

Experimenting With Madness And Suicide:

Swallowing The Nietzschean Pill

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Part One: Transvaluation

“Every true faith is indeed infallible; it performs what the believing person hopes to find in it, but it does not offer the least support for the establishing of an objective truth... Here the ways of men divide. If you want to achieve peace of mind and happiness, then have faith; if you want to be a disciple of truth, then search.”¹

Why Philosophy?

Since I began ticking away time, I have always wondered *why* there is something instead of nothing. Everyday, billions of human beings go about existing on a tiny speck of reality called “Earth,” a speck that is barely detectable in the grand scheme of space—a space that is, itself, expanding infinitely into...? Only an infinitely small fraction, precisely .00103% of these people, will persistently contemplate the implications of this very fact, and most of these unfortunate few will bear the weight of an agonizing sense of helplessness thereafter. These same people are often plagued with depressing existential thoughts and, though their friends and their family might urge them to do otherwise, they simply cannot stop thinking about their existential crises—the philosophical questions that seem to emerge in every aspect of their lives. While this philosophical questioning may, itself, be detrimental to life (after all, it is hard to put food on the table when you can’t get outside of your own head), this fraction is so overwhelmed by questions regarding the very process of life that not a moment—whatever that is—passes by in which these questions are not confounding their minds—whatever those are. Every moment, this fraction is perpetually seeking “the truth” (the *reason why* there is something instead of nothing, how one should live one’s life, etc.) via a deluge of

¹ Christopher Middleton (ed.). Selected Letters Of Friedrich Nietzsche [SL] (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1969), p.7.

philosophical questions. At least to some degree, *all* human beings seem to be concerned with these very same issues.

As Martin Heidegger states in *Being and Time*, a human being is “distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it.”² I am no exception to this: I have never been able to get myself out of “Why?” “Why?” is my own personal state of despair in which everything becomes a question mark—a “Why?” Indeed, one might say that the aforementioned fact (that there is something instead of nothing) has become my soul’s sole obsession. I can never cease asking *why* there is something instead of nothing, or *why* this as opposed to that. Hence, when it came time to choose a “profession,” I was instinctively drawn to the field of philosophy. Frankly, I felt I had no choice—with time, my questions would drive me nuts unless I could find some sense of closure, something that might finally ease my mind. Yet, after immersing myself in philosophy after philosophy, I’m afraid I have found no such relief, but, instead, a tremendous amount of guesswork. In fact, I feel as though philosophy has achieved the exact opposite effect than the one I had initially desired. Instead of pacifying my existential anxiety, philosophy intensified it to a near fatal climax. The more I studied philosophy, the less convinced I was of all my former beliefs and opinions, and my headache became a migraine. Then, a thought occurred to me: do any of these philosophers have it all figured out? Do Christians, Taoists, or eighty-year old Buddhist monks really have *the answer*? And, if not, at what point should we just stop kidding ourselves?

For the sake of my own sanity, I was just about to abandon my seemingly hopeless search for “the truth” altogether and to give up philosophy in its entirety, when I

²Martin Heidegger. *Being And Time* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1962), p. 32.

stumbled upon an existential recluse: Friedrich Nietzsche. What particularly enticed me about Nietzsche was his similar skepticism of all the magic formulas imbedded in academic philosophy. Naturally, I examined the alternatives Nietzsche offered in lieu of these formulas. While Nietzsche still purported to seek “the truth,” as did all the other philosophers, he did so in a fashion radically different from the rest.

In what follows, I will describe Nietzsche’s philosophy in an attempt to establish the (f)utility of philosophy itself. What *value* does philosophy, especially given Nietzsche’s conceptualization of it, possess? Essentially, what I’m asking is why ask why? Why question? Does philosophy merely suffocate a person with existential anxiety, or can it really be beneficial? Utilizing Nietzsche’s perspective of philosophy, the following is an honest attempt to justify philosophy and its search for “the truth” one last time. In conclusion, I will evaluate the effectiveness of Nietzsche’s philosophy—given his own purported task as a philosopher—within the context of an essential discussion on value.

Philosophy Of Philosophy

Before we delve into Nietzsche’s philosophy, we must first establish his philosophy of philosophy itself. According to Nietzsche, what is the task or purpose of philosophy, and, insofar as Nietzsche considered himself a “philosopher,” what was his specific task, or goal? To be sure, much of Nietzsche’s writing hints at an essential misunderstanding of philosophy on the part of all prior philosophers. This misunderstanding hinges upon what Nietzsche refers to as “idealism” (but more on this later). As I hope to show, Nietzsche’s philosophy aimed to provide a proper

understanding of philosophy itself (one might say that his philosophy examined the anatomy of philosophizing as such).

Where Nietzsche keeps with the traditional³ understanding of philosophy is in his equating it with a search for “the truth,” or “theory or analysis of the principles underlying conduct, thought, knowledge, and the nature of the universe.”⁴ Hence, he shared the same *purported* aim as his predecessors. However, this is where the similarities abruptly end, for Nietzsche’s conceptualization of “the truth” and the “underlying principles” for which he is striving is precisely what distinguishes him from the rest of traditional philosophy. Consequently, despite similar nomenclature, Nietzsche’s philosophy actually aimed at something entirely different from the rest of traditional philosophy. Hence, this is why Nietzsche maintained that all prior philosophy had hitherto involved a misunderstanding of what it was seeking—“the truth.”

The Truth About The Truth

As Walter Kaufman points out, “Nietzsche himself was a fanatical seeker after truth and recognized no virtue above intellectual integrity.”⁵ Yet to gain an understanding of Nietzsche’s “truth,” one must shed all traditional understanding of the concept. Traditionally, “truth” has meant something like accordance with reality, or “an established principle.”⁶ Thus, a statement is said to be “true” if it concurs with what has been deemed real and “false” if it does not. Regrettably, what conventionally goes unnoticed is that what is considered real must already be established before any “truth” can be deemed “true.” This presents an insurmountable difficulty if that which is real

³ Traditional will always refer to that which preceded Nietzsche’s own life.

⁴ Webster’s New World Dictionary [NWD] (Cleveland: William Collins Publishers, Inc., 1977), p. 340.

⁵ Walter Kaufman. Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist [K] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 16.

⁶ [NWD], p. 486.

(and the standard by which everything else shall be deemed true or false) is the point in question. For example, I must first know what is *really* “good” before I can ever hope to pronounce ethical judgments. Before one can evaluate the truth of various statements, one must first know the “real” itself. Yet in traditional philosophical inquiry, this is precisely what is sought after and missing to begin with. If this is the case, then any evaluations of truth must presuppose the standard (reality) by which truth is to be assessed. Hence, “truth” is like a kitten chasing its own tail.

This dilemma of philosophy is well illustrated by Plato’s famous analogy of the cave in *The Republic*. According to Plato, if one yearns to discover the “real” structure of reality, he must first find his way out of the cave of ignorance and illusion (where unreal or false structures conceal the real) before he can ever see the light of day—the “real” structure of reality that is. Yet the problem for those inside the cave is their lack of access to this “real” structure to begin with (they are ignorant). In fact, they aren’t even aware of being inside the cave of ignorance and illusion (they are ignorant of their ignorance), and, subsequently, they have nothing but false, or unreal, inclinations of the “real” structure. They have no means to assess the conception of reality they possess other than this conception itself.

Ultimately, Nietzsche realized this truth about the truth. In a sense, this truth about the truth (that it must always rest upon an initial presupposition or *interpretation* of itself) is the sole truth. Nietzsche’s thirst for truth was really more of a desire for *honesty* about this truth.

Nietzsche, however, was *not* the first to stumble upon the enigmatic nature of truth. The acquisition of truth and virtue is actually the central theme in Plato’s own

dialogue *Meno*. Within the dialogue, Socrates questions the very means by which truth and virtue are attained in the first place, and, at one point, his interlocutor, Meno, specifically asks, “and how will you inquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know?”⁷ Likewise, unbeknownst to Nietzsche, Soren Kierkegaard wrote about the very same problem in *Philosophical Fragments*, just a few decades before Nietzsche himself began writing.

For the sake of clarity, we shall no longer call Nietzsche’s philosophical aim “truth,” but “honesty,” as Nietzsche’s task was to be completely honest about the nature of truth itself. While traditional philosophy sifts through interpretations, Nietzsche sought the truth about truth. This reflects why Nietzsche said, “that which has hitherto been most stringently forbidden has always been the Truth.”⁸ Again, Nietzsche would argue that, insofar as traditional philosophy strove to establish truth and failed to recognize the contradiction implicit within this very task, it entails nothing but a misunderstanding of its own process—that is to say, a misunderstanding of itself. If traditional philosophers are *seeking* truth as they claim, which would indicate that they do not yet possess it, how can they ever begin to search for it, as it is unbeknownst to them in the first place? If they presume to know where to look (i.e. where to begin such a search), then they must in fact know something about it. Thus, traditional philosophers do not even properly understand themselves. Much like Kierkegaard said: “the question is asked by one who in his ignorance does not even know what provided the occasion for his questioning in this way.”⁹

⁷ Plato. *The Dialogues Of Plato* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), “Meno,” p.206.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Philosophy Of Nietzsche* [EH] (New York: The Modern Library, 1954), “Ecce Homo,” p. 813 (preface, section 3).

⁹ Soren Kierkegaard. *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 9.

The impact of Nietzsche's honesty regarding truth was far-reaching for the development of his philosophy. Most importantly, Nietzsche was concerned with the influences that the origin, development, and consequences of this illusion of truth had on *values*. As Kaufman indicates: "so little doubt does Nietzsche leave concerning his primary concern: values."¹⁰ Hence, Nietzsche's analysis of the illusion of truth stems from what he deemed a much more critical concern—values and the problem of *nihilism*. In fact, "to escape nihilism—which seems involved both in asserting the existence of God and thus robbing *this* world of ultimate significance, and also in denying God and thus robbing *everything* of meaning and value—that is Nietzsche's greatest and most persistent problem."¹¹ Before proceeding further, note that the problems outlined thus far apply to *all* human beings, not just "philosophers," insofar as all are, at least to some degree, acquainted with the same subject matter (i.e. searching for and dissecting "the truth").

The Value Of Value

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche proclaims, "what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all 'truth' but something else—let us say, health, future, growth, power, life."¹² Here again, Nietzsche insinuates that the alleged aim of traditional philosophy was not in fact truth, but essentially *self-preservation*, and that traditional philosophers misunderstood themselves. Morality and idealism, the byproducts of traditional philosophic labor, were "the great *antidote* against practical and theoretical *nihilism*," and "prevented man...from despairing of knowledge: it was a *means of*

¹⁰ [K], p. 121.

¹¹ [K], p. 101.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Gay Science* [GS] (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p.35 (preface, section 2).

preservation.”¹³ With this, Nietzsche reveals the impetus of traditional philosophy and its apparent pursuit of truth: need. More specifically, as Nietzsche himself points out, this need guards man against “nihilism,” also Nietzsche’s “greatest and most persistent problem.”

According to Nietzsche, nihilism consists of a depreciation of life. The process of this depreciation is by no means short and simple, nor sweet, but, instead, can be likened to a play consisting of three distinct acts: 1) the onset of idealism (what Gilles Deleuze refers to as “negative nihilism”); 2) the devaluation of idealism (which is brought about, in large part, by the *idealism* of science, and involves the self-destruction of “negative nihilism”); and 3) the devaluation of all values (what Deleuze calls “reactive nihilism”). All three stages are nihilistic in that they *depreciate earthly life to some degree*, but the third stage reflects the decisive danger—a complete disregard for life itself, and the loss of all values.

“Idealism,” in one word, describes traditional philosophy (and laymen who employ similar pursuits). Hence, generally speaking, idealism reflects *beliefs* in various ideals (truths), which, in turn, induce one to value life according to these respective beliefs (which are assumed to be “the truth”). For Nietzsche, idealism reflects, among other things: 1) “the basic absurdity” of his life;¹⁴ 2) “the greatest objection to Life;”¹⁵ 3) “vice” and “unnatural practice;”¹⁶ 4) “life preserving errors”¹⁷ and “a *means for preservation*,”¹⁸ 5) ignorance of oneself;¹⁹ 6) “the real riddle that the animal ‘man’ poses

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Will To Power* [WTP] (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 10 (section 4).

¹⁴ [EH], p. 839 (“Why I Am So Clever,” section 2).

¹⁵ [EH], p. 841 (“Why I Am So Clever,” section 3).

¹⁶ [EH], p. 863 (“Why I Write Such Excellent Books,” section 5).

¹⁷ [GS], p.171 (section 110).

¹⁸ [WTP], p. 10 (section 4).

¹⁹ [WTP], p. 189 (section 344).

for the philosopher;”²⁰ 7) “a source of misfortune and man’s loss of value;”²¹ 8) “lies arising from the evil instincts of diseased and, in the deepest sense, harmful natures;”²² and, in sum, 9) “poisons.”²³ Clearly, Nietzsche considered idealism not only illusory, but, more importantly, *unhealthy*.

While idealism is dishonest because it is not forthright about the nature of its own illusion, it is unhealthy because it implicitly draws attention away from the reality of life on earth. According to Nietzsche’s thought, man, faced with the absurdity of his own lack of direction or purpose for existing, is inclined to compensate by creating his own optimistic ideals (which Nietzsche calls *idols*), and thereby lives his life as if he were living it for this ideal purpose. Take for example the ideals of “good” and “bad” in systems of morality. For Nietzsche, these ideals are nothing but illusions, and, ultimately, they compel man to value these illusions more than life itself (i.e. martyrdom). As Michael Haar puts it, “nihilism...is thus for Nietzsche the manifestation of an enormous lie, of delusion, and ultimately, of despair.”²⁴ Man stresses his unworldly ideals instead of his worldly life and actions, and, consequently, denigrates what Nietzsche considers truly valuable—life on earth. Thus, a dichotomy emerges in Nietzsche’s thought, distinguishing a life with a worldly emphasis from a life with an unworldly emphasis.

As mentioned, Deleuze refers to this stage in the development of nihilism as “negative nihilism.” Negative nihilism “signifies the value of nil taken on by life, the

²⁰ [WTP], p. 25 (section 39).

²¹ [WTP], p. 50 (section 80).

²² [EH], p. 852 (“Why I Am So Clever,” section 10).

²³ [WTP], p. 130 (section 223).

²⁴ Michel Haar. *Nietzsche And Metaphysics*. (New York: State University Of New York Press, 1996), p. 141.

fiction of higher values which give it this value and the will to nothingness [disparagement of life on earth] which is expressed in these higher values.”²⁵ In other words, negative nihilism results from man’s generation of ideals and, in the process of doing so, his implicit negation of the value of worldly life. For instance, when man posits an afterlife to give himself a sense of purpose, or a goal, he implicitly diminishes the value and import of earthly life. What matters is not what he achieves or becomes during his life on earth, but whether he is granted access into heaven. In this sense, he lives this life in terms of the next life, or the one after that...

The second stage of nihilism consists of the devaluation of these unworldly values (similar to Nietzsche’s “transvaluation of values”), such as heaven and hell. This stage marks a transition between negative nihilism and what Deleuze deems “reactive nihilism,” the final act in the nihilistic drama. The higher ideals posited in the first act are at last questioned, and, ultimately, negated. As Deleuze puts it, the “supersensible world and higher values are reacted against, their existence...denied.”²⁶ At this point, the “decrepitude of the upper-most values edges toward consciousness.”²⁷

Ironically, the self-destruction of idealism is inherent in its own structure, most notably in the ideals of science and truth. Science is an ideal insofar as its adherents possess “the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being.”²⁸ In its attempt to know causes, the ideal of science eventually stumbles upon its own source and that of idealism in general. Science “speeds irresistibly toward its limits where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze. Nietzsche & Philosophy [D] (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), p. 147.

²⁶ [D], p. 147.

²⁷ Martin Heidegger. Nietzsche (Volume IV): Nihilism (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1982), p. 32.

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche. The Birth Of Tragedy [BT] (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 95.

shipwreck,”²⁹ and finally “logic coils up...and bites its own tail.”³⁰ Ultimately, the truth about truth is revealed, and there is a reaction against the same ideals Nietzsche vehemently condemns (i.e. supersensible or unearthly ideals).

What occurs at this stage of the drama is very similar to what Nietzsche refers to as “transvaluation of all values.” Nietzsche is very fond of the transvaluation of all values, which “serves as the ax which will be applied to the root of the ‘metaphysical need’ of man.”³¹ However, properly speaking, Nietzsche’s transvaluation of all values occurs when all known values are destroyed, or transcended, *and* new ones are constructed to replace them, specifically life-affirming values.

Unfortunately, unless the performers of this second act “see the light” (unless they climb out of the cave via Nietzsche’s ladder—the transvaluation of all values) and begin to value the earth (the antithesis of nihilism), the axe they wield will not sever the *root* of the problem (deprecation of the earth) and their efforts will actually generate a condition far worse than that from which they began. Thus, Nietzsche is just as leery about this stage of the drama because it generally leads to the third and final act (instead of scrapping the drama altogether and writing a new script).

Instead of negating unearthly ideals and affirming life itself, “reactive nihilism,” negates both. Whereas negative nihilism depreciates worldly values while esteeming unworldly values, reactive nihilism depreciates *all* values. Consequently, the earth is no longer even valuable as a means to some higher end. The death of idealism, “which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism.”³²

²⁹ [BT], p. 97.

³⁰ [BT], p. 98.

³¹ [EH], p. 885 (“Human, All Too Human,” section 6).

³² [WTP], p. 7 (section 1).

Incidentally, this death of idealism reflects Nietzsche's famous statement, "God is dead!"³³ This proclamation is often misinterpreted because readers fail to take notice of the problems that plague this death, problems that Nietzsche himself was very aware of and extremely concerned about. Many immediately (and ignorantly) write Nietzsche off as a nihilist because they assume that, by eradicating all prior ideals and announcing that God is dead, Nietzsche implicitly denounces all value. However, as many scholars are quick to point out, "he does not mean to imply that all respect for values should be abandoned and all self-restraint thrown overboard."³⁴ How, if at all, Nietzsche is able to avoid crushing all values—given this death of God and idealism in general—will be considered later.

The conclusion of the nihilistic drama demarcates nihilism in its truest sense, as life is deemed completely devoid of value. Now, "everything lacks meaning," and "the untenability of one interpretation of the world [idealism], upon which a tremendous amount of energy has been lavished, awakens the suspicion that *all* interpretations of the world are false."³⁵ As a result, nihilism brings forth contempt and resentment toward life ensuing from this sense of futility.

Thus, the drama has unfolded. In the beginning, man was faced with the confusing and chaotic abyss that defined his own existence. Feeling helpless, he fabricated his own ideals by which he attempted to justify his existence. Inevitably, the process backfired, and he questioned his own idealism. Man then reacted to his ideals, giving up his effort to attain meaning, and negated value altogether (reactive nihilism).

³³ [GS], p. 167 (section 108).

³⁴ Frederick Copleston. A History Of Philosophy (Volume 7, Part 2): Schopenhauer To Nietzsche [C] (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1965), p. 177.

³⁵ [WTP], p. 7 (section 1).

Nietzsche's Prescription

Assuming we have properly diagnosed the illness (Nietzsche literally considers nihilism a physical illness), does Nietzsche provide a remedy for it? As alluded to earlier, Nietzsche considers the transvaluation of all values essential on the road to recovery. But what, precisely, is this transvaluation of all values and, more importantly, how does it cure nihilism? According to Nietzsche, transvaluation of all values is the “formula for mankind’s act of highest self-recognition”³⁶ and indicates “a courageous becoming-conscious.”³⁷

Hence, while “not to know oneself” is the “prudence of the idealist,”³⁸ the transvaluation of all values provides Nietzsche’s patient with a strong dose of *self-knowledge*, or *self-consciousness*. Nietzsche’s patients must adopt a strict regimen of self-analysis, and Nietzsche maintains that his “life-task is to prepare for humanity a moment of supreme self-consciousness, a Great Noon.”³⁹ What does self-knowledge/self-consciousness entail?

In one word: honesty. First and foremost, this will require that Nietzsche’s patient not be deceived by illusions but, instead, *unearth what lies behind them*. Hence, he must evaluate them critically, and, in a sense, “see through himself and history,”⁴⁰ as “he who lets concepts, opinions, past events, books, step between himself and things...will never have an immediate perception of things and will never be an immediately perceived thing himself.”⁴¹ Essentially, *all* “convictions are prisons.”⁴²

³⁶ [EH], p. 923 (“Why I Am A Fatality,” section 1).

³⁷ [WTP], p. 521 (section 1007).

³⁸ [WTP], p. 189 (section 344).

³⁹ [EH], p. 887 (“The Dawn Of Day: Thoughts About Morality As Prejudice,” section 2).

⁴⁰ [WTP], p. 44 (section 68).

⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche. Untimely Meditations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 181.

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche. Antichrist (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 172 (section 54).

Nevertheless, this—the denunciation of all convictions—cannot in itself spell the end of the disease (nihilism), as idealism eventually accomplishes the very same task on its own (due to its own self-defeating nature; i.e. “science”) and, if this was the essence of the *cure*, the disease would cure itself. However, Nietzsche does not consider the transition from negative nihilism to reactive nihilism healthy by any means. How, then, are Nietzsche’s patients to avoid this exact same fate? Kaufman phrases the question rather well: “Now it may be asked: if Nietzsche thus criticizes and helps to destroy prevalent values, does he not hasten the advent of nihilism...does he not help to bring about that catastrophic vacuum which he is prophesying?”⁴³

Ideally, Nietzsche’s prescription—transvaluation of all values—is supposed to destroy all known values, and then construct *new, life-affirming*, values to replace them, whereas the normal course of the disease will result in the absence of all values. But might this itself be nothing more than a hopeful *ideal*? Does Nietzsche offer any additional instruction to enable his patients to overcome the typical nihilistic fate (reactive nihilism) resulting from something similar to a transvaluation of all values? If not, what was previously a minor infection (negative nihilism) could become fatal (reactive nihilism), and will we not see “in him and his philosophy the embodiment of the very nihilism for which he professed to supply a remedy?”⁴⁴

While Nietzsche’s concept of the “overman” (sometimes rendered “superman”) has been the subject of much debate in Nietzschean scholarship, it seems to me that the distinction between a healthy transvaluation of values and the similar reactive, nihilistic,

⁴³ [K], p. 109.

⁴⁴ [C], p. 191.

devaluation of values rests on an interpretation of what he meant by the concept. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra tells a herd of men at the marketplace the following:

*I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?...The overman is the meaning of the earth...I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes!...Despisers of life are they, decaying and poisoning themselves, of whom the earth is weary: so let them go.*⁴⁵

Given this, will a devaluation of all known values by itself give birth to the overman (the affirmer of life)? No, the overman must also *remain faithful to the earth*. In a sense, the overman must overcome what it means to be “man” insofar as “man” is “a fantastic animal” and “has to believe, to know, from time to time *why* he exists.”⁴⁶ Thus, the overman must cease to ask the question “why?” altogether. Only in this case does one cease to pass judgment on the earth and truly value and represent the earth as it is: unstructured and at each moment becoming something different. While the devaluator of values judges the legitimacy of man’s prior judgments according to his own judgment of the earth, revealing the lack of authority implicit in all judgments, the overman overcomes judgment itself. The overman no longer judges the earth at all (and this is what it really means to value the earth). Insofar as the earth is at every moment unstructured and becoming something entirely different, *all* determinations or judgments about it essentially misrepresent and taint its image because they implicitly make overgeneralizations about it. Hence, the overman accepts the earth exactly as it is, and, in doing so, befits Nietzsche’s formula for greatness in man: “that a man should wish to

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [Z] (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), pp. 12-13 (“Zarathustra’s Prologue,” section 3).

⁴⁶ [GS], p. 75 (section 1).

have nothing altered, either in the future, the past, or for all eternity.”⁴⁷ Interestingly, Nietzsche himself confesses, “I have not the slightest wish that anything should be different than it is”⁴⁸ (which, of course, seems to beg the question of why he is writing in the first place). Thus, given this interpretation of the overman, we are presented with a process by which the antithesis of reactive nihilism and the cure for the disease itself can be attained: the termination of the question why and all subsequent attempts to answer it. The following table illustrates what has been said thus far regarding Nietzsche’s philosophy of value:

Nietzsche’s Table Of Values

	Idealist	Nihilist	Overman	The Impossible ⁴⁹
Values The Worldly	No	No	Yes	Yes
Values The Unworldly	Yes	No	No	Yes

Given Nietzsche’s condition for a cure, we must now examine the practicality of this condition. Assuming his patient has already relinquished his diseased values, can Nietzsche convince his patient to stop asking why altogether? Can he preclude the possibility that his patient will relapse into a reactive, nihilistic stupor?

Nietzsche was not blind to the extreme difficulty implicit in the treatment of such a disease. A man without an ideal is a man with no sense of direction. What shall he do

⁴⁷ [EH], p. 853 (“Why I Am So Clever,” section 10); In the very next sentence, Nietzsche goes on to say, “not only must he endure necessity, and on no account conceal it—all idealism is falsehood in the face of necessity—but he must *love* it.” Ironically, this presents almost a mirror image of Kierkegaard’s formula for *faith* in *The Sickness Unto Death*: “By relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the Power which constituted it.” (Soren Kierkegaard. The Sickness Unto Death (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 262).

⁴⁸ [EH], p. 851 (“Why I Am So Clever,” section 9).

⁴⁹ This position seems untenable, as Nietzsche would likely argue that one who values the unworldly—ideals and systems—*implicitly* devalues the world itself.

then? Well, *whatever* he wants! Sex, drugs, and rock and roll! Poke himself in the eye with a toothpick! Burn Nietzsche's books! Kill, rape, worship! "Nice" things? This lack of constraint is precisely the problem Nietzsche is alluding to with his admonition, "God is dead!" "The greatest danger that always hovered over humanity and still hovers over it is the eruption of madness—which means the eruption of arbitrariness in feeling, seeing, and hearing, the enjoyment of the mind's lack of discipline, the joy in human unreason."⁵⁰

What does it mean to be mad?

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space?"⁵¹

Part Two: Transvaluation Of Transvaluation

Overman Contra Man

Is Nietzsche's overman practically feasible for a *human* being? Kaufman expresses doubt: "the result is less a solution of the initial problem than a realization of its limitations."⁵² Though I admire his attitude and courage, I must admit my own doubt regarding the extent to which Nietzsche's philosophy justifies he and the overman's professed affirmation of life. While Nietzsche and Nietzschean scholars provide ample descriptions of what this affirmation would consist of, they do not, in my opinion, do so

⁵⁰ [GS], p. 130 (section 76).

⁵¹ [GS], p. 181 (section 125).

⁵² [K], p. 82.

realistically. Instead, readers are given glimpses of a hopeful attitude that never really seems to substantiate its own positive conviction.

By Nietzsche's own standards, we must take man as given (that is, as we experience him here on this earth)—hence, we must admit what he *necessarily* is—and we should not picture him in any other light. In general, it seems that each living being values (or desires) being to some extent insofar as it *is* being, and Nietzsche himself says, “In itself, everything that is says Yes.”⁵³ Let us call this the “fact” of life. All being, insofar as it *is* being, values “self-preservation.” *Human* being, moreover, is *cognizant* of this very fact (i.e. self-conscious). As a result, a question emerges: *why? Why this self-preservation?* As Nietzsche explains, humans have “one additional need—the need for the ever new appearance of such teachers and teachings of a ‘purpose’,”⁵⁴ and, “gradually, man has become a fantastic animal: man *has* to believe, to know, from time to time *why* he exists.”⁵⁵

What Nietzsche failed to grasp in its entirety was that this need is a *defining* characteristic of what it means to be *human*, and that it cannot be thought through, annihilated, or overcome by any means. The illusion (of idealism in general) that Nietzsche is so critical of actually satiates a *need*, a need necessary to all human beings (the need to value valuing). What, given his innate questioning, does a human being really amount to: a being that must, insofar as it *is* being, value its implicit valuing (desiring) of being. By nature, man, unlike any other being, asks himself why he values valuing per se and, inasmuch as he still prohibits himself from putting a gun to his own head, nevertheless values valuing to some degree.

⁵³ [WTP], p. 165 (section 293).

⁵⁴ [GS], p. 75(section 1).

⁵⁵ GS], p. 75(section 1).

Impotent Dynamite

“I am not a man, I am dynamite.”⁵⁶

“The very last thing I should promise to accomplish would be to ‘improve’ mankind.”⁵⁷

In my opinion, Nietzsche’s critical error lies in this failure to recognize man’s very necessity: man’s *why*? In turn, Nietzsche conceptualizes *health* under the assumption that this necessity can be overcome; health comes to mean precisely this—overcoming man’s natural inclination to question being. Unfortunately, this does not seem possible, and Nietzsche’s notion of health is thus misleading. Conversely, any doctor specializing in the aid of *human* beings (i.e. a psychologist) will possess, first and foremost, knowledge of what it means to actually be human. Consequently, he will recognize the very trait that distinguishes human being from all other being: spirit, or self-reflective being (“self-consciousness”). Therefore, the health for which we are concerned is the health of this spirit—that is, *mental* health.

This is exactly the point Nietzsche fails to understand properly: sound mental health has, at best, an unpredictable influence on physical health (one can be perfectly “happy” and still contract cancer), while mental illness (hence, *instability*) can correlate directly to physical well-being (e.g. suicide). Despite what Nietzsche thought (he believed idealism was negatively correlated with physical health), idealism, if anything, positively reflects one’s physical condition. The idealist has, in a sense, ceased asking why (and, as Nietzsche points out, but for the wrong reasons, this *is* the key to health), as he simply presumes he knows why, and is, thus, no longer troubled by the question. Reactive nihilism also seems to reflect positively on physical health, as Buddhists, for example, do not become mentally ill precisely *because* they do not value “this life of

⁵⁶ [EH], p. 923 (“Why I Am A Fatality,” section 1).

⁵⁷ [EH], p. 812 (preface, section 2).

illusion” seriously enough to stress out about it (they too presume an answer to “why?”: there is no answer). One can devalue ideal purposes and yet, inasmuch as one still exists, one must still value life to some extent (again, all that is says Yes). Thus, it seems that Nietzsche completely inverted his whole schema regarding *health*. Because, when it comes to *human* being, *mental* health is decisive, and this is, itself, directly related to one’s sense of comfort regarding existential questions (i.e. his sense of purpose). Nietzsche’s compulsion for truth/honesty is inimical to mental health, as it is inversely related to the sense of comfort attainable by means of idealistic convictions (including the conviction that all conviction is futile—Buddhism). The truly unhealthy conviction: that one’s convictions should be questioned.⁵⁸ The unhealthy: Friedrich Nietzsche.

What Nietzsche has done, in effect, is reduced the mental stability of his readers by bringing them back to the beginning of the existential drama all over again. They must face the chaos once more, only to ask the question why all over again (as this is what they are *naturally* inclined to do). And yet, Nietzsche supposes this regression to be healthy? Even Nietzsche admits that there is a reason man adopts conviction (“life preserving errors”)—it is by no means a superfluous endeavor, but necessary for man’s *health* (man needs it in order to survive!).

The most striking characteristic of a human being when juxtaposed to any other being is its *volatility*. No other being questions its own existence; no other being poses a danger to its own being. Depending on the circumstances, the consequences of being human can be drastic, even fatal. I offer suicide as proof. The more one is self-conscious of valuing being, the more of a threat he poses to himself, especially when he is

⁵⁸ One can also substitute “value” for “conviction”; the unhealthy value: that one’s values should be questioned.

experiencing duress, as his conviction is exposed, questioned, and no longer stable and *healthy*.

The moral of the story is that being human is dangerous and extremely uncomfortable. Man “needs a vision, a goal, a sense of direction”⁵⁹ so that he will not be induced to question his own value. Nietzsche himself says it most eloquently—“not to know oneself: prudence of the idealist.”⁶⁰ Conviction is indeed the opium of the people! “You know it well: your cowardly devil within you, who would like to fold his hands and rest his hands in his lap and be more comfortable—this cowardly devil urges you, ‘There is a God’ [my underlining].”⁶¹

Redeeming Nietzsche

“There were dark moments meanwhile, whole days and nights when I did not know any longer how to go on living and when a black despair attacked me, worse than I have ever known before.”⁶²

“I am a half-madman who suffers in the head and whom long solitude has confused completely.”⁶³

“I no longer see why I should live for another six months—everything is boring, painful.”⁶⁴

“A few times I also thought of the opposite: driving my solitude and renunciation to its ultimate point and—”⁶⁵

“The barrel of a revolver is for me now a source of relatively pleasant thoughts.”⁶⁶

Despite what I consider a critical misdiagnosis, I do not *resent* Nietzsche for potentially poisoning me. Actually, he has done *me* little harm, as I myself was already afflicted with his disease—“honesty,” or consciousness of the truth about truth (i.e. existential anxiety). Nietzsche was part of the fraction alluded to at the beginning of this

⁵⁹ [C], p. 174.

⁶⁰ [WTP], p. 189 (section 344).

⁶¹ [Z], p. 180 (“On Apostates,” section 2).

⁶² [SL], p. 282.

⁶³ [K], p. 58.

⁶⁴ [SL], p. 203.

⁶⁵ [K], p. 59.

⁶⁶ [SL], p. 206.

paper, and, hence, just like myself, while most “philosophers” are generally not included in this fraction (i.e. most of them do not honestly question truth but, instead, merely seek to assert what they already presume it to be (i.e. they seek to reinforce their conviction and, hence, their comfort level)). Nietzsche himself never stopped asking why. Is it any wonder how much he suffered throughout his life?⁶⁷ Had he properly diagnosed the *real* illness, *his* illness, “honesty,” perhaps the outcome of his own life might have been significantly more comfortable...and *healthier*.

Or, maybe not. Is there any therapy available for one who has already been awakened? Or is he a lost cause, squelched by the weight of his own awareness and condemned to a life of second-guessing himself and everything that he will ever encounter? If so, it is even more essential that we put an end to this campaign for honesty and self-consciousness, this crusade for truth—the lives and sanity of human beings depend on it! We must tell the rabble: “Nietzsche is dead! Philosophy is dead! Cease all questioning, the time has come to *live comfortably* for once! Stop thinking! Let us *enjoy* life, even if it means that we must pretend and make-believe that we know what life *means*...” Oh, if only it were that easy! For some, there will never be any recourse to comfort. Once you swallow the pill, once you attain the requisite self-consciousness, you may never sleep easy again—oh the curse of philosophical honesty: existential anxiety!

“To tell the truth, I rejoice much more over those who do not read me, over those who have never even heard either of my name or the word philosophy.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Personally, I have my doubts regarding the conventional theory that Nietzsche’s insanity stemmed from physical causes...

⁶⁸ [EH], p. 857 (“Why I Write Such Excellent Books,” section 2).