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Nietzsche on Nihilism

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I, Dominic Yates, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own, and the work of other persons is appropriately acknowledged.

Abstract

Nietzsche, though he used various senses of 'nihilism', had two main conceptions: nihilism as the belief that life is meaningless (which I term 'value-nihilism'), and nihilism as negation of life. I argue that value-nihilism is Nietzsche's main conception of nihilism prior to 1888. Then, in 1888, Nietzsche introduced the conception of nihilism as negation of life. This explains why Christianity is seen as an antidote (though also a cause) of nihilism in the pre-1888 work, and then comes to be seen as intrinsically nihilistic in the 1888 work: Christianity provided a meaning to life, but did so in ways that negated life.

I endorse Bernard Reginster's view of nihilism as a characterisation of value-nihilism; however, it does not explain Nietzsche's claims that Christianity is nihilistic. Ken Gemes offers a view that aims to reconcile value-nihilism and the nihilism of Christianity. He sees nihilism as being, fundamentally, a state of 'wholesale repression' of the natural drives, which he terms 'affective nihilism'. Value-nihilism is then said by Gemes to be a cognitive expression of affective nihilism. However, I argue that value-nihilism is not necessarily an expression of affective nihilism.

I take Gemes's view to be more compatible with Nietzsche's 1888 view of nihilism as negation of life. However, I argue that while affective nihilism is a central feature of Nietzsche's account of nihilism as negation of life, a more expansive conception of negation of life best captures the diversity of Nietzsche's use of the notion.

I suggest a conception of nihilism as expression of will to nothingness as an alternative unified conception to affective nihilism. This has the advantage that it can be seen to be expressed by value-nihilism as Nietzsche uses the notion in the published works, as well as capturing the diverse forms of negation of life.

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0. Introduction

0.1. The argument

In this thesis, I aim to give an account of Nietzsche's conception of nihilism. Nietzsche uses the notion of nihilism in diverse ways, but I think that there are two options for giving an overall account of his conception. Each option has costs and benefits.

The first option is to see Nietzsche as using two main senses of nihilism. The first sense is the belief that life is meaningless, or (the same thing) that there are no attainable highest values. This is Bernard Reginster's view of nihilism (I will call this view 'value-nihilism' for short). The problem with this view by itself is that it does not explain why Nietzsche saw Christianity as nihilistic, as Christianity posits highest values, so provides a meaning of life for believers. This requires a second sense, which I will argue is that of negation of life.¹ Christianity can then be said to be nihilistic because it negates life.

This second sense marks a change in Nietzsche's view of nihilism. In the work prior to 1888, he only used the first sense. He did not at this point label Christianity nihilistic; even though he argued that Christianity negates life in the pre-1888 work, he did not come to see negation of life as a form of nihilism until his 1888 works.

Ken Gemes's view is that nihilism has a fundamental sense that denotes a state of the drives, such that the drives are turned against themselves in what Gemes calls 'wholesale repression'. Gemes calls this sense of nihilism 'affective nihilism'. This sense is said to be fundamental in that the belief that life is meaningless (Reginster's sense) can be seen as a cognitive expression of this fundamental affective condition. Gemes's view then has the advantage that it accounts for the nihilism of Christianity. Christianity involves affective nihilism, but it is not manifested cognitively as the belief that life is meaningless, but rather as belief in values that negate life.

¹ I heard in a seminar by John Richardson (at Birkbeck in May 2015) that he has a view of nihilism of this overall form: nihilism has two senses, negation of life and negation of value. His view is not yet published and I am unaware of whether it resembles the two-sense view expressed here in any further detail (he did not elaborate on his view in the seminar).

I endorse Gemes's conception as a diagnosis of a central way in which Christianity negates life. However, I have two reservations about it as a general account of Nietzsche's conception of nihilism. I argue in Chapter 3 that the belief that life is meaningless does not necessarily express an affective state of wholesale repression. In GM, Nietzsche argues that wholesale repression (in the form of the ascetic ideal) served as an antidote to suicidal nihilism, which suggests that the affective state underlying suicidal nihilism is different. My second objection, presented in Chapter 4, is that Nietzsche uses the notion of negation of life in a more general way than just to denote wholesale repression, or beliefs that express wholesale repression, or values that promote it.

The second option develops the first by saying that the two senses of nihilism can be reconciled in a unified conception. It follows Gemes's account in this respect, and also in that it takes the fundamental form of nihilism to be affective. However, it aims to avoid the problems mentioned above for Gemes's affective view by proposing an affective state of which value-nihilism can be seen as necessarily, rather than contingently, an expression, and, moreover, which can account for the diversity of Nietzsche's uses of the notion of negation of life. I argue that a conception of nihilism as expression of the will to nothingness, which Nietzsche characterises as a drive to general destructiveness and self-destructiveness, meets these desiderata.

The benefit of this second option is that it gives a unified account, which might be seen as an advantage over the two-sense view. The cost is that, as noted above, Nietzsche did not label Christianity nihilistic in the pre-1888 work, though he did see it as expressing will to nothingness, so will to nothingness does not seem to be regarded as necessarily nihilistic in the pre-1888 work. Consequently, this view, like Gemes's view of affective nihilism, would have to be seen as a rational reconstruction, which could be said to represent Nietzsche's later, more considered view of nihilism.

0.2. The structure of the thesis

In Chapter 1, I give an overview of the history of the concept of nihilism prior to Nietzsche's use of it. The concept of nihilism originated in the work of the late-nineteenth-century critics of Enlightenment, J.H. Obereit and F.H. Jacobi. Nihilism, in their usage, is the state of lack of belief in the possibility of knowledge of the external world, morality, and religious doctrine, occasioned by radical scepticism. Hegel subsequently took up the concept, and made attempts to refute it.

A related problem involving Jacobi, though not characterised as nihilism, was the Pantheism Controversy, which was over the view, attributed to Spinoza, that belief in free will and a transcendent God was rationally untenable, and, consequently, the only rational option is to adopt atheism and moral scepticism. This is a case of what Nietzsche would later see as the will to truth undermining morality and religion.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, 'nihilism' was the name of a Russian militant anarchist political movement, and Nietzsche makes allusions to it, the most prominent one being in A 58, where he compares it to the destructive campaign of the early Christian priests against the authority of Imperial Rome. Finally, I discuss to what extent the concepts of boredom and pessimism in Schopenhauer's philosophy might be seen as precursors to Nietzschean nihilism.

In Chapter 2, I outline two accounts of Nietzsche's conception of nihilism from the recent philosophical literature, by Bernard Reginster and Ken Gemes. Reginster interprets Nietzschean nihilism as the belief that existence is meaningless due to lack of belief in attainable highest values. Reginster posits two causes of nihilism, that previously highest values have been devaluated, and that highest values are seen as unattainable, and to these causes there correspond two forms of nihilism: nihilistic disorientation and nihilistic despair.

The second interpretation of nihilism I discuss in Chapter 2 is Ken Gemes's. Gemes gives two objections to Reginster's account of nihilism: that it fails to account for Nietzsche's claim that Christianity is nihilistic, and that it presents nihilism as fundamentally a kind of belief, when it is actually fundamentally a state of the will. Gemes proposes his own interpretation of nihilism: that it is the will turned against life, which Gemes glosses as the drives turned against themselves, or 'wholesale repression'.

My account of Nietzsche's conception of nihilism, and my critical engagement with Reginster and Gemes, is given in Chapters 3 and 4. In Chapter 3, I give an account of Nietzsche's earlier conception of nihilism, which is lack of belief in attainable highest values. In the notebooks, Nietzsche gives an historical account of how nihilism arises; he describes its being a threat to humanity at two points: around the time of the emergence of Christianity, and in the modern era, during the decline of Christianity. In GM, he gives an account of how the ascetic ideal has shielded humanity from nihilism by redirecting frustrated drives. However, this has been at a cost to the health of individuals and of civilisation. Moreover, by taking truth to be the highest value, the ascetic ideal precipitated its own

demise, and also made the likely consequence of its demise a descent into nihilism, due to lack of the ability to adopt values which both stand up to the scrutiny of the will to truth and accord with our sensibilities as they have been moulded by two millennia of morality.

I discuss Gemes's argument that nihilistic despair and disorientation (Reginster's forms) are cognitive expressions of a more fundamental form of nihilism, affective nihilism, which is a state of the drives, rather than a cognitive state. I argue that this view is incompatible with Nietzsche's claims in GM and in the notebooks that Christianity initially served as an antidote to nihilism.

Finally in Chapter 3, I address the question of Nietzsche's evaluation of nihilism. Bernard Reginster claims that showing how to overcome nihilism is the central aim of Nietzsche's philosophy. However, there are places where Nietzsche gives a positive evaluation of nihilism. Nihilism can be of benefit to the health of individuals and civilisation by destroying values which have become unhealthy, and creating conditions in which natural selection means the strong gain political power, which, Nietzsche argues, is a prerequisite of a healthy civilisation.

Although the ascetic ideal is portrayed in GM as an antidote to nihilism, the method by which it shielded humanity from nihilism was by devaluing life. Nietzsche changes his view on whether Christianity is inherently nihilistic (he comes to think that it is) and this reflects a change in his conception of nihilism to include negation of life. In Chapter 4, I discuss this later conception of nihilism. Gemes's affective nihilism captures one important form of nihilism as negation of life, but I argue that Nietzsche uses the notion in a more general way, and propose that a more general affective conception of nihilism – as the expression of the will to nothingness – accounts for this diversity of uses in the 1888 works.

Chapter 1. Historical background to Nietzschean nihilism

In this chapter, I give a brief account of the origins and development of concepts of nihilism prior to the work of Nietzsche. I detail to what extent these resemble Nietzsche's conceptions of nihilism. I begin with the concept of nihilism that gained currency in late eighteenth-century criticism of Enlightenment and was also a prominent concern in the work of Hegel. I label this concept 'epistemic nihilism'. I then discuss the Russian political nihilist movement. Finally, I discuss some concepts in Schopenhauer that resemble Nietzsche's conceptions of nihilism and also evaluate Nietzsche's claim that Schopenhauer's philosophy is itself nihilistic.

1.1. Obereit and Jacobi

According to Beiser (2005, p. 27), the term 'nihilism' (German: *Nihilismus*) gained philosophical currency after its appearance in a series of polemics against rationalism published in the 1780s by the German mystic J. H. Obereit, an associate of Goethe, Schiller, and Fichte. By 'nihilism' Obereit meant the consequences of radical scepticism about everything except the subject's own occurrent conscious experience. Obereit was advancing the sceptical view that the only rationally warranted object of knowledge is the subject's own impressions. The challenge to the authority of reason posed by scepticism is that it seems to show that reason itself gives us no grounds for belief in the veridicality of our beliefs about the physical world, or of our religious and moral convictions. The sceptical challenge expressed by Obereit is essentially the position arrived at in Book I of Hume's *Treatise*, which was very well-known among German Enlightenment philosophers, and recognised as one of the main challenges that had to be overcome in providing a rational foundation for knowledge; Kant's transcendental idealism was developed in part as a response to it.² Nihilism is thus at its origin fundamentally an epistemological problem, but one that is taken to have moral and spiritual consequences.

The concept of nihilism was subsequently taken up by F. H. Jacobi, a prominent and influential critic of Enlightenment during the late eighteenth century. In his 'Letter to Fichte' (1799), Jacobi makes the same basic point as Obereit, that reason compels nihilism; however, his argument here is that

² According to Beiser (2005, p. 174), Hume was seen as 'the paradigm nihilist ... who, at the close of the first book of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, famously declared that he could find no reason to believe in the existence of anything beyond his own passing impressions.'

Kant's and Fichte's theories of transcendental idealism fail to overcome the Humean challenge, because things in themselves cannot be known, so we are not justified in positing them (see Beiser 2005, pp. 174-5).

1.2. Jacobi and the pantheism controversy

Jacobi had engaged in a similar debate in the 1780s, beginning with his publication of his 'Letters on the Doctrine of Spinoza' (1786). This became known as the 'pantheism controversy'. Although the concept of nihilism was not invoked here, the problem that the controversy focussed on relates to Nietzsche's account of nihilism, and in particular could be seen to constitute an episode in the historical event Nietzsche called the death of God.

Jacobi's argument had a cataclysmic effect in calling into question the authority of reason, the latter shown, according to Jacobi's version of a position he attributed to Spinoza, to be in apparently irreconcilable conflict with religion and morality. Goethe described Jacobi's publication as 'an explosion', and Hegel as 'a thunderbolt out of the blue' (Beiser 1987, p. 46). The controversy itself was a dispute between Jacobi and Moses Mendelssohn over whether Lessing was a Spinozan pantheist. Jacobi alleged that Lessing had admitted to him in conversation that he was: that he held the Spinozan view that God was not an entity separate from the world, but was actually the world itself – 'One and All', in the phrase Jacobi ascribed to Lessing (*ibid.*, p. 65) – and that belief in a transcendent God and a non-deterministic world, including freedom of the will, was rationally untenable. Spinozan pantheism was considered at the time to be basically atheism, and determinism precluded moral responsibility (because of the lack of free will). So if Spinozan pantheism was the only viable conclusion of the application of critical reason to the world, as Jacobi believed, then the world lacked grounds for belief in God and morality. To hold the latter beliefs required a leap of faith (which, *contra* Lessing, Jacobi endorsed).

Although the crisis of moral and religious foundations that the pantheism controversy posed was not at the time characterised as a problem of nihilism (nihilism being conceived at the time as an epistemological problem, as noted above), the crisis exemplifies what Nietzsche would later see as a problem of nihilism: the problem of lack of belief in meaning or ultimate values leading to traumatic psychological consequences (see LN 2 [127], 5 [71], 9 [35]). The prospect of a world without God was for Kant a 'black abyss' (quoted in Beiser 1987: 30). According to Jacobi: 'Nothing frightens man so

much, nothing darkens his mind to such a degree, as when God disappears from nature ... when purpose, wisdom and goodness no longer seem to reign in nature, but only a blind necessity or dumb chance' (quoted in Beiser, *ibid.*).

1.3. Hegel

The concept of nihilism also featured prominently in Hegel's philosophy. Hegel used the term in the same way as Jacobi and Obereit, to mean the consequence of radical scepticism – lack of belief. A central aim of Hegel's epistemological project is to overcome the nihilist challenge, which, it was widely felt, remained a critical challenge to all previous Enlightenment philosophy, including that of Kant, that refused to accept Leibnizian dogmatism or Jacobi's leap of faith.³ Hegel arrived, via the argument in Part IV of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, at the view that nihilism is overcome in the mutual recognition between self and other, of each as an independent consciousness. The argument is, in very brief outline: the subject recognises that s/he cannot control the other, so recognises the other's conscious autonomy, and also recognises that this recognition is mutual – that the other sees the subject in the same way. Thus, the subject is conscious both of themselves as an object of the other's consciousness and their own self-consciousness, and of the other as a consciousness independent of them. This recognition then entails recognition of the subject's moral obligation towards the other, as the subject can infer that the other has needs and desires qua conscious individual (see Hegel 1977, pp. 104-19; Beiser 2005, ch. 8).

Here again nihilism has moral consequences but is at root an epistemological condition. Of course Nietzsche is far less troubled by the lack of epistemic foundations for some belief than he is with the consequences of the belief for human flourishing – he is less troubled by necessary illusions than the Enlightenment philosophers who struggled with the problem of nihilism were. However, the consequences of the epistemic problem of nihilism – the social and psychological consequences of the rational untenability of religious belief on European civilisation (Nietzsche's sense of the phrase 'the death of God') – were a concern of Nietzsche's. Of course the social consequences of the untenability of religion were also a main concern of Enlightenment philosophers, but what they sought was some kind of remedy to the sceptical problem: a transcendent grounding of knowledge, as in Kant, or some kind of naturalisation of religion and morality; the simple abandonment of religion and morality was the disaster to be avoided. Nietzsche, writing around a century later, was

³ Beiser (2005, p. 175): 'No one worried more about nihilism than Hegel himself. [...] Nihilism seemed to be the inevitable result of epistemology, the very foundation for his new critical metaphysics.'

much more sanguine about the latter possibility. He was not concerned with naturalising religion, nor was he concerned with naturalising a morality of anything like the previous (Christian) form. Rather, he was concerned with the problem at a more general level: the creation of new values, which, in terms of their content, need not bear any similarity to Christian religious and moral values – he was not seeking to give new foundations for Christian values. And this was because he saw that Christian values had long exhausted any benefit they might have had for humanity, and to attempt to retain them would be to humanity's detriment.

Another concept in Hegel that is not specifically related to his notion of nihilism, but which actually appears to have some affinity with Nietzschean nihilism (specifically the account Nietzsche develops in his works from 1888, where he argues that Christianity is essentially nihilistic), is the unhappy consciousness. The unhappy consciousness is the state of the Christian who suffers from an irreconcilable split between consciousness of themselves as an earthly, corporeal being, and also as an immortal soul. The Christian sees themselves as essentially the latter, and only provisionally incarnate; however, experience only directly manifests to them their worldly existence; the individual's essence as a soul is never purely manifested to experience, only mediated by emotional and cognitive experience. Moreover, the whole of the Christian's earthly life is devalued by contrast with God and the afterlife. Religious practices only heighten this sense of alienation because of their inadequacy or partiality in effecting communion with God. The priest is an impoverished form of mediator in comparison to Christ, whose death was in a sense God's departure from the world. So because of the separation in Christianity of divine and earthly realms, the Christian lives in a state of uncertainly, unsatisfied desire, guilt, inadequacy, and despair. This criticism of Christianity as devaluing life is akin to criticisms advanced by Nietzsche, particularly in GM and A (I discuss this in Chapters 3 and 4, below).

1.4. Russian nihilism

'Nihilism' was the name given to a revolutionary political movement in Russia that lasted from around 1860 to 1881. In 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated by nihilists, immediately after which the movement was finally suppressed. The political activity of the movement was organised only at a diffuse and clandestine level, due to constant attempts at suppression by the government. As well as the many direct revolutionary actions (demonstrations, agitation and dissemination of propaganda, assassinations, infiltration of state offices, bank robberies, etc.), the movement also

took the form of a subculture, most commonly among students, with associated attitudes and ways of behaviour (non-conformism, atheism, gender equality, unkempt personal appearance, ascetic attitude towards possessions, sexual liberation, etc.). The philosophy behind the movement was a combination of revolutionary socialism, particularly that of Bakunin (though the latter tried to distance himself from nihilism), and utilitarianism. It is distinguished from socialism in that its primary aim was the destruction of the existing social order, rather than the creation of new forms of social organisation.⁴

The sense of 'nihilism' attached to Russian nihilism is thus in certain respects quite different to that of post-Enlightenment epistemic nihilism. The former sense is of a destructive political programme, the destruction of social order without the foresight of a new order to replace the old. Epistemic nihilism, as discussed above, is a state of lack of belief that follows the exercise of rational scepticism. Nietzsche might be read as invoking the different senses at different places in his writings. In A 58, after discussing the destructive campaign of the early Christian priests against Imperial Rome, he remarks 'nihilist and Christian: this rhymes, it does more than just rhyme'. This makes sense as an allusion to Russian nihilism, suggesting that (nascent) Christianity and nihilism have a destructive revolutionary-political aspect in common. In passages from the Notebooks in which nihilism is discussed at relative length, he alludes to the epistemological sense. In LN 2 [127] (the 'Nihilism stands at the gate' passage), he writes that 'the decisive thing [i.e. cause of nihilism] is scepticism towards morality'. In LN 5 [71], Nietzsche writes that nihilism appears in modern Europe because a 'belief in God and an essentially moral order can no longer be sustained.'

It might be argued that nihilism in the epistemic sense is a prerequisite of political nihilism, that the latter's destructiveness is based upon a lack of belief in moral or religious values on which to base political principles. But this is not necessarily the case: the political nihilist may have principles (e.g. socialist or anarchist ones) that conflict with the political values they are attempting to overthrow, yet they are primarily a nihilist rather than a socialist or anarchist because they are concerned with the destruction of the existing political system rather than the creation of a new one. Moreover, it is certainly the case that an epistemic nihilist need not be a political nihilist. While the epistemic

⁴ Nihilism was most famously represented in literature in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* and Dostoevsky's *Demons*. Nietzsche read *Fathers and Sons* in French translation in 1873, and *Demons*, also in French, in late 1887-early 1888. Nietzsche expressed the highest admiration for Dostoevsky, whose work he discovered only in 1887; on first reading *Notes from Underground*, Nietzsche wrote: 'The instinct of kinship (or what shall I call it?) spoke immediately, my joy was extraordinary: I have to go back to my becoming acquainted with Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir* to recall another such joy.' (Letter of 23rd February 1887, quoted in Hollingdale, 1968, p. 202).

nihilist lacks belief in foundations of moral or political values, they need not be motivated towards politically nihilistic action. This could be described in terms of the distinction Nietzsche draws (see LN 9 [35]) between active and passive nihilism: the political nihilist is necessarily an active nihilist, whereas the epistemic nihilist can be a passive nihilist if their nihilist views do not motivate action.

1.5. Schopenhauer

There are two main concepts in Schopenhauer that resemble forms of Nietzschean nihilism: pessimism and boredom. I will discuss them in turn, and also discuss why Schopenhauer himself was seen as nihilistic by Nietzsche.

Pessimism differs from nihilism conceived as lack of ultimate values in that pessimism does not claim that ultimate values do not exist or are unknowable but rather that nature falls short of providing the conditions for their realisation. However, Nietzsche gives other characterisations of nihilism that are more closely related to pessimism, or even identical with it. In WP 585, Nietzsche writes: 'A nihilist is a man who judges of the world that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist'; such a man seems not to lack highest values, but rather to see them as unrealisable, which is pessimism. In WP 38, Nietzsche states that pessimism is actually a form of nihilism.

Devaluation of the world, nature or life is sometimes given as a characterisation of nihilism by Nietzsche; in TI, 'Skirmishes', 21, he explicitly charges Schopenhauer with nihilism for this reason: he accuses him of 'a nihilistic, total depreciation of the value of life'. Schopenhauer's pessimism is seen as similar to Christianity in this respect. Morality for Schopenhauer is not dependent on revelation (Schopenhauer is an atheist) but is knowable by exercise of reason – Schopenhauer has a Kantian conception of the basis of morality. Schopenhauer's conception of the moral status of humans differs from that of Christianity. Where Christianity sees humans as basically sinful but, with effort and God's help, able to strive towards sanctity, Schopenhauer sees humans qua rational agents as themselves the source of morality, but as burdened and thwarted by nature – the external world as well as their own natural drives. It is in this sense that moral values, for Schopenhauer, are in conflict with nature, and the latter is devalued in relation to them.

The second Schopenhauerian notion that resembles nihilism is boredom. Schopenhauer explains the cause of boredom as follows:

[T]he basis of all willing is need, lack, and thus pain, which is [the organism's] primordial destiny by virtue of its essence. If on the other hand it lacks objects to will, its former objects having been quickly dispelled as too easily achieved, it is seized with a terrible emptiness and boredom: i.e. its essence and its being itself become an intolerable burden to it. Thus, its life swings back and forth like a pendulum between pain and boredom; in fact, these are the ingredients out of which it is ultimately composed. (WWR I, 57)

Schopenhauerian boredom is a state in which the will lacks objects (values, in Nietzsche's sense of 'value'). Thus boredom resembles the Nietzschean conception of nihilism as lack of values (the form of nihilism that Reginster calls 'nihilistic disorientation').

A fundamental difference between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche is the former's placing ultimate value in the psychological wellbeing of the individual (so suffering is an ultimate evil) whereas Nietzsche locates value in the creative (primarily cultural) activity of the species, which requires a healthy civilisation, and suffering is not an ultimate evil. (In other words, Schopenhauer is a hedonist, Nietzsche is not.) Yet because suffering is an intrinsic part of life (a necessary consequence of willing), psychological wellbeing is sought, in a sense, in spite of life: through suppression of the will. This is a further sense in which Schopenhauer is seen as nihilistic (in addition to his anti-natural conception of morality, mentioned above). In A, Nietzsche places Schopenhauerianism alongside Buddhism and Christianity as nihilistic doctrines in that they promote suppression of the will. This is a nihilistic tendency because it is against life: exercise of the will is expression of will to power, and life is identified by Nietzsche with will to power (I will elaborate on this in Chapter 4, below).

Chapter 2. Reginster and Gemes on nihilism

In this chapter, I give an initial overview of two recent interpretations of Nietzsche's account of nihilism, by Bernard Reginster and Ken Gemes respectively. These are the interpretations that I will critically evaluate in my argument in Chapters 3 and 4.

2.1. Reginster's account of nihilism

Reginster is emphatic about the importance of the problem of nihilism for Nietzsche. He begins the first chapter of *The Affirmation of Life* with the claim: 'Nihilism is the central problem of Nietzsche's philosophy' (Reginster, 2006, p. 21). For Reginster, it is the overcoming of nihilism via the affirmation of life that is the central aim of Nietzsche's philosophical project (ibid., pp. 2, 4, 51, and passim).

Reginster characterises nihilism '[i]n its broadest description' as 'the belief that existence is *meaningless* ("alles Geschehen [ist] sinnlos" [WP 36]; "dasein [hat] keinen Sinn" [WP 585; cf. 55])' (ibid.). He defines a meaningless life as one that is not worth living, and nihilism is the belief that life in general, rather than a particular life, is meaningless, and therefore not worth living. Meaningfulness is related to values and goals: a life is meaningful to the extent that it is oriented by some inspiring goal or goals (ibid., p. 23). A goal for an individual is a state of affairs that is valued by them, and their valuing it means that they are motivated to pursue it. An individual may have many goals and values in life, but the meaningfulness of their life depends on their having *highest values*. Highest values are those that sustain all other values for an individual; they are values of such importance that without them the other values that the individual has would dissipate. Reginster gives the example of someone who takes the experiencing of deep friendships to be their highest value (ibid., p. 36). The person may have many other values as well, many of which are not instrumental for their highest value; for example, they might value intellectual work, even if this has no instrumental value relative to their highest value of friendship. However, their highest value is nonetheless what sustains all their lesser values; in the absence of the possibility of the realisation of their desire for friendship, their other values, such as that which they attach to intellectual work, would dissipate – the activities they had previously valued would become worthless. So the lack of highest values causes a lack of value tout court for an individual.

Values entail goals; 'accordingly, nihilism may be defined as goallessness: "What does nihilism mean? [...] The goal is lacking; 'why' finds no answer" (WP 2; cf. 55).' (ibid.).

A goal makes life worth living only if it inspires the agent to go on living [...] A goal's ability to inspire depends on two conditions: first, it depends on the agent's estimation of the *value* of the goal; second, it also depends on the agent's estimation of the *realizability* of this goal. The goal loses its ability to inspire if one or both of these conditions is not met. Nihilism, then, may have two sources: a devaluation of the goals in the realization of which our life has hitherto found its meaning, or the conviction that these goals are unrealisable. (Ibid., p. 24.)

To these two sources, there correspond two forms of nihilism. Reginster calls the first form of nihilism *disorientation*. Disorientation results from the belief that there are no highest values. If the agent doubts the existence of highest values, their life as a whole has no purpose, no ultimate goal to inspire and motivate them, and thus they are disoriented – goalless.

Reginster notes that this conception of nihilism as disorientation due to lack of belief in highest values has been the dominant one in interpretation of Nietzsche. However, he argues that there is a second form of nihilism that is actually used more often by Nietzsche than the sense of nihilism as disorientation; Reginster calls the second form *despair*.

Despair is 'the belief that what is most important to us is unattainable' (ibid., p. 28). Unlike disorientation, despair does not depend on the belief that highest values do not exist; the agent who suffers from despair can believe that there are values but they must also believe that they cannot realise them. However, despair is not necessarily nihilistic. Recall that nihilism is the belief that life in general is meaningless, not the belief that merely one's own life is meaningless. Nihilistic despair is thus the belief that highest values are *necessarily* unrealisable, rather than contingently unrealisable. An agent may despair over the belief that some goal they have is unrealisable for them, because of their particular circumstances; however, this form of despair is not nihilistic. Nihilistic despair is an agent's belief that, whatever their circumstances could be, the nature of the world is fundamentally such that their highest values would still be unrealisable, and thus their life is necessarily meaningless.

Reginster acknowledges that his notion of despair seems to be a form of pessimism: 'Pessimism and nihilism are closely related, in the last analysis, because nihilism proves to be nothing more than a kind of thoroughgoing pessimism' (ibid., p. 31).

2.2. Gemes's criticism of Reginster's view

Reginster's account accords well with Nietzsche's references to nihilism in the unpublished work (which is actually where nihilism is addressed most directly; in the published work, it tends to be mentioned in connection with other issues – mainly Christian morality). However, Gemes, in his review of *The Affirmation of Life*, makes two objections to Reginster's characterisation of nihilism. First, 'Reginster's account of nihilism fails to explain Nietzsche's repeated claim that Christianity is intrinsically nihilistic' (Gemes, 2008, p. 461). The problem here is that if the Christians are nihilistic, it is not clear how their nihilism can be characterised as disorientation or despair, as it is not clear how they generally suffer from either. Christianity is a paradigmatic case of a system of belief that posits highest values. Life, for the Christian, is completely oriented according to obedience to the will of God. Moreover, Christianity serves precisely as an antidote to despair. This partly explains its role in the slave revolt: the slaves would have been susceptible to despair had they held noble values, which by and large were unattainable for them, due to their circumstances of weakness and subjugation. Christianity offered a new set of values for the slaves which were attainable even in their circumstances. The Christian slaves' goal was God's favour, and this was attainable via the realisation of values such as humility, docility, compassion, self-sacrifice, etc. – values the realisation of which did not require health, skill, wealth, or power over others. Thus, if Christianity is intrinsically nihilistic, it constitutes a glaring lacuna in Reginster's conception.

Secondly, Gemes argues that Reginster's conception of nihilism is 'overly cognitive'. As noted above, disorientation depends on the belief that there are no highest values, and despair is the belief that one's highest values are necessarily unattainable. However, according to Gemes, nihilism is fundamentally a state of the affects (this will be explained below).

2.3. Gemes's account of nihilism

Gemes argues that nihilism can be manifested as a cognitive phenomenon and as an affective phenomenon. Cognitive nihilism characterises certain sorts of belief – nihilistic despair and disorientation both fall into this category. But, as Gemes argues, despair and disorientation are not exhaustive of Nietzsche’s conception of nihilism. The more fundamental form of nihilism, of which despair and disorientation are cognitive manifestations, is *affective nihilism*. Affective nihilism is a state of the drives.⁵

Nihilism in its deepest manifestation is for Nietzsche an affective rather than a cognitive disorder. It is a matter of the constitution of one’s deepest drives rather than a matter of one’s overt beliefs. This should hardly be surprising since Nietzsche, following Schopenhauer, tended to treat conscious beliefs as largely epiphenomenal; as more a reflection of deeper causes than as genuine springs of action. The deepest form of nihilism for Nietzsche involves what he calls ‘the will turning itself against life’ (GM, Preface, 5). (Gemes, 2008, p. 461.)

Gemes interprets Nietzsche as taking ‘individual humans to be, at some fundamental level, collections of drives’ (2009, p. 46). Drives are dispositions to action that in some cases are manifested consciously as desires, but in other cases lack conscious manifestation – an agent can be unaware that they have some drive (indeed, Nietzsche argues that this is the rule rather than the exception: ‘However far a man may go in self-knowledge, nothing can be more incomplete than his image of the totality of *drives* which constitute his being’ (D 119)).

Gemes does not expand further on the notion of affective nihilism in his (2008). However, in an unpublished paper (‘Nietzsche, Nihilism and the Paradox of Affirmation’, 2011), he characterises affective nihilism as a state in which ‘the drives are turned against themselves’; affective nihilism ‘involves a wholesale rejection of our natural drives’ (ibid.).⁶

⁵ It seems affective nihilism does not necessarily involve affects in the sense of emotions, it only necessarily involves drives turned against themselves (wholesale repression). However, Gemes states: ‘Typically this turning of the drives against themselves is also wedded to an affective component, a moralised emotion of disgust toward the drives’ (Gemes, 2011, p. 12). I take the term ‘affective’ in ‘affective nihilism’ to signify the drives rather than emotions, as this seems to be what Gemes intends; this accords with the Latin root of the term – *affectus* – which means ‘disposition’, and drives are a kind of disposition.

⁶ This paper is forthcoming in Came (ed.), *Nietzsche on Morality and the Affirmation of Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

How are the drives turned against themselves in affective nihilism? Affective nihilism involves repression of drives, and drives are repressed by other drives, so in this sense turned against one another. This is noted by Nietzsche in BGE: 'The will to overcome an affect is, in the end, itself only the will of another, or several other, affects' (BGE 117, cited in Gemes 2009, p.50). A repressed drive is either fully denied expression in action, or expressed in action in a disguised form; Gemes explains:

[I]n repression the stronger drive attempts to stifle any expression of the weaker drive so that its expression either is fully stifled or can only be achieved in a heavily disguised form that often represents the inverse of the original aim (the Christian's hate and envy of, and desire to have power over, his or her fellow man being expressed as professions of brotherly love and disinterest in power) (Gemes 2009, p. 48).

Repression constitutes a kind of psychological disunity, because drives are competing within the organism to express incompatible aims. Gemes states:

Repression is what happens when a drive is denied its immediate aim and is then split off from other drives in the sense that its aims are not integrated with the aims of other drives and it must battle, often unsuccessfully, for any opportunity to achieve expression (ibid.).

This can be seen in the case of the Christian in Gemes's example, cited above: they have both benevolent and hostile drives that can be expressed in the same kind of behaviour (e.g. acts of charity, humility, etc.). Assuming that the Christian genuinely believes they morally ought to be charitable, etc., they are disposed to benevolence, yet at the same time this can express hostile drives (e.g. charity can be an unconscious expression of power over the recipient).

Why is this turning of the drives against themselves nihilistic? According to Gemes, 'if we equate life with drives' then affective nihilism is 'a rejection of life in this sense'; affective nihilism involves 'a wholesale repudiation of our natural drives' or 'wholesale repression of the drives'; '[t]his captures the *nihil* (nothing) of nihilism, since the drive to suppress or extirpate the drives is a kind of drive to nothingness' (all quotations are from Gemes, 2011, p. 11).

So, to summarise the differences between Reginster's and Gemes's accounts, Reginster sees nihilism as fundamentally the belief that life is meaningless, which is then expressed in nihilistic despair or nihilistic disorientation. Gemes also sees these phenomena as forms of nihilism, but differs from

Reginster in that he thinks there is a kind of affective state (wholesale repression) of which the phenomena are cognitive expressions. This has the advantage over Reginster's view that it accounts for Nietzsche's claims that Christianity is nihilistic, even though Christians do not think life is meaningless. On Gemes's view, Christians suffer from affective nihilism, but in their case this is not expressed as the belief that life is meaningless.

Chapter 3. Nietzsche's earlier conception of nihilism

In this chapter, I make three main points. The first is that the main sense of nihilism that Nietzsche was using in the work prior to 1888 is that of lack of belief in attainable highest values (I will call this sense 'value-nihilism'). This is the conception of nihilism that Reginster ascribes to Nietzsche. The second point is that Nietzsche develops the notion of negation of life in GM, in his discussion of the ascetic ideal, but at this stage he does not consider it a form of nihilism in itself (unlike in the works from 1888, where negation of life is the main form of nihilism). The third point is that lack of highest values is not given an exclusively negative valuation by Nietzsche.

I will largely endorse Reginster's view as applying to Nietzsche's work prior to 1888. Reginster sees nihilism as fundamentally the belief that life is meaningless, which is expressed in nihilistic despair and nihilistic disorientation. Gemes objects that Reginster's view fails to account for the nihilism of Christianity; this objection is right but it only applies to the 1888 works. In the earlier works, Nietzsche did not see Christianity as intrinsically nihilistic, as it provided a meaning to life. However, Nietzsche did see Christianity as a cause of nihilism, and I will explain why below, in Sections 3.2 and 3.3.

Gemes gives an interpretation of nihilism that aims to reconcile Reginster's view of nihilism as lack of attainable highest values with Nietzsche's claim in the 1888 works that Christianity is nihilistic. The interpretation is that nihilism is fundamentally a state of the drives (which Gemes calls 'affective nihilism'), and this can be expressed as valuelessness, but it can also be expressed in values and kinds of behaviour that negate life (such as the values and behaviour promoted by the Christian ascetic ideal). However, I will argue in Section 3.5 that the nihilism mentioned by Nietzsche in LN 5 [71] and GM III, 28 – the nihilism to which Christianity is said by Nietzsche to have been an antidote – does not seem to be reducible to Gemes's affective nihilism. Gemes's view is more compatible with the new sense of nihilism that Nietzsche uses in 1888: negation of life. In the pre-1888 work, Nietzsche's main sense of nihilism is lack of belief in attainable highest values.

3.1. Different senses of nihilism

Nietzsche makes various statements in the pre-1888 work that suggest a conception of nihilism as the view that there are no attainable highest values, or, equivalently, that life lacks meaning. In LN 2 [127], he states 'The collapse of the *moral* interpretation of the world, its *sanction* lost once it has tried to flee into a hereafter: ending up in nihilism, "Everything is meaningless";' earlier in the same note he glosses nihilism as 'the radical rejection of value, meaning, desirability'. In LN 5 [71], he states that nihilism appears now because the Christian moral interpretation of the world has perished, 'but because it was regarded as *the* interpretation, there now seems to be no meaning at all in existence, everything seems to be *in vain*.' In WP 2 (1887): 'What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; "why?" finds no answer.'

However, Nietzsche also uses the term nihilism to characterise the intention or act of suicide. In GS 346, he states:

Have we not exposed ourselves to the suspicion of an opposition – an opposition between the world in which until now we were at home with our venerations – and which may have made it possible for us to *endure* life – and another world *that we ourselves are*: a relentless, fundamental, deepest suspicion concerning ourselves that is steadily gaining more and worse control over us Europeans and that could easily confront coming generations with the terrible Either/Or: 'Either abolish your venerations or – *yourselves!*' The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be – nihilism? That is *our* question mark.

Also, in GM III, 28, he refers to 'suicidal nihilism'. I think the two senses of nihilism can be related by invoking the distinction Nietzsche makes in LN 2 [131] and 5 [71] between theoretical and practical nihilism. Theoretical nihilism can be seen as the belief that life is meaningless, and then practical nihilism can be seen as action (such as suicide) that proceeds from this belief. So the passage above, from GS 346, can be read as saying that destruction of ourselves because of the realisation that our highest values are unattainable ('opposed' to the 'world that we ourselves are') would be an act of practical nihilism, and the theoretical nihilism would be the belief (the realisation) that our values are unattainable. The question with which the passage concludes then asks whether destruction of our venerations would be nihilism because it may leave us without highest values.

This view of practical nihilism as being caused by lack of belief in attainable highest values is supported in LN 5 [71]: there Nietzsche claims that the 'ruin' constituted by failure of belief in highest values

takes the form of – *ruining oneself*, as an instinctive selection of what *must destroy*. Symptoms of this self-destruction of those who have come off badly: self-vivisection, poisoning, intoxication, Romanticism, above all the instinctive compulsion to act in ways that make *mortal enemies* of the powerful (– breeding one’s executioners, so to speak); the *will to destruction* as the will of a still deeper instinct, the instinct for self-destruction, the *will into nothingness*.

What makes all these destructive acts nihilistic is that they proceed from the nihilistic belief that life is meaningless; they are practical expressions of the nihilistic belief. So it is not being claimed by Nietzsche that self-vivisection, intoxication, etc., are intrinsically nihilistic, but rather that they are nihilistic acts when they are undertaken because the agent lacks highest values, and so feels, consciously or perhaps unconsciously, that life is meaningless. A general destructive attitude can be seen to express a lack of values: nothing has value, so anything can be destroyed. Suicide, also, can express lack of values (though of course this is not necessarily the case with suicide – it can also be done for reasons that do not entail lack of values); suicidal nihilism expresses the view that nothing has value so life is not worth living.

However, Nietzsche also uses ‘nihilism’ (in the Notebooks) to refer to the belief that there is no truth. ‘That there is no truth; that there is no absolute nature of things, no “thing-in-itself” – *this is itself a nihilism*, and indeed *the most extreme one*’ (LN 9 [35]). ‘The most extreme form of nihilism would be that *every belief, every holding-to-be-true, is necessarily false*’ (LN 9 [41]). This sense of nihilism is not reducible to value-nihilism. Overall, in the pre-1888 work, Nietzsche seems to use the term ‘nihilism’ in its most general sense in the same way as it is used in contemporary philosophy, as generalised negation of some domain (e.g. moral nihilism is view that there are no moral facts, ontological nihilism is the view that there are no objects), so in the latter quotations he is applying it to the domain of truth (there is no truth); more commonly (in the pre-1888 work), he applies it to the domain of highest values (or attainable highest values).

Given that Nietzsche uses nihilism in these different senses, why am I arguing that value-nihilism is the *main* sense in the pre-1888 works? First, because, as noted above, what Nietzsche sees as nihilistic acts are nihilistic in virtue of the fact that they express value-nihilism – the belief that life is meaningless. The second reason is that in the notebooks, and implicitly in GM and GS 346, Nietzsche gives genealogical accounts of value-nihilism. The notebook accounts are his most focussed

discussions of nihilism in the corpus, and there he gives a comprehensive view of the genealogy of nihilism, and a similar view can be seen to be suggested in GM (and also in GS 346). Thirdly, it is in these accounts of value-nihilism that nihilism is intertwined with what is the most recurrent focus of Nietzsche's critical attention in his work from the mid-1880s onwards: Christian morality.

Below, in Sections 3.2 and 3.3, I will give an overview of Nietzsche's genealogy of nihilism, and then, in Sections 3.4 and 3.5, assess to what extent Reginster's and Gemes's accounts of nihilism are compatible with it.

3.2. The genealogy of nihilism

Although in the works from 1888, Nietzsche repeatedly charges Christianity with nihilism, the account he presents in the pre-1888 work is markedly different. Here Christianity is presented as one possible cause of nihilism, but not as intrinsically nihilistic; in fact, on the pre-1888 account, Christianity initially served as an antidote to nihilism, and nihilism now threatens modernity because of the decline of Christianity.

Characteristically, Nietzsche focuses less on giving an analysis of the concept of nihilism than on giving a genealogy of the phenomenon. The relation of nihilism to religion and morality is brought out in a number of genealogical sketches in the notebooks, and is also in the background of the genealogy of morality in GM. The portrayal of nihilism in this pre-1888 work is of a state of belief in which the subject lacks belief in highest values, or (which amounts to the same thing) believes that life is meaningless, and of acts that express this belief – general destructiveness and suicide. As noted above, Nietzsche distinguishes between theoretical and practical nihilism (LN 2 [131] and 5 [71]), the belief that life is meaningless being the former, and destructive acts putatively caused by this belief being the latter.⁷ The overall story, which I will expand on in detail below, is that

⁷ It is perhaps problematic whether Nietzsche really intends the relation between theoretical and practical nihilism to be causal, given his view that our motivations are essentially unknown to us (D 116), and constituted by drives rather than beliefs. However, in LN 5 [71] the relation does seem to be presented as causal: 'the Christian moral hypothesis [...] shielded' individuals from practical nihilism by giving them '*adequate knowledge*' (in italics in the original) of absolute values. Also, the particular activity in which a drive finds expression is often going to depend on belief: for example, an individual's drive to create artwork could be expressed in making sculptures or making films, depending on the individual's beliefs about what medium they would be most competent working with. So in the case of nihilism, a drive to destructiveness or self-destructiveness could find expression because of an individual's belief that there are no highest values, so no

Christianity provided a meaning to life, so kept nihilism at bay, but after the decline in belief in Christian dogma (the 'death of God'), nihilism threatens once again to become a widespread malaise, and this is partly because of certain psychological effects of Christianity that people are still subject to even if they lack belief in Christian dogma.

Nihilism is given a more explicit focus in notebook entries than in the published works. LN 2 [127], 2 [131], and 5 [71], are relatively extensive discussions. They appear to be plans for a work on nihilism, or at least places where Nietzsche was working out his view of the genealogy of nihilism. In GM, nihilism is mentioned in the preface and the final section, and there are isolated references within the main body of the work, but there no discussion that is as explicit and focussed as those in the notebooks; rather, in GM, nihilism plays an important, though background, role. I will discuss the notebook accounts in this section, then I will discuss nihilism in GM in the next section (3.3), below.

In LN 2 [127], written between autumn 1885 and autumn 1886, Nietzsche argues that nihilism is caused, not by social or physiological circumstances (there has always been, e.g., weakness and oppression), but rather by the collapse of a particular interpretation of the world – the Christian-moral interpretation. In work from 1887 (GM and LN 5), his view changes slightly, in that while he still sees Christian morality as a cause of nihilism, he also sees it as having served to prevent nihilism, by providing highest values that would otherwise have been lacking. The collapse of the Christian interpretation (the collapse of belief in Christian dogma) meant that the values it had provided are now vulnerable to being seen to lack foundation, and the likely response to this failure of Christian values is the generalisation that there are no highest values at all: nihilism.

The failure of the Christian interpretation was caused by an essential feature of the interpretation itself: the value of truth. Yet there is a second feature of the Christian interpretation that renders us more susceptible to nihilism when the Christian interpretation itself loses credibility – this is the devaluation of life. I will discuss these two causes in turn, beginning with the role of the value of truth.

The most sustained and explicit discussion of the genealogy of nihilism is in a note dated June 1887, entitled 'European Nihilism' (LN 5 [71]). It is here that Nietzsche describes the role of the value of truth in causing the threat of nihilism in the modern period. It is also initially worth emphasising a

opportunities for other drives they might have to be expressed, or the belief that expressing their other drives will not gain them enough satisfaction to make the effort to do so worthwhile.

couple of other points about this passage which support my overall argument in this chapter: the nihilism referred to here is value-nihilism, and Christianity is portrayed as having served as an antidote to nihilism because it provided highest values. Nietzsche states that Christianity was initially ‘the great *antidote*’ to nihilism, but then becomes the cause of the nihilism threatening modernity, because it initially provided, and then failed to provide, highest values that can be believed in and seen as attainable. Christianity is portrayed in LN 5 [71] as having been an antidote to nihilism in three ways: it provided a meaning to human existence (‘it endowed man with an absolute *value*’); it gave meaning to suffering (suffering as a product of human freedom); and it provided knowledge of absolute values (in God’s teachings and commandments in the Bible). Why was this condition, for which Christianity was the antidote, *nihilism*? Because in each case it involved the belief that highest values, which would give meaning to life, were lacking or inaccessible: (i) a meaning or purpose to human existence in general; (ii) a meaning or purpose to suffering; (iii) knowledge of ultimate meaning.

However, nihilism now stands at the gate not in spite of Christianity, but rather because of it. This reversal has occurred in part because of the value of truth, a central feature of the Christian interpretation of the world. In GS 344, Nietzsche claims:

Even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire too from the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato’s faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine ...

Nietzsche does not actually go into much detail about why exactly ascribing supreme value to truth was so crucial for Christianity, compared to the detail in which he analyses other aspects of Christian morality, particularly in GM. One might expect a genealogy of truth, of how, perhaps, a rhetoric of truth was necessary in Christianity’s struggle against noble morality, or that truth had to become an article of faith, rather than being thought to be generally present in appearances, because appearances more often than not were in direct conflict with the Christian-moral interpretation of the world – experience gives little reason to think suffering will be redeemed, that the meek shall inherit the earth, etc. Nonetheless, in LN 5 [71], Nietzsche argues that the will to truth ultimately came to undermine Christianity by turning its scrutiny against Christianity itself. The will to truth discovers the ‘*partiality* of [the Christian] viewpoint’, and then:

We notice needs in ourselves, planted there by the long-held moral interpretation, which now appear to us as needs for the untrue; on the other hand, it is these needs on which depends the value for whose sake we endure living. This antagonism – *not* esteeming what we know and no longer being *permitted* to esteem what we would like to pretend to ourselves – results in a process of dissolution. (LN 5 [71])

A similar point is made in LN 2 [127]. There, Nietzsche states:

[T]he sense of truthfulness, highly developed by Christianity, is disgusted at the falseness and mendacity of the whole Christian interpretation of the world. A backlash from “God is truth” into the fanatical belief “Everything is false” [...] The decisive thing is scepticism towards morality.

The will to truth is thus ‘a stimulus to nihilism’ (LN 5 [71]). Christian morality had provided values, but with them a will to truth, which now prevents us from esteeming what we would like to pretend to ourselves – that the Christian moral interpretation is true, that the values it posits are legitimate.

What Nietzsche proposes as necessary to overcome this modern condition of nihilism is a critique of our reliance on Christian morality and its after-effects; belief in morality has already been undermined by the death of God, but we still rely on it, so what is necessary is the overcoming of this reliance. In LN 2 [127], Nietzsche expresses the dilemma as follows: ‘Against “meaninglessness” on the one hand and moral value-judgements on the other’.

Does the will to truth’s undermining of religious belief negate moral values, which were grounded in religious doctrine (God’s teachings and commandments, etc.)? To some extent this is the case at the level of belief: we can no longer feel sure about there being a fact of the matter about moral judgements. Where previously moral questions had concerned the extent to which moral judgements accord with God’s will, the question of moral realism itself now becomes a problem: if there is no religious foundation for morality, is there any foundation at all? This is far from being an original observation of Nietzsche’s; it is a problem to be addressed by any view of morality that rejects a divine command model, and is a problem that motivated the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century debates on nihilism outlined in Chapter 1, above. However, Nietzsche’s more original take on the problem is that the promotion of the will to truth, which causes moral

scepticism, is actually itself a product of Christian morality; he claims in GM III, 24-5, that the valuation of truth as the supreme value is at the core of the Christian ascetic ideal.

However, even though, from this philosophical perspective, morality is subject to new doubt, psychologically, morality still has a pervasive hold on us.⁸ This factor compounds the difficulty of resolving the dilemma cited above, between meaninglessness and a morality we can no longer believe in: a way out of the dilemma might seem to be to create new meaning for life – create new values – yet, as Nietzsche argues in LN 5 [71], morality has created in Europeans an affective need for itself, and satisfying this need is a problem because the need has been distinctively shaped by Christian morality, so not any alternative value-system will suffice. There are two aspects to this. First, morality has instilled emotional responses that correspond to moral value judgements – people are generally appalled or disgusted about what Christian morality has deemed sinful, and feel a desire for what it promotes (spiritual purity, life after death, etc.). This mainly involves the devaluation of the worldly (nature, worldly desires, the body) in opposition to the divine. Secondly, morality has created a more general need for externally-positing, or objective, value; creating one's own values is not adequate to satisfy this need, and when externally-positing values are lacking, life is assumed to be meaningless (LN 5 [71]).⁹ If there is not the meaning that Christian morality had given to life, then there must be no meaning at all. Morality, initially the antidote to nihilism (according to GM and LN 5 [71]), has now become the cause of nihilism.

Thus for a new system of values to be adopted, there are certain affective constraints that would need to be met or overcome. The first constraint is that of moralised affective responses, instilled on generations during centuries of Christian hegemony; the second is the need for meaning to have an objective, rather than subjective basis.

One option for a new system of values (and this is the option that Nietzsche throughout his work advocates for higher types, those with the psychological strength to achieve it) would be to base new values on our natural drives. We could adopt as values – aim for – kinds of activity that express

⁸ A good example of this tension is in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*: the main character, Raskolnikov, reasons himself into the view that morality has no hold over him, but then finds, after committing an immoral act (a murder), that he is nonetheless subject to unbearable guilt and anxiety and the desire for expiation.

⁹ Reginster makes this point: 'A goal is worth pursuing, according to the nihilist, only if it enjoys some agent-external sanction' (2006, p. 56). The relevant kind of agent-external sanctions are values that have an 'external origin', which means 'they are metaphysically independent from the contingent contents of the human will, that is to say ... their nature is not conditioned by that will' (ibid., p. 57). So this precludes values consciously created by the agent as validations of their highest desires.

our drives in their highest form, the highest forms being activities that express will to power in creative ways; we could celebrate activities that involve great exertion and the overcoming of difficulty, and, in undertaking which, the agent gains power over themselves, others, and their environment, and also provides the conditions for others to make similar achievements, by setting an example to others, or by creating circumstances in which others are able, with the requisite degree of health and dedication, to flourish. Such a system of values is not without precedent; it is the noble morality referred to by Nietzsche throughout his corpus. Clearly, a problem for the adoption of a value-system such as this is that it would be difficult to stomach for those who have held many natural drives in contempt, in accordance with Christian morality – it would provoke self-disgust and a loss of the feeling of superiority over those whom one had previously morally condemned, and so adopting it would have to involve overcoming the first constraint mentioned above.

Moreover, overcoming moralised affects would include overcoming the will to truth, the deepest moralised affect remaining from the Christian ascetic ideal (GS 344; GM III, 24-5). In GM III, 24, Nietzsche criticises modern atheists, immoralists, nihilists (by which the context suggests he means Russian nihilists), and others, who think they have gained freedom from Christian morality, when actually their very mode of critique of the latter (the criticism that religion and morality have no basis in fact) belies that it still holds sway over them, in the form of the will to truth. Nietzsche cites, by way of contrast, what he sees as a genuine example of free spirits, the Assassins (the medieval Islamic sect), who, according to Nietzsche (*ibid.*), lived by the credo ‘nothing is true, everything is permitted’.¹⁰

But why ought the dominance of the will to truth be overcome? Merely because of the fact that it is a Christian moral value, or is there something intrinsically problematic about it? Nietzsche thinks the latter, and for a reason that relates to the value of life. In BGE 4, he says:

We do not object to a judgement just because it is false [...] The question is rather to what extent the judgement furthers life, preserves life, preserves the species, perhaps even cultivates the species [...] Admitting untruth as a condition of life: that means to resist familiar values in a dangerous way; and a philosophy that dares this has already placed itself beyond good and evil.

¹⁰ The question of whether free spirits are nihilists is addressed in Section 3.4, below.

Truth as the highest value is akin to the rest of the ascetic ideal in that it devalues life, by elevating the value of truth above the needs of life. Placing truth above the needs of life can be unhealthy and can stifle human achievement, and it is for these reasons that the dominance of the will to truth ought to be overcome.

So, to summarise, the genealogy of nihilism given by Nietzsche says that the nihilism that confronts modernity is the result of the decline of belief in Christianity (the death of God), brought about by an intrinsic feature of the Christian ascetic ideal – the will to truth – which eventually turned against Christianity itself. This has caused the meaning of life that the Christian interpretation provided to be cast into doubt. So the modern Europeans are now susceptible to value-nihilism. Moreover, the affective consequences of the Christian heritage (the fact that our affective responses have to some extent been shaped by morality) mean that possible alternative value-systems feel unacceptable. This affective sense that Christian morality is the only acceptable morality causes the nihilistic generalisation: if Christian values are no longer tenable, then there must be no values at all (because values that go against Christian values *feel* wrong).

3.3. Nihilism in GM and the negation of life

The role of the affective consequences of morality in causing modern nihilism was mentioned in the previous section, above. One aspect of this is morality's devaluation of the world and human nature, seeing earthly existence as a fallen state and the natural drives as sinful. This both manifests and promotes a turning of the will against life (as Nietzsche puts it in GM, Preface, 5). In GM, this aspect of morality – its negation of life, or its turning of the will against life – is given much more sustained focus than in the notebook passages considered above; the same point is made, that devaluation of life plays a role in causing nihilism. However, in GM, it is explained in more detail how the practical negation and devaluation of life has played a crucial role in *preventing* nihilism until now.

How has the negation of life prevented nihilism? It is a result of Christian morality's centrally involving an ascetic ideal, which gives meaning to life, but the meaning it gives involves devaluation and practical negation of life. This involves the ascetic ideal's presenting as an ideal a way of life in which one devotes oneself to repressing certain instinctual desires, and also expressing drives that diminish one's power as an individual. This ideal is presented in Christian doctrine as the paradigm of virtue, because it supposedly facilitates devotion to God by negating bodily distractions. However,

Nietzsche argues that the reason the ascetic ideal gained such prevalence was because it helped with a fundamental psychological need: the need for the natural drives to be somehow expressed or at least quelled, rather than being left in a state of frustration. The ascetic ideal provides methods for dealing with the problem of unsatisfied drives that could be used by people in circumstances of physiological inhibition, such as the early Christians, who suffered from social oppression and the poverty, misery, etc., that that brought with it. The ascetic ideal does this in various ways, involving what might be seen as theoretical and practical means that can be said to involve negation of life: it negates life at a theoretical level by morally devaluing it, and it negates life at a practical level by preventing the outward expression of drives that increase the individual's power, and by promoting the expression of drives that diminish the individual's power.¹¹

The two levels are causally related because a valuation or devaluation promotes or prohibits kinds of action. The moral condemnation of bodily desires – characterising them as sinful and impure (where purity is seen as a virtue) – operates at the practical level by demanding that drives are repressed. This has the effect of satisfying certain drives by allowing them to repress others. One example is the turning of the ascetic's cruelty against themselves; as cruelty is one of the basic instinctual pleasures (Nietzsche argues), self-punishment actually provides pleasure to the ascetic.¹² Resistance to one's desires provides a challenge, a struggle in which the ascetic can gain the satisfaction of victory if they succeed, and the satisfaction of self-punishment if they fail. Self-denial also creates a condition of over-sensitivity, so that small stimulations are magnified in comparison to how they would be felt by someone who was not repressing their drives. The effect of all this is to keep the individual too preoccupied to be overwhelmed by listlessness and depression. However, what the method has constituted is a negation of life in both moral and practical senses: a moral condemnation and the repression of natural drives, which in reality – i.e. outside of the religious fantasy of another world – are the essence of human existence.

The ascetic ideal also combats anomie in a way that negates life by increasing passivity: by providing methods for weakening the drives, or discharging them in a way that does not require the subject to have or gain any power over others: these methods include 'hypnotic' religious practices (prayer, chanting, etc.), restricted diet, mechanical activity, and devotion to others or popular causes ('herd identification'). These methods negate life inasmuch as they seek to negate that which is essential to life: the will to power. They involve activity that uses up energy and concentration without the agent

¹¹ The sense of 'life' here in 'negation of life' is not restricted to mere survival; I argue in Chapter 4 that 'life' is best understood here as will to power.

¹² This is discussed in GM II, as 'bad conscience'.

gaining power, weakening oneself through diet, and divesting power to others. Similarly, the repression that involves the drives turned against themselves, as discussed in the previous paragraph, negates will to power, but in a different way: by denying its expression in the form of the drives' outward expressions, and instead allowing will to power to be expressed in the struggle between the drives within the organism.

In GM III, 28, Nietzsche claims that the ascetic ideal served to 'shut the door to all suicidal nihilism' by giving a meaning to suffering. Moreover, the way it did this was by providing an interpretation of suffering from the perspective of guilt – that one's suffering is deserved, that one ought to hate one's nature. This is the negation of life at the moral level – the devaluation of life. At the practical level, this stimulated the will to nothingness, giving humans something to will – nothingness – which is a more bearable situation than not willing at all, which is what one risks if one has no highest values. The will to nothingness, as the notion is used here, to characterise the ascetic ideal, means the drive to negate life in the form of negation of natural drives, so it involves negating essential features of life without actually negating the existence of the organism. The ascetic ideal was a '*faute de mieux*' ('for want of anything better') (ibid.); by turning the will against life, it at least gave the will an object, and 'man would much rather will *nothingness* than *not* will...' (ibid.; also GM III, 1). So the crucial point here is that in GM negation of life is not seen as necessarily nihilistic, and is actually seen as having served to prevent nihilism.

However, in GM Preface, 6, Nietzsche suggests that this hostility to life threatens to *lead to* nihilism. He claims to see, in Christian morality ('the morality of compassion'),

the great danger to humanity, its most sublime lure and temptation [...] the backward-glancing tiredness, the will turning against life, the last sickness gently and melancholically announcing itself [...] [European culture's] detour to a new Buddhism? to a Buddhism for Europeans? to – *nihilism*? ...

This theme of tiredness with life is reiterated at GM I, 12, where it is identified more categorically with nihilism: 'The sight of man now makes tired – what is nihilism today if it is not *that*? ... We are tired of *man* ...' Why might we be tired of man? Because morality has devalued essential features of human nature. We are tired of man because we have been taught to see what is most essential to him to be of no value, or worse, only fit to be morally condemned and repressed. The crucial event that turns the devaluation of life into nihilism is the failure of belief in Christian dogma (the death of

God). Christian dogma had made the suffering involved in the ascetic ideal seem worthwhile, as it was a necessary step towards redemption. However, now that we can no longer believe in the prospect of redemption, morality has made human nature into an intolerable burden.

A specific case of the ascetic ideal's turning the will against life and thereby leading us to nihilism is presented by Nietzsche in GM III, 14, with his reference to disgust and compassion:

What is to be feared, what has a doomful effect like no other doom [...] [is] the great disgust at man; likewise the great compassion for man. Supposing that these two should mate one day, then immediately something of the most uncanny nature would come into the world, the "last will" of man, his will to nothingness, nihilism.

The claim that disgust and compassion 'mating' will bring about nihilism is somewhat enigmatic, but it seems to mean that one becomes disgusted at humanity in general (perhaps because morality has taught one to feel disgust at human nature, or perhaps because one cannot help but feel disgusted at the victims of the widespread sickness that is fostered and perpetuated by the ascetic ideal – Nietzsche seems to suggest the latter with his images of an unbearable hospital atmosphere, etc.), and also, because of compassion, a drive that Christian morality has promoted as a core virtue, feels that one cannot rise above the humanity at which one is disgusted – one cannot ignore or hold in contempt – so the weight of the disgust is enormous, and the situation seems hopeless (how could one cure humanity of its very nature?), so one starts to feel that it would be better if human life in general did not exist. The emotional weight of human suffering can no longer be borne now that there is no hope of redemption.

This form of nihilism is captured by Reginster with his notion of nihilistic despair. The values embodied in the hope of divine redemption – that there will be an end to suffering, that universal justice will prevail, etc. – are now seen as necessarily unattainable. Because Christianity has fostered in us the expectation of redemption, and also because it has taught us that suffering, injustice, etc., are evils, which ought to be repudiated, rather than tolerated as necessary aspects of life, the lack of belief in the possibility of redemption has the consequence that life is seen as not worth living.

So, in sum, the ascetic ideal involves negation of life, but it is only a *cause* of value-nihilism, and value-nihilism is how Nietzsche was using the notion of nihilism at this point. Christianity negates life, but at this stage is not seen as nihilistic because it provides highest values that are believed to

be attainable. If Nietzsche saw negation of life as identical with nihilism at this point it is most likely that he would have said that Christianity is nihilistic, which he does not. The difference with the works from 1888 is that there negation of life comes to be seen as nihilistic independently of value-nihilism. So prior to 1888, to be a nihilist, one had to be a value-nihilist; by 1888, one could be a nihilist merely because one negates life, even if one is *not* also a value-nihilist (in 1888, Nietzsche introduces the notion of a *nihilistic value* (he says Christian values are nihilistic), which would make no sense were he talking about value-nihilism). In GM III, 28 Nietzsche says the ascetic ideal engendered an aversion to life, and expressed the will to nothingness, but this is not to say that man thereby, nihilistically, believed life to be meaningless; rather, life was something to be endured, despite one's aversion to it. The problem with this attitude is that, though it facilitated survival, it had a catastrophic effect on health: it fostered values and practices that are harmful to health, and it made people susceptible to nihilism after the loss of belief in Christian dogma (the death of God).

3.4. Evaluation of Reginster's account

To what extent is Reginster's account of nihilism compatible with Nietzsche's pre-1888 conception of nihilism as presented here? One of Gemes's main criticisms of Reginster's account was that it fails to explain how Christianity is nihilistic. This is a strong objection to Reginster's account as a general account of Nietzsche's conception of nihilism, as Nietzsche clearly and frequently calls Christianity nihilistic in the works from 1888. However, this objection is not a problem if we are assessing the compatibility of Reginster's view with Nietzsche's pre-1888 conception. This is because before 1888 Nietzsche did not see Christianity as intrinsically nihilistic; as I have argued, he saw it as initially preventing nihilism, as well as being a cause of the nihilism that threatens modernity.

Reginster's concept of nihilistic disorientation is compatible with the account given by Nietzsche in GM and in the notebook sections discussed above. Nihilistic disorientation is the belief that life is meaningless because it lacks highest values. This is a sense of nihilism that Nietzsche uses when he presents the genealogy of nihilism in LN 5 [71] and in GM. In LN 5 [71], Nietzsche claims that humanity suffered from nihilism in the form of a lack of highest values, and Christianity came to fill this lack, so was an antidote to nihilism. In GM III, 28, the same point is made:

If one disregards the ascetic ideal: man, the *animal* man, has until now had no meaning. His existence on earth contained no goal; "to what end man at all?" – was a question without

answer; the *will* for man and earth was lacking; behind every great human destiny a still greater “for nothing!” resounded as refrain. Precisely *this* is what the ascetic ideal means: that something *was lacking*, that an enormous *void* surrounded man – he did not know how to justify, to explain, to affirm himself; he *suffered* from the problem of his meaning.

So the lack of meaning causes suffering; the nihilist ‘laments’ and ‘deplores the loss of meaning’ (Reginster 2006, p. 27) and possibly turns against life as a result (in the case of suicidal nihilism).

Reginster argues that meaning is a fundamental human need, and he ascribes the same view to Nietzsche. He interprets Nietzsche as claiming that the complete failure to satisfy the need for meaning leads to suicidal nihilism: ‘A full acknowledgement of the complete meaninglessness of our existence would lead to “suicidal nihilism”’ (2006, p. 27). However, I think the latter might be too strong a claim to impute to Nietzsche; it seems to be Nietzsche’s view that some individuals and cultures have the strength to embrace life without meaning; even if it does cause them suffering, they do not take the nihilistic turn against life. The Greeks, according to BT, suffered from the problem of the apparent meaninglessness of life and the meaninglessness of suffering, but used the notion of the tragic as a consolation. But perhaps they were thereby imputing a meaning of sorts – a justification of life though seeing it represented by their Gods and in art, so they were not seeing life as completely meaningless. On the other hand, free spirits, of the kind referred to in GM III, 24 (cited above), can see life as completely meaningless, and this is something they embrace, something that supports their recognition of their profound freedom.¹³

Are free spirits nihilists? In WP 14 (1887), Nietzsche seems to suggest they are:

The measure of *unbelief*, of permitted ‘freedom of the spirit’ as *an expression of an increase in power*.

‘Nihilism’ as an ideal of the highest degree of powerfulness of the spirit, the over-richest life – partly destructive, partly ironic.

However, this is one of various places in the notebooks where Nietzsche uses ‘nihilism’ in a way that contrasts with his uses in GS and GM. More commonly, in the published works and the notebooks, nihilism is given a more negative valuation: it is described as pathological (LN 9 [35], WP 13), and

¹³ Arthur Danto reads GM III, 28 as aiming to inspire in the reader a free-spiritedness of this kind: according to Danto, the recognition that life is meaningless ‘is essentially the most liberating thought imaginable’ (Danto, quoted in Janaway 2007, p. 241).

Nietzsche typically emphasises its traumatic psychological consequences. So Nietzsche's more standard use of the term in the pre-1888 work, especially in the published work, is of lack of values with an accompanying negative attitude towards life. On this more common use, free spirits would not be nihilists, because their lack of values is not psychologically problematic for them. An advantage of Reginster's notion of value-nihilism as entailing disorientation or despair is that it captures this negative attitude towards life, and so is more compatible with the negative portrayal of nihilism in GS and GM.

Reginster's disoriented nihilist is despairing in a sense, but not in the specific sense of nihilistic despair that Reginster uses. Nihilistic despair in Reginster's sense is the belief that there *are* highest values, but that they are necessarily unattainable. Reginster claims that this is the more prevalent sense attached to nihilism by Nietzsche in his work as a whole. Clearly, if one is subject to nihilistic despair, this precludes one's being simultaneously also subject to nihilistic disorientation.

As noted in the previous section, above, Reginster's concept of nihilistic despair characterises the second nihilism that Nietzsche describes in LN 5 [71] and suggests in GM, the nihilism that threatens modern Europe following the decline of Christianity. Nietzsche notes in LN 5 [71] that lack of highest values is not as much of a problem in the modern era as it had been previously; 'life is no longer quite so uncertain, contingent, nonsensical. [...] The *power* man has achieved now allows a *reduction* of those means of discipline of which the moral interpretation was the strongest.' What *is* the problem now is that morality has devalued life and we can no longer believe in the promise of redemption offered by the Christian interpretation. This point is made in LN 5 [71]: 'belief in the absolute immorality of nature, in the absence of purpose and meaning, becomes the psychologically necessary *affect* once belief in God and an essentially moral order can no longer be sustained'. Nietzsche is making the same point in GM with his remarks that nihilism today is tiredness with life, and the combination of disgust and compassion leads to nihilism: life has been devalued, and the hope for redemption of suffering is no longer tenable, so life is not worth living. According to Reginster, nihilistic despair is *constituted* by belief in this line of reasoning (2006, p. 49).

As noted above, Gemes's criticism of Reginster's view is that it fails to account for the fact that Nietzsche calls Christianity nihilistic. How exactly does Reginster's view fail in this regard? The problem is that Christians cannot be said to be disoriented, as they have highest values, nor can they be said to be despairing, because they retain the hope that their highest values will be realised – that the world has a meaning as part of God's plan, that there is an essential moral order to the

world, that suffering will be redeemed, etc. Those who suffer from nihilistic despair are those who recognise that God is dead, that there is no redemption or moral order to the world, etc., but nonetheless retain moral values (perhaps because these have been instilled in them at a deep affective level, so are not easily shrugged off), and find that the world as they see it falls short of their values. Indeed, Reginster's most general characterisation of Nietzsche's conception of nihilism, the belief that existence is meaningless (Reginster 2006, p. 21), fails to account for the nihilism of Christianity, as Christianity gave meaning to existence, as Nietzsche states explicitly in LN 5 [71] and GM III, 28.

So, although Reginster's view works as an account of Nietzsche's pre-1888 conception, as discussed in this chapter, a general, unified account of Nietzsche's conception of nihilism would need to say how exactly Christianity is nihilistic, as Nietzsche claims in 1888. Gemes aims to provide such an account with his notion of affective nihilism.

3.5. Evaluation of Gemes's account

Gemes argues that nihilism in its 'deepest manifestation' (2008, p. 461) is the will turned against life, which he characterises as 'the drives turned against themselves', or 'wholesale repression of the drives' (2011, p. 11), as discussed in Chapter 2, above. He offers an account that aims to reconcile value-nihilism with the nihilism of the will turned against life (2008, pp. 461-2; 2011, p. 12). This relies on his distinction between cognitive and affective nihilism. He argues that the nihilism of the will turned against life (which he terms affective nihilism) has existed since the birth of Judeo-Christian morality, but lacked cognitive expression until the death of God, at which point this nihilism manifests itself in consciousness in the form of the beliefs that there are no highest values (Reginster's nihilistic disorientation) or that highest values are necessarily unattainable (Reginster's nihilistic despair). So what appears to be a conflict between Gemes's interpretation and Nietzsche's view in the pre-1888 work, namely that Christianity was not nihilistic, can be seen to be resolved by invoking the different cognitive and affective senses of nihilism. Gemes can allow that the Christians were not nihilistic in the cognitive sense (they believed in attainable highest values), but nonetheless claim that they were nihilistic in an affective sense. This latter point, that Christians were nihilistic in an affective sense, is something that only really emerges in Nietzsche's work in 1888, when he begins to identify nihilism with negation of life, though Gemes can say that he is offering a rational reconstruction of Nietzsche's overall view, so from the perspective of his late view, Nietzsche ought

to have considered Christians to be affective nihilists in the pre-1888 work, even though they were not value-nihilists.

A problem for this view seems to be the point made in LN 5 [71] and GM III, 28 that Christianity initially served as an antidote to nihilism. If Christianity is intrinsically nihilistic (a manifestation of affective nihilism), how can it have served as an antidote to nihilism? Gemes's view does not seem to account for this. Reginster characterises the nihilism from which Christianity shielded as disorientation. But perhaps Gemes's view can be made to accommodate it. Disorientation could be seen as a cognitive manifestation of affective nihilism, which Christianity then served to overcome at the cognitive level, by providing highest values, while at the affective level, the Christians were still nihilistic – still turned against life – even though this was not manifested cognitively as disorientation or despair. So Christianity was an antidote to cognitive nihilism without being an antidote to affective nihilism.

However, I think there is still a problem here: affective nihilism as the negation of the drives via wholesale repression does not seem to be the affective basis of the nihilism from which Christianity is said to have shielded. This is because in GM III, 28, Nietzsche gives what can be seen as an affective account of how the ascetic ideal overcame nihilism: he describes the method as involving the ascetic ideal giving an overall aim to the will, where previously it had lacked an aim. He says that until the ascetic ideal, existence had 'contained no goal', but the ascetic ideal had provided one, and consequently man 'was henceforth no longer like a leaf in the wind [...] now he could *will* something – no matter for the moment in what direction, to what end, with what he willed: *the will itself was saved*', and thus 'the door fell shut to all suicidal nihilism' (GM III, 28). It is difficult, in light of this, to see the suicidal nihilism from which the ascetic ideal rescued humanity as a manifestation of Gemes's affective nihilism (wholesale repression). It seems, on the contrary, that the wholesale repression of the ascetic ideal is portrayed as that which *gave an aim to the will*, and so *prevented* suicidal nihilism.

It might be thought that the nihilism Nietzsche refers to in this passage is, in its affective dimension, a state of not willing, which Nietzsche contrasts with the affective state that he claims underlies the ascetic ideal – the will to nothingness; he states 'man would much rather will *nothingness* than *not* will ...' (ibid.). A notion of nihilism as meaninglessness or goallessness seems to characterise a state of not willing.

Gemes glosses Nietzsche's claim that man would rather will nothingness than not will as 'drives will always find some form of expression' (2011, p. 15) – drives will turn against themselves if they cannot be expressed outwardly. This seems right in some cases (such as the case of the ascetic ideal), but the fact that Nietzsche in GM III, 28 sees not willing as a problem suggests that he thinks that it can also be the case that drives can remain in a state of dissatisfaction, and fail to express themselves, failing even to gain expression by turning against themselves. 'Not willing' can be read as referring to a failure of this kind.

This reading depends on what Nietzsche means by 'willing' – does it entail some specific state of the drives? In BGE and GS, he describes the will as 'the affect of command' (BGE 19; GS 347). This can involve command over external objects (willing or intending that some external event should occur) or command over the agent's own drives. However, what Nietzsche emphasises is that the consciousness of willing does not really exercise command over the drives (as would be the case with a Kantian conception of an autonomous, conscious will), but is rather merely the feeling of command; what is really taking place is one drive dominating the others, and then this is consciously felt as a feeling of command, a feeling of control over one's drives.

The distinction between not willing and willing nothingness can therefore be explained in terms of the ordering of drives within an individual. If willing results from one drive asserting itself over the others, this suggests that willing shows some degree of orientation of the drives (BGE 19). The will can be conceived of as the totality of the drives in an individual, which may be more or less oriented. Richardson (1996, p. 45) and Reginster (2006, p. 57) have this view of the will: as the set of an individual's drives, that have a greater or lesser degree of order (hierarchy) to them – the more hierarchically ordered the drives, the stronger the will. This is supported by Nietzsche's analogy in BGE 19, between a strong will and a strong, autocratic society: a strong will is one with a dominant drive that controls the others; a strong society has a hierarchy of power, with an autocrat at the top of the hierarchy.

On this view of the will, a failure to will ('not willing') manifests a lack of a strong master drive, and therefore lack of hierarchical order among the drives in general (the will). 'Willing nothingness', by contrast, suggests that there *is* a dominant master drive, which, in the case of the ascetic, is succeeding in repressing certain other drives, and allowing the expression of certain drives, such as selflessness, that diminish the power of the individual. Why is the latter state (willing nothingness) preferable to the former (not willing)? Because in a state of repression, the drive or drives that are

doing the repressing, as well as those that are allowed to be expressed by the master drive, are gaining satisfaction (as described in Section 3.2, above). For example, in GM II, Nietzsche argues that this is why bad conscience exists. Bad conscience involves drives to cruelty and domination expressing themselves against the agent by struggling with and overpowering other drives. On the other hand, in the disoriented state of not willing, the drives are individually failing to gain control of the organism (hence the lack of willing – of the feeling of command), and so each drive is failing to gain the satisfaction of adequate expression.

This failure to will as being a cause of distress has a notable precedent in Schopenhauer's notion of boredom, discussed in Chapter 1, above. There, the will's lacking aims is seen as the cause of painful and aimless agitation. The difference with Nietzsche's view here is that Schopenhauer sees boredom as resulting from aims too easily attained, leaving the will with no new aims, whereas Nietzsche is seeing the failure to will as caused by lack of aims felt to be worth pursuing, due to the lack of a meaning of life.

So, on the basis of the distinction outlined between not willing and willing nothingness, Nietzsche might be taken to be contrasting the affective basis of suicidal nihilism – not willing – with Gemes's affective nihilism, which Nietzsche could be seen as presenting in GM III, 28, as the affective basis of the ascetic ideal. This would be a problem for Gemes's reduction of value-nihilism and the ascetic ideal to expressions of affective nihilism (i.e. wholesale repression) because it would mean suicidal nihilism and the ascetic ideal express *different* affective states – *not willing* and *willing nothingness*, respectively – rather than the one affective state Gemes's view requires.

The affective state of disoriented drives underlying not willing does seem like a viable affective expression of value-nihilism. Indeed, in the way Nietzsche describes the state of not willing in GM III, 28, he seems to be saying it results from life's lacking meaning ('If one disregards the ascetic ideal: man, the animal man, has until now had no meaning'). The individual lacks a sense of meaning, so their will is disoriented, and they thus *fail to will* in the sense described above (they may have diverse passing inclinations, but no overall orientation to the will, no strong master drives). This seems to be an affective state that could underlie Reginster's nihilistic disorientation, and, if this is so, then it goes against Gemes's claim that despair and disorientation are both cognitive expressions of Gemes's affective nihilism (wholesale repression).

However, there seem to be two problems for this reading (i.e. that the nihilism from which Christianity shielded – ‘suicidal nihilism’ – expresses a state of not willing). The first is that Nietzsche states in GM III, 28, that the ascetic ideal provided a meaning for humanity for the first time ever. Now if nihilism is meaninglessness here, does Nietzsche therefore mean that humanity was wholly nihilistic prior to the ascetic ideal?

The second problem is that suicidal nihilism actually looks like a form of expression of will to nothingness, and this undermines its being seen as *opposed* to the will to nothingness, as an expression of failure to will. The will to nothingness is described in LN 5 [71] as the drive to annihilation and self-annihilation, so suicide must be an expression of this. So can these two problems be reconciled with a reading of Nietzsche’s sense of nihilism in GM as value-nihilism?

I think they can if suicidal nihilism is seen as a practical form of value-nihilism (as argued in Section 3.1, above). What makes suicidal nihilism nihilistic is not that it negates life, but that it takes as a reason for action the judgement that life is meaningless, so not worth living; suicide for other reasons would not be nihilistic on this view.¹⁴ So it seems that what Nietzsche is saying in GM III, 28 is that suicidal nihilism – a form of will to nothingness, and an affective response to meaninglessness – has been substituted with the ascetic ideal, also a form of will to nothingness, and a response to meaninglessness, but not a nihilistic response, because it posits a meaning for life. The suicidal nihilist, by contrast, retains the belief that life is meaningless.

Although suicidal nihilism expresses the will to nothingness, it does so in a markedly different way to the ascetic ideal. The latter is a strategy for expressing the will to nothingness – the rejection of life – in a way that actually facilitates survival. The ascetic ideal does this by devaluing life, and negating or re-directing certain drives (those that require relative health or power on the part of the organism – sexual and aggressive drives, drives to the acquisition of possessions, drives to freedom, etc.) and fostering drives that diminish personal needs and desires, and facilitate survival in a relatively unhealthy and powerless state (altruism, compassion, mechanical activity, herd identification, etc.). In sum, it involves a meaning – an ideal – which is believed by those who pursue it to be valuable and attainable, and, moreover, the methods by which the ideal is pursued facilitate survival. Contrast the suicidal nihilism of GM III, 28: this is said to result from lack of meaning; without meaning, existence is unbearable, and not worth enduring. With the meaning provided in the form

¹⁴ Though on Nietzsche’s later view of nihilism as negation of life (discussed in Chapter 4) suicide for reasons other than value-nihilism would seem to be nihilistic (except perhaps in cases of acts of suicidal self-sacrifice for what Nietzsche would see as noble causes, for example, heroic acts of self-sacrifice in war, etc.).

of the ascetic ideal, existence still involves suffering, frustration, tiredness, etc., but it is seen as worth enduring, and the ascetic ideal provides methods to enable one to endure it. However, the ascetic ideal still expresses will to nothingness because it portrays life as a sickness, a devalued state, and something to be endured rather than embraced.

So, overall, what Nietzsche is saying in GM III, 28 is that willing nothingness is 'preferable' to a failure to will (as a last resort or *'faute de mieux'*), and this willing nothingness can take the form of suicidal nihilism or, alternatively, the ascetic ideal – 'the ascetic's slow suicide', as Nietzsche calls it in GS 131.¹⁵ This seems to be a major polemical point of GM: that in providing a meaning for humanity, what Christian morality was actually doing was preventing suicidal nihilism by substituting a slow suicide, or substituting one kind of expression of the will to nothingness (the ascetic ideal) for another (suicide). So the affect motivating suicide (the will to nothingness) is the same as that which motivates Christian morality; the latter is however a disguised expression of it.

So can the first problem mentioned above – that nihilism construed as lack of meaning implies humanity was wholly nihilistic prior to the ascetic ideal – be resolved? I think it can if nihilism is seen in GM as being not the *mere* belief that life is meaningless, but the belief conjointly with an aversion to life, as argued in Section 3.4, above. Moreover, I think this aversion to life can be characterised as the will to nothingness. On such a view, the belief that life is meaningless and the expression of will to nothingness are each necessary but only jointly sufficient for nihilism. This nihilism would still be value-nihilism because of the necessity of the belief that life is meaningless. Pre-Christian cultures are then not necessarily nihilistic even if they lack belief in a meaning of life, because they might still not be hostile to life, or generally express will to nothingness, even if they suffer from lack of meaning. The Greeks as described in BT suffered from lack of meaning but did not turn against life; rather, they found consolation in the notion of the tragic. Also, on this view, free spirits are not nihilistic; while they may lack highest values, they are not hostile to life.

Is this conception of value-nihilism in GM as necessarily involving hostility to life more compatible with Gemes's affective nihilism? Nihilism in GM involves the will turning against life, so is compatible on that score. However, it does not seem necessarily to involve the drives turning against themselves in repression. Suicidal nihilism, though hostile to life, does not entail repression: a suicidal nihilist, who believes life to be meaningless and wants to die, could nonetheless be someone

¹⁵ A further form of will to nothingness is the general destructiveness of active nihilism, described in LN 5 [71] and LN 9 [35], and, I will argue in Chapter 4, implied in A 9 and A 58.

who uninhibitedly expresses their drives but still finds life to be ultimately not worth living. So even if suicidal nihilism is seen as an expression of the will to nothingness, and thereby to be a form of the will turning against life, this does not support Gemes's specific contention that forms of value-nihilism are cognitive expressions of a state of wholesale repression – suicidal nihilism need not be such an expression.¹⁶

It is plausible that the view that life is meaningless and not worth living could be an expression of repression in some cases (it could be a form of denial or disavowal of one's drives: the belief that pursuing them is pointless). However, it does not seem warranted to claim that it is *necessarily* an expression of repression. And if this is so, then Gemes's affective nihilism is not the fundamental form, of which cognitive nihilisms (Reginster's despair and disorientation) are necessarily an expression.

In any case, what Gemes is offering is a rational reconstruction that aims to make a coherent story out of Nietzsche's diffuse and sometimes apparently contradictory references to nihilism (the main example of apparent contradiction being his shift from seeing Christianity as preventing nihilism to seeing it as intrinsically nihilistic). Gemes acknowledges that in places Nietzsche gives a different impression to that of Gemes's reading (2008, p. 461), and I think that the argument in GM III, 28 is a case of this. However, as noted, Gemes's view has the advantage that it provides a better account of Nietzsche's later claims that Christianity is nihilistic, which I will discuss in Chapter 4, below.

3.6. A hopeful nihilism?

In this section, I will address the question of Nietzsche's evaluation of value-nihilism. This relates to my overall argument, that Nietzsche moved from using nihilism mainly to mean value-nihilism to

¹⁶ Actually, in his (2011), Gemes does suggest that there is a further form of value-nihilism, other than Reginster's two forms, and it is one that does not involve repression; he calls this the 'nihilism of complacency' (2011, p. 18). Gemes says this is the sense in which the Last Men from 'Zarathustra's Prologue' are nihilistic. It involves the belief that there are no highest values, but also an attitude of indifference to this belief. But obviously this is not going to be a satisfactory characterisation of the suicidal nihilism of GM and GS. Moreover, free spirits seem to lack highest values but not be troubled by the fact, but the label 'complacency' does not seem to fit in their case. Perhaps the best option here is to recognise that Nietzsche in places in the notebooks did countenance a notion of nihilism as the view that life is meaningless with no consequent negative affects, but that this is a less common use of nihilism, and not one that is suggested in the published works (though he wrote about Last Men and free spirits in the published works, he did not label them nihilistic there).

using it to mean negation of life in the later work: what Nietzsche sees as the 'value' of nihilism in the pre-1888 works suggests value-nihilism because it involves the destruction of existing values.

There is a tension in GM in Nietzsche's evaluation of nihilism. On the one hand, it is cast in a negative light – as tiredness with life, as suicidal, as the product of the 'last sickness', the will's turning against life. On the other hand, in GM III, 27, Nietzsche refers to the demise of morality due to the will to truth as 'that great spectacle in a hundred acts that is reserved for Europe's next two centuries, the most terrible, most questionable, and perhaps also most hopeful of all spectacles ...' As Nietzsche suggests in GM, Preface, 5, the modern morality of compassion, epitomised by Schopenhauer's moral theory, is potentially leading Europe towards nihilism. Given that it stems from a post-Christian morality of compassion, the nihilism in question here seems to be Reginster's despair: the view that life is meaningless because highest values are necessarily unattainable. Suffering is both inevitable and meaningless, so life is an essentially desperate state. How could a situation in which such a view prevails be hopeful?

An answer might be provided by a couple of notebook passages, in LN 5 [71] and LN 2 [128]. In LN 5 [71], s. 14, Nietzsche says of 'the moment of nihilism and lust for destruction':

The *value of such a crisis* is that it *cleanses*, that it crowds related elements together and has them bring about each other's destruction, that it assigns common tasks to men with opposite ways of thinking – bringing to light the weaker, more uncertain of them as well and thus initiating *an order of rank among forces*, from the point of view of health: recognising those who command as commanders, those who obey as obeyers. Of course, outside of all existing social orders.

There is a similar statement at LN 2 [128], between two sections on nihilism (LN 2 [127] and 2 [131]): Nietzsche writes of

the most fruitful breaking of the clouds : my kind of pessimism – the great starting point [...]
The conditions of every heightening of culture (of making possible a *selection* at the expense of the crowd) are the conditions of all growth.

What seems to be the positive value here of nihilism is its destructiveness of existing values and social orders: the situation of general nihilistic despair allows those with the ability to create new

values to emerge. The crisis of nihilism acts as a means of natural selection of individuals and social structures that are fit to rule. So nihilism is not an intrinsically desirable state for Nietzsche, but it can have positive consequences.

In contrast to value-nihilism, if negation of life has any positive consequences, they are of a different sort (except of course the consequences of value-nihilism itself, which, according to the genealogical account of nihilism outlined above, can itself be a consequence of negation of life). In GM I, 6, Nietzsche notes the positive consequences of the priestly form of life, which essentially involves negation of life:

[M]an first became an *interesting animal* on the foundation of this *essentially dangerous* form of human existence, the priest, and that the human soul became *deep* in the higher sense and turned *evil* for the first time – and of course, these are the two basic forms of man’s superiority, hitherto, over other animals!

Moreover, the ascetic ideal facilitated survival in conditions of adversity, and shielded from suicidal nihilism. However, this was at great cost to the general health of individuals and of culture, which is why Nietzsche sees a period of value-nihilism as potentially a hopeful spectacle if it ultimately serves to replace the ascetic ideal, which has outlasted the usefulness it initially might have had, with new values that better serve to facilitate health and the expression of creativity.

In the 1888 work, however, the negation of life constituted by Christian morality is given a more strongly negative appraisal.¹⁷ When Nietzsche writes about the origins of Christianity in A, he does not describe it as a counter to value-nihilism, as he had done in GM and LN 5 [71], but on the contrary as *itself* constituting a destructive, nihilistic (life-negating) attack on noble civilisation (A 58). This will be discussed in Chapter 4.

¹⁷ However, Buddhism, though seen as a nihilistic religion because it involves negation of life in its struggle against suffering and desire, is portrayed in a much more positive light. Nietzsche admires its positivistic view of the world, as well as the fact that it does not promote guilt or self-loathing, but rather cheerfulness, calmness, and health (see A 20-1).

Chapter 4. Nietzsche's later sense of nihilism: negation of life

In this chapter, I argue that the main sense of nihilism that Nietzsche uses in the works from 1888 is that of negation of life. Negation of life here is not restricted to suicide; it means negation of life in the sense of life as will to power (I explain this in more detail in Section 4.4). This can take various forms: the repression of natural drives, the active destruction of conditions that are hospitable to the flourishing of life, the devaluing of the world in general in relation to the otherworldly, and the promotion of natural drives that are harmful to health and cultural flourishing.

Reginster does not see negation of life as a form of nihilism, so his view is incompatible with that expressed in this chapter. Reginster sees 'life-negating values' as a *cause* of nihilistic despair (2006, p. 45); this is because they are a premise from which, in conjunction with the premise that God is dead, or that the highest values cannot be realised, one reasons that life is meaningless; and it is this conclusion, rather than the premises, that is the nihilistic belief.¹⁸ This view seems to be a convincing interpretation of Nietzsche's accounts prior to 1888, but fails to account for Nietzsche's claims in the works from 1888 that Christianity is nihilistic, and fails to account for his apparent identifications, also in the 1888 works, of nihilism with negation of life.

The view expressed here is more compatible with Gemes's view of nihilism, though it departs in two respects. First, I argue Gemes's view is too restrictive: negation of life involves more than wholesale repression of the natural drives. A consequence of this argument is a second point of divergence: the more inclusive notion of negation of life proposed here does not depend on affective nihilism in Gemes's sense, as life can be negated in ways that do not involve repression (such as destructiveness, compassion, and some forms of devaluation of life). However, I will argue that nihilism as negation of life can be seen as having a fundamentally affective form if all forms of negation of life are seen as expressions of the will to nothingness. Moreover, I suggest that seeing nihilism as expression of the will to nothingness can serve as a unified view of nihilism, which, though it seems to conflict slightly with Nietzsche's view of nihilism in the pre-1888 work (because there some expressions of will to nothingness were not seen as nihilistic), could nonetheless be taken to represent Nietzsche's more considered view.

¹⁸ 'Nihilism – the claim that life is meaningless – is ... the conclusion of an implicit reasoning that comprises two premises: the death of God, or the conviction that the highest values cannot be realised, and the negation of life, which is the stance motivated by the endorsement of life-negating values.' (Reginster 2006, p. 49)

It should also be noted that although I refer to Nietzsche's characterisations of negation of life from some of the pre-1888 works in my argument below, this is not to suggest that Nietzsche actually identified nihilism with negation of life before 1888. Nietzsche developed the notion of negation of life prior to 1888, but my contention is that he only came to see it as a form of nihilism in the 1888 work.

4.1. Nihilism as negation of life

In a number of places in the works from 1888, Nietzsche characterises nihilism as negation of life. In A, he describes morality based on compassion as 'a nihilistic philosophy that inscribed the *negation of life* on its shield' (A 7); he says of compassion that it 'negates life, it makes life *worthy of negation*, – compassion is the *practice* of nihilism' (ibid.). In A 58, he says of Paul:

[H]e understood that he *needed* the belief in immortality to devalue 'the world' [...] that the 'beyond' could be used to *kill life*... Nihilist and Christian: this rhymes, it does more than just rhyme...

In TI, 'Skirmishes', 21 he describes how Schopenhauer saw behind various forms of human creativity 'a nihilistic, total depreciation of the value of life'. Continuity can be noted here with the way Nietzsche saw morality devaluing life in GM, GS, and LN 5 [71]. However, the difference here is that he has come to see the devaluation of life as making morality intrinsically nihilistic, rather than a cause of value-nihilism, which is how he had seen it in GM and the notebooks from 1886-7.

However, negation of life is not the only sense he attaches to nihilism in the 1888 works. In TI, it appears he also still uses it to mean value-nihilism; if so, it is not the case that he is now using the term only in a single sense. In TI, 'Skirmishes', 32, he states: 'Philosophers would be nihilists if they could be, because as far as they are concerned there is nothing behind any human ideal' – i.e. philosophers do not believe that values are objectively grounded in reality, so they would abolish them if they could; their belief that there are not really any values, that the values we seem to have are false, makes them value-nihilists.¹⁹ In 'Skirmishes', 50, he says that the nineteenth century has

¹⁹ The next sentence reads: 'Or not even nothing – but unworthy, absurd, sick, cowardly, exhausted things, all the dregs from the *drained* cups of people's lives...' (ibid.). This seems to express the sense of nihilism as negation of life, as it says that values express these unhealthy traits. So Nietzsche could be read here as

led to 'a chaos, a nihilistic sigh, a loss of all bearings, an instinct of fatigue'; this is ambiguous, but the 'chaos' and 'loss of all bearings' suggest value-nihilism (the same nihilism that was said in GS, GM, LN 5 [71], and elsewhere, to be threatening modern Europe).

The notion of negation of life is developed in GM, when Nietzsche writes about the ascetic ideal devaluing life and appealing to a will to nothingness, though at that point he does not identify these phenomena as nihilistic, but rather presents them as initially having been antidotes, and, later, causes, of nihilism. The will to nothingness had at least given humans something to will, and so it had shielded them from suicidal value-nihilism. However, what is novel about nihilism in the 1888 works is that here Nietzsche explicitly charges Christianity with nihilism because it negates life. Moreover, the fact that Christianity can be nihilistic, that there can be nihilistic values, shows that Nietzsche is using a different sense of nihilism here to value-nihilism. The Christians do not lack belief in attainable highest goals, but their goals, and possibly also the paths to them, are nihilistic, because they negate life.

4.2. Negation of life as affective nihilism

Gemes proposes the conception of nihilism as an agent's turning against life via a rejection of their natural drives in his (2008) and his (2011). In his (2011, p. 11), he states:

Let us ... consider what is Nietzsche's central complaint against Christianity. Again and again he claims that Christianity turns us against life. Alternatively, he repeatedly tells us that Christianity turns us against our natural drives. Now if we equate life with drives then there is no tension here. Christianity turns us against life in that it involves a wholesale rejection of our natural drives. Furthermore, if we see nihilism as a rejection of life in this sense then we can see how Christianity is intrinsically nihilistic. Our natural sexual and, especially, our aggressive drives are what Christianity demands we turn away from, if not wholly extirpate.²⁰

referring to the two senses of nihilism concerning values in these successive sentences: nihilism as lack of values and nihilism as negation of life.

²⁰ A good example of the point Gemes is making is Nietzsche's claim in TI, 'Morality', 1: 'The church combats the passions by cutting them off in every sense: its technique, its 'cure', is *castration*. It never asks: "how can a desire be spiritualized, beautified, deified?" – it has always laid the weight of its discipline on eradication (of sensuality, of pride, of greed, of the thirst to dominate and exact revenge). – But attacking the root of the passions means attacking the root of life: the practices of the church are *hostile to life*...'

On this basis, Gemes argues that wholesale repression of the drives, in particular, the natural sexual and aggressive drives, is the fundamental form of nihilism for Nietzsche.

Nietzsche gives two accounts of why repression of this kind becomes a widespread phenomenon in GM II and III, respectively. The account in GM II emphasises the prudential aspect of repression. Here Nietzsche focuses on the aggressive instincts that remain from wild prehistory, which often need to be repressed in civilisation. As instincts are not easily eradicated, they will tend to find expression in some direct or indirect form, and one way the repressed aggressive instincts gain expression is by turning against the agent themselves; the agent becomes cruel, violent, frightened, hateful, etc., toward themselves, allowing the aggressive drives still to gain expression without being expressed against other individuals. This is the phenomenon of bad conscience, which Nietzsche calls 'cruelty turned backwards' (GM III, 20).

The story in GM III conflicts with that in GM II, in that, in GM III, the expression of the aggressive drives against the self is portrayed not as something that inevitably happens in the process of civilisation, but rather as an innovation of the priestly caste, who used it as a strategy within their power struggle against the warrior caste.^{21, 22} The stroke of genius of the priests is said by Nietzsche to be their redirection of the slaves' resentment back against the slaves themselves (GM III, 15). This is partly why Christian morality served as an antidote to value-nihilism, as discussed in Chapter 3, above: with the Christian-moral interpretation, the slaves were able to see their suffering no longer as meaningless, but rather to give a meaning to suffering, and to bring it somewhat under their own control, by seeing their suffering as deserved, and thus allowing themselves to unconsciously gain pleasure from the cruelty of repression and self-punishment. This gained the priest power by gaining them the dependence of the slaves, who looked to the priest for legitimisation and rationalisation of their suffering and repression, and also looked to the priest to provide methods of repression, which the latter was able to supply. This also gained the priests power over the nobles, by diminishing the nobles' power by morally undermining them, and increasing the collective power of the slaves by fostering solidarity and co-operation among them.

²¹ Gemes (2011, p. 19) notes this conflict.

²² The priestly and the warrior castes are seen as two forms of the noble type, with the priests having a somewhat restricted, less politically and socially active role in noble society, and consequently becoming resentful of the warrior caste who enjoyed greater freedom. See GM I, 16, and Reginster 2006, p. 253.

What this genealogy of repression shows is that the wholesale repression Gemes identifies as affective nihilism emerged as a method of preservation for the priestly and slave forms of life. The way in which this method was communicated and consciously pursued was as a system of values: the Christian ascetic ideal. Values are said by Nietzsche to reflect forms of life: values are 'physiological demands for the preservation of particular kinds of life' (BGE 3). Christian morality is labelled slave morality and priestly morality by Nietzsche in GM I, and what this signifies is not just that it originated, according to the story in GM I, as a new form of morality among priests and slaves, but also that it reflects the circumstances of its origin, the forms of life of the priests and slaves: physiological inhibition (subjugation, ill health, in the case of the slaves, and a constrained social role in the case of the priests) and the psychological effects of this (ressentiment, and in the case of the slaves, depression, helplessness, etc.). The problem with the values of the ascetic ideal is that they facilitate the persistence of these priestly and slave forms of life, and so are hostile to flourishing forms of life (such as the noble form of life). Christian morality is said in GM III to have a weakening effect even on the already weak (it 'makes the sick sicker' (GM III, 20)); when this morality is able gradually to affect the strong, the loss of vitality is catastrophic, as the strong have more to lose.

This general weakening caused by the ascetic ideal is related to the fact that the ascetic ideal served as the strategy by which the priestly form of life was able to gain power. As described in GM I, the priests' method was to undermine the warrior caste's authority, and gain the support of the slave class, by morally condemning noble morality and creating a new form of morality that validated the forms of life of the priests and slaves. But the priestly form of life is an inhibited and, compared to the warrior caste, weak form, so the way it was able to gain power was only by diminishing the power of others, so diminishing the general level of power. It created sufferers, created dependency, so as to empower itself; it empowered itself by weakening others. Contrast noble forms of power: they tyrannise and command awe and reverence rather than seek to weaken and create dependency. In the next two sections, I will argue that this aspect of the priests' activity – the manner in which they gained power by weakening others – is a form of negation of life that requires a more expansive conception than wholesale repression.

4.3. The problem of the priests' nihilism

As noted above, Gemes claims that it is primarily our aggressive and sexual drives that Christianity demands we repress. On Gemes's affective nihilism conception, it is the actual repression that is the

fundamental form of nihilism; the moral condemnation is nihilistic in virtue of this – i.e. because of the fact that it demands repression and reflects a form of life in which repression is adopted as a survival strategy. So on this view it seems that what would make a person nihilistic is not their beliefs but rather the state of their drives. This makes sense if one thinks of, say, Renaissance nobles, who believed in Christian values but expressed their aggressive and sexual drives voraciously, often atoning for their excesses with ostentatious acts of devotion (building churches, etc.). It would be odd to see as nihilists figures whose lives show such ambitious pursuit of creative worldly aims. They are not nihilists because they do not engage in ascetic repression, and, to the extent that they might be thought to promote the ascetic ideal in their acts of religious devotion, it is only in a superficial or ‘token’ way.

Christian moral values such as meekness, turning the other cheek, loving one’s enemies, etc., do on the face of it condemn aggressive drives. Yet Nietzsche, in GM I (on the slave revolt) and in A 58, portrays the priests as engaged in a massive power struggle against Roman authority. In his account of the slave revolt, Nietzsche argues that the motive for the priests’ condemnation of aggressive drives, reflected in some of the noble values of the warrior caste, was itself an act of aggression – an attempt to undermine and gain power over the warrior caste. Also, in A 9, Nietzsche refers to the priests’ seeking to influence princes and peoples, and sees this as the ‘*nihilistic will willing power*’. So there seems to be a tension here between the interpretation of nihilism as essentially involving repression of aggressive drives, and Nietzsche’s statement that a nihilistic will can be behind aggressive pursuit of political power.

However, it could be insisted, in support of Gemes’s nihilism as negation of drives view, that the aggressive drives are being repressed by finding expression in a heavily disguised form that is characteristic of repression. The priests are expressing aggression by moralising, which involves condemnation of the very drives they are expressing in disguised form. Thus the priests are disunified, and engaged in wholesale repression according to Gemes’s definition of repression given in his (2009) (see Chapter 2, above, for an outline). This seems correct, on this conception of repression, but it does not account for the active aspect of the priests’ nihilism, which is another way in which they negate life, and something that Nietzsche seems to be emphasising in A 58. When Nietzsche says that Paul ‘used the beyond to kill life’, he does not mean that the way Paul was killing life was merely by repressing his drives. In A 58, Nietzsche refers to the priests as ‘holy anarchists’, and writes of Paul’s kindling a ‘world fire’ against Imperial Rome, uniting ‘the whole inheritance of anarchistic activities in the empire ... into an incredible power’; he concludes the section with:

‘Nihilist and Christian: this rhymes, it does more than just rhyme...’. The reference to anarchists, and the general description of politicised destructiveness, suggests that Nietzsche’s use of the term ‘nihilist’ in this section is making an allusion to Russian political nihilism (see Chapter 1, above), and suggesting that the latter’s destructive activity against established order, and that of the priests, are basically similar.²³

This reading perhaps seems to conflict with what Nietzsche says in TI, ‘Morality’, 1, (quoted in footnote 20, above) that the practices of the Church are hostile to life inasmuch as they focus on the castration and eradication of the passions. The latter passage might be interpreted as saying that castration and eradication of the passions is the only way that Christianity is hostile to life, and, if so, this would support Gemes’s argument that negation of drives is the fundamental form of nihilism. However, I think that negation of drives is just *one* way that life can be negated, and that Nietzsche suggests others. The case of the priests might be taken to show a sense of negation of life that is more general than repression. Nietzsche says in A, 9 that the nihilistic will can in fact will power for the individual:

When theologians use the ‘conscience’ of princes (*or* peoples –) to reach out for *power*, let us be very clear about *what* is really taking place: the will to an end, the *nihilistic* will willing power...

Nietzsche gives an account of such an aggressive form of nihilism in passages in the notebooks, where he claims that whether or not the nihilist ‘reaches out’ for power depends on their strength. In notebook passages written before Nietzsche had fully developed his notion of nihilism as negation of life, he describes how nihilism (at this stage, conceived as value-nihilism) can take an active form. Active nihilism is described as an ‘intermediate state’ of a ‘spirit’ which has too much strength to be constrained by old values, but not enough strength (or inadequate resources) to posit new ones (LN 9 [35]; see also LN 5 [71]). This state is then expressed as a ‘violent force of *destruction*’ (LN 9 [35]). I think the priests’ destructive activity falls under the notion of active nihilism.

There might seem to be a fundamental contradiction here between the nihilist’s negating life as will to power and, in doing so, expressing their aggressive drives and will to power. If they are seeking power, how can they be negating life as will to power? However, this is dispelled with a more

²³ This is supported by Nietzsche’s remark in TI, ‘Skirmishes’, 39, that the Russian aristocracy constitutes the nearest thing in modern Europe to a classical noble culture, and this is what the Russian nihilists are seeking to destroy.

generalised conception of negation of life: what the nihilist is aiming for can be the negation of will to power in general, rather than (or, unconsciously, as well as) seeking to repress their own aggressive drives and thereby their own will to power, and this can involve the moral promotion of repression as well as the moral promotion of the expression of drives that diminish the strength of individuals (such as compassion, which I will discuss below). If the priest gains power, or a feeling of power, in this attempt to negate power in general, that makes them no less of a nihilist, just perhaps a hypocrite, given that they espouse a moral objection to aggression. I will discuss this notion of negation of life in general in the next section, below.

4.4. What is negation of life?

With negation of life, the salient types of negation seem to be negative value-judgement (devaluation), and acts of negation, which include repression (negation of drives) and kinds of action that somehow harm life in general: the nihilist devalues life, and expresses that devaluation in repression or in destructive action. But this is not life lacking value in the same sense as in value-nihilism. While the latter takes existence to lack attainable highest values, negation of life treats life as disvaluable, either as mere existence (as in suicidal negation of life) or in a specific sense of 'life': life as will to power, rather than life in the sense of mere biological existence. Organisms have will to power to varying degrees, but existence is not by degrees; something that reduces their will to power without killing them negates their life, but not their existence. This does not mean that killing is not negation of life, the point is that it is not the only way life can be negated.²⁴ This is the sense in which life can be negated even in ways that promote survival, as in the case the ascetic ideal.

The notion of life as will to power is suggested by BGE 259:

[L]ife itself is *essentially* a process of appropriating, injuring, overpowering the alien and the weaker, oppressing, being harsh, imposing your own form, incorporating, and at least, the very least, exploiting.

²⁴ In GS 131, Nietzsche makes an illustrative remark (also cited in Chapter 3, above): he says that the inclination to suicide was widespread around the time of Christianity's origins, so Christianity forbade all types of suicide except those that could be beneficial to its aims: 'martyrdom and the ascetic's slow suicide'. So even at this stage (1882) he saw within Christian asceticism the negation of life, and he saw the two forms it can take: negation of life as immediate death and negation of life as the 'slow suicide' of negation of will to power.

Similarly, in A 6:

I consider life itself to be an instinct for growth, for endurance, for the accumulation of force, for *power*: when there is no will to power, there is decline. My claim is that *none* of humanity's highest values have had this will, – that *nihilistic* values, values of decline, have taken control under the aegis of the holiest names.

Here, the relation to nihilism is explicitly invoked: nihilistic values are values of decline. As noted above, Nietzsche argues that values reflect forms of life, so flourishing, healthy life will have values that celebrate and foster this vitality, such as the values of noble morality; by contrast, declining life has values that reflect strategies for coping with weakness, sadness, listlessness, etc. The values will promote, by making virtues of, the strategies for persistence of these forms of life. Noble life persists by maintaining health and power, so noble values promote this. Declining life persists via survival strategies, methods to avert suicidal despair, methods to dispel the resentment that builds up against the strong, to anaesthetise against largely unavoidable suffering, to counter individual weakness by communal solidarity (what Nietzsche in GM calls herd behaviour). The virtues of declining life are part of the overall survival strategy, so they, for example, invert noble morality to discharge the resentment of the weak in imaginary revenge; make virtues out of passivity, so it makes the weak feel that they are autonomously being passive, when in fact they could do no other; promise divine redemption conditional on declining life (the poor, meek, sick, etc., will gain the kingdom of heaven, whereas the rich, proud, and powerful will be less favoured by God).²⁵

Values of decline, among which Nietzsche places Christian moral values, negate life by validating and facilitating the persistence of declining life. They promote life which is lacking and losing will to power, yet still clinging to survival. Thus, values that promote survival can still be against life in the sense of life as will to power: they can promote declining life – survival at the cost of loss of will to power. In this way, the values can be destructive and nihilistic. The ascetic ideal was a paradigm case of such a nihilistic system of values: according to Nietzsche in GM, it promoted the survival of multitudes of weak and sick types, through conditions of great adversity, yet this was at the cost of the general level of health – the ascetic ideal was catastrophic for European health overall, because

²⁵ The way that values reflect ascending and declining forms of life is expressed by Nietzsche in CW: 'Every age has a measure of force that is also a measure of which virtues it is allowed to have or not have. Either it has the virtues of *ascending* life: in which case it finds the virtues of declining life repugnant at the most basic level. Or it is itself a life in decline, – in which case it also needs the values of decline, and it hates everything that justifies itself out of fullness, solely out of the superabundance of forces.' (CW, Epilogue).

it diminished the power of the strong and even of the relatively weak (it made ‘the sick sicker’ (GM III, 20)), yet kept them in a state of weak and dependent survival.

Moreover, nihilistic values promote the overt expression of some drives that Nietzsche thinks it would actually be healthier to repress. As noted above (at the beginning of this section), negation of life can take practical forms, as well as taking the form of devaluation of life. The promotion in moral values of drives that are harmful to life constitutes practical negation of life, even if the values do not explicitly devalue life.

4.5. Practical negation of life

The moral promotion of drives that are harmful to life need not explicitly involve devaluation of life, but can negate life in a practical sense. Examples are morality’s promotion of ‘the instincts of compassion, self-denial, self-sacrifice’ (GM, Preface, 5), and of the ‘protective and healing instincts of degenerating life’ (GM III, 16). In A 7, Nietzsche gives an extensive account of how compassion is harmful to life:

Compassion is the opposite of the tonic affects that heighten the energy of vital feelings: compassion has a depressive effect. You lose strength when you feel compassion. And compassion further intensifies and multiplies the loss of strength which in itself brings suffering to life. Compassion makes suffering into something infectious; sometimes it can even cause a total loss of life and of vital energy wildly disproportionate to the magnitude of the cause (– the case of the death of the Nazarene). [...] By and large, compassion runs counter to the law of development, which is the law of *selection*. Compassion preserves things that are ripe for decline, it defends things that have been disowned and condemned by life, and it gives a depressive and questionable character to life itself by keeping alive an abundance of failures of every type. [...] Compassion negates life, it makes life *worthy of negation*, – compassion is the *practice* of nihilism.

Compassion is a natural drive (Nietzsche calls it an instinct in GM, Preface, 5, cited above); it is the *failure* to repress this natural drive that is nihilistic – against life as will to power: it diminishes the strength of those who experience it, and, Nietzsche argues, it further diminishes the general level of health by perpetuating the survival of the unhealthy. Nietzsche notes (A 7) that in other (i.e. non-

Christian) moralities (including more noble forms, such as Aristotle's moral theory) compassion is advised against, as an unnecessary psychological weakness rather than a moral virtue.

So negation of life can occur in two ways, in a practical form and in the form of devaluation of life. The latter can involve the former, inasmuch as the acting on or disseminating of values that devalue life is practical negation of life. Paul's ideological attack on Imperial Rome, described by Nietzsche in A 58, can be seen to illustrate this twofoldness of negation of life, between practical negation and devaluation. First, it actually contributed to the decline, so in this way was destructive of a civilisation that facilitated flourishing life, and thus practically negated life. Secondly, what Nietzsche sees as the key aspect of Paul's destructive strategy involves devaluation of life: 'using the beyond to kill life'. What Nietzsche seems to mean by this is that the work and genius and dedication involved in the development of Roman civilisation rested on a sense of the importance of life, and how conditions can be achieved to allow it to flourish as much as possible. What Christianity then did was manage to replace this faith in life with a faith in nothingness – the 'beyond' – which undermined the effort to create a life-affirming civilisation, replacing it with the judgement that life is of secondary importance – or worse: a devalued, 'fallen' form of existence. The devaluation of life in general takes various specific forms, which I will outline in the next section, below.

4.6. Negation of life as devaluation of life

The moral condemnation of natural drives discussed in sections 2 and 4, above, constitutes devaluation of life. However, it is not merely certain drives that Nietzsche says are devalued by Christianity, but worldly and corporeal existence to a much broader extent. In GM III, 28, he refers to the ascetic ideal's 'hatred of the human, still more of the animal, still more of the material, this abhorrence of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and of beauty, this longing away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wish, longing itself'.

In GM II, 7, he states:

On the way to becoming an 'angel' (not to use a stronger word here), man has upset his stomach and developed a furry tongue so that he finds not only that the joy and innocence of animals is disgusting, but that life itself is distasteful: – so that every now and again, he is so repelled by himself that he holds his nose and disapprovingly recites a catalogue of his

offensive features, with Pope Innocent the Third ('conception in filth, loathsome method of feeding in the womb, sinfulness of the raw material of man, terrible stench, secretion of saliva, urine and excrement').

This kind of devaluation fosters an emotional aversion (in this case, disgust) towards corporeal aspects of life, rather than just towards drives. It is perhaps less clear how this kind of devaluation represents a negation of life in the sense of life as will to power. However, it might be thought to do so in a less direct way, by devaluing essential features of life (procreation, excretion), and suggesting that life would be somehow better in disembodied form (the immaterial soul is seen in Christianity as the essential and immortal part of a person), in which there are no bodily drives and no expression of will to power, no organism to increase or decline in strength. Moreover, in GM III (as discussed in Chapter 3) Nietzsche sees disgust as being a cause of nihilistic despair and thus fostering the desire that life as existence ought to be negated.

Devaluation of life is also manifested in seeing what is valuable in life in general, including non-sensual pleasures, as depending on God, or being a form of homage to God. In a devoutly religious society, more or less all forms of effortful or pleasurable activity are given this attribution (manifested variously from the creation of religious art to the saying of grace before meals). To say that the devaluation consists only in the injunction to repress certain natural (aggressive, sexual, sensual, etc.) drives seems too restrictive. Moreover, non-sensual drives (the drives to love, to creativity, to knowledge, etc.) are still devalued by being re-directed away from the world and towards God (one ought to love God, to create works in praise of God, to seek to know God, etc.). So these drives are not repressed, but their orientation away from life, away from worldly matters, is still a devaluation of life because it presents all that we would naturally find valuable about life to depend for its value on God. Nietzsche argues in GM III, 28, that what this devaluation of life expresses is basically a will to nothingness, as value is taken to have its source outside of this life, while in reality this life is all there is, so valuing the otherworldly is valuing nothingness: Nietzsche states in A 43: 'putting the emphasis of life on the beyond is putting the emphasis on nothingness.'

So the priests and theologians were not nihilistic merely because they, hypocritically, promoted the repression of selfish drives, as well as of sexual and other drives, but also because:

1. They redirected drives towards God (drive to beauty, love, art, etc.). Even the sensual drives that were allowed in moderation had to be done with thanks to God, or justified as ordained and

required by God (sexuality can only be expressed within divinely sanctioned marriage; violent drives expressed in war must be done so under the banner of Christ; etc.).

2. They promoted the expression of drives that are harmful to life as will to power ('the instincts of compassion, self-denial, self-sacrifice' (GM, Preface, 5); the 'protective and healing instincts of degenerating life' (GM III, 16)).

3. They devalued corporeal existence in general. This also includes seeing health as less important than spiritual devotion, which is a key aspect of how the ascetic ideal lowered the general level of European health (contrast the value of health in classical civilisation).

4. They destroyed what Nietzsche saw as the highest pinnacle and hope of great civilisation that promoted health, art, and noble virtues: Imperial Rome (A 58-9). In this last respect, they are like the political nihilists threatening what Nietzsche considers to be the nearest thing Europe has to a surviving noble culture – the Russian aristocracy (TI, 'Skirmishes', 39).

4.7. Is negation of life fundamentally cognitive or affective?

Nihilism as negation of life, as I have presented it, is, in its affective dimension, going to be more complex than repression. It is also going to involve the overt expression of certain drives (certain life-negating ones, such as compassion and selflessness). However, it is possible that values and kinds of behaviour that negate life are reducible to, or at least cause, the expression of a particular drive: the will to nothingness.²⁶ Nietzsche describes the will to nothingness as an instinct for annihilation and self-annihilation (LN 5 [71]). This is the instinct that Nietzsche, in GM, charged the ascetic ideal with exploiting. There, it was presented as having been used by Christian morality to provide an antidote to value-nihilism. Yet it is the motive to negate life, and in 1888 Nietzsche sees negation of life as a form of nihilism.

Such a drive is clearly against life if it seeks annihilation and self-annihilation. It might appear mysterious, but it can be conceived in quite a credible way: a drive is a kind of disposition, and a disposition to annihilation and self-annihilation is certainly something that countless people, to varying degrees, have. In LN 9 [35], Nietzsche explains why nihilism takes active and passive forms,

²⁶ Compassion does not seem to express will to nothingness, but can be said to be nihilistic inasmuch as it causes the expression of will to nothingness.

and this explanation seems to shed light on how the will to nothingness can come to the fore in an individual. Nietzsche says that passive nihilism occurs in weak individuals who are unable to express their drives because they lack highest values, so are disoriented, and so long for cessation of willing and of suffering. If life is identified with expression of the drives, then this is a form of self-annihilation. Such a condition could also result in the desire for suicidal self-annihilation; this seems to be what Nietzsche means by the suicidal nihilism mentioned in GM III, 28, and in GS 346 (“The time has come to abolish your venerations or yourselves” – the latter would be nihilism’). The will to nothingness can also be expressed, by a stronger individual, in active destructiveness (Nietzsche makes this claim in LN 5 [71], s. 11).

The notion of will to nothingness as the nihilistic drive is compatible with Nietzsche’s conception of religion and morality as nihilistic. In A, Nietzsche argues that religion is basically a mask for nothingness, and morality for the will to nothingness; he makes the claim repeatedly. In A 7, he says how compassion wins people over to nothingness. In A 8, Nietzsche describes the theologian as someone who champions nothingness. In A 18: ‘God as the deification of nothingness, the canonization of the will to nothingness! ...’ In A 43 (also cited above): ‘putting the emphasis of life on the beyond is putting the emphasis on nothingness.’ Also, in GM (Preface and GM III), as discussed in Chapter 3, above, the development and pursuit of the ascetic ideal (and also Buddhism) is portrayed as motivated by the will to nothingness (though at the time of writing GM, Nietzsche did not characterise the ascetic ideal as nihilistic).

This view accords with Gemes’s contention that nihilism is fundamentally an affective condition, but departs from it inasmuch as, on this view, the affective condition in question is the expression of will to nothingness, rather than just wholesale repression, which is one form of the expression of will to nothingness.

Seeing the will to nothingness as the nihilistic drive highlights a difference between Nietzsche’s earlier and later conceptions. Prior to 1888, expressions of the will to nothingness were not seen as *necessarily* nihilistic. Some expressions of the will to nothingness were seen as nihilistic and as the consequence of value-nihilism; for example, the suicidal nihilism that may result from nihilistic despair or disorientation. However, the will to nothingness as expressed in the ascetic ideal was not seen as nihilistic. Given that Nietzsche comes to see the ascetic ideal as nihilistic, because it negates life as will to power, it seems that, on his later view, expressions of will to nothingness *are* seen as necessarily nihilistic.

A rational reconstruction could be proposed that reconciles the two senses of nihilism (value-nihilism and negation of life). This would apply the view that nihilism is the expression of will to nothingness to the pre-1888 work. As noted in Chapter 3, the main sense of value-nihilism (the sense that features in the published work) takes it to be a cognitive expression of will to nothingness (the mere belief that life is meaningless, with no attendant hostility to life, is only considered nihilistic in places in the notebooks). The problem here is that some expressions of the will to nothingness (such as the ascetic ideal) are not considered to be nihilistic in the pre-1888 work. However, they are considered to be so in the 1888 work, so the idea that nihilism is the expression of will to nothingness could be taken to represent Nietzsche's more considered view, because it accounts for value-nihilism as well as the other phenomena that fall under the notion of negation of life, which he eventually comes to see as nihilistic.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I will summarise the main points made in the thesis.

The main sense of nihilism in the pre-1888 work is the belief that life is meaningless, or (the same thing) that life lacks attainable highest values. Practical nihilism is then the expression of this: acts such as suicide or destructiveness are nihilistic because the agent takes the meaninglessness of life as a reason to kill themselves or commit destructive acts. Yet, at least in the published work, the mere belief that life is meaningless is not sufficient for an individual's being a nihilist; they must also have a hostility to life, that can be characterised as the will to nothingness. On this view, free spirits are not nihilists, although in the notebooks (WP 14) he suggests they are, so it seems that there is a slight conflict here between the published and unpublished work: in the published work (prior to 1888), the belief that life is meaningless and the will to nothingness are each necessary and only jointly sufficient for nihilism, whereas in places in the notebooks Nietzsche seemed to entertain the idea that the belief that life is meaningless is alone sufficient. Also in the notebooks, he uses 'nihilism' to label the belief that there is no truth ('That there is no truth; that there is no absolute nature of things, no "thing-in-itself" – *this is itself a nihilism, and indeed the most extreme one.*' (LN 9 [35])), but this is not reflected in his use of the term in the published works. Overall, in the pre-1888 work, I think that nihilism is portrayed as fundamentally cognitive (in Gemes's terminology), because whether an action or an individual is nihilistic depends on the individual's holding the view that life is meaningless.

The main sense of nihilism in the 1888 works is that of negation of life. This takes various forms: wholesale repression of the natural drives, the devaluation of life, acts that aim to destroy the conditions for flourishing life, and the promotion of affects that cause the expression of will to nothingness (such as compassion and self-denial). Christianity now comes to be seen as nihilistic (rather than merely as a cause of nihilism) because it has negated life in all these ways.

A possibility for a unified view of Nietzsche's conception of nihilism is to take nihilism to mean the expression of will to nothingness. There is no reason to think that Nietzsche held this view in the pre-1888 work, as there he describes Christianity as expressing the will to nothingness but does not label Christianity nihilistic (rather, he claims it was an antidote to nihilism). However, given that he later came to see Christianity as nihilistic, and given that value-nihilism is portrayed in the published work as expressing will to nothingness, the view that expression of will to nothingness is identical with

nihilism could be seen as his more considered view. How would this get around the problem that Christianity is said to be an antidote to nihilism? Christianity could be seen as an antidote to nihilism inasmuch as it exchanges Christian forms of the will to nothingness for the will to nothingness expressed as value-nihilism. As GS 131 states, it replaced the pre-Christian inclination to suicide with 'martyrdom and the ascetic's slow suicide'.

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