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Nihilism

CURIOSITY ABOUT THE WORLD, as we know, sometimes leads to philosophy. It can happen when that curiosity cannot be satisfied by knowledge of one or another event, by knowledge of one or another contingency, or by discovering the causes behind one or another phenomenon. It happens when we are not satisfied with the information we have about particular events or relations, or with a discovery of their causes. When, in short, we are curious to understand the world, and not just a fragment thereof.

It is only then—when we understand what the world is like, when we discover the universal and eternal order of things—that this kind of curiosity about the world will be satisfied. Philosophy born of this kind of curiosity, philosophy that endeavors to satisfy it, is an attempt to find the immutable and universal structures that allow us to understand the world as it is, an attempt at a universal theory.

Of course, this is hardly the only motivation toward philosophy that we can think of. Others include anger and pain, the rejection of the world as it is. The world—not this or that fragment of the world, this or that situation or institution, this or that fact as it is—hurts and outrages us, it chafes. Bringing some piece of reality to order—controlling the river that has, until now, regularly flooded the neighborhood, or freeing oneself from political oppression, or finding a treatment for a heretofore untreatable illness—does nothing to relieve this kind of pain. Only a new, universal order of things could free us from this pain, quiet our rage, and reconcile us to the world.

A philosophy motivated by a rejection of the world around us is an attempt to find a treatment or therapy, an attempt to find a way out of crisis, an attempt at liberation. Its goal is the creation of the new: change, not description. It is, above all else, a program of action, not a theory.

Wouldn't it be better to call these two activities, so disparately motivated, by different names, since the one attempts to discover the eternal and universal order of things, whereas the other attempts to change a world that causes us pain and outrage? Does it make sense to call them both "philosophy"?

I believe that it does, and I think that there is a very good rationale for doing so. For in both cases, as we have already seen, we are speaking of

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“the whole,” of “the world,” and not of “a fragment” of the world. In philosophy as theory, we are talking about understanding “the world”; in philosophy as a program of action, about how to change it. This universal character allows us, I believe, to call both kinds of activity “philosophy.”

All the more so because what distinguishes one from the other is itself different from what differentiates the work of the cobbler from that of the tailor. These are not two kinds of activity dealing with different things and, accordingly, calling on us to separate them, at least in principle. In its universality, philosophy in both senses knows no limits; it cannot tend its own garden without peeking at the neighbor's. To put it another way, these definitions of “philosophy” do not complement one another but compete. From the perspective of philosophy as theory, “changing the world,” no matter how much we wish it, demands a prior understanding of that world, and at the same time, from the point of view of philosophy as an outgrowth of rejection, it is the very pain that “the world” causes us that assures our knowledge of the world. And so our rejection of the world and our understanding of it are not two separate activities but one and the same.

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Nietzsche understood philosophy primarily in the second of these two meanings. Humanity, he maintained, is sick; the world in which we live is sick. The task of philosophy should be the liberation of humanity and the world from the grips of this sickness.

What is wrong with the world in which we live, according to Nietzsche? What is the basis of this pathology? And is this pathology treatable? And, if so, what should this treatment (read: philosophy) look like? The answer to both questions requires us to refer to the concept of *nihilism*.

Nietzsche writes, “What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves.*”¹

What is a *value*? Let's start with the following general, formal definition: *values* are norms, principles, and rules that determine the order of our lives in all arenas, the experiential order, as well as the material or physical order, as well as the moral order, as well as the weather. The order of the world around us is determined by a set of rules. Following Nietzsche, we will call these rules values, deferring for now an answer to the question of why we do so.

Values, Nietzsche maintains, not only establish order but are also themselves ordered. This is why we can speak of “higher” or “lower” values (those that are subordinate to the “higher” ones), and especially of the *highest* values, those to which all others are subordinated.

What does it mean that “values devalue themselves”? This happens when they no longer serve to establish order, when they no longer impose obligations upon us, when reality slips away from them, resists them, contradicts them. We are dealing with *nihilism*, Nietzsche asserts in the aforementioned passage, when this happens to the *highest* values, that is, when the basic principles organizing our reality no longer organize or order our lives.

If this is the case, then what Nietzsche calls nihilism is not an outlook, or at least it is not principally an outlook. Specifically, the nihilism he speaks of is not the view that everything is meaningless, that there’s not really any point to anything we do, that what seems to us to be “everything” is really “nothing.” The nihilism that Nietzsche has in mind is first of all something that happens and not something that we, correctly or incorrectly, think about reality. Nihilism is therefore an event, or a chain of events, a historical process—and only secondarily, if at all, an attitude, outlook, or position.

Consequently, *overcoming nihilism* cannot depend on discovering the falsehood or moral error of “nihilistic” attitudes or views and convincing their proponents of other, non-nihilistic ones. Overcoming nihilism must mean, first of all, the modification of reality, the modification of what happens, and not of one’s outlook.

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Why must we call what is happening around us “nihilism”? How is it that the historical process, that history itself, has assumed such a meaning?

God is dead, Nietzsche tells us: that’s what happened. The death of God is the highest—really, the only—essential “event,” and it is this that imparts meaning to all other things. What does this mean? What does it mean for God to be dead?

First, let’s try to deal with what it might mean for God to be “alive.” When does God “live”? One can surely say that “God is alive” when belief in God organizes human coexistence and determines the meaning of human activities and, consequently, of the world to which those activities refer. But that’s not all. Even as Christianity (for Nietzsche is primarily concerned with the Christian God) is losing its power—and still people continue to organize their world around some ultimate purpose (though it is no longer God but “progress,” “social justice,” or something else) when they seek a single, all-encompassing totality—even then, Nietzsche maintains, God “lives.”

Thus when Nietzsche is talking about the “life” or “death” of God he does not mean the existence or nonexistence of some supernatural or

otherworldly being. Accordingly, the death of God is not something that happened to such a being and is not, in this sense, an “event.” Rather, Nietzsche is concerned with the order we strive to impose on the world around us, even when we no longer believe in God’s existence, even when the Churches have lost their social significance. “God lives” when we seek an ultimate meaning or some kind of all-encompassing totality in the world around us, when that search organizes our world into a teleological, comprehensive order.

But this search is in vain. For the world in which we live, Nietzsche asserts, does not lend itself to being organized toward some ultimate goal. Nor do things, people, events, or thoughts lend themselves to being arranged into a single, all-encompassing totality. Successive attempts, successive projects to order the world in this way—in the guise of “Christianity” or “faith in progress” or “socialism”—inevitably fail. In the world we live in, no form is ultimate—“becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing*,” Nietzsche says—and the diversity of forms cannot be reduced to a common denominator.² The world around us is a world of constant change and irreducible diversity: it is a world of *becoming*.

But what if the world around us is not the real world? What if it’s only an illusion? What if this world of ceaseless change, this world of irreducible diversity, this world of *becoming*, is only a mirage that conceals the real world? What if it is only in this hidden real world that the search for an ultimate goal and an all-encompassing unity can reach a successful conclusion? What if we have been looking for our ultimate goal or all-encompassing totality in the wrong place? What if God is alive but not here, in the world of appearances, of change and difference, but beyond it, in the world as it truly is?

And yet there is no other world than the one around us, the *world of becoming*, the world in which we live. This, according to Nietzsche, is the only real world. Looking for a real world “beyond” the world around us, the world of change, is just as pointless as looking for an ultimate goal within it, or a totality that encompasses all of it. Sooner or later, Nietzsche argues, we will inevitably realize that the “ideal world,” the “truth in itself” of philosophy, religion, or science, is the very same dream, humanity’s dream, as “the ultimate goal” or the “all-encompassing totality.” *The world of becoming* is the only real world.

God is dead.

And so, Nietzsche argues, we cannot deny the reality of the world as we know it, the world of infinite change (because there is nothing, no “real world,” hidden beyond it)—and at the same time all attempts at bringing order to the world, with the help of such categories as “goal” and “totality,” end in failure. The “death of God” places us in an impossible situation. On the one hand, it confronts us with the irrefutable reality of a world of con-

stant change and irreducible difference, and on the other, it deprives us of the tools we have used till now to bring that world to order and, by the same token, to give it meaning and value.

It is an impossible situation, an untenable situation, a situation of crisis, of the ultimate exacerbation of our sickness. But also of its potential turning point, as the impossibility of accepting the status quo forces us to look for a remedy, for new means by which to bring the world of our lives to order, for new values.

Nietzsche writes:

Having reached this standpoint, one grants the reality of becoming as the *only* reality, forbids oneself every kind of clandestine access to afterworlds and false divinities—but *cannot endure this world though one does not want to deny it*.

What has happened, at bottom? The feeling of valuelessness was reached with the realization that the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of “aim,” the concept of “unity,” or the concept of “truth.” Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking [...]. One simply lacks any reason for convincing oneself that there is a *true* world. Briefly: the categories “aim,” “unity,” “being” which we used to project some value into the world—we *pull out* again; so the world looks *valueless*.³

Unless we forget all of this and disregard the crisis we have found ourselves in. Nietzsche, again:

The ways of self-narcotization.—Deep down: not knowing whither. *Emptiness.* Attempt to get over it by intoxication: intoxication as music [...]; intoxication as blind enthusiasm for single human beings or ages [...].—Attempt to work blindly as an instrument of science: opening one’s eyes to many small enjoyments; e.g. also in the quest of knowledge [...]; art “for its own sake” (*le fait*) and “pure knowledge” as narcotic states of disgust with oneself; some kind or other of continual work, or of some stupid little fanaticism [...].⁴

Art, science, ideologies—the occupations of our times: Nietzsche tells us that these are intoxicants, drugs we use to escape having to confront the “death of God,” the need to order our world anew.

God is dead, and the values we have held till now no longer order the world in which we live. We cannot stand it, and yet we cannot deny it. What is to be done? To sleep, so as not to know, hear, or understand (and

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Nietzsche maintains that contemporary European culture puts a vast range of sedatives at our disposal). Or else to create new values, a new world order: *to reevaluate values*.

What, then, is nihilism?

Nihilism (in Nietzsche's use of the word) is first of all a situation in which the world appears to be without value, the world after "the death of God." There is no escape from the reality of the world, and at the same time there is no way to reconcile oneself to it because all known means have utterly failed. This is a dilemma, an untenable situation, a state of powerlessness that we cannot possibly endure.

It is precisely this situation, this nihilism, that is the source of philosophy as Nietzsche understands it: philosophy that responds to the pain the world causes by trying to change it.

But, Nietzsche demonstrates, theoretically we can also call the process that has led us to this situation "nihilism." For the world appears to be without value precisely because the values we have invested in the world are failing: they no longer perform their ordering or organizing function. The project (*investment*) of these very values—the *ultimate goal, the all-encompassing totality, truth in itself*—is therefore the beginning of nihilism. The sickness whose culmination is the critical situation in which we find ourselves today derives from the attempt to order the world in which we live according to these values. We cannot therefore liberate ourselves from this nihilism if we resume living in accordance with them and seeing the world through their prism. On the contrary, doing so sets us on a path that leads necessarily to nihilism, in the aforementioned sense of historical crisis. Nihilism is a pathology not of outlooks or attitudes but of their historical motivations, a pathology of life—but the attempt to reorganize life according to the patterns from which we have departed when we fell into the crisis of nihilism does not lead to our liberation from it. On the contrary, the values whose abandonment the word "nihilism" signifies cannot save us from it because they are in fact its root cause.

Nihilism is a critical, unbearable situation in which the world appears to be without values; it is a sickness, the pathological history that leads to it; finally, it is the infection from which all of this began: the attempt to order life in a way that it cannot be ordered. The attempt to order life according to values that are antithetical to it.

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In what sense, however, can we speak here of the "necessity" that leads us from the project of a certain system of values to the nihilistic crisis that, in Nietzsche's view, troubles us today? On what basis can I say that this crisis

is an *untenable* situation and that it therefore leads to a project of new values, to *the revaluation of all values*? What is the fundamental “logic” linking the elements in the sequence presented above—the search for an ultimate goal and an all-encompassing totality, the failure of that search, the attempt to escape from a world of constant change—the project of the “real world” hidden behind the illusion of a mutable reality, the subsequent failure, the crisis that places us before the necessity of *revaluating values*?

Let’s make the question more precise. This is not simply a matter of stringing together some chain of historical events. The aforementioned analysis of nihilism is not only a critique of culture, of modern European culture in Nietzsche’s own time. It is also something more. In the nihilism of the historical situation in which he finds himself, Nietzsche wants to uncover the nihilism of the human condition, what is in his view the necessary link between nihilism and its overcoming. In this sense the question of the “necessity” of this linkage is a question concerning the historical process itself, entirely different from a question about, say, the causes of the Second World War. At issue here is why a given stage of human life is followed by another at all, why any fact follows another. It is not a matter of why capitalism replaced feudalism, or why democracy replaced totalitarianism, but of why anything follows anything else. What drives historical change, the change we call “time”? What causes it to take place at all?

Or, to put it still another way: we will understand “historical necessity” in the above sense only when we succeed in understanding the here-and-now, the moment in which we now find ourselves, as laden with the future, when we succeed in understanding the future (any future) as an inherent element of this moment.

We will not find this “logic of history,” thus understood, by referring to a logic we know from other sources, independently of historical experience. (I take this argument from Leszek Kołakowski’s essay on the understanding of the historical event.)⁵ The answer to our question cannot be the discovery of a “logic in history,” the application of otherwise known criteria, criteria of understanding, to historical process. For by doing so we would be reducing history to logic, thereby removing the very object of the question: the “historicity” of the historical process, the simple though quite perplexing fact that history “flows,” that anything changes at all. If we “understand” the transition from one historical situation to another in the same way as we understand the link between the two terms of a syllogism (or any other rule of logic), history will lose for us (the subject of this “understanding”) its specific character and will become a sequence of arguments rather than a sequence of events.

At any rate, in Nietzsche’s opinion, a logic independent of historical experience is a complete fantasy. We can therefore understand history and its logic, the historicity of history, only by referring to history itself. The

“ahistorical” perspective, the point of view “from beyond” history that would aid us in this understanding, is nonsense. There is no such thing. “History,” in this context, is yet another name for the world in which we live: the world of becoming, the world of constant change and irreducible diversity. Attempts at discovering a goal, a totality, a “truth” beyond it, attempts at discovering the “transcendent meaning” of the world in which we live, or else at understanding in reference to some “external” system of reference—all these end, as we have already seen, in utter failure. Everything we know is comprehensible only in the context of our irreducibly diverse, infinitely mutable lives.

An understanding of history, of its “logic,” and not merely of this or that sequence of events, of this versus that historical process—an understanding of history as such, of history in its historicity—is, for Nietzsche, possible only “from within” and thus only from the perspective of a participant. We are the ones who, through what we do, through the acts that compose our lives, give history its meaning and make it comprehensible as history: we arrange it in some sequence of events, we “project some value” into it. Let us recall what Nietzsche says above: “the categories ‘aim,’ ‘unity,’ ‘being’ which we used to project some value into the world—we *pull* out again; so the world looks *valueless*.”

So it is only for us, only from the perspective of an active subject (a subject who *projects values* into the world and *pulls them out* of it), that it might be comprehensible why the categories we have established are then *pulled out* and why a world that seems to lack values is impossible (i.e., impossible to bear) and thus forces us to *revalue all values*, why, in short, history goes on. The “necessity” that connects one stage to the next is not the necessity of logical deduction but necessity comprehensible only from the perspective of a subject who shapes history: it is the necessity of our lives.

The future-laden present, the current moment necessarily leading to the next, assumes an active subject. Without him, the historicity of history—and thus the fact that the future follows the present—would be incomprehensible. In other words, history is real only as *our* history, only for the subject taking part in it. Not for the observer: history is not a process that flows forward independently of us; it is not like rain, which one can escape under a roof. History goes on only insofar as it concerns us.

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History as we know it *is* nihilism, a sickness that leads us to today’s turning point, which forces us to *revalue all values* and, by the same token, to *overcome nihilism*. Let’s try to understand what this “overcoming of nihilism,” this “revaluation of all values,” may mean.

Let us consider, first of all, the values that, according to Nietzsche, lead us to nihilism. Why is it that using these values to bring order to the world ends—and this is inevitable—in failure?

The answer demands that we consider an even more fundamental problem: how can values be justified at all?

We can try to do so by referring to “truth in itself,” “the world of ideas,” or “God” and thus to a reality that transcends the constantly mutable world of our lives. In this regard, something can be true or false, good or bad, independently of what we do, what we want, what we say, or what happens to us (and it’s all the same whether it’s because of God’s will or because these things are ultimately controlled by ideal—and thus timeless—laws). In other words, values, thus understood, are independent from our lives, and this independence is part of their meaning. Nothing, it seems, could be closer to common sense. The laws of nature, after all, apply regardless of what happens in our lives, and logic determines the validity of our thoughts regardless of whether our lives go this way or that way.

But then what are we to do with the fact that (in Nietzsche’s opinion), as we have seen, the concepts of “truth in itself,” “the world of ideas,” and “God” have no meaning when isolated from the constantly changing, irreducibly diverse world of our lives? If this is the case, then the claim that values can be independent of this world is absurd. Where are they supposed to have come from, if not from the world we live in?

In this regard, the question of how to justify our values becomes a matter of how our lives create the values that organize it.

The only possible way to justify values, according to Nietzsche, is therefore to refer to the life from which they are derived. The question of justification leads necessarily to the genesis of a given phenomenon. In order to understand and justify the system of values by which our lives are organized—even, as in the case of nihilism, incompletely and with awful consequences—we have to discover its genesis (i.e., to answer the question of how life produced just such a system). A philosopher, insofar as he strives to understand values, to discover their basis, must be a “historian,” a “geneticist,” a “genealogist,” an “archaeologist.” We can find a similar argument in Marx and, later, in Husserl. For Marx, understanding modern science requires us to refer to its (social) genesis, and for Husserl, understanding geometry requires us to discover the history of human activities, of which geometry is a product.

The above argument can also be formulated as follows: the attempt to justify (discover) values independent of life is, we can say, an attempt to evaluate the world as a whole, to discover the values of the world as such. This is possible only insofar as we assume a frame of reference with regard to which the world as a totality can be evaluated. Only by referring to such a frame of reference—to another, “real” world—can we offer a positive or

negative evaluation of life as a whole, can we affirm or negate it. And yet there is no such frame, no such standard, Nietzsche argues, no “real,” “other” world: there is only the constantly changing, diverse world in which we live. Consequently, then, the world as a totality “has no value at all, for anything against which to measure it, and in relation to which the word ‘value’ would have meaning, is lacking. The total value of the world cannot be evaluated [. . .].”⁶

Life as we live it is the only possible measure of value. It is our life that creates the order that organizes its diverse and ever-changing forms, but it cannot be appraised in itself: its value is the same in each individual moment, and the sum of values produced by it always remains the same. This is the core of nihilism, the answer to the question of what’s wrong with the values that give birth to nihilism: it is their claim to assess, to evaluate, the world as such, life as such.

Thus while the project of traditional values, or nihilism, is a negation of our life as it is, the *revaluation of all values* is not an affirmation of life as it is. Life finds no values, no order independent of it, to which it could correspond or not; it creates its own values. This does not mean that each of us is free to create our own rules. Rather, Nietzsche suggests that such rules cannot be formed until we begin to act; they are not prior to our life. The affirmation of life is therefore not a supplemental, reflexive act of assessment but is life itself. To “revalue values” does not mean to replace one set of values, one list of rules (which negate life and are therefore nihilistic), with another (which affirm life). We do not to replace “God” (after His “death”) with something else (whether “man,” “nature,” or “life”). The *revaluation of values* Nietzsche has in mind is an attempt to justify them differently: values (the order of the world) must, in this perspective (in the perspective of revaluation), originate in life liberated from nihilistic fictions (the ultimate goal, the all-encompassing totality, the truth-in-itself).

The *revaluation of all values* occurs only when our lives cast off the burden of the illusions that weigh them down and order themselves around new organizing principles, when these principles—these “values”—are the product of a life that depends only on itself, not on dictates “from outside.” Which means: insofar as life becomes unimpeded creation and is no longer a response to challenges imposed “from outside.” The revaluation of values should liberate life rather than try—in vain—to bring it under control.

Which means: if fundamental values are to undergo a radical revaluation, it will not be enough to understand them differently: one must live differently. The “revaluation of values” is possible only if it is a possibility of your life or mine. It is not an intellectual operation. Philosophy can cure the world’s sickness and point the way out of crisis only insofar as the “life” in the phrase “philosophy of life” is not just the object but the subject as

well—only insofar as a “life philosophy” is itself life and not just a theory of life. Which also means that one cannot first understand it in order to apply it to life later. Here, the action of understanding and the action of application cannot be separated from one another.

At the beginning, I defined values as the rules of some order, any order. It has now become clear, I hope, why Nietzsche calls such organizing principles “values.” We now know that no order can be imposed on the world “from outside,” for there is no “outside.” We also know, therefore, that every order is created in our lives through what we do, through our actions and lack thereof. The order that life falls under is created together with it, in its course. It is in this sense that its rules can be called “values”: they are evaluations of how and to what extent something is valuable for the life in which they are made. They open certain opportunities, certain possibilities for a particular life (and no other). This is why Nietzsche calls values “conditions of life”: they are the conditions of its development, the conditions that make it go this way and not that way.

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Is “truth” also merely a value, a condition of life? For Nietzsche, the answer is clearly yes: it is only in the context of a certain life, only by virtue of its significance, the “weight” it bears for a given life, that knowledge means anything. Knowledge, cognition, cannot be separated from the self-affirmation of life. Which means—if we take into account that the affirmation of life is not, as we have seen, a secondary act, the acceptance of something that already is, but an act of life itself—that knowledge cannot be separated from action. If our cognition communicates something essential about the world to us, this happens only because we are living this way, not some other way. Knowledge removed from this element, from life—consciousness or thought left to itself—would be utterly stupid, disoriented, blind. It is life that opens the world and gives us knowledge. The pathology of life is, at the same time, the pathology of knowledge: a kind of stupidity.

“We can comprehend only a world which we ourselves have made,” Nietzsche writes.⁷

The conviction that knowledge, especially true knowledge, depends on the situation from which it arises (a conviction that Nietzsche shares with Husserl and Heidegger) is by no means equivalent to relativism. It would be relativism to claim that different situations define different truths, hence there is no one truth. Such a claim presupposes a point of view external to every situation that allows us to define situations as different and, at the same time, equivalent, one no better than the next. This is precisely

the premise that Nietzsche questions: a point of view external to every life situation is nonsense; any life other than mine, any claim to truth, must always be seen from the perspective of my own life and is always better or worse (and never equivalent) and only in this sense different. Indeed, truth is always my truth and has meaning only in the context of the life I can call my own. But it would be futile to try to represent that life from outside, like one of the butterfly species displayed in a museum case.

Nietzsche sometimes defines his position as *perspectivism*: the world in which we live, he notes, “has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings.”⁸ We always see the world from the perspective of the situation we find ourselves in. But this perspectivism of Nietzsche’s is not in opposition to “absolutism,” to the view that it is possible to have knowledge independent of the situation in which the subject finds himself. Nietzsche’s perspectivism is rather an attempt to formulate the conditions according to which a view makes sense. “Absolutism,” much like “relativism,” does not meet these conditions. It is, for Nietzsche, nonsense.

Concepts-in-themselves are therefore stupid. Consciousness and conceptual knowledge are derivative; they reach only as far as they are taken by the life from which they originate. The world is revealed to us only as it is interpreted by our actions, only in their perspective, only as a set of values born in the course of living: only from the point of view of a participant, not that of an observer. Every attempt at understanding the world as such (i.e., independent of the concrete life of the subject) creates a fiction that damages the life from which it is drawn. This is nihilism and—one follows the other—stupidity.

If this is so, saying that “the world around us is a world of constant change and irreducible diversity, a world of becoming,” and that it is not, accordingly, a universal whole and does not move toward any goal, Nietzsche is not opposing one (true) thesis about the world to another (false) one. He’s after something more. This is an attempt at altering our sensibility, an attempt to free the potential that Nietzsche believes is hidden within each of our lives: an attempt at overcoming nihilism, at revaluating all values.

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The *revaluation of all values*, I have said, is the necessity that Nietzsche believes we face as a result of the crisis in which we live. The source of this crisis is ultimately the negation of life contained within the project of values that leads to it. This negation, and consequently our nihilistic history and our nihilistic crisis today, which arise from that negation—*nihilism* in

general—thus also has, we might say, a positive, creative significance, much like a health crisis: it is a condition for the possibility of self-overcoming, for the *revaluation of all values*. Nihilism, as a historical process, is therefore not only the history of the twilight of the gods (values that negate life) but also the path toward liberation from them, a liberation that is not otherwise possible.

Does this not mean, however, that, following Nietzsche, we have ultimately nevertheless introduced some ultimate goal into history by a backdoor, a goal that organizes history's entire process up till now? That, against our initial intent, we have hitched the negation of life to the treadmill of history, so that it would work toward the achievement of its positive ends (the revaluation of all values) and, accordingly, toward its self-negation?

No, not at all. Here's what Nietzsche has to say on the subject of negativity:

Waste, decay, elimination need not be condemned: they are necessary consequences of life, of the growth of life. The phenomenon of decadence is as necessary as any increase and advance of life: one is in no position to abolish it. Reason demands, on the contrary, that we do justice to it.

It is a disgrace for all socialist systematizers that they suppose there could be circumstances—social combinations—in which vice, disease, prostitution, distress would no longer grow.—But that means condemning life.—A society is not free to remain young. [. . .]—Age is not abolished by means of institutions. Neither is disease. Nor vice.⁹

To put it another way, Nietzsche asserts that negativity requires no additional justification: we do not need to justify the negative phenomena of our lives by referring to their future function. Negativity is not a mechanism that produces positive results in the future or a means of achieving a future goal. Decline, degeneration, aggression, and destruction are all, in degree and kind, as positive phenomena of life as growth and bloom. The *revaluation of all values* and, consequently, the *overcoming of nihilism* are not the negation of negation; they do not require us to remove negativity from the world. Negativity—and so nihilism as well—is an irremediable aspect of this world.

Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science*:

He that is richest in the fullness of life [. . .] cannot only afford the sight of the terrible and questionable but even the terrible deed

and any luxury of destruction, decomposition, and negation. In his case, what is evil, absurd, and ugly seems, as it were, permissible, owing to an excess of procreating, fertilizing energies that can still turn any desert into lush farmland.¹⁰

It is this conviction of Nietzsche's that, according to Stanisław Brzozowski, assures him a place in the pantheon of philosophy:

To this day it is not regarded as a loss, as a crime, as a disaster, that we will not have this or that other crumb of human soul, for, after all, other than this one, this one alone, man has nothing. And for this revolt, for this holy rage for man, for the love of everything there is within him, for understanding that the entire content of human life is precious, that it is the only precious thing, the source of everything else, Nietzsche will remain forever in philosophy, he will remain as a great innovator, a creator of moral energy.¹¹

We can formulate this position still another way: life—mutable, diverse, endlessly ongoing—must be comprehensible in each individual instant. Understanding life does not require us to refer to something “outside” of the given moment, such as, for instance, a future goal—a reference that would allow us to distinguish between what we should hold onto in this moment and what we should cast aside. “Comprehension” is therefore an affirmation of the moment that life itself is, an affirmation that also encompasses aggression, destruction, and negativity. It does not claim to be an adequate description, a “true” theory (for such a thing establishes what we have already seen to be dangerous fictions, such as “truth-in-itself”), but an affirmative creation. It is a creation rooted in a constant liberation from the fictions that bind life, from the pathologies that threaten it, from the concepts that negate it. It is rooted in the constant overcoming of one's own nihilism.

Where are the limits of such creation? What is at stake in this game, in this confrontation with nihilism? Nietzsche: “We are conducting an experiment with truth! Perhaps mankind will perish because of it! Fine!”¹²

8

To sum up: Nietzsche's philosophy arises from rejection, from outrage at the world, from the pain that the world causes. It is only when we learn to deal with this pain, when we discover its power, that we will understand the world as it is. This demands that we confront nihilism—not only nihilistic attitudes or positions but most of all the nihilism of what happens, the ni-

hilism of our lives. For our lives are nihilistic through and through: the negation of life is one of its inherent features, hidden within the project of values that arrange the world into a rational whole. We cannot blame life for this, nor are history and its (ostensibly) ironclad laws to blame; life and history do not go on independently of our participation, like a carousel you can ride or jump off of at will. History is real only as our history: it is only in what we do that history happens. As such, nihilism itself is the sickness of our actions, a pathology of the force expressed in them. Fictions like “God” or “truth-in-itself” are symptoms of this pathology, fictions that bind our thoughts as well as our hands, so long as we do not discover their genesis. Discovering their genesis, revealing life and its sickness, power and its pathology, which it hides behind the kind of concepts we use to take hold of our lives—this, Nietzsche says, is the task of philosophy. For concepts as such are empty and therefore stupid; if they say anything, if we understand anything through them, it is only thanks to the sensibility of the lives we live. Philosophy, in exposing the genesis of concepts from life, leads to the *overcoming of nihilism* and therefore to the rise of a new life and a new sensibility. To the liberation of the freedom hidden within our lives, which have been distorted by nihilism. To affirmative creation.

But doesn’t overcoming nihilism also mean overcoming humanity, that “skin disease” suffered by the world, as Nietzsche says?¹³ That is another story.