

## NIETZSCHE *CONTRA ATARAXIA*

WILLIAM EDWARD LEE  
Georgia State University

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### I

In this essay, I will compare and contrast Nietzschean and Stoic attitudes toward fate. I will argue, *contra* Michael Ure's conception of Nietzsche, that Nietzsche does not promote *ataraxia* and further that aligning one's will with fate is not enough to love one's fate. I will first address the role that empiricism plays in philosophic therapy and how *ataraxia* betrays Nietzsche's goal of life-affirmation. Then, I will address the issue of prescriptive reading in Nietzsche scholarship (evidenced in Ure's essay) in order to provide an account of Nietzsche's recommended disposition that avoids unnecessary prescriptivism. Lastly, I will distinguish between the act of willing and the act of loving and use Nietzsche's literature to substantiate my belief that he overcomes *ataraxia*.

To distinguish between the Stoics and Nietzsche I will focus primarily on the method of their respective philosophical inquiries. For example, epistemology plays a particular and unusual role in Nietzsche's philosophy. In the preface to *The Gay Science*, he quips that it may be *indecent* for truth to reveal itself, for the veil of Isis to be removed. Nietzsche's primary concern is human flourishing, the path to which truth may be an obstacle, and his conception of *eudaimonia* is not based on virtue as is the Stoic conception for this reason. I will argue that Ure's prescriptive reading of Nietzsche and his ascription of *ataraxia* fundamentally misinterprets Nietzsche's goal of flourishing. While Nietzsche may *actually* on occasion call morality and emotions into question, it is only so that one may eliminate emotions and judgments *qua* false beliefs (rather than judgments

altogether as the Stoics do). His therapy does not aim to do away with suffering entirely, but the sort of suffering that is merely contingent.

I will argue further that as a consequence of the dispositional difference between Nietzsche and the Stoics, fate has two different use cases. Nietzsche's love of necessity in *amor fati* is not simply his aligning his will with fate as with the Stoics. Instead, because Nietzsche is more concerned with life-affirmation than he is tranquility, fate is used as a tool to monitor the individual's anxiety about things beyond his control, rather than a dictum that imposes some regularity in one's life. The difference may seem minute but is incredibly important in understanding some of Nietzsche's more popular concepts like *amor fati* and the eternal return.

## II

*Empiricism qua Therapy*-- Both Nietzsche and the Stoics belong to the empiricist tradition, which values the role of sense experience over reason in human knowledge. Rationalism, contrariwise, values reason over experience. Historically, with the rationalists Plato, Kant, and Schopenhauer, the problem of logic mapping poorly to real life has been overcome by the positing of the *ding an sich* or Platonic Forms. This belief, Nietzsche claims, steals one's attention from the real world and instead focuses on an unattainable, unrecognizable other world, akin to the Christian worldview. When one concerns oneself with a weighty metaphysic, one takes the risk of concerning oneself with both mendacity and, even worse, more than he can handle.<sup>1</sup> This leads to Schopenhauerian pessimism, the opposite of life-affirmation.

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<sup>1</sup> It may be worth noting that mendacity is not *necessarily* bad. Nietzsche periodically praises lying to ourselves. There is a difference between lies that engender happiness and lies that bring about a whole realm of untruth that burdens and harms the individual. Nietzsche's form of lying might be similar to a facile understanding of something: while one is not technically wrong, he is also not in possession of Truth. He may still work with this mendacity, though. In the other instance, the mendacity of a belief in the afterlife may lead the individual to a lifestyle that is not in line with reality at all and is consequently harmful.

In overcoming rationalism, the philologist Nietzsche turns to the Hellenistic philosophers for their conception of philosophy as therapy. While he praises the profundity of “the Greeks” in *The Gay Science*, he also, in the same book, criticizes them for lack of *esprit*. It is difficult to navigate Nietzsche’s intention in these remarks by examining the nature of Greeks as a whole, though, because he praises some schools and ridicules others. The evaluative status of Greeks as a whole should thus be bracketed to focus instead on *what* exactly Nietzsche praises and ridicules. In the preface to *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche exclaims:

“Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to *live*: what is needed for that is to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, word--in the whole Olympus of appearance! Those Greeks were superficial--*out of profundity!* And is not this precisely what we are coming back to, we daredevils of the spirit...?” (P4, GS)

Here, Nietzsche seems to praise the empiricism of “the Greeks” who were satisfied with appearance as opposed to essence. This certainly excludes Plato and is more likely directed toward the Hellenistic schools (like the Stoics) where this profundity was at the root of most philosophies. Nietzsche’s therapy first calls for an understanding of one’s epistemic limits: do not become overly concerned with that which you can not know.

Nietzsche praises the “French” conception of logic as bread and water, both essential and “a kind of prisoner’s food” in its simplicity (82, *GS*). The French, in section 82, serve as a foil to the Greeks. The claim is that the Greeks survived on bread and water and nothing more--they lacked *esprit*. It may be the case that the Stoics (as Greeks) are in line with Nietzsche’s empiricism, but he goes a step further with *esprit*. Empiricism may not preclude a philosopher from overdependence on logic. Thus, it seems that Nietzsche believes that while rationalism is a sickness, not every brand of empiricism is necessarily the cure.

The problem is that Stoic empiricism is tied with Stoic *ataraxia*, which seeks to remove all judgments from one’s experience of the world. Here, I believe, is the core difference between the

Stoics and Nietzsche. Nietzsche emphasises in *The Gay Science*, section 114: “There are no experiences other than moral ones, not even in the realm of sense perception.” If this is the case, then ridding oneself of value judgments is not only futile, but tantamount to self-abnegation. In brief, if one’s experience of the world is filtered entirely through one’s morality, then to rid oneself of morality is to rid oneself of experience. This is the same sort of issue that steered Nietzsche away from rationalism. Thus, Nietzsche’s goal may be to overcome this abnegation and instead *perfect* morality. This understanding explains Nietzsche’s polemic on Stoicism in *The Gay Science* as well, discussed below.

Nietzsche claims that “The Stoic... trains himself to swallow stones and worms, glass shards and scorpions without nausea; he wants his stomach to be ultimately insensible to everything the chance of existence pours on him” (306, *GS*). It is important here to note two things: both the idea of fate (“chance of existence”) as something *happening to* the subject and the Stoic as *insensible*. On both criticisms can we distinguish Nietzschean philosophy from Stoic. In the following section I will provide accounts of Nietzschean and Stoic attitudes toward fate in order to highlight these differences.

### III

*Fate and Nature*-- The Stoics insisted on living in agreement with nature (63B, Arius Didymus). Marcus Aurelius believes that the end of a being “consists in that toward which it is moved” (63K Marcus Aurelius, 5.16), similar to the Aristotelian *telos*. Epictetus expands on what this entails specifically for humans: “Nature ended at studying and attending to things and a way of life in harmony with nature. See to it then that you do not die without having studied these” (63E Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.6.12-22). The nature of a human being can be observed and studied and

derived from the sorts of things human beings tend to do. Nature unfolds according to fate, so in order to align one's will with nature one must align oneself with fate.

Epictetus affirms Chrysippus' natural philosophy, saying that it is better to live in certainty and in accordance with nature rather than in uncertainty (58J, Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.6.9). Here, the Stoic emphasis is on uncertainty. The nature of Stoic misfortune is the failure of virtue in accordance with Nature. Uncertainty is to be avoided because one may then fail to act virtuously. Thus, studying fate is promoted in order to prevent being unvirtuous. Stoics, seeking tranquility, abide by fate and use *ataraxia* as a tool to do so. I will argue that Nietzsche, seeking cheerfulness, abides by his value judgments and uses fate (as seen in the following section) as a diagnostic tool.

In his paper, *Nietzsche's Free Spirit Trilogy and Stoic Therapy*, Michael Ure provides a different account of Nietzsche's attitude toward fate, concluding that Nietzsche, too, calls for *ataraxia*, contrary to my claim. Ure addresses the passages dedicated to Stoicism in *Daybreak* specifically, claiming that Nietzsche "*prescribes* a medicine for sufferings humans incur through various kinds of misfortune" (emphasis my own) (70, Ure). This comment is addressed to passage 137 of *Daybreak*, "*why double your 'ego'?*" which is situated within a long chain of aphorisms dedicated to dethroning the primacy of compassion as virtue. This is a focus of Nietzsche's throughout the free spirit trilogy. Ure confuses Nietzsche's polemic on pity as a vindication of the objective viewpoint. Nietzsche never makes a prescription, though, except in the passive voice: "To view our own experiences with the eyes with which we are accustomed to view them when they are the experiences of others--*this is very comforting and a medicine to be recommended*" (emphasis my own) (137, *Daybreak*). Thus, it is not the case that Nietzsche is recommending against one's having judgments about things. Instead, one is to get rid of one's "exaggeration and excess."

It is also significant that Nietzsche here recommends a Stoic cure because he does so elsewhere: “Stoicism may well be advisable for those with whom fate improvises and who live in violent times” (306, *GS*). It is not the case that Nietzsche is opposed to Stoicism because it is false, but rather because it is not suited for *his particular* goal of life-affirmation. While Ure may have read too prescriptively, he nonetheless raises a strong objection to Nietzsche: Nietzsche’s distaste for Stoicism does not preclude his falling into *ataraxia*.

Ure uses John Sellars’ distinction between novice and mature Stoics to classify Nietzsche’s progression through the free spirit trilogy. If Nietzsche is classifiable as either of these classes of Stoic, then he has fallen for *ataraxia*. The first classification, the novice Stoic, is referred to as a Human Stoic. The Human Stoic faces fate as external to his being and something with which the individual is faced rather than as something in which he takes part. In brief, the Human Stoic simply knows how to cope with fate as something happening against his wishes. This is the popular view of Stoicism as steadfastness. The second, more mature Stoicism is Cosmic Stoicism, in which the individual aligns his will with fate. Instead of merely coping with fate, the Cosmic Stoic has learned to will that which is necessary in the world, as opposed to the contingent and petty desires of a human that plague us all. He has internalized the “exterior” will of the universe.

The problem of these classifications has already been highlighted above. Namely, whereas the Stoics adopt their disposition in order to better align themselves with fate, Nietzsche adopts his disposition and seeks to reconcile his cheerfulness with fate as an afterthought. My contention is simply that a certain conception of fate does not necessarily make a Stoic. Further, Nietzsche’s complex conception of fate is not only beyond the scope of this investigation, but may actually thwart any such classification. The relevant features of Nietzsche’s understanding of fate are

discussed in the following section in which I reconcile his conception of *the necessary* with *amor fati* in order to prove the necessary lack of *ataraxia* in his philosophy.

#### IV

“I want to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them--thus I will be one of those who make things beautiful... I do not want to wage war against ugliness... Let *looking away* be my only negation!” (276, *GS*)

*The Necessary*-- Nietzsche's *necessary* can be understood here in one of two ways. The first is the common conception which results in an aesthetic discussion of “how one makes the Holocaust beautiful.” That is, if one is to see the necessary as beautiful, one must find all things beautiful, because *all* is necessary in Nietzsche's metaphysics. It is impossible to pick apart the necessary from the contingent (since there are no contingencies), and it may be the case that what is understood as contingent is only a personal imposition by the subject onto the world. Thus, seeing what is necessary is tautologous. Because of this objection, I understand necessity in this context as what is necessary to the individual subject faced with fate.

On my reading, what is necessary is that which we *must* accept. Refusing to accept what must necessarily happen to oneself is a fruitless endeavor, one which will make it much more difficult to affirm life. One must also understand the boundaries of what he *should* be necessarily bound to. It is not my lot to be concerned with the Holocaust; this is out of my control in every way possible<sup>2</sup>. I do not believe that this is an exhaustive understanding of *amor fati*, but it is perhaps a dimension of

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<sup>2</sup> An obvious objection to this claim is the residual effects of historic events like the Holocaust or American slavery that result in modern oppressive social structures or other inherited misfortune. To be clear, what is discussed in this paper is not how these events actually affect the individual, but that there is nothing one can do to prevent such a thing if they were born in the late 20th century. My understanding of this relationship is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper, but can be summarized in a two dimensional interpretation. To see the Holocaust as necessary is to see it as something I can neither prevent because it has already occurred, but also, if I could, that there is no way I can guarantee my temporary patch would actually result in a better world. It is not simply a matter of wishing Hitler were never born, but rearranging innumerable many events in history and then hoping that nothing worse occurs. This calculus is distinctly not Nietzschean. Thanks again to Anne Farrell for prodding for this clarification.

Nietzsche's thought that is visible again in the eternal return (his most significant philosophical contribution) and thus can be seen as a consistent attitude toward fate. This dimension is the reminder that some things are out of our control and we should not suffer on account of these things.

While Nietzsche may seem like a Cosmic Stoic elsewhere (and, again, is classified as one by Ure and Sellars), I believe this understanding sounds much more like a Human Stoic. As mentioned above, it seems as though Nietzsche's classification is beyond the simple dichotomy of Stoicism. This, I believe, can be shown by turning our attention to *The Gay Science* section 12, in which Nietzsche addresses not fate, but disposition. He asks if it may be the case that "whoever wants to learn to 'jubilate up to the heavens' must also be prepared for 'grief unto death?'" (12, *GS*). He is convinced that the Stoics, in dismissing their judgments, preclude the possibility of their own happiness and that by claiming "the virtuous man is the happiest man," they fatally misunderstand happiness.

*The Gay Science* section 12 calls into question the "stoic" distaste of displeasure. Here lies the crux of my argument. What is our concern when discussing Nietzsche should not be a particular attitude toward fate, but rather toward suffering. In dealing with suffering, the Stoics adopted a particular conception of fate. Nietzsche does not need to live in agreement with nature because he does not negatively value suffering. Nietzsche's focus is not willing what is fated, but loving what is fated.

## V

*Willing or Loving?*-- The discussion of necessity brings me to my final point, which is the distinction between love and will. It is possible to will a thing without loving it. For example, people frequently comment that a dying dog's "time has come" when they euthanize their pet. They are

acting in accordance with nature, but are not doing so happily. One may make this decision with stoic indifference, accepting the dog's death as necessary, or with sadness or anger, regretting the death of his dear pet.

Nietzsche is not bothered by suffering. In fact, an important tenet of his philosophy is the affirmation of suffering as necessary. For those who have the ears to hear Nietzsche, those sensitive spirits engaged in spiritual matters (like Nietzsche himself), Nietzsche recommends Epicureanism. This is a recommendation against Stoicism: "For it would be the loss of all losses, for them, to forfeit their subtle sensitivity in exchange for a hard Stoic skin with porcupine spines" (306, *GS*). In *The Gay Science* section 341, Nietzsche introduces his concept of eternal return to address this issue. The passage describes a daemon that visits an individual and curses them to live their life repeatedly, without memory of having already lived. A Stoic may resignedly agree to the demon, but Nietzsche demands "*to long for nothing more fervently*" than the eternal return.

If Nietzsche uses the eternal return as a diagnostic tool to gauge how well-disposed one is toward life (which it seems is the case), then the Stoic answer is undesirable. One must also have, as previously discussed, a feeling for their moral sphere. It may not even occur to those that "jubilate up to the heavens" to make a calculation regarding pleasure and displeasure at all. Instead, the proper attitude may be an instinctual and well-meaning "yes!"

## VI

While Nietzsche's thought bears some strong resemblance to Stoic thought, their different conceptions of the end of philosophy and the role of judgments and emotions in philosophy necessitate a strict divergence in thought. By refusing to evaluate suffering positively, Stoics already steer away from Nietzsche. Even worse, they step further away when claiming that certain qualities of emotions lead to more suffering. This calculus is tedious to Nietzsche, who would rather

experience the highs and lows of life in order to have a generally positive disposition. This difference, I believe I have shown, provides a distinct reading of both *amor fati* and the eternal return. By doing what is necessary to guarantee life-affirmation rather than avoid suffering, one becomes better able to love fate. The guarded, cynical man is much less likely to will the eternal return than the passionate artist.

*Works Cited*

Please note: whereas references to Ure's article are by page, numerical references to Nietzsche's works reference the passage or aphorism number. P means preface, GS stands for *The Gay Science*

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