Nihilism and fiction

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Paul van Tongeren asks us to consider the possibilities for "true thinking and meaningful life" on the day of his retirement, and I cannot help but be struck by the circumstance. Like much of his work, this question is animated with an urgency which exceeds the field of professional philosophy. Therefore, posing this question on the day in which his philosophical life finally outgrows his professional life sounds like an indication of the liberation of the de-professionalized philosopher, but it also underlines the burden that comes from this liberation: being formally liberated from the instrumental value of thinking and from the instrumental meaning of life leads to questioning what other standards of meaning remain. For us, still among the fray, it rings like a reminder of the paradox of the professional philosopher, a warning that philosophy—if it is to be meaningful at all—must always exceed professional life. It must ask about "true thinking and meaningful life" once again. Is there any meaning at all underneath the conventions and institutions?

I. Naïve *and* Serious *Meaning*

The questions of "true thinking and meaningful life" are of course not separate. True thinking, as Heidegger points out, is not true knowledge or true belief. Indeed, it is thinking that is true not to its object, but to its own nature, namely, thinking that transforms and invests

the world with value.[1] In this sense, it is a function—probably a privileged function—of meaningful life and should be subsumed under it.

"Meaningful life," for its part, is an expression that contains the same ambivalence as the most famous of Nietzsche's own expressions for nihilism: the "death of god." In both cases, the mere formulation of the problem intimates a creative and subtle re-working of the relations between the objective and the subjective. Should we say that the "death of god" is the subjective realization of the objective fact that there is, and never was, any god? But then, why call this the "death of god," when surely it is not god (the object) that has gone through any transformation (say from existence to non-existence), but rather faith, or the confidence in god, that has faded? Indeed, Nietzsche tells us, the relations of subjectivity and objectivity, when it comes to belief, faith, confidence and recognition, are more subtle: the belief in god itself is the life of god, and conversely, the end of this belief is the death of god.

Similarly, does the phrase "meaningful life" denote a life whose meaning is bestowed upon it by an entity which, in order to bestow it, must exist? This is the case when we think of the "meaning" of our life as a mission, for example, in the cases of Wagner's character of Parsifal where some of the dramatic urgency surrounds the question of whether the hero will recognize that his life has, objectively, a meaning, even as he feels it to be meaningless. In such a case, the meaningfulness of our life is regarded as dependent on the objective existence of the meaning-bestowing entity. In a nihilistic context, which affirms the non-existence of such entities, this opens only dire prospects and indeed, it runs against Nietzsche's account. For Nietzsche on the contrary, nihilism is a historical occurrence and a temporally located predicament, in other words, it is independent from eternal and universal truths (about the existence or non-existence of the meaning-bestowing entity).

A. The hidden premise of Nihilism: Cognitivism

Following the lesson of the death of god, we should probably find a better understanding of what "meaningful life" might mean by appealing to a more subtle relation between the objective and the subjective: a meaningful life is not

[1] Martin Heidegger, *Was heißt Denken?* (Tübingen, 1994).

a life with a mission, but rather, it is a life lived *in the confidence* that there is meaning to it. Note that this does not immediately imply that regarding one's life as meaningful is the same as assuming the factual existence of a meaning-bestowing entity. It may be so, but it may not. This depends on which one of two possible but opposite genealogical accounts for the origins of the experience of meaning one endorses. The first genealogical account, which I shall call the cognitivist one, purports that we experience our life as meaningful because we (subjectively) believe in the existence of a meaning-bestowing entity "out there." In this genealogical order, the factual existence of the entity in question comes first, and the experience of meaningfulness depends on it. The second, which is anti-cognitivist, holds that we surmise the existence of a meaning-bestowing entity on the basis of a primary *pathos* of meaningfulness in our life. Nietzsche says that this is derived from a sense of "blessedness" (AC 50-51). In this case, the experience of meaningfulness comes first, and the meaning-bestowing entity is only construed on this basis. Indeed, on this view, the word "meaning" in the expression "meaning-bestowing entity" only makes any sense with reference to this original pathos. It is perhaps already visible, that this anti-cognitivist view corresponds to what Nietzsche calls the singularly Aristocratic view, as exemplified for example in his accounts of the *Pathos der Vornehmheit* (GM I 2): "my life is meaningful because it is my life," "the meaningfulness of my life is the given standard for measuring meaningfulness in general" says the Noble. Meaningfulness is self-fulfilled, it is identical with the feeling of meaningfulness and therefore cannot be taken away just because whatever it rests on is taken away (as is the case in nihilism), and this is because it rests on itself: the experience of meaning is primary, not derived. The question which remains, of course, is the following: assume that we embrace the non-cognitivist view and think of ourselves as standards of meaningfulness, how can we then ever cease to feel the meaningfulness in our lives? How can nihilism ever come about? This is, of course, the key question of the *Genealogy*: how could the Nobles ever have been brought to their knees, how could they ever have bought into the narrative that states that the standard for meaning of their lives lies outside of them? In less elegant terms, how could our originary anti-cognitivism have provided the basis for our current cognitivism?

We must be careful in answering this question: because the transition from anti-cognitivism to cognitivism, now that it is connected to the slave

revolt in morality, must be regarded not as a *recognition* of the structure of meaning, but as an ideological construct, as a contingent *institution*. The force of the cognitivist narrative of the slaves is not based on its truth, it is based on its persuasiveness, and Nietzsche spends pages upon pages showing that this persuasiveness is made of dirty tricks of deception, intimidation and terror (see in particular GM II). This is important, because it suggests that, firstly, there is no *necessity* for cognitivism. Secondly, and more importantly, it suggests that although anti-cognitivism was overcome by cognitivism, it was overcome by being turned against itself: indeed, in their struggle against the masters, all the slaves had in their possession were the masters' pre-existing intellectual capacities: the masters valued their own lives as meaningful. In order to use this valuation against themselves, the slaves had to preliminarily endorse their view of meaningfulness, and indeed, strengthen it: they needed to speak to the masters in their own language. It was not what they meant by "meaningfulness" that could be transformed, but rather, the correlative idea that they were the standard of "meaningfulness," for this was to be transferred to the backworlds (Hinterwelten). Thirdly, this suggests that we are still now operating from the original (anti-cognitivist and aristocratic) notion of meaningfulness which is highly subjective, and that, therefore, this notion can be retrieved independently of the attached cognitivist claim that meaningfulness is dependent on the existence of an external, meaning-bestowing entity. Indeed, it is only here, when we combine cognitivism with the discovery that such entities cannot be said to exist, that the problem of nihilism appears at all.

B. Nietzsche's Genealogy of "Meaning"

Let me push these three points a bit further: all of this means that we must ask the question of whether and how "meaning" makes any sense: in a world devoid of meaning as nihilism describes it for us, how can we even tell what meaning is? Everything takes place as if "meaning" means something even as there is (objectively) no such thing as meaning. What is the experience which the fallacy called "meaning" is therefore purporting to grasp? This of course, is only a true question for objects that are *sui-generis*. As Descartes famously tells us, the meaning of "unicorn" tells us nothing of the existence of unicorns, precisely because unicorns are not *sui-generis*. In the case of meaning

however, the Nietzschean analysis of meaninglessness constantly encounters the problems related to the fact that meaning, in the ethical-normative sense of "meaningful life," can only be said to be absent if we have some preliminary experience of what a meaningful life *would* be. This is not a matter of reiterating Descartes' argument however: the point is not to say that our concept of meaning indicates the existence of meaning, but rather that it indicates or relies upon an *experience*—an illusion perhaps—of meaningfulness, what, as I have just recalled, Nietzsche called a sense of blessedness, or the *Pathos der Vornehmheit*. But this is the point that Nietzsche has been pursuing all his life: how can illusions be illusions of things that are not only absent but non-existent, impossible, and, even, inconceivable. Many of Nietzsche's most famous texts are aimed at addressing how these fundamental concepts may have some meaning whilst denoting nothing. There may be more, but I think some of the concepts that most visibly undergo this treatment include "reality" or "the real world" (the argument here is that the real world is the world of appearances— what Nietzsche calls "this world"—"once again") (KSA 13.11)[2] "value," which the second essay of *Zur Genealogie der Moral* simply reduces to pain, and of course, "meaning" which is derived from the intensity of our engagement. Nietzsche's treatment of these three concepts has three important features in common. First, the genealogical dimension of the argument suggests that such concepts are always derived from a preexisting experience. Second, such concepts are always intended to replace and dominate the experience that they are derived from (a basic anti-cognitivist commitment). What this means is that they are meant to provide the illusion that the genealogical order of derivation is reversed: it is not the "real world" that is derived from "this world" but rather the opposite; it is not "value" which is derived from power but rather the opposite (through the thematic of legitimacy); and, it is not meaningfulness that is derived from the intensity of our engagement but rather the opposite. We do not recognize our lives, others, actions or ideals as meaningful because we engage with them, but rather, we engage with them on the basis and on the condition that they *are* meaningful (as per the meaning-bestowing entity). Finally, this suggests that Nietzsche needs to provide

[2] On the "real world" being an imitation of the world of experience see also GD Streifzüge.

an account of how exactly the very concept derived from an experience which provides its sense (that is to say, the experience that makes this concept *mean* anything and gave rise to it) can turn against it whilst remaining potent (significant) enough to have such dramatic causal consequence (such as the psychologico-civilizational crisis of nihilism):

> First *images*—to explain how images arise in the spirit. Then *words*, applied to images. Finally *concepts*, possible only when there are words—the collecting together of many images in something nonvisible but audible (word). The tiny amount of emotion to which the "word" gives rise, as we contemplate similar images for which *one* word exists—this weak emotion is the common element, the basis of the concept. That weak sensations are regarded as alike, sensed *as being the same*, is the fundamental fact. Thus confusion of two sensations that are close neighbours, as we take note of these sensations; but *who* is taking note? Believing is the primal beginning even in every sense impression: a kind of affirmation the first intellectual activity! A "holding-true" in the beginning! Therefore it is to be explained: how "holding-true" arose! What sensation lies behind "true"? (KSA 11.58)[3]

Nietzsche's response is radical: our default mode of engagement with the world is belief. Belief, in this sense, precedes and institutes the reference to truth, and not the reverse: truth is what we say about that which we strongly and intensely engage with.

It therefore seems that we must recognize two kinds of meaningfulness. The first is the experience that "meaning" is meant to capture. It is an experience that precedes and constitutes the judgment: "this is meaningful." In this experience, meaning is derived from the quality and intensity of the experience, not from its (perceived) truthfulness. The latter notion of meaning, on the contrary, is dependent on a truth-belief. Indeed, this is why the (perceived) discovery of the truth of the death of god is experienced as the end of meaning. This involves a concept of meaning so demanding that even the experience that gave rise to it can no longer satisfy it. For the sake of clarity, let

[3] On the coincidence of the development of consciousness and the development of the faculty of imagination, see GM I 10 and 15; GM II 18, 19 and 23; GM III 12; FW 107, 294 and 359.

me call the original experience of meaning (derived from the *pathos der Vornhemheit*) "naïve meaning" and the post-nihilistic one "serious meaning"—"serious" not in the sense of "correct," but in reference to what Zarathustra calls the "spirit of gravity," [Geist der Schwere] (Z III 11) namely, serious in the sense that it presumes its own objective justification. By contrast, naïve meaning, it is worth noting, is not naïve because it *ignores* its groundlessness, but rather because—in good aristocratic fashion—it *disdains* it.

This distinction might perhaps help us cast the nihilistic predicament in a slightly new light: nihilism now appears as the mismatch between "naïve meaning" and the demands contained by "serious meaning": serious meaning is dissatisfied with naïve meaning—it demands grounds. As suggested above, this is, in a nutshell, the stake of the slave revolt in morality.

Asking whether there is any "beyond" of nihilism therefore amounts to asking whether this excess in the demands of "serious meaning" over "naïve meaning" is indeed necessary, unavoidable or inextricable: can our craving for meaning be satisfied by naïve meaning even as the demands of "serious meaning" are dissatisfied? Put another way: could it be that the demands of "serious meaning" exceed the requirement for the overcoming of nihilism?

C. Hyperbole and Anti-Cognitivism

As Paul van Tongeren reminds us, nihilism is a state of the modern soul characterized by some sort of depression and frustration. Although it is presented as the consequence of a "discovery," nihilism is not the same thing as this discovery: nihilism is not the knowledge that there is no reality supporting meaning, but the psychological reaction to this discovery. The question we must ask, therefore, is whether such a psychological reaction follows unavoidably from this discovery. Answering "yes" involves the assumption that meaning is dependent on truth. This view, which I called "psychological cognitivism," suggests that one cannot attribute meaning to an experience unless this meaning-attribution is justified by an entity taken to be real. Non-nihilistic times, of course, are replete with such entities, including god, good and evil, and heaven and hell. In modern culture as a whole, it seems that psychological cognitivism is the common-sense view to the point that doubting it might even appear absurd. Yet, as I have argued above, there is no contradiction in questioning it. Indeed, Nietzsche's genealogical account is largely necessitat-

ed by the assumption that cultures of the past did not always subscribe to it: it took the slave revolt in morality to even *teach* primitive peoples to subject their experience of meaningfulness to their beliefs about the truth. From the point of view of the slaves, this move was necessary, since the only realm they could claim control of was the realm of the invisible, which became marketed to their masters as the realm of truth, but all of this shows a genealogical (if not historical) contingency behind the perceived necessity of psychological cognitivism.

Indeed, Paul van Tongeren reminds us that the story of the coming about of the excessive demands for "serious meaning" made by psychological cognitivism takes place in three steps. The transitional device which made possible the passage from one step to another was the all-important Nietzschean concept of hyperbole: a linguistic form in which the signifier exceeds the signified and authoritatively induces belief in the impossible. In 1888, Nietzsche talks of hyperbole as the tool that allowed mankind to make a leap from identifying reality with experience (the aristocratic view) to assuming that reality stood behind experience (the exact move described two years earlier in the *Genealogy's* account of the slave revolt in morality):

> At bottom, it has been an aesthetic taste that has hindered mankind most: it believed in the picturesque effect of truth [*den pittoresken Effekt der Wahrheit*], it demanded of the man of knowledge that he should produce a powerful effect on the imagination [*der Phantasie*]. This looks as if an antithesis has been achieved, a *leap* made [*ein* Sprung *gemacht worden sei*]; in reality, the schooling [*der Schulung*] through moral hyperbole [*die Moral-Hyperbeln*] prepared the way step by step for that milder pathos that became incarnate in the scientific character.[4]

This is the trick of the slaves (their favorite hyperboles being hell – eternal pain – and heaven – eternal pleasure), and hyperbole is the weapon they used to overcome their masters. In aphorism 354 of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Nietzsche reminds us that this is also the tool of the artists who are entrusted with the excesses of consciousness (i.e.: the parts of it that are not exhausted in the communicative needs of the herd animal man).

[4] MusA XXIII 272 and AC 13 (Nietzsche's emphases).

Indeed, for Nietzsche, all seems to indicate that this excess is an irreducible property of discourse, and therefore that hyperbolic thinking is and has always been possible. This possibility entails that language always jumps ahead of itself and affirms more than is warranted. This was the case when the process of nihilism turned "naïve meaning" into "serious meaning" (its hyperbolic version): a concept without any possible referent. But of course, the talent of the slave revolt in morality was not to *imagine* hyperboles, however violent. Rather, it was to present them as *true*, to make them objects of belief. A second, perhaps more important point, therefore, is that what "believing" means at the opening and at the closure of the nihilistic era has changed. In line with Paul van Tongeren, we must admit that the history of nihilism is not just the history of false beliefs and how they came to undercut themselves. What is added, I think, is a change in our notion and in our experience of belief. Paul van Tongeren writes that at the closure of "Nihilism 3," "we remain caught in the longing for what we cannot believe in any more." Yet, his insistence on the long history of nihilism reminds us of a time (archaeological, logical, historical or genealogical — this is of no importance here), where those now-*dis*credited beliefs were themselves not *ac*credited yet: a time when we came to believe what was hitherto unbelievable. In short, we are now unable to believe what truth-discourses have discredited even though those discourses were initially unwarrantedly instituted.

So, if we bear in mind that the difference between naïve and serious meaning is that naïve meaning had no reference to objective truth, while serious meaning does, it follows that Nietzsche is committed to the anthropological possibility that belief be disconnected from truth, that is to say, to anti-cognitivism. One might say that the sting of nihilism lies in a hidden premise — the cognitivist premise — namely that meaning must be indexed on truth. In this view, a meaningful life relies on a belief in an "ideal." It is indifferent as to which side of the belief the hidden premise is placed on: either it *assumes* that meanings are indexed on truth and *states* that meaningfulness is indexed on belief, or it *states* that meanings are indexed on belief and *assumes* that beliefs are indexed on truth. In both cases however, cognitivism may be rejected in favor of anti-cognitivism, for the "will to truth" is an "acquired drive" (NL 1885 34[81]), presumably, one acquired at the "time" of the slave revolt in morality.

Two questions remain however:

- First of all, is naïve meaning still accessible to us?
- Secondly, is "naïve meaning" meaningful enough?

In the remainder of this talk, I would like to sound an optimistic note and answer "yes" to both questions.

II. Fiction as the Anti-Cognitivist Paradigm

A. The Lenzer Heide Note

Let me begin by briefly addressing the famous Lenzer Heide entry in the *Nachlass* of 1887, which Paul van Tongeren cites in his introduction. The note is ambiguous about the status of the will to truth or, in this case, of veracity (*Wahrhaftigkeit*). It suggests that the value of veracity was *developed* (*Grosszog*), which suggests that they were always there, albeit to a lesser *degree*, although we know little about what it was before this development. However, the same entry continues by declaring that such needs were "implanted" (*gepflanzt*), suggesting, this time, that this value was invented or created, not developed from some preexisting substratum. Although admitting that such needs were created and not just developed is not enough to suggest that any form of meaningfulness (albeit "naïve" meaning) was available before "nihilism 1," it prepares the ground for such a view. Here, I only wish to refer to the famous fourth section of the Vorrede of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* of 1885 which declares that "the Greeks were superficial out of profundity" in their disdain for truth. This might be enough to suggest that Nietzsche entertains the possibility that a satisfying life was possible before "nihilism 1." Indeed, other texts from the same time, including question the necessity to value truth rather than untruth, and cast this need as arbitrary (FW 344, JGB 4 and, most famously, JGB).

Secondly, section 1 of the Lenzer Heide note refers to "practical" and "theoretical nihilism": "Morality was the great antidote against both practical and theoretical nihilism" ["Moral war das große Gegenmittel gegen den praktischen und theoretischen Nihilismus"] (NL 1887 5[71]). It seems that "practical" and "theoretical nihilism" are narrowly connected but distinct. These expressions are rare in Nietzsche's writings. "Theoretical nihilism" appears one

other time, alongside "practical nihilism," in the *Nachlass* of 1885 (2[131]—a draft of GS 346 which Paul van Tongeren cites), and "practical nihilism" also appears in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*'s "Versuch einer Selbstkritik." These texts suggest that "practical nihilism" denotes the feeling of the meaninglessness of life and that "theoretical nihilism" describes the belief that ideals are not true. The "antidote" to both, however, is the same: it is "die *Moral*."

Although they share the same antidote, Nietzsche rejects any necessary connection between the two: there is no necessity to the view that our lives should lose their meaning just because truth has become inaccessible. I take this to indicate that Nietzsche leaves room for "naïve meaning." Here, I think we come closer to an understanding of the change not just in the *contents* of our beliefs, but also in their *forms* that has been occasioned by the advent of morality. This is a change from the indifference of life to truth (which I called "naïve" meaning) as exemplified in Greek superficiality, to its dependence on truth. It is a momentous change: what the advent of morality has taught us is that *nothing but the truth* is a ground for life. But, Nietzsche writes, this is an "implanted" prejudice, not warranted by necessity.

This might help understand why Nietzsche continues with a call for *moderation* in sections 4 and 15 of the Lenzer Heide note: the misguided habit of grounding living upon truth-belief, he argues, has made "moderation" impossible. This is because the indexation of the good life on the truthful life [*Wahrhaftigkeit*] forces life into the binary system of truth and falsity, and this precludes moderation. I regard this appeal to moderation as an appeal to separate meaning from truth once more, and therefore as an invitation for us to abandon the habit of "serious" meaning.

As I pointed out earlier, the "attempt at self-criticism" in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* seems to have some strong lexical connections with the Lenzer Heide note. Let me try to probe whether it contains some indication on how to read the note. In it, Nietzsche rejects the idea that there was any need for any consolation of metaphysics (which in the context of GT I take to be his way of talking about morality) by pointing to the way of Zarathustra, that is to say, "laughter." This looks very much like another attack on "serious meaning", as evidenced by the related passage from *Zarathustra*, one that castigates the "spirit of gravity." (Z III 11) Another, contemporaneous aphorism, declares the following: "The maturity of man—that means, to have reacquired the seriousness that one had as a child at play" (JGB 94). Assuming that by "maturi-

ty," Nietzsche means the ability to overcome nihilism, I take these references to play and to laughter to be gesturing at a restoration of "naïve meaning." In the case of laughter and play, however, the gesture is mostly metaphorical. In order to find more precision about what this "naïve meaning" really stands for, we must return to Nietzsche's analysis of the slave revolt, for it is there that Nietzsche explains how the ingredients available in the pre-serious world were put to use to institute the serious world. It is therefore there that we find a more detailed description of what this pre-serious world was made of.

B. Fiction

Paul van Tongeren regards the transitional element upon which the slave revolt hinges as "fictions."[5] Fictionality was an ingredient that pre-existed the slave revolt, but it also fuelled it and allowed it to overcome the old world. It seems to me that fictionality can indeed be regarded as our only hope to restore "naïve meaning" and move beyond nihilism. For in fiction, the experience of meaningfulness is entirely and transparently disjoined from any reference to truth—and we do not mind. The proposal, of course, is not to find meaning by *producing* fictions—the will to truth and its self-undercutting have blocked this path irreversibly—and as a result, the "restoration" of naïve meaning should not be regarded as a revival of the past way of meaningful living. On the contrary, what must be exploited is our *ability* to engage with fiction. This ability, according to Nietzsche, precedes even our acquisition of the will to truth, but it has not disappeared with it. In section 34 of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, Nietzsche famously calls "the world insofar as it is of any concern to us" (the world of experience) a "fiction" And the same section continues by declaring that "it is simply a moral prejudice to believe that truth has more value than appearances, it is even the most unfounded hypothesis in the world." Again, Nietzsche calls for a separation of value from truth in the context of a recognition that the world as we experience it is fictional. Finally, anticipating the call for moderation that is voiced in the Lenzer Heide

[5] Paul van Tongeren, "Nihilisme en Moraal," *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 53, no. 4 (2013), 596.

note, the section calls on us to evade the "radical opposition between true and false." The step beyond nihilism requires that *we learn to treat life itself as a fiction*.

If the human ability to engage with fiction is a remnant of our pre-nihilistic history, we should perhaps take heart in the omnipresence of fiction in our lives: this is an area which nihilism has left untouched. This was to be expected: the slave revolt in morality has in fact relied on fictionality to an unprecedented extent, and as Nietzsche himself recognizes it in the third essay of *Zur Genealogie der Moral* , in so doing, it has increased the human powers of imagination. It is part of the paradox of the slave revolt that it had to demand that the feeling of "naïve meaning" be indexed on truth even as it used fiction to enforce this demand. This paradox is the weakness of nihilism and our chance to step beyond it: as per the laws of dialectical transformation, nihilism had to preserve one area from the old world, one that would serve as a transitional device. In this one area, meaning remained untouched by theoretical nihilism. This area is fiction as an object that arouses a kind of psychological engagement indifferent to any truth-statement.

In order to understand the kind of fiction I have in mind, we must pay heed to two reversals contained in the great reversal of the slave revolt. The first is the logical order between reality and fiction, with reality derived from fiction and not the reverse. Although this reverse parasitism is (or has become) counter-intuitive, it is endorsed by Nietzsche, who describes the slave revolt as *instituting* the concept of *reality* (the backworlds, the "true world") out of fiction, and not the reverse. The second is a reversal of priority: fiction is not *directed* or *aimed at* reality. Its horizon is not reality. If the Greeks refused to lift the veil of Isis, it is precisely because to them, the meaning in their life did not refer to or rely on truth. As I noted earlier, their naivety was not to *ignore* the groundlessness of their lives but to *disdain* it.

The appeal to fiction might seem naïve, in the bad sense this time. Can we really expect fiction to fulfill our needs for meaning? After all, we do feel a pinch when things we took to be real turn out to be "just" fiction. There is no doubt that we will for many years, perhaps centuries, feel nostalgia for a life whose meaning once relied on "ideals" taken to be real. But this nostalgia is not a sign of insufficiency, simply a withdrawal symptom. Nietzsche himself, who cannot be accused of taking nihilism too lightly, appealed in the Lenzer Heide note to a "moderate" form of life which could only arise from

a disjunction of the practical and the theoretical. Fiction seems particularly suited to this task: for fiction not only separates the practical from the theoretical—we engage practically (by crying for example, but also through a wide range of behavior) with fictional events and characters that we theoretically believe to be unreal—but it *exploits* this distinction towards the creation of a meaningful experience unrelated to any ideal and towards the promotion of a meaningful life.

For there is meaningfulness in engaging in fiction: in order to persuade ourselves of this, we could apply to it the criterion of nihilism itself. If fiction were a meaningless experience, it would leave us feeling sick with nihilism. It is hard to prove that it does not, for fiction comes in all different shapes, from entertainment to personal life-narratives and, probably, perception too. But what one could point out, however, is that even in a world (the Christian-ascetic world) where ideals were the true standards of meaningfulness, fiction was not frowned upon as futile or meaningless. It does not seem to have a subaltern value to any other meaningful pursuits. Indeed, its permanence across all the various steps of nihilism seems to demonstrate its immunity to nihilism.

Conclusion:

There are two necessary conditions for nihilism:

(1) The hidden cognitivist premise which claims that meaning is dependent on truth. There is no logical, psychological, metaphysical or anthropological necessity to it. In fact, the structure of the slave revolt is a structure of redirection of belief towards truth, and of the constitution of truth as the object of belief (through saturation). In other words, belief *precedes* the concept, the experience and the discourse of truth.

(2) The discovery of meaninglessness (*a* truth), i.e. the "death of god." They are not however, both satisfied, for the first is only a prejudice. As long as we remain committed to it, we shall place it as a condition to any meaningful life, but there is no need to do so. Indeed, our ability to operate outside of its diktats is evidenced every day in our engagement with fiction: in fiction, we find meaning that is not indexed to reality or truth.

> The model for a meaningful life infused with this liberation from the hidden premise is our everyday experience of fiction.

Nietzsche's entire oeuvre could be read as an exploitation of the power of creation and the recognition that creation was directly derived from *misunderstandings*. The ontological question behind this, of course, is about the possibility of such misunderstandings. Nietzsche encounters it in language: words create misunderstandings about the world and they do so because of their ambiguous status: both *part of* and *about* the world. Values are derived from discourses and they become created out of a skillful exploitation of their ambiguous character by a class Nietzsche calls the "priests" (that is to say, the scholars). This revolution by the scholars redoubles the originary ambiguity into a second-order ambiguity: words are now taken to be unambiguous and excised from their ambiguous nature—for values, once instituted, are not ambiguous but absolute. This, Nietzsche suggests, should contain a great lesson for overcoming nihilism, and a great lesson for those scholars who seek to redeem their caste: it is by retrieving the originary ambiguity of words that values can be created anew. Yet, this must be done in such a way that it avoids the redoubling of this ambiguity: for solidifying values into absolutes is now a closed route. For Nietzsche, the lesson of the priest is that the ambiguity that structures human life is an opportunity for overcoming nihilism: it demonstrates the continuity, and not the opposition, between the groundlessness of naive meaningfulness and the grounding provided by values; it teaches us, finally, that the healing and productive power of values needs not be grounded in truth, not even in truth claims. Indeed, one of the key discoveries of the *Genealogy* is the realization that civilizations have constructed a system of values whose firmness is more than sufficient to overcome nihilism, not out of truth-belief, but out of fiction. The call of the redeeming scholar, the call of Zarathustra, is a call for a healing worldview. But first, the scholars must teach themselves how to create this new world: they must understand the possibilities contained in the existing world, they must retrieve the aristocratic, anti-cognitivist view.