enough to permit five conflicting interpretations. If one is genuine” (TI “Skirmishes,” sec.18). The chaotic is characterized by an inability to sublimate by organizing human drives and take advantage of their constant antagonism and tension. No decision can be made, no project can be pursued by those affected by multiple personality disorder. Instead of this widespread indeterminacy, Nietzsche argues for “the production of the synthetic man,” the man “in whom the various forces are unhesitatingly harnessed for the attainment of one goal” (WP sec. 881 and 883).

Although Nietzsche gives as examples of this chaotic personality Goethe and other literary figures, it is Wagner that provides a more fitting illustration of a general decay in art. As Gillespie puts it, “human beings are rent by multiple, contradictory passions. Music orders these passions to create a way of life in which all of the passions are directed to a single end” (Gillespie 1995, 235). Wagner’s music fails to perform this basic function; it wants to please by seeking “excitement at any price” (CW 643). One of the aspects of Wagner’s music with which Nietzsche takes issue is Wagner’s stylistic device he refers to as *infinite melody*. Melody, as a succession of musical tones, is strictly connected to rhythm, which breaks up continuity of sound into notes. In Gillespie’s words, “infinite melody... is not melody at all. It does not regularize and harmonize becoming. Real melody is the expression of a powerful will that produces

a unified whole. Wagner's infinite melody is eternally incomplete and thus a reflection of Wagner's decadence, of a weakness of will that is unable to establish order and lead to... chaos..." (Gillespie 1995, 236-7). According to Nietzsche, Wagner had no style at all, if by "style" we mean "lawfulness," order (CW sec. 8; WP sec. 834 and 838). This decline of the power to organize both musical elements and, consequently, corresponding affects may become a danger. If this attitude becomes dominant, it would cause "the complete degeneration of rhythmic feeling, chaos in place of rhythm" (NCW 666). This chaos is reflected in the chaos of affects of its listeners. Wagner's music not only is sick, but "makes sick." Wagner "flatters every nihilistic... instinct and disguises it in music."⁵ Wagner's infinite melody, his tempo and rhythm, all his "formless" music is "hypnotic" and wants to do nothing but please. The "grand style," the Dionysian music, instead, "disdains to please" but "commands;... wills" (NCW 669).

To say, therefore, that we are within an array of possible interpretations is not *per se* an obstacle to deciding which one is to be accepted, but to saying that there is an *infinite* number of possible interpretations can prevent us from making such decision. The existence of a variety of different ways to look at things does not mean that we must accept all of them as equally valid. "To become master of the chaos one is; to compel one's chaos to become form: to become logical, simple, unambiguous...--that is the great ambition here" (WP sec. 842). Deeming everything true or false may result in a passive acceptance of pure indeterminacy. The aim is lacking, and our inability to find a new one is a sign that the will is perishing. To deify the chaotic

element causes a “paralysis of the will,” a form of *akrasia* (WP sec. 12a and 30).⁶ Chaos becomes an aberration of the creative process when it halts the interpretive activity by the sheer force of its undifferentiatedness. Extreme fragmentation of a previously recognizable pattern may cause passivity, lack of will to create. When an order in the tension within the system of affects is not found, then the self is overcome by chaos and is unable to take the ascending, interpretive, path again.

Stable Interpretations and the Dogmatic Attitude

As we have seen, the dynamic engagement of life (as a text, made of meaningful relationships) can be hindered by an overly chaotic array of distinct phenomena. We find a similar problem at the other end of the creative process, where the achievement of a stable textual structure finds its aberrant state in the dogmatic attitude.⁷ The dogmatic represents the self-denial and self-destruction of a creative process gone terribly wrong. Nietzsche did not reject the idea of a temporary stability, of the emergence of recognizable patterns out of the dynamics of creativity. He never rejected, for example, the idea that interpretations perform a certain positive function. His love of “brief habits,” as opposed to “enduring” ones, such as living in the same house all the time, is a love for whatever stable in his person permits knowledge of the most general kind with regard to the most various objects. As he hated any form of fixation, he hated its opposite, chaotic life of “perpetual improvisation” (GS sec. 295).

We can describe Nietzsche’s conception of interpretative stability by following the allegorical travels of the Wanderer. The Wanderer, who has just returned from its

search into the “depth,” has lost its mask and asks for another. The Wanderer went to what Nietzsche calls a “desolate region” where “even his concepts eventually acquire a peculiar twilight color, an odor just as much of depth as of must, something incommunicable and recalcitrant that blows at every passerby like a chill.” This may be read as a beautiful allegory of the boundaries between meaningful textuality and chaos. What the Wanderer learns from its traveling is the absence of an ultimate Truth (GS sec. 309). This lack of foundation reveals the presence of pure indeterminacy, which can be *felt*, more than inhabited or explored. There is no Virgil which can vouch for our passage within such chaotic hell. The only thing to do is to wear another “mask,” to inhabit the “cave,” as the counterpart of the Wanderer, the Hermit, does.⁸ This is the interpreter’s basic existential condition. This “mask” and “cave” is also a “skin” which we shed from time to time, and underneath this “skin,” this foreground estimate, this “truth,” we find another skin, another interpretation. Nonetheless, if it were not for a successfully completed creative cycle, there would be, indeed, *nothing* underneath—the *nihil* of nihilism. In finding cracks in what we believed to be perfectly smooth and true, we “negate and must negate because something in us wants to live and affirm—something that we perhaps do not know or see as yet” (GS sec. 307 and 373).

The “skin” metaphor connotes an important destructive technique: the art of criticizing. The possession and use of this art is a sign of health, a sign that we are not caged within a dogma, that creation can go on its descending path. An alarming signal, on the other hand, comes from the lack of this ability. All forms of dogmatism,

such as the Judeo-Christian, the Platonic as-such, the Kantian in-itself, the scientific interpretation, or any other exclusive interpretation, are all essentially nihilistic. What all these heterogeneous forms have in common is that they share a common creative mechanism, and a sublimation of certain ruling drives (WP sec. 677).⁹ Since every world-view is a manifestation of a reached harmony of the system of affects, its fixation in time will result in the quieting of internal opposition and tension. The constant overpowering of some affects will cause the overpowered ones to disappear. Dogmatic systems are “masks,” foreground estimates, as any other interpretation, but “monstrous and frightening” so as to “inscribe themselves in the hearts of humanity with eternal demands...” (BGE, Preface). You cannot take them off. With no internal opposition, no disassembling action, no liberating criticism is again possible.

Each of these forms of dogmatism has developed its own characteristic technique. The ascetic priest has devised “procedures and modes of life” as “means of freeing these ideas from the competition of all other ideas, so as to make them “unforgettable” (GM II, sec. 3 and III, sec.23). The philosopher, the “metaphysician,” has devised “such contradictory concepts as ‘pure reason,’ ‘absolute spirituality,’ ‘knowledge in itself,’” which have the same exclusive function because they imply that we can see something from no particular angle (GM III, sec.12). Metaphysics’ “impetuous demand for certainty... today discharges itself among large numbers of people in a scientific-positivistic form.” All these forms of faith are symptoms that the “will... as the affect of command... is lacking” (GS sec. 347). All these interpretations were attacked both as stable interpretations and as being the result of a dogmatic attitude

which attempted to freeze the whole creative process. Nietzsche reacted not to the degree of the domineering instinct (it is inevitable to want to dominate forever and over all), but to the attack against those drives which, by Nietzsche's assertion, are essential components of human creativity. It is one thing to attack other interpretations so as to keep dominating and winning over competing world views; it is another to attack the very source of new challenges, the physiological and intellectual qualities which certain human beings possess. Similarly, it is one thing, one must agree, to convince somebody not to behave in a certain way, and it is another to perform a lobotomy. The first makes us stronger, the second weaker.

Such dogmatic aberration manifests itself with a vengeance in the form of Christian morality. The Christian interpretation is not life-denying simply because it "despise[s] every other way of life," but because its expansionistic tendency aims to overcome the world by fostering and nurturing one type of human being, passive in essence, at the expense of another type, the creative. Even though it has saved us from "practical nihilism," it has done so by initiating a process leading to a "slow suicide" (WP sec. 247). The ascetic reversal of values is, as described in the first essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, the first step towards a selective breeding of certain affective qualities. This attack on life is an attack on the human self, on its creative apparatus (TI "Morality," sec. 1 and 3; GM III, sec. 12; Z sec. I and 14; GS sec. 353).¹⁰ This situation was typified by Nietzsche in previous texts as the struggle between the master and the slave type. In a sense, Nietzsche observes, they are both creative, but with a difference. The slave's creativity is the creativity of the prey who finds a way

to die together with its predator. While the master is a “becoming master” over old interpretations by means of “fresh” ones, the slave longs “to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself” which means “a will to nothingness,... a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life” (GM II, sec. 13 and III, 28). Although this will not to will is still a will, and although successfully avoids total annihilation, the way it does so is ultimately self-destructive, not destructive of itself, but, more nihilistically, destructive of the self (GM III, sec. 1 and 28; WP sec. 4; TI “Morality,” sec. 6; GM III, sec. 28). The formation of a sense of guilt in the master, the notion of sin, itself a sign of physiological depression, aim at just this: a physiological decaying of certain drives and affects necessary for the renewal of the creative cycle.

2. Nihilism is a Real Danger

On the basis of this analysis that combines the theory of affects, the process of interpretation and creativity, we can argue that Nietzsche was not a nihilist. Nihilism is essentially the inability to activate the will to create and value. Passive and active nihilism are both characterized by a dysfunctional system of affects, and both lead to *akrasia*. Secondly, Nietzsche’s anti-nihilist position will be taken up, showing that the attempt to categorize Nietzsche as a nihilist is based on a confusion due to similarities between the healthy forms of interpretation and their corresponding aberrations. There is a difference between the nihilistic rejection of all interpretations and the anti-nihilist freedom from all attachments to any one interpretation. There is a difference between the nihilist reverence to one dominant worldview and the anti-nihilist temporary

acceptance of a perspective.

Nihilism: Passive and Active

So the story goes that an age of dogmatic acceptance of “transcendental” values is followed by its opposite extreme, an age of disbelief. The first age is nihilistic, not, obviously, in the sense of being characterized by a belief in meaninglessness, but in the sense that it promotes the sterile fixation of the system of affects. If it is nihilistic, it is so only in the sense of being a condition of nihilism, a sort of *antecedent nihilism*. Following the collapse of this system of beliefs, there arises the more appropriately nihilistic belief that all interpretations are false, all is meaningless. At this point, there are two major developments: one can passively reaffirm already discredited beliefs or can actively reject all attempts to establish a hierarchy of possible interpretations. The first person is unable to say Yes or No, and can only say Why Not? The second, unable to say Yes, utters a radical No. Both passive and active forms are *consequences* of this crisis of the predominant dogmas. Nietzsche talks of this new passive or active nihilist as having the sickly constitution of one who is prone to sterile affective responses to changing conditions. There is no reason to believe that a creative nihilist can be born out of two sterile ones.

In fact, Nietzsche ponders over a *de facto* domination of this sterile type, while suggesting that even such nihilism can, and will, be defeated, if not now, later on. What is it that gives Nietzsche this assurance that nihilism is a temporary stage which inevitably has to pass? The answer resides in his trusting the mimetic ability of the

Master. Nietzsche's strategic advice for the sick is to play dead, to accept whatever comes by accident, without resisting or trying to change it. These potentially "exceptional men" have to play mediocrity without "flatter[ing] the instincts of the 'disinherited'...", without becoming one. "[T]he best men have remained hidden—and have often misunderstood themselves." This is to be done until "vitality [is] rich and proud enough again" (WP sec. 45, 864 and 870). Nietzsche is thinking about a "temporary suppression of those passions" necessary for creativity, a kind of dormant state of creative tension, which is kin to sheer hypocrisy. This state is not to be confused with *akrasia*, or weakness of will; Nietzsche characterizes it as *adiaphoria*, indifference or impassibility (WP sec. 132, 869-70, 988 and 45). It reminds us of a lion waiting for the best moment to jump on its prey.

While these superior people are in hiding, two types of nihilistic attitudes, the *passive* and the *active*, dominate the European scene. Passive and active nihilists manifest themselves in a complex way, but in all cases they are incurably barren. While the creative type is able to delay its actions, the "underprivileged" one reacts harming itself. It reacts to the lost faith by "destroy[ing] in order to be destroyed;" it becomes an *active nihilist*: it *does* "No after all existence has lost its 'meaning,'" reveling in the chaotic (WP sec. 55). Its function is not to bring about, more speedily than the passive one, an intermediary period in which a meaningful world is destroyed so as to allow a new reversal of values (WP sec. 585). Its function is to maintain the chaotic *status quo* in which we experience no stable interpretation, no meaning, that can direct our will. The active type is "a violent force of destruction," "a sign of increased power of the

spirit” which is, however, unable to re-interpret the chaotic. Its doing No, after all has been fragmented, is a Yes to the chaotic. The passive type denotes “decline and recession of the power of the spirit.” It is “a sign of the lack of strength to posit for oneself, productively, a goal, a why, a faith” (WP sec. 22 and 23). It simply rests on old fictions no longer believable. In its contentment the passive nihilist betrays “the impotence of the will to create... no longer possessing the strength to interpret, to create fictions...” (WP sec. 585). This impotence to construct is first seen in its inability to destroy; in fact, it judges that the world it desires actually and already is. Passive nihilism “no longer attacks...” (WP sec. 23). This is the passivity of a person who resembles the zealots and the inquisitors, before the death of God, but lacks their fervor: it says Yes without really believing—its Yes is only a Why Not.

Nietzsche’s sympathy goes to the active nihilist for two reasons: one is that these nihilists do not passively wait to be “extinguished,” but compel “the powerful to become their hangmen.” In this sense, Nietzsche’s assurance that a powerful type of human being will raise and “hang” them is justified. The extinction of all types of nihilists, according to Nietzsche, will promote both a new “order of rank according to strength” where “those who command are recognized as those who command and those who obey as those who obey,” and the emergence of a commanding type of person: “the most moderate” (WP sec. 55). These “most moderate” human beings are able to stay within the historical process of destruction and interpretation, without getting implicated in either of the two possible aberrations which we have discussed. The other reason is that this active nihilist is a mode of discontent, of rebellion, “a

man who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist” (WP sec. 585). It thrives in meaninglessness itself; it says No to everything. In this sense, active nihilism has to be defeated, but its negating posture still provides an example to follow, though not to the end, for a necessary destruction of the chain that keeps us in bondage. An anti-nihilist, on the other hand, would not simply say No. Its negation has to take the form of “a critique of moral values” as a first step towards emancipation (GM Preface, sec. 6). The critical ability to disassemble an interpretation should leave us with the pieces that we can use to create a new valuation, a new rank in our system of affects. The active nihilist exhausts itself to pursuing a negativity without remnants, without the building blocks our affects can attach themselves to so as to reconstruct a temporarily viable worldview.

Nietzsche the Anti-nihilist

In the preface to *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche refers to nihilism as “the ultimate logical conclusion,” something we “must experience...before we can... [create] new values.” Nietzsche himself is talking from experience as “the first perfect nihilist of Europe” who has overcome its own nihilism. Nietzsche’s own creative movement can start only as a reconstruction, or reinterpretation, of the textual fragments left by his critique of the Judeo-Christian tradition. As he writes, this new interpretation “presupposes [nihilism],... and... can come only after and out of it.” Nietzsche’s analysis of the three centuries preceding his time, a “time of extensive inner decay and disintegration,” tells him that nihilism could be a good experience, a sign of growth in

that “every fruitful and powerful movement of humanity has also created at the same time a nihilistic movement” (WP sec. 112). This observation greatly reduces “the greatest of dangers” which requires “the greatest of struggles” to a not so worrisome event in a plot of which we already know the end. Though these statements point to a sort of *pro-creative*, friendly form of nihilism, I contend we should avoid the mistake of thinking of Nietzsche as a nihilist, neither a “complete” nor a “perfect” one.

Concerning the second qualification, a look at the text should suffice. We know that he considered himself to be “the first perfect nihilist of Europe,” but paradoxically this perfection implies standing *outside and beyond* “the whole of nihilism.” Immediately after this section, Nietzsche explains that the will to revalue all values, the will to recreate, is “a movement that in some future *will take the place of* this perfect nihilism” (WP Preface, sec. 3 and 4. My emphasis). The will to create may “presuppose it, logically and psychologically,” but it is still something to be overcome. This presupposition, however, may be interpreted as referring to an evolutionary line, or a causal chain, in which nihilism must take its place as a necessary link, even if as a “pathological transitional stage” (WP sec. 13, Preface, and 895). In this case, nihilism reminds us of the effects of acne that undermine the confidence of the adolescent, though it is a necessary stage towards maturity. This evolutionary or causal explanation does not, obviously, make of Nietzsche any more of a nihilist than pimples make any person eternally an adolescent. In fact, the mature Nietzsche lacks, and is proud of lacking, the symptoms of nihilism, such as pessimism.

The proponents of Nietzsche as a “complete nihilist,” that is, those who see nihilism as an ideal as long as it is not practiced partially and imperfectly, propose to see nihilism in the form of a dialectics. Byron Williston, for example, argues that the best form of nihilism is a complete system of affirmations and negations of values and interpretations, dynamically playing each other, like a child creates games and destroys toys always in a playful mode. Affirmations and negations are dialectically linked, but without ever coming to an end, without real progression, in the form of a virtuous circularity. This is a sort of endless free-play between creation and destruction, endless because “no reconciling synthesis” can take place without collapsing, or relapsing into camel-like passivity or lion-like blind destructivity. In his view, thus, “a nihilist is complete to the extent that she is involved in a perpetual dialectic of reactivity and passivity” and “the child just is the eternal movement between camel and lion.”¹¹ In other words, Nietzsche is a complete nihilist because he is able to engage freely in the play of critical negations, *just like* the active nihilist does in her uncritical rejection of all interpretations, and of critical affirmations, and *just like* the passive nihilist who is capable of accepting a value-system without really believing in it. Nietzsche does both without being stuck with either, like a pendulum perpetually oscillating within the passage of time.

Williston, in this way, saves the Antichrist but condemns the anti-nihilist. In other words, it is possible, contrary to Nietzsche’s own words, to fight the nihilistic tendencies of the Judeo-Christian tradition *by means of* nihilism, but this is not what

Nietzsche hoped for for the future of humankind: “This man of the future, who will redeem us not only from the hitherto reigning ideal but also from that which was bound to grow out of it, the great nausea, the will to nothingness, nihilism; ... this Antichrist and antinihilist; this victor over God and nothingness—*he must come one day*” (GM II, 24). You cannot be a nihilist, in any form, without being the harbinger of the nothingness that the nihilist carries on and brings about, unable to revalue and recreate. It is more likely, then, that Williston was misled by similarities between nihilism and anti-nihilism, and, by their strength, ended up diminishing the importance of the differences until they disappeared from view. There is a form of nihilism, the active type, that negates and destroys, but the negation and destruction are not identical with this form of nihilism. In the same way, there is no absolute identification between the affirmation of the passive nihilist and the passive nihilist. It is possible, in other words, to achieve a stable interpretation without resigning to its dogmatic acceptance, as it is possible to revel in criticism without sinking in the chaos of multiple worldviews.

In order to see better what this incomplete overlapping signifies, both for Nietzsche and Williston, consider these two examples. First, two very diverse conceptions of skepticism can illustrate for us the difference between the negation of the anti-nihilist and the fruitless rejection of the active nihilist. All nihilistic interpretations, we are told, are characterized by “hopeless skepticism regarding all philosophy,” i.e. the skeptical generalization about the falsity of all interpretations (WP sec. 55). This type of skepticism takes us nowhere, but engenders a pathological form of pessimism that

is but a symptom of a deeper dysfunction. Whether it manifests itself as “hatred of the dogmatist” or as Pyrrhic “weariness,” it remains a manifestation of “psychological confusion” (WP sec. 455). On the other hand, a healthy skeptical attitude is necessary for the great man to reach “freedom from any kind of conviction... [a task which] is part of the strength of his will.” Such a freedom is obtained by an “‘enlightened despotism’ exercised by every great passion.” This does not mean that the great man does not have convictions; this person simply does not “submit to them” (WP sec.963). What is the difference, then, between these two skeptical attitudes? The healthy form of skepticism possesses “the ability to control one’s Pro and Con and to dispose of them so that one knows how to employ a variety of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge” (GM III, 12). To control and to dispose, and to dispose in order to serve knowledge, this is exactly what the active nihilist cannot do: he has a “variety of perspectives” without being able to “employ” them—he cannot say Yes to any of them. Williston confuses these two forms of negations, and calls the second nihilistic, while, in fact, it constitutes its overcoming.

Nietzsche’s view of “reverence” well exemplifies the difference between the anti-nihilist appreciation of interpretative stability and its passive nihilistic aberration. Reverence is not a one-sided trait. Its significance varies depending on its place in relation to other affects. A dominating reverence, without mistrust, brings about dogmatic acceptance, but if reverence is dominated by mistrust, we experience the other, equally nihilistic aberration, of absolute pessimism and contempt for all interpretations. In fact, it is these two types of nihilism that are implied in “the

terrifying Either/Or: ‘Either abolish your reverences or—yourselves!’” (GS sec. 346). Complete lack of, or total subordination of reverence is also a vice, a form of degeneration. What is to be abolished is not the reverence for the “rich ambiguity” of existence, but the reverence for the “mild, serious and simple-minded, chaste priestly type and what is related to it” (GS sec. 373 and 351). The passive, as well as the dogmatic, nihilist is made sterile by its total surrender to one and only one interpretation, whether truly believed or not. The nihilist affirmation is total and unconditional, supported by a weakness of the will that makes it all the more unyielding. The anti-nihilist affirmation is still an affirmation, but is set free by mistrust and the awareness of the all-encompassing nature of human perspectivism. The “fearless ones,” while accepting the responsibility of interpreting, accept the possibility of “infinite interpretations” (GS sec. 374).

It is not, therefore, the world of “eternal novelty” that Nietzsche wants to affirm, but the “Dionysian world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying...” (WP sec. 1067 and 1062). This Dionysian creativity necessitates a re-interpreting, which produces a new interpretation, and a re-destroying, which brings us to the edge of chaos. Nietzsche does not “halt at a negation, a No, a will to negation,” but promotes this No-saying as a necessary stage in a truly creative process. In attacking the dominant interpretations of his age, Nietzsche was not denying the need to reach some interpretative stability; in proposing a new interpretation, based on such concepts as will to power or over-man, he was not betraying his perspectivism and his commitment to interpretative dynamics. His perspectivism was not so radical as to

deny the importance of accepting a way (but not *any* way) to establish interpretations we could live by and, possibly, die for. The anti-nihilist wants to bring about a change in *attitude*, first of all, towards all interpretations. I find Rorty's description of an *ironist* to be very fitting, at this point. Like Nietzsche's anti-nihilist, the ironist possesses the right attitude towards all "final vocabularies," as they are interpretations that seem to escape contingency by affirming themselves as true forever and for all. She maintains a healthy skepticism towards them, even towards her own, but this doubting attitude is healthy insofar as it does not commit her to endless rejections. The ironist has a point of view, a worldview, an opinion about everything, but without being attached to it to the point of sounding opinionated. All the anti-nihilist and ironist wants to do is to encourage the continuance of the game of "playing the new off against the old [interpretation]" (Rorty 1989, 73).

Since it is an attitude, and not a worldview, how do we attain it? We may hope to change a person's opinion by argumentation or, as the ironist would, by a more felicitous re-description of an old interpretation, but how do we make a person open up to such possibility? More than that, how do we keep that open-mindedness unremittingly open? We know how we may become nihilists, for example by going through the terrible experience of an essential loss, whether it is the death of God or of a beloved one. Possibly, then, we need another experience, intense enough to jump-start the stalling engine of human creativity. Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence was meant to perform such function: it is not, in this sense, a theory, but an experience. It is a strategic device to be used to oppose "the paralyzing sense of

general disintegration...” by undermining not the theoretical bases, but the affective structure on which dogmatic and chaotic modes of thought depend (WP sec. 417). It is an invitation to imagine and to live through this imagined reality, as when I feel afraid by imagining some danger or when I feel pleasure by recalling a nice song. In confronting this possibility, Nietzsche thinks, we are reduced to a non-theoretical, but purely affective response. We either shudder in pain at the thought of it, or we find new strength, a new reason for joy. We either utter a nihilist No, or, with Nietzsche, an unmistakably anti-nihilist Yes.

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NOTES

¹ The closest Nietzsche comes to a definition of the interpretive activity is the following: "... interpretation (of forcing, adjusting, abbreviating, omitting, padding, inventing, falsifying, and whatever else is of the essence of interpreting)..." (GM III, sec. 24). We can add other textual manipulations, such as inferring. This passage indicates the umbrella-like function of this term, which, far from being univocal, seems to refer to a variety of processes, all similarly tending to introduce meaning in life. This concept, in accord with Nietzsche's characterization, "falsifies" by "making equal what is only similar," namely a variety of textual phenomena.

² This ambivalence has not gone unnoticed, of course. See, for example, Pfeffer 1972, 67 and Gillespie 1995, 178.

³ See Schacht (1983, 316-326) for a more comprehensive analysis of Nietzsche's theory of the affects.

⁴ Nietzsche's hypothesis is that what we call "soul" (or "self," "atomon," "ego") is a multiplicity, a "social structure of the drives and affects." Having rejected the "I," Nietzsche argues that even manipulating language by saying that "it thinks" can be dangerous of ultimately unwarranted entifications, "even the 'it' contains an interpretation of the process, and does not belong to the process itself" (BGE sec. 17). For a psychological account of its origin, see WP sec. 547.

⁵ These three criticisms are respectively from NCW: p.669, p.664 and CW: p.639.

⁶ An interesting illustration of this phenomenon can be found in Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*. He borrows of the notion of "information," as referring to the potentiality of a message to give life to a wealth of possible orders (meanings), and "meaning," as "a function of the order, the conventions, and the redundancy of [a text's] structure" (Eco 1989, 93), from information theory as instructive of certain features of modern art. Using these notions, we could say that the more unambiguous a text is, the less informative, and vice versa. Eco gives the example of the visual reaction to observing the surface of a road as an extreme type of textual openness (98). This type of randomization of elements (we could connect the dots of the gravel as to recognize the stylized figure of any object whatsoever) allows total freedom of interpretation, unbounded possibilities to decide its extreme ambiguity. However, this total "openness" of the text paradoxically does not bring about what it promises, "a maximum amount of information" (98). In practice, we are forced into inaction: "Deprived of all indications,... the [interpreter] is not longer capable even of choosing; all it can do is remain passive and impotent in the face of the original chaos" (96).

⁷ I am not denying more specific meanings Nietzsche gives this term, of course. Other scholars have disagreed on this, too. But all these more specific uses, such as Clark's understanding dogmatism as "the belief that pure reason can know things-in-themselves" (Clark 1990, 202), based on BGE sec.193, do not contradict the view of dogmatism in terms of an attitude of total confidence of possessing the only possible valid interpretation.

⁸ "My cave is large and deep and has many nooks;"—Zarathustra tells "the murderer of God" (Z sec. 379). For its rhetorical strength, Zarathustra is more than a fictional spokesman for this notion. Walter Kaufmann, in his introduction to the book, quotes a passage from a letter to Jacob Burckhardt (Sept. 22, 1886) in which Nietzsche wrote: "Please read this book (although it says the same things as my Zarathustra, but differently, very differently—)" (*Basic Writings*, p.182).

⁹ In the preface to BGE, dogmatism “meant standing truth on her head and denying perspective, the basic condition of all life....” Nietzsche reminds us of the task of the “new philosopher” which is “wakefulness itself” guarding against the coming back of the dogmatic error of an “as such” which denies perspective. In GM II, sec.3, Nietzsche explains the psychology of dogmatism as originated in what he calls “asceticism” whose aim is that of “hypnotising the entire nervous and intellectual system with these ‘fixed ideas.’” In GS, science is exclusive in its “unconditional will to truth” (sec. 344). In all these cases, what is affirmed is the exclusive possession of Truth.

¹⁰ The ability to reverse one’s own perspective is, pro-creatively, one of Nietzsche’s educational strategies: “habituation to reverse evaluations” (WP sec. 898 and 903). Used pro-creatively, this technique allows us to see the new without erasing the old. It would be like possessing the ability to see the whole Necker cube or both the rabbit and the duck in the rabbit/duck picture, to mention but two of the most popular exercises in Gestalt psychology. We may argue that Nietzsche saw the world as a hugely more complex Necker Cube (GS sec. 373 and 374). The abolishment of its infinite “ambiguity” is a “great danger to mankind, its sublimest enticement and seduction” (GM pref., 5). This practice of reversal constitutes an attack against the idea of identity (WP 520) and non-contradiction (WP sec. 515 and 516). Nietzsche does not criticize this procedure, but the outcome of the ascetic reversal. This constitutes “a danger, a seduction, a poison, a narcotic, through which the present was possibly living at the expense of the future...” (GM Preface, sec. 6). Ultimately, it denies existence to what was reversed. Contra-creative nihilism is a weariness, a loosing of hope for a new reversal of values.

¹¹ All quotes are from p.364. As an aside and minor point, Williston has, in my opinion, confused active (or reactive) and passive nihilism. His description of the first seems to me more fitting the second form of nihilism.

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