

# Nietzsche's Life-Affirmative Suffering in Western Literature: Confronting Technological and Anesthetic Decadence

Lucas Wyrembeck

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Samuel Cocks, Department of Philosophy

## ABSTRACT

Nietzsche's philosophy reevaluates nothing less than the very essence of what it *means* to suffer. That is, his philosophy imparts a clearer understanding of suffering. It is apparent that most people abhor suffering induced by tension because it is often viewed as a means to an end: a necessary evil. Much is already understood about the utility of adversity, but rarely is its meaning taken into consideration. My ambition is to explicate his argument that suffering is not only useful, but that it has considerable value by itself, regardless of its consequences. To further explicate Nietzsche's view, I will turn to authors such as Reginster, Hesse, Huxley, Frankl, and Kundera. The issue of suffering today is hardly given explicit consideration as a matter of *meaning* despite its wide range of implications. Indeed, there are several primary contemporary outlets to which many escape in the face of hardship and pain. I will contend that Christianity, social media, and drugs such as alcohol are anesthetic in nature, as they exercise the proclivity to negate the real world in favor of an illusory world devoid of suffering.

## INTRODUCTION

Human interactions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are commonly relegated to social media such as Facebook and Instagram. In consequence, the contemporary social landscape afforded to us by technology is one that largely lacks the awkwardness, suffering, and anxiety engendered by face-to-face human encounters. Nietzsche may not have lived to experience such forms of technological socialization, but he was keenly aware of the social subversion in his time. "Behold the superfluous!" he cautions us. "They are always sick; they vomit their gall and call it a newspaper. They devour each other and cannot even digest themselves."<sup>1</sup> In respect to social media use, we avoid our own suffering by instead highlighting the triumphs of others as well as ourselves. Nietzsche's criticism is not only intended for the social domains themselves, but for their various implications concerning suffering. Primarily, he is apprehensive about their propensity to negate life on this earth by placing higher value within a secondary digital world.

Nietzsche affirms earthly suffering by asserting its intrinsic value. Consequently, he affirms life on earth, including the suffering within it. Taking Nietzsche's stance on affirmative suffering into consideration, this paper will respond to life-negating objections from Schopenhauer and Christianity. Following the responses to such objections, I will enlist various Western authors' life-affirmative claims about suffering to substantiate a far-ranging account which repudiates the nihilistic tendencies of Christianity, social media, and drugs. More specifically, I will bring Nietzsche's affirmation of suffering to bear with several fictional works which, I argue, are not so easily distinguished from our world.

Part I defines suffering in a Nietzschean perspective: I contrast his affirmation of life, including suffering, with its various forms of negation. Bernard Reginster contends that Nietzsche views suffering as an "ingredient" of his will to power; conversely, Schopenhauer and Christianity see suffering as an unfortunate symptom of the human condition. Part II confronts the issue of social media to the extent that it replaces face-to-face communication with an anxiolytic domain which resembles heaven. Part III considers drugs and alcohol as nihilistic "numbing" agents. I buttress Nietzsche's claims about such drug use and its capacity for denervation by referring to the literature of Frankl, Huxley, and Hesse. Part IV will then provide an account of Nietzsche's potential solution to these contemporary forms of nihilism: the will to power.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982), 162.

*Part I: Affirmative Suffering and Negation of Earth*

Let me begin by describing what suffering *is like* from an existential perspective. Suffering consists of pain induced by strife, tension, and conflict—both physical and emotional. The common approach from which to view strife and war is to avoid such things at all costs. At best, hardship is typically valued as a means to a peaceful and gratifying end. Nietzsche reverses the value assessment between resistance and achievement: the end itself is still meaningful, but the path to achieving such a goal has value by itself, no matter the outcome. Indeed, even the most trying circumstances have considerable meaning—*especially* the most trying circumstances. To find meaning in the suffering is to affirm life itself.

To oppose the affirmation of life, Schopenhauer will argue in favor of a pessimistic school of thought which renounces suffering. Schopenhauer's pessimism insists that life can be reduced to an 'unquenchable thirst,' a "lack that can never be fulfilled."<sup>2</sup> Schopenhauer acknowledges that life is mired in challenges comprised of suffering, boredom, and endless desires.

Rather than face life's challenges with Nietzschean courage and optimism, Schopenhauer thinks we should avoid suffering at all costs. As a result, Schopenhauerian happiness amounts to the brief respite from suffering in which we temporarily satisfy our desires. The satisfaction, however, does not last. The attainment of any goal is followed by desire for a *new* goal. Such is the constitution of man's "will to life": he continually "strives" to achieve more. Schopenhauer writes in *The World as Will and Representation*, "Therefore, so long as our consciousness is filled by our own will, so long as we are given up to the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears, so long as we are the subject of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Schopenhauer keenly observes two possible outcomes following the attainment of any desire: either we move on to a new desire or we fall prey to boredom.

Schopenhauer dismisses boredom as a viable option. In its place, he concedes that our best alternative is to negate the will to life on this earth. Reginster explains how "Schopenhauer's pessimistic response "remains stuck" in the Christian moral perspective because...he continues to subscribe to the Christian view that suffering is evil and to the ideal of a life free from suffering."<sup>4</sup> This solution to negate life is predicated upon Schopenhauer's presupposition that the ephemeral feeling of satisfaction is *not worth* the prerequisite suffering to achieve it. In this philosophy is Nietzsche's conception of nihilism: "*That the highest values devalue themselves.*"<sup>5</sup> The object of suffering, then, is without inherent value because it only functions as a means to achieve the end of a goal. At best, the brief moment of completion is only a short respite from the suffering endured.

As a solution, Schopenhauer suggests a "renunciation" of desire by negating the will to life, which is also the will to desire. "The negation of the will is a 'cure,' whereas satisfactions of desires can be at best mere 'palliatives, anodynes."<sup>6</sup> Schopenhauer maintains that the negation of the will is made for the same reason we have desires: to relieve pain. He argues that the achievement of a desire is a mere provisional "palliative," whereas the denial of the will through renunciation eliminates pain more thoroughly. Such a conclusion drawn upon suffering is ultimately born of hedonism and cowardice, as it belies man's capacity to endure resistance and derive intrinsic meaning from the experience.

Nietzsche critiques Schopenhauer's life-negating solution by reevaluating the *essence* of suffering. For Nietzsche, suffering is not just a means by which we satisfy a desire; nor is desire reducible to the mere absence of pain. Indeed, it is necessary to *have* a desire, or a thing worth suffering for. On the other hand, Nietzsche thinks we should value the painful experience by which we achieve our goals just as well as we value the goal itself. Nietzsche buttresses his reevaluation by proving that suffering is not only derivatively valuable, but that it is desirable for its own sake.<sup>7</sup>

To substantiate this claim, Nietzsche reevaluates the concept of happiness. Quite often, happiness is perceived in a Schopenhauerian sense as the absence of pain. Nietzsche challenges this position by considering happiness not in opposition to suffering, but *in union* with it—as a marriage of meaning. In other words, suffering is not the antithesis of happiness; the two are better understood as two sides of the same coin of being—as "sisters," he contends. "How little you know of human *happiness*, you comfortable and benevolent people, for happiness and unhappiness are

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 170.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, 175.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 15.

sisters and even twins that either grow up together or, as in your case, *remain small* together.”<sup>8</sup> Reginster clarifies Nietzsche’s meaning by referring to suffering as an “ingredient” of happiness. If we are to accept that happiness and suffering are indeed intertwined, then this, according to Nietzsche, should compel a reevaluation of suffering. Taken from this perspective, we can conclude that suffering is the foundation of Nietzsche’s life-affirmative “will to power.”

In considering the affirmation of life, the will to power is best understood as man’s “overcoming of resistance.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this “power” at the center of man’s drive appears to contrast Schopenhauer’s “will” to alleviate pain. Nietzsche’s critique of the will suggests that man’s primary drive is not to reduce pain, but to *affirm* it. The crux of Schopenhauer’s argument is that he neglects that which is tantamount to the human condition: man is made to suffer. Nietzsche confronts this issue by accepting it and reversing the perspective from which we view suffering. “Peak and abyss—they are now joined together,” writes Nietzsche. “You are going your way to greatness: now that which has hitherto been your ultimate danger has become your ultimate refuge.”<sup>10</sup> To exclusively value the pleasantries of life—the moments divorced from pain—is to castrate the human experience. If suffering is part of life, and life is worth living, then suffering on this earth should not only be endured, it should be *celebrated*.

The Christian panacea to earthly suffering is Heaven: “the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness.”<sup>11</sup> Christianity will confront Nietzsche’s affirmation of suffering by reducing it back to an object like Schopenhauer’s “will.” In a word, Christian ideology subordinates earthly experiences to determinate content: our actions in this world are valued in accordance with their afterworldly significance. Indeed, Paul the Apostle writes that “our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”<sup>12</sup> That is, the “momentary troubles” on earth are worth suffering as a means to reach Heaven. Such a philosophy is nihilistic because it reduces the earthly life to an object devoid of meaning *by itself*. The Christian human experience, then, has no *intrinsic* meaning.

One might object to this critique of Christian nihilism by arguing that a human life could be meaningful in this world *and the next*. Such a response seems reasonable, though it contains one critical semantic contradiction: an earthly life cannot have intrinsic value if it is lived *for* the afterlife. The subtle contradiction in the objection to what I will consider a “dual-meaning” existence is that the earthly life’s value is contingent upon its afterworldly consequence; whereas a divine life has intrinsic value because Christian ideology values the *next* world as the ultimate goal. In other words, it is logically impossible for life to be an object and a subject of consequence at the same time, as both items are semantically opposite one another.

Christianity’s most compelling solution to life, the alleviation of earthly suffering through Heaven and its “collection of refreshments, palliatives, and narcotics,”<sup>13</sup> turns out to be self-defeating. Christ explains in the Gospel of Matthew, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”<sup>14</sup> Christ’s message is germane to the affirmation of life because he negates this world in exchange for another. He urges us, in this passage, to renounce our earthly existence so that we might reach Heaven. By reducing the earthly life to an object, Heaven loses its claim to meaning because the earthly proving grounds upon which meaning was determined has been objectified. This critique begs the question of Christianity: can something be intrinsically valuable if it is founded upon nihilism? Nietzsche provides a solution to the problem with his perspectivism on suffering:

Distress, whether of the soul, body, or intellect, cannot of itself give birth to nihilism (i.e., the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability). Such distress always permits a variety of interpretations. Rather: it is in one particular interpretation, the Christian-moral one, that nihilism is rooted.<sup>15</sup>

Nietzsche takes issue with the narrowness in which Christianity considers suffering. It is obvious that Christianity places its emphasis upon the eternal bliss and joy associated with Heaven. Nietzsche argues that

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 270.

<sup>9</sup> Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, 132.

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 264.

<sup>11</sup> Catholic Church, “Heaven,” in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Cor. 4:17 (New International Version).

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 130.

<sup>14</sup> Mt. 23:12 (English Standard Version).

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 7.

suffering does not have to be negated as it is for Christians and Schopenhauer. Nietzsche implores us to seek out challenges, to “praise” them for their intrinsic value. “Praised be what hardens!” he proclaims. “I do not praise the land where butter and honey flow.”<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche’s Zarathustra not only cherishes hardship, he condemns the nihilistic Christian paradise and its lack of woe. To wish for Heaven is to wish for an end of earthly suffering. In a word, the longing for Heaven is parallel to Schopenhauer’s negation of the will. Nietzsche objects to such an “afterworldly” attitude because it disqualifies us from affirming life. To affirm life, we must not only affirm the blissful moments, we must “relish” the sour, thereby redeeming *all* of life.<sup>17</sup> The Christian ideal of eternal peace prohibits the exhaustive affirmation of life because Nietzsche’s standard for affirmation compels us to say “yes” to *all* of life, including the most challenging hours.<sup>18</sup>

To seek paradise beyond this world is to ignore our existential constitution: man is made to suffer, to bear a heavy load. Such a condition, however, need not be despised. Rather, the tragedy and chaos that constitute life are to be *wished for*—not just once, but for all time. This is the implication of Nietzsche’s greatest testimony to the affirmation of life: the eternal recurrence. He proposes a hypothetical situation in which a demon tells us that we will live the same life “innumerable” times over again, each a perfect replica of all the others. What would be our response to such a reality? Would we “gnash our teeth” in frustration, or would we praise the demon for delivering us his message? The mere possibility of this situation is unimportant; Nietzsche is more concerned with how we might *react* to the idea. He asks us: “how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?”<sup>19</sup> If I embrace my suffering, which is a core element of existence, then I will not reel upon hearing my recurring fate. Instead, I will “crave” the opportunity to relive my suffering and affirm my life. To illustrate Nietzsche’s criticism of the “afterworldly,” let us evaluate a few literary manifestations of nihilism versus meaningful suffering.

Milan Kundera implies that Heaven is the “lightness” of being, as illustrated through his character, Sabina. “The longing for Paradise,” he writes “is man’s longing not to be man.”<sup>20</sup> Attachment of meaning to the earth, to man itself, is heavy and arduous; whereas the *reprieve* from earthly suffering through “Paradise” is light.

Hermann Hesse asserts in his essay “Zarathustra’s Return,” “Don’t you feel that your pain can bear fruit? That your suffering can become a privilege, a call to the highest things.”<sup>21</sup> This is the positive attitude Nietzsche has in mind when he urges us to appreciate the role of suffering in our lives. Indeed, if the affirmation of life demands a *will* to tension, then the incurred suffering is a “privilege.”

Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and founder of logotherapy, developed an affirmation of life during his time spent as a prisoner in Auschwitz. His philosophy engenders an optimistic view on the tragedy of life, uncannily similar to Nietzsche’s perspectivism. That is: “even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by so doing change himself. He may turn a personal tragedy into a triumph.”<sup>22</sup> This is what Nietzsche means when he calls for a reevaluation, a “redemption” of life’s afflictions.

Frankl received a letter from Jerry Long, a patient who was paralyzed from his neck down during a serious accident when he was seventeen. Despite his immobility, Long adopted a life-affirmative philosophy wherein he *appreciated* his tribulation:

“I broke my neck, it didn’t break me. I am currently enrolled in my first psychology course in college. I believe that my handicap will only enhance my ability to help others. I know that without the suffering, the growth that I have achieved would have been impossible.”<sup>23</sup>

Frankl believes life can always retain its value, no matter the consequence. The fact that Long turned his accident into a triumph is evidence that life’s meaning is not derived from its consequences, but from *life itself*. According to

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 265.

<sup>17</sup> Robert C. Solomon & Kathleen M. Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2000), 205.

<sup>18</sup> Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, 219.

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 274.

<sup>20</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), 296.

<sup>21</sup> Hermann Hesse, “Zarathustra’s Return,” in *If the War Goes On*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Pan Books, 1978), 93.

<sup>22</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992), 147.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

Frankl, “In view of the possibility of finding meaning in suffering, life's meaning is an unconditional one, at least potentially.”<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche clarifies the unconditionality of life through Zarathustra. “You say it is the good cause that hallows even war? I say unto you: it is the good war that hallows any cause.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the “war” of life is not justified by conditional ends like Heaven or desire. Rather, it is the arduous *nature* of life which gives value to its calamity.

While this last case considers the implications of life-changing accidents, Nietzsche does not limit the scope of suffering to such extreme conditions. For Nietzsche, life is a ceaseless struggle to manifest the will to power. Suffering, consequently, is borne *throughout* the human experience—not just in times of severe distress. The degree to which we suffer is what separates individual segments of life; what unifies the human experience is suffering itself. In other words, we can discern suffering in almost all moments, even in mundanity. Suffering visits us when we cook a challenging meal, when we exercise—even when we speak with other people. While these ordinary experiences might not invite meaning obviously, their significance can still impart value if we choose to grant them our consideration. That is, we can view suffering during *any* moment as valuable due to its unity with the will to power. Consider, for instance, the implications of physical exercise in respect to the suffering it induces. A common approach is to view the activity as a means to an end. That is, we often think of exercise merely to promote our health or to build our body. Nietzsche retorts to this sentiment with a view of suffering as an end by itself, no matter how mundane. “The time is gone when mere accidents could still happen to me,”<sup>26</sup> he writes. Nietzsche means that *all* events have a purpose, a value: the will to power. Each moment, then, is potentially valuable as an opportunity to cherish suffering and affirm life.

### *Part II: Social Media's Absence of Suffering*

We live in a social environment where technology thoroughly dominates the means by which we communicate and digest information. Indeed, the accessibility and instantaneity of social media like Facebook and Instagram have entirely transformed the normativity of socialization. In considering the implications of life affirmation relative to today's social media, it is necessary to ask: how is suffering depicted within social media platforms? While the answer is quite obvious, its implications are woefully understated. Social media portrays the highlights and successes of a person's life, while rarely acknowledging the low points, frequent failures, obstacles, and anxieties. Such a scant illustration of the human condition appears nihilistic due to its underrepresentation of suffering. Given that the desire for meaningful suffering is a prerequisite to the affirmation of life, social media falls short of Nietzsche's standard. In a word, we adopt a form of Schopenhauerian escapism when we abandon the real world for its digital counterpart. In consequence, I contend that social media is akin to Heaven in its decadence and aversion from suffering. While fewer people today hold fast to their Christian faith than in previous times, it seems that the anxiolytic role of heaven has largely been replaced by social media.

By declaring the death of the Judeo-Christian God, Nietzsche also posited that He would be replaced by an earthly form of nihilism. Nietzsche lived long before the invention of our social media apps, but he certainly deplored the prevalence of newspapers. “That everyone may learn to read, in the long run corrupts not only writing but also thinking. Once the spirit was God, then he became man, and now he even becomes rabble.”<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche's conclusion is in part due to his view that groups of people tend to congregate as a means to avoid the suffering induced by honest introspection. Indeed, it is far easier to sign into Facebook and *immerse* ourselves with the joys of others than to critically address the suffering in our own lives. From a Nietzschean perspective, “your love of the neighbor is your bad love of yourselves.”<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche suggests that our aversion from ourselves and flight to others is not only made of curiosity, but by a lack of courage to face the truth.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera establishes a positive relationship between privacy and honesty. He suggests that the truth is attainable only for those who divorce themselves from the eye of the public. “For Sabina, living in truth, lying neither to ourselves nor to others, was possible only away from the public: the moment someone keeps an eye on what we do, allowances for that eye, and nothing we do is truthful.”<sup>29</sup> Such “allowances” exist today in the form of editing social media content. “Editing,” I will argue, is no more than a euphemism for *lying*. The truth is often mired in tension, awkwardness, and fear. Nietzsche takes issue with the

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 159.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>29</sup> Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 112-113.

aversion of truth because it disqualifies us from affirming the only reality we know. “What do they really want?” Nietzsche asks. “At least to *represent* justice, love, wisdom, superiority—that is the ambition of the ‘lowest,’ the sick.”<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche and Kundera think we should embrace the truth about ourselves; how else can we hope to grow, without first having a foot in reality?

The deceptive temptation of social media’s paradisaical environment is antithetical to Nietzsche’s affirmation of life. The allure of its decadence compels deception. Decadence, for Nietzsche, is ensconced in nihilism because it negates resistance and thus deludes man’s will to power. “You invite a witness when you want to speak well of yourselves; and when you have seduced him to think well of you, then you think well of yourselves... And thus you speak of yourselves to others and deceive the neighbor with yourselves.”<sup>31</sup> Here, Kundera’s “lightness” is brought to bear, as the weight of the world’s anxieties vanish within the decadence of social media. That is, we negate the will to power, or the realization of our drives, when we exalt the lie by diminishing the truth through digital means. In contrast, “The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become.”<sup>32</sup> Kundera’s thinking reflects social media’s kinship with Heaven, as both are bereft of suffering and the affirmation of life.

The dopamine response triggered by the reception of “likes” and “favorites” only succeeds in affirming the false identity depicted online. In a word, the aggregation of online popularity and approval is, at best, the affirmation of a lie. In other words, even the most honest social media user can only *depict* his suffering; he cannot affirm it because, as depicted, it is not *in this world*, but online. Any attempt to garner affirmation of his online identity only distances his affirmation of reality, of *real* suffering, and, therefore, of life itself.

Tolkien’s Ring of power behaves similarly to social media in its capacity to avoid real tension. Wearing the ring is akin to fleeing from problems—from our suffering. McKerracher explains, “The ‘friction free life’ made possible by our smart phones becomes akin to Frodo’s ring, tempting a short-term escape from raw confrontations with our immediate situation.”<sup>33</sup> Let me say that the power of the One Ring is akin to Christianity’s negation of earth. He who wears the Ring negates the real world in exchange for deception. In consequence, the Ring’s power of invisibility robs its wearer of his will to power, his proclivity to face danger. The frequent wearer of the Ring does not only disappear on occasion, “he *fades*...”<sup>34</sup> Much like social media, the Ring *detaches* its subject from reality, thus eliminating the possibility for the affirmation of life.

Nietzsche asserts that man turns his attention to his neighbor not out of selflessness or care, but out of his refusal to look himself in the eye. Such honest introspection often reveals a body of painful truths about the human condition, so he turns away from himself. “One man goes to his neighbor because he seeks himself; another because he would lose himself. Your bad love of yourselves turns your solitude into a prison.”<sup>35</sup> Here, Nietzsche contends that socializing *can* be deceitful to the self if done to avoid introspection, to “lose” himself.

Hesse’s *Demian* illustrates man’s flight to his neighbor as an escape from his *original*, more personal conflict with *himself*. “Men fly into each other’s arms because they are afraid of each other... People are afraid because they have never owned up to themselves.”<sup>36</sup> The narrator, Sinclair, struggles to fit in with other groups as an adolescent. He is torn between the light of his family and the darkness of his peers. In the end, his master, Demian, presents a different path: one of solitude and suffering. Hesse asserts, like Nietzsche, that life is suffering, but that we should meet it head on and not avoid it by retreating to the group. “It is easier and sweeter to walk with a people, with a multitude—even through misery,”<sup>37</sup> Hesse tells us. There will always be an opportunity to flee from tension into the safety of the community, but such a choice is not laudable as far as Nietzsche is concerned. At the very least, man has the constitution to face the truth of his life, with all its hardship. At best, he can find meaning in the struggle to affirm to his suffering. The path to affirmation is, no doubt, a solitary one. As such, social media’s decadence impedes our affirmation of this world and all the suffering within it.

<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 123.

<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 173.

<sup>32</sup> Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> David McKerracher, “Virtual Enframing: Social Media’s Subsumption of the Other into Theyness.” *Stance* 10 (2017), 80.

<sup>34</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, (New York: Del Rey, 2002), 51.

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 173.

<sup>36</sup> Hermann Hesse, *Demian*, trans. Michael Roloff & Michael Lebeck (New York: First Perennial Classics, 1999), 118.

<sup>37</sup> Hesse, “If the War Goes On”, 90.

*Part III: Alcohol and Narcotics as Numbing Agents*

Nietzsche is profoundly opposed to the use of drugs—alcohol in particular. He claims that drugs have a numbing effect which stifles man's will to power: his willingness to suffer gladly. On account of Germany's decadence in his time, he asserts that "nowhere else are the two great European narcotics, alcohol and Christianity, so viciously abused."<sup>38</sup> For Nietzsche, drugs have the same nihilistic roots as Christianity: they negate the real world by replacing pain with an illusory world of decadence. Indeed, "stimulants and brandy" amount to a "forgery in ideals,"<sup>39</sup> as they veil suffering in the real world and divorce their subjects from intrinsic meaning.

Frankl observes the relationship between drugs and meaninglessness in contexts ranging from war to substance abuse. Meaninglessness is often followed by drug use, due, seemingly, to a nihilistic attitude towards suffering. In other words, drug users judge that suffering has no intrinsic value, so there is no reason to endure it. Annemarie von Forstmeier found that "90 percent of the alcoholics she studied had suffered from an abysmal feeling of meaninglessness. Of the drug addicts studied by Stanley Krippner, 100 percent believed that 'things seemed meaningless.'"<sup>40</sup> Therein lies the association between Frankl's observed cases of meaninglessness with drug use.

During his time as a prisoner in concentration camps, Frankl noticed an inverse relationship between the affirmation of suffering and one's inclination towards pleasure. He recalls times when certain prisoners refused to get out of bed and work one morning. They would then begin to smoke a cigarette if one could be found. "At that moment we knew that for the next forty-eight hours or so we would watch them dying. Meaning orientation had subsided, and consequently the seeking of immediate pleasure had taken over."<sup>41</sup> Of course, one need not be a prisoner of Auschwitz to arrive at the same conclusion that suffering is meaningless. *Anyone* can exchange their resilience in the face of adversity for the nihilism that prioritizes pleasure and devalues suffering.

Frankl argues that the present conditions of life, no matter how miserable, can be meaningful until the last moment, so long as we *decide* to realize their intrinsic value. Such a decision often requires courage, which is why Nietzsche asserts, "To be brave is good."<sup>42</sup> His statement is meant quite literally, as his revaluation of the "good" can be likened to man's willingness to confront tension with courage and joy.

In *Demian*, Hesse manifests Nietzsche's criticism of drugs through the degradation of Sinclair's resolve for suffering. The adolescent turns to alcohol as a resort to the tension in his life. "Nonetheless, I felt wretched. I lived in an orgy of self-destruction and...deep down inside me my soul grieved."<sup>43</sup> Sinclair is unwilling to confront the hardship in his life, so he frequents bars with his peers. The bar scene, he feels, is quite advantageous due to its noise and the alcohol's ability to stifle the voice inside his head. Despite his overwhelming pessimism towards his struggle, Sinclair seems to be aware of an intrinsic call for courage inside himself. Rather than heed this call to confront his struggle, he quells the inner voice by frequenting bars. He recounts: "I was afraid of being alone for long, was afraid of the many tender and chaste moods that would overcome me..."<sup>44</sup> This "tenderness" is Sinclair's way of understanding his confrontation with the real world and all its suffering and uncertainty.

According to Sinclair, his abusive relationship with alcohol allows him to "protest" and "quarrel" with the world.<sup>45</sup> More accurately described, Sinclair drinks to *avoid* the real world, not to protest it. In his period of decadence, he realizes that the alcohol does not solve any of his problems or grant him happiness. "I really don't know any longer whether boozing and swaggering actually ever gave me any pleasure."<sup>46</sup> This account is consistent with Nietzsche's critique of Schopenhauerian life negation: the alcohol not only fails to deliver pleasure to Sinclair; its anesthetic constitution bars the way to life affirmation and positive emotions. It is his mentor, Max Demian, who breaks through to Sinclair and sheds light upon the implications of alcoholism. "It seems to me that going to bars is something genuinely philistine,"<sup>47</sup> Demian remarks. Indeed, the consequences of alcoholism are inherently wanting—both intellectually and existentially—as they deprive a subject of his proclivity to ascribe meaning and affirm life.

<sup>38</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 72.

<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 159.

<sup>40</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 144.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 159.

<sup>43</sup> Hesse, *Demian*, 64.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

Let me say, in the defense of Nietzsche's criticism of alcoholic nihilism, that his solution is not as radical as it may seem. By no means does Nietzsche suggest an absolute prohibition of alcohol, as this would be unreasonable, and perhaps unhelpful. Instead, Nietzsche recognizes man's proclivity towards alcohol as something to be *monitored*, not eradicated. Through Zarathustra, Nietzsche explains that "whoever does not want to die of thirst among men must learn to drink out of all cups; and whoever would stay clean among men must know how to wash even with dirty water."<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Nietzsche understands that a complete disavowal of alcohol is, at least, unreasonable. A better approach is to *limit* its capacity to negate the affirmation of suffering.

Bearing this in mind, let me offer another appeal for the moderation and not a complete prohibition of alcohol. Nietzsche's Zarathustra cautions us to recognize man's proclivity to *fatigue*. While we may wish to consistently realize the will to power in its maximum capacity, the choice to do so would neglect man's constitution: he requires rest, a reprieve from striving, lest he *collapse*. In a word, to effectively realize the will to power, Nietzsche calls us to "stand with relaxed muscles and unharnessed will" because an excess of "exertion" leads to destruction.<sup>49</sup>

Aldous Huxley uses "soma" capsules in *Brave New World* to demonstrate the potential aftermath of an anesthetic evolution. He describes the mass-produced drug as "a creator of active euphoria as well as of the negative happiness that follows the release from anxiety and tension."<sup>50</sup> The fictional drug is used by the masses to cope with the daily tedium and monotony of manual labor. For most people in the novel, the suffering of their jobs appears to lack meaning, so they use soma tablets to escape to an illusory world where life is easier. "Like religion, the drug had power to console and compensate, it called up visions of another, better world..."<sup>51</sup> In a word, the soma tablets not only disavow suffering, they relinquish access to reality; in doing so, they negate *this* world.

Mustapha Mond, a powerful political figure, stands behind the World State and its commitment to the abolition of suffering and war through the administration of soma pills. "Christianity without tears—that's what *soma* is,"<sup>52</sup> Mond explains. John "the Savage" is Mond's primary opponent of this conventional anesthetic, life-negating existence. John refuses to give in to the temptation of soma, due in part to the life-affirmative books to which he is exposed. Enlisting the words of Shakespeare, John argues that Mond's decadent vision of humanity is without meaning. "But the tears are necessary. Don't you remember what Othello said? 'If after every tempest came such calms, may the winds blow till they have wakened death.'"<sup>53</sup> The esoteric language John uses is no coincidence: his life-affirmative attitude towards suffering is just as divergent as his literary background. Referring once more to Shakespeare, John tells Mond, "You just abolish the slings and arrows. It's too easy."<sup>54</sup> The "slings and arrows," I have argued, are necessary components of an intrinsically valuable life. Abolishing them, Huxley offers, only stunts man's potential resolve.

During the time in which he wrote the novel, Huxley was suspicious of the rise of anesthetic drugs. Almost three decades after publishing *Brave New World*, Huxley admits he feels something graver than suspicion:

As things now stand, the tranquillizers may prevent some people from giving enough trouble, not only to their rulers, but even to themselves. Too much tension is a disease; but so is too little.

There are certain occasions when we ought to be tense, when an excess of tranquillity (and especially of tranquillity imposed from the outside, by a chemical) is entirely inappropriate.<sup>55</sup>

This paper validates Huxley's concern that too much "tranquility" is not only unhealthy, it is *decadent*. That is, the absence of suffering disavows the claim to meaning, since meaning requires a foothold in tension. What is more, the chemical means with which many people today confront the tension of life are counterproductive, as they stifle potential growth. Their use cannot coexist with an intrinsically valuable life, at least in practice. That is, the affirmation of life, as I have defined it, *requires* us to embrace life's hardship and not to mitigate or negate its significance. Huxley fears the readily available supply of anesthetics may be man's undoing, as there seems to be an inclination towards *prescriptive* solutions. He warns, "There can be no doubt that, if tranquillizers could be bought as easily and cheaply as aspirin, they would be consumed...by the scores and hundreds of billions. And a good, cheap stimulant would be almost as popular."<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Huxley's prediction is not only accurate, it is *uncannily* true and timely.

<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 254.

<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 230.

<sup>50</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited*, (New York: First Perennial Classics, 2000), 74.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>52</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, (New York: First Perennial Classics, 1998), 238.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited*, 76.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-76.



Today's prevailing campaign to legalize recreational marijuana use is not so different, it seems, from Huxley's soma-induced dystopia. In my view, the hallucinogenic nature of cannabis is life-negating in the same way as Christianity's emphasis on Heaven. The hallucinogenic state is reducible, like Heaven, to the aversion of earthly suffering. The consequences of its recreational use render its users nihilistic, at least in practice, because it divorces the experience of suffering from reality.

#### *Part IV: Prognosis and Potential Solution*

Nietzsche's most paramount claim regarding earthly suffering is that we should embrace it as an end by itself, no matter the consequence. In a word, suffering is *at least* a useful part of the human condition because it allows us to strengthen our will to power. Nietzsche advances this contention and argues that suffering is much more than a tool. If life has intrinsic value, and suffering is part of life, then the will to power *desires* tension as a part of the human experience.

The use and evolution of drugs have soared since Nietzsche's time. Today, it is commonplace to use drugs as substitutions for real solutions. To my mind, Nietzsche's criticism of anesthetic, illusory nihilism is not only accurate, it is *deadly*. The aftermath of the last century's habitual denervation through drugs cannot be overstated. I have referred to several literary manifestations of life-negation and decadence in this paper, all of which address the consequences of avoiding suffering. Let me say that my evaluation of these fictional works should not be taken lightly due to their literary nature. As far as I can tell, the real world is not so easily divorced from these fictions. Indeed, the resemblance between Huxley's soma pills and our real-world narcotics and anesthetics is uncanny. The One Ring's power of anonymity is akin to the deceptive facelessness of social media. By my account, these literary settings are not so different from our world. Nietzsche brings my warning to bear when he speaks of his "last man."

Nietzsche describes him as someone who "makes everything small." The last man is Nietzsche's greatest fear: he is the mass of men who flee from suffering, danger, and tension—from *meaning*. In consequence of his existential constitution, "His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest."<sup>57</sup> The appeal of the last man is his "happiness," his great comfort. "They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth."<sup>58</sup> In response to the overwhelming appeal of the last man, Nietzsche gives us his "overman" for which to strive.

The overman *relishes* the path to danger—to suffering. He even "hunts" for challenges and conflict, for worthy opponents of his will. "Your wildcats must first turn into tigers...for the good hunter shall have good hunting."<sup>59</sup> Filled with tension and conflict, the overman's path is meant to be dangerous. As such, Nietzsche encourages cheerfulness and laughter to make the task of affirming life bearable. Man will eventually collapse under the weight of *too much* tension. We can enhance our will to power, then, by *happily* accepting the duty to affirm life. It is Camus who tells us that we "must imagine Sisyphus happy." So, too, must we embrace our own boulder—our own pain—with gladness.

Nietzsche calls us to greet danger and suffering with joy, with reverence—to feel "happiness where others find their destruction."<sup>60</sup> We are encouraged to view hardship as a "privilege" to exercise our will to power. In that sense, Nietzsche does not necessarily prioritize victories, but *war*.<sup>61</sup> Consider Nietzsche's call to danger and suffering as the ultimate affirmation of life and meaning itself. For the sake of brevity, we will conclude with Nietzsche's most germane advice: to "*live dangerously!* Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius!"<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 129.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>60</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1982), 645.

<sup>61</sup> Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, 137.

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