Nietzschean health and the inherent pathology of Christianity

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Listen rather, my brothers, to the voice of the healthy body: that is a more honest and purer voice. More honestly and purely speaks the healthy body that is perfect and perpendicular: and it speaks of the meaning of the earth.

-- Nietzsche, Z I, 3

Nietzsche certainly had reason to be concerned about health. He himself was never healthy for more than a few days at a time over all of his adult life. He experimented with travel every season in the hope of finding the right climate for his conditions. His severe illnesses, coupled with his fear that the painful madness that killed his father lay also in his own future, must have hovered in his vision every day, no matter where he looked. But -- as with many tragic concerns in his life -- Nietzsche found a way to make this one philosophically fruitful. He looked out upon his cultural world and diagnosed it as suffering as well from a certain kind of sickness. It was a sickness born of upside-down values, shallow thinking, and spiritual cowardice. He wrote optimistically of establishing a new kind of cultural and philosophical health which could be attained despite whatever else we might suffer from, and he felt that this health offers the only kind of salvation in a world purged of illusory idols and misbegotten values.

Our common cultural and philosophical sickness, Nietzsche believed, is the result of being infected by a host of ideologies that tell us in one way or another to say No to life.
Traditional Christianity is one such ideology, he thought, as it tells us that this life is valuable only to the extent that it prepares or qualifies us for a more abundant life, a life in which we are reunited with God in a time beyond our natural lives and in a place that is far away from this world. To affirm Christian values, Nietzsche charged, is ultimately to deny the value of this world. Similarly, both classical Stoicism and at least some versions of Buddhism claim that we can find a way to detach ourselves from this world and regard our ordinary experience as superficial and merely transitory. This is another way of denouncing this life. But the roots of this philosophical nay-saying reach even deeper, he thought, all the way to the metaphysical bedrock of western philosophy. Western philosophy prizes what is stable and unchanging over the fluctuating testimony of the senses; it values the immutable laws of nature over the flickering inconstancy of change; it values *being* over *becoming*, Parmenides over Heraclitus. This dogmatic hierarchy of values is present even in our grammar, which privileges the stability of objects and nouns over verbs and participles. Our sickness is so pervasive that, in his later years, Nietzsche took as the principal object of his life’s work a *revaluation of all values*: that is to say, a complete inversion of everything we value with what we take to be insignificant, wrong, or even evil.

In the fall of 1886, in his preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche expressed a hope for a new kind of medicine man to cure our culture of this spiritual sickness:

> I am still waiting for a philosophical *physician* in the exceptional sense of that word -- one who has to pursue the problem of the total health of a people, time, race or of humanity -- to muster the courage to push my suspicion to its limits and to risk the proposition: what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all ‘truth’ but something else -- let us say, health, future, growth, power, life. (GS pref., 2)
And the title of his work, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, is surely meant to name the science in which such philosophical physicians should be trained. Such a science would be a cheerful celebration of the dynamics and tensions found within human experience -- “health, future, growth, power, life” -- *without* fitting these forces into some broad metaphysical scheme that tries to make our lives meaningful by telling us the truth about some *other* idealized superstructure. This joyous science is thoroughly naturalized, basing its observations on psychology, history, biology, and so on, but that is not all: it is a science freed from the calcifications of Platonism and inspired by new philosophical vistas. The practitioners of this new science have as their goal a rebirth of our spirit. In that same preface Nietzsche wrote that his book comes after a long period of convalescence --

… a bit of merry-making after long privation and powerlessness, the rejoicing of strength that is returning, of a reawakened faith in a tomorrow, of a sudden sense and anticipation of the future, of impending adventures, of seas that are open again, of goals that are permitted again, and believed again. (GS pref., 1)

And these conditions in which Nietzsche wrote the work are also supposed to be the conditions in which we are to read it -- as recovering from our philosophical sickness and opening ourselves to a new health.

But at least initially it is difficult to see what this Nietzschean health might consist in, and why it would be valuable. After all, isn’t Nietzsche the philosopher who ridicules the “sanctimonious snivelers” who do nothing more than paint themselves on the wall and pronounce, “*Ecce homo!*” (TI 5, 6)? Is there any room in Nietzsche’s thought for making claims about the way humans are *supposed* to be? According to *whose* preference? Even if Nietzsche could articulate a clear criterion for “health,” with what possible justification could he recommend it to all of us as an ideal to pursue? Of course, it could be that he meant only to speak from only *his own* perspective, expressing how life ought to be lived in
his own opinion. But in the distant possible world that has such a modest Nietzsche as a resident, he certainly would owe everyone some sort of apology for the thunderous broadsides he blasts against Plato, Kant, and Christendom. Could it really be that he only meant to say, “That’s fine and well for you, but it’s not my kind of thing”?! 

I will argue that Nietzsche does have a tolerably clear conception of philosophical health, and one that is meant to be objective, though dependent upon some empirical hypotheses. The next section of this essay will explain that conception, relating it to his ideas of life and the will to power. The second section will illustrate why some philosophical worldviews or ways of life -- especially Christianity -- are inherently sick, according to Nietzschean psychology. Finally, the third section will tackle the question of why Nietzschean health is supposed to be valuable. I will suggest an interpretation which holds that although its value is not objective, it is massively intersubjective, and we cannot know of any greater value.

I. Nietzschean health

We know that Nietzschean health is somehow related to the affirmation of life’s inherent value, given the way that Nietzsche rejects Platonism and Christianity as nay-sayers to life’s value. But what more can we say about it? Nietzsche offers an impressionistic vision of it later in *The Gay Science*:

> Being new, nameless, hard to understand, we premature births of an as yet unproven future need for a new goal also a new means -- namely, a new health, stronger, more seasoned, tougher, more audacious, and gayer than any previous health. Whoever has a soul that craves to have experienced the whole range of values and desiderata to date, and to have sailed around all the coasts of this ideal ‘mediterranean’; whoever wants to know from the adventures of his own most authentic experience
how a discoverer and conqueror of the ideal feels, and also an artist, a saint, a legislator, a sage, a scholar, a pious man, a soothsayer, and one who stands divinely apart in the old style -- needs one thing above everything else: the *great health* -- that one does not merely have but also acquires continually, and must acquire because one gives it up again and again, and must give it up. (GS 382)

Let’s set aside for now the “new goal” these intrepid souls seek and focus on the means they require -- “the *great health*,” which is supposed to be tougher, stronger, more seasoned, and joyous. The souls who will need this health (later in this passage, Nietzsche calls them “argonauts of the ideal”) crave two things: *broad experience* and *elevation*. The broad experience is of the “whole range of values and desiderata,” i.e., of the many ways humans can go about valuing and desiring things. The argonauts crave to have seen it all, from Christianity and Platonism to paganism and nihilism, and want to have visited each and every outpost around the ideal mediterranean. Furthermore, the argonauts want to be able to stand above this broad experience and be in a position to issue judgment upon it -- as does “an artist, a saint, a legislator, a sage, a scholar, a pious man, a soothsayer, and one who stands divinely apart in the old style.” They crave to be not just philosophical tourists, but discoverers and conquerors of the ideal, gaining first-hand knowledge of life’s various appeals, complications, and dangers, and being connoisseurs of them all.

To achieve this, the philosophical argonauts will need the great health, which “one does not merely have but also acquires continually, and must acquire because one gives it up again and again, and must give it up.” The model of health Nietzsche has in mind is clearly one of *resilience*. One grows in resilience by facing the right sorts of challenges, in the right doses and at the right times, in order to rebound in greater health. Weight lifting and inoculations aim at increasing resilience by exposing the muscles or the immune system to a certain level of damage or threat so that, in meeting that assault, the system grows in strength. Nietzsche thinks of philosophical health along the same lines. As the argonauts go
about discovering and conquering, they must face philosophical assault and challenge so that they too may rebound as “stronger, more seasoned, tougher, more audacious, and gayer.” Their health must be acquired again and again, after every challenge. Nietzsche goes on in the passage to say that he and the argonauts are “more daring perhaps than is prudent, and have suffered shipwreck and damage often enough, but are, to repeat it, healthier than one likes to permit us, dangerously healthy, ever again healthy.”

The pain and difficulty of the experiences craved by the argonauts should not be taken lightly. Consider Nietzsche’s advice in the preface to *The Gay Science*:

> Only great pain, the long, slow pain that takes its time -- on which we are burned, as it were, with green wood -- compels us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths and to put aside all trust, everything good-natured, everything that would interpose a veil, that is mild, that is medium -- things in which formerly we may have found our humanity. I doubt that such pain makes us “better”; but I know that it makes us more *profound*. …

In the end, lest what is most important remain unsaid: from such abysses, from such severe sickness, also from the sickness of severe suspicion, one must return *newborn*, having shed one’s skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a tenderer tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more childlike and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before. (GS pref., 3)

Thus, to gain philosophical health, on Nietzsche’s view, we must suffer loss of trust in hallowed ideals, even those in which we thought we had found our humanity. We should “inoculate” ourselves with acknowledged philosophical sicknesses, such as “severe suspicion,” and bring ourselves to let go of everything in which we had previously found comfort, so that we can rebound with greater capacities for philosophical discernment and
judgment. And greater capacities for joy, perhaps taken in things we once regarded as dangerous.

This, we should note, is a kind of health that Nietzsche believed he could attain himself, despite the migraines, the eye troubles, the dyspepsia, and the advancing brain malady. His personal task was to turn all these infirmities into psychic flourishing, growth, strength, and even joy. In the end he claimed to be grateful for all his physical miseries because they forced him to learn dedication to his task, and to harness his abilities and his concentration so that he could create despite them: what did not kill him made him stronger (TI 1, 8). At the end of his productive life, recounting the conditions under which he wrote Daybreak, he boasted that

In the midst of the torments which attended an uninterrupted three-day headache accompanied by the laborious vomiting of phlegm -- I possessed a dialectical clarity par excellence and thought my way very cold-bloodedly through things for which when I am in better health I am not enough of a climber, not refined, not cold enough. (EH I, 1)

Nietzschean health aims to take up and transcend every other kind of sickness. To have this kind of philosophical health is to be able to transform suffering into a kind of triumph -- not just the hollow victory of maintaining a peppy optimism, come what may (though Nietzsche consistently praises the cheerfulness of free spirits), but the triumph of turning profound tragedy into a new strength, a strength that allows us then to suffer even greater tragedy -- even to welcome it -- in the interest of making us healthier, stronger, and more resilient.

An alternative way to frame Nietzschean health -- and one that will help to shift our focus toward the psychological underpinnings of the notion -- is to think of it in terms of a plastic and resilient drive for more life. Entities are commonly regarded as healthy to the extent that they seek more life for themselves. This “seeking” can be manifested in many
elementary ways, such as fleeing threats and seeking food, light, air or water, and in more complex ways, such as eating well, exercise, prudent convalescence, and appropriate medicine. All these are legitimate ways for an entity to pursue its own preservation and growth. Similarly for Nietzschean health -- though in this case, when the argonauts seek more life, they seek profundity, not preservation. They seek “more life” in a vertical dimension, so to speak, looking for new heights and new depths, rather than along the horizontal axis of longevity. The Nietzschean agent is healthy to the extent it strives after its own deepening: Nietzsche values the pain of being burned on green wood because it forces philosophers “to descend into our ultimate depths,” making us perhaps not better, but “more profound.”

We can make more precise sense of these impressionistic claims by connecting Nietzschean health to the will to power hypothesis. “Hypothesis” is used advisedly, since it is not altogether clear just how Nietzsche regarded this notion. At times he seems to assert it as a systematic metaphysics. At other times he is sharply critical of any attempt to create a systematic metaphysics: “I distrust all systematizers and stay out of their way. The will to a system is a lack of integrity” (TI I, 26). But we can set this larger interpretive matter aside for now, since for the present purpose it is enough that he very often regarded the will to power hypothesis at least as a fruitful theory for making sense of human psychology.

According to this theory, human beings are governed by -- or perhaps even consist in -- a complex tangle of separate and competing drives. Nietzsche nowhere offers a list, but we may presume there are drives for food, water, shelter, comfort, sex, knowledge, victory, and recognition. Surely there are also darker drives for blood sport, cruelty, dominance, and aggression. Each of us is a “ball of snakes” (Z I, 6), and all that we do is the result of these snakes slithering along toward their own preferred destinations. Each drive seeks its own end, and seeks dominance over other drives. In this way each drive is a particular will to power -- a will to the drive’s own power, its own strength, and its own dominance. Different drives are found in varying strengths among different individuals, which accounts for
individual differences in temperament, inclination, perspective, and lifestyle. And within each individual, these drives are in frequent conflict with one another, making each human being a battlefield of wills to power.

As Richardson describes the theory, individual drives grow in strength by dominating other drives: “Drives are ‘will to power’ in that they essentially pursue the continual enhancement of their distinctive activities, enhancement that consists in their mastery of others. So the level of a drive’s activity, its strength, is measured by ‘how much’ it rules over others” (Richardson 1996: 33). Thus a drive X masters another drive Y by turning Y’s efforts toward X’s own end; Y becomes a slave to X. To the extent that a drive rules over others, it gains power (which is what every drive individually desires). And surely we can imagine humans in whom one drive has attained mastery over the others: in alcoholics, for example, nearly every other drive in enslaved to the drive for alcohol.

Drives, according to Richardson’s account of Nietzsche, can be either healthy (or active) or sick (or reactive). This has nothing to do with the object of the drive. It is not the case that the drive for exercise is healthy and the drive for tobacco is not. Rather, the health of a drive has to do with whether the drive is itself flourishing in its own strength, power, and growth. A healthy drive promotes its own end -- whatever it is -- and its own power to attain that end. Weeds, in this case, can be as healthy as roses, and an appetite for saturated fats can be as healthy as an appetite for fresh fruit. What matters is the drive’s growth in power to seek its own end. A sick or reactive drive, by contrast, has been enslaved in such a way as to turn against its own end and its own growth. If I have a drive to subjugate other people to my will, for example, and I manage to redirect that drive inward, and instead find ways to subjugate myself (getting myself to do all sorts of things I do not want to do, like jumping into freezing water, whipping myself, etc), then my initial drive has become enslaved to some other drive, perhaps one for self-mastery or one for self-punishment. (This is exactly what happens in the case of religious ascetics, Nietzsche thinks.) The first
drive has become sick or reactive in the sense that it no longer promotes its own end. The second drive, though, is robust.

This enslavement might be quite subtle. It might be simply that drive Y ceases to “see things” in terms of its own values, but instead in terms of drive X’s values. So, for another example, an athlete may desire both victory and recognition, but at some point the desire for recognition may gain the upper hand, just by getting the desire for victory to picture its own satisfaction in terms of standing on a podium and receiving a medal. This athlete might someday have the opportunity to gain recognition without really achieving victory, and in this case the drive for victory will be already harnessed to pull toward recognition instead of victory.

Thus drives, for Nietzsche, are healthy to the extent that they pursue their own ends and promote their own dominance. Note that Nietzsche’s account so far is value free: if we can individuate drives, and objectively assess the extent to which they promote themselves, then we can judge whether drives are healthy or sick without imposing any kind of moral framework upon them, just as a gardener can assess objectively the health of both weeds and roses. But what about when it comes to judging whether human beings are healthy, in a Nietzschean sense? Can this judgment also be made without imposing certain values?

It can, if we think of the health of a human being as a function of the overall health of his or her constituent drives. A healthy person, that is to say, finds a way to encourage the abundant growth of all of his or her drives -- or as many as possible. Richardson suggests that this is the recipe for a Nietzschean overman, though he adds that there should also be an overarching project which somehow incorporates all of the lesser drives pursuing their own ends: “The overman is that very rare person who can form a wealth of conflicting parts into a system in which they all find expression, yet also are phases in an encompassing project” (Richardson 1996: 69). Richardson cites a passage from Nietzsche’s notes in support of this:
In contrast to the animals, man has cultivated an abundance of contrary drives and impulses within himself: thanks to this synthesis, he is master of the earth. -- Moralities are the expression of locally limited orders of rank in his multifarious world of drives, so man should not perish through their contradictions. Thus a drive as master, its opposite weakened, refined, as the impulse that provides the stimulus for the activity of the chief drive.

The highest man would have the greatest multiplicity of drives, in the relatively greatest strength that can be endured. Indeed, where the plant “man” shows himself strongest one finds instincts that conflict powerfully (e.g., in Shakespeare), but are controlled. (WP 966 (1884))

This passage indicates a Nietzschean ideal (whether “overman” or “highest man”): the person who has encouraged all of his or her drives to flourish, in the greatest diversity and strength as possible. Generally, the passage suggests, human beings have ranked their drives, and have allowed some to become “master” while the others are weakened, but the highest human beings would endure and somehow control the conflicts among the drives, with the aim of making each drive as powerful as possible. It is important to emphasize again that, if the higher human being does have a single, encompassing project, it must be one that allows or even requires the flourishing of the widest possible variety of drives; otherwise, an encompassing project could well count as a sickness of some sort. Perhaps the higher person’s “single” project is to have many projects going, several even at odds with one another, under a Whitmanesque banner: “I am large, I contain multitudes.”

This view of the consummately healthy individual fits neatly with the goal of Nietzsche’s argonauts, the end for which they seek the great health. He writes that “another ideal runs ahead of us,” “the ideal of a spirit who plays naively -- that is, not deliberately but from overflowing power and abundance … the ideal of a human, superhuman well-being and well-willing [Wohlseins und Wohlwollens]” (GS 382,
translation slightly altered). The argonauts will seek to bring about such an ideal, though such a figure will appear *inhuman* to the uninitiated. He will laugh at what others take seriously and will for the first time pose “the real question mark.” The argonauts’ ultimate aim is not toward any sort of reform or revaluation so much as toward a new *way of being*.

Note that Nietzsche does not say that the highest man should try to acquire and strengthen *all* human drives. There is no obligation to do that. It is enough to strengthen the drives already found within oneself. This means that, if there were a number of “highest men,” they would not necessarily resemble one another. One might have drives A, B, and C, while another has B, C, and Z, while a third has A, M, and Z, and so on. The only feature they would have in common would be that each of them had cultivated their inner drives and found expression for them. If the endeavor to cultivate and strengthen one’s drives is the way to acquire overall Nietzschean health, then this further means that what is healthy for one individual may or may not be healthy for another.9 What one’s health is will depend ultimately on who one is, and which drives are to be found within the self.

But this observation provides us with new way to pose a question about Nietzsche’s right to criticize the values of Platonism and Christianity. Why should we think that Nietzsche’s argonauts are healthy in the cultivation of their drives, while the Platonists and Christians are not? Why could it not be that some people have the drive of argonauts, and others have the drives of a Platonist, and still others the drives of a Christian -- and all are healthy, to the extent that they cultivate their own drives and allow them to flourish? Why couldn’t there be a Christian overman?

II. The pathology of Christianity

Nietzsche’s reply, I shall suggest, is that there simply is no way to be a Platonist or a Christian without having a predominance of sick or reactive drives. There may be many
ways to be a Nietzschean overman, but being a thoroughgoing Platonist or Christian are not among them. In other words, both Platonism and Christianity are inherently pathological. By examining the strategy of Nietzsche’s attack upon Christianity, we will see why he thinks this is so, and at the same time gain a better understanding of the exact nature of Nietzsche’s psychological approach. We shall see, in particular, that his assessment of health relies crucially upon empirical assumptions about the kinds of drives that constitute a human being.

To begin, we will need to have before us a characterization of Christianity that highlights the features Nietzsche will go on to criticize. Any definitive attempt to summarize Christianity is doomed to fail, of course, but the following sketch will serve our purpose, which is to see (what Nietzsche saw as) the value structure of Christianity, especially with regard to natural human drives. That is, we need to see how Christianity regards the drives we find within human nature. The Christian value structure which Nietzsche sets out to attack has two prominent components. (1) Original sin. The traditional Christian believes that humanity is by its very nature unhealthy. When Adam disobeyed God, he rendered all his descendents guilty of the same sin. Hence many (or most or all) of our natural passions and instincts -- the drives rooted in our fallen nature -- are completely unreliable or even despicable in what they promote. In particular, the human drives for power, sex, and glory, and our passions for out-doing one another, taking pride in our accomplishments, and rejoicing in our strengths are consequences of our corrupt nature. (2) What to do about it. The task we now face, according to Christianity, is somehow to conquer these problematic drives and passions and liberate ourselves from them so that our lives can begin to approximate the healthy life, the life lived as an example for us in the person of Jesus Christ. In order to approximate this life, we need not only the moral guidance of the Church, but also God’s forgiveness and God’s willingness to pay the price for our disobedience. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, dies for our sin, and we are once again given the possibility of living healthy lives, given the grace of God.
Thus, according to the Christian value structure, our set of natural drives is a consequence of sickness and weakness. What appeals to us in this world is precisely what we must disavow if we are to be restored to God. This life, at its best, presents us with the opportunity to overcome it, with God’s help, since this life is little more than separation from God. To overcome this separation (and overcome this life) God (as the Holy Spirit) must place in our hearts the desire to transcend this world, to overcome its attractions, and cultivate true Christian piety.

Let this characterization stand as an account of “the” Christian value structure. Now, in assessing Nietzsche’s critique, we will need to presuppose his will-to-power account of human psychology and his own account of health. The Christian could of course supply a different psychology, and a different notion of health, but since our primary purpose is to understand why Nietzsche regards Christianity as inherently pathological, we need to presume his own criteria.

We can begin with Nietzsche’s account of life: “Life is to my mind the instinct for growth, for durability, for an accumulation of forces, for power: where the will to power is lacking there is decline” (A 6). Nietzschean health, as we have seen, is life-promoting, and growth- or power-promoting: the healthy individual is the one who cultivates as many of his or her drives as possible, strengthening them and allowing them their greatest possible expression. Perhaps, in this endeavor, some drives must be suppressed, at least for a time, in order to allow for a greater cultivation of drives overall. But any unnecessary suppression of drives is sick or pathological according to Nietzsche.

In Nietzsche’s estimation -- and, indeed, the account given above bears this out -- Christianity, by its nature, wantonly suppresses nearly all natural drives. Nietzsche writes that the Christian conception of God -- “God as god of the sick, God as spider, God as spirit” -- is “the contradiction of life…. the declaration of war against life, against nature, against the will to live” (A 18). The Christian god, in other words, favors the meek and
humble, and rewards those who are able to overcome their drives for the things of this world. Indeed, Nietzsche writes that Christianity on the whole

has made an ideal of whatever *contradicts* the instinct of the strong life to preserve itself; it has corrupted the reason even of the strongest in spirit by teaching men to consider the supreme values of the spirit as something sinful, as something that leads into error -- as temptations. The most pitiful example: the corruption of Pascal, who believed in the corruption of his reason through original sin when it had in fact been corrupted only by his Christianity. (A 5)

The whole point of Christianity is to *get over* our fallen nature, or overcome (with divine assistance) the drives we find in ourselves by nature. Insofar as this in inherent to Christianity, Christianity is inherently pathological -- at least according to the standards of Nietzschean health.

But even upon these standards, a Nietzschean-minded Christian might summon the following reply. It is true that Christianity asks us to overcome many natural drives. But this is not merely for the sake of denigrating human nature. Rather, it is for the sake of greater, more abundant life: the Christian maintains that a *flourishing* life, one that is more authentic to our pre-fallen selves, is what we gain by getting over our fallen nature. Thus Christianity does in fact promote the very strongest drives for life: not the natural drives which lead humans into the grave, of course, but the spiritual drives which lead humans into the triumph over the grave. This is in keeping with what a Nietzschean human is supposed to do, which is to suppress some drives, at least for a while, in order to promote a greater overall flourishing of drives and a greater health. The Nietzschean Christian (so to speak) is advocating a greater suppression of drives, over a natural lifetime, in order to promote an even greater kind of health. In other words, the Nietzschean Christian promotes a long-term or broader-band flourishing which surpasses the short-term or narrow-band health prized
by Nietzsche. In this case, Christianity’s vast suppression of natural drives would be part of the larger project to cultivate a greater global health in an individual.

But this response on the part of the Nietzschean Christian is legitimate only if it can be shown that the drives which are cultivated through Christianity are in fact genuine drives. And Nietzsche’s critical reply to the response surely will be that the “Christian drive,” i.e., the drive for a life more abundant than the one that leads to the grave, simply does not exist as a member of the complex of drives constituting the human mind. “The drive for the abundant life,” as we might call it, is an illusory drive produced by a pathological condition in which a set of drives “choke out” several others, resulting in a Christian value structure.

Nietzsche’s Antichrist is meant to fill in the details. He claims that the pathological value structure of Christianity is grounded in (1) Jesus’s psychology, (2) the historical institution of Christianity, and (3) the subsequent indoctrination of its members. (1) Nietzsche suggests that Jesus belonged to a psychological type characterized by extreme sensitivity, especially to any hostile encounters. This condition causes them to withdraw from experience as much as possible: it brings about in them an “instinctive hatred of reality,” in the sense that they approach any experience with reluctance, and an “instinctive exclusion of any antipathy, any hostility, and boundaries or divisions in man’s feelings,” in the sense that they would far prefer to suffer at the hands of others than confront them or even hate them for the pain that is caused by them (A 30; original emphases). People who fall into this type will try to smooth over all the rough edges of experience in order to preserve a state of mind in which one feels “in heaven” or “eternal,” or at any rate out of range of any damaging experiences. (2) Next, the Christian church was instituted upon the values Jesus set forth. But as an institution its aim was not to promote Jesus’s own practice of life (as Nietzsche memorably writes, “there was only one Christian, and he died on the cross” (A 39)). Instead, its aim was to promote a hierarchy of values which was subsequently employed to subjugate stronger (healthier) individuals and elevate weaker (sicker) ones. Christianity, as an institution, did this by encouraging its members to believe
that the way to gain power is through the suppression or subjugation of one’s natural drives. (This would be an instance of wills to power becoming enslaved by viewing their own success in the terms of some other kind of drive -- in this case, the institutional drive of the church to subjugate the strong and empower the weak.) (3) Christians thus are indoctrinated to identify what brings power with precisely its opposite, and identify what brings loss of power with its opposite -- and so the values of life are turned completely upside down. And so:

At the bottom of Christianity is the rancor of the sick, instinct directed against the healthy, against health itself…. Once more I recall the inestimable words of Paul: “The weak things of the world, the foolish things of the world, the base and despised things of the world hath God chosen.” This was the formula; in hoc signo decadence triumphed.

God on the cross -- are the horrible secret thoughts behind this symbol not understood yet? All that suffers, all that is nailed to the cross, is divine. All of us are nailed to the cross, consequently we are divine. We alone are divine.

Christianity was a victory, a nobler outlook perished out of it -- Christianity has been the greatest misfortune of mankind so far. (A 51)

Christians thus come to have an inverted sense of what constitutes an abundant life, and “the drive for the abundant life” is in fact a mask for a condition in which individuals have been co-opted by a larger complex of societal drives, and compelled to turn their own efforts toward a suppression of their real drives.

Thus, overall, Nietzsche has two responses to the Christian. The first response is that being Christian entails suppressing a wide array of natural drives, which is straightforwardly unhealthy (upon Nietzsche’s conception of health). The second response, to the Nietzschean-style Christian who attempts to portray Christianity as a kind of health, is
that such a Christianity is inventing a non-natural or “super-natural” drive in humans which simply does not exist, except as a mask for a pathological condition. Now in order to make this second response more compelling, Nietzsche would have to demonstrate exactly how we are supposed to identify and individuate drives -- a difficult task, to be sure, and one which Nietzsche never addressed. Presumably, the strategy of the philosopher of Nietzschean psychology would be the same as the general strategy followed by any philosopher of science concerned with ontology: pick the simplest set of entities that can allow for the most coherent and complete explanation possible (with a host of qualifications and caveats to be inserted here). Of course, it could turn out that the set of drives most plausibly ascribed to human beings is different from what Nietzsche thought it would be. But whichever way that gets worked out, it is safe to say that most of us -- and especially Nietzsche -- would not expect a “supernatural drive” to be required in a full explanation of human psychology.

III. The value of health

Even if we were to agree with Nietzsche’s account of philosophical health and his assessment of Christianity, we are left wondering how Nietzsche can justify his endorsement of health as a value. Why should anyone seek Nietzschean health as an end? What exactly would be wrong with embracing a pathological way of life? After all, it may be said, the sicknesses and aberrations of nature are just as “natural” as the more healthy or typical products. Why then should Nietzsche look at philosophical sickness as anything to be avoided or despised? Why not just accept any way that humans turn out to be as equally natural and equally valuable?

If Nietzsche’s task is only to describe, with a clinician’s cold objectivity, the psychology of values, then clearly he does not have justification for advocating any set of values over another, even if he regards some psychological structures as healthy and others
as sick. A botanist can study both roses and weeds without a concern to grow either one. And, indeed, from Nietzsche’s scathing indictments of moralists, one might conclude that he similarly has no inclination to enter into the advice-giving business:

Finally, let’s consider how naïve it is in general to say, “Human beings should be such and such!” Reality shows us a captivating treasury of types, the exhuberance of an evanescent play and alteration of forms. And some pathetic bystander of a moralist says to all this, “No! Human beings should be different”? … He even knows how human beings should be, this sanctimonious sniveler; he paints himself on the wall and pronounces, “ecce homo!” ...(TI 5, 6)

After this, it certainly would be surprising for Nietzsche to issue any judgments about how humans should live. But he carves out an escape route for himself as the passage continues:

Morality, insofar as it condemns on its own grounds, and not from the point of view of life’s perspectives and objectives, is a specific error for which one should have no sympathy…. 

Nietzsche here sets aside any morality grounded in “the point of view of life’s perspectives and objectives,” implying that it is acceptable to criticize or condemn from the perspective of life-affirming drives -- in other words, from the perspective of Nietzschean health. But -- again -- why should life’s perspectives have special force? Why should Nietzschean health be exempted from his general trashing of morality?

This is a big and important question, and it is fair to say there is little consensus among Nietzsche scholars about how Nietzsche might go about justifying his valuations -- or even whether he thinks he needs to. No complete survey of the various positions that have been ascribed to Nietzsche would be appropriate here. But I will outline one position
which I think deserves more attention than it has received to date. According to Nietzsche’s perspectivism, all values are relative to an entity’s own perceived situation and needs. As we have seen, the perspectives of the argonauts and the Christians result in very different value structures. And, *usually*, one might think that the point of maintaining perspectivism is to render all value structures relative to individuals so that no objective assessment of these values could be made. But (as seen in the above passage) Nietzsche thinks there is one perspective, the perspective of *life*, that cuts across all other perspectives. Nietzsche writes that to be alive is to have a perspective and impose a value structure upon the world.\textsuperscript{12} There are many ways of being alive, of course, and many different perspectives living things can employ. But we can also identify the perspective of a living thing *qua* living thing -- that is, the basic situation and perspective of any living thing, setting aside the features which individuate it from other living things. This perspective is *massively intersubjective*, since it is shared in some sense by all living beings (though complicating factors will compel some living things to turn against this perspective, as in the case of Christianity). According to its value structure, what is valuable is Nietzschean health: the flourishing and strengthening of all drives, or as many in the greatest qualitative diversity as possible.\textsuperscript{13}

Nietzsche clearly regards the “perspective of life” as the broadest court of appeal, in a sense. He might argue for its authority in the following way. It is often possible to compare and evaluate the values of organisms by finding a perspective shared by those organisms. (For example, one might evaluate the values of two political candidates by seeing them both as citizens of a particular nation.) But for any such comparison, there will always be other organisms who do not share that common perspective, and so will not value what those first organisms value. Except in one case: all perspective-having organisms share the perspective of living things *qua* living things, or the perspective of life. No living thing (at least, insofar as it has not been corrupted and made unhealthy) denies the values advocated from the perspective of life. Hence, the perspective of life enjoys an authority shared by no other perspective.
This argument, though, is not wholly persuasive, since it is not clear that a perspective should be privileged merely in virtue of its massive intersubjectivity. For all anyone knows, life itself may be a “mistake” of sorts, a perspective that promotes a set of values that is completely unconnected with what is truly valuable. Nietzsche would heap scorn upon such a claim, of course, but it is hard to see how he could provide an argument against its possibility. Indeed, in the texts we have been examining, Nietzsche briefly does take this possibility into account. He admits that the perspective of life, for all its breadth, is still just a perspective. But he thinks it is impossible for us to weigh its value structure against any others:

A condemnation of life by one who is alive is, in the end, just a symptom of a particular kind of life: this does not at all raise the question of whether the condemnation is justified or unjustified. One would have to occupy a position outside life, and on the other hand to know it as well as one, as many, as all who have lived it, in order to be allowed even to touch upon the problem of the value of life: these are reasons enough to grasp that, for us, this problem is an inaccessible problem. (TI 5, 5)

As living things, Nietzsche suggests, we are naturally inclined to value life (though of course that inclination can be upset, as happens in Christianity). But we cannot know if we are justified in valuing life without seeing how things look from the perspective of a nonliving thing -- not an available option for us, to be sure. We can only know that life is valued by us, as living things, and ought to be so valued, from our perspective. And with valuing life comes valuing Nietzschean health, since it promotes the expression of life in all its qualitative diversity.

According to this interpretation, Nietzsche is neither a realist nor an antirealist about value. He is, more precisely, ultimately a value skeptic: while he sees how individuals can
make correct/incorrect judgments about value from their own perspectives, and even sees how individual judgments can be correct/incorrect from the perspective of life, he simply does not see how one can assess the correctness/incorrectness of the values of life. This problem is, as he writes, inaccessible. The broadest perspective we have access to is the perspective of life, and it is in that broad perspective that Nietzschean health emerges as a value in the perspective of any living thing.¹⁵

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NOTES

1 I employ common abbreviations for Nietzsche’s works: A = *The Antichrist*, BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil*, EH = *Ecce Homo*, GS = *The Gay Science*, TI = *Twilight of the Idols*, WP = *The Will to Power*, Z = *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Abbreviations are followed by the divisions appropriate to each work. The specific editions and translations employed are listed in the bibliography.

2 For a recent examination of Nietzsche’s illness (with a strong case for believing his lifelong suffering and eventual breakdown was the result of a brain tumor), see Sax 2003.

3 “Plastic” in the sense that the drive can adapt itself to new conditions. See Richardson 2004: 28-9.


5 BGE 36 and WP 1067, for example, are particularly confident, though some scholars (see previous note) are suspicious of them. But, even setting them aside, Nietzsche employs the will to power at least as an explanatory device throughout his later works.

6 For further discussion of will to power as providing an explanatory framework for psychology, see Clark 1990: 209-12.

7 Drives are not conscious agents, and so may not properly be said to “see things,” but they must have the capacity to form a kind of “judgment” about which sorts of states or activities will constitute their fulfillment. See Richardson 1996: 35-9 and Richardson 2004: 26-35.

8 See the description of the “most free” man from Nietzsche’s notes: this man “has the greatest feeling of power over himself, the greatest knowledge of himself, the greatest order in the necessary struggle of his powers, the relatively greatest independence of his individual powers, the relatively greatest struggle within himself: he is the most discordant being and the most varied and the longest living and the one which desires, which feeds
itself extravagantly, the one which *excretes* the most and *renews* itself” (quoted in Moore 2002: 83).

9 See GS 3, 120.

10 It should be noted that many contemporary Christians may find this characterization superficial or even misleading. Several 20th-century theologians, from Dietrich Bonhoeffer to John Paul II, have argued for the importance of this physical life in Christian doctrine. But I believe that the above characterization does represent the sort of Christian theology Nietzsche was criticizing, and it does represent a central and still-popular construal of Christianity. So it will suffice for our purposes here. (I am indebted to Harrison Kleiner and Graham Dennis for discussions of this point.)

11 For a useful survey of the literature, see Leiter 2004.

12 BGE 9: “Is living not valuating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different? And even if your [sc. The Stoics’] imperative ‘live according to nature’ meant at bottom the same thing as ‘live according to life’ -- how could you *not* do that?”

13 At one point, Nietzsche even flirts with the idea of constructing “a scientific order of values,” according to the measure of *force* (that is, drive toward life) in individuals -- “All other ‘values’ are prejudices, naiveties, misunderstandings” (WP 710 (1888)).

14 I am grateful to a referee for this journal for raising this objection.

15 Earlier versions of this paper were delivered to audiences at Utah State University and Macalester College. I am grateful to those audiences for perceptive questions and comments, and to a referee for this journal for constructive criticism.