An Agon with Nihilism: Applying an Agonal Approach to Nihilism in Nietzsche

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In sterquilinus inventiur (In filth it will be found) – Alchemical dictum

"The path to one's own heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of one's own hell."
(*The Gay Science* 338)

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Contents:

Introduction

In sterquilinus inventiur ('In filth it will be found') is an alchemical dictum of which the psychoanalyst Carl Jung was said to be fond. This captures a central aspect of Jungian psychoanalytic theory, namely that 'that which you most need will be found where you least want to look'.[1] The way this cashed out for Jung was in the belief that it was through confrontation with, rather than repression of, that which we most feared or which most threatened us, that we would be able to heal our psychological wounds.[2]

We find a similar approach of overcoming-through-confrontation in Herman Siemens' agonal model which he constructs from Nietzsche's concept of the agon.[3] Despite only being discussed at any length by Nietzsche in his short work *Homers Wettkampf* (one of the 'Five prefaces to Five Unwritten Books' gifted to Cosmina Wagner in 1873) the agon has received attention as a lens with which to understand his work more broadly.[4] Literally meaning 'contest' in Greek, the agon is used to denote the ancient Greek institution of contest which was applied in all spheres of life. Siemens argues that this amounts to a form of productive conflict which can be applied conceptually to make sense of various areas of Nietzsche's work.[5] One such area that Siemens focuses on is the modern mental malady of ressentiment, which presents a major challenge to Nietzsche's life-long project of transvaluation.[6] Siemens argues that we can use the agon as a therapeutic model to contest and overcome ressentiment. This begs the question, what other problems in Nietzsche's work have the potential to benefit from such an agonal therapy?

One key issue in Nietzsche's work, often associated with his famous injunction that 'God is dead', is the problem of nihilism. Whether mentioned directly or indirectly, it is a problem that crops up both in his early and late work – and especially his unpublished fragments – and has a significant literature dedicated to understanding and interpreting it.[7] As such this thesis asks whether an agonal approach to nihilism is possible, and if so what this would look like.

Approaching a topic as broad as nihilism immediately requires clarification as to what kind of nihilism is being discussed, to which Chapter Two is largely dedicated. Firstly however, in Chapter One I will unpack Siemens' agonal treatment of ressentiment so as to establish what grounding this gives us in regards to a possible application to nihilism. In this chapter I will argue that in his agonal treatment of the 'mental malady' of ressentiment Siemens gives us an agonal model which has the potential to be applied to other such mental maladies, beyond ressentiment.

The question then becomes, whether we can see nihilism as the kind of mental malady to which an agonal approach can be taken. As nihilism is such a broad term even within

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[1] This quote is often attributed to Jung as it in many ways epitomises his theory of individuation; although its exact origin is unknown.
[2] Storr, A. (1982) *Jung.* Fontana, p. 80.
[3] Siemens, H. W. (2021) *Agonal Perspectives on Nietzsche's Philosophy of Critical Transvaluation*. De Gruyter.
[4] *Ibid.* pp.2-7
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] Siemens, H.W. (2001) 'Nietzsche's agon with ressentiment: Towards a therapeutic reading of critical transvaluation.' *Continental philosophy review*. 34 (1), 69–93, pp. 69-70.
[7] van Tongeren, P. (2018) *Friedrich Nietzsche and European nihilism*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 26-44.

Nietzsche's work, the first section of Chapter Two briefly explores the different ways in which Nietzsche uses the term. From here I focus on one of his unpublished fragments entitled 'Nihilism as a psychological state'. I argue that in Nietzsche's descriptions of how this nihilism manifests and what drives it, we find distinct similarities to the kind of malady that Chapter One established as being amenable to agonal treatment. As such, Chapter Two concludes that this type of psychological nihilism presents itself as a promising candidate for agonal treatment.

Having established that such a treatment is plausible, Chapter Three investigates whether it is possible. To do this I first use Siemens' criteria for the agon that were explored in Chapter One, and argue that whilst an agon with nihilism is *prima facie* threatened by an energy deficit, by quitting defensive expenditures, this energy becomes available for use in agonal contestation. With this I hope to have shown that an agonal approach to nihilism is theoretically possible.

The question remains however, what the implications of this agon with nihilism are. In response to this I make two suggestions: firstly that we can see it as providing a certain strengthening against dogmatism, in that the understanding of inherent meaninglessness occasioned in psychological nihilism, challenges dogmatic views that posit alternate 'true' worlds. Secondly that the dynamic of affirmation and contestation which the agon involves, can be seen to cultivate a dynamic sense of measure in the individual. Finally, I conclude by entertaining but challenging the objection that this notion of measure might have un-Nietzschean connotations; arguing that this position does not give full sufficient consideration to developmental features in Nietzsche's philosophy and thus that there remains sufficient space for Siemens' reading, and thus my own.

1. Sickness, Heath and the Agon

Herman Siemens has argued that the agon (an ancient Greek notion, translating as 'contest' or 'struggle') can be used as a therapeutic technique with which we can address the 'mental malady' of ressentiment.[8] In fact, for Siemens therapy precisely is an agon between sickness and health. In this chapter I will argue that although the focus of Siemens' investigation is ressentiment, what he gives us is a model that we can apply to other mental maladies or psychological sicknesses. As such the most part of this chapter is dedicated to an exegesis of Siemens' essay 'Nietzsche's Agon with Ressentiment: Towards a Therapeutic Reading of Critical Transvaluation'. I will begin by introducing the problem that Siemens seeks to solve; namely the threat that ressentiment poses to the project of transvaluation. From here I will outline the four problems that his endeavour to therapise ressentiment encounters, before moving on to how he sees the concept of the agon as meeting these demands. Finally, I will make the case for the applicability of this model beyond ressentiment.

1.1 Siemens' Agon with Ressentiment

Nietzsche's project of transvaluation seeks to contest the prevailing (Christian-platonic) values of Europe in an attempt to raise life as the highest value.[9] This project is threatened however by the mental malady of ressentiment that has taken hold in Europe from which we must be freed if such transvaluation is to take place. This raises the issue however, of whether ressentiment is even something which can be therapised or which we can be redeemed from.

In asking this question Siemens comes up against four main problems. First amongst them is the seemingly incompatible elements of Nietzsche's philosophy which make it unclear whether a redemptive or therapeutic reading of sickness is possible. On the one hand Nietzsche seems to express the desire to overcome ressentiment; he calls it 'sickness' and 'decadence', and advocates for the 'health' and 'future' of mankind.[10] Whilst on the other hand, he condemns healing; he deems the desire to heal as the instinct of declining life and his Zarathustra specifically *refuses* to heal his followers. GS 120 even goes so far as to suggest that illness is indispensable; questioning whether "the will to health alone is not a prejudice, a cowardice."[11] As such he both affirms the will to health *and* values sickness. Siemens' first problem is therefore, how to reconcile these two positions. What *is* clear is that any such thinking-together will require a redetermination of the concept of health.

Siemens' second problem, which complicates this further, is that Nietzsche's work seems to require a therapeutic approach to ressentiment which *is not* at the same time redemptive. In his discussion of Romantic and Classical art Nietzsche describes how Romantic art is characterised by a refusal to accept pain and a rejection of the 'growing, struggling life' that he idolises.[12] Instead it seeks to be freed from conflict and numbed to its suffering through indulgence in fantasies of pain-free happy endings and the destruction of antagonistic forces. This is for Nietzsche the mark of declining life, that has to falsify the inherently conflictual

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[8] Siemens, 'Nietzsche's agon with ressentiment'
[9] *Ibid.* pp. 69-70
[10] *Ibid.* p. 70
[11] *The Gay Science* 120
[12] *Ibid.* pp. 72-3

nature of reality in order to cope.[13] The problem this creates for Siemens is clear – if a therapeutic reading of Nietzsche is going to be possible it must somehow be free of any redemptive impulses. In other words, it must will health whilst not willing the removal of or freedom from sickness.

The third problem Siemen's encounters is that of an energy deficit. Opposed to the declining life of Romanticism, Nietzsche poses the Classical which is characterised by an 'excess' of life.[14] The Classical, unlike Romanticism, Nietzsche regards as able to have a positive therapeutic affect as it affirms the conflict inherent in life rather than seeking to escape it.[15] As such, 'good therapy' requires excess as a precondition – but Nietzsche is clear that the modern human being, after the long affliction of ressentiment, finds themselves in the opposite condition; debilitated.[16] Thus Siemens is faced with an energy deficit; if an effective therapeutic approach is to be embarked upon, some energy source must first be found to raise humanity out of its depleted state.

The fourth and final problem is that seeking a route out of ressentiment runs the risk of repeating that which it criticises.[17] The project of transvaluation is inherently about reversing weakness into power and thus in its desire to escape slave morality the project risks repeating the vengeful attitude which brought about slave morality in the first place. Therefore, if this is to be avoided, an approach must be found that seeks to overcome ressentiment and slave morality in such a way that resists the vengeful impulse to annihilate to it.

Having laid out the four problems that a therapeutic reading raises, in the second section of his paper Siemens argues for an agonal view of Nietzsche's transvaluation which can then form the basis of an agonal view of therapy. To do this he first introduces the concept of the agon and explores to what extent it can be seen to address the obstacles to a therapeutic reading which were encountered in the first section.

The agon is an ancient Greek concept and way of life which Nietzsche treats in his early work *Homer's Contest*. It is, Siemens tells us, a dynamic of contestation between a plurality of more-or-less equal forces, which was found in all aspects of Greek life, whether sport, art or political debate.[18] He describes it as follows:

> "Agonal contestation engages the antagonists in a complex interplay of mutual affirmation and mutual negation, a "play of forces" [*Wettspiel der Kräfte*] that stimulates or provokes each to deeds that would outbid the other, while containing both within the limits of measure."[19]

Thus it is a mode of contest between a group of forces (individuals, ideas, values etc.) in which each is trying to defeat *but not destroy* its fellow contestants: this is what is meant by "mutual affirmation and mutual negation". What results from this is a productive kind of conflict in

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[13] *Ibid.* pp. 72-3
[14] *Ibid.* p. 72
[15] *Ibid.* p. 73
[16] *Ibid.* p. 74
[17] *Ibid.* pp. 74-6
[18] *Ibid.* p. 77
[19] *Ibid.*

which the contestation pushes each to their maximum whilst remaining measured and thus avoiding the destructive possibilities of antagonism. It is productive insofar as it creates conditions of antagonism that drive forces or contestants to extend themselves beyond what they could have achieved independently.

The other key feature of the agon is that it is open-ended and thus infinitely repeatable.[20] As no party is ever destroyed, there is neither absolute loss nor absolute victory; one may win a given 'round' (for example, like a given year of the Olympic Games) but this victory is only provisional as soon another bout will resume and the winner is thrown in once again to compete on the same footing as all the other contestants. The agon is therefore essentially a productive mode of contestation; which can be enacted physically - such as between individual contestants in a debate or running race – or abstractly, between forces or values in a struggle for primacy.

Siemens then argues that not only can we see Nietzsche's project of transvaluation as centred around this agonal dynamic described in *Homer's Contest*, but that it is able to resolve and satisfy a remarkable amount of the problems and conditions for a therapeutic reading that we encountered in the first section.[21]

Firstly, the agonal dynamic of mutual affirmation and negation helps us think together the seeming irreconcilability of a will to health and an affirmation of sickness that was initially encountered. As the agon is open-ended and prohibits the destruction of antagonistic forces, an agonal approach to sickness gives sickness its due as Nietzsche requires. In fact it affirms sickness as it is only through the contest with sickness that health is possible. Such an understanding of sickness is strikingly similar to picture of health that Nietzsche outlines in GS 370: an energetic dynamic between health and sickness which thrives on that which challenges it as it is through such productive challenges that it grows stronger[22] - what Pasley calls "health in the teeth of sickness".[23] This understanding of health as necessarily intertwined with, and thriving off sickness as a stimulant of greater strength and vitality will be key to the agonal model for sickness that I look to extract from Siemens argument. Therefore, in simultaneously affirming and contesting sickness, this agonal dynamic neatly characterises exactly the 'growing, struggling' image of life that Nietzsche advocates.

The radically open-ended and anti-teleological nature of the agon is similarly assistive in addressing both the second problem that Siemens encountered (of avoiding the redemptive attitudes of declining life), and the fourth (the risk of repeating the ressentiment that is being critiqued). To the problem of redemption, as we have just seen, an agonal contestation would not seek a 'cowardly' escape from sickness in a falsifying desire to negate conflict, but rather does the opposite by affirming sickness as fruitful and productive. As such, if anything, the agonal approach embodies the Classical attitude of embracing conflict as opposed that of Romanticism and declining life. As for the fourth problem, the issue here was that in wanting to overcome ressentiment there is the risk of willing the annihilation of and freedom from the antagonism of ressentiment which would end up repeating the exact dynamic of ressentiment

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[20] *Ibid.* pp. 77
[21] *Ibid.* pp. 77-8
[22] *The Gay Science* 370
[23] *Ibid.* p. 78

– thus becoming self-defeating. An agonal approach to ressentiment would preclude this however, as unlike ressentiment and the logic of revenge, in the agon antagonistic forces are affirmed rather than negated. In this the vengeful desire to annihilate the antagonist is also kept at bay. Therefore, the affirmative and anti-teleological nature of the agon prevents it from both slipping into the Romantic impulses of redemption and repeating the annihilating instinct of ressentiment.

As we saw however, this Classical mode of life as excess was inaccessible due to the third problem of an energy deficit. As for this energy deficit, Siemens shows how this too finds a solution, in another aspect of the agon – its economising nature.[24] This is its ability to transform negative impulses into creative outcomes. This was a crucial aspect of the Greek agon; it drew on 'negative' affects such as hate, vindictiveness, and envy and instead of these being repressed as 'bad' they were seen as positive if they were expressed in agonal conflict, productive conflict.[25] In other words, the agon harnesses these negative impulses and makes them productive. To take a physical example, the envy and hatred one has for a particularly celebrated competitor on the racetrack can stimulate the individual to push themselves to train harder and run faster than what even they thought they were capable of. This is what Siemens argues can happen with ressentiment. The internalised and festering hatred and revenge of superiors that characterises ressentiment holds a considerable amount of energy; the release of which through externalisation and expression is not only therapeutic in itself, but when channelled into agonal conflict, can be productive. By redirecting the internalised energy of ressentiment, the project of agonal transvaluation becomes possible. Therefore, Siemens argues that we can find energy sources to address our deficit, in the internalised impulses of ressentiment; which not only fuels the agon but itself has a therapeutic effect by expressing what was previously kept repressed.

Therefore, Siemens argues that the agon is able to provide us with a Nietzschean therapeutic model with which we can address the mental malady of ressentiment in such a way that is congruent with Nietzsche's conflicting views about sickness and health.

1.2 An Agonal Model for Sickness

It is not hard, I don't think, to find in Siemens' agonal approach a model which we can apply to other sicknesses or mental maladies besides ressentiment. The crucial aspect in doing this is how the agon is able to think together sickness and health, as this has applicability to the dynamic of health and sickness in general and is non-specific to ressentiment. This was the first problem that Siemen's therapeutic reading encountered, but (in appropriate agonal fashion) this challenge can be seen as strengthening rather than detrimental. The agonal approach to sickness forces us to take a more nuanced view of sickness and health - or of what is seen to be 'negative' and 'positive' - by highlighting the interrelatedness of the concepts. This is perhaps best illustrated in GS 382 where Nietzsche describes health as continually dynamic – not a static state of the absence of illness but the *thriving on illness* and challenges. This is why it is for him "a health that one doesn't only have, but also acquires continually and must acquire because one gives it up again and again, and must give it up!"[26], because

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[24] *Ibid.* p. 84
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] *The Gay Science* 382

becoming ill and facing challenges *is precisely what is needed* for health; it is what makes one healthy. 'Threats' to health are thus seen as stimulants against which one can strive, and in the process, grow stronger.

A good way to make this concrete is through the analogy of resistance training as it has shares this counter-intuitive dynamic. The basic principle of resistance training is to grow muscle by damaging it. Exercises are designed to do small amounts of damage to the muscles in response to which they not only repair, but in repairing, grow stronger. Seen in this way, damage is not only not negative, but essential for development. In fact, without it muscles would atrophy. However, this is of course true only up until a point. If the damage is too severe it can do more harm than good and this is where the notion of measure comes in. As Pasley emphasises, and Siemens concurs, a critical feature of the agon is measure, and whilst there is aggression, it is '*limited aggression*'.[27][28] This is a key part of what makes the agon productive, the fact that measure prevents destruction. Therefore, although counter-intuitive, we can see damage (in appropriate quantities) as essential to growth, both in the case of resistance training and the agonal approach to sickness. As such it must be embraced as a stimulant and a source of growth rather than protected against to our cost.

This chapter has often mentioned sickness, but it remains to clarify what exactly is meant by this term. This is partly because Siemens does not clarify in his paper exactly what he means by sickness. In the context of his discussion a definition is not necessarily required as by having ressentiment as his subject we know that what he means by sickness or mental malady (as he terms ressentiment) is at least that kind of sickness of which ressentiment is. What this kind of sickness is, however, is unclear – and can we see sicknesses other than ressentiment in this category? This we can to some extent infer. For example, Siemens argues that we can understand Nietzsche's view of sickness and health by means of the agon which means that he can only be referring to the kind of sickness which could be engaged with through the agon. If this is the case then the criteria are fairly minimal as the given sickness simply needs to be a force with which one might struggle. Moreover, we have no reason to believe that the criteria are very restrictive as we see in *Homer's Contest* that the agon can be applied to anything from sporting contests to the abstract "play of forces"[29]. It is also clear from the example of ressentiment that such sickness can be mental. Therefore, it seems that we would be safe in positing that most kinds of mental illness, or disturbance (such as neuroses or depressive disorders) would qualify; providing that they are not catatonic, as this implies that contestation is impossible. In other words, we can take sickness in this context to denote mental affects that afflict the individual and cause suffering, but are not so severe as to render the individual incapable of contestation. Such sicknesses are thus akin to ressentiment as they are a mental affect which afflicts the individual but against which the individual is still capable of struggling.

Therefore, in the agon we find a valuable model with which to approach sickness. We have seen how Siemens has been able to use this agonal approach to form a therapeutic reading of

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[27] Pasley, M. (1978) 'Nietzsche's Use of Medical Terms' in *Nietzsche: Imagery and Thought.* Methuen, pp.88–112, p. 105.

[28] Siemens, 'Nietzsche's agon with ressentiment', p.77

[29] *Ibid.*

Nietzsche with which to address the mental malady of ressentiment. I have then argued that in its unique way of thinking health and sickness together this agonal approach can be used to address mental maladies more generally, beyond ressentiment. In chapter two we will consider to what extent we can see nihilism, or a form thereof, as qualifying as such a mental malady – which would then raise the question of whether there might be a space here to consider an agonal therapeutic approach to nihilism.

2. Nihilism as Sickness

In this chapter I will argue that we can locate in Nietzsche a view of nihilism as a sickness in the sense established in the previous chapter. Namely, a psychological malady or affliction which presents itself as a force with which the individual must struggle. Just as an individual can be considered neurotic or depressed, I will argue that we can find in Nietzsche a treatment of nihilism as a certain afflicted psychological state. The intention being that, given Siemens' argument for the therapising capability of the agon with respect to mental malady, by locating such a view of nihilism, a possibility opens for an agonal treatment of this kind of psychological nihilism.

2.1 Approaching Nihilism

There are many difficulties in approaching a concept as complex as nihilism. First and foremost, it is such a broad term as to border on incoherence. Derived from the Latin *nihil* meaning 'nothing', it literally means 'nothing-ism'. This can be cashed out as a belief *in* nothing – in other words a lack of belief in anything – or as a belief that there *is* nothing. But then *of what there is nothing*, or what there is an absence of, can vary. Nihilism can be the belief that there is no inherent meaning in the world (usually termed existential nihilism), or there can be moral nihilism, or even political nihilism which asserts that traditional political structures or values are unfounded. Therefore, we must specify what kind of nihilism we are concerning ourselves with addressed.

Even when restricted to its usage in Nietzsche's work the term still lacks cohesion. As Paul van Tongeren notes in his book *Nietzsche and European Nihilism*, 'Nietzsche has no systematic theory of nihilism to speak of.'[30] Multiple factors contribute to the fragmented nature of nihilism in Nietzsche. First is that mentions of 'nihilism' or variations on the term, are rather rare in his work – with the vast majority of them being in his notes, which he never published. Secondly, he uses a constellation of terms that are distinct from but closely related to nihilism as well as 'nihilism' itself. For example, in what van Tongeren dubs the first period of Nietzsche's work, he uses the term 'pessimism' to denote the construction of moral and religious values as a form of defence against the lack of meaning in the world; of which he later accuses Christianity in *The Genealogy of Morals* and terms nihilistic.[31] Then in other moments Nietzsche does distinguish between pessimism and nihilism, referring to the former as a 'preliminary form of nihilism', but by the time of his later works he uses the terms more or less interchangeably. [32]

Another term in this constellation is 'décadence' which is greatly intertwined with both nihilism and pessimism: that which is described as nihilistic or pessimistic is labelled also as decadent.[33] Décadence has a unique aspect however, in that it is used to describe the *effect* of nihilism – specifically a kind of psychological or physiological affect.[34] It can be understood as a kind of sickness of the soul which perverts the natural instincts for what is healthy and life

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[30] van Tongeren, p.42.
[31] *Ibid.* p. 34
[32] *Ibid.* p. 38
[33] *Ibid.* p. 39
[34] *Ibid.* pp. 40-1

affirming; leading to a disaggregation and loss of organising power. Nietzsche applies the term in different spheres: individuals are described as decadent, but so are religions, beliefs and societies.

The third complicating factor is that, when he does use the term 'nihilism', he does so differently over the course of his work. Elizabeth Kuhn for example, in her book *Nietzsches Philosophie des europäischen Nihilismus*, distinguishes six separate types of nihilism in Nietzsche's work.[35] According to van Tongeren, one key strand of nihilism that Nietzsche describes is what has been termed 'European Nihilism', which is primarily concerned with values. These are values like truth, beauty and goodness, which are seen to give meaning to life and its associated suffering.[36] For Nietzsche we see this acknowledgement of the meaninglessness of life's suffering in Greek tragedy.[37] This changed however to become more optimistic and sought to show this suffering to have meaning after all. Thus an antidote to nihilism was developed, and meaning was constructed to fend off the meaninglessness of suffering. This optimism reached its height in the Greek world in the form of Platonism. What Platonism did was to give the sensible world meaning by means of another metaphysical world – the world of Forms. Plato's metaphysics dictated that the sensible world is made up of reflections and instantiations of this realm of forms. As such, all things that we would call good in the world are but imperfect instantiations of the pure form of the good which exists in this world beyond. Not only does this doctrine bisect reality and thus diminish the world we inhabit, but it places our world as the lower and imperfect – subordinating it to an extramundane world that we cannot access (at least in this life). It is in this extramundane world that values like beauty, truth and goodness reside, and from which they imperfectly shine through to the sensible world, giving meaning to human life and suffering.

Nietzsche then argues that this Platonism is taken up and developed in Christianity. The bisection of reality is maintained but intensified; the extramundane world becomes the kingdom of God to which all must aspire, whilst the sensible world is merely suffering and temptation. The aspiration to truth is carried through, and truth becomes a core Christian value; perhaps most evident in the idea of one's conscience and the practice of confessionals. This Christian conscience then becomes sublimated, Nietzsche argues, into a scientific conscience which seeks truth through scientific investigation. However, this endeavour proves self-undermining. The will to truth discovers that belief in God lacks sufficient foundation and thus Christianity undermines itself from within. Moreover, the will to truth itself is undermined when the realisation is reached that these values of truth, beauty and goodness are simply constructions. This is the development of what Nietzsche calls European nihilism – when the highest values of the culture devalue themselves and the realisation is reached that the values that gave life meaning lack sufficient grounds. What ensues is an abrupt existential vertigo as the ground of meaning and values that Europeans have grown accustomed to standing on, suddenly gives way.

One of the ways Nietzsche uses the term nihilism therefore, is to denote this condition of cultural groundlessness that has been arrived at in Europe. But he similarly refers to the doctrines instrumental therein - Platonism and Christianity – as nihilistic. Whilst European

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[35] Kuhn, E. (1992) *Friedrich Nietzsches Philosophie des europaischen Nihilismus*. De Gruyter.
[36] van Tongeren, pp.78-81
[37] *Ibid.* pp. 78-9

nihilism is nihilistic in the sense that it lacks sufficient grounds for its values, Platonism and Christianity are also nihilistic, but in that they are life denying. This is another way in which Nietzsche uses the term. They are life denying in the sense discussed above, that by positing a higher, primary realm, they degrade the physical world and humans' lives within it, as secondary; despite the fact that this is the only world of which we can have any experience. As such Nietzsche similarly accuses Kant of being nihilistic in that he posits the 'thing-in-itself' as a primary but inaccessible reality. Therefore, we must be specific in approaching this concept of nihilism as even within Nietzsche's work he uses the term to refer to a diversity of phenomena.

2.2 Nihilism as a Psychological State

In light of this, this chapter will focus on a short fragment of Nietzsche's unpublished notes in which he discusses nihilism in a specific way which is related to but distinct from the above examples which are more prominent in his published works. The fragment comes from Nietzsche's late notebooks, written between 1887 and 1888 and explores '*Nihilism* as a *psychological state*'.[38] Differing from some of his other treatments of nihilism as a cultural or collective phenomenon, here he explores nihilism from a more individual perspective. For example, this nihilism is described as coming about when the individual 'searcher loses courage' (NPS, 170) after having sought in all things a meaning that they realise is not there. Similarly, in the fragment Nietzsche repeatedly refers to this as a nihilism that happens to 'oneself' suggesting that it is an internal and personal occurrence.

It is important to note however that whether this meaninglessness which Nietzsche discusses is regarded as either an existential or cultural-historical matter is largely a matter of interpretation. Ultimately though, we can see the two as related, and I will be taking a position between them. It seems in the fragment that the meaninglessness that is being encountered comes as a result of values formed in Platonism and Christianity (e.g. wholeness, truth) – it is the realisation of the groundlessness of these values that occasions the slip into nihilism (NPS, 169-71). This said, in the fragment it is the individual who is coming to this realisation and who is being existentially affected by this realisation. As such I think we can read this fragment as the individual's personal realisation that the values they have culturally and historically inherited, fundamentally lack foundation.

Moving to the fragment, in it Nietzsche discusses three ways in which 'nihilism as a psychological state' can come about – each of which centre around the individual's realisation that a certain concept or mode of interpreting the world is in fact defunct. Firstly, there is the realisation that purpose or meaning is an illusion (NPS, 169-70). The individual has spent their life striving for various goals whether that be morality, love or happiness – even nothingness, as this is still a goal and thus a purpose. All such endeavours become undermined however, Nietzsche writes, when it is realised that neither the world nor becoming is in fact aimed at, or purposed for, *anything*. As such this dawning understanding of

[38] Fragment (NF 11[99] 13.46-49) 1887/1888; I use the translation given in: van Tongeren, P. (2018) *Friedrich Nietzsche and European nihilism*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 169-171; hereafter cited as 'NPS'.

purposelessness leaves the individual deflated and ashamed for so long having strived effectively in vain, chasing shadows.

The second way that this psychological state of nihilism can come about is through the loss of belief in a unity (NPS, 170) . One might, Nietzsche writes, have invested belief in the idea of the unity of reality or the wholeness of being – such as in any monism or the systematic philosophies of the German idealists. As such the individual grounds their value in their participation in, or dependence upon this supremely valuable whole. This abruptly collapses however, with the eventual realisation that there is no such whole - and thus the individual is thrown into nihilism as without this whole, they are no longer able to sustain belief in their own value.
The third form of this nihilism comes as a response to one of these preceding realisations (NPS, 170-1). Having lost faith in purpose or unity, one may seek escape by negating reality as false and positing an alternate, 'true' world. When one realises however, that such a world is simply a fantasy constructed of 'psychological needs' that one cannot otherwise meet, the third form of nihilism takes hold. In this third form the individual accepts that there is only this reality of becoming and refuses to endorse any belief in other 'true' or metaphysical worlds; and thus disallows themselves any redemptive escape routes into the 'true'. The nihilism here however, consists in the fact that whilst the individual does not want to deny this world of becoming, neither can they endure it.

Nietzsche argues therefore, that whichever of these three routes one takes, an ultimate realisation of valuelessness is what is arrived at. Whether purpose, unity or truth none of these categories are able to 'fit onto' reality:

> "In short: the categories 'purpose', 'unity', 'being', by means of which we put a value into the world, we now *extract* again—and now the world looks valueless..." (NPS, 171)

It is therefore from *our* imposition of these categories onto the world that we have been able to read value off of it. As such the removal of these categories makes the world appear valueless in comparison – throwing one into a state of groundlessness. It is thus this vertiginous realisation that the ground of value we so long took for granted is no longer there, that characterises Nietzsche's nihilism as a psychological state. In this therefore, Nietzsche gives us the cause of this nihilism, namely that "we have measured the value of the world against categories *that refer to a purely invented world*." (NPS, 171)

What then are we able to do? Nietzsche asks. Are we able to divest belief in these categories and thus depotentiate that by which we devalue the world? To this he doesn't provide a clear answer. Rather, he seems to posit that these values are almost adaptive or inherent characteristics of humanity; "perspectives of usefulness for the preservation and enhancement of human formations of rule"(NPS, 171). This suggests that they are part of a kind of human 'lens' with which we view the world, and in seeing through this lens we mistake that which we project into it for being inherent in the world itself. Thus we deceive ourselves in what Nietzsche calls the "*hyperbolic naivety* of man" (NPS, 171); namely, that the meaning and value of things emanate from us.

The troubling implication of this is that we cannot escape the categories by which we devalue the world – in being human we cannot help but be in nihilism, whether directly, or indirectly by investing ourselves in a false, 'true' world beyond. Therefore, in the fragment Nietzsche

gives us a more individualised perspective on nihilism, as a psychological event in which the individual comes to the realisation that the categories by which they have always interpreted the world – be that meaning, unity or truth – are false projections. As a result the individual is thrown into a nihilistic state of valuelessness caused by their inability to view the world other in relation to these categories by which they devalue it.

2.3 Nihilism as Sickness

Having grasped what this psychological nihilism of Nietzsche's consists of, to what extent can we see this as cohering with our understanding of sickness as established in the previous chapter, as a psychological malady or affliction which presents itself as a force with which the individual must struggle?

It certainly seems from Nietzsche's descriptions throughout the fragment that this nihilism psychologically afflicts the individual. The first form for example, is said to come as a kind of tragic and utterly deflating realisation. The realisation that the struggles and projects of one's life have ultimately been 'in vain' (NPS, 170). As if one minute one had been surely travelling a road with firm ground underfoot, only for the world to melt away the next; as if it had been nothing but stage scenery. One is suddenly suspended in uncertainty, with 'the lack of opportunity somehow to recuperate, to calm oneself' (NPS, 170). A certain shame dawns with this realisation that one has been deceived for so long, but worse that one has deceived oneself. Deceived oneself that:

> "…That *meaning* might have been: the 'fulfilment' of a highest canon of morality in all that happens in the moral order of the world; or increasing love and harmony in the interaction of beings, or coming closer to a general state of happiness; or even setting off on the path to a general state of nothingness— any goal is still a meaning." (NPS, 170)

At least two tones can be detected in this quote. Firstly Nietzsche could be disparaging of these values of morality, love and happiness; as if to say 'how could you have fooled yourself into believing that such things are the source of meaning?' We can find support for this in the way he treats these kinds of values elsewhere in his work. We saw in the first chapter of this thesis how Nietzsche regards Romanticism as life denying in its will to close out hardship in favour of fantasies of optimistic resolution. The above quote could be seen in a similar light; that the shame at self-deceit is in no small part due to the perceived stupidity and softness of the fantasies with which one has deceived oneself.

This said, considering the melancholic tone of the rest of the fragment in the way it seems to lament the helplessness of the nihilistic psychological state, I think we can also read the quote as to some extent mournful. Whilst the individual acknowledges the falsity of the values and meanings that they have ascribed to life and is well aware that they must be dispensed with, this would seem nonetheless to evoke a profound sense of loss. Albeit false, a world of meaning provides comfort and promise. It is as if the quote suggests that there is part of the individual that wishes not yet to be torn from the comforting lie and longs for a world where '*meaning* might have been'; where love, harmony and happiness have substance. To misquote

Flaubert, 'we shouldn't maltreat our *values*: the gilt comes off on our hands.'[39] Nietzsche acknowledges that these values are comforting and thus it seems that we can read the quote as equally acknowledging the genuine discomfort and disorientation that their collapse occasions.[40] This is not to suggest that Nietzsche in some way wills these illusions – *The Genealogy* is very vocally to the contrary - but we should not infer from his vehement opposition to these constructed values that he sees their collapse as reason to rejoice.[41] As such the quote can be seen as to some extent voicing a mournful despair precipitated by the of loss of ignorance or innocence. Neither should this be surprising; it is common for the death of a loved one to be experienced as 'world shattering' as a fundamental aspect of one's life is abruptly withdrawn; the existentially decentring effect of nihilism can be viewed in a similar way. Therefore, it is both evident and unsurprising that this psychological nihilism has a marked negative or depressive effect on the individual that might constitute a mental malady.

Nietzsche's discussion of the categories can similarly be seen to pose this nihilism as a mental malady. We saw how it is our imposition of these categories of purpose, unity and truth, upon the world that is the cause of this nihilism; our false expectation that these world will live up to these invented ideals is what makes us perceive it as valueless when they are withdrawn. It does not seem however, from the fragment, that this is something we can help but do. Seen in this way, the human necessity to view (and thus devalue) the world through these categories can be seen to constitute a kind of compulsion neurosis – a self-inflicted affliction that we cannot help but repeat. As such, the quasi-neurotic way in which Nietzsche describes the human attachment to these categories adds another element of mental malady to nihilism as a psychological state.

Finally, it is evident from the language Nietzsche uses that this nihilistic state is one of suffering. The individual is wrapped in 'the *torment* of…uncertainty'(NPS, 170 emphasis my own), and is unable to 'recuperate'; implying that this nihilistic state has a significant depleting effect akin to a kind of sickness. He even later refers to it as a state in which one '*cannot endure this world*' (NPS, 171). From these characterisations we get the impression of this psychological state as unhealthy and afflicted – torment, inability to endure and the necessity to recuperate particularly, all bare connotations of affliction. Therefore, the effect this nihilism has on the individual shows that it is a force with which the individual struggles, and when combined with the characteristics it bares of mental affliction, we get an picture of this psychological nihilism that very closely coheres to the characterisation of sickness we extracted from Siemens' agonal account in the previous chapter.

In conclusion, whilst the concept of nihilism in Nietzsche's work is extremely broad and takes on a multitude of different forms and meanings, we find in his treatment of nihilism as a psychological state, a more individual depiction of what the confrontation with nihilism looks like. What we find in this treatment is a characterisation of the nihilistic psychological state which resembles the kind of mental malady discussed in chapter one, on multiple fronts. Not

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[39] Original quote: 'Casting aspersions on those we love always does something to loosen our ties. We shouldn't maltreat our idols: the gilt comes off on our hands.' (Flaubert, G. (1975) *Madame Bovary.* trans. Francis Steegmuller. The Modern Library, p.320) I see this quote as capturing the same duality of feeling occasioned by the unmasking of our highest values which Nietzsche describes.

[40] van Tongeren, pp. 53-4

[41] *Ibid*, pp. 61-2

only does Nietzsche's language and descriptions of the effect that this nihilism has on the individual resemble mental affliction and depressive disorders, but the nature of the categories introduce a quasi-neurotic element which adds to the image of mental malady presented. Therefore, we can see this nihilism as a psychological state that Nietzsche describes in the fragment as constituting a afflicting force with which the individual struggles, and thus qualifying as the kind of sickness which could be amenable to an agonal treatment.

3. An Agon with Nihilism

Having established that this psychological nihilism can be seen as the kind of sickness to which we could take an agonal therapeutic approach, it remains to be seen whether this would in fact be possible. As we saw in chapter one, Siemens outlines necessary criteria for the functioning of the agon, which we can use to determine the efficacy of the proposed agonal approach to nihilism. This chapter will therefore explore whether, against these criteria, an agon with nihilism is possible and if so what it would cash out as. I will argue that, despite obstacles like a potential energy deficit, such an agon is theoretically possible. From here I will argue that this can cash out as in two key ways, firstly as a certain strengthening against dogmatism, and secondly as cultivating a measured but affirmative individual existence.

We saw in the first chapter the four problems that Siemen's encountered in his therapeutic reading of Nietzsche; the first two (the thinking together or health and sickness, and need for a non-redemptive approach) were resolved in the agonal approach itself, and thus as I am adopting this model these resolutions carry over. Neither is the fourth issue of repeating ressentiment relevant as our concern is with nihilism. The problem of energy however, is pertinent and must be addressed if an agonal treatment of nihilism is to be possible. Moreover, the depressing and depleting effect of this psychological nihilism as discussed in the previous chapter gives us reason to believe that an energy deficit could pose a significant issue.

3.1 Energy

Like any other struggle, the agon requires energy for it to be embarked upon. Siemens raises this as an issue with regards to ressentiment as Nietzsche's comments on ressentiment described it as robbing the individual of energy, suggesting that an agonal approach could not be sustained due to an energy deficit. In the case of nihilism as a psychological state, it seems that this same charge may apply. Two characteristics of this psychological nihilism that Nietzsche describes are an inability to recuperate or endure the world both of which suggest an insufficiency rather than an abundance of energy (NPS, 169-70). Therefore it if any agonal account to nihilism is to function this deficit must first be addressed.

In his article Siemens tries to map a way out of ressentiment. The issue here however is that Nietzsche regards ressentiment as a state of impoverished and declining life which as such has 'depleted our volitional resources'.[42] How then can a state of depleted energy be turned into one of excess – from where can this energy be pulled? In answer to this Siemens refers us to the agon. He shows that the state of ressentiment itself requires energy to be sustained – it is fuelled by a certain hatred and resentment and thus contains energy which just needs to be repurposed. As we saw in chapter one, this is what the agon is capable of achieving. Instead of this energy being directed inwardly in ressentiment, the agon takes these negative impulses and expresses them outwardly, discharging them into the antagonism of the agon. [43] Thus with ressentiment Siemens shows how two objectives can be simultaneously satisfied;

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[42] Siemens, 'Nietzsche's agon with ressentiment', p. 70.
[43] *Ibid.* p. 84

discharging the previously inwardly directed drives of ressentiment into the agon utilises their energy for agonal antagonism which in turn serves to tames these drives.

Nihilism however, does not share the same structure as ressentiment. With ressentiment energy is already present; ressentiment is by its very nature a repression and inward directedness - and thus for the agon this energy simply needs redirecting. Nihilism on the other hand by *its* very nature, is the complete *absence* of energy; the 'nothingness' of nihilism presents a major issue as it cannot be viewed as the source of *anything*, let alone energy. From Nietzsche's description of nihilism in the fragment as characterised by an inability to endure or recuperate, the impression given is of a state in which the individual not only lacks energy but is actively sapped of any energy they may have. Therefore, it seems that Siemen's solution to the energy deficit in the agon with ressentiment cannot be simply transplanted into the case with nihilism.

This said, in the fragment and elsewhere Nietzsche hints that just in the act of confronting nihilism we may in fact free up certain energy sources. One place we see this is in *Ecce Homo* where he discusses instincts of self-defence:

> "The rationale is that defensive expenditures, be they never so small, become a rule, a habit, lead to an extraordinary and perfectly superfluous impoverishment. Our *largest* expenditures are our most frequent small ones. Warding off, not letting close, is an expenditure – one should not deceive oneself over this – a strength *squandered* on negative objectives. One can merely through the constant need to ward off become too weak any longer to defend oneself."[44]

Therefore, if one were to quit such 'defensive expenditures' by instead turning to confront that which one had previously been warding off, energy would be freed up with which this agonal confrontation could be fuelled. Moreover, this is no small amount of energy, as Nietzsche identifies such defences as amassing to 'Our *largest* expenditures'.

The question arises however, as it often does when dealing with a corpus as fragmented (and often at least ostensibly self-contradictory) as Nietzsche's, of the extent to which separate passages can be seen as relevant or applicable to one another. Can the discussion in the above passage from *Ecce Homo* about energy squandered on self-defence be seen as applicable to the fragment on nihilism as a psychological state? As I will argue, I believe we have sufficient justification to view nihilism as a paradigmatic example of the dynamic of 'defensively squandered energy' discussed in the *Ecce Homo* passage.

This is firstly because the two passages were written very close in time to one another – with *Ecce Homo* written in 1888 and the psychological nihilism fragment written between 1887 and 1888 . But more importantly, the same wording is repeated in both, ('*squandering* of our strength' (NPS, 170) and 'strength *squandered*'[45]) which gives us a good basis for drawing links between the two.

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[44] *Ecce Homo,* Why I am so Clever, 8.
[45] *Ibid.*

It also seems warranted to view the *Ecce Homo* passage as applicable to nihilism in virtue of the fact that Nietzsche describes just such a defence against meaninglessness as a central aspect of the development of European nihilism. As recounted in chapter two, Van Tongeren repeatedly identifies how Nietzsche argues that the meaninglessness of existence was seen as a threat which had to be protected against[46]. Values like truth or morality, the account goes, were constructed in Platonism, and later Christianity, as a way of fending off this meaninglessness. They constituted a defence mechanism which gave life meaning and thus prevented the slip in to nihilism. And just as the *Ecce Homo* passage talks about becoming weak from the 'constant need to ward off', in his account of European nihilism Nietzsche uses the concept of *décadence* to denote the declining and energy-sapping state which results from the constant warding off that is the sustaining of life-denying values. Therefore, we can see the dynamic that Nietzsche describes in the *Ecce Homo* passage as mirroring, if not reproducing, the structure of his account of European nihilism.

Although the comparison made is with European nihilism, the relevant features are the same with nihilism as a psychological state. In both cases the individual has squandered their strength in attempting to defend themselves against meaninglessness. What differentiates the two is that European nihilism is a collective and cultural phenomenon which is nihilistic because it maintains a belief in unfounded and life-negating values as a way of fending off meaninglessness; whilst nihilism as a psychological state is the realisation which the individual undergoes that the meaning they have ascribed or seen in the world is not actually there and thus it is nihilistic because it a direct confrontation with the meaninglessness and nothingness of existence. As such, the fact that the *Ecce Homo* passage and Nietzsche's account of nihilism as a psychological state not only share the same time period and phraseology but also closely mirror each other's features provides good justification for combining the two.

And when we do combine the two we are able to extract a solution to the energy deficit from which an agon with nihilism seems to suffer. In applying the *Ecce Homo* passage to the context of nihilism we get the following account: in an attempt to defend themselves against the meaninglessness of nihilism the individual expends considerable energy in warding it off; for example by investing belief in an alternate 'true' world, as Nietzsche describes in the fragment, so as to imbue existence with meaning. Consequently, agonal confrontation with the meaninglessness of the world necessarily means ceasing ones defensive activities and with them the energy expenditure which they require; meaning that this energy formerly used to ward off nihilism can now be used to fuel the agonal confrontation *with it*. Thus solving the energy deficit.

3.2 Conceptualising the Outcomes of an Agon with Nihilism

Having established that an agon with nihilism is theoretically possible, what would this look like and what might it be able to achieve? Having realised the meaninglessness in all things and quitted defensive expenditures against this, as Nietzsche's psychological nihilism fragment describes, the individual is now simultaneously exposed to nihilism and able to confront it; as this wilful exposure to nihilism releases the energy required to contest it. But what does this confrontation consist in?

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[46] van Tongeren, pp.30, 34, 37, 56, 61, 66.

What it cannot be is any attempt to negate, protect against or banish this meaninglessness. Not only does the agon and Nietzsche's anti-romantic convictions prohibit this, but as we have seen defensive measures are precisely what has just had to be escaped. Not only have they depleted the strength of the individual but in this depletion they have been completely unsuccessful in addressing the meaninglessness at issue, other than simply concealing and repressing it. Conversely, the agon requires an open-ended contestation which has two implications: one cannot seek the negation of nihilism as this would bring an end to the agon (more pertinently in this case it doesn't seem that a negation of nihilism is even possible), but must in fact affirm it as the antagonist and thus the source of contestation. Therefore, the agon dictates, as is congruent with Nietzsche's insistence on the affirmation of life as it is[47], that we affirm nihilism.

But the agonal approach is more nuanced than simply affirming because it is also a contest with nihilism. As such the agon requires us to take a janiform approach. If we deny nihilism and do not give it its due, we live a false and nihilistic existence according to Nietzsche, but at the other extreme it seems that the utter nothingness of nihilism has the ability to consume us. Thus the agonal affirmation-in-contestation is fitting in that it takes up a position between these two extremes. But how does this schema of an affirmation-in-contestation with nihilism cash out?

3.2.1 Dogmatism

The first valuable way I see this as cashing out is as strengthening the individual against dogmatism. We can see this firstly as of political importance. The twentieth century alone stands as grim testament to the horrors that can be occasioned by dogmatism and political fanaticism - nor can we say that such thinking has not survived to the present day. In *The Undiscovered Self,* Jung attributes such fanaticism to the fact that as Christianity declined in Europe, politics moved in to fill this psychological space[48]. Which led politics to inherit a numinous quality which up until this point, religion had maintained a monopoly on. For Jung, with this numinous quality comes dogma as political beliefs become centred around 'faith' in certain ideas and ideals, rather than worldly matters of organisation and distribution. This is because the employment of an extramundane reference point can have the effect of making beliefs unfalsifiable as the ground for contestation or refutation is shifted to a realm beyond direct knowability. Therefore, by exposing the falsity of belief in any such extramundane or 'true' worlds, psychological nihilism would be able to strengthen the individual against slips into political dogmatism or fanaticism.

One might argue, however, that this is not an entirely Nietzschean conclusion as it could be seen to will the overcoming of, rather than the affirmation of, the antagonism with dogmatism. In his discussion of dogmatism in the preface to *Beyond Good and Evil,* Nietzsche writes that in some ways we are indebted to dogmatism.[49] He is very clear throughout the preface about what he thinks of dogmatism; calling historic European dogmas a "nightmare" and "the worst, the most tiresome, and the most dangerous of errors". This said he is grateful

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[47] *Ecce Homo,* The Birth of Tragedy, 3.
[48] Jung, C.G. (2014) *The Undiscovered Self.* Routledge, p. 19.
[49] *Beyond Good and Evil,* Preface.

for dogmatism in so far as the struggle against it has cultivated strength in himself and his fellow "free spirits". It has therefore, had an instrumental value.

This does not have to mean however that it would be un-Nietzschean to take steps against it. Firstly, the historical nature of Nietzsche's discussion makes it possible to read the value of dogmatism as being of mainly historical importance. Whilst he does value the strength that the struggle with dogmatism has cultivated, in the preface he still looks forward to a future "when it has been surmounted, when Europe, rid of this nightmare, can again draw breath freely and at least enjoy a healthier – sleep". This suggests that dogmatism is at least to an extent something Nietzsche will's to be "rid of", or something which he sees as having had its time. We can perhaps find an analogous case in ressentiment. In the *Genealogy* Nietzsche describes how we similarly owe a debt to ressentiment as it occasioned a turn inwards which allowed for the development of an new interiority.[50] But this does not change the fact that he views ressentiment as an extremely harmful force which, although not eradicated, must be contested and to an extent overcome – as Siemens shows. Therefore, whilst Nietzsche can be seen to suggest that we should give dogmatism its due, it doesn't seem that he forbids taking steps to contest it.

3.2.2 Measure

The second valuable way I see an agon with nihilism as cashing out is as a mechanism to situate the individual between nothingness on the one hand and over-attachment on the other. This is similar to what Allan Watts refers to as the 'balance trick' of life in a lecture on transcending duality in Buddhist philosophy.[51] In the lecture Watts describes how whilst attachment is indeed a source of suffering, it is also a source of joy. Take for example an avid football fan who is so deeply invested in their team's success that a defeat reduces their day to misery. In many ways this is undesirable as their attachment to their team means that their wellbeing is entirely dependent upon the outcome of football matches, thus causing them a great deal of suffering. But on the other side, the joy they feel when their team *does* win is surely greater than that experienced by any unattached spectator. Therefore, it seems there are two sides to attachment.

To make his point about balance Watts starts with the idea of *māyā*; that all that exists is the present moment, in an eternal now, and all else is an illusion. As such we must avoid attachment to things as this only brings suffering for "everything you know about, that makes an impression on you is no longer there. So it's all really absolutely here." But then he pushes back on this notion: "But, on the other hand, what fun to drag it out! And to make it echo, and to get involved, and to fall in love, and to become attached." This is how he comes to his idea of life as a 'balance trick' – we can use these poles to prevent us straying too far in either direction, whilst allowing us to make the most of what each has to offer.

I think this same perspective can be applied to nihilism. The notion that there is no inherent meaning can be terrifying if one is fully submerged in it, but in small quantities it can serve as medicine. If we find ourselves becoming overly attached or invested in certain ideas or values

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[50] *The Genealogy of Morals*, II. 16

[51] Transcript available at: https://www.organism.earth/library/document/transcending-duality (Date Accessed: 14/05/2024).

it can help to remind ourselves that ultimately there is no inherent meaning and thus all we are engaged in are contingent constructions. But this knowledge needn't outlaw us from investing in values and becoming attached as there is joy to be had in this – what it allows us to do is remain circumspect and cognisant in our engagements so that an over intoxication does not lead to excessive suffering.

Striking this balance is what I see the agon with nihilism as being able to effectively achieve. The dual approach of affirmation and contestation prevents one slipping too far in either direction. But this is not to say that it has to close the individual into a state of medium – this balance has the potential to be very dynamic as it only prevents *overextension* in each direction, but between these exists significant space. Nihilism must always be affirmed and this prevents us from losing ourselves in the world, but nihilism must equally be battled and resisted so that we can live and not lose ourselves in abject nothingness. This then brings us back to the agon with sickness from chapter one. Just as sickness is not an end goal but something to be contested in such a way that it can *contribute* to heath, we can see nihilism through agonal confrontation as grounding us and even invigorating life.

One may once again raise the challenge that this conclusion is un-Nietzschean in that it seems to embody the exact kind of escape from suffering and struggle that Nietzsche so vehemently condemns. This would be a valid criticism if I were proposing that we were using the agon with nihilism as a way to avoid struggle, but this is not my position. Firstly, this would be to fundamentally misunderstand the agon as the very affirmation of contestation and struggle. Instead I am proposing that this agon with nihilism defends us only from the *absolute extremes* – whether that be losing oneself in the world or in nothingness. In this way, instead of avoiding conflict such insurance would theoretically allow us to do the opposite - descend to depths for which we would not otherwise have the strength. As such this is not a safeguard against struggle, but a strengthening against *annihilation* which thus allows us to engage in new levels of contestation.

In conclusion, having addressed the prima facie challenge of the energy deficit, we can see how an agon with nihilism is possible. We have seen both how this can function schematically as affirmation-in-contestation, and then how we can cash this out in two key ways: firstly, as a fortifier against dogmatism, and then perhaps more deeply, as a continual and personal process by which the individual can strengthen and develop a dynamic sense of measure in a world with no inherent meaning.

Conclusion

This thesis has asked whether an agonal approach to nihilism is possible and if so what this would look like. In chapter one I argued that Siemens' use of an agonal therapeutic approach to the modern malady of ressentiment can provide us with a model capable of addressing other mental maladies. The agon is ingeniously able to think health and sickness together and show us how, by affirming that which we may instinctively want to negate, we might find ways to address our greatest afflictions.

From here I argued that we can see Nietzsche's treatment of nihilism as a psychological state as constituting the kind of sickness for which this agonal treatment might be possible. The fragment explored shows a perspective on nihilism not usually explored in Nietzsche's other work; namely as an individual psychological encounter with the lack of meaning inherent in existence. We saw how Nietzsche described this realisation of groundlessness as having a marked depleting and depressive effect on the individual, driven by an almost compulsive devaluation of reality through the categories of purpose, unity and truth. As such it became evident that we could regard this form of psychological nihilism as constituting the kind of mental malady which could be approached with Siemens' agonal model.

In the final chapter we explored what such an agon with nihilism might look like. I argued that although the nature of nihilism meant that this agon would be threatened by an energy deficit, the confrontation with nihilism would in and of itself free up energy which was previously used in defensive measures against it. This aside I argued that we can see this agon with nihilism as cashing out in two key ways; firstly as strengthening the individual against dogmatism through the understanding which psychological nihilism affords, that other 'true' worlds are ultimately constructions; and secondly as fortifying the individual against loss of self in either over-attachment on one side and nothingness on the other.

Therefore, this thesis has shown that an agonal approach to the psychological state of nihilism is possible, and that it can be seen to provide constructive outcomes. As I explored briefly in the final chapter however, what we see the outcomes of this agon with nihilism as consisting of, raises a fundamental question about the agon's relation to Nietzsche's thought. In this thesis I have adopted Siemens' position that the agon is a productive form of contestation. It can be argued however, that this very notion of productivity is in tension with other areas of Nietzsche's philosophy; namely his anti-redemptive stance. As it appears to me the issue is that, for the agon to be a worthwhile tool or approach this implies that it has a certain utility or productivity – in other words that it serves some kind of end; an agonal treatment of ressentiment for example, appeals because it offers a way to overcome ressentiment. It seems however, that this has the touch of the redemptive impulse or teleology that Nietzsche clearly distains. But if this were not the case, if the agon was not productive and instead simply affirmed the struggle as it is, in other words if to engage in an agon with ressentiment was to run a very real risk of *coming off worse* as a result – i.e. not being strengthened by the struggle but irreparably weakened – then of what use is it? The agon is only valuable it seems, if it provides a net benefit; but in doing so it risks becoming a redemptive tool, a way to lessen struggle, or an efficient solution.

I fear however, that this logic might back us too far into a corner. It seems that the extreme conclusion of this line of thinking is that any attempt at development or strengthening

becomes redemptive, as they render one less susceptible to harm, or better able to cope. But this seems illogical; are we to suggest that Nietzsche endorses suffering for sufferings sake? I think this logic is particularly flawed for example, in the case of therapy. An individual might suffer, let's say, from a trauma that they have repressed. As such they can refuse to tackle this trauma, allowing it to remain repressed, or confront and incorporate their trauma in order to hopefully free themselves of its grip. Whilst the former will likely simply prolong their suffering (if not eventually increase it) the latter will probably occasion significant distress in the short-term (hence the need to repress) but will allow for greater long-term well-being. Can we really say that Nietzsche would consider the latter redemptive? Refusing to confront or take ownership of ones conflicts and instead to numb oneself to them or *dream* of freedom from them – this is understandably redemptive. But this is not the same, I would argue, as willing the overcoming of certain or immediate conflicts (but crucially not conflict *as such*) and from this will *going out to confront and overcome these struggles*.

In fact it is just this attitude that Nietzsche seems often to endorse. In *Ecce Homo* for example, Nietzsche discusses how he is both a *décadent* and its opposite.[52] In this section he talks about the value of sickness in becoming strong. He writes how he who,

> "*has turned out well*…has a taste only for what is beneficial to him; his pleasure, his joy ceases where the measure of what is beneficial is overstepped. He divines cures for injuries, he employs ill chances to his own advantage; what does not kill him makes him stronger."

Whilst he affirms life, "Out of everything he sees, hears, experiences he instinctively collects together *his* sum: he is a principle of selection, he rejects much." In this we find four points that are relevant to our discussion. Firstly, that a will to "what is beneficial" is permitted and presumably not redemptive; secondly, that measure is endorsed – the idea that what is beneficial is only beneficial in appropriate quantities, which supports my conclusion on measure; thirdly that ills should be used to one's advantage – in other words, instrumentally; and finally that only that which does not annihilate is productive. The image given here is much more pragmatic than simply the almost unconditional affirmation of struggle. It's suggested that both struggles and benefits are to be embraced and engaged in, but to the extent that they are beneficial. Therefore, we can see in this section that at least some parts of Nietzsche's philosophy affirm this idea of productive struggle, and as an accompanying principle, the idea of measure, with which such struggle can be regulated so as to remain more or less within the bounds of what is productive.

What I think we can take from this is that there are of course multiple ways to read Nietzsche. Whilst this is only one small section of his work (and a full treatment is far beyond the scope of this thesis) it does show, in support of Siemen's reading, that there are grounds on which to make this reading of productive conflict and measure, and thus that these ideas can perhaps not be dismissed so easily as un-Nietzschean.

Therefore, to regard any will to health as redemptive seems reductive and to contradict at least parts of Nietzsche's philosophy. We have seen how Nietzsche is suspicious of that which creates stagnation, quashes dynamism or seeks perpetual peace, but we should perhaps not

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[52] *Ecce Homo,* Why I am so Wise, 2.

conclude from these that *any* will to health or desire to be stronger is impermissible. Can we not instead have a circumspect will to health that affirms life as it is and welcomes struggle out of an understanding of the role it plays in that health; one which simply seeks not to struggle unnecessarily if it can be helped. If we can take such a reading of Nietzsche – as fearless but not reckless – then we can see the agon with nihilism and its ability to provide a sense of dynamic measure, as able to play an important role in this scheme.

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