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## **NIETZSCHE'S CONCEPT OF THE AFFIRMATION OF LIFE**

### **Abstract**

In this work, I analyze Nietzsche's concept of the affirmation of life as one of the main concepts of his philosophy in general. To overcome the pessimism and decadence modern culture has fallen into, Nietzsche construes the concept of the affirmation of life as its main goal and imperative. Hence, for each individual, it is necessary to affirm life by achieving their own autonomy, i.e. pathos of distance. Only by achieving genuine pathos of distance, would human beings be able to overcome pessimism.

Keywords: Friedrich Nietzsche; affirmation of life; pathos of distance; will to power; equality

## **NIETZSCHES KONZEPT DER LEBENSBEJAHUNG**

### **Zusammenfassung**

In diesem Aufsatz analysiere ich Nietzsches Konzept der Lebensbejahung als einen der wichtigsten Begriffe seiner Philosophie. Um den Pessimismus und die Dekadenz, in die die moderne Kultur verfallen ist, zu überwinden, konstruiert Nietzsche den Begriff der Lebensbejahung als deren Hauptziel und Imperativ des Philosophierens. Für jedes Individuum ist es demnach notwendig, das Leben zu bejahen, indem es seine eigene Autonomie, d.h. das Pathos der Distanz, erreicht. Nur wenn der Mensch ein echtes Distanzpathos erfüllt hat, kann er den Pessimismus als Lebenscharakteristik überwinden.

Schlüsselwörter: Friedrich Nietzsche; Lebensbejahung; Pathos der Distanz; Wille zur Macht; Gleichheit

## Introduction

Nietzsche's philosophy is fragmented, complex, and very hard to understand. That is why many authors found it difficult, or even impossible to systematize his philosophy, and thus portray Nietzsche as an inconsistent and contradictory thinker. Nietzsche himself contributed to such interpretation by making radical turns from one way of thought to another, inhabiting at the same time completely different philosophical standpoints and neglecting earlier fundamental ideas. In that sense, Nietzsche's critics established a usual chronological classification of his philosophy into three periods: early, middle, and late philosophy – considering all the differences between them, from Nietzsche's different writing style to more significant differences in the understanding of fundamental philosophical concepts.

However, there are a few philosophical conceptions Nietzsche was occupied with throughout all three stages of his philosophical career, and one of the most important, besides art, is the problem of life. In his early philosophy, Nietzsche explicates the problem of life through the concept of the pessimism of modern society which reflects itself in the affirmation of “the wisdom of Silenus” (Nietzsche 2007, §3), and from that moment the overcoming of pessimism persists as one of the main intentions of his philosophy in general. Finally, in the first work of his late philosophy – *The Gay Science* – Nietzsche discovers the concept of affirmation of life as the solution to the problem of pessimism.

### 1. Affirmation of Life

Here Nietzsche announces the upcoming nihilism, conditioned by the “death of God” and the decline of Christianity, along with all Christian “decadent” values. This is the reason why Julian Young, one of the most prominent Nietzsche's contemporary critics, considers *The Gay Science* as the fundamental work of Nietzsche's late philosophy, and of his philosophy altogether, while he holds all of Nietzsche's later books only as the more or less successful commentaries on *The Gay Science* (cf. Young 1992, 92-93).

Given that with the death of God humanity has lost its ground that earlier used to provide the meaning of life and existence, Nietzsche holds that human beings are now thrown into a new challenge and choice: to surrender and fall into nihilistic pessimism, or actively confront nihilism and create their own existence on new, healthy grounds. For Nietzsche, such a

moment (i.e. the death of god) represents the brightest point of modern human history, for it is the moment of humans' liberation from the bonds of the past – a past that was, in his view, a history of human decline – *and* it grants the possibility for a real affirmation of life.

Led by such faith in the possibility of affirmation of life, Nietzsche establishes the new imperative: to become what one is. In the aphorism "*What does your consciousness say?*" he says: "You should become who you are!" (Nietzsche 2001, §270). This is actually the main intention of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, and his philosophy in general, for he is aware that a huge challenge lies before the future of humanity: whether we will continue to decline in pessimism imposed by religion as mediocre or herd animals *or* whether we will develop ourselves into autonomous individual beings, and establish by that our own rules, values, and taste, that is to say, become who we are:

We, however, want to *become who we are* – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves! To that end we must become the best students and discoverers of everything lawful and necessary in the world: we must become *physicists* in order to be creators in this sense... (Nietzsche, 2001, §335)

Ted Sadler brings an interesting claim that Nietzsche's late philosophy was actually the continuing of the search for the *absolute*, that is to say, the absolute criteria for determining the value of any idea, activity, and finally human life as a whole (cf. Sadler 1995, 120-121). In that sense, he emphasizes (cf. Sadler 1995, 120) "two functions of Absolute, valuation and justification", wherein "the latter has the primary role", and that "the center of valuation is itself to be valued on account of its capacity to justify". Hence Sadler found (cf. Sadler 1995, 120) that it was substantial for Christianity to *evaluate* "'because' of the promise of heavenly rewards", while "for Nietzsche, the Dionysian phenomenon of 'life' is worthy of affirmation because only thereby is the justification of individual existence possible".

Guided by the earlier emphasis of the absolute value of life, Nietzsche indeed places the affirmation of life at the top of his philosophical interests and understands it as the fundamental step to overcoming pessimism. Sadler (1995, 136-7) adds that the affirmation of life – "Dionysian affirmation" – provides what Nietzsche calls the "Dionysian redemption" of human beings, and that "Dionysian redemption involves a return to the 'centre' of life". Nevertheless, how is the Dionysian affirmation actually

to be achieved? Sadler (1995, 137) replies that in Nietzsche, it is revealed twofold, as “a state of intoxication, rapture, forgetfulness of self, ecstasy, enchantment and cheerfulness, of surging power and strength which transports man out of himself”, and as “a state of great seriousness, reverence, and gratitude”.

The significance of the affirmation of life for the constitution of Nietzsche’s philosophy, and also for its proper understanding, was recognized by E.L. Allen (1990, 171-172) who concludes that Nietzsche, from *The Birth of Tragedy* to his last published works continuously confronted the concept of life with the entire decadence of modern culture, hence that in the affirmation of life Nietzsche saw the only way to overcome such decadence.

In this sense, compared to Sadler’s analysis, Allen took a step further in understanding Nietzsche’s concept of the affirmation of life, uplifting it from the level of individual existence to the level of a whole culture.

However, what does the concept of affirmation exactly mean for Nietzsche? The answer to this question lies in *The Gay Science*:

I want to learn more and more how to see necessary in things as what is beautiful in them – thus I will be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on! I do not want to wage war against ugliness. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. Let *looking away* be my only negation! And, all in all and on the whole: some day I want only to be a Yes-sayer! (Nietzsche 2001, §276)

This is a very significant moment in Nietzsche’s philosophy since he later wants to show himself exclusively as affirming – as “only the Yes-sayer” – first affirming life itself, but also affirming everything that comes with life. Consequently, he is resolute to adjust and perceive any philosophical concept through the prism of affirmation. One could even conclude that for Nietzsche, affirmation becomes the most fundamental perspective for understanding and evaluating the world, which would become clear throughout his explication of the doctrine of the will to power, for the main principle of the will to power is, in Nietzsche’s view, actually the affirmation itself.

Also, Nietzsche explains the affirmation as *amor fati*: as the absolute acceptance, even a love of destiny, hence the life in general. *Amor fati* is the best argument that Nietzsche understands and uses the concept of affirmation in an active, instead of a reactive sense. To affirm life means to will and love life, *and* actively contribute to its affirmation. Bernard Reginster

finds here the strong nexus between the affirmation of life and the ethical dimension of the concept of eternal recurrence in Nietzsche's philosophy, by claiming that "to affirm life is to will its eternal recurrence" (Reginster 2006, p. 14). At the same time, the eternal recurrence plays a twofold role in the affirmation of life, in a theoretical, and in a practical sense. Reginster sees the theoretical role of eternal recurrence in the fact that it contributes to the explication of life that is "to be affirmed", while the practical role lies in the explanation of the practical aspect of the concept of affirmation (ibid).

A direct connection between Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence and his theory of affirmation of life was also recognized by Lawrence J. Hatab in his 2005 book *Nietzsche's Life Sentence: Coming to Terms with Eternal Recurrence*. He also speaks about the apparent ambiguity of the concept of affirmation of life that Nietzsche uses in his works. Firstly, (Hatab 2005, 44) Nietzsche understands it as the most important task that humanity has ever had, and in this sense, "beliefs that are life-preserving, life-enhancing, and life-promoting" are crucial for such affirmation. However, Nietzsche at the same time criticizes these beliefs as "life denying", hence Hatab (2005, 44) construes the "distinction between *life-affirmation* and *life-enhancement*, where the former is Nietzsche's ideal, and the latter can be attributed even to ideals that are life-denying in Nietzsche's sense". Hatab supports this with the claim that Nietzsche's concepts like *bad consciousness*, and *ascetic ideal*, although they are usually completely life denying, they could serve at some level as instruments for the promotion and enhancement of culture, hence the promotion and enhancement of life. In this sense, even Christianity could contribute to life, since, for example, it unambiguously rejects suicide, even though Nietzsche presents Christianity as the paradigm of pure negation of life (cf. Hatab 2005, 45-47). On the other side, a fundamental concept of the affirmation of life cannot include anything that could be life negating. On the contrary, affirmation of life is affirmation in the absolute sense:

Nietzsche's conception of life-affirmation goes by far beyond life-enhancement; it aims for a *global* of affirmation of all life conditions, even those that run counter to one's interests (including...Nietzsche's own philosophical interests) (Hatab 2005, p. 47).

Therefore, given that life itself is the eternal recurrence of the same, the main task of human beings has to be nothing but the affirmation of life in all of its aspects, i.e. conditions. However, by affirmation, Nietzsche does

not mean a mere resignation of human beings here, but an active principle of accepting the necessary. So, it is clear that his concept of affirmation of life is not to be discussed in the context of stoic resignation and defeatism regarding the impossibility of escaping all the strikes of destiny. On the contrary, Nietzsche consciously introduces the love of fate – *amor fati* – and requests that humans accept love and want everything that comes with life as the greatest gift of all. Life, no matter how poor it may be, is absolutely worth affirming.

However, what about the pain and suffering that is inevitable in each individual life? How to want and love a life that inevitably includes suffering? Nietzsche's answer to this question is resolute: life is to be affirmed as a whole, along with the pain and sorrow, because suffering is an inseparable part of life itself. Reginster (2006, 231) confirms this by claiming that "suffering is not merely a complement or precondition of the good, (Nietzsche's 'new happiness'), but a *constituent* of it". He also adds (Reginster 2006, 247) that in Nietzsche the suffering is usually ascribed as the constituent of artistic creativity, and that it can be "therefore truly redeemed by creativity only if it is *essentially* necessary for it, that is to say, only when the suffering is an *enabling* necessary condition of the very possibility of creativity". Such suffering is acceptable for affirmation, it is loveable.

Another claim on the importance of suffering in Nietzsche's theory of affirmation of life comes from Babette Babich who adds that Nietzsche similarly treats the feeling of pain. She asserts (Babich 2006, 139) that, from the very beginning of his philosophical thought, Nietzsche has appreciated pain as that which is inherent to each individual existence, because "more than our own existence and even more than death, our pain is our own even when we are able to transcend our own pain in spirit or in the soldierly fortitude practiced by the young Nietzsche". Pain is our best reminder that we are alive, it is "loyal even without our attention to it, like a dog" (Babich 2006, 140). That is how Nietzsche in a way reaffirms his earlier concept of Dionysian affirmation of life, which implied affirmation of suffering as the substrate of the tragic conception of the world.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to distinguish suffering as the constituent of "new happiness" and human autonomous creative activity, from suffering that is the result of decadence, resignation, and pessimism. While the former is welcomed and necessary for the affirmation, later is the symptom of weakened life, it is opposed to life, it is its negation. In this context, Nietzsche (Nietzsche 2001, §340) holds that Socrates was the enemy of life

and creator of pessimism, and that his last word to his student Crito "I owe Asclepius a rooster" really meant "O Crito, *life is a disease*".

Finally, Nietzsche makes a distance from death as well, as the final outcome of decadence, as the final negation of life. Nietzsche says:

"It makes me happy that people even do not at all want to think the thought about death! I would very much like to do something that would make the thought of life even a hundred times more *worth being thought* to them." (Nietzsche 2001, §278)

A human being does not have any benefit from thinking about death; on the contrary, such reflection weakens their life power and leads to pessimism and resignation. This is how Young (Young 2006, 172.) reads Nietzsche's request for overcoming "the fear of death", for it makes true affirmation impossible. Furthermore, Young (cf. Young 2006, 172-175) explains that Nietzsche insisted from his early works that such fear is, and has to be overcome. Instead of reflecting on an unjustified fear of death, Nietzsche holds that for true affirmation human beings need laughter. That is why he keeps faith that "laughter still has a future" (Nietzsche 2001, §1), and later wants to establish "an order of rank among philosophers depending on the rank of their laughter – all the way up to those capable of *golden* laughter" (Nietzsche 2002, §294). This is also one of the reasons Nietzsche wanted to show his philosophy as "the gay science". The future of laughter that Nietzsche is referring to here, is the future of humanity that has completely affirmed life and rejected everything that was weak in us. Nietzsche says: "Life – that is: continually shedding something that wants to die. Life – that is: being cruel and inexorable against anything that is growing weak and old in us, and not just in us." (Nietzsche 2001, §26)

## 2. Pathos of Distance

Therefore, besides saying a huge *Yes* to life, affirmation of life also includes saying a huge *No* to many other human attributes (characteristics), firstly to the weakness in human beings. Nietzsche is here introducing the concept of the *pathos of distance*, or *pathos of nobleness*, as one of the most significant concepts of his philosophy. It is the principle according to which autonomous human individuals consciously and intentionally – by establishing their own set of rules, laws, and values – distance themselves from the majority of mediocre and weak members of a particular community,

or even from society in general. The pathos of distance is therefore, in Nietzsche's view, that principle that provides autonomous individuals their autonomy and freedom.

Nietzsche holds that only ancient Greeks possessed the genuine pathos of distance, unlike our modern culture which lacks even the slightest trace of such pathos. Namely, the ancient Greek individual had established this sublime feeling in his everyday life to such an extent, creating "such a distance between his own height and that ultimate baseness that he could barely see the slave clearly anymore" (Nietzsche 2001, §18), i.e. those people that noble Greeks distanced themselves from. Besides ancient Greeks, Nietzsche ascribed pathos of distance to all great cultures. For that reason, he concludes in *Twilight of Idols* that "the rift between people, between classes, the myriad number of types, the will to be yourself, to stand out, what I call the *pathos of distance*, is characteristic of every *strong age*" (Nietzsche 2005, 212). Unlike these, strong ages, our modern age – Nietzsche describes it as the age of equality – does not allow us to cultivate such feelings. This is, in Nietzsche's view, one of the greatest problems of modern culture, and that is why he requests us to, by looking up to Greeks, establish a clear distance from those weak individuals, but also from everything that is weak within ourselves. Only by such distance could we develop the genuine pathos of nobility, which would then lead us to the realm of creativity and freedom that Greeks had earlier.

For Nietzsche, nobles are those who establish their own rules at the top of the hierarchy of values, according to which they create new social paradigms afterward. At the same time, they proclaim their own taste as universal, which would later result in a change of the paradigm of taste as well, and here Nietzsche outlines the difference between noble and weak: noble individuals have enough strength and courage to generalize their own taste to universality. Hence Nietzsche concludes that "the change of common taste is more important than in opinions" for "opinions along with proofs, refutations, and the whole intellectual masquerade are only symptoms of a changed taste" (Nietzsche 2001, §39). On the other side, weak human nature lacks nobleness, which is easily noticeable in their general attitude and behavior. Hence, they try to substitute their lack of nobleness by establishing a kind of false nobility, i.e. by "improvising" what causes the feeling of disgust in noble individuals, so the antagonism between the two increases.

Nietzsche would later radicalize his view on the pathos of distance as a fundamental feature of a strong, noble human nature. By establishing such



pathos, this nature becomes totally unavailable, incomprehensible, and even repellent to common people. Therefore, Nietzsche concludes that “our highest insights must – and should – sound like follies and sometimes like crimes when they are heard without permission by those who are not predisposed and predestined for them”, also “what serves the higher type of men as nourishment or delectation must almost be poison for a very different and inferior type” because “the virtues of the common man might perhaps signify vices and weakness in a philosopher” (Nietzsche 2002, §30). Finally, the gap between these two distanced groups becomes completely insuperable. Based on Nietzsche's view, Daniel Conway (2005, 38) constructs his thesis on Nietzsche's political philosophy, precisely on his alleged admiration for “aristocratic regimes”. However, although it is true that Nietzsche, on the basis of his pathos of distance, somehow affirms the idea of aristocratic society as a specific, higher culture, the concept of the pathos of distance should rather be interpreted at an individual level, as a demand for an individual being to step into the realm of nobleness, and to create their own values.

Nietzsche's noble natures are particularly egoistic, they are aware of their egoism and they welcome it. Moreover, noble natures are proud of their egoistic character. From this perspective, Nietzsche criticizes Arthur Schopenhauer's thesis on “non-egoistic” instincts, such as pity, compassion, renunciation, self-sacrifice, etc. According to Nietzsche, these concepts represent Schopenhauer's ‘values in themselves’ “on the basis of which he said *No* to life and to himself” (Nietzsche 1967, 19). Schopenhauer's rejection was also followed by other modern philosophers, who appreciated and established the concept of pity as the fundamental moral principle, which is, in Nietzsche's view, nothing but the pure negation of life. However, at the same time, Nietzsche emphasizes that there were also many philosophers who developed a negative stance towards pity, among whom Plato, Spinoza, La Rochefoucauld, and Kant were the loudest (*ibid*).

Regarding the development of pathos of nobleness, Nietzsche approaches a kind of historical analysis, and finds that history is inexorable and pitiless, for the stronger cultures have always tortured those “weaker, more civilized, more peaceful races” (Nietzsche 2002, §257), and enforced their own rules and values, which would always result in the establishment of completely new, aristocratic cultures:

Without the *pathos of distance* as it grows out of the ingrained differences between stations, out of the way ruling caste maintains and overview and keeps

looking down on subservient types and tools, and out of this caste's equally continuous exercise in obeying and commanding, in keeping away and below – without *this* pathos, that *other*, more mysterious pathos could not have grown at all, that demand for new expansions of distance within the soul itself, the development of states that are increasingly high, rare, distant, tautly drawn and comprehensive, and in short, the enhancement of the type 'man' the constant 'self-overcoming of man' (to use a moral formula in a supra-moral sense).

Of course, you cannot entertain any humanitarian illusions about how an aristocratic society originates (and any elevation of the type 'man' will presuppose an aristocratic society –): the truth is harsh. Let us not be deceived about how every higher culture on earth has *begun!* (Nietzsche 2002, §257)

Therefore, Nietzsche believes that the oppressive attitude that strong natures practiced toward weak ones was necessary so they would eventually build the basis for the development of the pathos of distance, and says that every healthy aristocracy is characterized by its readiness to sacrifice lower cultures for its own benefit and growth (cf. Nietzsche 2002, §258). This is the pitiless truth that Nietzsche discussed earlier.

Such a described development of the pathos of distance is completely coherent with Nietzsche's theory of "the will to power" as a basic principle of the whole of life and existence. In Nietzsche's view, "life itself is *essentially* a process of appropriating, injuring, overpowering the alien and the weaker, oppressing, being harsh, imposing your own form, incorporating, and the least, the very least, exploiting", because the body itself grows and develops "not out of any morality or immorality, but because it is *alive*, and because life *is* precisely the will to power" (Nietzsche 2002, §259). In that sense, Nietzsche attributes this exploratory nature of human beings from earlier barbaric cultures to the essence of life, i.e. to the will to power:

"Exploitation' does not belong to a corrupted or imperfect, primitive society: it belongs to the *essence* of being alive as a fundamental organic function; it is a result of genuine will to power, which is just the will of life" (Nietzsche 2002, §259).

Hence, the affirmation of life and provision of autonomy for human beings by the pathos of distance becomes the fundamental task that Nietzsche assigned to the whole of humanity. However, he is resolute that modern humans have no potential and possibility to achieve this goal, for we are bonded by the values of tradition that consists of religion and its morality. That is why all traditional values must be rejected, revalued, and human

beings must form new values, based on the affirmation of life as their basic principle.

However, a serious problem would arise by affirming Nietzsche's conception of the pathos of distance, which is the complete rejection of social equality. Namely, Nietzsche's doctrine of the pathos of distance is way too elitist to be fully affirmed. It is also obvious from his late works that Nietzsche widely criticized egalitarianism and equality among human beings in general. So, how to resolve this issue? James Wilson (2007, 212) analyzes the problem of Nietzsche's criticism of equality by representing four different approaches to this problem: (1) total acceptance of Nietzsche's criticism of equality by "supporting Nietzsche against the moral equality of human beings", (2) diminishment of the ethical aspect of this problem by claiming that "the ethical views of Nietzsche that are ethically problematic are of only minor concern", (3) ignoring the ethical analysis of "the rightness of wrongness of Nietzsche's ethical views: it is enough to study them, and to find them challenging and interesting", or (4) condemnation of Nietzsche's criticism of the equality as Wilson does by concluding that "despite Nietzsche's undoubted interest and brilliance as an ethical thinker, at the deepest level we must think of him as an *opponent*". Wilson (2007, 221-223) also proves, in contrast to Nietzsche, that not all moral egalitarianisms are "moralities of denial", hence Nietzsche's criticism cannot be plausible.

Finally, although we must recognize, admit, and condemn all the elements of elitism in Nietzsche's concept of the pathos of distance, we should still apply his criticism of egalitarianism and equality to the individual level of human beings, as is suggested in this work. By reducing the pathos of distance to the individual, i.e. the personal level of human beings, we would better understand the importance of Nietzsche's imperative of life affirmation. It means that every individual should treat their own weaknesses with pure antagonism. By creating the genuine pathos of distance, each human being should be able to recognize within themselves everything that is weak, decadent, and life-negating, *and* distance themselves from that with a contempt, because both weakness and nobility lie equally in the potentiality of each human being, but the genuine pathos of distance is what really makes a difference. The pathos of distance enables us to overcome such "egalitarianism" in our own consciousness and thus provides us the possibility of a true affirmation of life.

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