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On the Very Idea of "Justifying Suffering"

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Abstract: Many commentators have said that Nietzsche is concerned, either in all or in some parts of his career, with providing a kind of "theodicy," or with justifying or finding meaning in suffering. In this article, I examine these notions, questioning whether terms such as "theodicy" or "justifying suffering" are helpful in getting Nietzsche's views into focus, and exploring some unclarity concerning the way in which such terms themselves are understood. I conclude that, while Nietzsche's later position is continuous with the tradition of theodicy in seeking to relate suffering's value to some wider whole, it is also discontinuous with that tradition because it does not hold that suffering as such has a fixed normative value, that suffering as such has a meaning, that it happens for a reason, or that it is justified, let alone that the world's containing suffering is in line with our interests, or that we ought because of suffering to value our lives one way or another. On Nietzsche's view there is nothing that guarantees meaning or specific normative value to suffering just because it is suffering. In all these senses Nietzsche has moved away from the tradition of theodicy.

Keywords: suffering, justification, theodicy, affirmation, Schopenhauer

Introduction

C. S. Lewis once wrote: "In a sense, [Christianity] creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving."¹ The Christian solution to its problem is theodicy, a justification of God. Theodicy aims to show that the pain and suffering in reality does not contradict God's essential nature as righteous and loving—suffering is justified

because God's action is justified: there were good reasons for it. But if Lewis is right, then if we could banish all thought of God, and also of ultimate reality's being somehow directed toward, or in tune with, our good, then the same problem would not arise. Lewis boldly states that pain would then be "no problem." We may not agree with that as a general claim. But at least without God suffering would not present the problem Lewis identifies.

My assumption in what follows is that Nietzsche is a thinker who aspires to banish all thought of God, and also of any ultimate reality that is somehow directed toward, or in tune with, our good. So is there any sense in which Nietzsche is concerned with theodicy, or something significantly like it? Some commentators say so. One view is that this is a concern for Nietzsche throughout his career. Aaron Ridley writes of "Nietzsche's attempts—early, middle and late—to offer a kind of aesthetic theodicy that would ward off the temptations of nihilism and despair,"² and describes Nietzsche's position as "a kind of naturalized theodicy . . . [a] perspective on our circumstances from which even the most grim-seeming of them can be regarded as indispensable to us."³ Daniel Came says that Nietzsche "always maintained . . . that the dreadful aspects of the human and natural worlds call for something like a theodicy, a mode of justification that would allow the troubled soul to find a place in them."⁴ An opposed view is that Nietzsche was never genuinely in a business that it is right to call theodicy. Thus Sebastian Gardner states that even *BT* sees tragedy as a "liberation *from* theodicy" because of its "refusal to tell us that we should affirm how things are because they are as they *ought* to be."⁵

Others say that Nietzsche starts out with an ambition to provide a theodicy, but abandons it. In the view of Raymond Geuss, *BT* is concerned with a kind of theodicy, but after a "change of heart,"⁶ "the whole project" of giving a theodicy "fall[s] by the wayside" for the later Nietzsche.⁷ According to Simon May, Nietzsche is in a more ambivalent position: he begins his career "overtly in the business of theodicy," that is of "justifying . . . sufferings in terms of higher goals,"⁸ but then later adopts a "direction of movement away from theodicy"⁹ toward a distinct notion of life-affirmation (seen in the ideal of *amor fati*) that aspires to affirm suffering without thinking of it as redeemed by some higher value that it enables. On May's view, then, Nietzsche develops a notion of affirmation that is distinct from theodicy or any attempt to justify suffering—a distinction I shall briefly return to at the end of this piece. Still, May argues, Nietzsche retains at the same time the aspiration to find suffering redeemed by higher values, and so is never wholly outside the tradition of theodicy.

In this article I start from a skeptical base: for me it will be an open question whether terms such as “theodicy” or “justifying suffering” will be helpful in getting Nietzsche’s views into focus. Nietzsche does not very often use these *terms* as such.¹⁰ There are three published occurrences of “theodicy,” all before 1876, two of them used disapprovingly in criticisms of David Strauss and Christian historians, the other in *BT* (discussed below).¹¹ And although Nietzsche uses the notion of justification (*Rechtfertigung*) copiously, it is hard to find passages in which Nietzsche talks literally of “justifying suffering.”¹² These textual details will not matter much if it turns out that we interpret Nietzsche well when we apply such terms. But then the more pressing problem is giving an account of just how we are to understand the terms themselves.

Questions about Theodicy and Justification

Nobody of course thinks that Nietzsche is involved in a *literal* theodicy in anything like the original sense intended by Leibniz. Since for Nietzsche “belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable” (*GS* 343), we can have at most a theodicy without the *theos*. A better name for this might be sought. In 1902 Hans Vaihinger commented that while Leibniz wrote a theodicy, “Nietzsche gives a cosmodycy, a physiodicy, a biodicy: he justifies the world, nature, life.”¹³ In a recent article David McPherson agrees that Nietzsche’s problem is indeed that of finding a cosmodycy, that is, “the problem of justifying life in the world as worthwhile in light of the prevalent reality of suffering.”¹⁴ “Cosmodycy” may well seem the better term at the very least for the statement in *BT* that “existence and the world are eternally justified” (*BT* 5). (Perhaps justification of existence should be “ontodycy,” and justification of suffering “pathodycy”? In fact the latter term—as *Pathodizee*—was used in the mid-twentieth century by Viktor Frankl in his formulation of the therapeutic task of giving meaning to suffering, born out of his experiences in concentration camps.)¹⁵

However, it would be merely pedantic to dismiss the idea of a theodicy without *theos* as ill-conceived, because the term has other uses. For example, as Geuss points out, Hegel appropriated it to designate “the whole programme of showing us that our absolute need for reconciliation with the world as a whole . . . was satisfied.”¹⁶ And Susan Neiman comments

(albeit in somewhat different terms) that in general philosophical discourse the term simply has a narrower and a broader sense: "Theodicy, in the narrow sense, allows the believer to maintain faith in God in the face of the world's evils. Theodicy, in the broad sense, is any way of giving meaning to evil that helps us face despair."¹⁷ Commentators who attribute a theodicy to Nietzsche clearly do so in *some* broad sense—or senses, for their formulations differ considerably. This brings with it two interpretive questions: (1) Is "theodicy" now so broad a term as to become unacceptably diffuse and uninformative? (2) In adopting the idea of a theodicy without God, do we risk reading into Nietzsche's writings residual aspects of the original narrow (or literal) conception—theodicy with God—that do not belong there?

For instance, how readily does the very notion of *justification* transfer into broad theodicy? If God is out of the picture, then at least in one obvious sense, the phrase "justifying suffering" most readily applies only to acts where human agents *cause* or *allow* some particular kind of suffering. For example, faced with mass casualties and limited resources in the aftermath of an earthquake, one might be justified in not treating a five-year-old child's painful but non-life-threatening injuries. One could justify that action by giving an account of some reasons. To say that the child's suffering was justified, or that I can justify the child's suffering, would at best be a shorthand way of saying my action was justified, or is amenable to a justifying account. There is no obvious sense in which the painful injury, taken by itself, was justified. Or we might debate whether the pain and distress of undergoing chemotherapy would be a justified suffering, or whether instead the alternative suffering from having a tumor in the lung would be justified. But if we decided for the latter, that naturally occurring pain and distress *itself* could not readily be said to be justified, independently of our allowing it to occur. In other kinds of cases, sufferings might arguably be justified, in the sense of deserved, as punishments, but the same point applies: it seems to be the *infliction* of the suffering that is really the candidate for justification. Yet again, suffering might in some circumstances be justly distributed. If food is scarce, a just state of affairs might be one in which every member of the group experiences a degree of continual gnawing hunger, so that all may stay alive. But again what seems justified, or susceptible to a justifying account, is not exactly the gnawing pain, but rather the allowing or enforcing of the particular distribution.

In narrow, or literal, theodicy there can in principle be a global justification of this kind for suffering's occurrence, that is, of God's *creating* a world that contains all the sufferings that occur, or God's *allowing* there to be all the sufferings. But with God's agency out of the picture, what remains? Here the worry about diffuseness comes in. "Justifying" something now seems to amount simply to there being *some positive attitude or other* that we can, or perhaps should, take toward it. Consider the above formulations: if *x* stands for "suffering," "life," or "the world," we might be concerned with "justifying *x* as worthwhile," "giving meaning to *x*," "satisfying the need for reconciliation with *x*," "affirming *x* because it is as it ought to be," "allowing the troubled soul to find a place in *x*," "warding off temptations of nihilism and despair about *x*," "regarding *x* as indispensable (*sc.*, valuable) to us." One skeptical query is whether the notion of *justification* is the most appropriate representative of this range of attitudes; another is whether there will be *any* single notion that they all converge upon, either in Nietzsche's texts or in the interpretive apparatus we are applying to them. A further possible obscurity concerns the *object* of the positive attitude that is to be achieved: we see "life," "existence," "the world," and "suffering" occupying this role. These objects are not necessarily exclusive of one another. If I am positive toward "existence," then presumably I am positive toward whatever exists, life and suffering both included. Yet in principle one can be positive toward existence, or to one's own life, without being at all positive toward suffering, even to the extent of finding it justified in relation to something else.

Both kinds of diffuseness are to some extent down to Nietzsche himself. Consider his well-known verdict on mankind hitherto: "He did not know how to justify, to explain, to affirm himself; he suffered from the problem of his meaning. [. . . T]he answer was missing to the scream of his question: 'to what end suffering?'" (*GM* III:28). Justifying, explaining, affirming, finding a meaning, finding an end (literally a "what-for" [ein Dazu])—are these all the same attitude? And are "himself" (his existence) and "suffering" in effect the same object that is to be justified, explained, or affirmed? There is no clear answer on either count. Immediately after this passage Nietzsche goes on to state that the ascetic ideal provided what was lacking—that is to say, at least a serviceable positive attitude to existence, suffering, and self. Perhaps some reflection on the ascetic ideal will give us more purchase on the issues? Schopenhauer's philosophy provides the best illustration of the ascetic ideal. But we shall find that Schopenhauer gives grist to the skeptical

mill, because he offers both a *meaning* for existence and a *justification*, but no *affirmation*.

Schopenhauer and the Meaning of Existence

In Nietzsche's day the definitive statement of the position known as philosophical pessimism was: "the non-being of the world would be better than its being."¹⁸ For Schopenhauer, the inaugurator of this school, the suffering in existence gives reason to think that nonexistence would have been preferable: we ought to lament human existence, and the solution is a recoil away from it into a state of will-less self-negation. It is important that this *ought* is grounded in the nature of the world as such, that is the will, which manifests itself in us as the will to life. Schopenhauer insists that the world in itself cannot just exist, but *must* have a moral meaning or significance (*moralische Bedeutung*).¹⁹ Existence for Schopenhauer is therefore decidedly not meaningless:²⁰ there is a way of interpreting it correctly. And it is called a "moral" meaning, I suggest, because in Schopenhauer's view the correct interpretation of the world does not just discover naturalistic truths; rather it discovers a would-be normative truth: that the world, and our existence in it, is in itself such that we ought not to want it, indeed such that it ought not to exist.²¹

Schopenhauer is clearly fighting against the optimistic meaning of existence that he thinks theism, and its derivative pantheism, must adopt: the world is such that we have good reason to value it positively—the view summed up in Genesis 1:31, "everything was very good [*panta kala lian*]."²² Schopenhauer's battle against optimism is in fact a battle for the soul of Christianity. He argues that not theism but world-rejection, resignation, and self-negation are the true heart of Christianity: "Do not think for a moment that Christian doctrine is favourable to optimism; on the contrary, in the Gospels, 'world' and 'evil [*Uebel*]' are used as almost synonymous expressions";²³ "optimism is irreconcilable with Christianity";²⁴ its true message is that "pain and trouble are the very things that work towards the true end [*den wahren Zweck*] of life, namely the turning away of the will from it."²⁵ We learn from this that finding a moral meaning in the world's suffering need not be the same as *affirming* the world or suffering. Finding a meaning does not necessarily *reconcile* us to the world, and it emphatically does not issue in our finding life *worthwhile*.

In his way Schopenhauer also thinks that suffering is justified, in the sense that we deserve it because of our very "act" of existing as individuated,

constitutively desirous beings. The doctrine of original sin contains an allegorical truth for Schopenhauer: “Christian doctrine symbolizes *nature*, the *affirmation of the will to life*, using *Adam* . . . ; the sin that we inherited from Adam, i.e. our unity with him in the Idea, which is expressed temporally through the bond of procreation, causes us all to share in suffering and eternal death.”²⁶ Our very existence resembles a desire that is worthy of punishment (*strafbar*), says Schopenhauer, and “every great pain, whether bodily or mental, states what we deserve.”²⁷ Suffering is not gratuitous, on this view; it is fitting given our essence as beings of will. In that sense we may say it is justified that we suffer, and there is “eternal justice” in the world. But then suffering’s *being justified* also does not legitimate *affirmation* of the world that contains it: rather, it intensifies the reason for lamenting the world, the evil vale of tears.

So in Schopenhauer’s case our existence, with all its suffering, has a “moral” meaning, and it is fitting for us that we undergo our sufferings. Would this qualify as a “theodicy”? Some have said so—but this is not obviously right.²⁸ We have lost not only God, but all reason to affirm the world. The world is by nature such that it *ought not* to be, constitutively such as to forbid any reconciliation with it, and life such that we are in error if we find it worthwhile. A theodicy should at least give meaning in virtue of which life can be affirmed. But here meaning, justification, and affirmation have come apart.

The Birth of Tragedy: Provocative Formula and Anti-moral Tendency

Nietzsche uses the term “theodicy” once in *BT*, saying that the Apollinian artistic drive “gave rise to the world of the Olympians in which the Hellenic ‘Will’ held up a transfiguring mirror to itself. Thus gods justify the life of men by living it themselves—the only satisfactory theodicy! Under the bright sunshine of such gods existence is felt to be worth attaining” (*BT* 3). Here, however, the term “theodicy” is almost a play on words. For, as Nietzsche said in writings just prior to *BT*, “a *theodicy* was never a Hellenic problem; they guarded against attributing the existence of the world and hence the responsibility for its constitution to the gods. ‘The gods too are subordinate to *anankê* [necessity]’” (*KSA* 1, p. 560, my translation).²⁹ So “justifying life” is here used loosely to mean merely “enabling the *feeling* that life has a positive value.” It does not mean that life truly has such a value, let alone that

there is any reason in ultimate reality for it to be as it is. So this is "theodicy" only in a very thin sense, if at all.

The term "theodicy" does not recur in the rest of the book. But, more to the point, Nietzsche makes the well-known pronouncement: "only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* are existence and the world eternally *justified*" (BT 5). Read carefully, the text presents the world as an aesthetic phenomenon *for* a "being" or "essence [Wesen]" that "gives itself eternal pleasure" in spectating our human lives; for *its* gaze we are "images and artistic projections," *it* contemplates us like "painted soldiers on a canvas." This being or essence is also the "creator" and "original [or primal] artist" of the world. The human artist makes art by channeling or merging with the point of view of this creating essence (from which, at the level of ultimate reality beyond the *principium individuationis*, we are presumably not distinct anyway). So the picture here has the approximate shape of a *literal* theodicy after all. The "primal artist," which is perhaps not distinct from the world, is *justified* in—has good reason for—its act of creation, because it can take pleasure in spectating what is created, and us within it, with our sufferings, as a grand artwork. How we are to take this picture is unclear. If the primal artist is supposed to be a true description of reality, then the intention is that existence is justified aesthetically, in the sense that its creation fulfils the purpose of being pleasing from a perspective beyond the human. It would make sense for us to describe that as an aesthetic theodicy. On the other hand, if, as many argue, Nietzsche intended this "primal artist" picture not as true, but rather as a self-conscious myth,³⁰ then we have at best a "false theodicy,"³¹ or in a sense none at all, in that nothing really *justifies* existence and the world. Absent any claim that we have good reason to affirm life because of a truth about the way the world is in itself, all it means to say that existence is "justified" through tragedy is that tragedy *enables a positive feeling* toward life, mediated by pleasure in its artistic representation. With Schopenhauer we had justification without affirmation; here, despite Nietzsche's wording, it seems we may have affirmation without justification.

What was Nietzsche's later attitude toward this notion of aesthetic justification? Commentators have said that in the "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" of 1886 the formula "it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally justified" is "repeated approvingly,"³² and that Nietzsche "congratulates himself"³³ for it. But I do not think the evidence supports these claims. Aside from the fact that in a parallel passage in GS Nietzsche pointedly drops the notion of justification and calls existence simply "bearable" as an aesthetic phenomenon (GS 107), the "Attempt" itself does

nothing to uphold these claims of continuity. Nietzsche now calls *BT* “questionable,” “strange,” “inaccessible,” “impossible,” “marked by every defect of youth,” “ponderous,” “sentimental,” “embarrassing,” and much else (*BT* P:1, 2, 3). It could, for all that, be that the key idea—eternally justifying the world as an aesthetic phenomenon—was a good one: but is that what Nietzsche now thinks? His comments are in fact (1) that this formula is “provocative [anzüglich]”; (2) that “the whole book acknowledges only an artist’s meaning (and hidden meaning) behind all that happens—a ‘god,’ if you will, but certainly an utterly unscrupulous and amoral artist-god”; (3) that “one may say that this whole artist’s metaphysics [Artisten-Metaphysik] is capricious, otiose, fantastical”; but (4) that “its essential feature is that it already betrays a spirit which will defend itself one day [. . .] against the *moral* interpretation and significance of existence [*moralische* Ausdeutung und Bedeutsamkeit des Daseins]” (*BT* P:5). It is this latter, anti-moral spirit that Nietzsche congratulates himself for. The capricious and fantastical theodicy, cosmodycy, or whatever it was (call it a “god” if you will, says Nietzsche, drawing attention to the vagueness of the original idea) is to be left behind. From the perspective of 1886, the best feature of *BT* is negative: that it saw no moral meaning in existence. To grasp this we need to look back again to where Nietzsche directs us (this time explicitly), to Schopenhauer.

Nietzsche congratulates himself on the following feature of *BT*: “Here, perhaps for the first time, a pessimism ‘beyond good and evil’ announces itself, here is put into words and formulations that ‘perversity of mind [Perversität der Gesinnung]’ which Schopenhauer never tired of bombarding (before it had actually emerged) with his most wrathful imprecations and thunderbolts” (*BT* P:5, trans. modified). The distinctive phrase “perversity of mind [Perversität der Gesinnung]” pinpoints the following passage in Schopenhauer’s *Parerga and Paralipomena*, volume 2: “That the world has a mere physical but no moral significance [*moralische Bedeutung*] is the greatest, most ruinous and fundamental error, the real *perversity* of the mind [Perversität *der Gesinnung*] and in a basic sense it is certainly that which faith has personified as the antichrist.”³⁴ In confirmation that we have the right text, Nietzsche concludes by saying “who can know the true name of the Antichrist?” (*BT* P:5). In other words: “How best to express the point that the world has no moral meaning?” *BT* looks in retrospect like a first shot at doing so, which didn’t quite hit the mark.

Schopenhauer thinks that unless we believe there is a moral meaning to the world we are falling into a ruinous and fundamental error, leaving us

unable to give a metaphysical account of the world, and thereby unable to complete an inescapable task. Schopenhauer holds that both religion and philosophy spring from a "metaphysical need" that is fundamental to, and distinctive of, human beings. "[M]ankind absolutely requires an interpretation [*Auslegung*] of life,"³⁵ which will "decipher" experience and provide an account of what is "concealed in or behind" nature.³⁶ Unless the world were an end in itself, a *Selbstzweck*—to be which it would have to be perfect and contain no suffering³⁷—it must "manifest itself as a *means* to a higher purpose [*Mittel zu einem höheren Zweck*]."³⁸ Metaphysics is the task of discovering the higher purpose, the hidden meaning behind nature, and it is ducking out of this task that he thinks would be a ruinous error.

For Schopenhauer, as we saw, the hidden meaning is that life ought to be negated. The metaphysical truth, for him, is that the world is an eternally unfulfillable will that manifests itself as multiple suffering individuals, and the world's being thus gives us reason to negate it. But Nietzsche's objection to Schopenhauer is not that he was a metaphysical pessimist when he should have been a metaphysical optimist—in other words, that he thought the world in itself was such that we have reason to negate it, when he should have found that we have reason to affirm it. It is not that Schopenhauer found the wrong "moral meaning," the reverse normativity, in the world. Rather, his mistake was to think that the world had *any* such meaning, that there are any such normative truths, one way or the other, about the world in itself. This links with Nietzsche's view that there is after all no genuine "metaphysical need": "The metaphysical need is not the origin of religion, as Schopenhauer has it, but only a *late offshoot* of it. Under the rule of religious ideas, one has got used to the idea of 'another world (behind, below, above)' and feels an unpleasant emptiness and deprivation at the annihilation of religious delusions—and from this feeling grows 'another world,' but this time only a metaphysical and not a religious one" (GS 151). As Nietzsche says later in GS, Schopenhauer abandoned the "counterfeit" Christian (that is, theistic and optimistic) interpretation of the world, leaving us with the question "Does existence have any meaning at all?" (GS 357). But Schopenhauer's answer was yes, it does have a meaning—and its meaning is that it ought to be negated. This, for Nietzsche, amounts to "remaining stuck in Christian-ascetic moral perspectives" (GS 357), not only because it takes the model of self-negation from Christianity, but also because it preserves the assumption that the world must point to some hidden or higher meaning beyond itself—it clings to the essentially religious assumption of a

“metaphysical need.” Nietzsche’s point is that we should dispense with that assumption once religious belief is rejected. Then only a historically localized psychological neediness persists, a mere “unpleasant emptiness.” But the way to react to this emptiness is to embrace Schopenhauer’s “antichrist”: the world has no higher or “moral” meaning.

Suffering Not Bad in Itself

So where does this leave us with theodicy? God has gone; suffering as such has no agency behind it, and cannot in any obvious sense be justified in a general way. Suffering is not there for a reason, and does not figure in any account of the way things ought to be. There is no overarching truth about the world that gives us reason either to want it or to turn against it. Metaphysical optimism and metaphysical pessimism are abandoned; suffering lacks the meanings that either of these metaphysical positions had assigned it, leaving the world “beyond good and evil.” But on reaching this point, we are left with a problem. Suffering still *seems* to us, as Nietzsche says, “an objection to life” (*EH* “Books: Z” 1); “evil, hateful, deserving of annihilation [. . .] a defect of existence” (*GS* 338), something to be, if possible, “abolished” (*BGE* 225). The apparent relic of theodicy in Nietzsche’s later work is his attempt to persuade us out of these attitudes. In Nietzsche’s writings of the 1880s there are many passages such as these: “Well-being as you understand it—that is no goal [. . .]. The discipline of suffering [. . .] has been the sole cause of every enhancement in humanity so far” (*BGE* 225); “We [. . .] are quite the reverse” of people who “view suffering itself as something that needs to be abolished” (*BGE* 44); “Are we not, with this tremendous objective of obliterating all the sharp edges of life, well on the way to turning mankind into *sand*?” (*D* 174); “Profound suffering makes you noble” (*BGE* 270).

What can possibly be the good of suffering? Rather than giving a single answer, Nietzsche seems to have several different strands going. The notion of an aesthetic appropriation of suffering begun in *BT* continues, broadly speaking, in the later writings. There is also Nietzsche’s provocative championing of suffering as a spectacle that enhances life through stimulating humanity’s sheer unadorned relish in cruelty, coupled with the allegation that we have recently become too soft to acknowledge this fact about ourselves: “Seeing-suffer feels good, making suffer even more so [. . .] without cruelty there is

no festival" (*GM* II:6). However, neither the case of suffering contemplated through the medium of tragic art, nor that of suffering enjoyed directly as an audience member, can convince us that suffering is anything other than bad for the person who undergoes real suffering. Suffering is by nature something unwanted by the one to whom it occurs, something to which humans are averse. The sufferer surely has reason not to want suffering to occur in his or her life, so how can it not be that life would be better without its sufferings?

One answer to this question explored by recent commentators is that for Nietzsche it is built into human agency that we value challenges to our will, not its mere satisfaction: "if we value the overcoming of resistance, then we must also value the resistance that is an ingredient of it."³⁹ This would be a case where suffering has positive value for the sufferer, assuming that we can call such resistance to one's will suffering. However, the kinds of suffering that have usually called for theodicy are precisely those that are passively undergone, out-of-the-blue afflictions that are in no sense wanted by those they afflict, and these kinds of suffering are not obviously addressed by the thought that suffering is a resistance to the will that has positive value as an ingredient of agency.

However, in *GS* 338 we find a train of thought that suggests another way in which suffering is not bad for the sufferer:

[S]hould you refuse to let your suffering lie on you even for an hour and instead constantly prevent all possible misfortune ahead of time; should you experience suffering and displeasure as evil, hateful, deserving of annihilation, as a defect of existence, then you have besides your religion of pity also another religion in your hearts, and the latter is perhaps the mother of the former—the *religion of snug cosiness* [Behaglichkeit]. Oh, how little do you know of the *happiness* of man, you comfortable and good-natured ones! For happiness and unhappiness are two siblings and twins who either grow up together or—as with you—*remain small* together! (*GS* 338)

As I have argued elsewhere,⁴⁰ in this passage Nietzsche identifies the phenomenon of psychological growth through suffering, akin to what contemporary psychology recognizes as posttraumatic growth.⁴¹ What Nietzsche calls the "religion of pity" (or compassion) is a moral outlook that classifies every instance of suffering as in itself bad, and therefore as something we

have reason to remove or prevent, on pain of diminishing the well-being of the sufferer. Earlier in the same passage Nietzsche objects to the “religion of pity” that it “strips the suffering of what is truly personal”; it leaves out of account “the whole inner sequence and interconnection that spells misfortune for *me* or for *you!* The entire economy of my soul and the balance effected by ‘misfortune,’ the breaking open of new springs and needs, the healing of old wounds, the shedding of entire periods of the past” (GS 338). Understood within an individual’s own life narrative, particular sufferings may (though equally they may not) be an essential part of a whole “sequence and interconnection” in which the individual gains depth of self-understanding, psychological strength, and new capacities for feeling and action. So one can intelligibly hold that one’s life would be impoverished without the suffering it in fact contains. One illustrative case is that of Kay Redfield Jamison, who in answer to the question whether to choose her life again with or without her repeated episodes of bipolar disorder, said, “Strangely enough I think I would choose to have it. . . . Because I honestly believe that as a result of it I have felt more things, more deeply; had more experiences.”⁴² The qualification “strangely” is understandable here, because the suffering, to be suffering at all, must have been phenomenologically bad and unwanted. Jamison’s choice makes sense, though, if phenomenological badness does not correlate with normative badness—that is to say, if something it is awful to experience can also be something we have reason to want in our lives. This appears to coincide with Nietzsche’s position here: we have reason to want suffering when it is an essential part of the “interconnection and sequence” that constitutes psychological growth through suffering.

If Nietzsche is saying that some suffering is simply instrumentally good by virtue of a relation to a state beyond itself, then his view is not terribly controversial. Such an instrumentalist view would even be compatible with the “religion of pity”—we could still classify instrumentally good suffering as *in itself bad*, an evil, albeit a necessary one. However, Nietzsche’s view differs from this: rather than thinking of suffering as an evil that may bring some good, he regards it as just *mistaken* to see suffering as “evil, hateful, [. . .] a defect of existence” in the first place. This suggests that we should not see suffering as normatively bad in itself. In that case, Nietzsche opposes the blanket claim that all suffering is in itself something we have reason to wish absent. A kind of growth is necessary for well-being, as Nietzsche understands it; and this kind of growth cannot happen to someone without her first undergoing suffering, and then being able to understand or

interpret her suffering in a way that makes it meaningful to her. Hence we must abandon the evaluation of suffering embodied in the "religion of pity," and accept that suffering has no fixed normative value across all contexts—it is not always bad in itself for the sufferer merely because it is suffering. Its value will always depend upon its place in someone's particular life, on which "sequence and interconnection" it becomes part of.

Conclusion

Nietzsche is, then, advocating a kind of reconciliation with suffering, a way of affirming life without wishing the suffering away, a way of finding suffering indispensable to us, a way of interpreting it as having a meaning. Such attitudes were said, in our opening quotations, to amount to a kind of theodicy or justification of suffering. But at the very least those descriptions are dispensable in stating this one clear strand in Nietzsche's position, his identification of a psychological phenomenon that *can*—depending on who we are and what happens to us—enrich our lives, and his claim that those who hold that life would be better with no suffering lose sight of this kind of enrichment. We do not need to mention "theodicy" or "justification" to make these points. On the other hand, some thin strand of continuity with theodicy may be thought to remain in the idea that suffering can be welcomed because of a meaning it acquires by its standing in relation to some greater whole (now just the individual's unfolding life).

As mentioned above, Simon May claims that we find in Nietzsche a distinctive notion of affirmation that is more radically discontinuous with theodicy than this. May sees Nietzsche as in a sense both outside and inside the morality tradition. The aspect that stands outside is a notion of affirmation that does not seek to "justify" or assign values or meanings to suffering on the basis of its relation to anything besides itself: "an affirmation of life that is an ungrounded joy in life's 'thereness' or quiddity" and "that does not invoke a supreme good to which suffering is essential."⁴³ *This* notion of affirmation stands in contrast to the claim made above that Nietzsche finds value in suffering because of its contribution to psychological growth and thereby to well-being. May would count the latter claim—because of its "because"—as continuous with theodicy. It can be debated whether this notion of ungrounded joy in life's quiddity without the need to relate suffering to any higher values

is genuinely Nietzsche's position. May acknowledges that Nietzsche does little to explicate this notion, saying "we need to do this work for him."⁴⁴ So it remains unclear how much evidence there is that Nietzsche's own view has the precise features May attributes to it.⁴⁵ May centers his view on the ideal of *amor fati*; but there is some motivation for the alternative view that *amor fati* should be seen as relying on a strategy of "hermeneutic theodicy," as Paul Loeb has called it,⁴⁶ retrospectively reinterpreting painful events as having been necessary for some good.

The view I have attributed to Nietzsche is also of this latter kind. It says that suffering is not bad in itself for the sufferer, and that a life cleansed of suffering would be incapable of a kind of enrichment necessary for well-being. But it is vital too that on this view suffering has the potential to be either enriching or ruinous. In many lives the "whole sequence and interconnection" that contains suffering will never be positively reinterpreted, found meaningful, or incorporated into a narrative of growth. And in this respect Nietzsche's mature position lacks some features distinctive of the theodicy tradition. For Nietzsche does not hold that suffering as such has a fixed normative value, that suffering as such has a meaning, that it happens for a reason, or that it is justified, let alone that the world's containing suffering is in line with our interests, or that we ought because of suffering to value our lives one way or another. On Nietzsche's view there is nothing that guarantees meaning or specific normative value to suffering just because it is suffering. In all these senses Nietzsche has moved away from the tradition of theodicy.

NOTES

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1. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Collins, 2012), 14.
2. Aaron Ridley, "Nietzsche and the Arts of Life," in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 430.
3. Aaron Ridley, *Nietzsche on Art* (London: Routledge, 2007), 135–37.
4. Daniel Came, "The Aesthetic Justification of Existence," in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 41.

5. Sebastian Gardner, "Nietzsche's Philosophical Aestheticism," in Gemes and Richardson, *Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, 605 n. 15, first emphasis mine.

6. Raymond Geuss, "Art and Theodicy," in *Morality, Culture, and History: Essays on German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 105.

7. Geuss, "Art and Theodicy," 109.

8. Simon May, "Why Nietzsche is Still in the Morality Game," in *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide*, ed. Simon May (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 88, 80.

9. May, "Why Nietzsche Is Still in the Morality Game," 91.

10. I use the following translations of Nietzsche's works: *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998); *The Gay Science*, trans. Josephine Nauckhoff and Adrian del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Spiers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

11. The word *Theodicee* occurs eleven times in Nietzsche's entire output, published and unpublished. The three published uses are at *BT* 3; *SE* 7; *RWB* 7 (the last also pre-drafted at *KSA* 8:11[39], p. 230). Three early unpublished uses are reworkings of the same point about the Greeks lacking a theodicy—see n. 29, below). Another early use is at *KSA* 7:7[167], p. 203. And there are three late occurrences in unpublished fragments from 1887: *KSA* 12: 2[161], p. 144; 10[21], p. 468; 10[137], p. 533.

12. I can locate only two published passages where suffering (*Leiden*) or evil (*Uebel*) is the explicit object of a *Rechtfertigung*. One is *GM* II:7, where Nietzsche observes—without approving—the psychological tendency to find suffering justified if it is spectated by a god. The other is *HH* 591, where Nietzsche says that everyone will find a patch of happiness amid misfortune, like a "little garden" upon "volcanic soil," then adds: "only it would be ludicrous [lächerlich] to say that with this happiness suffering itself is justified."

13. Hans Vaihinger, *Nietzsche als Philosoph* (Berlin: Reuther und Reichard, 1902), 59.

14. David McPherson, "Nietzsche, Cosmodicy, and the Sainly Ideal," *Philosophy* 91 (2016): 40. McPherson states that Nietzsche does not use the term (41–42). That is in fact untrue. In 1872, Erwin Rohde suggested the term *Kosmodicee* to Nietzsche in a discussion of how to advertise Nietzsche's forthcoming book, and Nietzsche used it occasionally—though admittedly there is only one published use, in the essay on David Strauss (*DS* 7). Of unpublished occurrences, all but one (*KSA* 10:10[137], p.

533) are in the early period of 1872–73 (see *KSA* 1, p. 825; 7:21[13], p. 526; 7:27[34], p. 597; *KSB* 3, p. 294).

15. See Viktor E. Frankl, *Homo Patiens: Versuch einer Pathodizee* (Vienna: Franz Deutike, 1950).

16. Geuss, “Art and Theodicy,” 82–83.

17. Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 239.

18. Olga Plümacher, *Der Pessimismus in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart: Geschichtliches und Kritisches* (Heidelberg: Georg Weiss, 1888), 124 (my translation). On Plümacher, see Frederick C. Beiser, *After Hegel: German Philosophy 1840–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 160, 218–19; and Tobias Dahlquist, *Nietzsche and the Philosophy of Pessimism: A Study of Nietzsche’s Relation to the Pessimistic Tradition: Schopenhauer, Hartmann, Leopardi* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2007), 37, 222.

19. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena [PP]*, vol. 2, trans. and ed. Adrian del Caro and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 183. This passage is discussed below, in the section on *BT*.

20. Readers of Schopenhauer may remember his emphatic message about ordinary human life: “how vacuously and meaninglessly . . . life flows away for the vast majority of human beings” (*The World as Will and Representation [WWR]*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 348)—but the point here is that ordinary human life is caught in the delusory web of individuation and desire, unable to grasp the *metaphysical* truth that existence does have a meaning.

21. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation [WWR]*, vol. 2, translated by E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), 576.

22. See Schopenhauer, *PP*, 2:171 and *passim*.

23. Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 1:352.

24. Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 2:584.

25. Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 2:635.

26. Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 2:432.

27. Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 2:580.

28. James Sully, *Pessimism: A History and a Criticism* (New York: D. Appleton, 1891), 104, wrote that Schopenhauer “will have his theodicy, and a curious thing this is.” His remark is echoed by William Mackintire Salter, “Schopenhauer’s Contact with Theology” *Harvard Theological Review* 4 (1911): 291: “The eternal order does no wrong. . . . [W]e, the world, are responsible for what we suffer in the world. Such, if I may say so, is Schopenhauer’s theodicy.” But Rudolf Malter supplies the corrective to this: “The doctrine of eternal justice does not speak of a good or providential world order, it is at its core an unmasking and an indictment of the sole source of suffering, the will” (Rudolf Malter, *Arthur Schopenhauer: Transzendentalphilosophie und Metaphysik des Willens* [Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1991], 375, my translation).

29. Three versions of the same point are extant from 1870: a notebook fragment from early that year (KSA 7:3[62], p. 77) appears lightly revised in the essays *Die dionysische Weltanschauung* (quoted in the text) and *Die Geburt des tragischen Gedankens* (KSA 1, p. 580).

30. See Gardner, "Nietzsche's Philosophical Aestheticism," 603–6; Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes, "Nietzsche's Illusion," in *Nietzsche on Art and Life*, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 82–84.

31. Geuss, "Art and Theodicy," 105.

32. Came, "Aesthetic Justification of Existence," 41.

33. Michael Tanner, "Introduction," in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), xiii.

34. Schopenhauer, *PP*, 2:183.

35. Schopenhauer, *PP*, 2:293.

36. Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 2:182–83.

37. Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 2:577.

38. Schopenhauer, *PP*, 2:94.

39. Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 177. A related account is that of Paul Katsafanas, *Agency and the Foundations of Ethics: Nietzschean Constitutivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), who argues that something like this structure is constitutive of all agency for Nietzsche and can generate substantive normative conclusions. Both Reginster and Katsafanas associate these notions with Nietzsche's concept of will to power.

40. See Christopher Janaway, "Attitudes to Suffering: Parfit and Nietzsche," *Inquiry* 20 (2016): 1–31.

41. See Stephen Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us: The New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

42. Kay Redfield Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (London: Picador, 1997), 218–19. I owe the quotation to M. Roberts, "Facilitating Recovery by Making Sense of Suffering: A Nietzschean Perspective," *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 15 (2008): 745–46. See also Janaway, "Attitudes to Suffering" 18.

43. May, "Why Nietzsche Is Still in the Morality Game," 80, 91.

44. May, "Why Nietzsche Is Still in the Morality Game," 81.

45. The evidence may be equivocal. As a gesture in that direction, consider two late notebook passages that contain rare uses of the term *Theodizee*. In one passage Nietzsche writes: "[I]t is a naivety to set up pleasure or intellectuality or morality or any other particularity from the sphere of consciousness as highest value.—This is my chief *objection* to all philosophical-moral cosmo- and theodicies, to all *Whys* and *highest values* in previous philosophy and philosophy of religion. *A kind of means is misunderstood as an end: in reverse, life and its intensification of power has been diminished to a means*" (KSA 10:10[137], pp. 533–34). This passage sits well with May's notion of affirming life in its quiddity without asking for reasons.

Nietzsche sets himself against all theodicies or cosmodicies, and says it is mistaken to view life as realizing any value over and above itself. By implication, the suffering that life contains also requires no “Why?” On the other hand, a note from the same period characterizes “the pessimism of strength” as follows: “Now the human being *no longer* needs a ‘justification of evil,’ he shudders precisely at ‘justification’: he enjoys evil pure, raw, he finds *meaningless evil* as the most interesting. [. . .] This *pessimism of strength* also ends with a *theodicy*, i.e., with an absolute Yes-saying to the world, but on the grounds for which people previously said No to it” (KSA 10:10[21], pp. 467–68). The notion of being beyond “justification” looks favorable to May’s account of affirmation; however, Nietzsche ends by linking affirmation to the theodicy tradition, and speaks of saying Yes to the world for reasons (*um Gründe*), affirming life *because of* its suffering.

46. See Paul S. Loeb, “Ecce Superhomo: How Zarathustra Became What Nietzsche Was Not,” in *Nietzsche’s “Ecce Homo,”* ed. Duncan Large and Nicholas Martin (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014).