

Nietzsche's Philosophy of Self-Creation as Practical Philosophy: An understanding,  
and overcoming, of suffering as philosophical problem.

by

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*Thesis presented in fulfilment for the degree Master of Arts in Philosophy at  
Stellenbosch University*

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December 2016

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December 2016

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## **Abstract**

There are an increasing number of philosophers today who utilize philosophy in order to cope with everyday difficulties, both their own and those of others. Yet philosophers have been aware of the therapeutic or, in this sense, practical nature of philosophy since its birth in Ancient Greece. In fact, the purpose of providing solace to a life of suffering was clearly visible throughout ancient Greek philosophy. Although philosophy has substantially grown beyond this purpose in subsequent millennia, one philosopher in particular made a deliberate return to this purpose in his philosophical works – though they are nevertheless often overlooked in this regard. Friedrich Nietzsche's life was unusually beset with hardship and suffering. He thus turned to philosophy. For Nietzsche, suffering was a philosophical problem, and as such, it could only be overcome by philosophical means. Addressing what he called "the problem of suffering", Nietzsche's work can be viewed as an attempt to overcome this problem by providing all suffering with meaning. Suffering, he argued, is imbued with meaning through the philosophical process of self-creation; a process that is explained in this thesis as an amalgamation of individual philosophies, viz. the will to power, *amor fati*, and eternal recurrence. Together these philosophies are claimed to constitute a radical affirmation and revaluation of suffering and, as such, allow for a complete transformation of the individual, thus providing purpose and utility to suffering, rendering it meaningful as opposed to life-destructing. There can be little doubt that Nietzsche sought this solution for his own suffering – unsuccessfully as it turned out. Yet, in this thesis the assessment of the effectiveness of self-creation does not merely focus on Nietzsche's own accomplishments in this regard. On the contrary, it is shown that, when properly applied, Nietzsche's philosophy of self-creation *can* be effective as a practical philosophy meant to overcome the problem of suffering. This is done through testing its key features in a real-world scenario, viz. Victor Frankl's implementation thereof to overcome his suffering in Nazi death-camps.

## **Opsomming**

Al hoe meer filosowe gebruik vandag filosofie om die alledaagse eise van die lewe te hanteer. Filosofie was egter reeds met die geboorte van filosofie in antieke Griekeland bewus van die terapeutiese en, in hierdie sin, praktiese aard daarvan. Trouens, die klaarblyklike doel van antieke Griekse filosofie was deurgaans om troos te bied ten aansien van 'n lewe van lyding. Filosofie het sedertdien oor millennia heen ook ander doelwitte begin dien. Een filosoof het egter doelbewus terugkeer tot die terapeutiese doel van filosofie in sy werke – hoewel hulle dikwels in hierdie verband misgekyk word. Friedrich Nietzsche se lewe was buitengewoon vol moeilikhede en lyding. Hy het hom daarom tot filosofie gewend. Lying was vir Nietzsche 'n filosofiese probleem en dit kon as sodanig slegs met die hulp van filosofie oorkom word. Sy werk kan beskou word as 'n poging om die (wat hy noem) “probleem van lying” te oorkom deur sin aan alle lying te gee. Lying, so het hy geargumenteer, verkry sin deur die filosofiese proses van self-skepping, 'n proses wat in hierdie tesis verduidelik word as die samevoeging van individuele filosofieë, te wete die wil tot mag, *amor fati*, en ewige wederkeer. Van hierdie drie filosofieë word beweer dat hulle saam neerkom op 'n radikale bevestiging en herwaardering van lying en dat hulle, as sodanig, 'n algehele transformasie van die individu moontlik maak om só 'n doel en nut aan lying te verleen wat dit sinvol maak en nie lewensvernietigend nie. Daar kan min twyfel bestaan dat Nietzsche self probeer het om sy eie lying so te hanteer – hoewel, soos dit geblyk het, onsuksesvol. Nietemin, in hierdie tesis word daar in die evaluering van die effektiwiteit van self-skepping nie slegs gefokus op Nietzsche se eie sukses in hierdie verband nie. Inteendeel, daar word aangetoon dat, indien dit behoorlik toegepas word, Nietzsche se filosofie van self-skepping wel effektief *kan* wees as 'n praktiese filosofie wat veronderstel is om die probleem van lying te oorkom. Dit word gedoen deur die sleutel-aspekte daarvan te toets in 'n lewensgetroue scenario, te wete Victor Frankl se toepassing daarvan om sy lying in die doodskampe van die Nazi's te oorkom.

## ***Acknowledgements***

My Master's thesis was a personal and solitary venture. However, I could not have successfully completed this project without the understanding, love and support of my family – thank you for standing by me as I follow my heart.

Dr. Dirk Louw – Thank you for your help in guiding me to this topic and thank you especially for the hours of work you put into my project and helping me produce this thesis to the best of my ability.

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## **Introduction**

There is a growing trend to utilize philosophy in the process of counselling and therapy. Often referred to as philosophical counselling or philosophical practice, this movement is becoming increasingly popular in the mental health community. Although there is still no universally accepted definition of philosophical practice, the underlying essence seems to entail the practitioner using philosophical analysis, knowledge and thinking tools to address everyday predicaments and hardships of the individual in so far as they involve “sane, yet confused or obstructed thinking (i.e. reasoning or conceiving)” (Louw and Fourie 2011:109). The philosophical practitioner draws on millennia of philosophical wisdom in order to offer what many of their clients perceive as a fresh approach to their predicaments. These practitioners are finding that more and more people are drawn to the insight gained from drawing on philosophical wisdom, and many of their clients prefer it above traditional counselling and psychology.

However, this use of philosophy is nothing new. Philosophers have known the value for life application of philosophy as well as its ability to address and overcome difficulties we face. Among the first Greek philosophers, Socrates’ and Plato’s dialogues depicted an understanding that the aim of philosophy is to “improve the human condition” (Raabe 2002:2). Sharing this spirit, the 6<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Anicius Boethius, wrote rather poetically:

The clouds of my grief dissolved and I drank in the light. With my thoughts recollected I turned to examine the face of my physician. I turned my eyes and fixed my gaze upon her, and I saw that it was my nurse in whose house I had been cared for since my youth - Philosophy (cited in Marinoff 1999:V).

More recently, philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Dewey also saw philosophy as a way to address the problems we face. Wittgenstein’s work, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), is widely (Raabe 2002:2) considered to be a therapeutic work, in which he expresses the idea that the purpose of all philosophy is to be helpful to the individual. He famously stated that the task of philosophy is to “show the fly the way out of the fly bottle” (Wittgenstein 2009:309). Dewey, again,

writes that the “causes remain which brought philosophy into existence as an attempt to find an intelligent substitute for blind custom and blind impulse as *guides to life and conduct*” (cited in Raabe 2002:2; italics mine).

However, philosophical practitioners do not confine themselves only to those philosophers whose works are known for their therapeutic focus. Philosophers in general seem to have a knack for addressing prominent life issues, often proving to be a useful source for modern philosophical counsellors who might have cause to address a similar question. One notable figure who is often overlooked for his contribution to this form of philosophizing is Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche is one of the most profound thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and arguably all time. His work is not generally known for its uplifting and positive character, in fact, quite the opposite. There are many who may consider Nietzsche’s philosophy anything but life-enriching. Yet I hope to show that Nietzsche’s works are a significant source to draw from for anyone wanting to live a more fulfilling and significant life, or who is tasked with helping others to do so. Nietzsche utilized philosophy in order to overcome one of life’s most troubling issues: *the problem of suffering*. Much of his work deals extensively with suffering, its nature and his philosophical experiments to overcome it. As such, Nietzsche’s work promises not only to help us understand the nature of suffering as a *philosophical problem*. It also promises to be a valuable practical philosophy, tailored specifically to deal with the problem of suffering, thereby enriching the life of the individual. Nietzsche believed that in order to overcome suffering, one has to embrace it completely for the sake of self-improvement, a process that he called self-creation. However, as will be explained, his philosophy of self-creation consists of an amalgamation of sub-philosophies, viz. the will to power, *amor fati*, and eternal recurrence. Together these philosophies constitute a radical affirmation and revaluation of suffering and, as such, seem to allow for a significant transformation of the individual. It is this transformation that Nietzsche considered to be the key to overcoming the problem of suffering. I aim to assess the practicality of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Or, more specifically, I aim to ascertain whether his philosophy of self-creation or becoming can in fact be successful as an attempt to overcome the problem of suffering. To this end I shall consider Giles Fraser’s assessment of the key concepts underlying Nietzsche’s philosophy of self-creation and of the extent to which Nietzsche himself was able to uphold the strict criteria set



out for self-creation in order to overcome his own suffering. Yet, my assessment of Nietzsche's philosophy vis-à-vis suffering will not stand or fall with his own success or failings in this regard. In fact, through testing its key features against a real-world scenario (viz. Victor Frankl's suffering in Nazi death-camps), I hope to show that Nietzsche's philosophy is indeed commendable as a coping response to suffering.

I am aware that there is a growing trend amongst modern philosophers and philosophical counsellors to explore the practical benefits of historical philosophies in the same way that I shall explore Nietzsche's "self-creation". Many of these works inquire into how historical philosophies can enrich our lives today, or help us cope with modern-day living. By examining and applying age-old philosophical wisdom, they address everything from relationships, conflict, careers, crises, and moral and ethical dilemmas, to existential questions and grief. In recent works like *Plato not Prozac!* (1999) and *The Inner Philosopher* (2012), Lou Marinoff applies a myriad of ancient and modern philosophical truths, principles and values, to the prominent issues and pains of modern living in the hope of helping the individual deal with the demands of life. In essence, works like these use philosophy to present an alternative perspective on modern day living with the purpose of enriching our lives. Moreover, though these works are often overlooked, I am certainly not the first to highlight the immense personal value of Nietzsche's works. Recently Nietzsche's ideas featured in works such as Allen de Botton's *The Consolations of Philosophy* (2000) and John Armstrong's *Life Lessons from Nietzsche* (2013). In both works his ideas are presented as having valuable life application, and principles and values are applied to modern-day living in ways that underscore the richness of Nietzsche's works in this regard. De Botton (2000), for example, comments on Nietzsche's unique view of suffering and how there is indeed, as Nietzsche insists, a natural inclination to see suffering in a favourable light as a means to achieve personal growth. However, my research branches off from these works in two ways. Firstly, I do not wish to apply Nietzsche's work to specific aspects or struggles of life. My aim is rather to show how Nietzsche attempted to solve the problem of suffering per se. For Nietzsche, the problem of suffering was the ultimate problem, one that merited much of his time and philosophical contemplation. For him, solving the problem of suffering entailed solving any and all future struggles. Secondly, I shall undertake the novel enterprise of depicting self-creation as an *amalgamation* of *amor fati*, eternal

recurrence and the will to power, and how these processes together constitute a radical affirmation and revaluation of suffering. I aim to show that, as such, self-creation has value for personal life application and self-betterment as a practical philosophy able to overcome the problem of suffering. Nevertheless, I would not like to suggest that the will to power, *amor fati*, and eternal recurrence are exhaustive as a delineation of Nietzsche's philosophy of self-creation; I merely limit myself to these key concepts<sup>1</sup>. Nietzsche's work on the self and self-creation is quite extensive, ranging across several of his published works and permeating many of his views, values and philosophical concepts. It is therefore beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss it in its entirety. However, understanding self-creation as an amalgamation of these three processes, suffices to provide a foundation from which to explore its viability as a means to overcome suffering.

In chapter one of this thesis I set out to explore the roots of philosophy as a healing discipline. Philosophy, far from how it is understood and practiced today in academic circles, emerged as a response to suffering to assuage the anguish of ancient life. In this regard, I shall consider the work of Pierre Hadot (1995), who showed how ancient philosophy addressed the problem of suffering, with the intention of comparing those ancient practices with Nietzsche's self-creation in a later chapter. By highlighting the similarities between Nietzsche's self-creation and the ancient Greek practices, I hope to illustrate its merit as a solution to the problem of suffering. In the second chapter, I wish to lay down a foundation for Nietzsche's philosophy of self-creation. Nietzsche's obsession with suffering is evident throughout his work. I shall aim to establish the reasons for this obsession by exploring his personal relationship with suffering, as well as his antagonism directed at the Christian church. Furthermore, as an introduction to his philosophy of self-creation, I aim to show that, for Nietzsche, suffering was exclusively a philosophical problem, meaning that for him, suffering could be understood and addressed only from a philosophical stance. The third chapter is then dedicated to an in-depth explication of the philosophies that make up self-creation, viz. *amor fati*, eternal recurrence, and the will to power. In the fourth chapter I shall endeavour to explain how these three philosophies drive the process of self-creation. In order to show how these separate philosophies tie

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<sup>1</sup> Although there are many aspects of Nietzsche's work that can be said to play a role in the overcoming of suffering, these three concepts address the problem of suffering specifically or directly.

together in the process of self-creation, I shall first explicate Nietzsche's complicated and controversial view of the self. Nietzsche challenges the traditional view of the self and proposes that we are not so much a human *being*, but rather a human *becoming* – constantly changing. I shall then compare self-creation with Hadot's understanding of ancient Greek practices in order to affirm that, like the ancient Greeks, Nietzsche attempted a philosophical overcoming of suffering. In the final chapter, I shall critically evaluate whether or not Nietzsche succeeded in his quest to overcome suffering. Yet despite Nietzsche's lack of success, I also aim to ascertain whether or not self-creation, as a practical philosophy, may contribute to the overcoming of suffering. I shall draw on the critique of Giles Fraser (2002) to determine Nietzsche's success. Yet my primary aim shall be to put Nietzsche's philosophy of self-creation to the test by evaluating its plausibility in a real-world scenario.

## Chapter One

### 1.1 Suffering and the Greek Response

Suffering is a concept with which every human being has been familiarized with in a personal way. Although the intensity and nature of suffering vary considerably from person to person, no human being is immune to it. It is perhaps because of its unrelenting and indiscriminate presence within humanity that suffering has often been referred to as the “problem of suffering”. To speak of the problem of suffering is then to understand suffering as a universal, unavoidable, and often unbearable human condition. This problem has intrigued scientific, artistic and philosophic minds throughout history, notably that of ancient Greek culture. Not only were the Ancient Greeks avidly aware of their suffering, but their struggle with suffering has influenced the course of history in an unprecedented way. Hall (2012:156) notes that Greek antiquity brought us some of the first recorded discourses of philosophy by Plato and Xenophon, one of the first practical handbook of medicine by Hippocrates, and last but not the least, the first surviving Greek tragedies by Aeschylus and Euripides. The influence of these creations can be seen throughout history. Yet what intrigues Hall most is that they all have one common and crucial feature: “they all confront, very directly, the problem of suffering in human life” (2012:156). The Greeks understood that suffering was not only an undeniable part of life, but that it was, in fact, part and parcel of what it meant to be human. That is to say, the Greeks understood that to be human inexorably meant to suffer. Greek literature as far back as Homer’s *The Illiad* provides an intimate window to this ancient understanding of suffering:

There are two urns that stand on the door-sill of Zeus. They are unlike for the gifts they bestow: an urn of evils, an urn of blessing. If Zeus who delights in thunder mingles these and bestows them on man, he shifts, and moves now in evil, again in good fortune. But when Zeus bestows from the urn of sorrows, he makes a failure of man, and the evil hunger drives him over the shining earth, and he wanders respected neither of gods nor mortals (cited in Hall 2012:133).

In this passage Homer depicts a rather senseless and absurd world in which “sorrows” abound and ruins all men (read people). Suffering, for the ancient Greeks,

was therefore an unfathomable reality. There was no reason behind misfortune, and to attribute it to the random whims of immortal gods did little to grant solace as the above passage from *The Illiad* suggests. The birth of medicine, art and especially philosophy, was in fact the Greeks' response to this unavoidable human condition. While ancient medicine as established by Hippocrates was specifically aimed at alleviating suffering in bodily afflictions or pain, both philosophy, and art as tragedy, had the specific purpose of addressing the suffering of the soul (Hall 2012:134).

The well-being of the soul was indeed very important to the ancient Greeks. However, one has to take into consideration that the Greek understanding of the soul differs somewhat from modern conceptions. According to Blyth (2012:132), the soul did not have the religious connotations we associate with it today. Instead the Greeks saw the soul as whatever it was that was "responsible for physical life, perception, self-movement and thinking" (Blyth 2012:132). In other words, the soul was responsible for our actions and thoughts. Our very *being-in-the-world* was a representation of what the Greeks understood to be the soul. In essence, the soul was reflected in the way we acted in the world, that is to say, the way we lived. Blyth (2012:132) points out that in Greek antiquity, whatever was good and bad for the soul predominantly determined human well-being in general. The Stoics, for example, believed that the soul was the only factor affecting the well-being of the individual. The Greeks therefore placed great value on the happiness and flourishing of the soul and, consequently, suffering was considered to be anything which inhibited this happiness and flourishing. This in turn meant that suffering had to be addressed where human beings were affected most, that is, the soul. Philosophy and art were the Greeks' two responses to the suffering and anguish of the soul (Blyth 2012:132). Art, in the form of poetry, was considered as a viable means by which to assuage suffering in that it could invoke sympathy by emphasizing the universal character of suffering (Hall 2012:134). Greek poetry found its main expression in the art of tragedy; the ancient form of theatrical art which "brought back long-dead mythical heroes to suffer both physically and psychologically, at great length and with great intensity, in front of audiences in the Athenian theatre of Dionysus" (Hall 2012:156). Greek tragedy, more than just identifying suffering as an inevitable way of life, raised practical as well as ethical questions about how to suffer, and how "human beings can and should respond to the sufferer" (Hall 2012:175). Art as a

response to suffering also plays a significant role in Nietzsche's philosophy. As we shall see in chapter four, Nietzsche drew inspiration from art as a response to suffering when developing his philosophy of self-creation. However, for the ancient Greeks, philosophy, and not art, was the crowning achievement in their quest to address the suffering of the soul. As a means to assuage the anguish of suffering, philosophy was specifically thought of and tailored as a response to the problem of suffering and was, as such, considered a "necessity" (Schuster 1999:27). This conception of philosophy departs from the purely academic terms in which it is often understood today. The role of philosophy, at its very beginning, was not "theoretical". Rather, as will be explained presently, for the Greeks philosophy by definition served as a life enriching experience, a transformative therapy or, in short, a way of life.

### 1.2 Philosophy as Spiritual Exercise

Both Blyth's (2012) and Hall's (2012) take on the origins of philosophy resonates with Pierre Hadot's classic, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995). Hadot's study of ancient Western philosophical texts has led him to understand that the modern conception of philosophy has the tendency to distort our understanding and interpretation of ancient philosophy. For him, modern historians and philosophers alike have been approaching ancient texts and philosophy without taking into consideration the most important aspect of those texts, viz. the role that they played for the ancients who conceived of them (Hadot 1995:269). Modern philosophers and historians assume that the role of ancient philosophy was much the same as modern academic philosophy, in other words, they assume that the role of ancient philosophy was to produce abstract theories in an academic context to be analysed by other philosophers. Arnold Davidson summarizes Hadot's point as follows:

[M]any modern historians of ancient philosophy have begun from the assumption that ancient philosophers were attempting, in the same way as modern philosophers, to construct systems, that ancient philosophy was essentially a certain type of organization of language, comprised of propositions having as their object the universe, human society, and language itself (1995:19).

When considering ancient philosophy and philosophical texts from a modern perspective, argues Hadot, instead of aligning our interpretation with accurate ancient purpose, context and value, we rather project onto it a modern valuation of the same. Martha Nussbaum expresses a similar concern in her book, *The Therapy of Desire* (1994). She not only argues that philosophical scholars frequently neglect contextual material, but, more importantly, that without this contextual material it is impossible to come to a coherent understanding of ancient Hellenistic philosophy (Nussbaum 1994:7). She is therefore in agreement with Hadot when he asserts that a “philosopher’s works cannot be interpreted without taking into consideration the concrete situation which gave birth to them” (1994:104).

As we have seen, it was the problem of suffering which gave birth to ancient Greek philosophy. Hadot agrees that philosophy at its very beginning presented itself first and foremost as “therapeutic, intended to cure mankind’s anguish” (1995:266). Likewise, Nussbaum finds a clear and distinct therapeutic character in ancient philosophy when she asserts that the “Hellenistic philosophical schools in Greece and Rome - Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics - all conceived of philosophy as a way of addressing the most painful problems of human life” (1994:3). Epicurus, for example, is well known for his observation: “[v]ain is the word of that philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man” (cited in Hadot 1995:267). Hadot beautifully summarizes this idea of Epicurus when he writes: “philosophical theories are in the service of the philosophical life” (1995:267).

Considering these valuations of philosophy, it is clear that academic philosophy, as it is understood today, is indeed a far cry from its earlier Greek roots. According to Nussbaum, philosophy at its very beginning existed for the “sake of human beings, in order to address their deepest needs, to confront their most urgent perplexities, and bring them from misery to some greater measure of flourishing” (1994:3). Both philosophy and the philosopher of ancient times was nothing outside of their service to humanity and its deepest problems. The ancient philosopher “practiced philosophy not as a detached intellectual technique dedicated to the display of cleverness but as an immersed and worldly art of grappling with human misery” (Nussbaum 1994:3). Both Nussbaum and Hadot share the belief that the ancient philosopher had a duty to the human soul similar to that of the physician to the human body. This likeness, however, is as old as philosophy itself. The ancients considered the philosopher as a



“compassionate physician whose arts could heal many pervasive types of human suffering” (Nussbaum 1994:3). For the ancient Greeks all philosophy had a singular goal: to ameliorate human suffering in much the same way as a doctor would treat a wound. It was the philosopher’s role to bring about healing, not only within himself, but also within others. This medical analogy was taken quite literally, and it is the ancients’ commitment to this analogy which leads Nussbaum to reach a conclusion similar to that of Hall (2012:156), viz. that philosophy was indeed established to meet a singular human need: to address the problem of unrelenting suffering. The central motivation of Ancient Greek philosophy, Nussbaum contends, was the “urgency of human suffering”, where the goal of philosophy was quite simply *eudaimonia*, that is, the flourishing of the soul (1994:15).

It is clear then that the task or purpose of ancient philosophy, as therapy, was to address the problem of human suffering. Yet the question now remains, *how* did philosophy achieve this purpose? As the title of his book suggests, Hadot believes that ancient philosophy, as practiced by the Greeks, can best be understood as living a certain *way of life*. This way of life can be seen most prominently in the Hellenistic and Greek period of philosophy “at least as far back as Socrates” (Hadot 1995:268). Socrates and his disciples practiced philosophy as a mode of life or a “technique of inner living” (Hadot 1995:269), and the Stoics declared explicitly that “philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory - much less in the exegesis of texts - but rather in the art of living” (Hadot 1995:83). The Stoics, as well as the Epicureans all practiced philosophy as a continuous act, an act which was “permanent and identical with life itself, which had to be renewed at each instant” (Hadot 1995:268). The key here is that philosophy was practiced on a continuous basis (“at each instant”), making philosophy a habitual way of life. It should be clear that “*practiced*” here does not mean that philosophy was practiced as a profession, in the sense in which, for example, a medical doctor or psychologist would “practice” their profession. Rather “practiced” here refers to exercising a skill or ability. This led Hadot to call these ancient philosophical practices: “spiritual exercises” (1995:81). Hadot specifically uses the word “spiritual”, despite its modern connotations, to convey the all-encompassing nature of these exercises. He explains that,

[t]he word spiritual is quite apt to make us understand that these exercises are the result, not merely of thought, but of the individual’s entire psychism.



Above all, the word spiritual reveals the true dimensions of these exercises. By means of them the individual re-places himself within the perspective of the Whole (Hadot 1995:82).

In other words, Hadot believes that ancient philosophy was a set of spiritual exercises which permeated every aspect of one's being as an art of living. He writes elsewhere that "philosophy thus took on the form of an exercise of the thought, will, and the totality of one's being" (Hadot 1995:265). These philosophical exercises were then not only situated at a cognitive level, that is, thoughts and beliefs, but also within one's very being and acting, which, for the Greeks, constituted the human soul. These exercises were meant to affect the soul and produced a "better" and "fuller" individual (Hadot 1995:83). Ancient philosophy was a mode of thinking and acting within the world, with the specific aim of transforming the individual<sup>2</sup>. This was both "a transformation of our vision of the world" and a "metamorphosis of our personality" (Hadot 1995:82). In other words, philosophy was a transformative exercise, affecting the individual in every way possible. Hadot notes that when studying these ancient schools of philosophy, it is clear that "each school had its own therapeutic method, that is, its own manner of practically implementing philosophy, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being" (1995:83). For the ancients, this singular goal or purpose entailed the alleviation of suffering (i.e. a total transformation of one's worldview, along with a complete metamorphosis of the self). It was, according to Hadot, a "method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being" (1995:265). Philosophy, then, addressed the problem of suffering by changing the individual who experiences it.

All schools agree that man, before his philosophical conversion, is in a state of unhappy disquiet. Consumed by worries, torn by passions, he does not live a genuine life, nor is he truly himself. All schools also agree that man can be delivered from this state. He accedes to genuine life, improve himself, transform himself, and attain a state of perfection. It is precisely for this that spiritual exercises are intended (Hadot 1995:102).

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<sup>2</sup> Spiritual exercises were meant to bring about a total transformation of the individual's existence. Hadot divides these exercises into four categories, viz. learning to live, learning to die, learning to dialogue and learning to read. Exploring these disciplines was meant to transform the individual's vision of the world and consequently his/her being-in-the-world (Hadot 1995:81-125).

Hadot believes that it is here that the word *philosophy* comes into its own. *Philosophia*, meaning: “*the love of wisdom*”, was used to refer to this *way of life* as a transformation of being. Wisdom was essentially the end product of these spiritual exercises. Wisdom was the “transcendent norm which guided their action”, and finally, wisdom was “a way of life which brought peace of mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*), and a cosmic consciousness” (Hadot 1995:265). In short, ancient philosophy was therefore an answer to the problem of suffering, and a means to transform the individual’s entire way of being. This transformation took place not simply by knowing or studying philosophy, nor simply thinking philosophically, but rather by *living*<sup>3</sup> philosophically.

In this chapter we have seen that Ancient Greek philosophy was a response to the problem of suffering, and as a response, ancient philosophy was indeed very different from academic philosophy today. Hadot explained that the philosophy of ancient Greece was a very practical matter, in essence, a way of life to be continually practiced. The main purpose of ancient philosophy was to address the suffering of the individual through a process of transformation. In the chapter to follow, I aim to consider the life and suffering of Nietzsche who, as we shall see, was a man unusually beset with suffering both physically and mentally throughout his life. By examining his suffering and the cause thereof, I will show how Nietzsche turned to philosophy to overcome his suffering. Nietzsche’s response to suffering, like the Greeks’, was to turn to practical philosophy. Because of his extensive personal experience with suffering, Nietzsche dedicated much of his work and the majority of his most influential ideas towards finding a philosophical solution for his suffering, all the while allowing his philosophical pursuit to be significantly shaped and informed by his suffering, his personal life, and his antagonism with the Christian dogma.

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<sup>3</sup> Living philosophically means to completely commit oneself to the spiritual exercises through which one is transformed (Hadot 1995:81-125).

## **Chapter Two**

### **2.1 Ecce Homo**

Friedrich Nietzsche is regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of the nineteenth century. The name Nietzsche is one which most probably every philosophy student has heard and whose influence has reached far beyond the borders of philosophy itself. He is perhaps best known for his merciless assault on the Christian dogma, dedicating countless aphorisms and also an entire book towards the intentional subversion of what he deemed mankind's greatest curse. Nietzsche saw himself as a philosopher who philosophized with a 'hammer'; a metaphor for his ruthless revaluation of all values, and the waging of a great war upon all that is weak and sickly. For Nietzsche, living was to "continually eliminate from ourselves what is about to die", and to be "cruel and inexorable towards all that becomes weak and old in ourselves and not only in ourselves" (Nietzsche 2009:39). Nietzsche is also known for his contempt towards different races, genders and even entire countries. In fact, much of his work is dedicated to explicitly affirming and justifying these contemptuous feelings. Yet, Nietzsche was ahead of his time and of this he too was well aware. He often wrote as if speaking to a future generation of readers, as though he knew that his work would only be understood and appreciated by those not yet born. He addressed these future generations directly: "perhaps you too are something of the same type, you coming men? you new philosophers" (Nietzsche 1990:73). Unfortunately, and much to his distress, Nietzsche's works did in fact find little following and still less praise during his own time. Yet for Nietzsche, this only served to affirm his feelings that he was a philosopher ahead of his time. In *Ecce Homo*, his autobiography, Nietzsche writes:

I should find it as a complete contradiction of myself, if I expected to find ears and eyes for my truths today: the fact that no one listens to me, that no one knows how to receive at my hands today, is not only comprehensible, it seems to me quite the proper thing (2008:485).

It was not until after his death that his works and ideas received their due recognition. Now, more than a century later, Nietzsche's works and ideas are idolized by philosophers and scholars. It was Nietzsche himself who believed that every

philosopher's work is but an extension of who he is. A philosopher's works are a reflection of the life and beliefs they derive from. For Nietzsche then, philosophy was a very personal affair and not at all a cold, objective, unemotional abstraction. The convention of his time being the latter, Nietzsche broke from the norm claimed by so many, if not all of his contemporaries, to harness the practical value of philosophy and set about overcoming his suffering. In his masterpiece, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche remarks that "every great philosophy has hitherto been: a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir" (1990:37). Contrary to the claims of many philosophers, Nietzsche believed that their philosophies, as well as his own, was unequivocally a personal affair, a fact he himself was not afraid to admit. Nietzsche's philosophy is both a testimony to and an account of his quest to overcome not only his own suffering, but also the suffering of all mankind. In what follows, I shall briefly consider Nietzsche's personal experience with suffering. His daily struggle became an obsession with overcoming suffering and led him on a philosophical quest to not only overcome his own suffering, but to ultimately solve the problem of suffering. Understanding Nietzsche's personal experience with suffering will tell us how he perceived and defined suffering. Nietzsche is often criticized for mitigating and romanticizing suffering. I will address this criticism in Chapter 5 by contrasting this mitigated and romanticised conception of suffering with what could be considered as ultimate or unmitigated suffering.

## 2.2 Nietzsche's Obsession with Suffering

Nietzsche was unusually tormented throughout his life. He experienced all kinds of physical and emotional afflictions on a daily basis. Physically Nietzsche suffered from severe migraines, some lasting for days, as well as painful vomiting on occasions. His physical illnesses made life almost unbearable at times and from about 1875 onwards, Nietzsche's symptoms reduced him to little more than an invalid (Fraser 2002:87). Nietzsche's personal letters to his friends often testify to his anguish:

Pain is vanquishing my life and my will. What months, what a summer I have had! My physical agonies were as many and as varied as the changes in the sky... Five times I have called for Doctor Death, and yesterday I hoped it was the end - but in vain (cited in Fraser 2002:87).

Along with his bouts of physical anguish, Nietzsche often felt that his eyes were on the verge of blindness (Fraser 2002:87). Many of his physiological ailments are believed to be symptoms of the syphilis that he contracted at a younger age while studying philology and working as theatre-reviewer in Leipzig. It was during this time that Nietzsche led a vibrant and active urban social life which included frequent visits to brothels. Graham Parkes remarks that because of his vocation, Nietzsche “was much in demand at receptions and dinner parties”, where Nietzsche would constantly throw himself into the “vortex of social life as he never had before” (1994:50). Later in life Nietzsche told doctors treating him that he had been treated for syphilitic infections while in Leipzig. Nietzsche’s physical ailments took a toll on him later in life, forcing him into an early retirement and a continuous search for climates that would accommodate his delicate constitution. But his physical ailments were not at all the extent of his suffering. Nietzsche became acquainted with loss and grief at the age of four when he lost his father as well as his younger brother the following year. This marooned Nietzsche, at the age of five, as the only male in a household with five women. For Nietzsche, this living situation was less than ideal, having no male figure to look up to and constantly finding himself at odds with his mother and older female siblings. Kaufmann writes that during his early childhood after the loss of his father Nietzsche bore the emptiness and hopelessness of his situation, knowing that it was his father who alone could have “redeemed him from his almost intolerable situation” (1974:33).

Later in his life, Nietzsche experienced an especially trying time emotionally, which ensued due to the break with his good friend and mentor, Richard Wagner. Wagner was in his own right a brilliant German composer, and it was his music which first caught Nietzsche’s attention. After meeting the man, their friendship grew out of mutual admiration. For Kaufmann, there is no doubt that Nietzsche’s friendship with Wagner was to be a momentous crucial aspect in his life and that “some of the lasting elements of Nietzsche’s thought [...] are inseparable from these personal experiences: the friendship with a man of great creative genius; the jealous aspiration to excel the friend and, begotten by it, the deep insight into the artist soul - [...] one of the decisive inspirations of his later conception of the will to power” (Kaufmann 1974:31). Nietzsche’s will to power, as we shall see, was indeed one of his greatest conceptions, one which he called the very “essence of life” (Nietzsche

1990:259). Nietzsche was always full of praise for Wagner, both as man and as composer. The break between Nietzsche and Wagner developed gradually as he realized that his own independence as creative thinker could not be attained alongside his friendship with his mentor and friend. Nietzsche obviously treasured his independence as he asserts in *The Gay Science*:

Independence of the soul - that is at stake here! No Sacrifice can then be too great: even one's dearest friend one must be willing to sacrifice for it, though he be the most glorious human being, embellishment of the world, genius without peer (2009:98).

The breaking point, however, came with Wagner's conversion to Christianity, which was artistically embodied by Wagner's *Parsifal*, a play to commend his new found love for Christianity (Kaufmann 1974:37). Nietzsche's antagonism towards Christianity is one of his trademarks (I shall briefly examine some of the reasons behind this antagonism later in this chapter). Accepting Wagner's conversion to Christianity, for which he had no respect, left him with no choice but to break with his mentor and friend. Though Wagner's friendship had tremendous influence on Nietzsche, it was overshadowed by the influence of this break with him. Karl Löwith writes that the "tie to Wagner, and the break with him, was the decisive event in Nietzsche's life, and he never got over it" (1997:22). There is no doubt that apart from his physical ailments, Nietzsche experienced a fair amount of life changing events through loss and emotional pain. Adding to this was his ever increasing loneliness. From 1883 Nietzsche grew more and more depressed due to an increasing falling out with his friends. He subsequently also became increasingly isolated and lonely, and therefore plunged himself into his work.

With his suffering continuously tormenting and consuming his mind, Nietzsche accepted his inescapable fate. Nietzsche understood that all human life was plagued with inescapable suffering. His first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche 1967), already testifies to his obsession with suffering. In one particular aphorism Nietzsche recalls the ancient story of the Greek king, Midas, and his capture of Silenus, the demigod and companion of Dionysus. In short, after Silenus fell into the hands of the ancient King Midas, the King, wishing to obtain wisdom from the half-god, asked him what man desired most. The wise Silenus then replied: "Oh, wretched ephemeral

race, children of change and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is - to die soon" (Nietzsche 1967:42). Silenus' answer here suggests that human life is endless misery, full of suffering and pain. For Nietzsche, nowhere did this hold truer than in his own life. Living with constant anguish and suffering, his obsession with it permeated his philosophy. Parkes notes that:

[t]raditionally the philosopher has been thought to transcend his personal situation, rising above the contingent particulars of the everyday world to the realm of the universal and totally impersonal ideas from there to propound discourses concerning reality and truth. With Nietzsche [...] the philosopher goes *down* and *in* to the things of his life for the sake of deeper insight into their hearts (1994:9).

Nietzsche by no means wanted objectivity to rule within his writings. He preferred to write in as personal a manner as possible. "Of all that is written I love only what a man has written with his blood. [...] Whoever writes in blood and aphorisms does not want to be read but to be learned by heart" (Nietzsche 2005:37). Nietzsche believed his work to be a testimony of his suffering and, more importantly, his overcoming of suffering. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche asks: "Is sickness not the motive which inspires the philosopher? [...] he carries with him all his scientific curiosity into his sickness" (2009:5). Nietzsche did not want readers to merely read his work as they would a novel. He wanted those who read his work to be consumed by it and to learn it off by heart. The philosophy that is learned off by heart becomes more than just an idea and more than just knowledge. It becomes part of the reader and, essentially, a way of life. As we shall see, Nietzsche's philosophy to overcome suffering was indeed a *way of life* in much the same way as the ancient Greek tradition.

Nietzsche is certainly not the only philosopher who has experienced hardship and suffering throughout his life. He is also not the only philosopher who has written about it. Yet what makes Nietzsche so noteworthy in his relation to suffering is not that he experienced so much of it throughout his life, nor that he wrote about it, but rather the approach that he chose to deal with his sickness and suffering. Nietzsche's attitude towards suffering was especially remarkable considering the



epoch in which he was situated. In *The Gay Science* (2009), Nietzsche speaks of the current generation's disdain for suffering. He writes that "people now hate pain far more than earlier man did, and calumniate it worse than ever; indeed people nowadays can hardly endure the *thought* of pain, and make out of it an affair of conscience and a reproach to collective existence" (2009:46). Suffering was something Nietzsche's generation detested, hoping only to avoid or abolish it. This, for Nietzsche, was an inconceivable mistake verging on madness: "You want if possible – and there is no madder 'if possible' – *to abolish suffering*" (Nietzsche 1990:115). Moreover, where suffering and misfortune could not be avoided, it was "sweetened" by ideals and values often preached by religion: "[w]e understand very well how to pour sweetness on our bitterness, especially on the bitterness of the soul; we find remedy in our bravery and sublimity, as well as in the nobler delirium of submission and resignation" (Nietzsche 2009:121). Nietzsche believed that this attitude towards suffering was not natural, but one cultivated by religious dogma. As we shall see, Nietzsche found himself firmly rooted in an era when the Christian Reformation was at a highpoint in Europe. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes that it is only "out of the soil of the German Reformation that there could grow a Nietzsche" (cited in Fraser 2002:31). Religion was the main instigator which set Nietzsche upon his quest to overcome the problem of suffering. Fraser construes that Nietzsche saw Christianity as a "disease" from which humanity suffered, a disease "brought about by a misplaced attempt to ameliorate suffering with the imagined comforts of Christian redemption" (2002:87). In essence, Nietzsche found the Christian solution to suffering quite inadequate for several reasons, which I shall discuss in a moment. However, in order to understand Nietzsche's charges against Christianity, one has first to grasp his understanding of suffering and its philosophical nature, to which I now turn.

### 2.3 The Christian Illness and the Ascetic Ideal

That the ascetic ideal has meant so much to man reveals a basic fact of human will, its *horror vacui*; *it needs an aim* (Nietzsche 1997:68).



For Nietzsche, the problem of suffering could be understood as nothing else but a *philosophical* problem. Nietzsche illuminates the philosophical nature of suffering with the following passage in his book, *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

[...] but suffering itself was *not* [mankind's] problem, instead, the fact that there was no answer to the question he screamed, "Suffering for what?" [...] The meaningless of suffering, not the suffering, was a curse which has so far blanketed mankind (1997:120).

For Nietzsche, suffering itself in all its various forms was not what tormented mankind most, but rather suffering without *meaning*. Nietzsche continues: "man, the bravest animal and most prone to suffer, does not deny suffering as such: he *wills* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a *purpose* of suffering" (1997:120). According to Nietzsche then, the idea of suffering, devoid of meaning or purpose, is what we find tormenting. The ancient myth of Sisyphus is a striking example of this truth. The myth tells of a Greek hero whose hatred for the gods and death earned him an unspeakable punishment in which his "whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing" (Camus 2005:116). In essence, the tale tells of the hero Sisyphus who severely enraged the Olympian gods, who, in their fury, condemned him to an eternity of meaningless suffering. Sisyphus was condemned to roll a huge stone up the side of a mountain in the underworld, a painstaking excise to endure each day throughout eternity, without respite or absolution. At the end of each day when Sisyphus reached the mountain top, the stone would roll down under its own weight to begin the process again. This myth specifically attests not to the torment of endless suffering, which Sisyphus would experience for all eternity, but rather to the *meaninglessness* of his suffering. It is in the absence of meaning or purpose that Sisyphus' true punishment resides. Should Sisyphus' task have had some form of meaning in terms of accomplishing some or other goal, would this not have significantly lessened the torment of the task? Is it not true that we would readily bear all sorts of torment provided we have a significant reason to do so? With no end in sight and no reason or meaning behind his torment, Sisyphus' punishment was unusually cruel. For Nietzsche, to understand suffering is to understand it only in its relation to the meaning it does, or does not, possess. The problem of suffering throughout history, then, is centred not on suffering *per se*, but rather on its meaning. In one of his most notable maxims he writes: "If man know the wherefore of his

existence, then the manner of it can take care of itself” (Nietzsche 2008:304). Another translation reads; “[h]e who has a why, can bear almost any how” (Frankl 2006:76). For Nietzsche this meant that suffering can be made bearable provided one has a significant reason to suffer. The problem of suffering was a question of meaning. Once we identify the *lack of meaning and significance* in our suffering as the torturous element, suffering as an inevitable force of anguish, loses its enigmatic, fearsome character, and enters into the scope of philosophy. Understood in terms of meaning, suffering is something that can be philosophically examined, and ultimately, addressed in a philosophical manner. After all to endow phenomena with meaning is a characteristically philosophical activity. Philosophers have been asking questions of meaning since the birth of philosophy itself. The idea that philosophy is a meaning-giving discipline is pivotal in Nietzsche’s quest to overcome suffering. If meaning could alleviate suffering to the point where one could bear it, Nietzsche’s task would simply be to discover or create that meaning. Nietzsche realized, however, that suffering had been given meaning by Christian teachings. Christianity, and its teachings of salvation, offered mankind’s suffering meaning and purpose in the form of the *ascetic ideal*. But for reasons I shall shortly discuss, Nietzsche found the Christian solution to the problem of suffering wanting. The meaning offered by the ascetic ideal served to be little more than a poisonous balm, Nietzsche thought, which provided temporary relief for the suffering individual, but failed to address the problem of suffering.

Nietzsche’s antagonism towards Christianity is one beyond compare. According to Fraser (2002:1), Nietzsche’s antagonism is arguably “unrivalled in its ferocity and vitriol”. The Christian religion, for Nietzsche, was as far reaching and unavoidable as suffering itself, an illness from which humanity was doomed to suffer. In *The Anti-Christ* (2008), a book devoted solely to his criticism of Christianity, Nietzsche calls Christianity “the one great curse” and the “one immortal blemish of mankind” (2008:446). From a young age Nietzsche experienced the overbearing presence of Christianity. He descended from a prominent line of Lutheran clergymen. His father and both of his grandfathers before him all served in the German Reformed Church. Fraser explains that coming from a “tight-knit Lutheran Background the expectations upon Nietzsche were clear and firm. He would, like his father before him, become a Lutheran clergyman” (2002:31). As a boy, Nietzsche seemed to embrace his

heritage, receiving the nickname of “little pastor” from his contemporaries, while his school reports spoke of a “pious and studious boy” (Fraser 2002: 32). After school, Nietzsche predictably enrolled at the University of Bonn to study Theology. It was during his studies at Bonn, however, that his perception of the Christian faith faltered.

One of the major reasons for Nietzsche’s rage against Christianity, was his conviction that the church and the Christian faith were solely responsible for the presiding attitude of his generation towards suffering. The Christian teaching of heaven and an eternal life after death, he believed, severely devalued suffering by branding it something to be hated, avoided, or tolerated in return for an eternal reward. As St. Paul puts it in Romans 8:18, “the sufferings of the present are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (cited in Fraser 2002:73). With the promise of eternal glory in a life after death, Christianity teaches that suffering is trivial, fleeting and something to be tolerated in the hope of eternal reward. Suffering is seen as an inevitable consequence of sin, and therefore to be hated as much as sin itself. Furthermore, for Nietzsche the Christian doctrine teaches that as sinners we are to hate not only the sin, but the sinner as well. This gives rise to self-loathing, contempt for bodily desires and in extreme cases self-flagellation. “We deny ourselves sex, food, even happiness, in the desperate desire to create the conditions for our redemptions [...] we prefer a religion of self-hate to no religion at all” (cited in Fraser 2002:86). Christian dogma preached an ascetic ideal which was supposed to give suffering, mankind and all of existence a sense of purpose and significance. Or, as he puts it:

Except for the ascetic ideal: man, the *animal* man, had no meaning up to now. His existence on earth had no purpose [...] behind every great human destiny sounded the even louder refrain “in vain!” *This* is what the ascetic ideal meant: something was *missing*, there was an immense *lacuna* around man, [The] *ascetic ideal offered man a meaning!* [...] With it, suffering was given an interpretation; interpretation – with a doubt – brought new suffering with it, deeper, more internal, more poisonous suffering, suffering that gnawed away more intensely at life: it was saved, it brought all suffering within the perspective of *guilt* (Nietzsche 1997:120).

Mankind needed an explanation for life, some kind of meaning to underscore our existence. Mankind feared the *horror vacui*; the horror of a meaningless existence and consequently required purpose and an aim. The ascetic ideal was exactly that aim. It promoted the view or attitude in which one hated all life, doubted all the senses and ultimately denied this world as valuable and beautiful (Nietzsche 1997:84).

The case of the ascetic life, life counts as a bridge to that other existence. The ascetic treats life as a wrong path which he has to walk along backwards, till he reaches the point where he starts; or, like a mistake which can only be set right by action – *ought* to be set right (Nietzsche 1997:85).

This teaching promoted the idea that this world was but a prelude to the next and, as such, one should forgo all the pleasures of this world and hate life all together. This world was merely a transitory moment to the next and it is in this next world that we should place our hopes and aspirations. All life, and especially all suffering, had purpose and significance only in the light of it being a bridge to this next world of eternal glory. For Nietzsche, this idea or view had serious implications. He saw the Christian hope of eternal glory as recompense for a life of suffering, as a coward's retreat from the reality of suffering. For him, the only means of overcoming suffering was *not* to shy away from it or to bear it in hopes of eternal reward in a life hereafter. Rather, it was to face the reality of it, courageously and honestly, in its absolute fullness (more about this later). When one accepts one's current circumstances as trivial in view of a life of eternal glory beyond death, so he argued, one becomes unfaithful to this life, which is indeed our only life, and consequently, who we are. There was no heaven or world hereafter with which to justify this one, and to hope in a world of eternal glory is to deny this world and to deny its suffering. For Nietzsche, this was a momentous mistake for anyone addressing the problem of suffering. The Christian teaching of eternal glory only invites an attitude of indifference or hatred towards suffering. Fraser explains that it is "precisely the desire to minimise suffering at all costs, to make the minimisation of suffering a fundamental dimension of one's life policy, that leads to pathological religion" (2002: 89), a religion which Nietzsche could not accept. Christianity, as far as Nietzsche was concerned, made both suffering, and life itself, an enemy to be detested. Promising eternal glory could

perhaps succeed to offer solace by lessening or anesthetizing one's suffering in the moment, but for Nietzsche, there could be no worse response to suffering. Such a response (as will be explained at length in a later chapter) counters his solution to the problem of suffering, for in denying this world and its suffering, one inevitably denies the intrinsic value of suffering and the joy to be found from suffering.

However, for Nietzsche, the most upsetting character of Christianity is not that it promotes an aversion towards suffering in a world-denying manner, but rather its claim that life could have no meaning without God. Fraser summarizes Nietzsche's point as follows:

[A]t the heart of the Christian world-view, is a powerful counter-factual that asserts life is meaningful if and only if there exists some non-worldly realm that invests human lives with significance. That is simply to say, without God life is meaningless. And the more Christianity is able to demonstrate the meaninglessness and worthlessness of human life the more it is able to promote God as the one who saves (2002:73).

Nietzsche's examination of Christianity led him to realize that the ascetic ideal it preached was first and foremost meant to provide mankind with meaning and significance. Denying and even hating this world in favour of the next was what the ascetic ideal required. In turn this life became meaningful and significant only as part of a divine plan of redemption. An all-knowing, all powerful, benevolent creator was the ultimate and sovereign meaning of the world. Not only did God provide meaning and significance for life in general, but, more specifically, God provided meaning and significance for *suffering*. The ascetic ideal held that all suffering could either be justified by God's righteousness or made bearable by God's promise of eternal glory. However, as will be presently explained, Nietzsche realized that such a valuation of life and suffering could have potentially devastating consequences.

Nietzsche found the idea that God confers meaning and significance upon all life "ultimately degrading" (Fraser 2002:73). Yet far more important than the degradation of humanity was the inevitable consequence to which it led. We have seen that Nietzsche considered suffering as a philosophical problem, claiming that what people fear and detest is not so much suffering itself, but meaningless suffering. Understanding suffering as a philosophical problem, it was clear to Nietzsche that the

role of God was to provide this meaning and therefore nullify the sting of suffering. But having realised this, what was most distressing for Nietzsche, was the question as to what would happen to mankind in the absence of God. The Christian God, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had provided meaning and significance for centuries to the far reaches of the world and its multitude of cultures. Nietzsche was now confronted with a crushing question: If it were to be proven that God does not exist, or if by some other means mankind lost faith in God, who or what would then endow meaning upon a world of endless suffering? Could mankind survive such a loss of meaning and significance? It was this line of questioning that started Nietzsche on his quest to overcome suffering. In essence, Christianity provided Nietzsche with a clear indication of what was *not* helping mankind with its problem of suffering. Not only was Christianity the root from which an aversion towards suffering springs, but in claiming that God was the only source of meaning, the Christian faith would inevitably lead mankind into a crushing state of meaninglessness, which he called *nihilism*. Nietzsche saw the Christian God as nothing more than an idol or an image that could not be sustained in a progressively enlightened world.

#### 2.4 Meaninglessness, Nihilism, and Death of God

The sick and the decaying – it was they who despised the body and the earth, and invented the heavenly world, and the redeeming drops of blood [...] those sweet and dark poisons (Nietzsche 2005:30).

Nietzsche lived in an era which saw magnificent technological and scientific advances. Kaufmann informs us that while optimism was common during this enterprising time, all the technological advances and material improvements did little more than disgust Nietzsche (1974:96). He saw this as an omen that there will soon come a time when God will lose his sovereignty; a time when God will die in the hearts of mankind, and with it, usher in an era of nihilism. In *The Will to Power* (1967), Nietzsche writes of the inevitable:

[T]he end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism. Everything lacks meaning... Since Copernicus man has been rolling from the

centre toward x... The goal is lacking; the answer is lacking to our Why?  
(cited in Kaufmann 1974:122).

Scientific advance was taking mankind into an age of doubt. Safranski notes that the true strength of reason appears at the end of the Enlightenment era, as it “questions and casts a critical glance on moral and religious traditions” (2003:89). As a taste of what was to come, Nietzsche depicted his premonition in a parable named *The Madman*. It is in this parable that we find one of Nietzsche’s most famous quotes. It tells of a man who makes his way into the market place proclaiming that God is dead and that it is mankind who has killed him (Nietzsche 2009:79). Although this parable tells of an unknown man, Nietzsche saw himself as the prophet of God’s fate and he was severely distressed by it. Not that he believed in God. It is well known that he did not and the parable by no means testifies to such a belief. In this parable, however, God is not so much a divine being who has met his end in some brutal way, but rather a symbol for mankind’s faith in an agency which endows life with meaning, value and significance. Fraser rightly writes that “Nietzsche’s target is not so much God *per se*, but rather patterns of thought inscribed into European culture by Christian soteriology” (2002:73). What Nietzsche was prophesying was an impending apocalypse in the wake of the death of all that gives meaning, value and significance to mankind. As Fraser puts it:

For a culture that retains a basic belief in the necessity of some saving agency external to human life, the loss of belief in God prompts one of two responses: either it responds in despair at the meaninglessness of life, or it simply replaces the God idea with another agency (2002:73).

Nietzsche anticipated that mankind would respond with the former, and that from the loss of their belief in God, who is supposed to instil meaning upon all life, a world of utter despair and meaninglessness, a nihilistic world, would ensue. In *The Will to Power* (1967), Nietzsche describes why he believes that the death of God would be a crushing blow for humanity:

Nihilism appears at that point, not that the displeasure at existence has become greater than before but because one has come to mistrust any meaning in suffering, indeed in existence. One interpretation has collapsed; but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there



were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain (Nietzsche 1967:35)

The interpretation in question involves the idea of God (or any supernatural deity) as the ultimate provider of meaning. A collapse in such an interpretation of life, Nietzsche claims, would fill mankind with despair. Kaufmann notes that this “sense of dreadful things to come hangs over Nietzsche’s thinking like a thundercloud” and that Nietzsche “felt the agony, the suffering, and the misery of a godless world so intensely, at a time when others were yet blind to its tremendous consequences, that he was able to experience in advance as it were, the fate of a coming generation” (1974:97-98). The consequence of this Godless world which Nietzsche experienced as a prophet before all others, was a meaningless world. Nietzsche’s task was no longer only to overcome his own suffering, but as the prophet who already bore the weight of nihilism, Nietzsche’s task was now to overcome all suffering and avert the impending nihilism he foresaw. Nietzsche realized that, to solve this problem of nihilism, he would have to find a way to re-establish meaning and significance for mankind in some non-supernatural manner, that is, without the help of some metaphysical deity or world beyond the present. Replacing God with another divine agency would simply be postponing the inevitable and was therefore not an option for Nietzsche. Neither could he simply condone nihilism, a fate which he was sure would crush mankind, and himself. Nietzsche thus had to find a philosophical answer to nihilism. What was at stake, was the “place and significance of human suffering” (Reginster 2006:160). Nietzsche’s search to overcome his own suffering was now intertwined with the quest to overcome nihilism.

In the first chapter we saw that the ancient Greeks, in their own search to overcome the problem of suffering, produced both art and philosophy. In what follows I aim to show how Nietzsche traced their steps by also experimenting with both art and philosophy. Following the tradition of the Greeks, Nietzsche overcame nihilism and suffering through a unification of the creative beauty of art and the transformative power of practical philosophy.



## 2.5 Suffering and the Creative Power of Art

Nietzsche was plagued with the question as to what could give mankind meaning, significance and ultimately happiness without divine sanction in a world of suffering and anguish. For him, aesthetic values were the first and most obvious starting point, since, as Kaufmann notes, for Nietzsche aesthetic values were not so “firmly associated with a supernatural sanction and [where, as such] conceivable without any element of obligation” (1974:130). Aesthetic values, he argued, are uncorrupted by the “ought” of piety. There is no *ought* behind beauty. Where religion teaches one *ought* to do so and so, it is perfectly conceivable for one to be able to “speak of beauty without implying that anything ought to be beautiful or that anybody ought to create anything beautiful” (Kaufmann 1974:130). Moreover, Nietzsche believed that beauty found its truest expression in artistic creativity, which comes not from a perfect sovereign being, but rather from a frail mortal being, plagued by imperfection. Beauty is created not from perfection, but from the absence thereof. Imperfection, pain and suffering, argued Nietzsche, are the true inspiration behind beauty and art. Artists draw from their impurities and sufferings, not their “undisturbed good health” (Kaufmann: 1974: 130). In fact, for Nietzsche there was a natural precedent at work here. He writes, “Homer would have created no Achilles, a Goethe no Faust, had Homer been an Achilles and had Goethe been a Faust” (Nietzsche 1997:71), and “[indeed it] does not seem possible to be an artist and not to be sick” (Nietzsche 1967:428). History is full of examples of great creative genii who suffered in some form or another: Homer’s blindness, Beethoven’s deafness, Van Gogh who thought himself extremely unattractive and the ancient Greeks, from whose suffering the beautiful and timeless art of tragedy was born. However, as we have seen, the Greeks did not merely aim to produce a timeless form of art and beauty. Rather they intended tragedy as a cure or remedy for suffering. They found in tragic art a means to alleviate their suffering. Kaufmann notes that Nietzsche was all too aware of Greek tragedy as a “triumphant response to suffering” (1974:131). Nietzsche, in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1967), offers an eloquent thesis to explain exactly what led to the advent of the tragedy. He proposed that art in the form of the Greek tragedy sprang from Dionysian festivals. The Dionysian festivals were great celebrations in which the Greeks worshiped Dionysus, the mythical god of excess and ecstasy, and where crowds of thousands would join in frenzied dancing.

The individual loses any consciousness of his individuality when seized by this frenzy; he disappears into the excited crowd of revelers and blends with it. Individuals excite one another once they blend into the aroused group, which shares a set of visions and images. The Dionysian revelers believe that they are seeing and experiencing as one. Then, however, and every time the moment of awakening from this frenzy arrives anew, each person falls back into his isolation (Safranski 2003:61).

The Dionysian festivals were indeed an escape from a brutish reality through intoxication and unity. During these festivals, the individual was no longer aware of himself and his everyday reality. He/she was aware only of collective ecstasy. These festivals thus offered total freedom from suffering and the anguish of everyday life, albeit only while the festival lasted. Returning to a state of sobriety and individuality could indeed be a harrowing experience. The Dionysian festivals were therefore concluded with a tragedy as a means of easing the frenzied crowd into sobriety and a reality of suffering. As Safranski notes, this transition from a frenzied collective to sober isolation was a “risky” endeavour which demanded “ritual accompaniment and support” (2003:61). The Greeks therefore needed something to ease the transition from ecstasy back into horrid reality, and thus, Nietzsche believed, the tragedy was introduced. Greek tragedy, as we have seen in Chapter 1, is thought to alleviate suffering by universalizing it through collective sympathy for the protagonist or hero who suffers. Nietzsche adds that tragedy presented a visual depiction of the Dionysian festivals, a metaphoric drama depicting the entire process the individual experiences at the Dionysian festivals, i.e. an integration into the collective and the transition back to isolation (Safranski 2003:61). The collective on stage is represented by the chorus, while the individual is represented by the protagonist or hero. In the tragedy, it is always the protagonist who must endure suffering and never the chorus, who is rather depicted as a safe-haven from any suffering. This succeeds to depict, for the audience of the tragedy, the absence of suffering in the Dionysian festivals. For Nietzsche, the individual or protagonist in the tragedy “asserted their individuality against the collective chorus, coming to the fore and embodying living dissonance” (Safranski 2003:62). Suffering then is a reality for the protagonist only in his individuality and when he is separated from the chorus. However, before long the individual always returns to unite with the chorus both in music and body. This had

the purpose of portraying the process of the Dionysian festivals in which an individual, alone and suffering in the world, would enter into the collective state of the festivals represented by the chorus. The merger of the protagonist with the chorus is then a symbolic representation of the Greek individual retreating from the world into the collective of the Dionysian festival. The music from the chorus, Nietzsche insisted, evoked an intense sympathy from the audience for the protagonist and his suffering<sup>4</sup> (Safranski 2003:62).

Greek tragedy, as Nietzsche envisioned it, was art used to combat the individual's harsh return to a world of suffering from a state of euphoria and ecstasy found in the Dionysian collective. The individual transitions or returns from a state of collective frenzy to everyday consciousness, which Nietzsche dubbed *Dionysian consciousness*. This is a consciousness in which "only the horror and absurdity of existence are evident to him" (Nietzsche 1967:60). Nauseated by Dionysian consciousness, the individual finds solace in art.

Here when the danger to his will is greatest, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the *sublime* as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the *comic* as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity (Nietzsche 1967:60).

For Nietzsche, a life saturated with horrid absurdity and suffering can only find its justification when conceived of as an aesthetic phenomenon, a point which he famously opines in *The Birth of Tragedy* (Fraser 2002:67). Yet for him there is a deeper, more profound discovery here. Nietzsche believes that it is the very reality of horror, suffering and absurdity that gives rise to great art and, by extension, great beauty; an idea that would become a premise in his philosophy of self-creation. Greek tragedy is a resounding example: with their tremendous suffering the Greeks gave birth to a beautiful and timeless form of art. The closing lines of *The Birth of Tragedy* read: "How much did these people have to suffer to be able to become so

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<sup>4</sup> While words are subject to interpretation, music "goes right to your heart, as the true universal language that is understood everywhere" (Safranski 2003:62). The music reminds the audience of their shared struggle. It helps the audience identify with the protagonist and his suffering, thereby alleviating their own suffering through an awareness of their collective struggle.

beautiful” (Nietzsche 1967:144). Art was both the child of suffering and the healing physician.

Kaufmann notes that Nietzsche never renounced the idea that beauty is born of suffering (1974:132). Nietzsche’s later philosophical works only build upon this fundamental idea. The Greeks proposed three responses to suffering: medicine, art as tragedy, and philosophy. Nietzsche’s later works are an attempt to combine the creative power of art with the transformative power of philosophy in an attempt to overcome the problem of suffering. For this, Nietzsche turned to philosophy as the ancients understood and practiced it, that is, philosophy not as an academic discipline, but rather as a way of life able to transform both the self and one’s worldview. Nietzsche was not satisfied with producing something which is beautiful in the form of a great artwork, play, or musical masterpiece. Rather, he aimed at creating the perfect person. He wanted more than an external representation or symbol of one’s defiance of suffering. Equipped with the transformative power of practical philosophy, Nietzsche sought to *become* a beautiful artwork himself. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2005), Nietzsche proclaims that we should “re-create” ourselves, and that this creation should be our best. This was his answer to the problem of suffering and, by extension, the problem of nihilism. By providing suffering with a purpose and thereby creating meaning within suffering, nihilism or a life of meaningless suffering was no longer a threat.

In the chapter to follow, I shall argue that Nietzsche’s “eternal recurrence”, “*amor fati*” and his “will to power”, are all philosophical concepts in service of his quest to overcome suffering and nihilism. They signify processes that form the basis for what Nietzsche calls “self-creation”; a process able to restore ultimate meaning to all suffering. Eternal recurrence is the concept proposed by Nietzsche to signify the restoration of significance to our choices, while *amor fati* and the will to power constitute a radical affirmation and revaluation of suffering. Yet it is the amalgamation of these processes that, for Nietzsche, enables an individual to draw meaning, through self-creation, from suffering itself. Nietzsche was not satisfied simply with producing a beautiful artwork or great musical masterpiece, thereby temporarily alleviating the horrid suffering of existence with aesthetics. Rather, he wanted to become the masterpiece, a continuous artwork in which all suffering adds to the innovative process of self-creation. Nietzsche did therefore not seek to eradicate his

suffering. Rather, he sought to give it purpose in the service of self-improvement. As such, the process of self-creation resembles the spiritual exercises of ancient Greece. As I will show, not only does Nietzsche's philosophy resemble the ancient spiritual exercises in that it constitutes a transformation of the self. It also and equally shares the purpose of these exercises by directly addressing the problem of suffering. I shall begin with a brief exposition of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, *amor fati* and will to power.

## Chapter Three

### 3.1 Eternal Recurrence - A New Significance

[T]he ideal of the most exuberant, most living and most world-affirming man, who has not only learned to get on and treat with all that was and is but who wants to have it again as *it was and is* to all eternity, insatiably calling *da capo* [...] (Nietzsche 1990:82).

Eternal recurrence is the concept which lies at the very heart of Nietzsche's work. It is also the main teaching of the fictional prophet Zarathustra, featured in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2005). Nietzsche held this book to be "the highest book", and also the deepest, "born out of the inner most wealth of truth" (cited in Clark 1990:245). The idea of eternal recurrence first came to Nietzsche during August 1881. It was his first step towards an answer for nihilism, a means of restoring significance to a life of suffering and pain. Briefly put, this idea is a thought experiment which entices the individual to imagine their own life in every minute detail from birth to death, as an endlessly recurring phenomenon throughout eternity. This thought experiment restores significance to life in two ways. In the first instance, eternal return can influence our immediate *future* by acting as a decision criterion. Clarke summarizes this beautifully when she asserts that eternal recurrence combats nihilism by "intensifying the dynamics of choice: Our decisions and actions have a point because what we choose to be we shall be for eternity" (1990:250). Secondly, eternal return joins with Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati* to give new significance to *past* sufferings as well. I shall examine both possibilities presently. However, allow me to explore Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence in greater detail first.

Recall that Nietzsche's search to overcome his own suffering inadvertently led him to the discovery that Christianity, more than simply failing to live up to its claim of overcoming suffering, would lead to an unavoidable nihilism. He knew that when faced with nihilism, mankind would either be crushed by it or erect another idol. Nietzsche could not accept either of these solutions. He believed that nihilism could only be overcome by endowing mankind with an alternate form of meaning and significance, one that is not bound or sanctioned by any divinity or other metaphysical means. For Kaufmann, Nietzsche's eternal recurrence can be

understood as the “antithesis of any faith in another world” (1974:321). As Nietzsche writes in the prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “I beseech you, my brothers, *remain true to the earth*, and do not believe in those who speak to you in other worldly hopes” (2005:10). For Nietzsche, eternal recurrence was exactly that which could bestow new significance on all mankind without reverting to a supernatural agency. In an aphorism named, *The Heaviest Burden*, Nietzsche poses the following question in order to clarify the complexity of this idea:

What if a demon crept after thee into thy loneliest loneliness some day or night, and said to thee: This life, as thou livest it at present, and hast lived it, thou must live it once more, and also innumerable times; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh, and all the unspeakable small and great in thy life must come to thee again, and all in the same series and sequence - and similarly this spider and this moonlight among the trees, and similarly this moment, and I myself. The eternal sand-glass of existence will ever be turned once more, and thou with it, thou speck of dust! - Wouldst thou not throw thyself down and gnash thy teeth, and curse the demon that so spake? Or hast thou once experienced a tremendous moment in which thou wouldst answer him: Thou art a God, and never did I hear anything so divine! (2009:129).

In this aphorism Nietzsche introduces the idea of eternal recurrence by creating a scenario: a person is approached by a demon who reveals to him/her that his/her life would repeat throughout eternity exactly as it was before, without change and without end. What Nietzsche is able to do so brilliantly in this aphorism is to both have the reader imagine the ultimate nihilistic scenario, while simultaneously proposing its solution to him/her. We know that for Nietzsche, nihilism is a certainty in the wake of the death of God. Yet in this aphorism, Nietzsche is able to recreate nihilism by introducing its principle characteristic, namely, meaninglessness. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche explains that “[d]uration coupled with an ‘in vain’, without aim and end, is the most paralyzing thought” (1967:35). For Nietzsche, the only thing worse than nihilism (i.e a total loss of meaning and significance), is *eternal* nihilism. Nietzsche continues: “[l]et us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence as it is, without sense and aim, but recurring inevitably without a finale of nothingness:



the eternal recurrence” (1967:35). This aphorism allows the reader to imagine nihilism in its “most terrible form”, that is, essentially, the reader is able to envisage the fate of Sisyphus: an eternity of endless and meaningless suffering. Hearing the demon speak these words would confront an individual with the prospect of having to face his/her sufferings, which he/she experienced throughout his/her life, endlessly and without it having any meaning or significance. Nietzsche believes that the recipient of such a fate, a nihilistic eternity of suffering, would throw themselves down in utter despair and “curse the demon that so spake” (2009:129). Yet Nietzsche imagined that there could also be a second response to such a revelation. He wrote that “[i]f that thought acquired power over thee as thou art, it would transform thee, and *perhaps* crush thee” (2009:129; italics mine). Yes, a person captured by the nihilistic possibility could be crushed by its immense implications of eternal meaningless suffering. However, Nietzsche argued, he/she could also be filled with relief and gratitude towards the one who brings such a revelation. After all, the idea of eternal return proposes a twofold answer to nihilism. That is, more specifically, it restores significance on two fronts: both the future and the past. Every individual has a past, filled with pain and suffering of times gone by, as well as a future, filled with uncertainty of what one’s decisions would bring. In its application to the future, the idea of eternal recurrence becomes a decision criterion which offers direction and significance for every decision. In its application to the past, it combines with Nietzsche’s concept of *amor fati* in order to redeem past sufferings. I shall first consider the former, that is, the idea of eternal return as decision criterion.

### 3.2 Eternal Recurrence as Decision Criterion

Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence has often been met with mixed feelings. It has sparked many debates about how exactly it should be interpreted. On the one hand, an interpretation of eternal return could suggest that Nietzsche wished to establish some form of cosmological theory by claiming that this world and all its happenings will literally occur time and time again. On the other hand, there is the interpretation that Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence is simply an eloquent imperative which functions as a decision criterion. My discussion feeds on the work of Maudemarie Clarke (1990), who argues for the latter interpretation. Moreover, she argues that the very



*idea* of eternal recurrence does not even have to signify a plausible eventuality in order for it to function as a decision criterion.

Returning to the passage where eternal recurrence first appears, Clarke (1990:248) notes that in the absence of accompanying arguments to establish a claim for a cosmological theory, one has to conclude that Nietzsche has no interest in establishing such a theory. Of course, in opposition to the claim that Nietzsche never meant for eternal recurrence to function as a cosmological argument, some have pointed out that there are unpublished notes in which Nietzsche did in fact entertain the idea of eternal recurrence as a cosmological hypothesis. However, these notes were never published, nor are there any hints at such a claim wherever eternal recurrence appears in his published works (Clarke 1990:248). Nehamas similarly argues that, considering that Nietzsche saw himself and Zarathustra as the teachers of this phenomenal idea, the style of writing in which Zarathustra appears does not “tolerate an attempt at a scientific proof of the theory” (1985:143), and in those passages where Nietzsche describes himself to be the teacher, though the style and seriousness would tolerate it, we find that he chose not to include any proof for a cosmological interpretation. This leads Clarke and others to believe that the eternal return was never meant to function as a valid cosmological theory, but instead as a decision criterion. For Clark (1990:248), what Nietzsche wished to achieve with eternal return was in fact a decision criterion which would enable one to endow every decision with significance. Eternal recurrence, as a decision criterion, provides an eternal context for every decision, allowing one to consider each decision in the light of a scenario in which the decision, and its consequences, are yours to bear not only once, but an innumerable amount of times replaying throughout eternity. In other words, eternal recurrence can be considered as a thought experiment, able to make the individual pause and consider whether his/her decision is trivial or significant when considered against the vast context of eternity. With eternal recurrence, the individual has the means to consider whether his/her decision is truly one worth making, in that he/she would imagine himself/herself making that same choice again and again, for all eternity.

An important question raised concerning eternal recurrence as a decision criterion, is whether it could function as such in the absence of proof of its actuality. In other words, why should one consider decisions, and their consequences, in the light of an

“eternity” that would in all probability never “recur”? Clarke notes that it was Ivan Soll who started the trend of defending eternal recurrence as decision criterion by claiming that the reality of eternal recurrence has no bearing on its function as a decision criterion (1990:248). Clarke agrees with Soll, claiming that, “Nietzsche’s main concern is not the truth of recurrence, but the psychological consequences of accepting it” (1990:248). The truth of eternal return does not weigh upon its merit as a decision criterion and its ability to inform one in a psychological manner. Or, as Clark explains: “Affirming eternal recurrence depends in no way on believing recurrence to be true, probable, or even logically possible. It requires the *willingness* to live one’s life again, not the belief that one will, even as a mere possibility” (1990:252; italics mine). Thus understood, it stands to reason that eternal recurrence can indeed aid one in making more significant decisions. The significance which eternal return bestows on decisions would be that every decision one makes is one made for all eternity. It lends perspective to what is truly important in one’s life. After all, no one would want to repeat an eternity filled with trivialities.

Yet Nietzsche’s eternal return provides not only a criterion for decisions, it also provides a means to bestow significance on past sufferings. It is often our past tribulations which torment us most, and because of these past sufferings, one can imagine that some would be distraught by the very idea of eternal recurrence. Anyone with a past exceptionally filled with suffering would surely despair at the thought of endlessly experiencing that pain and anguish repeated throughout eternity. Nietzsche knew that the past was unchangeable and fixed, together with its suffering. Yet recall that for Nietzsche, suffering was a philosophical problem. He knew that in order to change the torment of suffering, even past suffering, he did not have to abolish or eradicate it, but rather endow it with meaning.

But how does the idea of eternal recurrence bestow significance and meaning, not only on past sufferings, but *all* events? In order to see how, we need to understand this idea in conjunction with Nietzsche’s *amor fati*. *Amor fati* is a principle of radical affirmation. Instead of avoiding pain and suffering, as his generation was inclined to do, Nietzsche insisted that one had to embrace suffering through radical affirmation. We have seen that for Nietzsche, the Christian faith was responsible for a generation who avoided pain and suffering, a generation who could only bear suffering in the hope of future reward and glory. He believed that these teachings were

counterproductive for those seeking redemption, meaning and solace. Not only did Christianity bring the threat of nihilism, but it also cultivated an attitude of resentment and avoidance towards pain and suffering. Such an attitude clashed with Nietzsche's radical affirmation and revaluation of suffering. In a time when everyone around him resented suffering, Nietzsche sought not only to embrace it, he ultimately strove to *love* it.

### 3.3 *Amor Fati* as Affirmation

As we saw, Nietzsche believed that a person faced with a revelation of his/her life recurring again and again throughout eternity would either experience joy and gratitude, or extreme anguish. For Nietzsche, affirmation was the most important step in overcoming suffering. He believed that the highest affirmation that one could achieve was what he called *amor fati*, the love of one's fate. However, before I examine Nietzsche's notion of *amor fati* at length, it would be appropriate to first consider some of the principles and virtues on which this prominent notion is based. Nietzsche's reference to Silenus and his perception of mankind as a "wretched ephemeral race" and the "children of change and misery" (1967:42; cf. also Chapter 2.2), makes it clear that for this ancient figure, mankind's only desire should be to have never existed. Nietzsche understood that he could never be free of suffering, but the eradication of suffering was not the goal of his quest; quite the opposite. Nietzsche rather wanted to endow his suffering, and for that matter all suffering, with new meaning and significance in order to make it bearable. This goal required one to possess two virtues above all others, namely *courage* and *honesty*. Nietzsche considered these to be "primary" virtues, and indispensable for the concept *amor fati* (Fraser 2002:59). For Nietzsche, it was only with these virtues that one could face Silenus' wisdom that all life is emphatically horrific. Indeed one cannot hope to endow suffering with meaning if one denies its existence. It is with courage and honesty that suffering should be met, in the manner of the Greeks "whose courage is celebrated in *The Birth of Tragedy*", along with their "unflinching capacity to say 'Yes' to whatever comes their way" (Clarke 1990:17). Honesty requires the individual to acknowledge his/her suffering in its totality and not avoid it or shy away from it in any manner. Facing the truth of one's suffering is however a frightful thing, which is why it often feels easier to avoid or deny its existence. It is for this reason that Nietzsche

links honesty to courage. Honesty requires courage. Facing suffering with honesty and courage lies at the root of Nietzsche's *amor fati*; an unwavering, uncompromising affirmation and love of one's fate. This fate, Nietzsche envisaged, was an *eternal return of the same*. As Zarathustra dramatizes: " 'Was *that* - life?' I will say to death. 'Well! One more!' " (Nietzsche 2005:273). *Amor fati*, therefore, is an affirmation of all suffering and joy alike, every aspect of one's life as it returns again and again, for all eternity. It is an appeal to love every aspect of one's life, the joyous moments as well as those that are painful; a conscious *willing* for all pain and all joy to return in the same manner for all eternity. At first glance this seems almost ridiculous, prompting the question as to why anyone would want to love that which causes them pain. However, as Nietzsche explains, any joyous moment that one may have had, is intrinsically entwined with all other moments including, and especially, moments of suffering:

Pain, too, is a joy [...] Have you ever said Yes to a single joy?... then you said Yes, too, to all woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored. If ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said 'you please me, happiness! Abide, moment!' then you wanted back all (2005:278).

Eternal return involves both joy and suffering. If one's life is to return again throughout eternity, both suffering and joy would return. Joy and suffering, then, cannot be separated. One cannot hope to repeat only those moments which brought pleasure and joy, nor would one only experience all the suffering and anguish. To embrace the joy that one has had throughout one's life, one must therefore indiscriminately embrace the painful too.

However, Nietzsche's reasoning goes beyond the simple fact that one cannot separate or be selective with past experiences. For him, suffering is not only intimately entwined with joy, suffering is seen as something to be joyous about and, ultimately, that which *causes* joy. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche proclaims:

My formula for greatness for a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it - all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary - but *love* it (2008:484).

Amor fati is Nietzsche's principle of radical affirmation. In order to overcome suffering, Nietzsche realized that one has to accept it. The test of true acceptance for Nietzsche was the ability to live it once more; to behold all of our suffering and to have it return again and again throughout eternity. Elsewhere he writes that *amor fati* is, in essence, to *will* the past into existence. As one looks back on past anguish, *amor fati* is an appeal to turn every, "Thus it was", into a, "Thus I willed it" (Nietzsche 1990:17). The past is then no longer something that merely happened and, in the context of eternal recurrence, it is no longer something which one passively experiences throughout eternity. *Amor fati* is rather an appeal to actively *will* that which has happened and to have it return again and again. Dove writes that *amor fati* suggests a matter of "introspection and confronting one's past; to be no longer ashamed of the ugly - the sickness, the slander - not merely accepting, but affirming all of one's own failing and misfortunes" (2008:34).

But why would anyone affirm his/her past sufferings? Asking someone who lost a child, for example, to love that dreadful experience and to *will* it again and again into eternity, seems absurd and monstrous at best. Yet for Nietzsche, willing that experience, that is, proclaiming that one would have it no other way, is the only way one could hope to bear such horrible bereavement. The revaluation of suffering can only transpire after its affirmation. The way to acquiring true joy and fulfilment does not go around suffering, but through it. That is why *amor fati* is of such importance to Nietzsche. As we shall see, Nietzsche believed that suffering is its own redemption. However, the individual who hates suffering, and continuously lives to avoid it, would never discover and revel in the value, joy and redemption suffering has to offer. In fact Nietzsche's view of suffering changed when he saw the value suffering brought to his own life:

I have often asked myself whether I am not more heavily obliged to the hardest years of my life than to any others. As my inmost nature teaches me, whatever is necessary - as seen from the heights and in the sense of a great economy - is also useful par excellence: one should not only bear it, one should love it. Amor fati: that is my inmost nature. And as for my long sickness, do I not owe it indescribably more than I owe to my health? I owe it a higher health - one which is made stronger by whatever does not kill it. *I owe my philosophy to it*" (cited in Dove 2008:35; italics mine).

For Nietzsche, suffering was not only an immutable fact of life, it was an absolutely crucial necessity for anyone hoping to do well in life. He realized that antagonism towards and avoidance of suffering are natural inclinations, begotten by baser beliefs and ideals. However, in the above passage Nietzsche gives testimony to the fortune his suffering has brought him. He praises his suffering and extends his gratitude. In fact, he proclaims elsewhere, rather smugly, that it is his “fate to have to be the first decent human being” (De Botton 2000:205); no doubt owing this decency to his suffering. He believed that suffering is the key to great individuals analogous to the way in which it is the key to great art (more about this later).

One might be inclined to think that, if this conception of Nietzsche holds true, there should hardly be an unexceptional person given all the suffering in the world. Yet it is well known that suffering is most commonly met with hatred, or avoided all together. For Nietzsche, this state of affairs necessitated a radical reevaluation of suffering, and his *amor fati*, as affirmation, is a crucial step towards this reevaluation. Nietzsche knew that it is only after its affirmation that suffering could bear its treasures. In *The Gay Science* he writes:

we so palpably see how everything that befalls us continually turns out for the best. Every day and every hour life seems to want nothing else than to prove this proposition again and again, be it what it may - bad or good weather, the loss of a friend, a sickness, slander, the absence of a letter, the spraining of an ankle, a glance into a shop, a counter-argument, the opening of a book, a dream, fraud - it shows itself immediately or very soon to be something that was not allowed to be lacking - it is full of deep meaning and use precisely for us (Nietzsche 2009:104).

All suffering, says Nietzsche, offers an opportunity for great personal growth. Reevaluating suffering is then to see hardships and tribulations not as life negating experiences, but rather as life affirming or life creating. One no longer takes a passive role towards suffering, that is to say, suffering is no longer an uncontrollable fate to which one resigns oneself, but rather a tool to be used towards the betterment of oneself through personal growth. This reevaluation forms the basis of Nietzsche's will to power as the crowning achievement in his quest to overcome suffering. The will to power is what he calls, the “essence of life” (Nietzsche 1990:259). The will to

power, for Nietzsche, is the very principle which bestows meaning on all suffering through utility and purpose. In the last part of this chapter, I shall consider the will to power as a concept in terms of Nietzsche radically reevaluates suffering.

### 3.4 The Will to Power as Revaluation

The will to power is perhaps one of Nietzsche's most misunderstood concepts. Bernard Reginster believes that the reason for this resides in a "particularly inviting interpretation of power in terms of control, or domination" (2006:104). Of course such an interpretation would suggest that the will to power is nothing but a search for control or domination, that when one speaks of the will to power, it would suggest need for power; even a need for power over others. However, Reginster believes that the proponents of this interpretation make one fundamental error: they all fail to see that what they take to be the essence of the will to power, is merely a by-product of it (2006:105). What Nietzsche's will to power entails can quite simply be understood as the *activity* of overcoming resistance. In his book titled *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche describes the concept as follows:

[A]ll expansion, incorporation, growth is striving against something that resists; movement is essentially tied up with states of displeasure; that which is here the driving force must in any event desire something less [than happiness] if it desires displeasure in this way and continually looks for it (1967:374).

In this passage Nietzsche beautifully encapsulates his notion of the will to power. It is a "striving against something that resists", or more specifically, a desire for overcoming resistance. Reginster points out again that Nietzsche is not saying that the will to power is a will to the "state in which resistance has been overcome", in other words, it is not a will to *satisfaction* or a *satisfied* state, nor is it "simply a will to resistance" (2006:126). For Reginster, the "expansion, incorporation and growth" of which Nietzsche speaks is not possible without success or overcoming, therefore the will to power can more accurately be understood as "the will to the very activity of overcoming resistance" (2006:127). In Nietzsche's own words, it is a "game of resistance and victory" (1967:353), a continual succession of resistance met with



victory only to be followed again by resistance. For Nietzsche, this resistance is by no means a pleasurable experience. He writes:

Humans beings do not seek pleasure and avoid displeasure. [...] What human beings want, what every smallest organism wants, is an increase of power; driven by that will they seek resistance, they need something that opposes it - Displeasure, as an obstacle to their will to power, is therefore a normal fact [...] human beings do not avoid it, they are rather in continual need of it (Nietzsche 1967:373).

All resistance is displeasurable as an obstacle to one's desires, and all life is in continual need of it. Indeed it was Schopenhauer, a philosopher whose work influenced Nietzsche's own in an extraordinary way, who defined suffering as the will's "hindrance through an obstacle placed between it and its temporary goal" (cited in Reginster 2006:133). Suffering for Schopenhauer is therefore considered as resistance against the will. But Nietzsche seeks to take it one step further in asserting that displeasure is not only essential, it is *desired*. At first glance it would seem ridiculous that anyone could desire displeasure, but Reginster clarifies Nietzsche's notion by pointing out that there is a hierarchy of desire for Nietzsche. One must understand that the desire behind the will to power is what Reginster calls a "second-order desire", meaning that the desire for resistance or displeasure must necessarily be subsequent to an initial, or first-order desire (2006:132). Consider an example: wanting a new sports car would be considered an initial or first-order desire, it is a desire we are conscious of and strive towards. However, this first-order desire would not be desirable should there be no resistance in obtaining it. The second-order desire is therefore an unconscious desire of the resistance to obtaining said sports car. The second-order desire is therefore a desire that makes the first-order desire possible. Because the will to power is not the will to satisfaction or the will to a satisfied state, but rather a will to the activity of overcoming resistance, it suggests the *desire* of resistance or a dissatisfaction against what is desired as a first-order desire. In fact, Nietzsche claims that pleasure is not begotten by the satisfaction of the will, but rather by opposition and overcoming of it. He writes:

[I]t is not the satisfaction of the will that causes pleasure, but rather the will's forward thrust and again and again becoming master over that which stands



in its way. The feeling of pleasure lies precisely in the dissatisfaction of the will, in the fact that the will is never satisfied unless it has opponents and resistance (Nietzsche 1967:370).

We see here that the will to power also emphasises the idea that joy and suffering are intertwined, and that suffering is presupposed in all desire. The very nature of pleasure and joy depends on resistance and suffering. This effectively shows that suffering is therefore not some unnatural abomination of life, but rather the very “essence of life”, as Nietzsche proclaims (1990:259). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2005), Nietzsche speaks of the crooked path the will must take in order to truly find joy and love: “[t]hat I must be struggle and becoming and goal and conflict of goals: ah, he who divines my will surely divines on what *crooked* path it must tread. Whatever I create and however much I love it - soon I must oppose it and my love; so my will wills it” (2005:101). It is in this sense that Nietzsche’s will to power accomplishes a total revaluation of suffering, where suffering is seen not as the opposition to joy, pleasure, fortune and life, but rather as that which precedes it. Resistance and suffering is exactly that which makes it possible to experience joy, pleasure and true fulfilment. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the will to power constitutes a revaluation of suffering in that it shows how all growth presupposes suffering. Thus, if suffering is understood to precede joy, pleasure and growth as the very essence of life, then suffering becomes useful and, indeed, valuable. Reginster shares this conclusion when he writes that the doctrine of the will to power

radically alters our conception of the role and significance of suffering in human existence. If, in particular, we take power - the overcoming of resistance - to be a value, then we can see easily how it can be the principle behind a revaluation of suffering. Indeed, if we value the overcoming of resistance, then we must also value the resistance that is an ingredient of it. Since suffering is defined by resistance, we must also value suffering (2006:177).

This revaluation allowed Nietzsche to bring to light the value of suffering. Suffering is no longer seen as a life negating experience, but rather a life constituting and life affirming principle. It is for this reason that the will to power becomes the very

foundation of Nietzsche's process of self-creation. As a final step towards the solution for nihilism and an answer to the problem of suffering, Nietzsche, as I shall presently explain, combines the above-mentioned philosophies – the will to power, *amor fati*, and eternal recurrence - as a transformative therapy with the creative beauty of art to form a process which he called self-creation. Art plays a critical role in self-creation as this process of transformation implies an element of creativity. It is this process which, for him, gives meaning to all suffering, meaning in the form of creation and beauty. He therefore proclaims: "I shall thus be one of those who beautify things" (Nietzsche 2009:103).

## Chapter Four

### 4.1 Self-Creation and the Self as *Being* and *Becoming*

Transform yourselves [...] and let that be your best creation (Nietzsche 2005:75).

Nietzsche's self-creation, so I argued (cf. Chapter 2), was inspired by Greek tragic art. Greek tragedy, as an art form, was a response to the problem of suffering, a means of making suffering bearable. The principle of suffering as the driving force behind art and beauty is a prominent feature in Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1967). This principle is not only a source of inspiration for Nietzsche's self-creation, but it is also the very embodiment of it. Nietzsche proclaims that as one who has affirmed and revaluated suffering, he has the "right to regard [himself] as the first *tragic philosopher* – that is to say, the most extreme antithesis and antipodes of a pessimistic philosopher" (2008:495). He sees himself as the complete opposite of the pessimistic philosopher through his affirmation of all suffering, by saying yes to "contradiction and war", and "the eternal lust of Becoming itself" (Nietzsche 2008:495). The aim of Nietzsche's philosophy of self-creation is to literally empower the individual to fashion himself/herself anew. This process of self-creation is, by its very nature, a process of self-improvement in which the individual uses all resistance, suffering and hardship towards the betterment of himself/herself. As an embodiment of the creative beauty of art, self-creation is firmly grounded within philosophy, for as we have seen, it is Nietzsche's *amor fati*, eternal recurrence, and the will to power which drive and constitute the affirmation and revaluation of suffering. Nietzsche describes this idea of self-creation as an overcoming of suffering particularly well in a letter to his friend Overbeck:

If I do not discover the alchemists' trick of turning even this filth into gold, I am lost. - thus I have the most beautiful opportunity to prove that for me, all experience are useful, all days holy, and all human beings divine!!!! (cited in Kaufmann 1974:59)

In this letter, Nietzsche recites the old lore of the alchemists' philosopher's stone. The philosopher's stone is said to have the extraordinary power to turn base elements into precious metals, like gold and silver (Ragai 1992:61). Nietzsche is comparing

himself to an alchemist in search for this precious element with which he could turn the “filth” of his suffering into something beautifully rare and valuable. Self-creation is Nietzsche’s philosopher’s stone, his opportunity to show that “all experiences are useful, and that all humans are divine”. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2005) he proclaims: “[c]reation - that is the great redemption from suffering, and life’s becoming light. But that the creator may be, much suffering itself is needed and much change” (Nietzsche 2005:76). It is through the process of self-creation that Nietzsche gives meaning to his suffering. Or, in Kaufmann’s words, “instead of relying on heavenly powers to redeem him, to give meaning to his life, and to justify the world, he gives meaning to his own life by achieving perfection and exulting in every moment” (1974:324). Nietzsche sought to transform his suffering into something of worth and his philosophy of self-creation provided the means to do so. However, before I consider Nietzsche’s self-creation at length, it would be prudent to briefly consider his notion of the self.

Nietzsche’s understanding of the self was, like many of his other notions, quite controversial at the time. For him the self was not a concrete and enduring entity, but rather the sum of one’s experiences and therefore subject to change. Nietzsche believed that not only can one change, but that change was all that we can be certain of. Nietzsche’s work concerning the self focuses largely on the distinction between *being* and *becoming*, or rather, the lack of a distinction between them. According to Nietzsche, these concepts are not at all related as we commonly suppose (Nehamas 1985:170). Commonly we would consider the individual as a being, a singular unity with a will by means of which he/she acts upon the world. Moreover, being is often thought of as the end product of becoming. But this notion, Nietzsche believes, is false and misleading. Being and becoming are two sides of the same coin. The self, Nietzsche writes, is like truth: not something that “might be found or discovered - but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a *will to overcome* that has in itself no end” (cited in Nehamas 1985:174). Or, as he also puts it, there is no eternal soul within our being who projects character unto the world:

Active, successful natures act, not according to the dictum “know thyself”, but as if there hovered before them the commandment: *will* a self and thou shalt *become* a self (Nietzsche 1996:294).

The idea of understanding the subject as that which can be discovered reaches back to ancient Greece and Socrates' charge to "know thyself". The charge to know oneself assumes an entity or being to be known, that is, discovered. But, for Nietzsche, the self is not some dormant or mysterious "thing" that can be discovered. It is rather that which must continually be created. The self must be willed into existence, it is something that you must *become*. Nietzsche's understanding of the self centres largely around a phrase, which features several times in his works, where he urges us time and again to become who we are:

For *that* is what I am through and through: reeling, reeling in, raising up, raising, a raiser, cultivator, and disciplinarian, who once counselled himself, not for nothing: Become who you are! (2005:204).

The paradox within his incitement, to become what you already are, may seem quite puzzling at first. It seems as though Nietzsche is implying that one ought to *be* who one is, while also *becoming* who one is. This of course makes little sense; being and becoming, after all, are thought to be logically exclusive; being follows becoming and, therefore, they cannot coexist. However, Nietzsche would insist that what makes this puzzling is simply our preconceived notion of the self, that is, our understanding of the individual as a singular unified being. We understand being as an entity who acts upon the world by his own volition. But, so he argues, the very idea of "*a self*", as a singular entity, a unity of volition, is nothing but an invention, spurred on largely by a misuse of language:

[T]he ego as Being, and substance and the faith in the ego as substance is projected into all things - in this way, alone, the concept of "thing" is created. Being is thought into and insinuated into everything as cause; from the concept "ego", alone, can the concept of "Being" proceed. At the beginning stands the tremendously fatal error of supposing the will to be something that actuates - a faculty. Now we know that it is only a word (Nietzsche 2008:315)

Nietzsche thus turns the conventional understanding of self on its head. The individual as a "being" is challenged by Nietzsche who believes that being, as an entity, is wrongly assumed as cause for every deed. "There is no such substratum", he asserts, "there is no being behind the deed, its effect and what becomes of it; the

doer is invented as an afterthought, - the doing is everything” (Nietzsche 1997:26). Nietzsche, therefore, does not believe in the monolithic unity of “being”. In fact, he is suspicious of all unity. Instead he believes that everything is in constant change, much like the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who first proposed that all existence is always in a state of flux. For Nietzsche, there is an absence of stability and unity. This absence characterizes the world and all life, rendering everything into a state of constant change: “If the motion of the world aimed at a final state, that state would have been reached. The sole fundamental fact, however, is that it does not aim at a final state” (Nietzsche 1967:377). Everything is in a state of continual change without a final state as goal. Nietzsche’s prophet Zarathustra is the main advocate for this idea of constant change:

All the permanent - that is only a parable! [...] But the best parables should speak of time and becoming: let them be a praise and a justification of all impermanence! [...] there must be much bitter dying in your life, you creators! Thus you are advocates and justifiers of all impermanence. For the creator himself to be the new-born child, he must also be willing to bear the child and to endure the pains of childbirth (2005:76).

We see here that, for Nietzsche, the idea of constant change holds true not only for the natural world, but also and specifically for the individual. Yet, the individual is not commonly understood in terms of this constant change. He/she is rather understood as a unified being who, as such, acts upon the world. This, Nietzsche believes, is a problem of perspective. We witness the deed and immediately assume the doer. But, he argues, there is no *being* that does the deed, the doer is an invention or assumption on our part. The key to understand the subject therefore lies not with the doer, but the deed. Instead of assuming a being and a will behind our deeds, we should focus on the deeds themselves. The individual should be considered as a deed, or, more precisely, a succession of deeds. Viewing the individual as a succession of deeds has the advantage of simplifying the conundrum of who we are. Viewed this way the individual is not a complex unit of emotions, desires and personality, but rather something more tangible. We are our past. Our deeds define us and become us. This ties in with Nietzsche’s claim that we are the sum of our past experiences; experiences which are constituted by our deeds. If an individual is the sum of his/her experiences and actions, any change in his/her past experience would

not only alter the course of his/her life, but, by extension, also change the individual himself/herself. This is also the underlying notion of Zarathustra's famous words, "Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? Oh my friends, then you have said Yes to all woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enarmoured" (Nietzsche 2005:278). As we have seen, for Nietzsche, all suffering and joy are intertwined. But this idea is more complex. The self would undoubtedly be altered should one change any past experience. Nietzsche writes in the *Will to Power*: "[i]f we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence" (1967:532). Thus, for Nietzsche, existence itself is intertwined with the self, "for everything is so bound up with everything else, that to want to exclude something means to exclude everything" (Nietzsche 1967:165). What this entails, essentially, is that all events, not only that which the individual experienced in his own history, but all past events lead up to the exact culmination of each individual. In other words, if an individual was to read about some ancient battle and its brutality, for example, and thereby be empathetically moved to compassion in wishing such an event never took place, then that individual may be negating his/her very existence. To wish change on any past event, is to wish a completely different present in which the person who wished it might not even exist. Nehamas (1985:156) explains that it is for this reason that the demon in Nietzsche's aphorism, *The Heaviest Burden*, offers us the exact same life, and not one with even the slightest change. Nehamas explains furthermore that, for Nietzsche, a life with the slightest change would simply not be our life (1985:156). Any change would produce a "self" which would simply not be you. Therefore, to wish any change in one's life, no matter how slight, amounts to a complete denial of the self.

The self is then not simply a *thing* or *being* who acts, for Nietzsche, but he/she is rather the act itself. There is no distinction between the deed and the doer; in the same way that thinking can't be separated by its contents, so too, Nietzsche believes, it is impossible to separate the deed and the doer. To think is to always think of *something*; to will is always to will with effect. The act as effect cannot be separated from the will. As he explains:

There is no such thing as "willing", but only a willing *something*: one must not remove the aim from the total condition [...] "Willing" as [we]

understand it is as little a reality as “thinking”: it is a pure fiction (Nietzsche 1967:353).

Nehamas notes that what we, according to Nietzsche, must attribute to the notion of self is the “sum of its acts along with their contents: each subject is constituted not simply by the fact that it thinks, wants, and acts but also by precisely *what* it thinks, wants, and does” (1985:180). In *The Will to Power* (1967), Nietzsche uses a political metaphor in order to clarify the nature of subject-unity. He (1967:271) describes the subject as a “regent at the head of a communality”, where the “dependence of these regents upon the ruled and of an order of rank and division of labour” are the very “conditions that make possible the whole and its parts”, and where “the struggle expresses itself in obeying and commanding”. Just as the regent is kept and appears as a unity, that is, through “struggle” and “division”, so too the individual, as a multiplicity, seems to act as a unified subject. He adds that there is also a “relative ignorance” in keeping the regent, ignorance of “individual activities and even disturbances within the communality”, these are all vital part of its continuity (Nietzsche 1967:271). In spite of appearing as a unified whole, in much the same way as a political system would appear as acting in unity, there are, hidden beneath the surface, a system which is actually in utter disunity<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, Nietzsche seems to say, this disunity is a crucial condition for the continued rule of the regent. To put this into perspective in terms of the individual: Nietzsche is saying that although it appears to us as if the individual who acts does so as a unified subject with a single integrated will, the underlying thoughts, feelings and wills, which cannot be separated from the deed, are in fact in utter disunity by contradiction.

We are therefore a multiplicity of contradicting states; thoughts, desires and wills. For Nietzsche, “a single individual contains within him a vast confusion of contradictory valuations and consequently of contradictory drives” (1968:149). Nehamas also notes that, according to Nietzsche, our “thoughts contradict one another and contrast with our desires, which are themselves inconsistent and are in turn belied by our actions” (1985:180). Because we are a culmination of conflicting states, what appears to embody the subject as a unified being, is only the dominant state at the

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<sup>5</sup> A regent or country seems to function as a unified whole with a singular will when making decisions and acting upon them. However, the process of reaching these decisions and mobilizing the entire regent as a whole is not a straight forward and easy process. There is usually opposition to the decision and the execution thereof, yet this is seldom known or seen by individuals outside of the regent.



time of action. It is these states that “speak with the voice of the self when they are manifested in action” (Nehamas 1985:181). But this self is not at all a stable “regent”, and can be overthrown at any stage by another “regent”. Thus, for Nietzsche, there is no unified self that accounts for our actions as we presuppose. Rather, the subject is a multiplicity:

The assumption of one single subject is perhaps unnecessary; perhaps it is just as permissible to assume a multiplicity of subjects, whose interaction and struggle is the basis of our thought and our consciousness in general? [...] *My hypothesis: The subject as multiplicity* (1967:270).

Or, to return to the political metaphor, it is clear that in the same way a communality can only *appear* as a unity, but never embody unification, Nietzsche believes that the self can only appear as a unified being, but that in reality the self is constituted by struggle and conflict. Amelie Rorty sums up this conception of the self as a “loose configuration of habits, habits of thought and perception and motivation and action, acquired at different stages, in the service of different ends” (cited in Nehamas 1985:182). These habits, states, character traits are all in competition for domination. This struggle for domination places the will to power at the very centre of who we are. The self is unequivocally and entirely determined by the will to power; it is the essence of all life, as Nietzsche puts it, and the foundation of who we are. The will to power is a striving for dominance. Nietzsche is therefore saying that the principle of the will to power underlies the struggling nature of our competing wills. Being, then, is not a state which succeeds the process of becoming, being *is* the very process of becoming, of creating oneself, driven by the will to power. Nietzsche writes that “[t]o impose upon the becoming the character of being: that is the supreme will to power” (Nietzsche 1967:330). Becoming who we are, can therefore be seen as a call to integrate “one’s character traits, habits, and patterns of action with one another” (Nehamas 1985:185), in order to give style to one’s character:

*One Thing is Needful.* - To ‘give style’ to one’s character that is a grand and a rare art! He who surveys all that his nature presents in its strength and in its weakness, and then fashions it into an ingenious plan, until everything appears artistic and rational, and even the weaknesses enchant the eye - exercises that admirable art (Nietzsche 2009:108).

The will to power forms the foundation of the self as a continuous struggle for dominance. Nietzsche envisages the individual who, in order to become who he/she is, identifies those habits, character traits, and patterns of action, all of which are desirable, in order to form them into a harmonious appearing being. He speaks of the inner war; a war of “contrary drives and values” (Nietzsche 1990: 121), which, when left to their own devices, cultivates a weakness in men. “If, however”, he continues,

the contrariety and war in such a nature should act as one *more* stimulus and enticement to life – and if, on the other hand, in addition to powerful and irreconcilable drives, there has also been inherited and cultivated a proper mastery and subtlety in conducting a war against oneself, that is to say self-control, self-outwitting: then there arise those marvellously incomprehensible and unfathomable men, those enigmatic men predestined for victory (Nietzsche 1990:122).

The individual therefore has two choices set before him: he/she could either strive for a mastery of his/her inner conflicts as an art of self-creation, or he/she could succumb to the chaotic drives. Vasti Roodt comments that there are clearly “two modes of being human as two particularisations of the will to power, one which fails to organize its multiplicity, [...] and another which manages to sustain itself in the midst of this struggle and opposition between drives” (Roodt 2005:105). Nietzsche believed that Goethe was one individual who were able to reach such a unity of the self: “[t]hat to which he aspired was *totality*; [...] he disciplined himself into a harmonious whole, he *created* himself” (Nietzsche 2008:370-371). Becoming and being is therefore indivisible. Becoming who we are is to take that which is there, that is, the multiplicity of conflicting states of the subject, and giving style to one’s character by artfully integrating them into a desirable character. Nehamas notes that “the creation of the self therefore appears to be the creation, or imposition, of a higher-order accord among our lower-level thoughts, desires, and actions” (1985:188). But this is a process which has no end goal or final state. For Nietzsche, “all who are ‘in the process of becoming’ must be furious<sup>6</sup> when they perceive some satisfaction in this area” (1967:68). It is a continuous process in so far as one is always met with new experiences to be appropriated in the process of becoming. “To

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<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche detests the idea of becoming comfortable and satisfied. The individual should strive for a constant dissatisfied state of becoming.

become what one is, we can see, is not to reach a specific state and to stop becoming - it is not to reach a state at all" (Nehamas 1985:191). Considering the individual as a process of becoming underpins Nietzsche's philosophy of self-creation. As such, the radical affirmation and revaluation of suffering forms an integral part of this process of becoming, and so suffering becomes meaningful to the individual. To this I shall now turn.

#### 4.2 Self-creation as Practical Philosophy and Ultimate Meaning

Recall that for Hadot and Nussbaum, ancient philosophy was practiced as therapy in aid of human suffering, and that, unlike philosophy academically understood today, philosophy "did not consist in teaching an abstract theory - much less in the exegesis of texts - but rather in the art of living" (Hadot 1995:83). Indeed, Hall (2012:156) enlighten us to the fact that the problem of suffering was the very reason for the advent of philosophy in ancient Greece (cf. Chapter 1). Philosophy had a singular goal for the Greeks to assuage the anguish of human suffering. I have shown that the Greeks accomplished this goal through a transformation of the individual, meaning that philosophy as therapy was a very practical matter to be exercised by the individual and philosopher. These "spiritual exercises", as Hadot calls them, constituted "a transformation of our vision of the world" and a "metamorphosis of our personality" (1995:82). Philosophy as "a way of life" was thus a process of "spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being" (Hadot 1995:265). Thus understood, Nietzsche's philosophy is no less than an embodiment of this ancient spiritual practice. It similarly constitute a radical transformation, not only of the individual himself/herself, but also of their view on suffering and life in general. Ultimately Nietzsche's philosophy serve as a therapy in his struggle with the problem of suffering and nihilism.

Let us therefore consider once more Nietzsche's philosophy, as discussed in the foregoing chapters, while keeping in mind the nature of Hadot's spiritual exercises. For Hadot, ancient philosophy took the "form of an exercise of the thought, the will, and the totality of one's being" (1995:265). That is to say, ancient philosophy, as a therapy, was not simply the acquisition of abstract knowledge, but a practical means of living which permeated the individual in thought, will, and action. Indeed, there was

no aspect of the individual which remained unaffected by philosophy practiced as a way of life, a feature, I have argued, that is shared by Nietzsche's philosophy. His philosophy of self-creation as eternal recurrence, *amor fati* and the will to power, had the singular goal of restoring meaning and significance to suffering and all of existence, through a complete and radical transformation of the individual and his/her interpretation of suffering, and by extension, all life.

The will to power by its very nature necessitates a continuous search for resistance with a desire to overcome it (cf. Chapter 3). As such, it necessitates a complete reevaluation of suffering, hardship and life in general. A person exercising this philosophy would consequently see suffering, hardship, and tribulation of any kind, not as a crippling memory or something to be avoided and despised, but rather as an opportunity for personal growth, fulfilment and happiness. Such a person would not simply wait passively for suffering and resistance, he/she would rather seek suffering and resistance as opportunities for growth and happiness. The will to power, as the driving force of self-creation, motivates the individual to seek out resistance towards the betterment of himself/herself. For this reason Nietzsche constantly promoted a warring state, in which one does not only wait for suffering or hardship to come, but in which one actively seeks them. Nietzsche writes elsewhere that, "saying Yes to opposition and war; becoming, along with a radical repudiation of the very concept of being – all this is clearly more closely related to me than anything else thought to date" (2008:495). Nietzsche refused to see himself as a static being passively subjected to suffering. He saw himself rather as a *becoming*, welcoming opposition and suffering in the process of self-creation. Consequently, Nietzsche knew that in times of respite from one's suffering or hardship, one should seek yet again an opportunity to grow, an opportunity for resistance, opposition and suffering: "You should love peace as a means to new wars - and the short peace more than the long" (Nietzsche 2005:43). Self-creation, driven by the will to power, allows suffering and hardship to acquire new meaning as a means to self-improvement. Therefore, Nietzsche did not want to spare himself any suffering, and it is with this frame of mind that he wrote: "That which does not kill me, makes me stronger" (2008:304). As Dove notes: "[t]he diminishment of pain is at its core the diminishment of the possibility for great human beings" (2008:61). Moreover, recall that for Nietzsche, pain and joy are inseparable and that to diminish pain would inevitably diminish one's

joy. He writes: “Should you decide to decrease and diminish people’s susceptibility to pain, you also have to decrease and diminish their capacity for joy” (2009:12). This sheds light on a particularly strange remark in *The Will to Power*, where Nietzsche writes:

to those human beings who are of any concern to me I wish suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, indignities – I wish that they should not remain unfamiliar with profound self-contempt, the torture of self-mistrust, the wretchedness of the vanquished (1967:481).

Far from being a sadist, Nietzsche’s wish for ill times and suffering on those he cared for, though quite controversial, was in fact well intentioned. It is only through suffering and hardship that he believed one could come to understand and experience true fulfilment and happiness, as well as personal growth. Therefore, to wish all sorts of hardship and tribulation upon those he cared for, was to wish for them the means to achieve fulfilment, happiness and growth. Avoiding pain was then not the key to fulfilment for Nietzsche, as De Botton rightly points out. Rather, it was the recognition of its “role as a natural, inevitable step on the way to reaching anything good” (De Botton 2000:10).

Nietzsche believed that self-creation reaches into the past as well. However, since the past is fixed and unchangeable, this seems unlikely. Creation or becoming by definition necessitates the act of changing, presenting a challenge when it comes to the past, which could never change. Yet Nietzsche did not want to physically change the past. For him, we can only affirm the past. But precisely therein lies the key to its transformation. As we have seen, the philosophies of eternal recurrence and *amor fati* are exactly that which enables one to affirm every aspect of one’s life and thereby redeem it. “To redeem what is past, and to transform every ‘It was’ into ‘thus would I have it!’ – that alone do I call redemption” (Nietzsche 2005:121). For Nietzsche, the very act of affirming is also an act of creation. He writes that “[t]he will is a creator” and every “it was”, is nothing but “a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident - until the creative will says to it, ‘But thus I willed it’” (Nietzsche 2005:121). To affirm the past is to recreate it entirely. This recreation is not a recreation in which one literally changes the past. Rather, it is a recreation of the mind. Or, as Nehamas observes: “Through a new way of life, [Nietzsche] believes, even the past can be changed”

(1985:160). To recreate the past is, quite simply, to transform one's viewpoint of it by affirming it in its entirety. To turn every "it was" into a "thus would I have it!", is an act of creation in which one creates the self by affirming everything the self consists of. The view one has of the self "affects crucially that very nature of my past" (Nehamas 1985:160). Nietzsche's *amor fati* and eternal return, do not involve the recreation of the actual past or the world, but rather of our *interpretation* of the past and ourselves. It is this change which for Nietzsche can be nothing other than a beautiful process of creation. Kaufmann writes that the "man who perfects himself and transfigures his physis, achieves ultimate happiness and experiences such an overwhelming joy that he no longer feels concerned about the justification of the world: he affirms it forward, backwards, and in all eternity" (1974: 324). What Kaufmann is saying is that ultimate happiness is consequently a product of affirming one's life in its entirety. This is perhaps why Nietzsche deems his affirmation of life to be his single greatest philosophical achievement (Reginster 2006:228).

The creation of the self is then, firstly, a willingness to accept responsibility for the past, to admit that the past completely constitutes who we are, and to love every facet of it by willing it into existence time and again in order to affirm and love ourselves. Secondly, it is to continually seek out that which resists the will with the desire to overcome it. We now understand Nietzsche's self-creation as an amalgamation of *amor fati* and eternal recurrence as a total affirmation of all life by willing it to return throughout eternity in its entirety, together with the will to power as a revaluation of suffering by seeing all hardship and tribulation as a means to grow and better oneself. These philosophical concepts, which signify the process of self-creation, inform spiritual exercises. They require a full commitment from the individual. *Amor fati* as merely a theoretical appropriation or theory, offers no value or meaning to the individual's life. Its value resides only in the continuous renewal of thought, in which one affirms every aspect of one's past and self. The love of fate, which is the love for oneself and all of existence, is then the goal of this radical affirmation and a critical part of the process of self-creation. Eternal recurrence would also not weigh down personal decisions with significance if one does not consider its implications, that is to say, if one does not *will* all of existence, all experiences, and therefore all of oneself to return again and again in absolute similarity throughout eternity. Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, *amor fati*, and the will to power, constitute a

change of thought, will, and action. Yet it is Nietzsche's philosophy of self-creation, as an amalgamation, which enables a complete transformation or metamorphosis of the individual being. Similar to spiritual exercises, Nietzsche's self-creation effectively transforms the individual's perspective of the world and consequently the individual himself/herself. In this sense Nietzsche's philosophy can be considered as spiritual exercises, and ultimately, a way of life.

In the chapter to follow, I want to consider the plausibility of Nietzsche's philosophy as a practical philosophy. His philosophy of self-creation as eternal recurrence, *amor fati* and the will to power, is a radical revaluation and affirmation of suffering in order to overcome it. Yet, as we have seen, this affirmation might ask too much, perhaps even the impossible. Consider again, for example, someone whose child passed away. Nietzsche's philosophy would have such a person face the full brunt of their pain in order to not only affirm it, but also to will it to return time and again throughout eternity, for the purpose of growth and self-betterment. As cruel and harsh as this may seem, Nietzsche believed it to be the only way in which one can truly overcome the reality of suffering. On this point, Giles Fraser, in his book *Redeeming Nietzsche* (2002), argues that Nietzsche lacked the courage and honesty to face his own suffering, giving weight to the idea that his philosophy asks too much of the suffering individual. Indeed, if the creator of this philosophy proves unable to fully commit to his own standards, why should it be considered as a plausible practical philosophy? For Fraser, Nietzsche's emphasis on the virtues of courage and honesty was quite ironic, given his inability to confront his own suffering with courage and honesty. Moreover, Fraser believes that Nietzsche's view of suffering was grievously mitigated by nineteenth century romanticism, meaning that because of the cultural influence of his time, Nietzsche did not really understand the true horror of suffering. Using the horrific reality of suffering in the Nazi death-camps, Fraser argues that Nietzsche was completely ignorant of the nature of *true* suffering and that, given his incapacity to face even his own distorted view of suffering, it follows that his quest to overcome suffering failed by his own standards. As I shall explain, I do not find fault with Fraser's argument. Yet Fraser's contention could undermine my aim to show that Nietzsche's philosophy is a plausible and viable practical philosophy. But if Nietzsche failed by his own standards, does it then follow that self-creation is implausible? I think not. In the following chapter I hope to establish the plausibility of Nietzsche's

philosophy by showing that it is indeed possible to do what Fraser argues Nietzsche could not, that is, to face the true horror of suffering with courage and honesty in a process of self-creation.



## Chapter Five

### 5.1 The Problem of Suffering as the Problem of Shit

As we have seen, Nietzsche's most important step in his philosophy of self-creation is a complete affirmation of suffering through an eternal *willing* of the same. Nietzsche believed that in order to overcome suffering, one cannot avoid it or simply bear it. Instead, one has to love suffering and will it to return endlessly. For Nietzsche this necessitates two virtues, viz. courage and honesty. The individual who affirms the entirety of his/her suffering cannot do so other than with courage. Equally, the individual who affirms his/her suffering cannot do so without being completely honest about it. Fraser's charge against Nietzsche is that he not only failed to face his own suffering and thereby lack courage, but also that, in a manner of speaking, Nietzsche was insufficiently honest about suffering itself, that is to say, Nietzsche did not fully grasp the horror of true unmitigated suffering. I shall examine the latter charge first.

Fraser believes that Nietzsche's work misrepresents the true horror of suffering, that it is essentially a "denial of shit" (Fraser 2002:123). In order to understand this accusation, one requires first an understanding of absolute horror as seen by Fraser. Fraser distinguishes between two concepts of evil: lament evil and blame evil (Fraser 2002:122). Lament evil, he explains, is very different from blame evil, which can be understood as the "sufferer looking for the provenance of his suffering" (2002:123). Lament evil, on the other hand, is understood as evil which "describes the horror of human pain, the cry of the afflicted" (Fraser 2002:123). For Fraser, the only evil that could fit the description of lament, is that found in the Nazi death-camps. He calls lament evil, or evil as seen in the Nazi death-camps, not the problem of suffering, but "the problem of shit" (2002:123). Fraser has two reasons for the use of this nonacademic word. Firstly, the word "shit" plays a key role for Fraser in that it appropriately illuminates the absolute horror of the death-camps where excrement and faeces were used as a means of torture and humiliation by the Nazi guards. The second purpose is that the vulgar nature of the word also serves to bring a sobering element to the horror of genocide without distorting this horror. Fraser draws on various essays, including Terrence Des Pres' *Excremental Assault* (2003), to explain the pervasiveness of excrement in the death-camps and, ultimately, how these

death-camps embody what he calls the problem of shit. Not only was dirt and excrement a permanent condition of existence, but excrement and faeces became an effective means of torture and humiliation as inmates were forced to relieve themselves where they stood (Fraser 2002:123). For Fraser, shit became both a symbol of the Nazi death-camps and true unmitigated suffering. Although Fraser realizes that the word “shit” is likely thought inappropriate in academic context, he believes that it is exactly for this reason that it should be used. He explains: “[T]he shocking vulgarity of shit is the only way properly to open academic discourse to the reality of genocide” (Fraser 2002:124). Moreover, the word is valuable in that it is so “thoroughly resistant to any form of philosophical appropriation; it cannot be readily co-opted into a philosophical system or distorted into a technical term” (Fraser 2002:124). It is clear that, for Fraser, the problem of shit can be seen as the epitome of horror and suffering.

As mentioned, Fraser criticises Nietzsche’s work for being a denial of shit, that is, an avoidance of true horror. For Fraser, Nietzsche’s work is a denial of shit in that it is “shaped considerably by the effects of kitsch” (2002:126). To say that something is kitsch, for Fraser, is to say that something is “cheap, gaudy and crass”, which emphasises “sentiment as a way of hiding its lack of aesthetic content” (2002:125). Fraser’s appreciation of Nietzsche’s work as kitsch, is fitting when considered in context of our examination of Nietzsche’s philosophy as self-creation. I have argued that Nietzsche’s philosophy of self-creation was inspired by his study of Greek tragedy, and that underlying this philosophy is the notion that suffering drives the creation of art. Yet for Fraser, “[k]itsch art is a lie, it wholly distorts reality by denying the perspective of the afflicted, by denying the horror, by denying shit” (2002:125). Kitsch is a “beautifying gloss, and as a gloss a strategy of denial” (Fraser 2002:125). Nietzsche’s philosophy of self-creation would then be nothing more than a lie, in that Nietzsche misrepresents the true nature of suffering at the core of this philosophy. Indeed, Fraser believes that kitsch is “insufficiently honest” in that it prefers, wherever possible, “sentimental fantasy to painful reality” (2002:126). As mentioned, Nietzsche holds honesty and courage to be primary virtues. By characterizing Nietzsche’s work as kitsch, Fraser is accusing Nietzsche of being dishonest and, basically, a coward by his own standards.

Fraser's claim is grounded in Nietzsche's affirmation of aristocratic or "high-brow kitsch" as he calls it (2002:133). High-brow kitsch was especially prevalent in nineteenth-century German literature, and the way literature depicted suffering during the nineteenth-century must have had a considerable influence on Nietzsche's conception of suffering. During this period, suffering was often portrayed as "romantic disappointments of aristocratic young men" (Fraser 2002:137). Fraser says that when Nietzsche writes of pain it resembles the same aestheticized pain seen in Goethe's *The Sorrow of Young Werther* (2002:136). In this novel, unrequited adolescent love is depicted as the very core of human suffering with the consequence that this depiction of pain and suffering became increasingly linked to the "exultation of noble sentiments and purity of feeling" of nineteenth-century Germany (2002:137). This, according to Fraser, had the effect of equating pain and suffering with something to be valued, and there came to be a "powerful association of sentimentalized suffering with nobility" (2002:137). In essence, Fraser's point is that Nietzsche's revaluation of suffering is built on the idea that it ennobles, while true horror and suffering as seen in the Nazi death-camps could by definition never ennoble. Fraser considers Nietzsche's fictional character Zarathustra, whom Nietzsche claims capable of redeeming himself, as a representation of Nietzsche's kitsch. He notes that the only horror ascribed to Zarathustra is the horror of nihilism, yet the horror of nihilism could never begin to compare with the horror seen during the Holocaust (Fraser 2002:138). In trying to express suffering in a philosophical manner, viz. in terms of meaninglessness (cf. Chapter 2), Nietzsche only renders it kitsch and therefore only succeeds to "glamorize suffering" (Fraser 2002:139).

Fraser's second criticism of Nietzsche's work, is that despite his misrepresentation (read mitigation) of true suffering, Nietzsche still unknowingly, or dishonestly, manages to avoid facing his own suffering, and that in so doing falls prey to the same charge that he levels against Christianity, namely, disloyalty to the earth. Fraser believes that Stoicism is a principal influence on Nietzsche's thinking. In fact, he argues that Nietzsche endorse a stoic tradition, which Fraser calls "hardness" (2002:151). Nietzsche himself admits that "all creators are hard" (2005:79). The Stoic, Fraser explains, is mainly concerned with upholding virtue and therefore only concerned with acting in a virtuous manner. The hardness Fraser refers to comes from an indifferent acceptance of consequences providing that one acted virtuous.

For example, suppose a Stoic man finds his house ablaze with his child trapped inside, he would immediately try to save his child because it is the virtuous thing to do. However, as Fraser (2002:151) points out, should the Stoic sage fail to save his child, he would have no regrets, because he acted virtuously. Moreover, as the Stoics also claimed, “everything that happens is ordered for the best by Providence” (Fraser 2002:151). For Fraser, this acceptance of fate is very similar to Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence and *amor fati*, the affirmation of life and suffering in its totality. However, Fraser questions whether it is really possible to remain indifferent to the passing of one’s child as the Stoic tradition, and Nietzsche’s philosophy, clearly seem to imply. On this point Fraser agrees with Nussbaum when she argues that the hardness evident in both Nietzsche and the Stoic sage is a means of protecting oneself against the horror of the world. She writes:

[Nietzsche] fails [...] to see what the Stoicism he endorses has in common with the Christianity he criticizes, what the hardness has in common with otherworldliness: both are forms of self-protection, both express a fear of this world (cited in Fraser 2002:153).

In making oneself *hard* to the reality of horror, in an effort to affirm it, does one not do so at a cost of our humanity? Both Fraser and Nussbaum charge Nietzsche with disloyalty to the earth, that is to say, they believe Nietzsche protects himself against the horror of reality by hardening himself against it. One *hardens* against the reality of horror, not in order to affirm it fully, but because one fears it. This fear is proof of Nietzsche’s disloyalty to the earth and his inability to fully face and affirm the horror of reality. For Fraser, Nietzsche’s fear is nowhere more clearly visible than in his rejection of pity. Both Nietzsche and the Stoic tradition view pity as a form of dishonesty in so far as it misrepresents reality (Fraser 2002:154). Fraser notes that pity, for Nietzsche, “stands in the way of tough-mindedness about the human condition”, and it “substitutes bedside manner for a clear-eyed encounter with painful reality” (2002:154). Pity, then, is understood by Nietzsche as a dishonest act, a means of fleeing from reality. It is no surprise then that he, in seeking a more *honest* encounter with reality, would reject it all together. However, Fraser does not believe that honesty is the only or real reason Nietzsche rejects pity. He believes that Nietzsche’s rejection of pity is also caused by his fear to “enter into the suffering of another” (Fraser 2002:163). The rejection of pity ultimately represents his rejection of

any identity between himself and the suffering of humanity: “In rejecting suffering humanity, in casting people as the herd, Nietzsche is seeking to set himself free from the earth below” (2002:163). Thus, for Fraser, Nietzsche’s disloyalty to the earth is grounded in his rejection of pity. Though it might seem that Nietzsche’s motivation for rejecting pity is solely to uphold his claim to honesty, he does so because of fear. Fraser puts it thus:

This begins Nietzsche’s disloyalty to the earth; a murderous disloyalty which, for all Nietzsche’s emphasis on honesty, is motivated by an unwillingness fully to face the pains and disappointments of his own humanity (2002:163-164).

Nietzsche sought to distance himself from humanity and its suffering in order to escape from his own suffering. For by entering into the suffering of another, one is faced with one’s own suffering in return. Fraser’s analysis of Nietzsche’s work offers a strong argument that Nietzsche failed to overcome suffering by his own standards. Not only did Nietzsche fail to fully appreciate the horror of suffering, he also failed to face his own suffering. However, this does not negate the fact that he practiced philosophy “as a way of life”, to use Hadot’s expression again. It simply means that he lacked the courage and honesty to do so adequately. Neither does it undercut the usefulness of Nietzsche’s philosophy in modern day philosophical counseling or practice. On the contrary, in what follows, I shall argue that Nietzsche’s philosophy is still relevant and useful for dealing with the problem of suffering, despite Nietzsche’s own shortcomings in his application of it. That is, I shall argue that although, as Fraser pointed out, Nietzsche lacked a true representation of suffering and displayed a fear of his own mitigated suffering, his philosophy could still be relevant and useful granted these shortcomings are overcome. To do so, I shall elaborate on the renowned psychiatrist, Victor Frankl’s successful negotiation of suffering in Nazi death-camps, while assuming (with Fraser) that Frankl’s death-camp experiences qualified as true unmitigated suffering. I shall also illustrate that Frankl indeed applied Nietzsche’s philosophy, though their philosophies vis-à-vis suffering may not have been a perfect match. My aim is not to show that Frankl deliberately practiced Nietzsche’s philosophy always and everywhere, despite there being some clear influences from Nietzsche in his testimony. My aim is rather to show that Nietzsche and Frankl’s philosophies sufficiently overlap in this regard to support one and the

same conclusion: that it is indeed possible to face true unmitigated suffering with courage, while remaining loyal to the earth, that is, while not retreating to some form of divinity or metaphysical significance.

## 5.2 Courage in Auschwitz

As was noted, Fraser believes that true unmitigated suffering is symbolized by the horror of the Nazi death-camps, in what he calls the problem of shit. Victor Frankl is one of the many who has experienced such suffering. Moreover, he is one of even fewer who was able to face it with courage. Frankl, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (2006), recounts his experience as a prisoner in several Nazi death-camps as he came face to face with the problem of suffering, or, as Fraser insists, the problem of shit. There can be little doubt that Frankl was strongly influenced by Nietzsche and that this influence had considerable bearing on *how* he experienced the death-camps, and especially *how* he experienced the problem of suffering. Throughout his testimony, Frankl often quotes Nietzsche concerning suffering: "He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*" (2006:76), and also: "That which does not kill me, makes me stronger" (2006:82). Quotations like these attest to the fact that Frankl's valuation of suffering was at least in important respects similar to that of Nietzsche as it was explained in the foregoing, despite, or, perhaps because of, his experiences in the death camps. Just like Nietzsche, Frankl believed that it is the meaning, or lack thereof, in our suffering which torments man most. This absolute central role of meaning in our lives, was to be the main motivation for his psychological theory called *Logotherapy*. His therapy aims to establish meaning and significance in the lives of patients as a means to combat psychological and pathological disturbances (Frankl 2006:99). The main drive behind Frankl's theory was his realization that suffering is essentially a philosophical problem, that is, he realized that it was the prisoners who had lost a sense of meaning and hope, that were bound to die first. He recounts:

One of the prisoners, who on his arrival marched with a long column of new inmates from the station to the camp, told me later that he had felt as though he were marching at his own funeral. His life had seemed to him absolutely without future (Frankl 2006:71).

The prisoner had lost all hope and hence all meaning in his life. For Frankl, there could be no surviving the horrors of the death-camps without giving one's suffering some form of meaning or significance. There were of course prisoners who looked to religion for meaning. However, Frankl bore the horror and suffering not by looking to religion for meaning, but through a revaluation and affirmation of suffering very similar to that of Nietzsche. He writes:

What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude towards life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life (Frankl 2006:77).

This passage is testimony to Frankl's own radical revaluation of suffering. His attitude towards suffering was an understanding that there was no hiding or fleeing from suffering, which for him, was to flee from life itself. He believed that one must face suffering with courage, and in so doing, find meaning within the suffering itself: "I told my comrades that human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a meaning, and that this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death" (Frankl 2006:83). Frankl did not seek meaning for his suffering in other-worldly hopes beyond this life. Instead, he believed meaning was made up of tasks each man faces throughout his life. Suffering is one such task. He explains:

When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden (Frankl 2006: 78).

Frankl thus saw suffering as opportunity for personal achievement and growth, a conclusion remarkably similar to Nietzsche's self-creation. Suffering, he argued, allowed for endless personal growth given that one recognized the opportunity for growth given by suffering. By seizing these opportunities, even the most horrid suffering could come to have meaning. As he puts it:



Once the meaning of suffering had been revealed to us, we refused to minimize or alleviate the camp's tortures by ignoring them or harboring false illusion and entertaining artificial optimism. Suffering had become a task on which we did not want to turn our backs, we had realized its hidden opportunities for achievement (Frankl 2006:78).

As an embodiment of Nietzsche's will to power (cf. Chapter 3), that is, the will to resistance, Frankl and his comrades who understood the value of suffering, no longer sought to avoid or lessen their suffering. Instead they welcomed it. They understood the camp, and its suffering, as a "test of inner strength" (Frankl 2006:72). Frankl saw a strong difference in zeal and physical demeanor between those who shared his valuation of suffering and those who passively waded out the horror. For them, life was devoid of meaning in the face of such horror. Most prisoners would simply ignore the challenge and "vegetate", while Frankl realized suffering was an opportunity to make a "victory of those experiences, turning life into an inner triumph" (2006:72). He turned every experience into an opportunity for growth. This contrast, for Frankl, literally divided life and death.

Amidst true unmitigated horror, Frankl displays in his testimony a similar valuation of suffering to that of Nietzsche by not retreating to other-worldly hopes. Moreover, Frankl displays courage amidst this suffering when he writes: "There was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer" (2006:78). This attests to the fact that Frankl was indeed able to face suffering and horror without *hardening* against it. As such, his testimony suffices to show that, through applying Nietzsche's philosophy, it is indeed possible to face true unmitigated suffering, as seen in the Nazi death-camps, with courage and honesty. Despite Nietzsche's own personal shortcomings in this regard, his philosophy is still relevant for, and applicable to, the struggle with the problem of suffering.



## Conclusion

At the outset of this thesis I asserted that my aim would be to determine whether or not Nietzsche's philosophy of self-creation was able to overcome the problem of suffering. My criterion to conclude whether self-creation does indeed succeed in overcoming suffering, was not whether it did so specifically for Nietzsche, but whether it could combat suffering at all. I hence set out to evaluate the underlying pillars upon which this philosophy is grounded in order to compare it to the ancient understanding and purpose of philosophy as a therapeutic response to the problem of suffering. From its very beginning, philosophy sought to address the problem of suffering. We have seen it explained in terms of spiritual exercises by Hadot, in that philosophy was a way of life, permeating every facet of one's existence in a total transformation of being. I have likened this transformation to Nietzsche's self-creation and argued that just as the ancient Greeks sought to address the problem of suffering with the help of philosophy, so too Nietzsche's philosophy represents an embodiment of this approach. Retreating from the Christian solution for suffering, Nietzsche's enterprise was to solve the impending nihilism which he believed was an inevitable corollary of the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche's self-creation addressed both nihilism and the problem of suffering by finding meaning in all suffering. We have now seen how *amor fati*, the will to power and eternal recurrence create meaning in suffering by means of a radical affirmation and revaluation of suffering, thereby driving the transformative process of self-creation together.

The transformative similarities with the ancient spiritual exercises confirm that Nietzsche was indeed using philosophy to address the problem of suffering in much the same way the ancient Greeks first envisaged the purpose of philosophy. However, despite Nietzsche's passion and verve, he was unable to live up to the standards he himself proposed as necessary conditions for self-creation. Nevertheless, although Nietzsche himself fell short of the mark, his philosophy does not necessarily ask too much of the individual under harrowing circumstances. Having discovered the underlying essence of Nietzsche's philosophy in the testimony of Nazi death-camp survivor, Victor Frankl, I argued that where Nietzsche failed, Frankl succeeded by applying the core principles of this philosophy (i.e. the radical affirmation and revaluation of suffering) to the horrors he experienced in Auschwitz.

Frankl's testimony bears witness to the practical, life-enriching value of Nietzsche's philosophy and, specifically, the overcoming of suffering through self-creation. As such, Nietzsche's understanding of self-creation can effectively inform counselling and therapy. Amidst a growing trend to utilize philosophy in the process of counselling and therapy, this conception of self-creation establishes its utility by addressing not only a specific instance of suffering, grief or loss, but rather suffering itself.

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