



# nietzsche

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## Actas / Proceedings

**Life-Affirming Ambivalence**  
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## **Life-Affirming Ambivalence**

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One of Nietzsche's principal aims is to develop what I term a secular theodicy; an attempt to affirm life in the face of all that is deeply problematic about it. The problem with such theodicy, and arguably with theodicy in general, is that they seem to entail the absurd and abject idea that the opposite of good is good, which amounts to the erasure of all ethical distinctions. I will show that one can overcome this problem by defending an imperfectionist ethic and I argue that Nietzsche, in his better moments, endorses such an ethic. But he is not entirely consistent and I will show, following Camus, that, in his worst moments, Nietzsche endorses an ethic which incoherently and perversely makes good of its opposite.

### **Nietzsche's Secular Theodicy**

Despite the fact that I end by supporting Camus' sympathetic yet emphatic critique of Nietzsche in *The Rebel*, this paper's principal starting point is a qualified endorsement of Nietzsche's affirmation of central negative aspects of our lives as part of his central project of affirming this-worldly life.<sup>1</sup> And the affirmation in question is one that, according to Nietzsche, involves shunning any attempt to find a metaphysical source of value and purpose. Such attempts, Nietzsche thinks and I agree, necessarily lead to life-denying *ressentiment*. Nietzsche's alternative attempt to find the source of value and purpose in this problematic world involves showing how the good is largely constituted by the bad. To use the imagery of his early work—*The Birth of Tragedy*—the Dionysian forces of nihilistic destruction are a necessary requirement for the creative forces of the Apollonian artist. Our task is creatively to construct value and purpose, but this requires the Dionysian threat as its motivation. One mustn't forget that one of Nietzsche's central concerns is to overcome nihilism, but not in the sense of 'overcoming' that entails a final resolution. Rather, value and purpose, for Nietzsche, emerge in the perpetual struggle against the nihilistic forces of destruction; forces which for this reason play a central creative role in human life. So, for Nietzsche, life-

affirmation is an ongoing struggle for value and purpose in the face of the ongoing threat of nihilism; the threat is a condition for affirmation.

This is in many ways the picture of life that Camus gives us in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, but with the key difference, discussed toward the end of this piece, that in his attempt to affirm life in the face of nihilism, Nietzsche ends up, in his worst moments, joyfully embracing the nihilistic forces of destruction, whereas Camus, more consistently and ethically enlightened than Nietzsche, conceives of life ideally as a permanent rebellion against meaninglessness and, centrally, nihilistic murder.

My central aim here is to show how the negative aspects of existence that need to be affirmed can indeed remain negative—although in a qualified sense—even if they play key positive functions in our lives; functions that warrant their affirmation. I agree with Nietzsche that, if we are genuinely going to affirm life, then we must learn to accept the bad with the good, not primarily because of the pessimistic insight that the bad is probably here to stay, but because the good requires the bad; because without the bad much of what is positive in life—what is worth affirming in the first instance—could not exist. But the problem with this assertion is that, if as Nietzsche thinks bad things are constitutive of life at its best, then it seems that in some sense we must claim that bad things, some bad things at any rate, are good insofar as they are constitutive of goodness. This claim, however, seems *prima facie* absurd in addition, of course, to seeming deeply morally problematic. The key question I will address here is how to avoid the absurdity and the morally abject while holding onto the Nietzschean thesis at the heart of his affirmation of life.

Because of the concerns briefly described above, I think of Nietzsche's philosophy of this-worldly life-affirmation as a secular theodicy. By this I mean that, unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition, which finds redemption for this-world suffering beyond this world, Nietzsche seeks such redemption entirely within this world. Life affirmation, for Nietzsche, involves an affirmation of earthly life by expressly denying metaphysical utopian thinking and by finding the sources of value in this all-too-human world. Even divine values, Nietzsche famously argues in *The Genealogy of Morals*, spring from the inner needs of the priestly caste. Indeed, it is the fact of the Ascetic Priest's expression of his will to power, in the face of his disempowerment—his vulnerability to the noble master—that leads, according to Nietzsche, to the creative but ultimately stifling affirmation of slave morality. The question is how to interpret the idea of affirmation of the badness that we need in order to be at our best, for it would seem to be incoherent to affirm the bad by thinking of it as good simpliciter, and I suspect that at times Nietzsche assumes something of this sort. I think, as we shall see, that we can in a sense affirm the negative aspects of existence and still preserve the key distinction between goodness and its opposite.

As mentioned above, I agree with Camus' criticisms of Nietzsche in this regard. Life affirmation cannot amount to unconditional acceptance. Rebellion must always be a possibility and at times Nietzsche seems to slip from life affirmation of the type that involves rebellion to a kind of Stoic acceptance of whatever life may throw on us, including our own base drives and motivations; particularly the instinct for violence and destruction.

## Bad and Evil

Let me warn the reader that my use of 'bad' and its derivatives up to this point has deliberately been provisional, and it was required in order to set up my basic concerns without raising what many will think is a misguided approach to Nietzsche before I have had a chance to defend myself against this potential imputation. My concern in this piece is more specifically with evil in general and its relationship to goodness rather than badness and its opposite. I could avoid controversy simply by avoiding evil-talk altogether and replace it with bad-talk, but I do not think that this would properly describe the relevant phenomenon. It is indeed true that Nietzsche rejects the good/evil dichotomy—at the heart of slave morality—in *The Genealogy* and elsewhere precisely because it is life diminishing, but this does not mean that Nietzsche rejects evil-talk altogether. His use of 'evil' in *The Genealogy* and elsewhere is quite specialized as there he aims specifically to draw the distinction between the moralities of masters and slaves. And, because of this, I could potentially endorse Nietzsche's argument in *The Genealogy* without being forced to drop evil-talk altogether.<sup>2</sup> Here I will mean evil in a broader sense, which includes natural and moral evil, and intentional and non-intentional evil. What is bad is a subcategory of this wider category of disvalue, for although it is true that all bad things are evil, not all evil things are properly described merely as bad. It would be strange, for instance, to categorize large-scale atrocities merely as bad, but it is not odd to say, for instance, that stealing a few coins from my son's piggybank is a petty evil. Anything that is morally negative is an evil, but not everything that is a moral disvalue can properly be characterized merely as bad. The Holocaust is bad, but it is not merely bad; it is unspeakably evil. And it would be odd to refer to it merely as tremendously bad. The use of 'evil' in the context of describing unspeakable atrocities expresses only a subset, indeed a paradigmatic subset, of the broad range of meanings that 'evil' can express. 'Evil' has a wider scope of uses than 'bad' in the moral domain although it is true to say that the smaller the evil, the easier it is to characterize it merely as bad and not as evil at all. However, this is only true because the sense in which evil is being used in this last example is more restrictive than use I will be putting it to in this piece—the wider sense. Given this wide characterization of evil, I take it that, although non-standard in the context of a discussion of Nietzsche, is not unfitting.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, here is a passage from *Human, All Too Human* where Nietzsche uses 'evil' in a way that is more closely related to my usage than with his specialized usage in *The Genealogy*:

*The Cyclops of culture.* – When we behold those deeply-furrowed hollows in which glaciers have lain, we think it hardly possible that a time will come when a wooded, grassy valley, watered by streams, will spread itself upon the same spot. So it is, too, in the history of mankind: the most savage forces beat a path, and are mainly destructive; but their work was nonetheless necessary, in order that later a gentler civilization might raise its house. The frightful energies – those which are called *evil* [my italics] – are the cyclopean architects and road-makers of humanity.

## Defending Imperfectionism

The above passage is also statement of the central concern of this piece. The evil 'cyclopean architects' are the 'road-makers of humanity'. But isn't it the case that to put things in this way is problematic for doesn't it force us to admit that, at least in some cases, evil is good? And it seems that this claim is straightforwardly incoherent in addition to being deeply morally problematic, but this is different from saying that evil may have a positive function, or so it seems. Crude utilitarians would dispute this claim, but then one can easily find innumerable examples of fortuitous mishaps leading to fortunate outcomes, so the crude utilitarian picture cannot be right. Also, Leibniz attempted to show us that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and I think Nietzsche also has something like this in mind, except that he is under no compulsion to square God with his creation. Do Leibniz's views commit him to the idea that evil is good? If so, then he would have to be committed to the idea that the unspeakable suffering of millions across the span of our lamentable history is good or, more precisely, as good as it can possibly be at the time of the unspeakable events. Rwanda was good, and so was Auschwitz. Absurd and terrible! One of the key question that will concern me here is 'How could a Nietzschean avoid this sort of Leibnizean absurdity?' I think the Nietzschean could—Nietzsche himself doesn't do this consistently—by claiming, following Robert M. Adams, that necessary evils, that is, evils that are necessary for bringing about key goods, are not all-things-considered bad.<sup>4</sup> So, rather than claiming that at times 'evil is good', I endorse the claim that 'evil is not purely bad' and, symmetrically, that 'goodness is not purely good'. In fact, I will reject the perfectionism that holds that the categories purely good and purely bad are intelligible. We are always working within the constraints of the world that makes our basic concepts intelligible and which always involves strife, and its eternal companion, sacrifice.

As I said, I think of Nietzsche's philosophy as a secular theodicy for he tries to save humanity from the Judeo-Christian impossible moralizing *resentiment*-constituting demands by properly affirming worldly existence, which means affirming at least many of its evils; minimally, those that are necessary for goodness. The Judeo-Christian rejection takes the form of a testing ground: this world is indeed plagued with evils, but it is the place that must be endured in order to find a rightful place in the afterlife. This move is meant to help give meaning to all seemingly senseless suffering, but affirming the world merely as a place of passage is in effect to denigrate it and, with it, life. Judeo-Christian thinking, as Nietzsche rightly observed, is fundamentally Platonic.<sup>5</sup> And this sort of approach to sense-making is ultimately self-defeating. One cannot genuinely find value and meaning by systematically denigrating earthly existence. The denigration occurs because the value of the here and now is grasped as very low in relation to the divine standards against which it is measured. Judeo-Christian morality, Nietzsche famously argues, is ultimately nihilistic. Nietzsche, by contrast, wants the standards against which we measure human life to pertain to this world and this means finding values where seemingly there are none; hence the motivation for the divine fiction that ultimately turns against humanity, making us cripples of the impossible (and, ultimately, of the undesirable insofar as Platonic ideals are health-diminishing). And to find value in this way is ultimately to find value in evil. But if this does not amount to an endorsement

of evil then I must be able to show in what way accepting that evil may have a positive function does not amount to its endorsement.

But are we to suppose then that Nietzsche's rejection of divine perfectionism means that he is lowering the bar for humanity? Are we to think of Nietzschean this-worldly ideals as rather mediocre? I think not and to understand why this is the case we need to understand Nietzsche's secular theodicy; we need to understand how, generally speaking, the constraints within which we live are conditions for the possibility for healthy living; indeed, for flourishing.

If one is to affirm this-worldly life in the way that Nietzsche does, then one must also affirm, at least to some extent, its tragic dimensions, which are made tragic by the presence of evils. Indeed, to repeat, Nietzsche's fundamental philosophical aim is to develop a secular theodicy; an attempt to show, not that God is good despite all the evil in the world, but that the world is good despite (and to a large extent also because of) the abundance of evils, large and small. This does not mean that we must unconditionally affirm any and every negative thing that life throws on us, but rather it means that we must learn to accept the fact that life emerges in all of its brilliance only in a world plagued with adversity (with evils), a world very much like our own. And the fact that this is the case for Nietzsche does not mean that he is committed, at least not if read charitably, very charitably at times, to the incoherent idea that evil is good simpliciter (or that it could be good in this way), or to conservatism about values. Rather, it means that for him, read charitably, evil plays a key positive function in our lives and not everything that plays such a function is good. Evil, so to speak, spurs us forwarding, opening up occasions for creative possibilities. The Mandelas of this world, for instance, could never have come about were it not for the presence of evils such as apartheid (or the Chile of Pinochet). This is not to say that we should have an unqualifiedly positive attitude towards apartheid (or to the Chile of Pinochet), but what should our attitude be if we are committed to the idea that evil may have a positive function? I think, following Adams, that our attitude should be one of ambivalence. But what ambivalence amounts to needs careful unpacking for it is clear that it cannot amount to the endorsement of evil or to moral apathy. Rather, provisionally, ambivalence amounts to non-complacent—rebellious—acceptance of the negative conditions that make human living at its best possible.

Should we understand 'ambivalence' as 'partly good'; that evil is in part good because it is a condition for goodness? And how else can we explain ambivalence? Should we, as I have suggested we should, follow Adams in claiming that evils that are necessary for goodness are not all-things-considered evil? How would a claim of this sort differ from simply claiming that there is an aspect of evil which is good; namely, some of its functions? Or shall we claim that evils are unqualifiedly evil, but if they are necessary for goodness, that they must be accepted? But how should we understand 'accepted' in a way that does not commit us to claiming that evil is partly good, and hence, it seems, that some evil is good? We must accept evil because, without it, we could not thrive. So evils, some of them at any rate, are partly good. This move, it seems, leads to the same dead end. If we admit that there are many evils that are necessary for goodness, then it seems that we must accept the apparently absurd claim that evil is good. How can we avoid this apparent absurdity? Perhaps the solution lies in a certain attitude to life, a none-complacent acceptance that is manifested by

permanent struggle, permanent strife; a combination of resignation and rebellion; resignation to the fact that life is endless strife, with an acknowledgement of the fact that it is precisely in this world that the humans can thrive, if one is strong and courageous enough to see the face of evil without recoiling into theological or, more generally, Platonic despair. The source of strife—the swords hanging above us—is double-edged: it is both a condition for the possibility of living fully and a source of great pain and anxiety; and indeed often the source of our destruction; an acceptance of my fate while at the same time a rebellion against it, to put things in ways that would perhaps please Camus. It is perhaps in rebellion, endless Sisyphean rebellion, that the contradiction is avoided. Rebellion without end, recognized as being so. Whereas I agree with Camus on these matters, I do not see how this is going to help us with our present concerns, for it is still the case that we seem, absurdly, to have to embrace evil for the good work that it does; that we must think of some evil as at least partly good, precisely on account of its instrumental value.

It seems that we are struggling here with the limits of reason. Have we reached a dead end, are we unable to dispel absurdity from our midst, or must we interrogate our first principles and commence afresh? Perhaps the problem is with the dichotomy between good and evil. Perhaps there is a way of claiming that evil is good without violating the principle of non-contradiction. Or shall we return to other-worldly Platonism and invent an otherworldly world where goodness exists in a pure form and perhaps operates as a perfectionist moral compass untainted by the mess of this world. Leaving aside the issue of *ressentiment*, the problem with this alternative has already been suggested. We need evil. Evil is the pretext for goodness, or for lots of goodness at any rate—for truly robust goodness that is expressed at its best, among others, I suggest, by our moral heroes—such that, were we not to have a plethora of evils, our lives would be significantly impoverished. We need the challenges posed by evil in order even to make sense of goodness and for goodness to become something genuinely of concern to us. But this way of putting things may lead some to think that the dependence is merely epistemic. This is not the case. Goodness in its robust form depends on evil even for its being, so the issue is ontological as well. This, I take it, is Nietzsche's position, and I endorse it in general outline.

How can we move forward, how can we dispel absurdity? It seems that perhaps the solution is to dispel perfectionist thinking here; to think that neither goodness nor evil come in pure form and, by doing this, to take one further step in the direction away from Platonism. But imperfection, presumably, is measured as just that in relation to perfection, so we have come unstuck again. We keep on crashing against the walls of reason. Or perhaps we should reconsider what we mean by 'perfection'. Don't we just mean something along a continuum with no clear end? So, when we talk about goodness, we do not mean goodness in absolute terms and, similarly, when we talk about evil we do not mean evil in any absolute sense. Goodness and evil can be understood as moving in opposite directions along a continuum that has no determinate endpoints. What, after all, is absolute evil or absolute goodness? Can we even start to imagine these ideas in more than a merely deeply sketchy way? I think not. So, we can talk about levels of perfection without having in mind any absolute, and in this way, it seems to me, we may be able avoid absurdity. Things are neither all-things-considered good nor all-things-considered evil. The pursuit of goodness just is the pursuit of

betterment; of acting in the best possible way and being the best possible person in a world rich in challenges. And the criterion for betterment is never measured in relation to an absolute. All betterment requires sacrifice; minimally, requires conditionally affirming the system that makes betterment possible.

So, the fact that evil is a condition for goodness means that goodness is tainted, in the ontological sense, by evil and the fact that evil is a condition for goodness also means that evil is tainted by goodness in an analogous fashion. But we must be very careful in formulating what we meant by 'tainted' here. We ought not mean that which is measured against an ideal of perfection. It is not as if we can distil goodness and evil in their pure forms from tainted admixture. Rather, we ought to say that descriptions of goodness involve talking not about goodness abstracted from the evils of this world but, rather, talk of goodness as rebellion, to borrow Camus' term, in the direction away from evil.

Or, to put things in ways that Nietzsche would, to live humanly is to struggle for health, and goodness, which must not be measured in relation to Platonic absolutes, but in relation to a very earthly Nietzschean ideal of health. Health is a useful concept here, for unlike goodness, there is never any question regarding any absolute conception of health, as the concept is unambiguously related to the idea of proper bodily function. By wedding the notion of goodness to a conception of human health, Nietzsche is able, in his better moments, to avoid the absurdity discussed above. Health is measured against the very contingent standards of life on earth.

As I said at the beginning, Nietzsche's philosophy is one of this-worldly life affirmation. And this means a conditional affirmation of evil and goodness. Now we have a way of explaining how affirmation may do its work. By affirming evil we affirm it as not-all-things-considered bad insofar as it is a condition for goodness and in affirming goodness we accept it as not all-things-considered good, as it gets its value, its meaning and its identity, from the evils of this world. And this should not confuse our moral compasses as the relationship between goodness and evil, which allows these two largely indeterminate poles to be intelligible as what they are, need not be changed. We can still direct ourselves toward goodness. But we must give up hope of any absolutes. We can differentiate goodness from evil, but not in the stark way a Platonist would. The good Nietzschean subject is one who is good at finding an ideal balance where, minimally, goodness wins out, but this will typically require the sacrifice of some goods; indeed, often very important ones. We sometimes kill in order to live and we care for those that we love to the detriment of the anonymous many. Indeed, relative imperviousness to the many is a condition for caring; a central human value. Caring is not all-things-considered good. It happens only in conditions where its opposite is always present, constituting it as what it is. Caring involves sacrifices to goodness and it only exists in an environment where caring comes about as a kind of victory over odds. Crucially, it only comes at a price. We can recognize that it is always better to care for more people than we happen to care for, but we cannot properly make sense of the idea of caring for everyone. There is a threshold of care, determined not so much by our psychological limits as by the conceptual limits set by the concept itself of caring; conceptual limits defined by the role that the lack of care play in the game of caring.

We are creatures that are neither perfectly good nor perfectly evil. Rather, we are creatures ideally struggling in the direction of goodness within the limits of our

ambivalent—double-edged—existence. And we should joyfully embrace this, for what we value, what we care about; what makes us human in the superlative sense, is formed in this ambivalent space. And now we have, it seems, sufficient resources to produce a relatively coherent, admittedly rather schematic, formulation of the ambivalence we have been after. We can say that evil is not all-things-considered evil—is partly good—if and only if, minimally, in the existential calculus, the balance of evil and goodness ought to be biased in the direction of goodness; if the vessel of life is steered, largely against the current, in the direction of goodness. But there is never a question about finding a clear beacon of light in the horizon. Instead, treacherously, we muddle our way towards goodness, but the goodness in question is one that is constituted by the conditions that limit its goodness and make it possible; conditions that involve the abundance of evil. Nietzsche's ultimate end is health. And health is an imperfect ideal of vulnerable—indeed moral—creatures.

But, nevertheless, this imperfectionist ethic, which I think Nietzsche endorses in his better moments, does force us to reevaluate our values in the light of the imperfectionism that has allowed us to dispel the absurdity described above. Evil is a condition for robust goodness—indeed for the only goodness we are capable of—so we must see our earthly task as a permanent struggle against all manner of obstacles demanding that we ideally express our humanity at its best in moments of high vulnerability. So life, as Camus would put it, is fundamentally Sisyphean.

## **Camus' Rebel**

Platonism ultimately entails this-world hatred, but there is a risk that the Nietzschean alternative leads to the incoherent logic that ends up glorifying, or something like this, murder and destruction. I think Camus is right to point out that at least at times Nietzsche succumbs to this temptation. His rebellion against the Christian rebellion is also, at least partly, a lustful embracing of murder, violence and death; indeed of cruelty. In Camus' words:

The Nietzschean affirmative ... disavows rebellion at the same time that it disavows the ethic which refuses to accept the world as it is.<sup>6</sup>

For Nietzsche, in his darker moments, the death of the morality of good and evil implies the erasure of all ethical distinctions. In his darker moment, Nietzsche's secular theodicy inevitably leads to the absurd conclusion that I have aimed to show how to avoid in this piece. *Ressentiment* is overcome at the cost of embracing murder. Let us hear Camus' post-Nietzschean voice once again:

To say yes to everything supposes that one says yes to murder.<sup>7</sup>

And Camus reminds us of Nietzsche's own words:

'How can one make the best of crime?' asks Nietzsche, a good professor faithful to his system ... 'When the ends are great' ... 'Humanity employs other standards and no longer judges crime as such even if it resorts to the most frightful means'.<sup>8</sup>

Platonism leads to crime for it is predicated on misanthropy, but so does complete acceptance, a blind optimism in fate; something Nietzsche is often guilty of. In place of the totalizing metaphysical rebellion of Platonism, Nietzsche, in his worst moments, seems to recommend complete acceptance. This aspect of his thought could be seen as consonant with Leibnizean theodicy—necessarily, we live in the best of all possible worlds. Camus' solution is rebellion, but for the sake of the here and now; not rebellion that turns the here and the now into a mere means for total emancipation—Platonism—but rebellion which is firmly anchored in this world as it exists today, which is the only way to rebel without bringing about the generalized pathology that has led the Platonist ultimately to revolt against life.

But we can avoid both Platonism and Nietzsche's anti-rebellion rebellion against Platonism. We can accept the fact that we can only live distinctively human lives in a world plagued with evils and give up hope for paradise without having to turn the acceptance of our fate into a kind of love affair with evil. Instead, we should give up our perfectionist aspirations and accept the fate of the rebel trapped in endless struggles for betterment; Sisyphus rather than Dionysus.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Camus, Albert, *The Rebel* (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 57-71.

<sup>2</sup> Although I tend to agree with Claudia Card's critique of Nietzsche's argument in *The Genealogy*. See her *The Atrocity Paradigm*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 27-49.

<sup>3</sup> For an alternative defence of my use of evil, see the introduction to Tabensky, P. A. (ed.). 2009. *The Positive Function of Evil*. London: Palgrave. pp. xii-xix

<sup>4</sup> Adams, R. M. 2009. 'Love and the Problem of Evil', in Pedro A. Tabensky (ed.), *The Positive Function of Evil*. London: Palgrave. Pp. 1-13.

<sup>5</sup> For a more sustained critique of Platonism see my 'Shadows of Goodness', P. A. Tabensky (ed.), *The Positive Function of Evil* (London: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 45-65.

<sup>6</sup> Camus, Albert, *The Rebel* (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*