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Nietzsche's rejection of stoicism. A reinterpretation of Amor fati

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INTRODUCTION

The formula ‘*amor fati*’ is Nietzsche’s. Yet no concept introduced by a philosopher stands on its own. Like all new formulae, the idea of loving fate is the consequence of an engagement with other philosophers – or their texts, to be precise. Nietzsche, who started his career as a classicist, may well have been inspired in this case by classical ideas. Several commentators claim to recognize the influence of Stoicism. Thomas Brobjer, for instance, opens his article on Nietzsche’s reading of Epictetus as follows: ‘Nietzsche had an ambivalent and complex relation to Stoic philosophy. He had a Stoic temperament, and Stoic philosophy may have been an important influence on some aspects of his philosophy. This is especially likely for his idea of eternal recurrence and *amor fati*, which have both a close kinship with Stoic thinking.’¹ Nuno Nabais similarly argues that *amor fati* betrays the influence of Stoicism: ‘Nietzsche knew that this *wanting what is necessary in each happening* was the central pillar of the ethical programme of the philosophy of the Portico and that it was embodied in the maxim “live in accordance with nature.”’²

Yet when Nietzsche reflects on Stoic philosophy, his tone often betrays disagreement and contempt. Stoicism is deemed to be a form of ‘Bülsäulenkälte’, associated with the stiff coldness of a statue.³ Other aphorisms describe the Stoic as having a ‘hard skin’, with ‘porcupine spines’⁴, and the *Nachlass* of 1881 contains one of the most critical passages: ‘*turning oneself into stone* as a weapon against suffering [...]. What significance can be attached to embracing a statue in wintertime if one has become entirely deadened against the cold? [...] I am very antipathetic to this line of thought.’⁵ What is more, this *Nachlass* passage appears significantly close to one of the earliest occurrences of *amor fati* in Nietzsche’s oeuvre.

What arguments, then, do commentators use to still defend a ‘kinship’ between Stoicism and *amor fati*? Like Nabais, most authors point out its similarity with the maxim to ‘live in accordance with nature’. Nietzsche, like the Stoics, seems to defend a notion of a fully predetermined, eternally recurring world, in which all humans play their immanent part; the thought of free will is only illusory. At the same time the adoption of a certain affirmative attitude towards the inescapable is encouraged, as it is understood to have a positive influence on our well-being. The Stoics claim that focusing on ‘what is in our power’ and accepting the

¹ Brobjer, T. (2003), 429.

² Nabais, N. (2006), 85.

³ *Jenseits von Gut und Böse (JGB)* 198 5.118: ‘jene Gleichgültigkeit und Bülsäulenkälte gegen die hitzige Narrheit der Affekte, welche die Stoiker anriethen und ankurirten’. All the texts by Nietzsche are taken from the *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Banden* (KSA), ed. by Colli, G. and Montinari, M. (1967 ff). See Abbreviations for a list of the references used throughout this dissertation. After this Introduction all references to Nietzsche’s texts will be in German.

⁴ *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft (FW)* 306 3.544: ‘[Es] wäre [...] der Verlust der Verluste [...] die stoische harte Haut mit Igelstacheln [...] geschenkt zu bekommen.’

⁵ *Nachlass (NL)* 15[55] 9.653: ‘*Versteinerung* als Gegenmittel gegen das Leiden [...]. Was ist es, eine Statue im Winter umarmen, wenn man gegen Kälte stumpf geworden ist? [...] Diese Denkweise ist mir sehr zuwider’. Translation by Elveton R.O. (2004), 200.

things we cannot change (which is synonymous with ‘living in accordance with nature’) will lead to a state of calm happiness (*eudaimonia*)⁶; Nietzsche explicitly associates loving fate with ‘greatness’: ‘my formula for greatness is *amor fati*: that you do not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity.’⁷

Yet, Nietzsche also criticises the Stoic adage: ‘So you want to *live* “according to nature”? Oh, you noble Stoics, what a fraud is in this phrase!’⁸ Nabais, referring to this aphorism, argues that we should not be intimidated by it. Its critique is only superficial, he claims; it hides the implicit ‘confrontation with Stoic ethics and Stoic physics’, which concerns Nietzsche’s ‘attempt to absorb ethics into a philosophy of nature.’⁹ Theodore R. Schatzki, likewise, persistently argues that living ‘in accordance with the essence of life is the deepest thought animating Nietzsche’s ethics’¹⁰; what is more, ‘for Nietzsche as for the Stoics, the good life is a life of virtue, and a life of virtue is a life in accordance with nature’.¹¹ Schatzki concedes that Nietzsche’s position is not exactly identical with Stoicism, but he does so without explaining why Nietzsche’s attitude is so fiercely critical. Nabais by contrast bites the bullet: ‘The only explanation for Nietzsche’s response is that what he is really doing is taking issue with himself, since, in the moment that he jeers at the Stoic ideal of the complete absorption of human will in the cosmic dynamism of each happening, he betrays the basis of his own ethics of immanence.’¹²

But why would Nietzsche ‘take issue with himself’ by way of criticising the Stoics? Why would he want to hide the (seeming) similarities? Shouldn’t we rather take Nietzsche’s criticism seriously, and assume that his *amor fati* must in significant respects be different from Stoicism? Importantly, what do we know exactly about the meaning of *amor fati*? Might it not be the case that misunderstanding the concept explains our struggle with Nietzsche’s judgment of Stoicism?

Typically, authors who write on *amor fati* and Stoicism can be divided in two groups. Authors who focus on Nietzsche’s relation with Stoicism (Brobjer, Schatzki and Nabais for instance) fail to do justice to the complexity of *amor fati*.¹³ Others, who are interested mainly in *amor fati*, briefly mention that it may have a Stoic background but tend to overlook Nietzsche’s critical

⁶ The first words of Epictetus’ famous *Encheiridion* are: ‘There are two classes of things: those that are under our control and those that are not. [...] Remember, therefore, that that if you regard the things that are by nature slavish as free, and the things that are up to others as your own, you will be hampered, you will suffer, you will get upset, you will blame both gods and men’. Translation by Boter, G. (1999), 276.

⁷ *Ecce Homo (EH)* klug 10 6.297: ‘Meine Formel für die Grösse am Menschen ist *amor fati*: dass man Nichts anders haben will, vorwärts nicht, rückwärts nicht, in alle Ewigkeit nicht.’ Translation by Norman, J. (2005), 99.

⁸ *JGB* 9 5.21: ‘„Gemäss der Natur“ wollt ihr *leben*? Oh ihr edlen Stoiker, welche Betrügerei der Worte!’ Translation by Norman, J. (2002), 10.

⁹ Nabais, N. (2006), 85.

¹⁰ Schatzki, T.R. (1994), 158.

¹¹ Schatzki, T.R. (1994), 159.

¹² Nabais, N. (2006), 86.

¹³ See also Neymeyr, B. (2009), Bertino, A.C. (2007), Groff, P.S. (2004), Elveton, R.O. (2004), and Armstrong, A. (2013).

remarks.¹⁴ This thesis aims to avoid both pitfalls. Its main hypothesis is that our understanding of *amor fati* may be illuminated through a careful, more historical examination of Nietzsche's engagement with Stoicism. If it can be shown whether and in what sense Nietzsche was or was not inspired by Stoicism in the period in which *amor fati* was introduced, it may potentially uncover features that have gone unnoticed so far.

Tracing the background of a certain concept requires more than just analysing similarities and differences, in this case between *amor fati* and Stoicism. At least three other, more historical sets of questions need to be answered as well: 1. When and in what context does *amor fati* appear for the first time? How does it function in this context? 2. What was Nietzsche's judgment regarding Stoicism in that time-frame, and what aspects of it did he consider? 3. Related to the second question: what knowledge of Stoicism did Nietzsche have? What were his sources, and which other, later authors may have influenced him in his judgments?

Let me start by concentrating on the third set of questions. Stoicism is not a clear-cut and unchanging set of axioms, as our access to traditional Stoic texts has evolved over the years. The so-called *SFV*, the *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, is a collection of fragments and testimonia of the earlier Stoics composed by Hans von Arnim in 1903-4. In a situation of complete loss of primary sources, this collection has proven to be highly influential in shaping our contemporary understanding of Stoicism. The two frequently used volumes by Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, contain many references to the *SFV*.¹⁵ But this collection was not yet available to Nietzsche, whose last sane words were written early 1889. Moreover, Stoicism has a long and rich reception-history. Whereas some centuries witnessed a revival of Stoicism – as for instance the 16th Century with Lipsius – in most others Stoicism was deemed dangerously un-Christian, even pantheistic, allegedly defending a solipsistic and overly rational ethics.¹⁶ Both the question of Nietzsche's sources and of the historical assessment of Stoicism should be considered carefully in a study that investigates Nietzsche's reception of Stoicism.

Strikingly, Stoicism as a form of therapy is becoming ever more popular today. In the fall of 2015, the fourth 'Stoic Week' was organised in England. Its idea was to follow daily instructions collected in the 'Stoic Week Handbook', written by an interdisciplinary group of academics and psychotherapists, and published online.¹⁷ Every day offered a different theme and related exercises, based on original Stoic texts. All participants were encouraged to take well-being surveys before and after the week, so that the effectiveness of the course could be measured. The results of the 2015 week can be found on the website: around 2,500 people took part, and their findings supported the view that Stoicism is 'helpful'. Participants reported a 15% improvement in life satisfaction, a 10% increase in flourishing, a 10% increase in positive emotions and a 14% reduction in negative emotions.

¹⁴ See for instance Stern, T. (2013), Han-Pile, B. (2009), Cobb-Stevens, V. (1982), Domino, B. (2012), Stambaugh, J. (1994), and Brodsky, G. (1998).

¹⁵ Long, A.A., Sedley, D.N. (1987), *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Vol. I and II. The first volume contains a collection of translated fragments and commentary; the second presents the fragments in their original language.

¹⁶ See for instance Ierodiakonou, K. (1999) or Neymeyr, B., Schmidt, J., Zimmermann, B. (eds.) (2008).

¹⁷ <http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/stoicismtoday/>.

The obvious question is: was Stoicism considered to be of therapeutic value in Nietzsche's days as well? Some commentators think it was. Keith Ansell-Pearson, for instance, in his 2011 article 'Beyond compassion: on Nietzsche's moral therapy in *Dawn*', adopts Martha Nussbaum's suggestion that Nietzsche wishes to 'bring about a revival of Stoic values – self-command and self-formation – within a post-Christian and post-Romantic context'.¹⁸ He agrees with her that the picture sometimes presented of Nietzsche as advocating the value of unbridled egoism 'fails to capture what we might call the Stoic demands Nietzsche places on the self and its cultivation: harshness toward oneself, self-discipline, self-control, honesty, and a profound love of fate'.¹⁹ Michael Ure, whose 2008 book is entitled *Nietzsche's Therapy*, goes even further and claims that 'what looms large in Nietzsche's thinking is the question of psychological health and sickness [...]. In the middle period, [...] he conceives the patient, piecemeal labour of psychological self-observation as a therapy of the soul'.²⁰ Ure argues that Nietzsche 'critically explores what we might call, borrowing from psychoanalytical parlance, the pathological symptoms of wounded narcissism. [...] Nietzsche draws on the Hellenistic and Stoic traditions to conceptualise a therapeutic art of self-cultivation oriented toward treating such pathologies'.²¹

Ure's book, however, has one major handicap, even apart from its neglect of the critical passages on the Stoic 'weapon against suffering' mentioned earlier: it fails to take as its starting point the texts which we know Nietzsche had read. Instead, he turns to Foucault, claiming that 'Foucault's schematic presentation of the concepts and practices of Hellenistic self-cultivation, especially his analysis of Roman Stoics, can be used to clarify the extent to which Nietzsche takes up not just its general ethical orientation, but also its substantive conception of the work of the self'.²² In order to see if his analysis is correct, as well as those of Martha Nussbaum and Keith Ansell-Pearson, much more historical work needs to be done, bearing in mind the possible risk of anachronistically failing to do justice to Nietzsche's knowledge and influences.

On top of this historical difficulty at least two more complicating factors should be considered in tracing the Stoic influence on Nietzsche's *amor fati*. Addressing the second question (what was Nietzsche's judgment regarding Stoicism in the years of introducing *amor fati*, and what aspects of it did he consider?) means that we have to deal with Nietzsche's peculiar way of writing: it is notoriously polemical and especially so when mentioning philosophers he admires. Socrates, possibly the most prominent example in this context, is analysed antagonistically in several texts²³, and yet we know that he was particularly relevant to Nietzsche. Neither the depiction of the Stoic as having a 'hard skin' with 'porcupine spines' nor that of Stoicism as a form of 'Bildsäulenkälte' in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* should therefore induce the overhasty conclusion that Stoicism is considered worthless. Moreover, there is a lack of consistency in Nietzsche's assessment of thinkers, a rule to which the Stoics form no exception. One negative remark might well be outweighed by another betraying consent and

¹⁸ Ansell-Pearson, K. (2011), 185. He refers to Nussbaum, M. (1994), 139-67.

¹⁹ Ansell-Pearson, K. (2011), 185. Another article Ansell-Pearson refers to in this context is Elveton, R.O. (2004).

²⁰ Ure, M. (2008), 3.

²¹ Ure, M. (2008), 4.

²² Ure, M. (2008), 59.

²³ The most famous one probably being *Götzen-Dämmerung* (GD) 'Das Problem des Sokrates' 6.67-73.

even sympathy. Both extremes may occur even in one book, as is the case for *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*: only a few pages away from the remark on ‘Bildsäulenkälte’ we find Nietzsche identifying himself as one of the ‘last Stoics’: ‘We will stay *harsh*, we, who are the last of the Stoics!’.²⁴ What is more, Nietzsche regularly discusses a particular philosopher without mentioning a name. This means that we should avoid limiting our scope to the texts with explicit references to Stoicism and develop a certain sensitivity to implicit references. Keeping all these difficulties in mind, it is vital to include the context for all remarks and follow Nietzsche’s very own advice on *Morgenröthe*: ‘My patient friends, this book desires for itself only perfect readers and philologists: *learn* to read me well!’²⁵ Taking this hint seriously usually proves to be the best method; this case is no different.

This brings us to the first, perhaps most important question: when and in what context does *amor fati* appear initially, and what connotation does it acquire in this context? Detecting a possibly Stoic background in its introduction presupposes at least a well formed idea of the meaning of *amor fati*. Unfortunately, since it only appears ten times in Nietzsche complete oeuvre (including the *Nachlass* and the letters), it is far from easily determined. In fact, some recent articles suggest new and interesting interpretations.²⁶ Not all of these betray awareness of its philological difficulties, however. Béatrice Han-Pile claims in her 2009 article ‘Nietzsche and Amor Fati’ that she has been able ‘to identify only seven passages’ on *amor fati*, of which one is from the controversial book *Der Wille zur Macht*.²⁷ Most commentators also assume without much further deliberation that *amor fati* must have just one consistent meaning. Yet, since the first passages occur in 1881 and the last in 1888, it might well be the case that its meaning develops or even changes, as many of Nietzsche’s concepts do. As far as I know, only Tom Stern takes this idea seriously.²⁸

Not only philological issues stand in the way of a good understanding of *amor fati*. Neither the conceptual meaning of ‘love’ nor that of ‘fate’ is unproblematic. Should we interpret love as an erotic drive, or rather, as Béatrice Han-Pile suggests, as an agapic gift? And to what extent does Nietzsche’s use of ‘fate’ entail the acceptance of determinism? Does ‘fate’ refer to a cosmic totality, as it does within Stoicism, or is it a personal concept, connected only with one’s very individual character traits or possibly tragic life history? And what kind of concept is *amor fati*? Is it, indeed, a moral or therapeutic device? Which patients does it attempt to cure in that case, and from what diseases? Or should we take it as a mere description instead? If so, a description of what exactly?

In the first chapter all these difficulties relating to *amor fati* – both philological and philosophical – will be mapped out. It will be argued that there is a difference between *amor fati* when it is introduced in 1881/1882 and that of later years, from *Also Sprach Zarathustra* on

²⁴ JGB 227 5.162: ‘Bleiben wir *hart*, wir letzten Stoikern!’. Translation by Norman, J. (2002), 118.

²⁵ *Morgenröthe* (M) Vorrede 5 3.17: ‘Meine geduldigen Freunde, dies Buch wünscht sich nur vollkommene Leser und Philologen: *lernt* mich gut lesen!’ Translation by Hollingdale, R.J. (1997), 5.

²⁶ To mention a few examples: Stern, T. (2013), and Domino, B. (2012).

²⁷ Han-Pile, B. (2009), 1. The passage from *Der Wille zur Macht* (WM) corresponds with NL 16[32] 13.492, which will be the reference used throughout this thesis, keeping in mind the highly controversial status of WM. For more information on the dubious history of this book for which Nietzsche’s sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche was responsible, see Fuchs, D. (1997).

²⁸ Stern, T. (2013).

(1884). The later *amor fati* can be seen as a more 'religious' concept, stressing the immanence of all individuals within a fated cosmos, and revealing what image Nietzsche has of himself, namely the fated thinker of life-affirmation in a history dominated by life-negating Christianity. This notion of *amor fati* has some striking similarities with what John Sellars has baptised 'Cosmic Stoicism': the idea that loving fate entails embracing the cosmos of which we are a small part, thereby essentially dissolving the boundary between the individual and the cosmos.²⁹ The early texts on *amor fati*, however, seem to involve a different notion of fate, one that is more subtle and not as inclusive as the later. So if *amor fati* is Stoic, one might think that this only applies to the later version. In that case it would be implausible for *amor fati* to be inspired by Stoicism. In that light, the question concerning the relation between *amor fati* and Stoicism becomes more complex; and the questions of the meaning of the early *amor fati*, and of Nietzsche's relation to Stoicism, become more pressing.

The second chapter sums up and analyses the parallels between *amor fati* and Stoicism in the secondary literature. It first reflects on the relation between *amor fati*, Stoicism, and the eternal return, investigating whether there are any conceptual or historical connections linking the three, and if so, of what kind these are. I conclude that the parallels are very limited; Nietzsche's own remarks on the eternal return cannot be taken as an argument that he was inspired by Stoicism when he introduced it. Next, I examine and nuance Sellars' thesis that there is a striking parallel between Nietzsche's *amor fati* and 'Cosmic Stoicism'. Thirdly, I offer a close reading of *JGB* 9, in which the Stoic adage 'live in accordance with nature' is rejected. Although this text discloses a multi-layered and complex relation to Stoicism, one that partly confirms Nabais' claim that Nietzsche covers up a striking similarity between his naturalism and that of the Stoics, it makes clear at the same time how Nietzsche cannot agree with the basic Stoic presupposition that knowledge of nature is possible (let alone attained).

Tracing all of Nietzsche's explicit references to the Stoics has resulted in an article on the lemma 'Stoa' to be published in the Nietzsche Dictionary. This forms the basis for analysing Nietzsche's historical approach of Stoicism in the third chapter. I present the main outcome of this research in three frameworks. The first concerns Nietzsche's engagement with Stoicism as a specific school within late antiquity, historically situated between pre-Socratic philosophy and Christianity.³⁰ Secondly, there are several remarks in which Stoicism is approached as a psychological attitude. In this context the question arises of whether the Stoic way of life deserves approval or rejection. Thirdly, some texts betray a direct engagement with Stoicism on a specific subject. The most prominent example of this are the reflections on pity, which are explored in more detail in chapter 4. Chapter 3 furthermore works out four of the main characteristics Nietzsche ascribes to Stoicism: (1) a lack of honesty, even dishonesty, theatre, pretension, arrogance; (2) a sense of hardness, coldness, numbness, stupidity, as the consequence of (3) a long and persistent ascetic overpowering of the passions (self-tyranny), out of (4) a desire for clarity, abstraction, systems, 'truth'.

I conclude this chapter by claiming that Nietzsche's interest in Stoicism is restricted mostly to the context of the scientific quest for knowledge – which puts into perspective the

²⁹ Sellars, J. (2006a), 157-71.

³⁰ I follow in this respect Nietzsche's own use of the term 'late antiquity'; in contemporary literature it usually describes the period roughly between the 2nd and the 8th Centuries AD.

contemporary analyses by Keith Ansell-Pearson, Martha Nussbaum and Michael Ure, who claim that Nietzsche's interest is mainly therapeutic. The next step must be to focus in more detail on Nietzsche's dealings with Stoicism in the years leading up to the first published pronouncement of *amor fati*, which is in Book IV of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, early 1882. This is the program for chapter 4. In contrast to chapter 3, which examines Nietzsche's reflection on Stoicism, chapter 4 explores his appropriation of it. This invokes, as has been mentioned, a more refined sensitivity to implicit references. I will offer a close analysis of the way in which Nietzsche initially adopts (*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*) and gradually (*Morgenröthe*) comes to reject (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*) the moral-psychological 'Kunstgriffen' of the Stoics in the context of the search for knowledge and science. Nietzsche's shifting thoughts on pity will be explored as well. And as it turns out, the disappointment with Stoicism as it is traceable in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* should indeed influence our understanding of *amor fati*.

Finally, chapter 5 returns to chapter 1 in its concern with interpreting *amor fati*. Other than chapter 1 though, chapter 5 does not analyse all occurrences of *amor fati*. This chapter will develop a new and nuanced account of *amor fati* in the context of the texts in which it occurs for the first time. The *Nachlass* texts of 1881 reveal a deepened interest in an organismic and evolutionary analysis of humanity, which Nietzsche strongly relates to the drive for truth understood as a 'Leidenschaft der Erkenntnis'. Seen in this light, *amor fati* turns out to be quite different from the Stoic adage to 'live in accordance with nature'; what is more, it is a concept that actually developed out of a growing sense of disappointment with the Stoic strategy for dealing with the desire for truth. The surprising result is that *amor fati*, when it is first introduced, is not only non-Stoic, or un-Stoic – it is even anti-Stoic.

